

ESSAYS AND STUDIES

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FOREWORD

English began to be seriously studied in India somewhere in the sixties of the last century, although a few stray Indians had begun expressing themselves in it a few years earlier. When the Universities were founded, English became immediately the favoured subject of study, primarily as providing the surest means of official preferment, but partly also as the language which enabled one to make the acquaintance of writers like Godwin, Burke, and Mill—whose political philosophy, immediately after the Rising of 1857 and the growth of a feeling of nationalism, suited the temper of young India and directed the aims and ambitions of the leaders of the Indian Renaissance. It was quite a common sight to see the Congress orators end with a passage from Burke or Byron or Swinburne. They were intoxicated, as Lord Morley said, with the ideas of freedom, nationality, self-government, that breathe the breath of life in those inspiring and illuminating pages. There was also, in many quarters, a genuine literary enthusiasm for the tongue that Shakespeare spake. To this day journalists refer to the Indian Shakespeare, the Indian Milton, the Indian Scott. Much of the literature of modern Bengali, Marathi, Gujrati, Hindi, Urdu is indebted both in spirit and in form to English. But, owing to the exigencies of administrative convenience, thousands of Indians have had to study English and waste priceless years in striving to attain a working knowledge of this exceedingly difficult language. That is how the ill-natured gibe against “Babu English” or “Indian English” came into existence; that is how so many bright men have wasted their intellectual efforts only to discover that their expression is weak, lifeless, full of errors, sometimes ludicrous. The attempt to impose a foreign language and compel every boy and girl to attach at school and college a superstitious importance to it is responsible for the antagonism towards it that is so marked a feature of Indian political and educational thought today. In the last generation it was the fond ambition of a political leader in this country that he might dream in English. Indian scholars and writers disdained at one time to use their mother-tongue. If they lisped in numbers, Tennyson and Pope were their models, and the shores of Albion the source of their second-hand inspiration. In everything they were content and indeed

ambitious to be mere imitators. The rising wave of nationalism checked the growth of this ambition. Must we remain mere imitators? Must our writings remain mere inane copies of those of the West? Must we borrow our critical canons from Aristotle, Horace, Dryden, Boileau, Walter Pater and Arnold and Croce? Had we not better examine our own law-givers, Vishwanath, Dandin, Mammata and Jagannath? Have these not something to convey, something more akin to our own national background, temperament, the genius of our race? And in any case why seek in vain for recognition as writers of English? Barring Joseph Conrad what other foreigner has won for himself an honoured position among English men of letters?

These and similar questions suggest a welcome return of balance and sanity. No Indian scholar of English imagines now that he will ever be a great English poet or a great master of English prose style. This is not to say that he is opposed to the study of English. Who can afford to ignore the rich treasures of English Literature? Or who can fail to recognise the importance of the language which is spoken and understood in every continent? The teacher of English in India does not need to apologise for his existence. He performs and will continue to perform an important function. He will help to enrich the literatures of the land, to point new lines of advance, to suggest fresh forms and unattempted themes, to adapt western methods of criticism and analysis, to broaden outlook and present a vaster prospect. Extensive rather than intensive study seems to be indicated. A broad view is needed. Perhaps it is inevitable that in the changed conditions scholarship and learning will suffer. But I am not sure that that will be a loss without "abundant recompense." Thanks to the desire to place literature on the academic map and to compete with such subjects as the exact sciences and history and economics, literature been allowed in the Universities to degenerate into a matter of dates, sources, editions, various readings, and all the other trappings and fopperies of so-called scholarship. The spirit is departed and only the dry bones are left. Researches having been regarded as indispensable in some subjects, literature also had, almost as a necessary condition for continued existence, to arrange for research theses, and authors, long left in well-earned oblivion, have been taken out of the dead covers of their books and musty manuscripts, and mummified and rejuvenated with all the artificial stimulus of foot-notes, search in libraries and museums, and the pseudo-scientific nostrums of psycho-analysis. The result of

this is that literature ceases to be alive, it is so thoroughly botanised over. The soul of the writer, the thoughts that he seeks to convey, the dreams and aspirations that he moulds into words, the deeps of personality that can be plumbed, recede into insignificance. Literature has suffered grievously at the hands of the professional scholar. The late Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch are excellent guides; but they are not beloved of the tribe of professional scholars. It has been said of Raleigh that one of the articles of his creed as a professor was that too much system kills the study of literature. His true function, as he saw it, was not to discuss theories, or to trace influences, or to show developments, so much as to exhibit what was great in literature.

What is great in literature: this must not be lost sight of, and the discovery, revelation, and interpretation of it is the teacher's task and delight and privilege. The first issue of "The Review of English Studies" (January, 1925) had some wise words on the subject of literary research. The editors said: "In matter of literary history 'research' is not quite the same thing as in the natural sciences. We have less to do with that which has never previously been known, and more with that which has never been rightly interpreted. There is little for us to discover in the way of bare fact that was not known to some person or other before our day: much of our work must necessarily be re-discovery, but it is no less important on that account and no less worthy of the name of research." To what extent we, teachers and students of English, working in India, have been able to enter into the spirit of English literature, to study its forms and origins, to assist in the growth and development of our own literatures, to do research in the way either of discovery or re-discovery, it is for others to say. In our branch of the English Association we have striven, in pursuance of its aims, to link together groups engaged in English work, to uphold the standards of English writing and speech, and to discuss methods of English teaching.

AMARANATHA JHA,

President, U.P. Branch of the English Association.