

Sahitya or Literature: A Dharma Centric Account

Prof Ravinder Singh*

The Encyclopædia Britannica classifies literature as “the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing”. Etymologically, the term “literature” is derived from the Latin term ‘litteratura’ meaning “learning, writing, grammar”. Originally it was “writing formed with letters (littera)”. Additionally, the term has also been applied to spoken or sung texts. Literature is often referred to as “writing” or, poetically, “the craft of writing”. Definitions of literature have varied over time. In Western Europe prior to the 18th century, literature generally denoted all books and writing, and it is also used in reference to “oral literature” and “the literature of preliterate culture”.

However, in India, the English word ‘literature’ has taken the sense of the Sanskrit term ‘Sahitya’, which is a little different in its etymology. Indian approach towards the expression of the word ‘literature’ is somehow different, since ‘Sahitya (साहित्य)’ is not confined merely to the expression of thoughts but is more related to the quality of thoughts and its concerns with human life. Etymologically, ‘Sahitya’ is an abstractive of ‘Sahit (सहिति)’ that means ‘together with’ or ‘inclusive’. It has some inbuilt quality of thoughts with concern and connectedness to well-being. So here the concern of literature, ‘Sahitya’ is located in the well being of society and human beings as a whole.

It is important to ascertain how we perceive and respond to our social system/order and its relationship with human beings. ‘Sahitya’ is imbued in this idea of inclusiveness of social order and its relation to humanity. This idea of inclusiveness epitomises our worldview based on the Indian knowledge traditions. Indian social order has been a traditional structure under an integrated system of Dharma based on a Brahma-centric worldview. According to this view, there is no ‘otherness’

beyond time and space, and in this time-bound existence, one should treat everyone as its own self. The social order structured around inclusivism operates as per an evolved, disciplined moral order called Dharma (not religion). Therefore, Sahitya (literature) expressed human concerns within this order, and its purpose is to establish or strengthen the core idea of inclusivism. That is how the ancient and medieval Indian literature represented core concerns of humanity and the social system while creating dialogue through an inclusive worldview.

There is another aspect of literature where it is connected with the unconscious mind. Unconscious mind is a state when conscious observations and experiences get settled in the mind to influence our acts later. Consciousness is also constructed through the experience of human life in a particular time and space. In the Indian context, the Geo-cultural time and space of Indian civilisation provided the basic abilities in mind to think, perceive and act according to the evolution of knowledge. The evolution of knowledge means the journey of finding answers to the questions of ultimate reality; about creation and creator. On this journey, the Indian mind belonging to Indian civilisation got the conditioning of its intellectual practices. All these intellectual practises shaped the Indian knowledge tradition largely based on the commonly accepted idea of Brahma as self-creator and creation. With this kind of cognitive conditioning, the Indian mind perceives its socio-cultural reality and expresses it accordingly. That way, our societal and human responses are very much on the same ground. This is an important factor that constitutes our mind and its expression in the language and literature. So it is not easy to separate ‘Chetna’ from the expressions.

Modern literature is somehow exclusivist in its nature, and it has impacted the nature of Indian writing and its literary traditions as well. Western literary traditions are rooted in social structures influenced by the Abrahamic worldview. The Western sociological outlook has evolved

* Fellow, IAS, Shimla. He can be reached at ravinder707@gmail.com

with the theocentric perspective of the world. From this point of view, modern literature and its interpretive critical theories lack the traditional Indian spirit of 'Sahitya'. It promotes outwardly exclusive elements of society through literary modes of expression without any objective of uniting or creating inclusiveness in social order. This exclusivist approach to literary writing and critical thinking is creating more conflicts than resolving the existing ones. Highlighting social disorders through literature is perfectly relevant until it provides or suggests establishing some harmonious social and moral order. While only exhibiting the social-cultural conflicts and eulogising separate identities leads to more conflicting and clashing societies. This character of 'literature' is not similar to 'Sahitya' since it hardly shows any concerns for resolution of conflicts. In present times, certain modern western literary critical thoughts have pitted different social categories against each other. This exclusivist character of literature promotes and strengthens the idea of 'otherness' in society instead of resolving the differences created on the basis of otherness. Thus, the Indian literary tradition, with regard to its creativeness and analytical paradigm, has gone through an unwarranted change with the advent of western modernist ideas in the last century.

Re-interpretation of ancient and mediaeval 'Sahitya' according to modern literary critical tools is unjustified since both traditions belong to different perceptions of creation and expression. For instance, interpreting the Ram-Katha characters 'Rama' or 'Sita' from the viewpoint of feminist critical ideology cannot do justice to the exposition of actual socio-cultural composition presented in the Ramayana. This epic is not a piece of 'literature' but a 'sahitya' presented in a poetic form. Every event and depiction of various characters complements the narrative flow in the direction where the goal of harmony and establishment of Dharma is achieved. This goal of achieving Dharma is a prime factor in all the ancient and mediaeval literary narratives. Thus, in Sahitya, the purpose of writing with the intensions of creating harmony, propagating core moral values, and ensuring the well-being of society and humanity as a whole from an inclusivist worldview is much more important than merely expressing various thoughts.

Indian civilization is basically a Dharma-centric and knowledge-oriented civilization. Here, the word dharma stands for a universal moral order operating in the world. It has given rise to four major dharma traditions, namely, Sanatan Dharma, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. The ideas of a permanent, self-dependent, ever present, ultimate reality (Brahman=ब्रह्म), impermanent, ever changing, phenomenal world (Jagat=जगत्) and the living beings inhabiting this phenomenal world (Jiva=जीव) are

the core concepts representing the world view of this civilization. Positing a fundamental unity of Jiva and Brahman, it presents a philosophy of life (Advaita) in which realisation of the ultimate reality (Moksha = मोक्ष) is the core concern of all beings. This philosophy of life structures the relationship with the cosmos, nature and human beings in a harmonious manner. Therefore, Indian epistemology is essentially Brahman-centric in relation to western epistemology which is Abrahamic. The Indian thought process operates with the core narrative structures of its cosmological, anthropological, and sociological conceptualisations and ideas, which are based on ancient knowledge practices. Ancient knowledge and intellectual practises tried to formulate explanations for pertinent questions about human existence. While exploring the answers to human existence, these intellectual practises arrived at the ultimate conceptualisation for defining creation and the creator as purely a self-sustained system or order named Brahman. The visible world and human existence are nothing but the manifestation of that order in material form. That way, the Darshan (philosophy) of this knowledge constructs the consciousness of Samsara as a Brahman-centric Dharma order; to be experienced as a social system. This whole knowledge has been perceived, memorised, and transmitted in socio-culturally structured language systems. Since abstract concepts are difficult to define without concrete examples, the idea of Brahman was explained in the easily understandable socio-cultural communication systems of language and narrative.

Literature is an extension of linguistic expression for socio-cultural existence. Literature and society are linked through the language of a particular civilisation based on the epistemological insights of its Darshanik (philosophical) knowledge explaining human existence. Indian literary/narrative tradition dates back to ancient times. Its origin is believed to be from the oral tradition of the Vedic period. Vedic or Veda means knowledge and that knowledge is articulated in a poetic form. Here the poetic form was just an expression of intellectual practices related to the exploration of ultimate truth or reality. Oral traditions have successfully stored and transmitted that knowledge from one generation to the next while adding more and more meaning to it. In this sense, the renderings as oral traditions used various forms of poetic expressions to transmit that knowledge to the masses. The knowledge of ultimate truth, e.g., the questions of existence, were conceived in abstract conceptual ideas and it has always been difficult to express abstract ideas in a concrete language without using prevalent socio-cultural structures and linguistic idioms. This peculiar situation shaped the expression of Vedic knowledge in literary form. Ancient Indian knowledge texts are composed in poetic and other literary genres, making

them easy to perceive, memorise and transmit. Thus the literary tradition of the Indian sub-continent is rooted in Vedic knowledge practices.

It is clear now that these Vedic knowledge were fundamental, and literary practises are only the poetic expression of that knowledge. This binary relation of knowledge and literature is as old as the evolution of a human being becoming a conscious being. Hence the consciousness is also a repository of the earliest and continuous intellectual practises preserved as memories in the human race of a particular geo-cultural space called civilisation; in this context the Indian Civilisation. Thereafter, whatever has been expressed about the socio-cultural system, is essentially rooted in the knowledge-oriented; geo-culturally evolved civilisational formation.

Indian literary traditions have their literary structures which operate through the definition and meaning of literature as Sahitya. Discussions about the definition of Indian literature and its hallmarks have been going on for a long time. A major idea that emerged about Indian literature is that its scope or definition necessarily includes the literature created by the Indians in the geographical region of India. A renowned poet, Subramaniam Bharati speaks that the unity of Indian literature is to recognise a commonality in the literature of all languages beyond the linguistic variations:

*Seppu mozhi padhinettu udalay,
Enil chintanai onrudalay.*

(She {India} has eighteen languages to speak,
even as the chintana {thinking} is one.)

Therefore, the commonalities of thoughts born out of Indian civilisation have been flowing as a tradition for centuries, building the archetypal socio-cultural behaviour. This also illustrates the non-linguistic elements of our literary expressions. It is important to have a proper understanding of Indian civilisation in defining the intrinsic structures of its literature. Various civilizations have the conception of commonality and integrity to the literature only through the continuity of their heritage. Since literature creates a dialogue with the core concerns of human life and the inherited experiences of its civilization. It prepares a response to contemporaneous situations and gives new shape to the understanding through this dialogical process. In literature, homogeneities are certain to emerge from the underpinning of a common background. On this basis, various languages of India hold themselves culturally together and point to a commonality.

During the course of time, certain hallmarks of Indian literary identity emerge that define and operate as the basic inspiring factors of contemporary literature. Professor Gokak insists that consistency in terms of

the choice of themes and their portrayal, or the writer's discerning understanding of his entire culture, shapes Indianness in Indian literature. Similarly, K. S. Srinivasan also seems to be very appropriate that the theme of *karma* in every literature, the four objectives of life (Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha) and belief in rebirth etc., should be seen as part of our socio-cultural life shaping the consciousness. In this way, one can also grasp the similarities of style and content in our literature. This way, one can easily understand the Indian way of life, deeply embedded in the ways of thinking in this vast and ancient country.

From the preceding discussion, we can conclude that some of the popular philosophical ideas have continued to be a part of our daily life and literature. Such as:

- Fate that governs human life
- Karma, Punya and cycle of births
- Life is temporary, mortal
- The world is a stage
- The irony of coexistence of joy and sorrow
- The concept of living and non-living beings
- Ethical ideas such as the essential greatness of man, attaining happiness through self-control and domesticity, etc.

All these elements show the commonality of Indian thought, expressed in different languages and suggest how Indianness/emotions are shared by all despite differences in region, social class and language. The similarity in the Indian literary subtleties can be comprehended by considering the India-wide circulation of literary ideas. Although the family of languages are different, but their literary elements reflect similarity. Literary ideas of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Bhagavata, the classical literature of Sanskrit i.e. composed by Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bana, Sri Harsha, Amarak, and the immortal works of Jayadeva, the literature of Buddhism, Jainism and other traditions written in Pali, Prakrit and Apabhraṁsh have been inherited by all the languages of India. All the Indian writings have continuously used the contemplative experience of Upanishads, Shada-Darshan, Simritiyas etc. in the scriptures and several other poetic works, *Natya-Shastra*, *Dhavanyaloka*, *Kavya Prakash*, *Sahitya Darpana*, *Ras Gangadhar* etc. Their influence upon the Indian people has certainly been synergistic, and a kind of fundamental unity in emotions has come naturally to the literature inspired by them. Thus, flourished on a common civilisational geo-cultural space, Indian literature has a continuous and natural phenomenon of commonness.

According to the Indian Knowledge System, *Jiva* and *Jagat* are fleeting manifestations of the Creator. This means

that everything that comes into existence is considered to be *Mithya* or a deceptive reality that is created by humans and believed to be true. Our knowledge traditions do not prescribe organized structures of social construction or practices. Instead, they provide a guiding principle for the betterment of social order, which is known as Dharma. Whenever there is a significant social disorder due to ignorance or neglect of Dharma and selfish human behavior, the importance of upholding Dharma has been emphasized. This was evident during the Mahabharata time and later during the Bhakti period when Bhakta poets and Sikh Gurus highlighted the significance of Dharma.

During medieval times, literary texts were created to interact with the socio-cultural sphere of human activities. They addressed ill practices that deviated from Indian knowledge-based Dharma conducts. Gurbani, for example, is considered to establish Dharma Order to eradicate social ill practices that were prevalent at the time. The Bhakti movement was a great social renaissance with a main focus on creating social equality on human grounds. It propagated a non-dualistic Vedic philosophy to create equality and harmony among different classes and castes, recognizing that the omnipresent creator cannot be unequal.

The beginning of Indian literature is considered to be from the Vedas as Prof. Kapil Kapoor underlines: “कथा वेद से ही आरंभ होती है और भक्ति के बीज भी वेद में ही हैं। कथा के धात्वर्थ ‘कहना’ के अनुरूप सर्व वेद को ‘वेद कथा’ ही कहा गया है। ब्राह्मण, उपनिषद तथा ब्रह्मदेवता आदि में जो कथाएं विस्तार से दी गई हैं उन का बीज ऋग्वेद के उन संहिता के संवादों में उपलब्ध है, जिन में दो या तीन पात्रों का परस्पर कथोपकथन इन कथाओं का आधार बन जाता है।”¹ Thus, he explains that in Indian tradition, storytelling has been the primary method of imparting knowledge. There are various types of narratives in the oral tradition of India, such as Upanishad stories, Buddhist Jatakas in Pali, Jain Gathas in Prakrit, sub-narratives of Mahabharata, Puranic stories, Nidarshan stories in Panchatantra, and countless war and love stories in different Indian languages. The main objective of these ancient legends has always been to teach Dharma. Although the stories may differ, the objective remains the same. In the search for Dharma, the Upanishads teach that it lies in knowledge (Gyan), while the Buddhist Jatakas suggest that it lies in the act (Karma) undertaken for the welfare of others. The Uttar Purana states that it lies in devotion (Bhakti). The Indian tradition of answering fundamental questions of human existence through dialogues has been a practice for centuries. This knowledge (Gyan-Chetna) has been present in India for thousands of years and is still capable of solving various life questions. The Bhagwat Gita is famously significant in this context, as Adi Shankaracharya’s pronouncement on it is noteworthy. According to Prof. Kapoor: वैदिक ज्ञान, बौद्ध

कर्म तथा पौराणिक भक्ति को रस में बाँधा आदि शंकराचार्य ने, जिन्होंने ने भगवतगीता के दूसरे अध्याय पर टीका करते हुए निर्णय किया कि “ज्ञानयुक्त कर्म ही भक्ति है।”²

Thus, the basic nature of Indian literature has always been knowledge-oriented and its roots lie in the Vedic heritage. For hundreds of years, the literature of our country while carrying out the tradition of philosophical contemplation, has been drawing social ethics on the questions of spirituality or self-identity. It is in these philosophical traditions that certain eternal concerns of human life are also ascertained, consistent with the consciousness of Vedic knowledge. In this context, Swami Muni Narayan Prasad observed: “All Upanishads teach ‘brahmvidya’ the science of the Absolute, whose ultimate goal is to free the seekers from the tangle of worldly trials and tribulations of the day-to-day life. This freedom is known as ‘Mukti’ or ‘Moksa’.”³

By various such observations, one finds that the nature of early Vedic literature was not a faith system, but basically knowledge-oriented. In the stories of the Upanishads, religion (Dharma) is accepted only in the form of knowledge and the heroes of these stories like Nachiketa are inquisitive for knowledge. Even further, the literature that we find is more related to these fundamental questions of human existence.

It is from the development of knowledge-centric literature in India that karma and devotional traditions begin. Jatakas, written in Pali, are stories related to the previous births of Bodhisattvas. These literary narratives aim to reinforce good moral (*Dharmik*) conduct in ordinary life. Bodhisattva denotes a seeker who practices the virtues of knowledge, truth, mercy, etc., who advances towards enlightenment (*Bodhi*) by his conduct in every birth. For him, religion is in action, not in knowledge. However, the nature of these stories still remains concerned with human existence.

Ramayana and Mahabharata are two great literary texts whose narratives have become an inseparable part of Indian folk mind that can be related to every field of life. Both these texts are great examples of Indian literary tradition. Valmiki’s Ramayana has had a profound impact on the behaviour of Indian society and culture. Ramayana not only influenced Indian life and ideology but also influenced literature and became the source of many other scriptures. Mahabharata is a great scripture representing Indian civilization, culture, knowledge and idealistic narratives. It is also a founding scripture of Indian personality. The Puranas were composed after the Upanishads, Brahmanas and Aranyakas. All these are related to the message of the Vedas and in its series, the Puranas were also composed in narrative form to bring the knowledge of the Vedas for the understanding of the common people. The narrative tradition comes out in a more distinct form from the Puranic literature. This

narrative also forms a part of the socio-cultural expressions of the people's lives, affecting the consciousness of contemporary society. As Dr. Ramsharan Gaur says:

“पुराण भारतीय संस्कृति की आधारशिला हैं एवं भारतीय समाज के आदर्शोन्मुख जीवन मूल्यों की प्रतिष्ठा करने वाले हैं। इन का उद्देश्य सत्य, अर्ध-सत्य और काल्पनिक कथा, रूपक, अलंकार और अतिशयोक्तियों के माध्यम से आध्यात्मिक प्रेरणा देना है।”⁴ The Puranas thus contained tradition of Vedic thoughts and cognition and it also developed elements of narrative or literary creation. Coming from the tradition of Vedic literature, their nature is also related to religion (Dharma) and philosophy (Darshan).

To take another example, the *Kathasaritsagar* is a very complex narrative and is interwoven with one another like a web. Even though it is an example of pure narrative, the motivational elements that are seen working behind the depth of the subjects are directly or indirectly connected to the same Indian tradition of knowledge which is related to the narratives available before it. Broadly, the topics related to worldly pleasures and acquisition of power has only appeared in these narratives. Hence, it is associated with the sense of the four Purusharth. The stories of the Panchatantra are another great attempt to reinforce the moral practical values in social conduct through the narratives of animals. Purity of deeds has been the basis of these stories. Although the stories of Panchatantra are

related to animals, according to their structure, even if human characters are replaced by animal characters, they will give the same meaning as with animal characters. This means that these stories express the concerns of human life through the characters of animals.

It is evident from the above discussion that the Indian literature term *Sahitya* has some definite qualitative differences from that of the term literature. Its internal and external binary is essentially structured within the Indian civilisational context, which defines the socio-cultural order established in Dharma, the righteous way of living. Dharma is an ethical and moral order of conduct as well as the goal of all human activities, which informs all classical narratives of India.

Notes

1. प्रो. कपिल कपूर, कथा परंपरा, रति-भक्ति: भारत की कथा परंपरा में (2011: दिल्ली, डी के प्रिंटवर्ल्ड, p. 51)
2. Ibid, p. 8.
3. Swami Muni Narayan Prasad, “Introduction”, *Katha Upanisad*, (1998: New Delhi, D. K. Print World, p. 1).
4. Dr. Ramsharan Gaur, “Purana evam Dharamshastra”, in *Bhartiye Sanskriti ke Adhar Srotra* (1998: Delhi, Swaraj Prakashn, p. 103).