

THE POETICS OF STATUES

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Men construct huge structures, make endowments, inscribe their names on monuments, create memorials, demonstrate their authority with seals imprinted with their images, consecrate statues and there by long for permanence. One such urge of the erstwhile kings, conquerors, military generals had always been reflected in the statues they themselves got erected or when their disciples had done so to prove their allegiance to the authority. There are statues installed by democratic governments too, to celebrate an occasion or remember a person. The Statue of Liberty standing as guard at the entrance of New York Harbor on Liberty Island is a gift from France to commemorate the 100th year of signing of the Declaration of Independence of USA. A symbol of democracy, it's also a colossal neoclassical structure.

But, this well known statue has an inscription on its citadel, a sonnet written by **Emma Lazarus** (1849-1887), "***The New Colossus***". Considered as one of the finest pieces of sonnets in English literature, it compares the Statue of Liberty with the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World. The Colossus of Rhodes no longer stands. Constructed to celebrate the Rhode's victory over the Cyprus, it was said to be approximately 70 cubits or 33 meters (108 feet) high, almost the height of the present day Statue of Liberty. Erected by Charles of Lindos in 280 BC, it collapsed during an earth quake of 226 BC. Parts of it are preserved, though never rebuilt; it stands as a big question to the endeavors of men or their ideas of permanency!

But my Statue of Liberty, says Lazarus:

*“Not like the brazen giant of Greek Fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. ...”*

Thus describes Lazarus the Statue of Liberty as the mother of exiles, and as distinguishable from the Colossus of Rhodes. While Colossus of Rhodes stood for ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and for exhibition of power, authority and victory in a war, the Statue of Liberty, says Lazarus, stands for compassion, an inviting Mother of Exiles!

*“Keep, ancient lands, your storied
Pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door! “*

Yet the question that lingers in the mind of any liberal today is: **“Is she now the same Liberty, the personification of liberty as Lazarus so passionately praised?** When the inviting golden doors are shut to millions of immigrants and asylum seekers, exiles and destitute in the name of **“America first”**, the first of the first colonizers, and when walls are erected with the neighboring States, is she the same Lady of Liberty who cried “Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” and invited those tired, poor and huddled masses yearning to breathe free? Time has erased the luster of even the claims of

Lazarus? Or as history demonstrated time and again – today's heroes are tomorrow's tyrants?

There are plenty of statues, and they stand higher and higher. The Sphinx and the Great Pyramid stand far taller than the Statue of Liberty. Competitive devotees clamor for taller, stronger, higher idols to consecrate their Gods, Kings and Gurus, owned or appropriated. Now the ancients are also in the race of surpassing all that is tall in the world. Sardar, one of the triumvirate of the freedom struggle with Gandhi and Nehru, standing as the Statue of Unity, a new Colossal, bigger than his mentor in the very land of the mentor, 182 meters high, on the river island constructed by a Multinational Company, with the aid of a much tainted Public Sectors' money, consuming about Rs.3,000/- crores of a poor and developing India, looking down condescendingly his mentor and all his comrades-in-arms or with inexplicable consternation? Housing within his steel frame reinforced concrete and bronze cladding exhibition, garden and museum, and with all the potential of inviting thousands of tourists, lo! He is he our Sardar! Challenging many, including the Spring Temple Buddha and the Father of the Nation, he occupies now more than two hectares of land, which probably he might not have ever ventured to occupy while alive!

There is another statue, which also stood for power and authority, the statue of Egyptian King Ozymandias. The Egyptian King was a villainous pharaoh who enslaved the ancient Hebrews and who Moses led to the Exodus. In the night in which, at midnight, the first born were slain, (Exodus12.29) Pharaoh urged the departure of the Israelites. God used Moses to save His people from Bondage in Egypt for 400 hundred

years. **P.B. Shelly** (1792-1822), in "**Ozymandias**" reveals the nature and state of statue.

*"I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ... Near them, on the stand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
...
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

Ozymandias, the ancient Egyptian King, now known as Ramesses II, regarded as the greatest and the most powerful Egyptian pharaoh, now stands as '*two vast and trunkless legs of stone*', conveying the ephemeral nature of human pursuits, with the civilizations themselves disappearing into a whisper. **P.B. Shelly** and **John Keats** were contemporaries. Here is a response to **Shelly** from **Keats** (1795-1821) in "**Ode on a Grecian Urn**", describing the Time's irrelevance to the physical and material, with a suggestion that it is the art that is an anti-dote to this impermanence. The art on the Grecian Urn, a decorative pot from ancient Greece, survives the test of time. Empires, emperors, civilizations and cultures appear, and again disappear traceless into the history but the piece of art remains.

*“Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,*

.....

*What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels! What wild ecstasy?*

.....

*When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”*

The earth is limited and as well the life. But the beauty of an art transcends the time and space constraints. A life gets immortalized by art. In one of the best descriptions of a noble person our ancient sage–poet and grammarian, Bhirrhari, writes:

*“Keyurani na bhushayanti purusham
hara na chandrojjwalah
Na snanam na vilepanam na
Kusuman naalankrta murdhajah
Vaanyeka samalankorati purusham
Ya samskrta dharyate
Ksheeyante Khalu bushanani
Satatam vagbhusanam bhusanam”*

[Anklets, bracelets, necklaces, bath, smearing of sandal or vibhuti, or wearing flowers and garlands, or well dressed hair – do not add to the value of a true man. Only the words uttered, rendered with culture, adds to the beauty of a noble man. All that glittering ornaments vanish, and what remains is the beauty of the words spoken.]

If so, will the statue do? Yet again, Sankara, the Advaitin, says in Bhaja Govindam:

*“Maa kuru dhana jana yavvana garvam
Dahati nimesha kaala sarvam”*

We remember Sardar as one of the greatest freedom fighters, as the man with absolute integrity, honesty and sincerity - of purpose and action, as the greatest adherent to his leader Gandhi, as the comrade-in-arms with Nehru, and many more freedom fighters, as a *satyagrahi* of highest order, and as the Iron Man with iron grit to unify the nation and as a man with great humility who spoke less, and did more. He is one of the tallest figures of modern Indian history. His greatness is within and not without. Hugeness of his statue may not be in furtherance of the ideals of this Great Soul, instead it distances us from him. We want to remember Patel as one along with our Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, as one in that triumvirate – Gandhi, Patel and Nehru – who constituted a formidable force in that anti-colonial struggle. The Indian freedom struggle is, probably, one of the best human struggles for freedom and liberation in the world history! The madness to dislocate Patel within huge fortified structures need not disturb the serious student of freedom struggle of India from appreciating and re-appreciating his contribution to the nation.

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