

Fellow's Presentation- MAKAIAS

Topic: **Gagged Voices: Banned Writers of the Mao Regime**

Presenter: **Suvro Parui**, Fellow, MAKAIAS

External Expert: **Dr. Kamal Dutta**, Banaras Hindu University

Date: **15.06.2012** Time: **3.30** pm

Venue: **Azad Bhavan, Salt Lake**

Rapporteur: **Anwesh Ghosh**, Researcher, MAKAIAS

Suvro Parui's presentation dealt with Chinese writers, their works and their relations with the society during the Mao regime. He attempted to capture the manifestation of political ideas in Chinese literature and focused on how writers deviated from the socialist framework that was created in China during the mentioned period. He also touched upon the gradual move from classical Chinese literature to a new realm of discourse, which was distinct in terms of style, socio-cultural role and concerns. Through this process of transformation, certain issues and concerns not only generated lively debates in literary circles but contributed to the shaping of political thought and criticism in post 1949 China.

Parui began by emphasising the role of literature, especially novels, as important source material for understanding socio-political development in China for the period starting from October 1st, 1949. With the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, an attempt was made to mobilize writers, artists and personalities from creative fields to provide support to the new regime in Beijing. This resulted in the creation of a congress consisting of 824 members, with representations from creative and political fields alike. During Zhou Enlai's premiership, this body was requested to abide by the principles laid down by Mao Dun, the Cultural Minister and Director of the Cultural and Education Commission. Writers from the Party's domain were appointed at zonal levels.

When Mao took charge he wanted a departure from the existing order and launched the Hundred Flower Campaign (HFC) in July 1957, which encouraged the people to express their thoughts. However, this noble idea backfired. The people started criticising Mao's system itself; and this led the political authorities to reverse their stance.

Parui pointed out that this anti-rightist campaign was a reaction against the HFC. It represented a 'leftist' over-extension of the class struggle, which seemingly was 'extremely harmful, involved 'harsh and arbitrary criticism' and 'severely curtailed' artistic democracy. The Presentation dealt with the cases of a few writers and intellectuals like Ding Ling, Wan Meng, Liu Bin Yan and Zhang Xian Liang, who were penalised and silenced during the course of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Towards the end of the presentation, it was mentioned that the journals and debates prevalent in the society provided a diversity of opinion as critics began to stress upon 'critical realism' as opposed to 'social realism'.

Discussion Session

Dr. Kamal Dutta congratulated the presenter on the ground work he had put into the paper and observed that the period between 1949 and 1976 in China was a highly political one, a fact that makes it extremely volatile to capture. He argued that though Mao was a great thinker, yet his moves backfired because they were imposed from above as the state was disconnected from the 'real' problems which its people were facing. He added that Mao polarised the society into two sections - people and enemy - and anybody who was critical of the system was viewed as an 'enemy' of the state. This model penetrated into literary discourse in the 50s, which created problems for many liberated intellectuals in China. Dr. Dutta mentioned that it would be fallacious to argue that all important literary works were banned and himself threw light on some celebrated works like *Songs of Youth*, *Tracks of Snowy Forest*, *Keep up the Red Flag Flying*, *Red Son* etc which were published during this period. However he pointed out that there was a gross mismanagement of affairs during the Mao regime, as a result of which the handling of the contradictions of the common people went out of control. He concluded by saying that under the mentioned political environment, the literature produced had its share of misgivings; however it must be remembered that despite such periods in its history, China could succeed in emerging as one of the leading powers of the world.

Apart from valuable insights and recommendations from the expert, certain pertinent points were raised in the extended discussion session, some of which are as follows:

- Questions were raised on the role played by alternative literatures like pamphlets and handouts, while other literatures were banned in China.
- The broader political backdrop of China during the period in question was lacking in the paper, so suggestions to incorporate this angle came from the floor.
- Discussions also touched on areas like the transitional nature of Literature in China and suggestions to refer to classical literature were forwarded.
- Questions regarding the impact of these literatures on common people during that period were also posed.
- An interesting observation drawing a comparison between the scenarios in the Soviet Union and China was shared. Whether or not some of the Chinese literatures carried hidden messages in them was also asked, to which the presenter's response was negative.
- Finally, a question was posed about the concept of "Critical Realism" that was mentioned in the presentation; the presenter reserved his comments since he himself is currently reading about the concept.