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**Between Past and Future: Representations of Contemporaneity in Bhartendu
Harishchandra's Dramatic Works**

Modern Hindi vernacular discourse was inaugurated by the literary figures of North-West Provinces, centred around the Banaras-Allahabad-Kanpur region. The intellectual world of the North-Western Provinces in the second half of the nineteenth century is acutely aware of the backwardness of that region in terms of social and economic questions. In *Harishchandra Magazine*, edited by the leading intellectual and public figure of this region – also known as the father of modern Hindi, Bhartendu Harishchandra – the following editorial comment records this self-awareness: “The middle class of the North-Western Provinces has undergone a change as regards its occupations, but not in Social Manners and Customs which are the only objects in these days of civilizations to be surmounted over. The people of the north-Western provinces are conservative and are quite against the innovations of anything whether of social, moral or intellectual reform and hence the progress is slow. Bengal is ahead and is actually progressing, being divested of conservatism. *We should not however urge our north-west middle class to speedy progress which may bring reaction*, but shall patiently and gradually aid them to march cautiously and deliberately towards the attainment of that position in which the class men of a civilized nation are now-a-days placed.”¹ (15th Oct., 1873, emphasis added)

It is clear from the quote above that despite this awareness of the backwardness of this region there is an ambivalent attitude towards the social reform movements happening in other parts of the country, most noticeably in Bengal and Bombay presidencies. This ambivalent attitude characterised the whole intellectual world of this region during the second half of the 19th century.² In the decades of 1860s and 70s, the influence of social reform movements of Bengal and Bombay were beginning to

¹ cited by Satya Prakash Mishra, in the Introduction to *Balkrishna Bhatt ke Shreshth Nibandh*, Ed. By Satyprakash Mishra, Lokbharati Prakashan, Allahabad, 1998, p. VII.

² See Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*,

influence the social and intellectual worlds in other regions of the country also. In the North Indian regions also, from the 1870s onward, an influential social reform movement, Arya Samaj was emerging as a powerful reformist current. Although Arya Samaj as an organization and movement was most successful in the Northern province of Punjab, it became difficult to ignore the growing influence of its radical reformist ideas, for the intellectual elite of the North-Western Provinces. The educated Hindus of this region stood up against Swami Dayanand's ideas and the Arya Samaj movement in defence of what they understood as 'orthodox' Hinduism, naming it Sanatan Dharma. Bhartendu Harishchandra of Banaras was connected to one such conservative organization, the Kashi Dharma Sabha. As John Zavos, Vasudha Dalmia and others have argued, it is important not to understand the Sanatan Dharma organizations as unmediated reactionary organizations but as an important part of the modernizing process itself, albeit their vision and strategy of modernization were very different from that of the reformists.

The birth of modern Hindi language and literature took place at the same time when Kashi Dharma Sabha, with Bhartendu Harishchandra with its executive secretary, was bracing itself to face the challenge posed by Dayananda's reformist ideas, i.e. during the decades of 1860s and 70s. Bhartendu Harishchandra, along with Raja Shivprasad Sitarehind, was actively involved in the demand for the official recognition of Hindi language with Devnagari script. The language spoken by the urban Hindu and Muslim elite of this region was a common language written in two different scripts. But since the founding of the Fort William College in 1800, a debate was going on whether Hindi and Urdu were really one and the same language or whether despite their apparent similarity, and a common basic vocabulary, these were in fact two different languages, substantially distinct in their higher vocabulary and literature.³ In the 1860s, a demand for the official recognition to the Devanagari script emerged from the prominent members of the Hindu elite. Soon there developed a full fledged movement for the recognition of a separate language Hindi written in Devanagari script.

New Delhi: OUP, 1992.

³ Harish Trivedi, "Progress of Hindi: Part 2", in Pollock (Ed.) *Literary Cultures in History*; The officially recognized script for administrative and legal purpose in this region was Persian till 1900.

The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of new literary genres in the modern vernaculars of India. For the new Hindi language, Bhartendu Harishchandra made the most important contribution towards the development of modern literary genres in modern Hindi language. His creative output wasn't limited to any particular genre as he wrote poetry, essays, dramas, travelogues, and newspaper articles. His most important contribution, however, has been in the field of Hindi drama. He created a repertoire of dramatic works in modern Hindi.

Bhartendu also wrote an important essay on drama called *Natak*, in which he expresses his views on the contemporary plays in India, which he calls *navin*, meaning new and differentiates them from the Sanskrit drama. In this essay, he analyses traditions and procedures of classical theatre from the point of view of their use to the emerging Hindi drama, and in the light of Bhartendu's own experience, with some reference to the earliest Hindi productions, and also a summary of the history of drama in Europe.

Representation of Contemporaneity

Contemporaneity refers to time-consciousness, awareness of the time one lives in. But contemporaneity has to be differentiated from empirical simultaneity of different instances at the same point of time. In a way, contemporaneity, necessarily, has to be a constructed and represented. An example of such a representation is the Enlightenment concept of progress. Reinhart Koselleck, in his book on the semantics of historical time argues that "the concept of "progress" was first minted toward the end of the eighteenth century at the time when a wide variety of experiences from the previous three centuries were being drawn together. The solitary and unitary concept of progress drew on numerous individual experiences, which entered ever more deeply into everyday life, as well as on sectoral progress that had never before existed in this way. ...All such instances are indicative of the contemporaneity of the non contemporaneous or perhaps, rather, of the non-simultaneous occurring simultaneously." Contemporaneity thus refers to a special mode of representing time. Let us see how contemporaneity gets represented in Bhartendu's discourse generally and in his plays more particularly.

Bhartendu's consciousness of the special nature of the time he is going through is acute. References to time can be found in many of his works with terms such as *vartaman*

kaal, yeh samay, hamara samay, mahaghor kaal, vikral-kaal etc. Two of the features that emerge very clearly on Bhartendu's representation of his own present are: present as a time of transition and present as a time of crisis. An article by Bhartendu (written in English and published in *Kavivachan Sudha* in March, 1872) begins like this: "The state of transition in India, after a lapse of so many centuries of thralldom, is come under the paramount sway of the British nation. The country is gradually rising from the death like slumber of misrule and oppression by the appearance of the western rays of civilization and enlightenment, and with its bulk of multifarious population, is influenced by the progressive policy of the British nation."⁴

The terms like mahaghor kaal or vikral-kaal express the critical nature of the contemporary times or contemporary times as times of crisis for Bhartendu. In the play *Bharat Janani*, the character Bharatmata tries to wake up her sons by saying: "*Yeh poorva kaal ka samay nahin, tumhara vah din gaya, ab sheeghra utho aur is rog ke nivritt karne do sab mil kar ekyavalamban kar svastha chit ho koi upaya socho, nahin to rog badh jane par phir kuchh na ban padega.*" (these are not times like old times, your old days have gone. Now you get up quickly and get united and with a healthy mind think of some treatment for this ailment in a united manner, otherwise if the disease worsens, you wont be able to do anything.) It may be noted in passing that, in terms of its history, the concept of crisis comes to philosophy history from the science of medicine. A disease is said to be in critical stage when it can still be treated. Some of the titles of plays themselves express in a powerful way the contemporary time is comprehended as the time of deep crisis: titles such as *Bharat Durdasha* (India's Plight) and *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja* (City of Darkness).

There is a strong didactic orientation in Bhartendu's dramatic works. In the essay *Natak*, Bhartendu notes that the two of the most important goals or purposes (*uddeshya*) of the *navin* or the new kind of plays are: social reform (*samaj sanskar*) and patriotism or love of the nation (*desh-vatsalta*). Bhartendu's own dramatic works, almost all of them, are basically governed by these two imperatives.

Economic, Social, and Political dimensions of the Crisis as represented in

⁴ Bhartendu Harishchandra, "Public Opinion in India" in *Bhartendu Harishchandra Granthavali Vol. 6*, ed. By Omprakash Singh, Prakashan Sansthan, New Delhi, 2008, p. 361.

Bhartendu's plays:

Some of the main issues raised by this the nationalist economic critique were: poverty of India, drain of wealth, destruction of indigenous industries, heavy taxation of peasantry, inflation, frequent occurrence of famines, and the critique of the polity of free trade. Such an economic critique is present in many works of Bhartendu Harishchandra himself. Bhartendu's well known play *Bharatdurdasha* (1877) opens with a description of poverty of India and a feeble mention of the siphoning off of the wealth of the country to England, which soon became popular in the discourse of economic nationalism as 'drain of wealth.' The opening verses (in *Braj* language, still continuing as language of poetry in this region) of this very interesting play contain these lines:

*Angrez raaj sukh saaj saje sab bhari
Pai dhan bidesh chali jat ihai ati khwari
Tahu pai mahangi kaal rog bistari
Din din dune dukh ees det! ha ha ri
Sabke ooper tikkas ki aafat aai
Ha ha! Bharatdurdasha na dekhi ja⁵*

(Summary in Translation: There is visible prosperity under the British rule (*angrez raaj*); but the export of wealth to foreign land is a matter of great sorrow. On top of that there is a widespread inflation; God is increasing our sorrows by the day. The burden of taxation weighs on everyone like a calamity; the misery of Bharat is unbearable.)

Bharatdurdasha is an allegorical play with characters like Bharat, Bharatbhagya (Destiny of Bharat), Bharatdurdaiv (Tormentor of Bharat), Nirlajjata (Shamelessness), Aasha (hope), Rog (disease), Aalasya (laziness), Madira (liquor), Andhkar (darkness), Kavi (Poet), Editor, Bengali, and most interestingly, Disloyalty. The play shows India in miserable condition both economically and socially. The country is in the grip of forces like Darkness, Disease, and Laziness let loose on the country by the Tormentor of Bharat (shown to be half-Christian, half-Muslim in appearance). In the beginning scene, Bharat is shown to be on the verge of dying. It is saved by two forces: Shamelessness and Hope.

⁵ Bhartendu Harishchandra, "Bharatdurdasha" in *Bhartendu Granthvali I (Natak)*, Ed. By Shivprasad Mishra, p

The play describes the bad condition of the country in every domain but the fear of Disloyalty is all pervasive.⁶ It is not possible to speak against the government directly. In the end Hope wins. And the source of hope is the sun (of knowledge) rising in the West! In the last scene, Destiny of Bharat tries to wake Bharat up with the following exhortation: “Hey, brother Bharat, get up! Look, the sun of knowledge/science is rising in the West. This is not the time to sleep. If you don’t wake up under the regime of the British, when will you wake up? The terrifying rule of the fools is over; now the ruler (*raja*) is recognising the self of the subject. There is a great discourse of knowledge/science all around; everyone has right to say everything; there is a spread of science and technology everywhere. You still behave like a simpleton, lost in useless intoxication, same old folk-songs, child marriage, same old worshipping of ghosts and spirits, same old method of horoscope (*janmapatri*)! The same old mentality of contentment in little, the same old love of gossip, and destructive moves!”⁷

It is important to cite these lines as they tell us in a nutshell about the main items on the agenda of the nationalist discourse in Hindi. These basic elements can be found in this discourse for the next thirty years. First of all it indicates that the take off time for the nationalist project in India has come and that the Indians have to realize it (metaphor of waking up). But for the nation to take its destiny in its own hand, there are tasks to be performed. Here the economic, social, and religious issues are interlinked. There is a social reform agenda mentioned here (child marriage), there is also a struggle to be carried out against superstitions, there is a struggle against laziness and habit of wasting time in intoxication and gossiping, through disciplining time in everyday life. Most

⁶ Under the conditions of colonialism, the greatest enemy of Enlightenment, namely fear, becomes its constant companion. For an elaboration of this point, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*,

⁷ Bhartendu Harishchandra, “Bharatdurdasha” in *Bhartendu Granthvali I (Natak)*, Ed. By Shivprasad Mishra, p. 160; Original text: “*Hai, Bharat Bhaiyya, utho! Dekho vidya ka surya pashchim se uday hua chala aata hai. Ab sone ka samay nahin hai. Angrez ka rajya pakar bhi na jage to kab jagoge. Moorkhon ke prachand shashan ke din gaye, ab raja ne praja ka svatva pehchana. Vidya ke charcha phail chali, sabko sab kuchh kehne ka adhikar mila, desh videsh mein nai vidya aur karigari aai. Tumko us par bhi vahi sidhi baatein, bhang ke gole, gramgit, vahi balya-vivah, bhut-pret ki puja, janmapatri ki vidhi! Vahi thode mein santosh, gap hanknein mein preeti aur satyanashi chalein!*”

interestingly, there is also a critique of an ethical attitude originating in religion but having economic implications – the attitude of contentment (*thode mein santosh*).⁸ This last element will become part of the common sense and a recurring motif in the writings of the nationalist figures during this period and later.

In Bhartendu's other essays also one finds numerous occasions where he writes critically on the economic issues such as heavy taxation of the peasantry, export of Indian wealth out of the country.⁹ He always relates these issues to the question of the progress of the nation on the one hand and to the need to carry out some transformation in social and religious attitudes on the other.

A situation of crisis can be gotten over by acting on it. However, there has to be a specific form of action corresponding to the specific kind of crisis. When the crisis is national and historical, the form of action can only be political. The 5th Act of *Bharat Durdsha* can be legitimately read as a “search for the political.” The characters who search for the correct political form to get over the crisis in the 5th Act all come from the English educated middle class background. The scene is set in a Kitabkhana (book house/library or bookshop). It is a scene of a meeting of a Committee consisting of six civilized people. (In original: 6 *sabhyon ki ek chhoti si committee*). The committee form already indicates a preference for a certain political form. Nevertheless, there is an active discussion on the possible form of political action that can be legitimately adopted to get over the crisis. The Committee of the civilized is constituted by an impressive cast of characters. They are: Sabhapati (the chairperson), Bangali, Maharashtrian, editor, Kavi (the poet), and two deshi mahashay (2 local gentlemen).

The crisis is recognised as the attack of *bharat-durdaiv* (tormentor of Bharat). Force is first ruled out as the solution. The memories of the defeat of 1857 are still fresh. In any case this class had played a loyalist role in that episode. The character Bangali is

⁸ Few years later in an article “Jatiya Sangeet” written for his journal *Kavivachan Sudha*, Bhartendu again criticizes these two things *aalasya* and *santosh* and talks about the harm they can cause to the prospect of the progress of *Bharatvarsh*, see, “Jatiya Sangeet” in *Bhartendu Harishchandra Granthavali Vol. 6*, Ed. by Omprakash Singh, Prakashan Sansthan, New Delhi, 2008, p. 103. In this article, he also emphasizes the need to promote the progress of trade and commerce.

⁹ “Akbar aur Aurangzeb” and “*Bharatvarsh ki Unnati kaise ho sakti hai*” (How can India progress), in *Bhartendu Harishchandra Granthavali Vol. 6*, ed. By Omprakash Singh, Prakashan Sansthan, New Delhi,

made to say: *ye hamara bal ke bahar ki baat hai* (this is not within our powers). He then talks about the possibility of acting like British Indian Association league. He suggests making noises through newspapers, as it happens in Bengal, because the government listens to noise made in the newspaper. The Editor comes up with this solution: we should erect an army of education, an army of committees, weapons of newspapers, and the bombs of speeches. Then there is an objection to this solution from one of the local gentlemen saying that the rulers might get angry. The Maharashtrian suggests more radical solutions such as: *Sarvajanik Sabha* (A general assembly or association); a acquiring a clothe weaving machine, wearing home made clothes. All proto-Swadeshi elements. The poet's suggestion is that all the Hindus should give up there own ways of dressing and should learn the fashion of the Europeans. The first local gentleman objects that the colour of the skin of the Indians is still not white.

Suddenly, the character named Disloyalty appears in police uniform. They are all scared of Disloyalty. She accuses the committee members of conspiring against the government. The committee members come up with an interesting line of defence: they say that they are not against the government but are merely trying to promote the interests of the country. This seems to be the problematic of politics in the times of loyalty and of all pervasive fear of disloyalty: to promote the progress of the country without turning against the government. Bhartendu died in the same year that the Indian National Congress was born in. Being a conservative, perhaps, he would have endorsed the initial policy of the Indian National Congress of the exclusion of the social question from its political agendas, at least in initial years.

The political question of most far reaching consequences that pervades the political discourse in India during this time is the 'muslim question.' It is interesting to note that Bhartendu's treatment of the 'muslim question' in his plays is very different from its treatment in his essays, pamphlets, and public speeches. The dress prescribed for Bharat Durdaiva in *Bharat Durdasha* is "Half-Christian Half Muslim." The muslims get represented in the play *Neeldevi* is Hindu communal representation as the chief villains of the history of Bharat. However, in his best known essay, "*Bharatvarsha ki unnati kaise ho sakti hai?*" (How can India progress?), he argues that Muslims are part of Hindustan

and they must unite with the Hindus, Jains and other sects (*mats*) of India to work for the progress of the nation.

The word *unnati* is normally translated as progress, but a careful study will reveal that there is a subtle difference in connotation. In contrast to the universalistic scope of the Enlightenment concept of progress, the concept of *unnati* always has a definite subject, at least in the 19th century context. And this subject is *desh* or *jati* (a term used for both community and nation). Contemporaneity in Bhartendu's discourse takes the form of a project: the project of the *unnati* of the *jati* (nation). As a project, it unites all the empirical and non-contemporaneous instances into one homogeneous time of the *jati*/nation. Although its registers keep shifting, sometimes, it is the region, sometimes the Hindu *jati*, sometimes Bharatvarsha. The task of the theatre is to performatively create the sense of contemporaneity in its effect.