

The Role of Language and Literature in Unifying Society through Culture

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Abstract

The global crisis today is centered around terrorism, inequality and environmental hazards. The alienation of man from man and the resulting cultural disconnect between humans is the cause of this crisis. Man is not only a social animal but also a cultural animal and so a cultural re-orientation can offer an effective solution to this crisis. Culture is based on the basic moral values of a society. In order to re-establish these values, mankind needs a structured approach. A reprogramming of society's psyche through language and literature is the need of the hour. While there have been various approaches to this problem from the point of view of language and literature of each land, there, we have a ready-made solution to most of the problems of humanity in the Vedic culture and corresponding Sanskrit language and literature. Sanskrit is one of the most ancient languages of the world. Its structure is consistent with the tenets of the Vedic culture, creating a bridge between humanity and utopia. Humanity is based on four purusharthas- dharma, artha, kaama, moksha, that explain how the four aspects of life - cultural, monetary, material and spiritual – need to be perfectly aligned with each other to ensure a fruitful life. Man constitutes society, societies constitute a nation, and nations constitute a collective global society. In this manner, man is the focal point of international understanding. Through mankind's interpersonal concurrence in thought we can ensure global peace and Sanskrit language and literature can offer a solution to this.

Introduction

Modern society is teetering on the precipice of a disaster. The only question that remains to be asked is - what will that disaster be? There are a multitude of crises to choose from be it overpopulation, deteriorating environmental health, gender inequality, terrorism, or societal breakdown leading to anarchy at a more individual level. The answer to this lies in what we think of as “the days of yore” when human society lived based on a cultural perspective and flourished with a zeal that was beautiful and inspiring. Society consists of individuals that contribute to its progress or downfall. As such, individual growth and success is an integral part of communal health. One individual has the power to ensure the stability of the world. An American revolutionary by the name of Thomas Paine once said, “My country is the world, and my religion is to do good.” Such an attitude can contribute to a structured society that is both cooperative and co-reliant and a large number of societies such as these can be the foundation of a peaceful world. The words “country” and “religion” used here are probably two of the most explosive words in any debate on international cooperation. The difference between country and religion has created a world divided into fanatics led by blind faith in a particular ideal versus the rational minded led solely by their intellectual prowess. This lack of interpersonal relationship ensures that while the two live in the same society, they may never coexist peacefully, to the detriment of international understanding. Hence, there is a need for a structured approach to reprogramming the individual psyche to create a society that works in tandem with the universal need for peace and stability. A pressing concern of today's society is the alienation of mankind and the root of this problem lies in an excess of individualism. The modern need for individual freedom has created a world where the excessive need for privacy has led to a society that is paranoid, intolerant and impatient. The escalation in hate crime, identity crises, and mental disorders also display a dysfunctional society that is crying out for a purpose and a sense of direction, culminating in extreme detachment from the world. How can inter-personal relationship exist in such an environment? How can international understanding be achieved in a world where its citizens are desensitized to its needs and to each other? Charles Darwin asserted that “man is a social animal” and that the basic instincts of human society mimic this statement when we explore the history of mankind. From the prehistoric hunter-gatherers to the following nomads and subsequent civilizations, one can observe the evolution of mankind in manners and living style but

the one thing that has remained consistent is that our predecessors all lived in groups, *a society*. The values of a society helped its individuals grow personally as well as collectively into psychologically stable people. Inter-dependence was not considered a crutch or a burden, but rather, a display of unity and strength. Limitless expectations have produced a society that cannot seem to satisfy its desires and, in the attempt, to achieve this have steadily isolated themselves from the world. The Vedic system and its four *purusharthas* can offer a viable solution to this conundrum. The *purushartha* model covers the basic needs of an individual to ensure stability in personal life and slowly uplifts the overall standard of living through persistent self-development. Guided by the *purusharthas*, the *ashram* and the *chatur varnya* systems create a microcosmic change through the application of simple time management and dictating individual duties. Primarily, a person's dominant necessity is to be financially capable of sustaining their basic needs. Once the question of comfortable existence is solved, there is scope for a more philosophical approach to life such as the question of morality, the workings of society, motivation for actions, etc. which are some of the questions addressed in the *purushartha* system. In the Vedic model, the four *purusharthas* form the backbone of society. They distribute the essence of human life into four parts- *dharma*, *artha*, *kaama*, and *moksha*- which are further prioritized according to the *varna* and *ashrama* systems. Our focus here will be on explaining how the *purusharthas* work with the *ashram* and *varna* systems in reprogramming society and offer the possibility of a global bond of fraternity.

The Universal Necessity

The four *purusharthas*- *dharma*, *artha*, *kaama* and *moksha*, propose that a person's basic survival needs be ensured before they can be inspired to consider a more philosophical outlook towards life. To this end, the *ashram* and the *varna* systems were developed to focus on individual upliftment as the base for societal stability and universal peace. While these systems have been notoriously misinterpretedⁱ their original conceptualization is truly socialisticⁱⁱ in nature, enabling society to prosper without the side effects of regulation through an extremist regime. In these systems, social and individual satisfaction as well as spiritual and material (financial, social, aesthetic etc.) development are approached concurrently to create a balanced growth. Socially, humans need to feel connected with others in order to have a sense of well-being. Individual satisfaction is dependent upon this feeling of well-being which is a result of community and family. Throughout the centuries we have been constantly asking ourselves who we are, where do we come from, who do we belong to, and these questions have formed the core of various philosophies around the world today. Once material satisfaction is achieved, the next step is spiritual progressⁱⁱⁱ, creating a society that is not only stable but also has an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the world, ensuring an empathetic culture. This leads to the awareness that one is merely a link in the chain connecting all of humanity, creating motivation for selfless behavior. Consider a smoker that is willing to make an effort to give up his addiction after he becomes a father or a successful businesswoman willing to put her child before her career for a few years. The level of devotion that is visible towards another life form as demonstrated by parents is required at a universal level to ensure a sense of global relationship. In this manner, culture plays an important role in the upliftment of society and this can be achieved through Sanskrit language and literature. To this end, the *purusharthas* can be considered as the organizational backbone of any society with *dharma* being the regulating agent in life. Morality and ethics help police actions but at the same time there is a need for regulating life itself so that time and energy can be utilized efficiently and in pursuit of personal development. The *ashram* and the *varna* systems help in regulating this need through a structure that helps define the stages of life as well as division of labor.

Explaining Dharma

While there are multiple definitions in various Sanskrit texts,^{iv} *dharma* can be essentially explained as a way of life that aids in steady self-development through a structured system of living. Today, *dharma* is loosely translated as religion when, in reality, it is made up of three distinct facets:

- Way of life
- Way of thinking
- Way of worship

Dharma outlines a way of life focused on a culture that cultivates an inherent consciousness in society about the impact of one individual on the world. Through this mentality, a chain reaction in positive development could affect the world towards international understanding. Such a global society

would be united in their beliefs and outlook for the future of the human race. These three aspects complement each other and help regulate the rest of the *purusharthas*. *Dharma* is the supervising agent that helps keep these *purusharthas* in check in addition to aiding in their optimal utilization in life. For example, a person in a difficult situation would consider solving their problem illegally in order to save time, money and energy. While their purpose might not be negative, their process could be considered unethical and/or immoral. In such a situation, *dharma* could help them choose the appropriate path. While the outcome of such a situation can be extremely subjective, there is a possibility that the person can navigate through to a solution that is both moral and efficient. Such a conclusion could also influence the society through example. The thought process that the person went through would reflect their core values and in the event of religious beliefs influencing the decision (fear of a supernatural power or belief in the afterlife), *dharma* comes a full circle in instituting a structured way of life in today's society. In the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 17Another example can be taken from the epic of the Mahabharata where Krishna leaves Gokul when the invading army of Jarasandha attacks for the seventeenth time. In this instance, Krishna decided that his image as a warrior or his desire to rid the world of a tyrant is of lesser importance than the collective good of the people and flees the battlefield. A counter example of this would be the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 where the multiple adharmic^v decisions by the leaders created a political vacuum resulting in a massacre of the Maratha army and civilians at the hands of the Mughals. These examples aid in the imagination of *dharma*'s capacity to promote an ordered life.

The Ashram and the Varna Systems

The *ashram* and the *varna* systems detail a plan to aid in the implementation of the *purusharthas* with each division most effective when followed within its given parameters. Different stages of life need their own focus in order to ensure that a human lifespan is utilized efficiently. The *ashram* system has four such divisions- brahmacharya, grihastha, vaanaprastha, and sanyaasa.

- The *brahmacharya ashram*: 15-17 years of uninterrupted education time.
- The *grihastha ashram*: 25 years for raising a family and instilling values in children.
- The *vaana prastha ashram*: the children have entered their own grihastha *ashram* while the parents take a secondary role.
- The *sanyaasa ashram*: a spiritual focus on life away from society.

A prioritized life combined with a self-implemented division of labor in society creates a consensual work ethic that contributes to professional and efficient labor. In the *varna* system, citizens have the option of electing their profession and *varna* based on their inherent qualities and interests ensuring lifetime engagement in their trade. With a healthy professional life there is the promise of a steady family life and a stable society. These divisions are not hierarchal but, rather, a system of equality to ensure that every necessity of a society is accounted for and that every member is judged equally regardless of their profession.^{vi} The divisions are as follows:

- The *brahmanas* are the intellectuals of society,
- The *kshatriyas* are the protectors,
- The *vaishyas* are the businessmen, and
- The *shudras* are the artisans or workers of society

These divisions enable society to function as a well-oiled machine with every citizen aware of their responsibilities. Throughout the centuries, the original intent of these divisions has been replaced with a corrupted interpretation and the resulting chaos led to reformers like Gandhiji, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Vinoba Bhave, Pandurang Shastri Athavale among others to encourage a change in the societal structure.

Today, the original application of these systems is a complex ideal that might be almost impossible to achieve. Therefore, a solution to this dilemma would be to implement the ideas behind the concepts in a modified manner that will eventually create a ripple of effect in society and, thus, the world. *Dharma* plays a supervisory role in this process. Vedic scriptures have various descriptions of

dharmā that contribute to a better understanding of its all-encompassing nature as a force of universal change. Some of the more popular descriptions are:

1. *Yato abhyudaya nishreyasya siddhi sa dharmah* - The *Vaisheshika Sūtras* of Kanada explain *dharmā* as “that which leads to the attainment of *abhyudaya* (a cocktail of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual prosperity) is called *dharmā*.”

2. *Dhārayati iti dharmah* - Another definition of *dharmā* in Sanskrit lore is “that which nurtures and nourishes is called *dharmā*.”

3. *Yaagaadireva dharmah* – “*Yajnya* is *dharmā*”. The word *Yajnya* is formed from *yaja devapuja sangatikaranam maitrikanam* – “that which promotes worship of the *devas*, unity and friendship.” *Yajnya* is the act of a collective drive for spiritual upliftment and unity. The spiritual quotient in human life expects a mental and emotional satisfaction that is provided through the act of *Yajnya* where the society works as a unit to eliminate any negativity, they may have amongst themselves.

These depictions explain the all-encompassing nature of Sanskrit literature in expressing culture as a mode of unity through the conditioning of the collective consciousness of society, creating concurrence in thought and contributing to stability in society. Culture regulates *artha* and *kaama* through a system of checks and balances that is essentially the society that one lives in. The extent to which the *purusharthas* can be applied in such a manner today can be demonstrated through attempts by various groups today such as the Arya Samaj and Swadhyay Parivar. These groups work towards an ideal society based on the teachings of the Vedas and consider their practical applicability based on logical interpretations of the scriptures. In an effort to understand the applicability of the topic discussed we will primarily focus on explaining the two groups mentioned above. The Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 in opposition to the various dogmatic beliefs that were prevalent at the time such as untouchability, child marriage, degraded status of women, blind faith in the form of pilgrimage and temple offerings and rituals and the basis of caste upon birth rather than merit. To provide an alternative to these practices Swami Dayanand created the Arya Samaj, a society of people that would adhere strictly to the Vedas as the ultimate truth and live according to the refined interpretations. A more current group goes by the name of the Swadhyay Parivar that follows the teachings of the Vedas in the form of the Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta. Established by Pandurang Shastri Athavale around 1942, the Swadhyay Parivar has been described as a “silent yet singing revolution” touching millions of lives worldwide through its focus on what the founder calls “intellectual devotion”. Their main premise is that the basic component missing in society today is love and relationship and that the Geeta explains how this can be achieved through the simple act of expressing intellectual love towards a universal creator. Through groups such as these an emphasis has been placed on developing a society that is based on *dharmā*, follows the four *purusharthas* and also adheres to the actual conceptualization of the *ashram* and the *varna* systems.

While world peace is a difficult objective, societal stability is at least a promising step towards that aspiration and Sanskrit language and literature offer the conditioning needed to create such an environment. Sanskrit, as a language, is known for its meticulous structure and impeccable grammar. Its construction expects students to nurture a precision in thought process and decision-making that is automatically implemented in everyday life. Likewise, a similar result can be expected from Sanskrit literature as we have several exemplary works that display the *kavi*'s creativity and flexibility of thought in educating the masses. A *kavi* is a philosopher sage that pours their essence into a literary work, making it a representation of the ideals of Vedic culture that were followed by the society at the time.^{vii} Every work of Sanskrit literature promotes the *purusharthas* and their attainability. Sanskrit language expresses sentiments such as *saiyam*, *viveka*, *dhairya*, *kritajnyata*, *tejasvita*, *karuna*, etc.^{viii} that explains a range of emotions seldom found in the world we see today. A study of these qualities by the intellectuals and the elite of the society ensure a trickle-down effect creating change in society. The excessive individualism seen in today's society is also remedied through a study of qualities like these. The Vedic literary tradition shows a level of pragmatism in its structure that cultivates a mentality that is rational yet idealistic in the face of a rapidly deteriorating world. To ensure that the essence of the literature is captured the works need to be understood in the language that they were written in – Sanskrit. Sanskrit has attracted the explorers of the world and offered a solution to problems throughout the centuries and continues to do so today as well. The road to inter-personal relationship and

international understanding begins at the individual level and through the development of the individual, societal change can take place, leading to a chain reaction that can change the world.

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Endnote

ⁱ I would like to point out that the views given here are based on textual interpretation of the concepts mentioned. In popular implementation, the *varna* system has been seriously misconstrued as a hierarchal division of society rather a simple classification according to labor. This misinterpretation has gained popularity over the actual model which is, in fact, merely a division of labor according to the inherent qualities of a person in order to create a society that is satisfied with their choice of profession and the direction of their lives.

ⁱⁱ The term “socialism” has a long and confusing history of different interpretations all of which center around the idea that a society collectively reaps the benefits of any positive or negative outcome.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term “spiritual” here is not used in a religious context, but rather, in terms of mental and subliminal development. Mental is different from subliminal as it portrays conscious processes while the latter explains the subconscious. According to the Vedic texts, culture means a system that promotes well-rounded development of the individual encompassing physical, material, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the personality. To this end, festivals and the correlating fasts and events encourage a change in personality subtly.

^{iv} Sages such as Manu, Kautilya, Yajnavalkya etc. all have various types of definitions for *dharmā* that reflect the situation that they describe. For example, Manu mentions a verse as a definition:

*Dhriti kshama damo 'steyam shaucham indriya nighrahah
Dheervidya satyam akrodho dashakam dharmā lakshanam (Manu 6.92)*

This verse is part of a chapter that explains the duties of a person in the *vaana prastha ashrama* and, therefore, explains qualities that depict a slow progression towards a calm and detached demeanor, preparing the practitioner for *sanyaasa ashram*.

^v The opposite of *dharmā* is *adharma*, which can loosely be translated to “not *dharmā*”.

^{vi} While this is the ideal mentality, it has not always been adhered to. A dark chapter in Indian history remains where societies corrupted the proposed systems leading to untouchables, caste hierarchy, and a rigid observance of the *jaata* system that led to many a child being deprived of their choice of profession.

^{vii} A definition of *kavi* found in Sanskrit lore is as follows: *kavate sarvam jaanaati, sarvam varnayati, sarvam sarvato gacchati va* – one that knows everything, explains everything, understands everything and reaches everywhere is called *kavi*.

^{viii} These words loosely translated are “moderation, presence of mind, steadfastness, gratefulness, brilliance, empathy”.

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