

From the Bhavan's President

India and World Literature

R. Venkataraman



Literature has no political barriers. It has no colour, no racial prejudice, no geographical location. It wafts across the world and makes its home where it is needed and loved. For a while, language might delay its journey from one land to another. However, good literature, whether it is fiction, poetry, drama or literary criticism, whether it is a branch of philosophy, arts or sciences, eventually belongs to the world.

From pre-historic times, India has welcomed foreign writers and scholars for an in-depth exchange of views frankly and freely on Indian letters, philosophy, metaphysics, sciences, arts and culture. We continue this tradition, as we value and benefit from the wisdom of others as much as they benefit from us.

Mahatma Gandhi often said that he would like to keep the

windows of his house open all the time so that the winds from outside blow in and out. But he added that he would refuse to be blown off his feet.

Apart from the great Indian Epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the Vedic scriptures and the great philosophical work, the Bhagavad Gita, the folk tales and modern literature in many Indian tongues also portray the various facets of the Indian

image from many angles.

Literature has no political barriers. It has no colour, no racial prejudice, no geographical location. It wafts across the world and makes its home where it is needed and loved. For a while, language might delay its journey from one land to another. However, good literature, whether it is fiction, poetry, drama or literary criticism, whether it is a branch of philosophy, arts or sciences, eventually belongs to the world. In this sense, literature is the wealth of the whole of humanity. It must breathe the spirit of humanism, universality and brotherhood of human beings.

These qualities of world literature could be easily found in the Indian Epics, folk tales and some of our modern letters in our many languages, including English, which in some ways, is as Indian as other Indian languages are. Sanskrit, the mother of Indian languages, has priceless treasures, seldom surpassed

elsewhere. No wonder, it influenced other classical languages. As it embodies human vision and wisdom and depicts the entire spectrum of human emotions, its works continue to be studied in all the continents of the world. It has enriched the streams of thought in other countries. In turn, it has been influenced by others. But, its mainsprings have remained as pure and pristine as they were five thousand years ago. These mainsprings were spirituality, humanism and concern for the common people.

I recall the words of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the philosopher-statesman of our time. Drawing our attention to the historical truth that Asia witnessed the fusion of many cultures, he said:

'The great periods of human history are marked by a widespread access of spiritual vitality derived from the fusion of national cultures with foreign influences. If we take Judaism, we find that Abraham

came from Mesopotamia and Joseph and Moses from Egypt. Later, Judaism shows the influence of Hellenism. Asia Minor and Egypt exercised considerable influence over the Greek development. The creative genius of the mediaeval world came from Palestine. The transition to the modern world was marked by the recovery of the ancient.'

Our modern world is, at present, beset with formidable dangers and dilemmas. As we know, the arms race continues unabated. Our contemporary history is a history of wars with intermittent, uneasy, peace intervals.

The nuclear age dawned on us 55 years ago. It has brought us to the brink of great hopes and unrelieved despair. "The Day After" not merely in filmic art, might see star wars. Satellites hover around us. Science has gifted to us the key to material prosperity which may have no limits but it has also given us a horrifying glimpse into desolation,

destruction and death. It is at this juncture that India's age-old wisdom, inscribed in its ancient literature, in Sanskrit as well as in other languages, can come to our rescue and guide us away from the doomsday some predict for humanity.

We have to recover our past for a better tomorrow. In times of trouble, the inspiration comes from many sources, from the wisdom of many peoples, from the newly acquired knowledge and from the new discoveries of today. It is my hope that a revival of interest in our ancient scriptures, the *Vedas*, the *Gita* and in the message of non-violence and peace that Lord Buddha gave us, adapted anew by Gandhiji in a modern setting, will help us tide over these turbulent times. Dr. Radhakrishnan had written in one of his works:

'The Civilizations of the East, their religions and ethics, may offer us some help in negotiating

difficulties that we are up against. The only past known to the Europeans emerging from the Middle Ages was the Biblical, and the Graeco-Roman and their classics happen to be the subjects studied in the great universities founded in that period. Now that we have the whole world for our cultural base, the process of recovery and training in classics cannot cease with listening to the voices of Isaiah and Paul, Socrates and Cicero...

The Egyptian, Chinese and Indian sages and seers have indicated to us the spiritual trail; they guide us to a world of moral and material happiness. India's contribution has enriched literature. With the Sanskrit language and with all the philosophical, scientific, and other concepts it contains, India has left its imprint on world literature. And its works continue to inspire the international community. Yet throughout its history, India

has shown itself willing and eager to learn from others and to foster universal brotherhood through theoretical and practical endeavour. This is as true of arts and letters as of social and natural sciences.

In a speech in 1956 Jawaharlal Nehru said: "I often wonder which is the most important of the many things that have distinguished India in the past, in the history of thousands of years. I have no doubt in my mind that it is the Sanskrit language. I think it is that which has embodied the genius of our race, the wisdom of our race, and almost everything that has emerged in later years can somehow be found to have sprung from that magnificent language." Our modern letters derive inspiration from Sanskrit classics which rejuvenate our thought processes. This is as it should be, because India has given to the world as much as it has gained from it.

