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POLITICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THOMAS PAINE'S *RIGHTS OF MAN*

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Abstract

The French Revolution of 1789 was not simply a social and political 'event' in the history of Europe. It made its impact in the world of words as well. Most strikingly, it was the pamphlet war- or what is often described as the "Revolution Controversy" (1789-95) - which witnessed it as a favourite theme to be taken up by many thinkers, writers and philosophers. My study of Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man" tries to unearth the political dimension(s) of the text. The text in question is very much a part of the "Revolution controversy" as it does not simply attack Edmund Burke's conservatism and anti-revolutionary stand, but also champions, quite emphatically, Paine's political ideas. In fact, Paine can be seen as employing different 'strategies' to serve his end of "politicizing" and "mobilizing" the masses in favour of revolution. It is also interesting to see how "the French Revolution" emerges as a protean term which finds different meanings in the works of different writers.

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Introduction:-

The American Revolution of 1774 and the French revolution of 1789 not only changed the social and political landscapes of the countries concerned but had repercussions on other countries as well. Most importantly, they augmented passionate public/political debates over matters of 'universal' importance such as liberty, equality, rights of men, and the advantages /disadvantages of revolution, monarchy and other social institutions. But what triggered the major pamphlet war or what is often termed the "Revolution Controversy" (1789-95) in Britain was the French Revolution. It has been estimated that around 400 pamphlets were published in Britain on the subject of revolution and its implications, during the 1790s.

Though it is difficult to trace the genesis of the Revolution Controversy, it was perhaps Richard Price's sermon¹, as Tom Furniss opines, which sparked it off (61). Edmund Burke responded to it with his ferocious attack on Price and the French Revolution in his seminal work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which in turn provoked a spate of radical writings that were specifically intended not just for the (political) opponents but also the larger reading public.

Jeremy Bentham uses a phrase "the regime of publicity" in "An Essay on Political Tactics" to describe how the reading public grew in number and importance in the last decades of the eighteenth century. It was no longer viewed as a passive consumer of ideas but as a mode of opinion-making, "a kind of feed-back loop which has a potentially

¹ Delivered on 14 November 1789, the sermon argued that despite the 1688 Revolution, liberty in Britain was neither secure nor complete. In his conclusion, Price enthusiastically hailed the French Revolution, and implied that Britain ought to follow its example and thereby complete the political process that had begun with the Glorious Revolution.

transformative effect on the ideas it receives” (Andrew Franta 2). The works written were therefore not simply expressive of the writers’ opinions but were to serve specific, well-thought ends in the politically-charged atmosphere of the 1790s.

Detailed analysis:-

Seen from this perspective, Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* appears much more than simply an answer to, or a scathing denunciation of Burke’s conservatism and his anti-revolutionary stand. The work has larger political ends: to establish equality of men; to portray the ills of authoritarian regimes, aristocracy and hereditary government; to ‘showcase’ the boons of democracy, trade and commerce; and most importantly, to favour revolution. In fact, the text can be seen as not only making a strong plea in favour of revolution but also preparing, or rather inciting the readers (which comprised mainly of common men) towards it. A few examples from the text clearly illustrate the point:

As revolutions have begun (as the probability is always greater against a thing beginning, than of proceeding after it has begun), it is natural to expect that other revolutions will follow... revolutions are to be looked for (183).
From a small spark, kindled in America, a flame has arisen, not to be extinguished (232).

It is time that nations should be rational, and not be governed like animals, for the pleasure of their riders (258).
And it is to serve this end of “politicizing” and “mobilizing” the masses (Marilyn Butler 2) in favour of revolution that Paine employs various strategies. The major one is to de-stabilize the established social and political machinery of Britain by showing how “unnatural and oppressive” (265) it is. This he does by grounding the radicalism in his belief in the equality of all men. As against the traditionally celebrated discourses on “duties” which placed men in subservience to the state/society, Paine’s discourse upholds the natural “rights” of men which have its basis in “their natural dignity” (90). By insisting that “all men are born equal and with equal natural rights” (88), he validates his rejection of all man-made hierarchies between men. And if at all he talks of the ‘duties’, it is in an altogether different context. Described as “plain and simple” by himself, his notion of ‘duties’ consists of two points: Duty to God, which every man must feel; and with respect to his neighbor, “to do as he would be done by”. (89). Man’s duties towards the social and political institutions don’t have much place in Paine’s discourse.

Paine, furthermore, condemns monarchy and hereditary government as unnatural and tyrannical. Every king is to him a George III and a George III at his worst. The worst vocabulary is exhausted in the effort to render Monarchy odious and ridiculous: “Sceptered Savage”, “royal brute”, “breathing automaton” are presented as accurate characterization of kings. Burke’s elaborate and eloquent plea for the “divinity that doth hedge about a king” is wholly rejected by Paine who finds kings to be only useless and expensive figureheads-the sooner dispensed with, the better. The only function performed by them is that of making war and giving away places for £800,000 a year and being worshipped into the bargain.

Paine’s criticism of hereditary government and aristocracy is also no less pungent and bitter. He denounces Burke’s assertion of the nobility’s inherent hereditary wisdom; countering the implication that a nation has not a right to form a government for governing itself. Rejecting Burke’s definition of Government as “a contrivance of human wisdom,” he argues that government is a contrivance of man, and it follows that hereditary succession, and hereditary rights to govern cannot compose a government because the wisdom to govern cannot be inherited. He also seeks to abolish the institution of aristocracy which he associates with two major evils: Primogeniture and hereditary power.

Though Paine views man as essentially good and moral in nature, he also realizes the need of a government (which he views as a necessary evil). He favours a republic in which the basis of representation is personal qualities rather than the family name or financial worth. The essence of this government is that the “principles of despotism be given up and that of contract and consent accepted.

Paine concludes *Rights of Man* by proposing practical reforms of the English government: a written constitution composed by a national assembly (in the American mould); the elimination of aristocratic titles because democracy is incompatible with primogeniture, which leads to the despotism of the family; a national budget without allotted military and war expenses; lower taxes for the poor; subsidized education for them; and a progressive income tax weighted against wealthy estates to prevent the emergence of hereditary aristocracy. In unambiguous words, Paine conveys his belief that this utopian vision of the welfare state can only be realized by the help of a revolution.

Having stated how Paine champions the cause of revolution, there is a need to scrutinize his ways of doing so. In this regard, the first thing that needs to be taken in to account is that in the Paper War, the questions of representation and interpretation became fundamentally important as writers attempted to convince readers of the truth of their own accounts while discrediting those of their opponents. It is not therefore surprising to find Burke and Paine attaching different meanings to the same terms such as “French Revolution”, “Enthusiasm”, “Constitution”, and so on. Whereas for Burke, the whole enterprise of the revolution was vitiated by the “errors and excesses of enthusiasm” (208), Paine, on the other hand, looked to align the revolution with the nobler associations of the word in the Whig tradition of liberty. He believed that the “Bastille was attacked with an enthusiasm of heroism, such only as the highest animation of liberty could inspire” (56). Similarly, while Burke views French Revolution as a revolt against a specific individual Louis XVI, Paine focuses on principles rather than individuals.

Also, as has already been indicated, in the highly-radical and volatile decade of the 1790s, the categories of what is “right” or “wrong” no longer remained fixed and undisputable; they became subjected to all sorts of interpretation. What appeared “right” for one thinker became hellishly “wrong” for the other(s). And though almost every (political) writer condemned the others of distorting/misrepresenting the “facts”, no one himself/herself was entirely immune to it. Paine may have found Burke’s ideas and representation of facts in *Reflections* faulty and erroneous, but a close study of his own work clearly shows that it too is not without such faults. He himself is guilty of the very thing he criticizes Burke of, namely the distortion of facts. In his absolute rejection of Burke’s allegations that the Queen was endangered in the palace, and she and the king got insulted throughout their journey to Paris, Paine makes a sweeping assertion that the king accepted the original demand for his return as “the shouts of peace”, and that thereafter, there were no further troubles. Furthermore, in drawing a comparison between the constitution of England and France, he says that whereas in England the qualifications for being a parliamentary elector are arbitrary and capricious, in France every man who pays a small tax is qualified. What turns out to be questionable is the Paine’s consent to there being any financial qualification at all. In fact, he was soon to declare himself in favour of universal male suffrage, but never went so far as to advocate voting rights to women. He might have become a champion of the rights of men but his domain remained limited, for it did not include women.

The interplay of the private and the public is another noteworthy aspect of the text. Apparently, the text appears to be a private document, written in the form of a personal address/letter to George Washington, the President of the United States of America. But the very act of its publication registers its shift from the private to the public realm. In other words, Paine’s personal views about the English society in general and Burke in particular, as expressed in his “private” letter to Washington are made “public” through the act of the publication of the work. Paine’s manipulation of his rhetorical style, the pricing of the text and the methods of circulation of the book also indicates its public nature.

As far as the price of the book is concerned, it was deliberately kept quite low. Part I was published in 1791 at the price of three shillings and sold approximately 50,000 copies in the first year. Later, both parts were sold at the price of six pence. The intention behind keeping the book affordable was very pragmatic: to ensure wide circulation of the text in the public. In *The Politics of Language*, Olivia Smith argues that the price of the book greatly offended the government, according to whom, the “... inexpensive price was evidence of the author’s malicious intent because it established that the book was addressed to the ignorant, to the incredulous, to the desperate” (64). To ensure extensive circulation and easy availability of the book, Paine did away with all restrictions on its publication: there were no restricted copyrights – any and every press could publish it.

Furthermore, Paine’s radicalism derives great force from his rhetorical style. There are no two views that all great features of his ‘system’ – his theory of the state of nature, the rights of men, the representative government – had been marked out earlier by other thinkers and philosophers. But what set Paine apart from them was his rare faculty to make popular statements of his radical ideas. In the words of C.E. Merriam, “Few political writers had a more perfect mastery of the art of political persuasion – few have played more skillfully on the popular chords than the author of *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*” (402). Paine’s deliberate use of simple, unadorned, but at the same time, lively and provocative language was intended not only to successfully communicate his revolutionary sentiments to the reading public but also to win their allegiances. Realizing the power of Spectacle, his style also lays heavy importance on the visuals. The text is rich with such representations: “Lay then the axe to the root, and teach governments humanity” (80); “they [despotic principles of the government] were become too deeply rooted to be removed, and the Augean stable of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by anything

short of a complete and universal revolution” (69). And it is not for nothing that the book was later banned, and the writer prosecuted for being a scandalous, malicious, and seditious libel, and upon trial Outlawed.

Conclusion:-

One can therefore easily conclude that *Rights of Man* is not simply a response to another political thinker, Edmund Burke, but an effort to mobilize the masses in favour of revolution which is celebrated as a harbinger of a new era of peace, order, equality, liberty and prosperity. Paine’s scathing attack on Burke, his principles and his style can also be seen as his attempts to rid the British society of all conservatism and slavish adherence to the long-cherished institution of monarchy. For this purpose, he employs all the tools he could think of or gain access to.

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