

Namvar Singh (1927–2019)

A Discourse with Time

MANINDRA THAKUR

Namvar Singh was a public intellectual and a creative thinker who carried forward the tradition of reclaiming the radical aspects of the Indian knowledge tradition for the benefit of contemporary times, and strengthened it further by engaging with Marxism.

Namvar Singh, a leading literary critic of contemporary Hindi literature, passed away on 19 February 2019. It will be difficult to fill the void he leaves, in the near future. One cannot be a good social scientist without being fully aware of the literary wealth and one cannot be a good literary critic without being aware of the available knowledge in the social sciences. Singh was an epitome of this. He was a voracious reader of literary texts and fully aware of the recent debates in Indian social sciences. He used to surprise his audience by referring to complex philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Tulsidas in the same breath. Similarly, he would in very simple language present to his audience the nuanced debate on multiple modernity or on the idea of civil society in India.

He represented the tradition of Hindi literature that emerged during the anti-colonial struggle in which there is hardly any division of labour between the philosopher and the social and literary critic. He played this role fairly well and his knowledge of Sanskrit, Urdu and other pre-Hindi languages helped him in

this endeavour. Singh engaged with his time and through his literary critique prepared the reading public of the Hindi-speaking world to capture the changing social realities. He was an interlocutor between the Hindi and the English medium world, very much like the noted philosopher of his time Daya Krishna and in this process he successfully contributed to the overall intellectual climate of Indian society.

Fruitful Tension

Like a good disciple or *manasputra* as it is described in Hindi, he not only carried forward the tradition of reclaiming the radical aspects of the Indian knowledge tradition for the contemporary world initiated by his guru Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, but also strengthened the system by engaging with Marxism. This difficulty of engaging with Marxism and the Indian intellectual tradition simultaneously provided him the creative tension that contributed to his emergence as a vibrant thinker in postcolonial India. This daring act of engaging simultaneously with two apparently contradictory trends can be seen in his two articles, one titled “Georg Lukacs,” published in *Alochna*, the journal he edited throughout his life; and the other “Itihas ki Shav-Sadhna,” an article he wrote to defend Dwivedi against Ramvilas Sharma’s assessment of him as an advocate of Hindu revivalism. In the first essay he questioned Lukacs’s argument of giving

Manindra Thakur (manindrat@gmail.com) is associate professor, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

autonomy to consciousness vis-à-vis matter and his assertion that methodology is more central compared to his theories. In the second one, he defended his guru's approach to tradition that argued that tradition should be considered as a part of the collective consciousness and that social transformation may not be possible without engaging with it. Dwivedi borrowed the metaphor *shava-sadhna* from the tantric tradition to assert the point that while doing this *siddhi*, the face of the dead body turns towards the *sadhak* and empowers him with transformative energy. The central idea of the tantric tradition is mastering the technique of accessing the layers of consciousness of oneself and of the other, in order to influence the real world.

Like any other left intellectual in India, he also faced this contradiction being a Marxist and engaging with the indigenous traditions. It is not important whether he could resolve this tension or not but to read the process through which he was attempting to do so. His famous book *Dusari Parampara ki Khoj* (2003) is the best example of his struggle to discover a radical tradition in India in

which thinkers like Kabir, Dwivedi and Nagarjuna could be counted and to whom he has dedicated this book. He has compared Dwivedi to Lenin in his own way, mentioning that "sometimes one feels that he (Dwivedi) would have lived more had he been less sensitive" as "Lenin's wife Krupskaya too had written about Lenin that he could have lived more had he been less sensitive." It is not merely a matter of fact, but an expression of Singh's subconscious mind that one of the items on his wish-list was the suggestion that India needed a leader who could combine the radical modernity of Lenin with the traditional sensibility of Dwivedi.

When I was called upon to introduce a course on Indian Intellectual Tradition at the Centre for Political Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, I went to meet him. He explained to me the need for such engagements which surprised me because this went against the commonsensical expectation from a famous Marxist scholar. But probably it was an inclination of many Marxists of his generation because I recall Randhir Singh, another legendary Marxist scholar saying

that he should have taken Indian philosophy more seriously.

His capacity to read politics between the lines was so sharp that even social scientists would find it difficult to keep up with him. For instance, once he took his audience by surprise by differentiating between the idea of *dyut* (gamble) as a *krida* (game) or a *leela* (the divine play). While the former is a normal game tinged with the pleasure of uncertainty, the latter is one in which while the outcome remains uncertain to the participants, to the divine (also a part of the game) the consequences are known from the beginning. He decoded Hindutva's politics of reading the text replacing *krida* by *leela*.

He offered this "clue" for multiple readings of religious texts and argued for reclaiming the radical tradition of interpretation, one that was initiated by his teacher Dwivedi in his famous novel *Ananddas ka Potha* (2016). The protagonist is a philosopher who believes in experimentation and tends to doubt the authenticity of every idea that is not verified by experience. At one stage, he questions the authenticity

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of the philosophy itself by questioning the value of knowledge that does not have the capacity to liberate human beings. Probably, Singh was guided in his endeavour by this question his teacher left for him and therefore, he argued for exploring the radical trends in Indian traditions, which could help people in their struggle for liberation.

Failure to Appreciate

As a critic and a public intellectual Singh was not beyond criticism. Probably, his ideological commitment took a toll on his literary self as he either ignored a good number of his contemporary writers or rejected them for not following the party line. For instance, he ignored Phanishwar Nath “Renu,” who was one of the great writers of Hindi literature. Anyone who has read Renu would agree that his experimentation with language is a great contribution to Hindi literature as it opened the floodgates for writings with regional sensibilities. His writings are the best examples of the way the literature of the marginalised communities plays a double role that of literary expression and also creation of social science knowledge. His novel *Parati Parikatha* (2009) captures the political transition in postcolonial India in the best possible way. His *Maila Anchal* (2006), which is much more nuanced as compared to Premchand’s celebrated novel *Godaan* (2007), is in a genre of its own. It is a mystery why such a wonderful critic like Singh missed out on the literary genius of Renu.

Similarly, he failed to appreciate the literary genius of Hiranand Sachchidananda Vatsyayan “Agyeya,” the author with remarkable capacity to raise existential questions through his novels and poetry and someone who invested his entire energy in taking Hindi literature to the unachievable height. He was critical of Agyeya for his egoistic reflections on the contemporary world which was full of disappointment and hopelessness. Singh contrasted the trend in Agyeya’s writings that ignored people’s struggle against the darkness of the era with Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh’s works which exposed the ruling classes in *Andhere mein*. The difference between the two poets

has to be considered a virtue in this case since both of them were able to expose two different aspects of the multilayered reality. One has to appreciate that Agyeya trained the Hindi reading public to engage with the complexity of the human psyche reflected in literary forms. Nevertheless, Singh’s greatness lies in his ability to correct himself as towards the end of his life he started appreciating Agyeya and declared him one of the great poets of India. Probably, he was able to resolve the epistemic tension emerging out of his efforts to reconcile the Indian intellectual tradition with Marxism and this was reflected in this act of reconciliation.

As someone who was known for his close observation of social change and its reflection in literature, it was not expected that he could miss three major trends emerging in the last decade of the 20th century. One of them is the rise of Dalit literature, which once again repeated the history of literature playing a significant role in the liberation of a community through the catharsis of the humiliation that it went through. For this community, like the role literature played for the Indian freedom struggle, it was a process of constituting a new self by reflecting upon their humiliation. Singh, who always advocated a progressive role for literature and was supposed to be against the idea of art for art’s sake, missed the point that caste is a real category in society and that it cannot be reduced to class by any means. Though one would like to grant him some concession on this score. I remember him speaking about Tulsiram’s two-volume autobiography *Murdahiya* and *Manikarnika* at a book launch where he suggested that these two texts should be considered to be a new genre of novels written with experiential epistemology.

I would have liked to know more about his silence on feminist writings too. Hindi literature has witnessed a huge upsurge in this genre of writing almost in all forms and these works are comparable to such literary expressions in other parts of the world. Yet, Singh managed to maintain complete silence on this issue. I am not sure if it was the epistemological limitation of an orthodox

Marxist thinker who was ready to give some concession to tradition but not to gender or it was the constraint of a thinker whose gender sensibilities were weak due to his social background.

Remembering Singh cannot be a complete experience without mentioning his proximity to power and which his critics never failed to mention. The last in this series was his attendance at a function organised to celebrate his 90th birthday by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). Sometimes celebrities become prisoners of their public images. He was supposed to represent the aspirations of radical writers and critics of the emerging Hindi world. I think this is the complexity of his personality in which ideology mattered but friendship mattered too. It is well known that he was on good terms with the director of the organisation and could not have refused the invitation. This is a familiar dilemma today in the context of the sharpening of ideological divides and demands serious philosophical reflections without engaging in a blame game.

It is difficult to compare him with any other public intellectual in this country who has influenced such a large number of people through his writings and particularly his lectures. The latter have become part of public memory, which is reflected by the number of meetings organised after his death in the different parts of the country. He was a great teacher, a wonderful person but above all, he was a philosopher and a creative thinker reflecting the intellectual potential of the Hindi-speaking population in India. It was difficult to appreciate all his contributions in the shadow of his towering personality. Hopefully, one would find more serious research on his ideas once he is physically absent but intellectually present amongst us.

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