

To bridge or not to bridge JLF comes to close with debate on Left-Right divide

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Jaipur, Jan 23 (PTI) The thundering clouds over the Pink City on Monday were matched by the fiery closing debate at the Jaipur Literature Festival here as Indian writers, thinkers and politicians from the Left and the Right argued over the ideological divide.

The 16th edition of "one of the biggest literature festivals" came to a close with Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar, literary historian Purushottam Agrawal and scholar-activist Vandana Shiva speaking in favour of the topic: 'The Left and Right Divide Can Never Be Bridged'.

On the other side of the debate were former diplomat and lawmaker Pavan K Varma, Rajya Sabha MP Priyanka Chaturvedi and novelist Makarand R R Paranjape, who essentially argued that a bridge can be built over the ideological divide.

Opening the debate moderated by columnist Vir Sanghvi, Sircar said after the fall of the fortress of Bastille in France in 1789, the terms Left and Right were coined based on the people who were against the monarchy and those who wanted to retain the monarchical system respectively.

"As time went on, the term Right acquired certain traits for itself going back to orthodoxy, reframing their own plastic and fraud history, imagining heroes and gods. It happened not only in India, but also all over the world," he said.

Sircar argued that Left and Right meant progressive and regressive, and like "north and south, they can never be bridged".

Agrawal, in Sircar's corner, argued that the terms were given at a certain point in history but the tendency and the phenomena existed much before that. "It is a perpetual conflict between fundamental world views."

Shiva noted that the two sides cannot meet as they are "organised on totally different parameters".

"The Right is organised around the issue of cultural domination and cultural superiority, but the Left is organised around equality, justice and the economic spheres. The two spheres are incommensurable, they cannot meet unless you change the terms or parameters," she argued.

The proponents of bridging the gap, Varma, Paranjape and Chaturvedi, argued that the ideologies are a "Western construct" and that the two sides should work closely for a progressive and united India.

"In India, we believe in civilisational unity. We can disagree but we agree there is an essential unity not only in nationhood but also in civilisation," Varma said, adding that it was for prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru who leaped across his ideological differences and invited the RSS to join the 1963 Republic Day parade.

Former prime minister Indira Gandhi honoured nationalist leader V D Savarkar with a postal stamp despite her disagreement with him and her own centre-left leanings, Varma said.

"The Left will learn from the Right, the Right will learn from the Left. We will try to improve both and work towards a great India," the former ambassador to Bhutan added.

Novelist-poet Paranjape said the proposition that the Left and the Right cannot be bridged is "counter-intuitive and counterfactual".

"Not only does the bridge exist, but I dare say many people right here have walked

back and forth across the bridge. The debate is not between Left and Right, but 'right' and 'wrong'. I don't mean to say that the Right wing is right, nor do I say the Left wing is always left out," the writer of 'JNU: Nationalism and India's Uncivil War' said.

Meanwhile, Shiv Sena leader Chaturvedi added grit to her side by saying that the Left and the Right schools of thought do not apply to the Indian governance model. "India has its own construct."

The wide-ranging debate heard arguments on history, politics and semantics of the ideologies as both sides argued on a number of historical events, including the Partition, the 1984 Delhi riots, and the 2002 Godhra riots in Gujarat.

The seemingly inconclusive debate came to an end with a voice vote from the audience, with festival producer Sanjoy K Roy leaning towards those in favour of the motion that there will always be a divide between the two ideologies.

Over the course of five days, the literary spectacle witnessed scintillating debates and exciting discussions on topics ranging from history to politics, culture, cinema, poetry, religion and science.

The festival hosted the likes of Nobel Prize for Literature winner Abdulrazak Gurnah, Booker Prize winners Bernardine Evaristo, Marlon James, Shehan Karunatilaka, and Geetanajali Shree – the first Indian to win the International Booker Prize.

The literary event also saw participation of Indian writers and poets, including Javed Akhtar, Gulzar, Sudha Murty, Amish Tripathi, Shashi Tharoor, Anamika, and Mukulika Banerjee.

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