

The Joy of Literary Criticism

Mudrarakshas

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The editor has been complaining that Mathuradas hasn't been sending in his articles regularly. In point of fact, the problem doesn't lie with Mathuradas. The two-and-a-half year rule of the Janata Party made such a mess that everything became irregular. It will take some time before Mathuradas's articles can be put back on a regular footing. After all, he wasn't born with a magic wand in his mouth.

Instead of sending in my articles directly by post, I am trying to have them sent through the satellite INSET 1–B. When news comes from INSET, it has a certain glamour about it. Even if we do eat khicheri, when we use knives and forks and place napkins in our laps, a certain nobility radiates from our faces.

Take Doordarshan for example. After the news an announcer stands squarely in INSET's glow (why doesn't he properly bow to INSET first?) and announces that according to an image received from INSET 1–B there will be light showers with thunder. A report like that has a definite ring of truth about it. Up until now the Weather Service would report that there would be light showers with thunder, but people would take that to mean that the skies would be clear and they'd go out without their umbrellas. That's how the Weather Service got its bad reputation. Now, however, INSET graciously tells us that there will be light showers with thunder, and if it doesn't happen, it's our bad luck. If someone gives us expensive French perfume and we splash it on cow dung, is it the perfume's fault? If INSET says there will be light showers with thunder, there will be light showers with thunder. If not, then we can conclude that powerful, disruptive forces are at work.

So, Dear Reader, Mathuradas will begin sending his articles by INSET. That will bring about another advantage, too. Stuffing my work into

an envelope and dropping it into a red P.O. box has something of the bumpkin about it. INSET will give the process an international *je ne sais quoi*.

I must also make it clear, however, that Mathuradas will be very happy if the cheque for his work be sent directly to him in the old-fashioned manner.

So what does all this have to do with literary criticism? Nothing, except for the bit about the cheque. What I want to announce is that Mathuradas is about to enter the field of literary criticism. Literature is currently in a very bad way. Until a good critic puts his finger in the works, literature will continue to disintegrate. With a good critic watching over them, writers and poets will vandalise literature less.

Being a critic has many advantages and not one disadvantage. The foremost advantage is that critics are able to frighten people. Police officers can't frighten writers and poets. Hooligans can hardly frighten them because hooligans themselves slink away out of fear of poetry. Writers and poets aren't afraid of thieves and robbers either. They are only afraid of critics.

To frighten a writer or poet the critic has many weapons at his disposal. The foremost one is that in the process of reviewing a writer's book the critic can show that it's just twaddle. And it's not even necessary to go to all the trouble of reading the book in order to do that. Another sure-fire deadly weapon is silence. Mention ten writers and then either remain enigmatically silent about the eleventh or include him only under the rubric of *etc.*, and your weapon has scored a hit.

Furthermore, people have been able to simplify to a large extent this heroic activity of reviewing and criticizing. During the days of Acharya Ramcandra Shukla literary criticism was as difficult as visiting the four principle pilgrimage places by foot. Now all one has to do is hang up photos of them in one's room, and by contemplating each in its turn the same pilgrimage can be accomplished without all the fuss and bother. Clever critics have even gone as far as having the photographs replaced with miniature models to scale.

Poets themselves have put an end to most of the difficulty involved in criticism. In order to write about Ratnakar you had to know all sorts of useless things, like *chand*, *dhvani*, *alamkar* and *ras*. If your fate demanded that you had to deal with a poet as upside down and front backwards as Kabir, then you had to know everything about philosophy and history in

addition to literature.

Now, however, the process has become streamlined. To do literary criticism you don't need to read anything else, and you can do a good job without even reading the works of the author or poet himself. Not only that, you are no longer constrained to write literary criticism on literature. You can literarily criticize whatever you like.

Now, I can hear you saying, "How can that possibly be?" Listen. Let me explain. Suppose Mathuradas wants to write a review of a novel called *The Shades of Denmark*. He'll write something like this:

Suffering the terror of the inner life and displaying the values of some of the fundamental truths of unequal relationships, the writer peers keenly into contemporary society. The structural pressures involved in that approach testify to the insightfulness of the author's observations. The structural tension emerges out of the emotional tension, and the author, interfering in human destiny, comes face to face with the cost. The present work, *The Shades of Denmark*, is a document that underscores such experiences. Etc.

What did you understand from that? I didn't understand anything, either, nor did Mathuradas understand anything. Such criticism is not to be understood, it is to be experienced. Not only that, it is to be tasted. With such criticism not only will you confuse the writer, but you'll have the other critics spinning as well.

The most important advantage to such criticism is that you neither accept nor reject the book. You say it's neither good nor bad. The writer's enemies will understand your review to have panned the book, and they'll be happy. The writer's friends will take it for a rave, and they'll be happy.

If you can develop the habit of chewing tobacco after writing such a review, then the pleasure of literary criticism will be that much more magnified.

The demand for critics to give speeches and chair commissions has suddenly increased. That could give trouble to a critic with attitude. Before his speech he'll even have to do some homework. The contemporary critic, however, is saved from all that trouble. Like a politician, he is ready to give a moving speech anywhere anytime.

If you invite a politician to inaugurate a literary convention (having first received Parsai's regrets), he'll talk about the problems facing the country, and he'll mention the existence of disruptive forces. Should he be invited to help celebrate the opening of a new bridge, he'll still bring his disruptive forces with him. Sometimes, he'll even go beyond that.

Barabanki is a district in Uttar Pradesh. Yes, the same place where the story of Kishan Candar (I mean the story of his donkey) takes place. Once, the birthday of Rafi Ahmad Kidwai was being celebrated there. The politician who had been invited to open the festivities said, "I am so proud that an unparalleled singer such as Mohammad Rafi was born in Barabanki."

Critics can pull off such howlers in their literary criticism, too. No one will question them. No one would even dare consider questioning them. Therefore, Mathuradas is now on the verge of becoming a regular contributor to Hindi literary criticism.