



A coup d'oeil of Literature & Culture with their roots

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Literature is so multifaceted that it generates a medley of definitions, perceptions, interpretations, and explications with each litterateur and critic having their own distinct perspectives. Literature, in my view, is an aesthetic and thought-provoking or motivating reflection of the writer's mind and heart focusing on emotions, creative ideas, the rainbow of personal, inter-personal, societal, and environmental developments and viewpoints as triggered by various factors within himself and in the eco-system surrounding him of which he is an inseparable part. While every writer or artist has his own distinctiveness—

“Even the greatest genius is necessarily moulded by the culture, ideals, and mental and moral tendencies of the world into which he is born, and the character of what he produces is therefore to a large extent determined by these” (William Henry Hudson, An Outline History of English Literature).

Just because we say literature is a reflection of the society, it is not supposed to be a copy-and-paste affair but an aesthetic, inspiring, syncretic, cathartic, and harmonious one, not a crude and instigating one... not political pamphleteering, not the despotic, hurting and invasive angularities of exclusivism. In short, literature is a salubrious tonic of sapience to draw upon its distilled quintessence—that we are all part of the same web of creation with its multiple links, and with a positive attitude of give and take.

Culture

Culture is a dynamic continuity of history and natural evolution with necessary adaptations, deductions and additions on an ongoing basis. Each geographical entity has its own specific culture that is a coalescence of tradition, folk arts, classical arts, fine arts, performing arts, philosophical and spiritual wisdom, way of life, food habits, intra-and-inter-societal bonds and values, religion, temples, architecture, philanthropy et al.

Literature is, naturally, intertwined with culture. True literature together with our objective and epistemological experience of life makes us realise that God has created various systems so that we should be on a quest to learn from each other. Life has positivity and negativity like light and shadow. Wisdom lies in striking a healthy balance between them.

Spirit of and dedication to duty

True understanding of literature and culture clarifies to us the purpose of our life and our role in it. It is but natural that the difficulties, obstacles, unhealthy practices in the society that we face make us disheartened, depressed, and even incensed. But stopping there and keeping fuming or lamenting is no solution and it doesn't carry us anywhere. The only way is to accept and follow the imperative



of going on discharging our ordained duties, come what may—like our brave soldiers protecting the borders and the sovereignty of our country. In the *Mahabharata*, when Arjuna was wincing to go ahead and fight the war that had already been declared—after every effort for peace had failed, we all know how Lord Krishna urged Arjuna to fight on till the end with all his might, never once pausing to think of the ensuing result or any other distraction.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

Likewise, the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley (1849-1903) gives a clarion call for the sense of courage of conviction, self-confidence, duty-mindedness, and sangfroid.

*“In the fell clutch of
circumstance I have not winced
nor cried aloud. Under the
bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
... ..
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.”*

In the same spirit, the poem “Ulysses” by an earlier poet Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) feistily reverberates—

“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Excessive and exclusive talk of rights totally sans responsibilities doesn’t provide a holistic perspective of life.

Ethical education & values

To know and imbibe positive things like the above, we should be on a constant quest with an open mind. In a world where venality, horrendous crimes including cyber scams proliferated by the highly educated are ruling the roost, it’s time we recalled the ‘**seven social sins**’ pointed out by **Mahatma Gandhi**—“*Wealth without work; Pleasure without conscience; Knowledge without character; Commerce without morality; Science without humanity; and Worship without sacrifice*”—and did our bit or best to ensure the purity of both the means and the ends.

Simple academic knowledge or power or pelf doesn’t make a person ipso facto virtuous. Inherent and infectious goodness can be seen even in the uneducated and economically poorer people. That’s why, **Bhartrihari**, the ancient Indian philosopher warns that a man with negative qualities exploits education for quarrel; money for pomp; and authority for harassing and persecuting others; while a man of morals uses education for dissemination; money for rightful purposes and charity; and authority for protecting the law-abiding people.



विद्या विवादाय धनं मदाय | शक्तिः परेषां परिपीडनाय |
खलस्य साधोर्विपरीतमेतत् | ज्ञानाय दानाय च रक्षणाय ॥

Good qualities need to be learnt right from a very young age; and it's good that our school children have the following **daily national pledge** in their morning school assemblies—

“India is my country. All Indians are my brothers and sisters. I love my country. I am proud of its rich and varied heritage. I shall always strive to be worthy of it. I shall give my parents, teachers, and all elders, respect, and treat everyone with courtesy. To my country and my people, I pledge my devotion. In their well-being and prosperity alone, lies my happiness.”

The above ethical values need to be ardently assimilated and put into practice throughout our lives, not just during our school lives or as tokenism—irrespective of one's religious affiliations. We have to conduct ourselves in such a manner that when any foreigner looks at us, he should recognise us as an Indian but not as the follower of a particular religion. Hence it will be good if this pledge is made compulsory for every section of our society irrespective of their level of education or profession or occupation.

Our roots

Staying rooted to our Indic/native culture is so vital for its existence, survival and progress that the great **epic hero Shri Rama** himself emphasised it. As we all know, Sita, the consort of Shri Rama was treacherously carried away by Ravana—the demon-king—to his country Lanka. To retrieve her, Shri Rama along with his younger brother Lakshmana and their simian army invaded Lanka, battled and killed Ravana. Charmed by the wealth of Lanka, when Lakshmana said that they better settle down in that island, Shri Rama said—

अपि स्वर्णमयी लङ्का न मे लक्ष्मण रोचते |
जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी ॥

“Lanka despite its golden treasures doesn't appeal to me since one's mother and motherland are superior even to the Heaven.”

That is the importance of one's native culture and native identity. Likewise, **our respective mother tongues together with our matriarchal Sanskrit**—the oldest, richest and most ingenious language in the world—are equally important for the promotion of our Indic culture aka sanatana dharma. We can survive only on the basis of our native cultural values. If we continue to be enslaved by aping the foreign cultures, it's like a petrol vehicle sought to be filled with and run on diesel and vice versa.

Individuality is distinct like the thumb impressions of humans and the stripes of tigers—as a part of rich diversity. It doesn't however mean that we should be egotistic and narcissistic. We should be broadminded and modest enough to subordinate our personal interests to the larger interests of the society we are a part of in the spirit of symbiosis, universal harmony and altruism.



The first step toward universal harmony is to follow our own culture, learn and promote our own Indian languages and build strong bridges across them. Unfortunately, we have got so addicted to the enslaving cultures that we are resorting to self-flagellation, and idolisation of the foreign cultural and intellectual mores and fashions. This is exactly what **Thomas Babington Macaulay** (1800-1859) wanted of us. The ulterior motive of the English education system he succeeded in imposing on us was—

*“...to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern,
—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in
morals and in intellect.”*

Bharat—that is India—despite being the greatest repository of multifarious wisdom since ancient times in almost every field and never invading any country despite being wealthy—lured the foreigners to invade, conquer and enslave us. Yet, Macaulay ridiculed us—

*“A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India
and Arabia.”*

It's a clearcut fact that the British—and other invaders including the ideological—wiled us with their spurious **divide and rule tactics** pitting one caste against the other even as a number of saints like Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Chaitanya, and Annamacharya were against untouchability and any type of socio-economic discrimination. Of course, certain type of discriminations at individual or certain factional levels always exist in any society, even as the scriptures are against such malpractices, and we have to effectively counter them but with no violent eddies. This is in the paradoxical background of the invaders decimating many native races across the world and permanently occupying their lands, ushering in the slave trade, apartheid, etc., and yet pinpointing our Indian society as discriminative. And what about the self-styled egalitarian regimes with their totalitarianism? Does their President or the Prime Minister host dinner to his driver or attendant at his own table?

Likewise, to spark off hostility and hatred against **Sanskrit**, the colonialists distorted the history by alleging that it was the language of the alien Aryans who they said were the first invaders of India. If Sanskrit was really so, is there any historical evidence like—the presence of Aryan dynasties outside India with Sanskrit names; presence of any Sanskrit literary work or inscriptions outside India? If Aryans and their Sanskrit were conquerors of India, why in their works they praised only the land of India with its vast diversity—its rivers, its mountains, its seas, its lands— and not the foreign soil they were presumed to hail from?

At the same time, **we are not opposed to English**—which willy-nilly has become a de facto lingua franca of the word—and we would like to learn and use it—respecting the words of **Rajaji** (Chakravartula Rajagopalachari) the freedom fighter and statesman from the Tamil land—that the English language is a gift to us from Goddess Sarasvati. English will certainly be a medium to express our views, knowledge and wisdom to the English-savvy world outside India but not at the



cost of our native mother tongues. However, the English taught in our country should contain an optimal number of chapters on our native culture.

Of course, we have our share of superstitions in our society; and many a reformer has chastened them from time to time. In the name of superstitions, we needn't jump into a non-Indic culture, as **Swami Vivekananda** puts it—

“We have to find our way between the Scylla of old superstitious orthodoxy and the Charybdis of materialism—of Europeanism, of soullessness, of the so-called reform—which has penetrated to the foundation of Western progress. These two have to be taken care of. In the first place, we cannot become Western; therefore imitating the Westerners is useless. Suppose you can imitate the Westerners, that moment you will die, you will have no more life in you” (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 3, Section: Lectures from Colombo to Almora, Chapter: Reply to the Address of Welcome at Madura, page 172).

As for the social reforms, Swami Vivekananda avers that the naturally evolving ways of a society shouldn't be interfered with for a reform unless that reform benefits a large section of the society. He also advises that reforms should not be based on the whims and fancies of the non-Indic occidental perceptions. He goes on to say—

“Most of the reforms that have been agitated for during the past century have been ornamental... The question of widow marriage would not touch seventy per cent of the Indian women, and all such questions only reach the higher castes of Indian people who are educated, mark you, at the expense of the masses... You must go down to the basis of the thing, to the very root of the matter. That is what I call radical reform. Put the fire there and let it burn upwards and make an Indian nation” (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 3, Section: Lectures from Colombo to Almora, Chapter: My Plan of Campaign, page 216).

Way of life

Keeping the above things in view, we should lead our lives in a healthy way. Being engaged in literary, artistic, spiritual, and altruistic activities gives us real pleasure, as the Hitopadesha says—

**काव्य शास्त्र विनोदेन कालो गच्छति धीमताम् ।
व्यसनेन च मूर्खाणां निद्रया कलहेन वा ॥**

“The wise spend their time in literary, intellectual or scientific quest and edutainment; whereas the fools fritter away their time and energy in gambling, vices, quarrels and excessive sleep.”

Spiritualism is something related to our soul, and let's heed the words of **Democritus**, a Greek philosopher (460- 370 BC)—



“Happiness resides not in possessions, and not in gold, happiness dwells in the soul.”

This type of equanimity sans hedonism can be achieved when we accept and follow certain perennial principles like having purity of thought-word-and-deed—living prescripts like “Practise what you preach”—and righteous earning to fulfil our desires and lead our lives in a wholesome manner (Dharma-Artha-Kama-Moksha).

Literature & Culture

Literature is a vast field with numerous genres. The **diction and styles** depend upon the nature of the theme and depth of thoughts, upon the vastness and profundity of lingual erudition and dexterity of the writer, and the target readership and even the posterity as well. After all, Style is the man, the saying reminds us.

As to the level of words used, let’s hear what **Cardinal Newman** (1801-1890), in his *Idea of a University* says:

“While the many use language as they find it, the man of genius uses it indeed, but subjects it withal to his own purposes, and moulds it according to his own peculiarities. The throng and succession of ideas, thoughts, feelings, imaginations, aspirations, which pass within him, the abstractions, the juxtapositions, the comparisons, the discriminations, the conceptions, which are so original in him, his views of external things, his judgments upon life, manners, and history, the exercises of his wit, of his humour, of his depth, of his sagacity, all these innumerable and incessant creations, the very pulsation and throbbing of his intellect, does he image forth, to all does he give utterance, in a corresponding language, which is as multiform as this inward mental action itself and analogous to it, the faithful expression of his intense personality, attending on his own inward world of thought as its very shadow... the style of a really gifted mind can belong to any but himself. It follows him about as a shadow. His thought and feeling are personal, and so his language is personal.”

Otherwise, why so many different types of words, idioms, phrases, and syntaxes come into existence and find their way into the dictionaries?

Entrapped in the overseas literary movements, we too, the Indians, have denounced the metrical poetry alleging that poetry should reach the common man. However, it’s a common knowledge that a number of the current day poets use free verse but the sentences that some of them use can’t be easily understood. We understand each word they use but the intended purport of the sentence is hard or impossible to decipher—be it under the conscious or unconscious influence or aping of theories like Abstraction, Ambiguity, Avant-Garde, Existentialism, Symbolism, or Surrealism.

the original lame excuse of discarding prosody on the ground of reaching out to the laity is totally lost. Of course, not every free verse can be faulted.

Whatever modern critics argue, metrical poetry has its own beauty, brevity, musicality and mnemonics vis-à-vis the modern verse libre wherein the sentences are unnaturally broken with no basic punctuation and no capitalisation of the initial syllables of the lines—on the lines of



chaotic road traffic. Metrical poetry is akin to the symmetry of a house or a car whereas the free verse is irregular in shape. Despite being despised, metrical poetry is thriving across the world.

Translation from one language to the other is highly important in the zeitgeist of the much-touted current global village concept though this concept is woolly with increasing international conflicts. Translation is a step toward universal empathy and harmony. Shortage of **well-researched comprehensive dictionaries in Indian languages**—especially from and to English—and from one Indian language to another—and the lack of thesauruses—is a stumbling block in the way of meaningful translations. While the English lexicography is highly professional—be it from the United Kingdom or the USA—the position of Indian languages in India is unenviable with the research being perfunctory. Quite a good number of words from the works of learned writers over the last 150 years or so are yet to enter the Indian dictionaries, especially the Telugu. Though the equivalents of the English names of some of the animal and plant species are available in our native tongues, these dictionaries carelessly generalise them simply as “the name of a type of animal/plant”! Likewise, a wealth of evocative words in our Indian languages are shoved under the carpet because of non-use. There is no systematic mission of translating into our mother tongues the many English words in daily circulation in our country. It has become a fashion to use English everywhere, and in any situation—by calmly accepting all its inherently conspicuous oddities, and giving a step-motherly treatment to our own mother tongues—by indiscreetly eliminating some of the distinct syllables. Should we destroy or revive our mother tongues? Let us realise before it is too late that there are many countries in the world where education is through their respective mother tongues and not in English. Yet those countries are progressing. Mother tongue is the proper nourisher and nutrient for our natural growth and blossoming. So, let’s have our mother tongues as a compulsory subject at every level—irrespective of the nature of the course.

Expressional clarity

Getting back to literature, whatever we would like to express, let there be clarity and brevity since brevity is the soul of wit—and in a thought-provoking, motivating, objective, dispassionate, and appealing manner—and not in an anarchical, raucous, biased, exclusivist, centrifugal, malicious, and disruptive manner.

When it comes to aptness of expression and contextual propriety, Hanuman stands out as an ideal in the words of Shri Rama himself.

अविस्तरम् असन्दिग्धम् अविलम्बितम् अव्ययम् ।
उरस्थम् कण्ठगम् वाक्यम् वर्तते मध्यम स्वरम् ॥

“Hanuman has the ability of speaking in sentences that are not extravagant or loose but succinct; his sentences are not ambiguous but precise; his sentences have no drag but go on, at a measured pace. When it comes to the tone, he is not raucous but euphonious; he does not gabble but soulfully articulates his expression. And he speaks in a pitch that is neither low nor high, but medium.”

Likewise, we should speak the truth, and speak it not harshly but pleasantly. We shouldn't utter the untruth though it may be to the liking of the listener. A sloka from the Manu Smriti exhorts us to be so.

सत्यं ब्रूयात् प्रियं ब्रूयात्, न ब्रूयात् सत्यम् अप्रियम् ।
नासत्यं च प्रियं ब्रूयात्, एष धर्मः सनातनः ॥

Universal spirit

Let's all try our best to cultivate and promote universal harmony with Mother Nature with her flora and fauna being a part of it—with objective cultural exchanges—and with a realisation that God has created various systems—but with none totally perfect in itself—so that the humans should put in their efforts to give and take, and synthesise and harmonise—drawing inspiration from the large galaxy of saints and savants of our ancient motherland.

The world is a family! वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥

May everyone and every being in the creation be happy! लोकास्समस्तास्सुखिनो भवन्तु ॥

Bionote:



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Atreya Sarma has edited 13 books in English and translated 5 major books from Telugu to English besides many individual poems, short stories and articles. Atreya Sarma had featured and encouraged poets through a weekly column 'Wordsmith' in *The Hans India*, a Hyderabad-based English daily (Jun 2013 to Jul 2018). He has guest-edited two Features— 'India @ 70' for *Setu* magazine (Aug 2017); and 'Animal Poetics' for *Teesta Review* (May 2022). He has received six literary awards including one from Rashtriya Sanskriti Mahotsav for Literary Merit by the Department of Culture, Government of India (at its Hyderabad event on 03 Apr 2022). Interested in holistic fitness, Atreya Sarma has taken part in 23 organised runs since 2018.

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