

Back to Square One on the Writing Board

By BS Murthy

So to say, in its origins, the writing board consisted the rectangles of recognition over which, in time, the pillars of popularity were formed that held the interests of the literature and the writers alike for long. However, in the later part of the last century, this bottom-to-top order was turned topsy-turvy by the pyramids of publicity erected by the publisher-media nexus to promote the writers with the right connections. When it seemed, all was irrevocably lost to the unconnected authors, came the internet to usher in the e-book revolution followed by social media explosion that once again restored the rectangles of recognition, albeit in unruly profusion. All the same, it's absurd that the daily churning of the writing mill of the day dwarfs the literary output of any yester-century, given even the enhanced social literacy! By and large, this is in the Indian context that may hold good everywhere else, and if only you bear with me, I would have a chance to explain this anomaly in the world of letters.

To start with, man would have made his mark with his brawn and woman with her beauty, and with time, the skill sets too came into the construct of the 'rectangles of recognition' in their respective communes. Over time though, what with the formation of broader societies, still on narrow communal lines, as the rectangles too got widened, recognition needed the word-of-mouth to fill the extended spaces. Eventually, the societal sophistication that ensued the evolution of arts had ensured the formation of the 'pillars of popularity' on the enlarged 'rectangles of recognition', which was from bottom to top progression that is fair and square for praise and patronage. However, the advent of, from top to bottom, mainstream media altered all that for the writers but yet the old model continues to serve the singers, the dancers, the painters, the sculptures and such visual artists, more or less that is, even in our era of overwhelming publicity.

However, unlike the visual arts, as the written words cannot be appraised on espial, writers have been traditionally handicapped and if anything, in the world of printed words, the publisher-media nexus dealt them a double whammy, more so in the recent past. What with this vexatious commercial nexus pitchforking their favoured folks as published authors into the literary limelight, the genuine writers got relegated into the scornful arena of self-publishing. Incredible though, that was when the mere sale of five-hundred copies of a published tome used to earn the writers the successful author tag in the newspapers' literary supplements and the magazines' book columns with guaranteed pre-launch interviews for their subsequent publications. But God only knows how many of those five-hundred 'sold' books forever remained as

showpieces in their buyers' bookracks even as their authors wormed their way into a million minds, of media-consumers. Yet, in the make-believe world of letters, it is the media awareness that imparts literary touch to the goings on in the learned drawing rooms that is besides scoring points in the quiz competitions, if one happens to be participant. Why, the media itself, the mother of publicity, fares no better in its eulogical obituaries of the famous writers, mostly of its own creation, for it seldom quotes a sentence or two from their writings as a measure of their literary worth.

However, as it seemed all was lost to the genuine writers, in came the internet with a formidable e-publishing space for their works as if to free the literature from the publishers' fanciful editorial grip and to directly deliver their e-books into the readers' digital laps to sort them out for themselves. Laudable though this literary freedom in principle, yet in practice, so to say, the internet opened the floodgates of writing, thereby enabling even those that have no business to write, to inundate the e-book space with all sorts of imitative works. If only the aspiring writers would read Leo Tolstoy's *What is Art* in which he articulated that to be qualified as an art, be it a good or a bad art, that work must be original foremost, and if not, it's just an imitation, no more and no less. What with the entry of the bloggers and the bots alike into the ever-expanding e-book arena to serve the ill-literary cause of the intruders, yet again it's a theatre of the absurd for the destined writers. So, be it the mainstream media or the social media, in either case, the commercial pull has been inexorably pulling down the literary standards. Have any heard any author of the day say that he was influenced by the writings of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Proust, Zola, Flaubert, or Fontaine, to name a few! So, to best describe the state of the current literature, barring honourable exceptions, as an analogy, one may borrow the old computer adage – garbage in, garbage out. But yet, on balance, the democratic word in the web world is far more conducive for the survival of the genuine literature than the literary tyranny of the publishing world.