

The Role of the Writer in Contemporary Indian Society

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I am grateful to all of you for this opportunity to appear before you as a writer, and an Indian writer. The subject is inviting. It's tempting. It's also a bit dangerous. There are some things which I am going to avoid doing, there are other things that I am going to try to do. I am not really going to talk about the role of the writer — I do not like the idea of the writer seeing a role or a mission for himself — I'd much rather talk of the predicament of the writer in India today. I should think that most writers would prefer to see themselves as in a particular predicament in a society rather than as fulfilling a role or carrying out a mission. There may be some who have a sense of mission; I commiserate with them.

There is another problem that I have, particularly as an Indian writer today. It would be possible to raise the question of a definition of society — what exactly do we mean by 'society'? — not just to get lost in abstractions but to present something which, I think, is a special feature of the Indian situation. The question has been asked elsewhere, too: in what sense does a writer 'belong' to society? I might for example refer to a rather poignant statement that Pasternak had made when he first accepted and then declined the Nobel Prize. I don't remember the exact words, but he said something like: **"The society to which I belong will not approve"** etc. Now, what exactly did he mean when he used this phrase "the society to which I belong"? Did he **belong** to it? Was that, and was that the **only** 'society' to which he belonged? If not, was he being dishonest in talking about 'the society to which he belonged'? None of these things, obviously. But this question, of what exactly society means to a writer, has always been important and in the Indian context it has been and is even more important. There is no doubt that all over the world the influence or the position or the prestige of the intellectual has been waning in society. He no longer means today what he used to mean in the past. And within the world of the intellectual the artist or the writer has declined further in influence. In India we see the same problem, the same position in a somewhat different context, and it may be worthwhile to present that here. In the West, the decline of the intellectual or of the artist in society was linked with the reduced importance of religion. It seems to me that this decline of the artist began with the Renaissance in the West. It would be possible to study that decline in such a context. But, in the same context, one may look at the process from the other side and try to relate the emergence of the artist as an individual to the Renaissance also. It would seem that while on the one hand the artist became more and more important as an individual, he declined in society; so that you may link the development of individuality or personality in art with the decline of the intellectual in society.

These appear to be two contradictory trends, but there is somewhere a relationship. It is interesting also that — and for us in India it becomes specially interesting because, at a time at which we came in contact or in urgent contact with the West, this is what was happening in the West — the writer was losing his position as a leader of the intellectual world and taking a secondary place after the painter or the artist. In India throughout its history and tradition literature had been the primary art and it was **through the writer** that there was any interflow of ideas about culture from the elite to the world of the artist. The writer stood in between the world of the artist and the world of the thinker or the religious leader. Perhaps in the West also in medieval times that had been the case; but at the time when we came in rather pressing contact with the West — towards the end of the 18th century or the early 19th century — the position in the West was changing. It was a period of much new thinking, many new ideas about the theory of art or literature or aesthetics; but these new ideas were not being developed by the writer, they were being developed by the artist, the painter. And they were travelling from painting and art into literature rather than from literature into art, which had been the traditional direction of the flow. This reversal is, of course, linked with the growth of art as personal expression, and I shall presently have something more to say about the development or the emergence of the person or the individual in art.

To come back to the idea of predicament, there is a distinction that I want to make, and that is between society and audience. For the writer society is never as important as the audience. The writer's relationship is essentially with the audience rather than with society. And this statement becomes specially significant in the Indian context. For a writer or for any artist an audience is always necessary: A society may perhaps also be necessary, but not in the same sense. It is possible for an artist to reject society, but he does not reject an audience. It is possible, in a society — you see examples of this in present-day society, too — for a person to 'opt out' or 'cop out' or 'drop out' from society. But those who opt out or cop out or drop out of **society** still want an **audience**. They may, indeed, reject society in the interest of the audience they want to have; they never reject the audience. We may study this in a historical context and see how the Indian artist related to society or his audience in the past and how he does so in the present day. The writer today could not possibly take the stance that e.g. Bhavabhuti took when he said: 'But sometime, somewhere, there will be someone who is my equal: time is limitless and the earth is vast.' No writer today will take that stance, because he does not accept Bhavabhuti's premises: the earth is no longer vast and time is no longer limitless. You may compare this with the stance of a Hindi writer of today: he, too, does refer to a reader in the future, but not a very distant or a hypothetical future; he addresses his poem to his 'reader of a hundred years hence'. But there again, he is not content to live in the time of this future reader. The question he asks him — I quote only approximately, from memory — is: 'You, a hundred years from now, who will read my poems, will you be able to understand the conflict, the state in which I live today?' He is not willing to live in this time in the future; he insists on living in his own time and presenting it, even if to a future reader. And even this is rare enough: the writer today will just not have the time or the inclination to bother about the reader a hundred years or even ten years from his time. He will, of course,

hope that there will be readers for his writing in the future; but it is not for them that he writes.

For any writer at any time, as I said, it is most important to ask who his audience was or who his audience is. And as I said, there are special aspects of this audience relationship or author-audience relationship in the past in India which must be kept in mind. I have had frequent occasions to refer to some aspects of this relationship, aspects which might almost justify the statement that in the past there was no society. The classical poet who insisted on, who assumed that he was writing for a **sahridaya**, a man, an audience, — shall I translate the word literally? — with a heart, he could demand that and take it for granted that the people who would listen to him or hear his poetry had the same kind of discipline or training and the same kind of developed sympathy as he himself. He therefore was in no sense a defender or an explainer of his poetry, he was a performer and he performed it to an audience consisting of like-minded — or, to stick to the literary rendering of the qualification — like-hearted people; people about whom he could take it for granted that they had the right kind of training or approach or sense of tradition or whatever you like. This, of course, in more democratic times is impossible; no one expects it, no one imagines that it is possible. But there is more to it than just the emergence of democratic ideas. In the past the classical poet was a member of an elite and he performed for an elite. He was perhaps aware that there were other people outside this world; there was what might perhaps, therefore, be called society. But he was not concerned with society, he was concerned with his audience. He was also vaguely aware that there were other performers at a different, to him a lower level, a folk level, and that they had their own audience or community. There was the folk poet performing for a folk audience: that was a parallel world. In a sense it also 'belonged' to the same 'society' to which he belonged; but these were two distinct worlds and society was a hypothetical thing which may perhaps have existed, but did not concern either the classical poet and his elite audience or the folk poet and his folk audience.

It may be possible and perhaps worthwhile to go a little further back into the Indian past and consider the — hypothetical perhaps — origin of the arts. We may go as far back as the Vedic sacrifice (**yajña**) or a calendrical rite and consider the presentation or the enactment of certain events in the past as in the **pariplava**, for example: it could be a part of the vedic sacrifice, particularly one of the very large or universal ones (**sarvamedha**), to re-enact or re-create the past and this re-creation provided occasion and opportunity to all kinds of artists, the dramatist, the theatre-actor, the acrobat, the dancer. But always there was an emphasis on the re-enactment, re-creation, of past events. So that there was always a living past, but not really a present. This produced the special qualities that we find in classical Sanskrit literature; it also produced the special problems that the writer faces in later times. To our generation and the two or three generations before mine the problem was simply and starkly this: we had a tradition and we had an audience; we had no society. Perhaps for the poet of those ancient times there was nothing inconsistent in this, he was concerned with his audience and he was concerned with his tradition, which he perpetually re-created. But for us this could no longer suffice. I may point out here by way of illustration that till two generations before mine it was not only customary, it was even expected of a poet before he would be accepted as of

major rank, to do what the poet, the dramatist used to do, did in those ancient days, i.e., to re-create the past. All major poets re-wrote the **Ramayana** or the **Mahabharata** or a part of it. Even Maithili Sarana Gupta, from whom I learned much of the technique of versification — not from him, but from his work; he would probably have disowned me as a pupil! — also re-wrote the **Ramayana** story in **Saketa** and the **Mahabharata** — or episodes from the **Mahabharata** — as **Jayabharata**. A little earlier in Bengali the poet who is considered justly the father of modern Bengali, and I think that he should be regarded not only as the father of modern Bengali but the father of modern Indian literature, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, he also wrote parts of the **Ramayana** story rather as a longer romantic narrative poem. He had good reasons for — or were they bad reasons? — he had reasons for re-writing the **Ramayana** in that sense, and it is instructive, perhaps specially instructive to study his life and development as a poet and as a modern poet. Some of you perhaps do know that Madhusudan Dutt as a young man imagined himself as a major English writer. It was his dream — let me try and quote a verse from memory — “To cross the vast Atlantic wave / For glory — or a nameless grave”. For him the options were either to go to England and become an English poet, which was glory, or death as a nameless person. He did not imagine that it was possible to become an Indian poet and write in an Indian language. And this was the person whom we today regard as the father of modern Bengali and the father of modern Indian literature. He took a long time learning his lesson, he learned it rather tragically and certainly very bitterly. But he finally did learn it. And there is another poem, a sonnet in Bengali, in which he describes and explains his transformation; in this poem mother Bengal or the mother of literature or the muse or Sarasvati or whatever you like comes to him and says: “My son, why have you gone wandering all over the world looking for a treasure which you have right here at home?” And then, of course, he discovers this treasure; and then it is that all his wanderings contribute to his making as a modern poet. Inevitably, being a 19th century poet, he had been steeped in the romantic traditions; he had studied the English romantics (whom we compulsorily studied until my time of education — in fact, those were the only English poets that we were compelled to study: Keats, Shelley, Browning, Wordsworth, a little Coleridge, Byron only on the fringe because he was rather dangerous for young people to read; these were the poets on which we students were brought up). But Madhusudan Dutt was more fortunate in that he was not limited to English; he studied French and Italian and a little Greek, he even went so far as to learn Hebrew. Then he came back and worked in the South and started learning Telugu and Sanskrit and — inevitably — Bengali. A little incident might tell you how far removed in his younger days he had been from Bengali of which he later became a creator: after his marriage when he had a son he wrote to a friend of his in English asking this friend to inform his father of the birth of the child because, to quote, “I do not know how to say the damned thing in my own language”. And the friend did oblige and he wrote to Madhusudan’s father of this happy event.

Now, when we study the development of Madhusudan Dutt, it’s not only his historical evolution or his going quite far out into European languages and his returning to his own that is important as a lesson for us. There is more to it than that. And this other aspect also is particularly important and I think that there are implications of this which may help other people to study even European languages and literatures and parti-

cularly the literatures of the past. Dutt's transition was not only the journey from an Indian language to a completely alien one and the return; it was also a move from a tradition of oral literature to a written one. This is something that is extremely important for us. I think that it was also extremely important for the West, but quite some time ago, so that readers and critics in the West tend to forget what happens to literature as a whole when you move from the oral to the written or the printed poem. The literary critics study the differences between one kind of poetry and another; they do not quite see how the development of printing itself necessarily changes the poem. We are in some respects much behind the West in the emergence of the printing press and its use, but we have the advantages of our misfortune, shall I say: it is still possible in India to study what exactly happens. I can remember that when I was a child the enjoyment of poetry was still aural or audial rather than visual; and it was still an enjoyment in a community situation rather than in private. People heard poetry and they rarely heard it alone. You might ask why it is so important to refer to this fact. But, as I said, what really happens is that the nature of poetry changes when you go from one situation to another. It is not only that in a written poem you have a fixed text and in the oral one there isn't a fixed text and the poem is practically recreated every time it is performed. There is more than that. The printed poem is an **object**; it is something that you see out there; it is not something that is inside you and is created and comes into existence only for as long as there is communion between poet and audience. The oral poem exists only in the air between poet and the audience. It is never there in the audience alone or in the poet alone. The printed poem is an object, it's something that you see out there whether or not you read it, whether or not you understand it. That's a fact important enough in itself. It's also important that once it becomes an object it has to **belong** to someone: it is so-and-so's poem. The oral poem is the property of the entire community; every time it is created it belongs to everybody and when it is not being performed it belongs to nobody. And that is why in the oral traditions — and this is as true perhaps of the Greek tradition as of mine — with oral literature the poem is rarely the expression of one personality. It expresses a time perhaps, a society perhaps, a literary theory of a certain time perhaps; an age, but never a person. The printed poem is always, essentially and primarily the expression of one man. It has to be **his** poem, not the poem of a period, an age, a region, a tribe or of this or that. And in India we see that till practically the end of the 19th century there were good poets and there were bad poets, but all good poets wrote poems which could have been written by anyone of them; they were not that distinctive. But finally the point I want to make and which is most important for development of literature today, is the sense of time in the poem. I have already referred to Bhavabhuti and his idea of the timeless; I have also referred to the perpetually living past. You are all familiar with the concept of cyclic time or time recreating itself. But what happens when you move from an oral poem to a written one or a printed one is that **you move from one order of time into another order of time**. And perhaps recognition of this change from a continuously or perpetually flowing time to an intermittent time is essentially the transition from a traditional to a modern approach to poetry: the sense of time, either fluent time or intermittent time. Let me say that when we moved from one sense of time to another sense of time, one order of time to another

order of time, we were moving from a **tradition** into an **actuality** and becoming aware for the first time not only of an audience but of society.

But actuality does not solve problems, nor give us very clear indications of the way we have to go. Perhaps it does give or enhance the sense of predicament to which I referred earlier. Now this is what I would like to talk about in particular. Because I would like to argue that the Indian writer is writing under greater handicaps than any writer has ever suffered in history anywhere or at any time. It seems a tall claim and perhaps a theatrical stance to take, but it really is true. To look at the situation of the Indian writer today: first of all he is living simultaneously in two worlds, in two societies, a literate one which considers itself educated, and an illiterate one which the educated or the literate consider uneducated. Quite often neither is right. Quite often it happens that an illiterate in the sense of unlettered audience is educated in the sense that, having still remained in an oral tradition, it does have a sense of judgment and of literary values; while those literate — who can just read and write and sign their names — may have no sense of these and may therefore in fact be less educated. Now, the writer today, not only because of the situation but additionally because of his democratic assumptions, cannot disown either of these two parts of society as his audience. He writes for both. He writes for those who do not read but have a sense of judgment and for those who do read and may or may not have this sense of judgment. Of course, this is not unique either to our time or to our country; there are other countries today, and there have been other countries in the past, that had this same problem.

But let me go on. The oral tradition has been dying and is very rapidly dying, but is not completely dead. Even after I had started writing, for quite some time poetry was still enjoyed and demanded in the communal situation. People did not read, did not want to read poetry, they wanted to hear it. And there is the experience of many of my contemporaries, people of my own age who are still writing, who read their poems to communities and from whom the audience always demands the kind of poetry they were writing 20 or 25 years ago, because that poetry was designed for the oral-audial situation, could be received by the ear and enjoyed, while what they are writing today is meant to be read and cannot be enjoyed in a communal situation. And that audience continues today, even though many of these people are well educated, they have college degrees and they also read poetry. All the foreign poetry they read, they read from a book and accept from a book. They would find it hard to accept a British poet reading a modern English poem; they would find it unacceptable to the ear; they prefer to read it from the book. But the Indian poem they must hear. Now, this continues to be the audience situation for people who accept the logic of the printed poem and must write for the printed page. They must write the visual rather than the oral poem.

There is a further aggravation of this problem; and that is the problem between the Indian languages and English. All those who are recognized as poets or writers in a literate tongue — I mean thus to exclude the performer of oral literature — they have all been educated through the English medium, or at least partly. Most of the academic thinking they have done, the discussions they have had, they have been obliged to do in that foreign tongue. So when they write they are confronted with the choice, if there is really a choice there, whether they should write in English or in their own language. I am glad that most of them decide to write in their own

language, but that does not mean that there isn't a real problem and perhaps even a real sacrifice involved there. Inevitably, they all begin to write in a language which they handle only in a very clumsy fashion; this not for any lack of talent or genius, but because all their training has been in the use of another language. Unfortunately most of them handle that also equally awkwardly, but that is not their fault. I went through this. It happened some time ago, but the memory of the travail is vivid. I had no hesitation in my choice, but having made it I knew that my problem had not ended. It has not ended yet. Because when I write today, I still have to consider who my audience is going to be or who my **preferred** audience is going to be; I imagine — and I accept — that the people who will read me will all know English also. Certainly I hope that they will know Hindi well enough to read what I write, but I assume — I do not particularly want it, but I assume — that they will also know English. I do know that all the critics who will read, and write to assess and evaluate, what I write will know English, and may or may not know Sanskrit — generally will not; and therefore the critical apparatus that they will be using will more likely be a foreign one. So that as a writer I accept it as a part of my predicament that I will be writing for perpetually hostile assessment. 'Hostile' may seem too strong a word; but would it make the situation easier or more palatable if they were recognized as only prejudiced or ignorant or even disenchanting? This is the predicament of all Indian language writers today. They know that they will write for a hostile or disaffected world. The reader **may** be sympathetic; if he **is** sympathetic, he will still have problems. The critic will generally begin from a hostile position — and for reasons for which the critic also is not to blame: the critic also has been brought up to think through the medium of English as the writer has been. Now, knowing that he will write for a hostile audience and deciding to do so is a major act of choice. As I said, this in some senses isn't choice because no other choice is really possible. But there it is: to accept this predicament is choice in that sense.

The consequences of making this and of being conscious that this is the predicament in which the writer will write means that this writing is very self-conscious. Now, it is true in a general sense that all modern writing is self-conscious, but Indian writing is more self-conscious because of this new kind of awareness of the relationship with the audience. It's also true all over the world that the writer, the artist, the intellectual has a sense of alienation. In India this is more true for more unfortunate reasons. But, shall I say fortunately, and shall I say that in some senses it is to the credit of the Indian writer, that he does not, at least not generally, write with a sense of self-exile: he does not consider himself an exile. He is very self-aware, he is frequently lonely; but in the case of most Indian writers it is true that they do not feel that they are exiles in their own society. Almost fortunately for Indian language literatures, the sense of exile or total alienation is amongst writers who are called 'Indo-Englian' or Indian writers of the English language. They have more of this; they suffer more from this sense of exile. And that I think is fortunate for, and it is also to the credit of, the Indian language writer. But it is a special feature of writing today that there is this awareness of a tension, or of several tensions operating at several levels; and it is an interesting part of the writer's predicament that this **tension** has to become the **principle of coherence** in his writing. We do not imagine tension as something that holds two things together, it's rather something that is pulling things apart; and yet for the Indian writer this awareness of tension has to become the

principle of coherence; this is what holds him together. The tension is operating at various levels, some of which I have referred to; the primary one of Indian language versus English, the next one of East versus West or East vis-à-vis West, then of tradition vis-à-vis experiment, literacy versus education, and, if you like, identity versus modernity, a debate that is perpetually going on in India: the question of the necessity of being a modern poet and linking that with the idea of identity. Can you have an identity and also be modern? Or you can put it conversely also: can you be modern and yet have your identity? Although some of these issues may seem dead in the West, these are living questions and they are still being debated at all levels, from the college to that of senior and well-established writers.

I don't know whether what I've said was really about the role of the writer in present-day Indian society. It was perhaps a preamble to a discussion of whatever might be his role. I see him as a tight-rope walker, a tight-rope walker who furthermore is responsible for seeing that the rope remains taut. He is not only riding the rope, he is also the man who is stretching it tight all the time. He is also concerned not only with keeping the rope taut but ensuring that the rope is there, and with demonstrating that it can be done. It is, if you like, an act of faith; so that the Indian language medium is a sort of **auto-da-fé**. That again seems an over-dramatization of the situation, and I am glad to say that the writer doesn't feel so dramatic himself. But there it is. If you can see this from the outside — and perhaps you can more and better than I can —, this is really the predicament in which he is working. It is important for him to show that this can be done; because if he cannot show it and if he cannot do it, no one else can or will. And that would mean that there would be no Indian literature, there would be no literature.

Perhaps I should say something in explanation or defence of the statement that, if there is no Indian literature in India, there is no literature in India. This is not a chauvinistic statement. I do think and believe that literature is a unique individual expression of a unique culture. If we are persuaded or convinced that literature is no longer necessary, then we accept that culture is no longer necessary; which really means that personality, the individuated human person, is no longer necessary. I know there are people who argue that. I'm not one of them, and I hope you are not, either. Because, if you do believe that, an occasion like the present one is meaningless. I said at the beginning that the intellectual today was less effective in society than he used to be in the past. But it seems to me that with this presentation of his predicament, it is possible to argue that **the less effective his role is, the more necessary it has become.**

Before I conclude I should refer to one other related question perhaps, particularly because it was put to me twice by two different persons the day I arrived here. And that was a question relating to the computer. "Isn't it possible to create poetry by computer? Also music by computer? And if so, what is the need for poets or musicians?" Now, I have had some training in science, so let me begin by conceding, even though I insist on my uniqueness as a writer, that it is possible to produce a poem by computer. 'A' poem. It may also be possible to produce music. I make that concession in order to bring out the distinction between what the computer might produce and what the poet might. Actually, the potentiality of the computer — although the computer is relatively new — the beauty or the elegance or, if you like, the **poetry** of mathematical logic was something that even 19th century mathe-

maticians were talking about. English mathematicians like Maxwell — he was talking about the poetry of mathematics. I concede that there **is** a poetry there. In mathematical logic you can also talk of the aesthetic of mathematics. But so far as producing a poem by computer goes it is important to remember that a programmed poem of that sort is **based on choices that were already made**. What the poet writes is an envisioning of a situation and **the choice is a part of the creation itself**: it is not based on choices that have been made in advance. And this is something that the computer in the nature of computers cannot do. It must operate on choices that have already been made. The poet can make a choice in the act of creation. In this sense the poet creates reality, the computer can only present it. And every time a good poem is written, there has been this — shall I say creative — choice; and that in a sense is a refreshment or even a recreation of humanity. And it is this possibility, if not fact, of perpetual renewal that is a justification for literature today. And if there is anything that I might call the role of the writer it could be this: the presentation of such a possibility: the possibility of perpetual renewal of mankind.