



## LITERARY VOICES OF PROTEST AS PROJECTED IN THE EMERGENCY PROTEST POETRY FLOWERING DURING THE EMERGENCY PERIOD : A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the many literary voices of protest as raised in the Emergency protest poetry flowering during the Emergency period and examines how protest literature, because of its operational constraints, employs tools such as parables, allegory, satire and the absurd relating to one's own inaction, fear of prosecution, defiance analysis of the social milieu, the tragedy of the individual in the face of Emergency excesses, the insincerity of political charlatany, opposition to Brahminisation and Sanskritisation, starvation of people leading to death due to atomic power. It beautifully pictures how the poems abound in very original images drawing their strength from folklore, rituals, exorcism, mythology, religion and local festivals for bringing home the point that Emergency protest poetry was nothing but a simultaneous flowering in many languages affecting the record of the varied hues **of Protest** to an experience of repression.

**Keywords:** *Literary Voice, Emergency Protest, Protest Literature, Operational Constraints, Folklore Rituals, Exorcism, Varied Hues.*

### Citation:

**APA** Chelliah,S.(2017) Literary Voices of Protest as Projected in the Emergency Protest Poetry flowering during the Emergency Period : A Brief Analysis. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 4(4), 250-256.

**MLA** Chelliah,S. "Literary Voices of Protest as Projected in the Emergency Protest Poetry flowering during the Emergency Period : A Brief Analysis." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp. 250-256.

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Indian English poetry is generally talked of as deficient in social and political awareness. This allegation was sought to be tasked by the response of the Indian English poets to the imposition of emergency and censorship vis-à-vis that of the poets of the regional languages. The emergency period was a initial moment in the history of independent India because it was for the first time, the freedom of the writer and the press was formally curtailed. Censorship was severe; but many little magazines, some national papers, many activists from the opposition parties, the Rss and the Naxalites beat censor by resorting to underground publications; many Indians abroad mobilized protest by publishing in foreign periodicals the truth of the matter as they saw it.

The psychology of protest is much more complex than its politics. Resistance to oppressive regime in prompted by the perception of the writer as the sentinel of his times as well as his urge to communicate to his readers, how so ever few and where so ever scattered. The requirement of being able to incite the reader immediately limits the aesthetic of protest; from this stems the perennial debate whether all committed literature is good. Protest literature, because of its operational constraints, employs tools such as parables, allegory, satire and the absurd. It has a more or less predictable image pattern, made up of drought, darkness, silence, exile, imprisonment etc. ***Voice of Emergency***, the major primary source, has poems from fourteen regional languages. The themes range from pointed personal attacks on the prime minister to eulogies of Jayaprakash Narayan, rejection of the Nehru legacy, remorse relating to one's own in action, fear of persecution, defiance, analysis of the social milieu, the tragedy of the individual in the face of Emergency excesses, the insincerity of political charlatany, opposition to Brahminisation and Sanskritisation and the wrong priorities of the government which seeks to become are atomic power even as people die of starvation. The poems also abound in very original images drawing their strength from folklore, rituals, exorcism, mythology, religion and local festivals. The early appearance of Naxalite and Dalit poetry has been the determinant factor of the quantity and quality of Emergency

protest poetry in regional languages. Though comparatively few in respect to the readers of regional language poetry, the readers of Indians English poetry form a crucial segment of opinion-makers and decision-takers.

The decision of the government of India to declare Emergency on June 26, 1975 invoking Article 352 of the constitution was totally unexpected. In an attempt to describe the condition & that impelled it for such an action and to justify it, the Government tabled a paper in the two Houses of the parliament of July 21, 1975. After discussing the events in Gujarat in early 1974, the Bihar agitation which followed and the efforts of certain opposition parties under the leadership of sri-Jayaprakash Narayan, The paper concluded:

"Under all forms of Government, forcible resistance to the legitimately constituted authorities is a criminal act and may properly be met with ordinary police action..... the true justification for the present proclamation of Emergency under Article 352 of the constitution is the preservation of the social interest in peace and order and the promotion of public good " (P57)

The Government issued detailed censorship guidelines and guidelines for the press with the following justification:

"Declaration of national emergency to meet the threat to the security and stability of India by internal disturbance will point to the need for extreme caution and circumspection in the handling and purveying of news and comments" (Nayar 212)

The imposition of censorship in India was watched with disbelief in journalistic circles all over the world it was reported as "severe as any in the world" in the internationally acclaimed ***Index on Censorship***. Many of censorship sharply in the beginning by leaving the Editorial Column blank, encasing is in black border and publishing cartoons of the national newspapers, ***the Statesman*** and the ***Indian Express*** put up a stiff fight, but had to pay a heavy price. However, it was indeed some periodicals like ***Seminar, Himmat, Mainstream,***



**Opinion, Freedom First**, etc., that resisted the censor's highhandedness by displaying professional courage and taking recourse to judicial redness. Writers started writing protest poems during the Emergency and people started asking what the distinctive nature of protest literature was, Primarily, the determinant is the obvious political position taken up by the writer; protest literature, by definition, is anti-establishment and hence the writer seeks a direct and immediate response from the reader. His readers it partisan and it was "no less a writer than Albert Camus, who, when asked we must be really willing to forget all that is bad on one side to fight what is worse on the other, answered that one may even have to fight a lie in the name of a quarter-truth" (248) once the ideological dominance of politics over canons of poetics is agreed to, anything passes for poetry. Hence, John Oliver Perry's statement:

"Thus, we give careful attention to poetry that voices immediate personal feelings about public political events, even if these contemporaries lack formal or verbal inventiveness" (perry xiii)

and that of David Selbourne, "It is this struggle which is more important, always, than the questions whether a poem can be judged 'good' or 'bad' according to a conventional aesthetic (pix). This does not appear to be a tenable proposition, not because it cannot compare favorably to the greatest poetry which "touches us most deeply, by aspiring to the highest, most transcendent perspectives or by plumbing the broadest most subterranean psychological or cultural structures" but because it is woefully inadequate to encompass the multi-dimensional possibilities of poetry" (voice xii). K. Ayyappa Paniker puts it picturesquely:

"Between the anemia of non-politicalness and the leukemia of nothing but politics, the greatest poetry has always managed to run its course..... In so far as one can shift the grain from the chaff, it will be obvious that the better the poems, the higher and deeper the politics too" (voices 31)

This polarity makes its special demands or every aspect of poetics, as has been noted in the case of

the two war-poets. Siegfried Sasson and Wilfred Owen:

"The two options open to literary anger would seem to be either a language which works by immediacy, transparency, rawness and a sledgehammer – forthrightness such as sasson created for his purpose, a language like owen's which expresses with control and obliquity emotions which are similar to sasson's but are treated by distancing and contemplation"(Rayan 51)

The best votaries of protest literature seem to be wise capably bogged down by the perennial problem pertaining to the adequacy of revolutionary fervor as constituting the sole ingredient of political poetry. Thus, Sumante Banerjee observes:

"At the same time, to estimate the worth of these poems, we have to learn not to condone slipshod art just because they may have been written by a revolutionary (Banerjee 25)

Apparently, Sartre and Camus were the two writers of this century who differed on this count; Sartre believed that even if not all committed literature was good, all good literature would be committed whereas Camus was much wavier" (king 73). And what is good? Talking of Proletarian art, William Empson notes – "Good writing is not done unless there are serious forces at work; and it is not permanent unless it works for readers with opinions different from the authors" (Empson 3) Because of its special nature, protest literature employs certain special roles as a rule. To evade censorship, it is made "obscurely symbolic or allegorically broad" (voices xxxix). Camouflaged characters, animal fables, allusions, cartoon poems, satires, unit, hyperbole, bombast, rhetoric, the absurd and the surreal are some of the methods commonly used in protest literature, songs, riddles, local myths and mythology also find their expression. In the words of Alvarez, "Censorship is the mother of metaphor" (pxxi). The persistent theme of oppression universally finds expression images of drought, prison, darkness, bird with clipped wings, silence etc. Talking of silence, it is no synonym for indifference in the context of protest literature.



Generally speaking, the protest against Emergency and Censorship was spread all over India. In discussing the Emergency, the intellectual elite, the hyper-educated literature, created for themselves exciting experiences out of paranoid delusions of officially inspired injuries and insults" (P31). Indeed, so varied are the experiences born out of the event and even more varied are the responses to it. The thematic variations may be considered first. Primarily, many poems attack the prime minister as solely responsible for Emergency followed by censorship as in Vinod Sharma's "Abattior", Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's "Decency" and Ejas Siddique's "Ghazal-e-Masalal" (Linked thoughts); some of them literally call names and shower abuse on Narayanan Desai's "You Tyrant". It concludes with a terrible curse:

"In the heat of history, power melts  
Like rotten snow;  
As Hitler has gone, so you must go"

(voices 275)

Yet another set of poems refer to the prime Minister's acquiescence of her political ambitions:

"A whip in hand like a scepter  
Sitting in spite on this horse  
Hurriedly rocking to and fro,  
Oh, mother-child, where do you go?"

(Trip 234)

Bhavani Prasad Mishra sounds ominous in his prediction of the political overthrow which was to take place soon:

"But that boy  
does not know yet  
what a tiger his strength  
raises in our hearts-  
his mother too ignores  
the crouched beast" (vision 244)

At a deeper and more interesting level, the very credentials and credibility of the Prime Minister and the Nehru household are called into question. Thus, Ismail provides a logically plausible twist to the famous story of the prime.

Minister's Childhood: The lady  
We are told-When a child, in fervor  
she burnt to ashes her darling fancy doll  
for the sake of the motherland!

No wonder-now grown up, willfully  
she is burning to ashes the motherland  
for the sake of her darling living doll!

(The Lady in *voices* 115)

What is more, the legacy of Nehru is seen as distinctly inferior to that of Gandhi, there by negating the usual Gandhi- Nehru equation. In a poem curiously titled "He Rose Folk" addressed to Gandhi, Allama Prabhu, the Kannada poet refer to the Nehrus:

"and they are building Delhi now  
a capital on village ruins, these descendants  
of the Rose Building a Rose Dynasty"

(Voices 182)

At the other end of the spectrum, there are poems extolling the role of Jayaprakash Narayan in leading the battle against the Prime Minister. Thus, there are two poems entitled "To J.P" by Narayan Desai and Vishnu Pandya and the other one being "To Jeyaprakashji" by Nimisha, which, apart from exposing the lack of refinement of oppose the personality cult of a dictator in the realm of politics, they get swayed by the dictates of opposition to or adulation of one person in the realm of the poetics. More importantly, the infinite shades of personal responses to this political event gain in authenticity, as poets attempt to define and analyses the under currents. Here again guilt to a feeling of optimism. Thus over D.N. Bezboruah in "A Myopia Memory":

The remorse of inaction  
In the memory of forgetting  
If the musky learn of the vertebral column  
Had even for a few moments  
Turned to hard brick  
On the night of the night more,  
I would not have had to  
Wake up my forgetting once again"

(voices 139)

One way to escape the tyranny of memories is to rationalize the inaction and try to justify it:

Yes, Yes, I know all that. Silence  
does not mean acceptance  
I have my own sense of limits"

(Ramesh cour 216)

But how so ever, one might try to justify it, the sense of remorse thickness:



Soldiers rushed into the city at dead of night  
we cursed them for destroying our sleep  
only cursed them  
The crows in the trees cawed at the bullets  
firing  
we scanned the sky-only scanned it"

(Mukundsomani 235)

And the inner voice grows more and more insistent:

"Why doesn't this ghugghu fly away?  
Where are those who changed voices  
To drive off the ghugghu?  
These crammed phrases, different voices,  
This fluttering of the wings and ominous  
Whisperings  
What does the ghugghu cry and why"

(Nirmal 40)

There are other poets who put it more plainly; thus the renowned poet of Bengal, sunil Gangopadhyay avers, "poetry is written out of guilt now a days and a sense of sin "(Self-Confrontation 190) and Dhermavir Bharati writes:

"O, giver of bread!  
But what should I do with this thing called  
'soul'?  
What should I do with all these words of  
truth  
that still bear the turmeric stain of your  
hand"? (voices 49)

Even as they know that the dust on their footprints was sent to the analyst "to catch the refrains of their revolutionary songs" (Rebirth 175) they would greet the lord protector softly, but defiantly " for those forced to silence, not surrender, who got broken but did not bend "(voices 50) to the festival of cowardice, not of discipline. This defiance is born out of the belief in the triumph of the word :

"This procession will soon end  
and the sad, impatient people,  
crawling, wriggling on mutilated legs  
will reach that jungle  
where you lead them by way of assurance  
but where they felt thilled by the touch  
of that slow, idle, yet spreading fire"(P 213)

Again as Perry observes correctly, many of the poems react against "not necessarily social or personal conditions specifically brought on by the Emergency; rather they were conditions only

intensified during the Emergency" (P16) Sumante Banerjee corroborates:

"Torture in police lock-ups, detention of dissenters without trial for an indefinite period, summary executions of suspects behind the propaganda screen of 'encounters' and killing of prisoners in jails- which were reserved all these years for Naxalites-became the common fate of almost all opposition activities"(p58)

Mangalura vijayasummarises the story of oppression here:

"I have wiped the behinds of your little  
children, washed your infer dirty linen,  
taken kicks from your son  
and the boot from your leg  
and what in more,  
when you hung your umbrella on my hut  
I have waited, hiding in the dark of the night  
till you have taken your pleasure.  
But when I see today  
how your son  
is my master again  
and how my son has to serve him again  
my against begins to boil and burst-  
O you man - eating monster  
you blood – sucking basard-  
in a lava of annihilation "

(kast word to the Exploiter 115)

Arun Tyagi in "what Happened to Badesi" and vijaypatil in "sweat, cuts and Revolution"(P203) reiterate this story. The intensification of this age-old oppression comes alive in many poems in the form of "Emergency Excesses". It is at this cross road of politics and fireside that poetry blossoms. All metaphoric wailings about censorship and all jokes about compulsory sterilization fade into insignificance in he face of the authentic ring of these poems. Perhaps it leaves the poems bland, as it probably does in Dauji Gupta's "One Night During Emergency" which is only an eyewitness account of a blind women's young son being picked up by police at two in the night. But what redeems the poem is the picture of the child who unknowingly tells that police have taken him away and the mother, who in fear pushes the child inside. Should anyone feel that the mother was acting out of exaggerated fear,



Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena's "Red cycle" is the answer. It "describes with frightening intensity the madness of the paranoiac police" (Banerjee 58) Here the child only played with the dew-welt bell of the red cycle:

Then with screaming siren  
a huge black van  
roared to a stop  
The child  
forgot him bell  
watching in fascination  
the winking blue light on its roof .....  
The black van took away the child

As the images of father, mother and children come into the field of vision, the picture of he family becomes clearer. It is the victim speaking in the following lines:

"Fatma! close the windows tight!  
Lift the children into your lap  
and mind you, never leave the door  
unlocked.  
Now 'they' will rape women out in the open  
and pitch their flags in virgins' bosoms"  
(A Dirty Poem 48)

On the other hand, it is the activist speaking here:

"I could not tell you while going-  
when the police caught me, I could not tell  
you.  
You stood speechless, your eyes full of tears  
my cuffed hands could not wipe them...."  
(Tarakam 99)

These personal tragedies become all the more unbearable because they find that the opportunistic politicians always have their ways.

One most unlikely theme for an Emergency protest poem was the tragedy at the chasnala coal mine. With overtones of a divine scourge on the oppressor, the chasnala tragedy also afforded an opportunity for comparison:

"Friends, things are O.K. up here  
If you're doing some penance down there,  
don't come bake  
there isn't much to choose  
between you-down there  
and us-up here" (Krishnamurthy 27)

With protest against an oppressive region as the central theme, image-patterns which are likely in the poems are fairly easy to predict-speech/silence,

light/darkness, sickness/health, birth/death, and food/poison are some of them. Among other images of this cast are those of prison, blood and fire.

**Voices** abound in al these and many more such as those of a journey or a quest, of children and animals. The idea of censorship seems to have vexed the poets to churn out images out of silence itself:

Today on my lips there is only  
The opening line  
of the first stanza  
of the canto of stunned silence" (P 163)

Writes Dilip Chitra in "Pilgrimage of the Deaf Mutes". "Silence is in my Chromosomes" Says Rejendra Kishore Pande (Voices 258). Gopalakrishna Adiga fuses an eminently appropriate visual picture of fire to suggest defiance in the face of extreme oppression:

"I will show you how in this broken  
lantern the sooty  
wick lifts up its burning head" (P 34)

Kusumagraj points to the ambivalence of freedom, trailing a picture of blood satire is used to censure and ridicule the wrong-does in order to uphold the well settled values of the society:

Thus, satire is a kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation".

As Ian Jack has put it very adroitly "satire is born out of the instinct to protest; it is protest becoming art" (P 828). Allegory is another most popular form of satire; "The caravan" by Jai Narain and "A shriek" by Harinder Dave are two good examples. The Tamil poet Admaanaam uses pun to great effect in his poem "Haste" by invoking the meaning "period – of – haste" for Emergency. There is an element of exorcism combining words like 'ward', 'exist', 'operation', 'Latrine' reduces the severity of Emergency in themselves. Hasit H. Buch talks about "Children/seeming wise, play/Emergency emergency-emergency". Ponnuraj in "Emergency" tries to laugh at the very word. A dissimilar attempt with similar intentions is discernible in christening the new-born as '1976' (Naming the baby 140). In "Shooting Fish", Shriram verma invokes the story of Mahabharata which speaks of the pandavas hiding their weapons and Narayan Desai suggests, Jayaprakash Narayan's greatest and supreme



sacrifice by likening is a fathomless reservoir and with the backing of the Bhakli literature in all the regional languages poets put it to great use.

To conclude, it may be said that Emergency protest poetry was nothing but a simultaneous flowering in many languages effecting the record of the varied hues of protest to an experience of repression.

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