

Fullness of India: Word, World and People

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There are many stories about India. But the key question is how to know and see India? Most importantly, which of the stories represents authentic India? Which system of thought represents India in its pristine form? What does the term ‘our culture’ mean?

In the 80’s a friend asked me to tell him, in one word, what is India? I instantly uttered- ‘Sharat Chandra’ the renowned writer from Bengal. The answer was spontaneous, but why I said it became clearer to me over the years.

My peers and I grew up in the 60s, speaking Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Marathi etc. in our respective homes, very comfortable, and organically rooted in our lineage, and with an unassuming, unconscious, non-declarative pride of being Indians. Speaking for myself, (this is possibly true for the generations of this time), we lived in a joint family, in a small first floor flat in a middle class, considerably close-knit neighbourhood in West Delhi. We grew up listening to stories from our grandmothers, with a sense of belonging and a shared togetherness with the community, enjoying and celebrating not only festivals but marriages, birthdays, impromptu lunches, get-togethers, in short, life in general. We were all in it together with no concept of mine or yours. In fact, looking back, I still don’t know the demographic composition of my neighbourhood. It seemed so irrelevant.

My connection with my roots was routed through the world of Indian literature and thought. Gently, my father introduced us to Hindi literature and the translations of vernacular literature in Hindi. He introduced me to a huge range of writers: Prem Chand, Sharat Chandra, Bankim Chandra, Tagore, Bhagwati Charan Verma, Phanishwarnath Renu, Jainendra Kumar Jain, Sri Lal Shukla, Rahi Masoom Raza, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, (I remember learning to read Gurmukhi to read Amrita Pritam’s award winning poem ‘aj aakhaan Waris Shah nu..’, and to read Waris Shah himself), Girish Karnad, Vishnu Khandekar, Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Dr C. Rajagopalachari. My mother introduced me to classics like Charles Dickens, Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, Ernest Hemingway, Somerset Maugham, Leo Tolstoy, Homer, Kamala Das, Ruskin Bond, Salman Rushdie, and Anita Desai. The list is endless. My mind was exposed to a plethora of ideas, perspectives and readings of social reality by great minds from across the world. Together with my neighbourhood, these works shaped my idea of India, and Indian culture.

The novel or for that matter any literary piece, is a writer’s engagement with social reality and their reflections on it. In that sense a novel can be treated “as a substitute ethnography, especially...the Anchalik Upanyas (regional novel) genre of post-independence Hindi fiction” (Jain, 1994). Here, “the author concentrates on a particular part of the country and depicts its life in such a way as to bring about a consciousness among the readers of its unique

characteristics, distinguishing features and particular customs and patterns of life” (Upadhyay 1956). These authors, whom I read, were in conversation with each other, and presented a decolonised view of India. Their writings threw light on the varied, nuanced, and layered dimensions of Indianness. They revealed the nature of social and cultural processes in different regions and the interplay of the “Sanskritic” and the “laukik” ways of being, each flowing into the other.

To Said, ‘metaphors, figuratives, and the narrative in a literary piece are processes through which social phenomena are registered after they are received, making these pieces an important method of search for meaning’ (Said, 1985). The writers spoke through the metaphors and usages distinctive to their respective languages and regions, and through well thought out characters who were powerful, inspirational and human, with their weaknesses. These are characters of people who think independently, speak their minds, raise voices against injustice. Their commitment to India is unquestionable, and they dreamt of a free India: free of social injustices, where everyone was equal. Tagore’s Ghare Baire, Sharat Chandra’s Path ke Davedar gave a nuanced understanding of the struggle for independence, of the meaning of a nation, nationalism, patriotism, and the value of freedom. Munshi Premchand’s Godaan foregrounded the lived reality of rural life, its culture, social structure, social hierarchies, inequalities, social justice/ injustice; Phanishwar Nath Renu, and Rahi Masoom Raza gave insights into local histories, processes of formation of identities, social movements. Sri Lal Shukla’s Raag Darbari engaged with the challenges confronted by the common man in post independent India: increasing corruption and the nexus between police, politicians, businessmen and criminals. Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Pritam challenged the patriarchal norms of society, and so much more.

The utterance of “Sharat Chandra” stood for this representation and understanding of Indian culture, that shaped my sensibility of being an Indian: firmly rooted, secure, fascinated and excited to discover and be a part of such a diverse and rich culture, yet not blind to aspects that hindered the realisation of the dream of a just India.

The contemporary use of the term ‘our culture’ invisibilises this dimension of India. It not only standardises the idea of Indian culture, but is also self-centred, unilateral and ‘exclusive’. The narratives of literary writings give a different picture. They shift the focus to India’s heterogeneity and diversity. In these, the Indian world and its people come alive in all their fullness in a seamless flow of written and spoken words.

Going back to our roots is a reflexive journey resulting in the simultaneous discovery of one’s culture and one’s own self. These roots are sprawling – from classical textual Sanskritic to the laukik, vernacular wisdom transmitted through grandparents and storytellers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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