

## **Intentions of History and Literature**

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**Abstract:** History and literature should not be just tools of intellectual inquiry or mimetic representation but create a new awareness to improve the consciousness of the individual and the process of living. Over the centuries both history and literature have been used and misused to identify with an intellectually evolved culture of the past and create a national identity. The once collapsible categories of history and literature have become rigid making it difficult for scholars and readers to draw benefit from them. In the wake of European collapse and American implosion of civil society in the twenty first century it is now possible to move beyond rigid western foundationalism and include the fluid boundaries of the Upanishads, Vedas and the yogic sciences to understand the representations of the past and present through techniques of self-development. It is possible to create a new renaissance of learning to move from historical and literary compulsiveness to historical and literary consciousness.

**Keywords:** History and literature, history as literature, intentions, boundaries of the Upanishads, Vedas and the yogic sciences.

Today I wish to interrogate three words which are basic to the intellectual content of the MELUS 2017 Conference namely, intentions, history and literature. Intention refers to a wish, a conception formed by directing the mind towards an object. The word comes from the Latin *intendere* meaning to direct attention or stretch towards something. In

Sanskrit the word sankalpa implies a representation of desire or positive thought that we want to manifest in the world—a promise we make to ourselves. San means idea found in the heart and kalpa means “rule that I will follow.” In yoga, which implies a connection or union with the world, we make sankalpa to manifest self-development, to realize something. It is not ‘I want’ but “I am” involving both effort and surrender. In the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Vajasaneyi Samhita Shukla Yajurveda sankalpa becomes a part of maya not as illusion but through the mysterious power of the will or sankalpa sakti that allows gods to create the world between reality and illusion. The maya is prakriti or primal matter and possessor of the maya is maheswara. The word cetana is frequently used in Buddhism to imply direction and urge. Therefore intention is a method, a vidhi which can be realized through purification. The eastern conception is positive and involves both effort and surrender at the same time a belief in the illusion of creation. The word history deals with past events with a belief that the past can be systematically studied and accessed; it creates a systematic narrative.

The changing nature of history and literature in the west over the last two centuries has created confusion regarding their boundaries and beliefs. In the early decades of the twentieth century the distinction between the two was just a matter of nomenclature but gradually this began to change. Theodore Roosevelt writing in *History as Literature* (1913) argued that the distinction between history and literature was just a dispute of “terminology.” He explained that the Romans did not distinguish between history, poetry and science—“poetry was accepted by a great scientific philosopher as the appropriate vehicle for teaching the lessons of science and philosophy” (Roosevelt 1). The Greeks accepted history as a method to know the world. The Greek word historia

means knowing by inquiry. The Sanskrit tradition in India did not see a distinction between history and literature. In India we understand history as ithiyas, which range from heroic history (ithiys charitra) and family history (vansha charitra) to royal history (royal history) and old traditional history (purana). The Indian conception of ithiyas differs from the western conception of history significantly. Ithihas includes the bardic songs (of Rajasthan), old traditional stories (purana) and biographies (charitra) and are not necessarily written narratives with a significant ideology to interpret the past.

The written forms of history and literature are widely accepted. Inheriting the western tradition it is possible to see history as a written form. Histories are never made, they are written. And because they are written, they are read. Literature is not organic reality but written and read. Both are accessible only through language. We assume that events in the past can be meaningfully understood and spoken about. We assume that we can give significance to human emotion (White 2). The narrative a historian places upon events and emotions express the temporality of human experience manifested through language. This is more so with literature. We also assume that issues in liberal education are more Eurocentric, foundational and West-oriented and categories such as “history” or “literature” also share such assumptions.

History and literature should not be just ideological analysis or mimetic representation but a consciousness and method to live a better life that the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads, Vedas and Yogic sciences propagated centuries ago. History and literature should not be just separable or collapsible categories but reveal the constantly improving process of lived life within by giving significance to it.

Some of the past is not just retrieved but enacted and lived as significant memory of the past. To place a strict cause and effect continuity over large bodies of historical past is not our main concern. Since the western historical tradition does this it becomes somewhat contentious. The rise of subaltern history or fragmented histories is a revolt against a causal narrative. Historiography is somewhat different. It is the study of writing of history--solutions, technologies and applications. The attempt to claim a past through history and construct a national identity along those lines is well-understood now through the works of Indian and western scholars. Sudipta Kaviraj points out that Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay attempted to claim an Aryan past like many Bengalis and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay imagined India in the phrase *Swapnalabdha Bharatvarser Itihas* or a “dream history of displacements.” The desire for a “collective self” meant claiming the Aryan past as their past (Kaviraj 123). K. N. Panikkar also argues that the historiography of modern India emerges from the renaissance of pre-political anti-colonial phase (Panikkar 1). Historians concentrate more on historiography and interpretation and less to understand people’s way of life and beliefs.

### **Intentions of History and Literature**

Both history and literature arise from subterranean human intentions as inorganic forms of representation, negotiating the boundary of the self and other, dreaming an unrealized past and reaching out to an unknown future. The ideological underpinnings of German philosophy, the ascendancy of Europe and the rise of American English as a global lingua franca universalized European intellectual and cultural specificity creating an intellectual marketplace, a global literary audience and a network of texts. Anglophonic

writers inherit this global marketplace and gear their ideas and anxieties to address a cosmopolitan audience. A convincing representation of “historical fact” and “social reality” through major discourses of literature, history and anthropology are embedded in foundational belief of non inferential knowledge and use artful rhetoric to reveal the “truth.”

Both history and literature are powerful, often ideological, forms of writing, representing a time relationship within a culturally specific moment. They imitate reality in specific ways and create a hypothetical empiricism or idealism through rhetorical devices. Therefore, convincing literary or historical texts are those which are rhetorically moving and artfully contrived. Often facts in history are interpretations or even biases of the historians, while fancy in literature might at times convey oft-ignored truths. The selection and choice of reality are inherent in literary and historical representation. The mood, temper, fashion and ideas of the age often determine which “facts” from the past are converted into “believable facts” of history and literature. The present also influences the working of history and literature. The mimesis of literature and the historiography of history learn from each other to provide a better understanding of the world we inherit.

### **The Impact of Colonialism on Modern Indian Scholarship**

The intellectual tradition and the present academic scholarship in India as it is practiced today are largely shaped by colonial practices. We see the impact of British colonialism in the growth of popular scholarly disciplines like law, history, and literature. We still have a strong belief in paper work and procedural process in government, bureaucracy

and trade. The habits of our mind embrace modernity but time and again these habits return to orientalist assumptions spread by the Empire. The early nationalists were aware of the colonial burden Indians carried and explained it through economic and cultural metaphors. The economic ideas of nationalism and the negative impact of colonialism were largely accepted by a wide spectrum of nationalists from Savarkar to Gandhi. There was hardly any vigorous attempt to engage the colonial conquest or the Indian response to it in modern intellectual terms. Williams and Wanchoo believe that cultural understanding was based on the “benign” understanding of India which was encouraged by the works of scholars like William Jones, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Maurice Winternitz, Max Muller, Sir Henry Maine and others. Many of the British and German orientalists promoted the ideas related to the “significance of Sanskrit, the plurality of village republics and the spiritual heritage of India.” Over the last three decades the works of scholars and historians like Edward Said and Bernard Cohn have made us conscious of power relations affecting the production of knowledge. Cohn has shown how the result of the census impacts on Indian self-perception and defines boundaries (Williams & Wanchoo 2-3).

Early in the eighteenth century the German orientalists saw a connection between the Aryan mind and culture and the German culture. Later when the British orientalists came in the nineteenth century the connection between the German and Indian cultures was already established. The works of British orientalist Maurice Winternitz identified the influence of Sanskrit literature on German literature and philosophy in the eighteenth century. He discovered a relationship of “mind and culture” between the Germans and Indians because of their “common Indo-Aryan linguistic background”

(Williams & Wanchoo 20). The spread of orientalist ideas and study of Sanskrit in the nineteenth and twentieth century was largely responsible for creating “the wonder that was India.” Sanskrit texts were used to codify knowledge about Indian laws, comprehend religious texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, the epics, and the Sanskrit aesthetics. This would lead to arguments about the philosophical wisdom of the ancient Aryans, the absence of a caste system, the existence of assemblies and republics, systemization of law, philosophy, philology and science.

A new interest in Sanskrit texts made the study of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita revolve around popular themes of Aryan wisdom. Sheldon Pollock has explained that the Sanskrit lexicography and its evolving intellectual tradition became the foundation of the vernacular thought of the north and south. The rise of the Sanskrit cosmopolis expanding from Central Asia to South East Asia made Sanskrit the lingua franca of intellectual inquiry and discourse without the geography or politics of an Empire (Pollock 6-37).

### **Understanding the Mind—East and West**

The mind as we understand in the west is capable of using the sharp knife of intellect to dissect and understand the world of the five senses. It can only present or represent what it has collected through direct experience or reading. To be impartial and free from ideology and personal biases is impossible without accessing the energy of life or kriya. Both literature and history are partial representations of life and can be seen as partly illusory, just as life itself is a big illusion. So in India history was not represented the way it was in the West where there was a clear demarcation between written forms of

history and written forms of literature. This led to western orientalist and many modern day scholars to assume that India lacked a sense of history. Edward Said argued that orientalism in history arose out of “fundamentally fractious” circumstances and was therefore connected to the “tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history” (Said xvi-ii). Maurice Winternitz who systematized the history of Indian literature concluded that Indians had no sense of history. In recent times V.S. Naipaul complained that Indian writers like R.K. Narayan have no sense of history; and consequently their writing “hangs in the air.” Writers like Narayan see the isolated eternity of Malgudi and ignore the 400 years of Indian history in their writing, a history replete with conquest and defeat (Suroor 2). Romila Thapar on the other hand explains that ancient Indians may not have had “conventional form of historical writing” but they did have a “historical consciousness of the past.” According to her there were three distinct historiographies in ancient India—the Bardic tradition, the Puranic and the Shramanic. She believes that the Puranas were “:not entirely mythical, since they contain references to historical events” (Thapar 30). Krishna Charitra by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya attempts to find the real Krishna separating him from myth and legend. The past is also connected to the concept of linear or circular time. Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutra* believes that past, future and present exist eternally. The difference amongst them is to do with their moral character (Ranganathan 283). Both history and literature also grapple with the concept of time to conceptualize the graspable past.

History today concentrates more on analytical historiographies and ideological debates. Historians see themselves more as interpreting and analyzing historical facts and not as creators of the past. They do not want to understand how people lived, believed or died.



To narrate the history of the past with conviction a historian needs the urgencies and skill of a creative writer. Hayden White states that “believable” history is written by those who can convince others with their rhetoric.

Literary writers have often won international prizes for documenting the emotional life of an era—the courage and suffering of ordinary people. Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 but the citation referred to her “monumental” work in documenting the “suffering and courage in the Soviet Union.” Sir Winston Churchill’s writing was singled out for praise in 1953 for possessing “historical and biographical” detail and a style with “brilliant oratory” that defended “exalted human values.” A historian could use a powerful style to document historical events to make them more convincing and interesting, something that authentic historians would object. The revisionist representation of the First World War by Niall Ferguson had a profound effect on the general public as serious piece of history though it was derided by academics for eliding difficult historical questions. Today nobody reads Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) but often its irony, detachment and wit can be quite interesting.

## **Conclusion**

We work under the shadow of western disciplines and find it somewhat difficult to use our methods or vidhi to investigate reality. In the world of digital technology knowledges from the west and east are merging as they once did in the 18th century. Just as German and English orientalists sought the knowledge of the Sanskrit tradition we should also create a third wave of globalization, create a new cosmopolis that would

address the concerns of our day. In the last 35 years the rise of digital technology has created a new explosion of knowledge both in the academic world and outside encouraging a new interaction of disciplines. The power of western publishing houses and universities is on the decline giving way to a new synergy of marginalized knowledge. With the implosion of the West and the United States due to demographic and racial reasons a new knowledge space is opened for the East to emerge once again. The issues that confront us today in literature and history are the tremendous unhappiness of displaced populations, economic inequality, cultural and linguistic tensions, closing down of national borders and environmental degradation. All these and much more prevent the spread of cosmopolitan feeling of concern for the other. Can we grasp the new challenge? Can we occupy the newly vacated space?

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