

Open letter to the eminent writers who have returned their Sahitya Academy Awards

Respected Litterateurs,

The nation has been observing a strange spectacle for last one week. One after other, eminent writers have been returning their Sahitya Academy awards, in protest against “growing intolerance” in India, especially in the backdrop of most unfortunate murder in Dadri.

The manner in which this has been happening, its timing and the selective nature of the ‘outrage’¹, has raised serious doubts, which have already been expressed by many equally eminent litterateurs and other citizens. I will not repeat them.

My question is different: What purpose has your ‘protest’ served? Has it helped to reduce intolerance? Has it helped to promote harmony or only increased acrimony?

Any dispassionate citizen would agree: It has only exacerbated the situation and polarized the nation further. I can’t imagine that thinkers like you could not visualise the reaction to your action and really wonder why you did this? To satisfy ‘conscience’ or just to show the present dispensation which, as is well known from the remarks made by some of you during 2014 elections, is not to your liking, in poor light?

Have you not thus willy-nilly played into the hands of the politicians? We can understand their political compulsions, especially when a fierce electoral battle is going on. But what were your compulsions? Why have you all ignored the fact that the villagers of Bishara have already demonstrated by their behaviour that this was the act of lunatic fringe elements, and not a communal tangle arising from “growing intolerance” with “tacit approval” of the Central government as some of you have interpreted ?

Would it not have been better if you had taken some positive steps to promote harmony? Could you not have called a meeting of the thought leaders from various communities and discussed various contentious issues to evolve a consensus on respecting diversity and not hurting the feelings of any community? Does freedom of expression mean freedom to hurt the feelings of fellow citizens? Please recall the cartoons published in Denmark and France. Should freedom of expression extend to freedom to publish such things?

¹¹ For example no one, including any national TV channel, thought it fit to bother about the broad-daylight murder of a cow-protection activist in Moodbidri, Karnataka

I beseech you, on behalf of the concerned citizens of this country, to show by example how a community can live harmoniously in spite of differences in perception. Blaming each other, the Sahitya academy, the politicians, only breeds hatred, and hatred doesn't solve any problem. It is high time that all right thinking people, and litterateurs like you take lead in promoting harmony in the society, by removing mutual distrust and evolving limits to freedom of expression so that harmony is not disturbed again and again. We do not hope that politicians would ever be able to do it.

Can we hope that litterateurs would rise to the occasion and not satisfy their conscience just by pointing out the problems and blaming others, but actively contribute to evolving a solution? That would surely go down in the annals of Indian history as a momentous contribution of litterateurs.

Hope you would not dismiss this appeal as yet another 'sponsored' letter.

Sincerely

Prof. P.L.Dhar