

Popular Literature And The Reading Public

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PERSPECTIVES

POPULAR LITERATURE AND THE READING PUBLIC

Sisir Kumar Das

ABOUT forty-three years ago I went to live with a family in a small town to spend my summer vacation. Most of the inmates of the family were old and one was completely deaf. Conversations with them were not exactly pleasant. The working men were away in their places of work and the women were busy. There was none of my age with whom I could talk and play particularly during the long summer afternoon. After a few days of boredom I found to my delight that the family had a fine library which contained a large number of books and bound volumes of old periodicals, some of them meant for children. In those days many Bengali families did not allow teenagers to read certain books which were thought to have corrupting influence on their moral life. Most of the writings of Sarat Chandra Chatterji in particular and contemporary novels in general belonged to this category. The teenager's exposure to literature, therefore, used to be very carefully planned and was under a careful supervision. Here in this family I had the first opportunity in my life to read books of my choice without any interference from the puritan guardians, and I realised the taste of the forbidden fruit, that was popular literature. I narrate this incident if only because it provides me a kind of framework of reference to my understanding of the problem of popular literature and the reading public. No doubt it is a personal framework, inadequate and insufficient for the students of popular literature, none the less this can be stretched beyond the typicality of the situation in which I, a school boy at that time, was placed, and compared with experiences of other readers to arrive at certain general consensus.

To continue with my story, I discovered several texts in that library, all of which can be considered as part of

popular literature in some sense or the other, although they were widely different in literary merit and their impact on the readers. I should like to give a few examples to elaborate it. I found a huge volume of the *Mahabharata* translated from the Sanskrit into Bengali. It was written in grand classical prose which was both attractive and repelling. I did not understand many parts of it, skipped even larger parts but I also enjoyed certain sections and wanted to read them again. I also found a copy of the first edition of *Agnibina*, a collection of poems by Kazi Nazrul Islam, which contained the most-read and most popular Bengali poem written in this century. I did not know at that time that it was a prized edition since the book was banned by the British government for its seditious content and that particular copy could have any collector's delight as it bore the autograph of the poet himself. My admiration for the poems particularly, the one entitled *Bidrohi* (The Rebel) with which Nazrul (as we call him violating all rules of Arabic grammar) stormed into the Bengali life, was simply boundless. I found its rhythm hunting, its rhetoric magnificent and the conception of the poem fantastic. Both these texts, however, were already a part of the canonized or respected literature. The novels of Sarat Chandra, too, though yet to be considered fit for the consumption of young boys and girls, had received serious critical attention and generally valued as serious literature. I found a brand new book entitled *Dristipat* written by one Jajabar (The Nomad), obviously a pen-name, which was a craze in the house and was deliberately kept away from my reach. I need not tell you how did I acquire it but I was simply overwhelmed when I read it. It gave me a painful but also pleasant feeling, the kind of which I first felt while reading *Devadas*. I came to know later that *Dristipat* was the best seller of the year and it continued to be so far few more years during which, we were told, forty-thousand copies of the book were sold. It was not a novel but a work of fiction containing the narrator's impressions of New Delhi, its physical features, men and manners in a very sophisticated prose. The amazing popularity of the book was partly due to urbanity of style and dazzling wit and also partly, if not mainly, due to the final section of the book narrating a story of a highly talented young Maharashtrian and his passionate love for a Bengali woman who turned out to be a coquettish and cruel. The book closed with a fine pen-picture of the pathetic hero—a modern Devdas—writing in pain but enduring in silence. The immensely quotable concluding lines of the narrative were on the lips of young men and women in my college days: love lends splendour to life and glory to death. But what does it offer to the deceived. It only burns. Charudatta Adharkar, the wretched man, continued to be smothered slowly in that fire

without radiance. I have enquired and found that the book is still in print and still read.

I must mention another author whom I came to know through a book entitled *Dasyu Mohan* which was an extremely popular work in those days. Its popularity was of a different kind from *Dristipat* and so was its readership. *Dasyu Mohan* as the title indicates is a story of a bandit called Mohan and it is the first of a series of books, all independent and self-contained, but thematically connected by a common hero. Mohan, the hero of this series of books, is highly educated, handsome, a polyglot—he speaks German and Russian fluently, a master in the art of disguise, a modern Robin Hood who robs of the rich to distribute among the poor and his wife Rama is a devastatingly beautiful woman. In *Dasyu Mohan*, however, the first in the Mohan series, Mohan was yet to be married although Rama had been introduced. Mohan is not only a modern Robin Hood but also a superman who performs miracles, travels all over the world without much problem in getting visa, and meets almost any one he wants to, one such person whom he visited during his Russian operation was Joseph Stalin. He is also an anticipation of the heroic and romantic characters played by Amitabh Bachchan in the seventies, that are successfully pitted against the under world rogues, vindicating the supremacy of a heroic individual making all organized resistance against evil totally irrelevant. The first work in the series was published in the early years of the forties. By the end of the decade the number of books in the series was nearly fifty and around nineteen sixty the number closed two hundred. The style of the book is pedestrian but never vulgar; its spirit is generally adventurous, marginally romantic, but does not indulge in any kind of obscenity. The series aims to appeal the teenagers and also semi-educated adults. The price of the book is cheap, their printing deplorable, paper used in them the cheapest and vilest. Two years ago I visited a small public library in a small town near Calcutta to find more than one hundred volumes of Mohan, their appalling physical condition indicating their great demand. And two weeks back I found from the New Delhi Kali Bari Library that atleast seventeen large volumes entitled *Mohan Omnibus*, containing the two-hundred odd titles, were published from Calcutta during the last five years or so. So Mohan whom I met forty-three years ago and admired, is still loved and admired by many readers. I may also mention that in the late fifties a film was made on the exploits of Mohan, with Pradip Kumar, a well-known Bombay actor of that time, as the main character. Our knowledge of its author, Shashadhar Datta, however, is next to nothing. *The National Bibliography of Indian Literature* edited by the distinguished scholar V. Kesavan, which lists

numerous books published between 1901 and 1953, does not contain a single reference to Mohan or its creator. No history of Bengali literature contains any information on these works, though it is hard to believe that the literary historians are unaware of Mohan and his reception and survival in Bengal.

All the texts that I have mentioned so far belong to 'popular literature' in some sense. Number of copies of books sold or number of times a book is borrowed from a library—which are the indices used by students of sociology of literature—of course are helpful in quantifying popularity but they hardly tell anything about the nature of the reader's response or even the reasons for a given response to a given text. We measure popularity synchronically on the basis of the size and enthusiasm of the readership at a given time. It is also possible to measure popularity dichronically using the same criteria at various points of time. Popularity through generation not only is a vindication of the vitality of the text but also an indication of the process of standardization of taste. The term 'popular literature,' however, in the current critical vocabulary means only contemporary popular works and that too in a derogatory sense. It is a cheap literature, unsure, if not totally devoid, of literary merit. The term 'reading public, too implies an image of a mindless crowd without any aesthetic training and taste, seeking only sensual pleasure from works of art. All our critical assessments of popular literature, therefore begins with a high-brow distinction between two categories of reading public; one, the minority that canonizes texts and formulates aesthetic codes; and the other, the majority who treats literature as an entertainment or as a substitute for a football match or a picnic or a drinking party. A correlation between the reading public and popular literature, thus defined, can easily lead to various false and untenable conclusions such as these : (a) all serious and good literature is necessarily 'unpopular' and confined to a scholarly or a 'refined' group; (b) all bad literature is potentially popular literature, and (c) in matters of taste and judgement the majority is always undependable because no popular writer is a great writer.

The point I like to make is that there is hardly any incongruity in a person's admiration for classics and his attraction for the avant-garde or even trivial writings. It depends upon his literary needs, occupational training, nature of his leisure and plasticity of his taste. An observation by Arnold Bennett, who wrote this as an apology after having read a novel by Edger Wallace is worth quoting¹ :

1. Quoted in Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Russel and Russel Inc., New York, 1965, p.34.

Nearly all bookish people are snobs, and especially the more enlightened among them. They are apt to assume that if a writer has immense circulation, if he is enjoyed by plain persons, and if he can fill several theatres at once, he cannot possibly be worth reading and merits only indifference and disdain.

The worst victim of this kind of snobbery of the minority, which evoked the wrath of Arnold Bennett among Indian writers is Sarat Chandra Chatterji. He was the most popular writer in his life time. He is still popular, now more than fifty years after his death. He is the most translated, the most plagiarised and the most dominant influence on Indian films, and yet the most suspected too by enlightened critics and even writers, Buddhadev Bose wrote about Sarat little more than forty years ago.

Popularity is malodorous. An author who has found excessive favour with contemporaries makes us uncomfortable; the suspicion that there is something wrong in him is hard to exorcize.²

Buddhadev Bose, however, reluctantly admitted that 'yet many of the great have been thus favoured.'

I am not suggesting that the critic is always unjustified in disdain-ing popular literature or that the minority or the scholarly academies or the state should not have any responsibility in controlling literary production. What is more crucial for the student of popular literature is to understand the situation that has emerged since the mid-nineteenth century in India, in respect of the triangular relationship between the author and the reader and the relationship between the author and the reader and the intermediaries, which created a climate for the growth of writings, generally identified as popular literature. Prior to the introduction of the printing press, which created an almost insurmountable gap between the literate and the non-literate, literatures in all Indian languages was an indivisible whole in respect of readership. In fact, there was an 'audience' or 'listening public' rather than a reading public. This is a vital distinction. The printing press divided the audience. The literate public drifted away from the non-literate audience and formed the reading public. Q.D. Leavis initiates discussion on *The Book Market* with an interesting sentence: "In twentieth century England not only every one can read, but it is safe to add that every one does read."³ It was safe for the British

2. Buddhadev Bose, *An ere of Green Grass* (1948), Second reprint, Papyrus, Calcutta, 1982, p.41

3. Leavis, op. cit. p.3.

scholar to assume that for the 1932-England. It is not safe for us even at the close of the century. Popular literature, being a literature for the literature, is still a literature of the privileged in India.

But can we say that the literate community is a stratified community and each stratum has different literature? And if the answer is yes can we also ask whether planned attempts are made to produce different kinds of literature for the consumption of different groups of readers; or whether the choice of certain themes (such as scandal, violence, sex, espionage etc.) is dictated by a desire for money-making over-riding all social concerns? Perhaps the Indian literate section is more stratified today than the non-literate section in respect of literary taste but we do not have enough evidence to believe, as Q.D. Leavis claims for the British readership, that each stratum is catered for independently by its own novelists and journalists.⁴ The stratification of our literary community is primarily linguistic and consequently determined by the power-structure entailed in the existing language hierarchy. We have popular literature that is the cheap literature as defined by the minority cultural elite, for both groups: the English knowing group normally finds such literature in English, and the group ignorant of or without sufficient command over, English likes to have a similar literature in Indian languages. The feature that demands serious scrutiny is that the dominant models of popular literature prevalent in this group come from English or through English. This feature of dependence on our colonial masters in matters of taste and aesthetic canons emerged in the last century and has become almost a permanent component of our literary activities. The history of our popular literature is yet another evidence of that dependence. Very few people remember today the works of G.W.M. Reynolds,⁵ particularly *The Mysteries of London* (1845-6) which became a craze for the English educated Indian in the nineteenth century. We read these works along with Shakespeare and Scott and Dickens, all of them popular in India in varying degrees. The book was translated into several Indian languages, inspired the famous *Chandrakanta* in Hindi and received serious attention of Hari Narayan Apte. An editorial in *The Statesman* (dated 17 December, 1890) described Reynolds as the most popular author in Madras and Calcutta although he was described as the author of "the most detestable books ever issued from an English press." It is not to be assumed that Reynold's popularity was a peculiarly Indian phenomenon. Delziel informs that

4. Ibid. p.35.

5. See Margaret Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago*, Cohen and West London, 1957, pp 35-45

he was the most popular writer in Britain too. He wrote more and sold in far greater numbers than Dickens.⁶ He was popular among the British readership, may be because of the depiction of the 'immorality of the upper class' or vivid descriptions of cruelty or his sympathy for an egalitarian society. We do not know the exact reasons that made him popular in India and particularly among the different groups of literates. But it was a time when certain *themes* such as scandals, gossip, immorality of the rich and aristocrats were emerging in almost all the Indian literatures, some of them were meant for vilification of certain individuals or groups. *The Mysteries of London* was translated into Indian languages for a new readership not only interested in sensational stuff but also in the life of their rulers as well.

Every literate society, and modern India is not an exception, produces different types of literatures for the community. There are books which are honoured, revered, normally read in class rooms—in fact one may be tempted to define classics as works read in class rooms—there are books which are part of avantgarde writings which are also read by few. If these two (categories, both patronised by a minority) are kept at one side of spectrum of total writings of a community the pornographic and other sensational literatures belong to the other extreme. They may be called sub-literature. Within the remaining space operate the high-brow and the middle brow and low brow literature. Popular literature as we understand today belongs to this area: occupied by the middle-brow or low-brow category and often verging towards sub-literature. It is probably true that the authors and the intermediaries have been able to create a stable readership for each category of writings as political parties have done in respect of vote-banks, but it is the swing of readership from one category to the other that makes a particular work more popular in the market. Otherwise it is very difficult to explain why a biography of Ramakrishna Paramhansa became a best seller in Bengal in the early fifties. It was written by an author who was an avantgarde writer in his young days and earned notoriety for his obsession for sex.

Twentieth century has given a large measure of freedom to the readership to chose from different categories of literatures. If we value freedom we must also admit that only does literary sensibility differ from one generation to another and individual to individual, but also there can be different emphasis on the functions of literature itself. Literature, like all other arts, is primarily an object of enjoyment.

6. Ibid

Even if one agrees that it is a different kind of enjoyment, an enjoyment different from say that of watching a cricket match or eating a good lunch, there can be hardly a consensus today about the nature and function of that enjoyment. Our response to literary works and our choices depend upon the nature of the society we live in, the amount of leisure we have in our disposal, the values we cherish in our private and public life. If one blames the majority reading public for treating literature as an object of entertainment alone, one can also blame the minority for making literature an intellectual game an esoteric exercise. With the increase of literacy there will be an increase in the size of readership, there will be a corresponding demand as well as widening of the market, for all types of literature, not for popular literature alone. The minority desiring to set models of aesthetic excellence will naturally have more stiff challenges from the majority. But if the history of literary production has any lesson to impart it is this: the strength of popular literature is in its power to please readership for a short time; and popularity is but a verdict that can be changed at anytime. Any work of literature, popular or not popular, will be judged by the reading public again and again. This is a freedom which cannot be denied. □