

Poetic licence



GUEST COLUMN

ASHOK VAJPEYI

As this tumultuous century moves towards its end, the terror of ideologies has receded

and volunteers of great causes seem to have withdrawn. Poetry stands alone; without any props, also without any expectations. But finally on its own -- in the overcrowded space, full of noise and din, peaceably tense. No longer required to carry the burden of ideas, hopes and insights born elsewhere. A moment of liberation, when it has to speak in its own voice, to be heard for its own revelations and anxieties, not to have to speak great truths earned if at all elsewhere but to articulate its own verities. To be a residence of small intimate truths rather than a dormitory of great causes.

It is time that poetry, long last, is to be heard for itself -- human, urgent and passionate. As confused as this business of living, and as hopeful as any of us in the circumstances could be. Here and now with us -- not tempted to judge us but be with us. And to be judged by the vigour and the mystery of its own intrinsic truth. Somewhere in the middle of this century it was said that poetry was struggling to defend not its ornaments but its very skin. While it divested itself of the conventional jewellery, poetry covered itself largely with ideological arms and moral certitudes. It is perhaps only now that poetry turns bare, in its true hues. It is only now when the unnatural geography is getting wiped out and new maps being drawn that poetry arrives in its own territory, in its own 'janpad' trespassing on nobody else's and resisting all, who may attempt to occupy any part of its legitimate domain. Kavita in its 'Swaraj', which does not wish to throw anybody out of its boundaries, but would not allow itself to be colonised either by forces which seem gigantic and overpowering and go in the name of politics, religion, entertainment etc.

In all fairness it must be said that even while poetry suffered from illusions of social or political power, it has, nonetheless, been a continuing struggle, a 'satyagraha' against simplification, totalisation and marginalisation. It has constantly refused to sum up the human condition. People may have lost their lands and rights, even their freedom but they have not lost their memory and, therefore, their poetry. Poetry has never betrayed freedom. In fact for many communities, poetry has survived as the only inalienable human right. The one which has endured and continued to define them in their distinctive humanness.

The age of making large claims for poetry

is over. Indeed such claims can hardly be made on behalf of other major forces of our time with any kind of honesty either. But in all humility, it could be asserted that for those, who have cared to listen to "the other voice of poetry", it has perhaps helped them in a modest way to endure with understanding, to suffer with dignity, to enjoy with grace and to celebrate with humility. In a time of almost irreconcilable extremities poetry has striven to keep a middle space, vulnerable and pulsating, where the exclusive singular gives way to the inclusive plural. With the past second world war polarities all but disappearing, the world today is truly pluralistic, more in

Poetry has never betrayed freedom. In fact for many communities, poetry has survived as the only inalienable human right. The one which has endured and continued to define them in their distinctive humanness

keeping with the inherent vision of man in poetry rather than anywhere else. One can almost say that finally the world has come the way of poetry. Plurality has been the native land of poetry and, towards the end of 20th century, seem to have become the surviving mystique of the whole world. It is obvious that in the light of these developments, poetry would have to evolve new norms of authenticity, fresh moral insights new structures of hope and despair. It would appear that the innovative verse and the will to appropriate new in poetry have been recently somewhat on the wane. They have to be rekindled and rejuvenated. The radical must reinvent itself not merely socially but also aesthetically.

In Indian society the linguistic space is shrinking. More and more people are content with using fewer and fewer words. Vast resources of our languages are faced with the threat of drying up due to disuse. The linguistic ecology is facing an ever growing erosion. Abbreviations, initials etc. are fast becoming the main syntax of communication. Perhaps one of the roles of poetry is not only to keep the language of the tribe pure but to keep it alive and in creative animation. Words to survive must live not in dictionaries or old texts but also in live communication, dialogue, new works and daily parlance. Saving the language of a society is to enlarge its domain of reality. A society whether developing or post-capitalist or post-communist or post-modern needs poetry to fight against amnesia and to remember and recall. Poetry perhaps more than any other human discipline, has from time immemorial believed that anything that exists has a desire and need to speak and a memory.

As development takes place and the global structures of mass media, entertainment and consumerism engulf us, less and less people would be turning to poetry. But in the tedium, the boredom, the vacuity and the passivity these inevitably bring about and promote, there would be some hope for poetry. Some would need to restore to human living its sense of mystery, of sacredness of inviolability of the private space of the self and the sense of community. That little glow of words called poetry might help some to regain them and to possibly move towards fuller humanness.

For the Assamese poet Hiren Bhat-tacharya "The earth is my poem" while the Hindi poet Vinod Kumar Shukla says "Closing my room, I step down the staircase so fast/That I seem to be afraid the room/ Will step down the staircase following me." For Sheen Kalf Nizam, the Urdu poet "Night still remains/ And even if it doesn't/ We do." And the Bengali poetess Anuradha Mahapatra has "No hunger left/ the deep warmth of birds." Poetry in India today moves freely and confidently from our times to the timeless. Where else, except through poetry we know that eternity waits eagerly in the neighbourhood of time waiting for us merely to open the window?

In poetry we hope to go to places, persons and events where, in our experience, language has not dared or cared to reach before. Poetry ultimately causes language to exist there where there was none before. It is acutely aware of its inadequacies in many ways and craves our indulgence. It thrives in the hope that it would never, to use the words of Vijay Nambisan, "lack the charm of inadequacy".

(The author is joint secretary, culture, in the HRD ministry and a poet)