

The poetry of freedom — sarfaroshi ki tamanna ...

The master craftsmen of words and emotions fired the imagination of a nation in chains to reclaim its right to freedom



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Soul-stirring : 'Mera rang de basanti chola ...' is remembered as Bhagat Singh's song of the gallows. PTI

HUMANKIND'S irrepressible urge for freedom has inspired several popular movements for Independence, including our own, in a long and unequal fight against imperial colonialism. The 80th year of Independence should be our moment to salute those who articulated the pain and aspirations of a subject nation into a compelling song of resistance that shook the foundations of the mighty British Empire.

The struggle for India's independence was inspired by a quest for human dignity anchored in equality, liberty and fraternity. The idea of independence encompassed freedom from want and

exploitation. This vision of a sovereign egalitarian nation was burnished by the writers, poets, song writers, storytellers and singers of the time.

The power of their writings and rendition created an indefeasible national sentiment against foreign rule and motivated a proud people to become masters of their own destiny.

Galvanising a society riddled with endless divisions and a nation broken into several fiefdoms, for freedom, required the harnessing of the wounded self-esteem of a subjugated people and communicating it in a manner that would 'unlock their soul, (and) turn up their heart'.

This was achieved by the bards of the freedom movement, by creating a powerful imagery of colonial injustice. The rhythm, lyrics and the sound of poetry steeped in pulsating nationalism stirred the nation's latent ardour for independence.

Those who made this possible included exceptional Indians, such as Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sarojini Naidu, Mohammad Iqbal, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sardar Jafri, Josh Malihabadi, Agha Shorish Kashmiri, Majaz Lakhnavi, Ram Prasad Bismil, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', Sahir Ludhianvi, Amrita Pritam, Kaifi Azmi, Ramdhari Singh 'Dinkar', Subramania Bharati, Nanak Singh and Dhani Ram Chatrik. Through their writings, they illumined the nation's path to freedom.

Their critique of colonialism and espousal of freedom became a veritable mirror of ideological and socio-political change.

The compositions of these extraordinary men and women of letters, suffused with idealist fervour, redefined the 'political discourse of nationalism', giving voice to the voiceless and hope to the forgotten. They were engineers of the soul, whose

medium became a powerful instrument to interrogate the premises of imperialism and its inherent injustices.

They stirred a despondent people to join an arduous and uncertain journey to freedom. The tremor and draw of their poetic compositions founded in an ethical critique of the Raj magnified the assertion and anger of the colonised, converting language into an art.

Denouncing the moral decay in a colonial society, poetry of the freedom movement became an exercise in self-reflective engagement about the injustices of the then political and social order.

Hence, the inspirational *shayari* of freedom traversed the question of independence in its widest social, economic and political context, reminding us that man's will to freedom inevitably prevails over the tyrant. It had its roots in a civilisational ethos that rejected subjugation and injustice in any form.

Guru Gobind Singh's immortal indictment of Mughal imperialism in *Zafarnama* and the ethical imperative to resist oppression is indelibly etched in our civilisational consciousness. Savour the power of his pen: *Chun kar az hameh heelate dar guzasht, Halal ast burdan bi-shamsheer dast* (When all has been tried, yet justice is not in sight, it is then right to pick up the sword, it is then right to fight). The flame of liberty and justice has been kept alive by succeeding generations and is captured in the libertarian literature of our times.

Ram Prasad Bismil's *Sarfaroshi ki tamanna, ab hamare dil mein hai, Dekhna hai zor kitna baazu e qaatil mein hai...* (The desire for revolution is in our hearts; Let us test the strength in the arms of the executioner) is immortalised in the thought of the nation as the ultimate song of resistance.

Mera rang de basanti chola...Dum nikle is desh ki khatir bus itna armaan hai, Ek baar is raah mein marna sau janmon ke samaan hai (Dye my robe in the colour of spring [saffron] My only wish is to sacrifice my life for this country, better than a hundred births, is to die once for the motherland) is remembered as Bhagat Singh's song of the gallows, to which he walked smilingly. The song is an enduring inspiration for patriotism, sacrifice, valour and martyrdom in the cause of freedom.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Vande Mataram is a poetic offering to Mother India, an ode to nationalism, that brightened the inextinguishable flame of freedom.

Gurudev Tagore's Chitto Jetha Bhayshunyo, translated into its celebrated English version: 'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let me country awake', represents a vision of India where free people would walk tall, with their heads held high and their minds without fear. This vision of nationhood rooted in universal humanism presented the utopian imagination of a free nation struggling to be born.

Ram Dhari Singh Dinkar's compelling verse, *Samar sesha hai, nahin paap ka bhaagi kewal vyaadh, jo tatasth hain, samay likhega unke bhi upraadh*. (The battle is still on; the tormentor alone is not guilty of crime, History will also record the crime of those who were complicit by their silence) is a powerful reminder that those who are indifferent to injustice cannot escape responsibility.

Allama Iqbal's verse *Uttho meri duniya ke gharibon ko jaga do, kakh-e-umara ke dar-o-divar hila do, jis khet se dahqañ ko mayassar nahiñ rozi, us khet ke har khosha-e-gandum kojala do* (Rise, and awaken the poor of my world; Shake the walls and doors of the palaces of the rich! The field that provides no sustenance to the peasant- Burn to ground every piece of grain

in that field) was a call for uprising against an unjust order that allowed peasants and workers to go hungry.

Pagri Sambhal Jatta, the poem recited by a Punjabi poet and journalist Banke Dayal against the injustice of colonial farm laws, became the anthem of self-esteem, celebrating the moral and political agency of the individual.

Subramania Bharati's vision of a liberated and united India in Viduthalai roused the masses through its powerful emotional appeal.

The oratorical grandeur of Josh Malihabadi's poetry in *Shikast-e-zindan ka Khwab* (The dream of the prison's destruction) was a symbolic metaphor for the inevitability of Independence amidst the trembling prison walls erected by the imperialists.

Together, these master craftsmen of words and emotions fired the imagination of a nation in chains to reclaim its right to freedom and justice. Theirs was an insurgent art. They wove into their compositions the anguish of the helpless and wounded self-esteem of the tormented. This tradition was kept alive by the poets after Independence.

Consider for example, Sahir's evocative humanism, his despair about an unjust social order and solidarity with the helpless which has held generations in thrall. Savour the felicity of his expression:

Majbur huuñ main majbur ho tum

majbur ye duniya saari hai

tan ka dukh man par bhari hai

is daur mein jiine ki qimat ya dar-o-rasan ya khvari hai

[I am helpless, as are you,

Helpless is this whole world.

Despair weighs on my mind

The price of living is either the gallows or wretchedness.]

Thus, their thoughts continue to inspire a magnanimous vision of nationalism amongst succeeding generation of Indians. As GN Devy reminded us: 'Words do not vanish into silence; they live in you, live through you, live behind you, live even after you are gone'.

The enduring resonance of the literary heritage of the freedom struggle should inspire us to civilise the nation's political discourse. The devastating poetic indictment of colonialism and its attendant injustices is a reminder that the potency of democratic protest is enhanced by its refined tone.

And it is our burden to energise the processes of democracy to ensure a benign exercise of power, answerable to the injunctions of conscience. We would then have truly honoured the memory of our freedom fighters and redeemed a debt of gratitude owed to them for the unspeakable hardships they suffered, so that we could breathe free.

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