

What was I doing
When
Everyone was saying "Hail"?
I was also saying "Hail,"
And was afraid,
As everyone was.

What was I doing
When
Everyone was saying,
"Aziz is my enemy"?
I too said,
"Aziz is my enemy"

What was I doing
When everybody was saying.
"Don't open your mouth"?
I also said,
"Don't open your mouth.
Say
What everyone says."

The shouts of "Hail" have ceased.
Aziz has been killed;
Mouths have been silenced.

Bewildered, everyone asks
"How did it come to pass"?
As others ask
So I ask,
"How did it come to pass?"

Summary and Analysis

The poem 'Prakriya' by Shrikant Varma was first published in the Hindi anthology "Jalsagar" in the year 1973. This was translated from Hindi by Vishnu Khare and published in Signatures: One Hundred Indian Poets (2000) with the title "Process".

The poem highlights the predicament of individuals in society who become a part of such opinions, which go against their own fundamental beliefs and principles, often resulting in disastrous consequences. As in the case of the speaker in the poem, they do so either out of fear or out of wanting to belong to a particular social/ religious/cultural/ economic or caste group.

When everyone was saying "Hail" the speaker in this poem also said "Hail" The speaker like everyone else said this not because he wanted to, but because he was afraid, just as everyone else was afraid. Now, what were they afraid of ? The speaker does not specify.

The society in which we live consists of many groups based on religious, cultural, linguistic class, and caste affiliations. Sometimes on certain issues there could be friction between the groups and this could lead to animosity and confrontation between people belonging to two different groups.

Sloganeering is one way in which people belonging to one group try to garner support for their point of view and also to assert their power and strength vis-viz the other group. Often when we are in complete disagreement with the majority view of the group to which we belong, we still endorse it and do not express our differences. This silence could sometimes lead to tragic consequences. When sane rational voices choose to remain silent because of fear, then irrational and aggressive voices take over and create mayhem. When everyone was saying "Aziz is my enemy" the speaker in the poem concurred with the others and just like everyone else chose not to "Open" his mouth.

The name Aziz in the poem, hints at the some kind of communal tension which as you know has plagued our nation. But this however is not the central point of interest in the poem. Who is Aziz? Why is he being called an enemy? These questions are not relevant to the point that is being made in this poem. The main concern in this poem is opinion formation in groups and the inability /reluctance/fear of individuals within the group to take an independent stand. Freedom of speech, thought and expression become simply hollow phrases in the face of such situations.

The consequences of targeting an individual or group by a more dominant, vocal, aggressive group invariably results in a tragedy. In this case the mobfrenzy of which the speaker is also a part results in "killing" of Aziz. When groups turn into mobs, they become irrational and violent and this results in senseless bloodletting. With the death of Aziz, the shouts of "Hail" have stopped and mouths have been silenced. When people say "hail" it is usually to cheer, salute or enthusiastically acclaim something. Whatever it was, that was being saluted and cheered by everyone, seems to conclude with the killing of Aziz. It is almost as if all "hails" were leading to this particular end.

The speaker in the poem like everyone else is bewildered and unable to comprehend how something like this could have come about.

The poem ends abruptly and is a chilling reminder to individuals that it is important to exercise their option of independent thought and expression. Silence on their parts makes them complicit in the crime that is perpetrated and any regret or bewilderment after the crime is done, is simply meaningless.

The speaker who has participated in the first three of the above actions, was however a reluctant participant and did it out of fear like so many others. We know this because the speaker is truly bewildered and unable to make sense of Aziz's death. This poem by describing one instance of opinion formation and the disastrous consequences of the same emphasizes the need of sane and rational voices to express themselves freely and fearlessly. Differences between groups however serious in nature, in a civilized society should be settled by discussion and debate and not by irrational mob violence.