

Why do I write?

"Recently I saw a house. It was ablaze. The flame was crackling on its roof. I went up close and I could understand that there were people still trapped inside the house. I walked in through the door shouting, "Fire! Fire! The roof is on fire. Vacate the house quickly. Vacate it quickly." But I could sense that the people inside seemed to be in no hurry. I noticed that the heat was scorching the brow of one of them but he began asking me what it was like outside, whether it was raining or there was a wind blowing and whether there was another house for them. Without giving any answer I went out once again. These people here, I thought, will burn to death for there was no end to the questions they asked..."

This is not my story – this story is being narrated by Lord Buddha himself to a few of his disciples. And the story is again repeated by famous German poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht in the concluding lines of one of his poems. In this poem Brecht draws a parallel with the former's ideologies on equality. Let me explain to you my reason for referring to this poem. It goes something like this:

The Radio has asked me, "Why do I write?" My forehead contracted when I had heard this request. I deliberated on what reply I could give to this question? Why don't they ask the clock, "Tell me Brother Clock, what makes you tick?" It is, of course, easy for the clock to reply. The clock will say – "I have been made this way; my construct is like this. I cannot remain without ticking. Ticking is my religion. If I cannot tick then I will no longer remain a clock"

But, of course, we do not put such questions to the clock for we too know that the clock has been made thus. All clocks have the same basic structure or construct. Similarly, a writer, perhaps, is constructed like writers. But all writers do not have the same construct. (Perhaps genes, chromosomes and family will also determine things.) The ticking of a clock is monotonous, is repetitive – but it will not do if a writer is repetitive. What will the readers think if a writer keeps writing the same story over and over again? Writing is my religion, I have been structured thus, and I cannot do without writing; if I cannot write I do not remain a writer." I cannot give such answers and escape like the clock. Certainly there is some reason for writing? Different writers, different reasons.

Oh! Perhaps that is why they have asked me this question, "Why do I write?" But the moment I hear myself uttering this question I become totally perplexed. What answer can be given to this question? Are there answers to all questions in this world? I find it hard to believe that someone is eagerly waiting to know why I write. But what I understand is that perhaps this same question has been asked to many others. Surely people have earlier asked this question to many other writers? What answers had they given? Right, hidden amidst the statements of these great writers, perhaps, my own answer lies. Who will waste his time to find an answer to why one writes? Then that settles it. Do I have any such autobiography of some famous writer? Like a goatherd I beat my scattered books together from all corners of the house. But in vain, in vain! All over the house I could only find detective novels (mainly Agatha Christie), humorous books (mainly P.G. Wodehouse) and all kinds of pornography - in other words, no trace of "Memoirs of Eminent Writers from World Literature" or any other such serious writings. What do I do now? Which library do I go to and in search of what? Suddenly I came across a small paperback, an anthology of Brecht's poems. I had not bought it myself; it had been gifted to me at some time. I turned over the pages and, ah! In the very first page Brecht had written why he writes! One small canon:

On a small ceramic lion's figurine –

"The superior derive delight from its graceful moves
And those who are bad fear its paws;

- If I could hear my poetry generate such effect"-

Whatsoever, I have no such longings. This will not do. I simply continued turning over the pages and after turning over a few, I came across this story of Lord Buddha:

Some students once asked Gautama Buddha: "Lord you have taught us that as we are bound to the painful wheel of joy and sorrow, we repeatedly keep returning to this world life after life. You have advised us to shed all cravings and worldly passions and escape from this tiring wheel of life and, thereby, attain *Nirvana* and merge with the one Great Nothingness. But Lord what is this *Nirvana*, this Nothingness? What is it like? We are ready to sacrifice all cravings in accordance with your advice. But tell us whether this non-existence, this Nothingness which we shall then enter, is it perhaps like the feeling we experience, sometimes, of being one with all creations of this universe, of being same, of having one soul and being completely merged into one being? When at noon, forgetting our physical being we indolently allow ourselves to drown in water or when sleep benumbs us and unknowingly we pull up the sheet and we go down fast into the bosom of deep sleep - is this nothingness like that - a happy and pleasant nothingness - or whether this nothingness is merely a nothingness that is cold, void and senseless." The Buddha sat in silence for a long time, and then said nonchalantly: "There is no answer to this question of yours." But in the evening, when the disciples who had asked the question had gone from there, the Buddha sat under the banyan tree and told this parable to those others who had not asked the question: "Recently I saw a house. It was ablaze. ..." Concluding the story Buddha said, "Those who have not yet experienced the heat and those who are more eager to keep talking, I have nothing to say to them."

It hit me that Brecht was also trying to tell something here - I kept on turning the pages and came across another charming poem, an ancient Chinese tale of how an old Tao preacher sage, Lao-Tzu wrote *Tao-Te-Ching*, the chief religious book of Taoism. Perhaps many of my readers know this story. Even then let me tell you the story in my coarse, prosaic language instead of in Brecht's enjoyable one.

Lao-Tzu's Road into Exile:
Legend of the Origin of the Book *Tao-Te-Ching*

Sage Lao-Tzu had completed seventy years of age. His body had become frail and feeble. Virtuousness and justice was no longer held in regard by the people and anarchy and injustice was multiplying by the day in his country. Lao-Tzu made up his mind that he would leave his country and travel to a distant land in search of peace. So he buckled on his shoe. He packed up a few necessary things into a bundle. Even though he had very little requirements he still needed this and that - things like the pipe he used to smoke every evening, the small book that he read daily and as much bread as he thought he would need on the journey. The Old Man mounted an ox and set out. A small boy walked ahead pulling the ox. The Old Man felt happy to once again travel across valleys but then came the mountainous tracks. And Lao-Tzu's ox happily went ahead munching the fresh grass. The Old Man had no objection to the slow pace of the ox. Four days into the journey, atop a rocky mountain, his path was blocked by a State Border Custom Officer who asked, "What valuables have you to declare there?" "Nothing," said the boy leading the ox. "The Old Man teaches." In short, that too was made clear. But the Custom Officer in a mood for mischief, cheerfully asked, "What has he discovered?" to which the boy replied, "How quiet, soft flowing water with the passing of years can erode hard rocks. Got it? In other words, the powerful also are defeated." Saying this, the boy tugged at the ox. It was getting late and he was anxious to move on. Shortly the three walked around a distant, dark fir tree and disappeared. But then something suddenly began to agitate the Custom Officer and he shouted out, "Hey, you folks! Wait! Wait! Old Man say what was it you said about the water?" The Old Man replied, "Oh you want to know, don't you?" The Custom Officer replied, "I collect tax only. I just guard the things one takes out of the country. But even I want to know who wins over whom. If you know please tell me. Write it down for me. You tell me and the boy will write. It is not correct to leave without sharing such knowledge. We have pen and ink out here and

I live out there. And we can share our supper. What do you have to say to that? Should we consider it a deal then?" The Old Man peeped over his shoulders to look at the man. He was wearing a patched tunic, was bare footed and his forehead bore no signs of a single line – Ah! This man has not yet been swallowed by thoughts of success and defeat. He spoke sweetly and softly, "You too want to know about this?"

But the Old Man was considerably aged and was incapable of snubbing polite requests. He said with clarity, "Those who ask questions deserve answers." The boy said, "It will get cold now." To which the old man replied, "Right, let's rest here for a while then."

The Old Man dismounted from the ox. For seven days he wrote along with the boy. And the Custom Officer brought them their meals. And all these days the Custom Officer swore at the smugglers in a hushed voice. In this manner, they completed writing and one morning the boy handed over what they'd written – pages filled with eighty-one aphorisms. And after that they thanked the custom officer for the small alms given to them and skirting that fir tree the three of them once again vanished.

At the end of the story Brecht asks, "Say, what more benevolence can a man show?" But we should not be contented singing the praise of the old sage only for Lao-Tzu's name has already been acknowledged on the cover page. His abundant knowledge had to be extracted by somebody. The Custom Officer had insisted that he could not go away with the knowledge he had gained without sharing it with anyone. So we should not forget to express our gratitude to the custom man.

Closing Brecht's anthology of poetry I am contemplating on the question asked me "Why do I write?" but I cannot think of an appropriate answer. I have to give an answer to this. Hadn't Lao Tzu told the custom man that if a person wants to know something he deserves an answer? (That is why we are grateful to the Radio for asking me the question). Even though Lord Buddha had at first said, "There is no reply to your question," he later answered the question although there was no precedence from which he could draw an answer. But we are not Lao Tzu – what answer can we give now. I remember that the question asked is not a new one. Once at an interview at the *Sahitya Sabha* (literary meet) I was asked this same question – "Why do I write?" Not being able to think up anything I had to answer very briefly. The answer, undoubtedly, is not wrong. Perhaps like in man's other work areas the reasons for writing may also be traced to some such root sources - wealth, fame, respect, social correctness and responsibility, some one line from a book, some inspiration drawn from teachers, some anxious parents' support, some lover's encouragement, desire to capture the reality and immortalize it, social and cultural desires, propaganda, sex, perception of fine art, creative pressure and editor's demands ... All these are possible, but not a must in all situations. If we do not desire wealth then we desire fame, if we have not been struck by creativity then we desire propaganda etc. etc., but there is one thing everyone desires, that the thing should be printed, should be published, people should read it, listen to it, express their opinions on it. Just as there is nothing like a voiceless poet, there is no such creature as a voiceless writer. We have not seen any writer writing to have his writings locked up in a stashed away box. Therefore, I think I can give the very same brief answer I had given the *Sahitya Sabha* – "to publish."

(Radio talk)