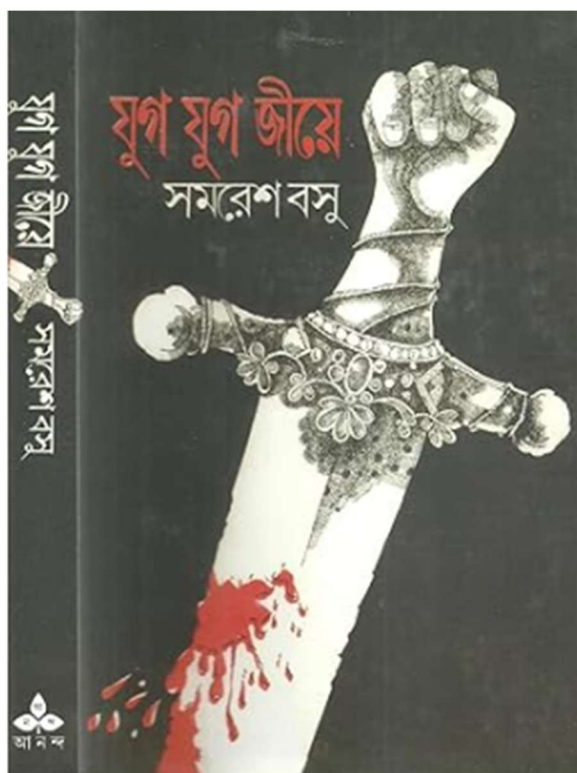


The Quit India Movement - How the movement shaped Indian literature

Prem Singh



The Quit India Movement launched by Gandhi for the liberation of India from British imperialism was a major event in the history of the Indian freedom movement. The great events that take place in the national life of a society have an impact on its literature and other art forms. By being recorded in creative genres, an event becomes a part of the civilization and culture of that society. The event of the Quit India Movement is different from the revolt of 1857 in the sense that it attracted the imagination of Indian writers immediately and on a large scale.

Some writers of Indian languages also played an active role in the movement. The writer of '1942' (1950) based on the movement, Ku. Rajavelu (Tamil), Nityananda Mohapatra (Oriya), author of 'Ghardeh' (1975), Satinath Bhaduri (Bengali), author of 'Jagari' (1945) and (first part 1949, second part 1951), Phanishwar Nath Renu (Hindi), author of 'Maila Anchal' (1954) etc. also served prison sentences while participating in the movement. This could not even be imagined in 1857.

Apart from the above, Samaresh Basu's (Bengali) 'Jug Jug Jiye' (1977) written in four volumes, Yashpal's (Hindi) 'Deshdrohi' (1943), 'Geeta Party Comrade' (1946), and the last mammoth novel 'Meri Teri Uski Baat' (1979), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's (Assamese) 'Mrityunjay' (1970), Doodhnath Singh's (Hindi) 'Aakhri Kalam' (2006), RK Narayan's 'Waiting for the Mahatma' (1955), Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many

Hungers' (1947), Satakadi Hota's (Oriya) 'Mukti Yudh' (2021), Khushwant Singh's (English) 'I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale' (1968) whose Hindi translation was published nearly 56 years later under the title 'Bolegi Na Bulbul Ab' (2014) – are some important novels which have been written on the Quit India Movement or refer to it.

An objective and authentic history of the Quit India Movement has not yet been written. When an authentic history of a movement is not available, literature to some extent fills the gap. However, socio-historical reality is depicted in the artistic manner in creative works. In all these novels, various aspects of the Quit India Movement have been represented aesthetically. Political novels often face the risk of polemics and bias. Despite this, such works can be an authentic source of the historical, social and ideological reality of a particular movement.

'Jagari' has been translated into Hindi by Hanskumar Tiwari with the same title. The English translation has been done by Lila Ray with the title 'The Vigil' (1965). The novel is set in Purnia region of Bihar.

'Jagari' is considered a milestone in the tradition of Bengali novels, especially political novels. Shishir Kumar Das has described it as "one of the finest political novel". 'Jagari' is the first important novel written on the colossal event of the Quit India Movement, if we use the words of Saroj Bandyopadhyay, who has written its Preface, "the fiery ground of forty-two". Although Yashpal's novel 'Deshdrohi' was published in 1943, but with its literary merit, 'Jagari' probably remains at the first place even today among the novels written on the theme of the Quit India Movement. Satinath Bhaduri once again returns to this Movement in the second part of 'Dhorai Charit Manas'. In the words of Bandopadhyay, "This makes us understand how deeply the author was moved by this incident in terms of knowledge. It was as if he wanted to see those people by removing all the veils in the light of a revolutionary great fire."

The technique of retrospection and stream of consciousness have been used in the novel. This technique had created its distinct identity and place with the publication of 'Ulysses' (1922) by the modernist Irish writer James Joyce. S.H. Agyeya had used this technique successfully in Hindi's first important modernist novel 'Shekhar: Ek Jivani' (first part 1941, second part 1944).

The plot of this novel reaches the reader through the introspection and self-appraisal of the lives of four characters in first person narrative style. These four characters are the protagonist Bilu, who is an activist of the Congress Socialist Party, his father Master Saheb, who is a devoted Gandhian, his younger brother Nilu, who is a committed worker of Communist Party, and their mother, whose life is spent in looking after these three men. Except Nilu, all three are in jail for participating in the Quit India Movement. Bilu has been sentenced to death on the basis of Nilu's testimony in the court.

In the four chapters of the novel, on the night before Bilu's hanging, various sublime and weak incidents of life emerge and disappear in the consciousness of the four characters. All four see life from their own perspective. Incidents of ordinary life and political life are not divided into separate compartments. Jail life has also been depicted in some detail. The writer of 'Jagari' extracts the political content from human life. At the end of the Preface, Bandopadhyay writes, "The subject of Jagari is man, not the political worker."

At one point communist leadership of India declared the imperialist war a People's War. This became the reason of conflict between Congress Socialists and Communists. Even the Communist Party workers became victims of confusion and dilemma regarding the definition and criteria of patriotism and treason. Communist Party workers tell Nilu that he has not done the right thing by testifying against Bilu. Nilu himself is also not fully convinced about his action. The argument of loyalty to the party was his only solace. The conflict and dilemma have been delineated in a subtle manner in 'Jagari'.

The author does not ignore the fault-lines and weaknesses of the national freedom movement led by Congress-Gandhi, which culminated into Quit India Movement, with its sacrifices and idealism. This novel, without any fierce debates, gently conveys the fact that when the thoughtful people of India were immersed in the revolutionary and libertarian ideas/ideologies of the West, Gandhi had already entered into the minds of Indian masses. It also highlights the fact that if this had not happened, what would have been the situation in the country today! Along with the four lower middle class characters of the novel, we get a glimpse of the vast jungle of the populace of India. The novel throws an intense question whether any unmingled doctrine/ideology could have been reflected in it?

This novel can also be read as an allegory. At the very end, it is revealed that Bilu's death sentence was postponed. But no one except the high officials were informed about this. Bilu was not even removed from the hanging cell. A non-political prisoner was hanged that morning. The first to get this news was Nilu who was waiting outside the jail the same night with an official order to take Bilu's body. The dreadful dark night finally ends, and a joyful morning begins.

(The author associated with the socialist movement is a former teacher of Delhi University and a former fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla)