

Siddhant Iyer

Professor Samara Hayley Steele

UWP 001 (Literacy Narrative)

Sunday, December 13, 2020

A Reconnection

“We have got a gift for you” my father said, as he gave me a children’s version of the Ramayana when I was around nine years old. I gladly accepted the gift and as a jolly little child, I opened the book and started reading it. For me, at that age, it was like any other adventure book that involved an interesting story and vivid descriptions of characters. The story of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana being exiled to the forest for 14 years and their encounter with Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, always fascinated me. Similarly, stories of Krishna and Kamsa, Shiva-Parvati and Ganesha were always engrossing. However, little did I know that these stories were an integral part of my Indian culture, religion and traditions and stored immense amount of valuable lessons of moral responsibility which were once scribed by wise sages more than 6000 years ago.

My parents always brought me along to different religious and cultural events and made me sit for hours in marriage functions where pandits (priests) would perform rituals in front of an Agnikund (fire pit) and chant sacred verses from the Vedas. But for me, the only pastime was to either sit, tired of boredom, or to play with my cousins who were also present at the functions. When I was eleven years old, a ritual was performed for me where I had to wear a sacred thread (Yajnopavitam) and my father told me that it was my duty to perform ‘Sandhyavandhanam (a ritual offering obeisance to Goddess Sandhya, the sun, the sky, the earth and other divine beings)’ three times a day. I did not understand what I would have achieved from this ritual and thus I had stopped doing it. As a naïve child, I looked for answers in these rituals but because our nation got increasingly distanced from our scriptures and other ancient texts, our parents could seldom provide answers to those questions.

What had happened was, once the British left India in 1947, their residues were long-lasting and had a negative impact on our minds. Their policies to divide our nation on the basis of religion, caste, language and the constant attempt of missionaries to forcefully convert Indians by misinterpreting religious

scriptures and presenting an improper perspective of our culture and language increasingly distanced us from being proud of our culture and heritage. Since the Independence, most of us had started considering ourselves inferior compared to the West and started disdaining our own culture in an attempt to suit the interests of the West. After a while, the situation was such, that when someone would speak English, he/she would be praised heavily while the other person would be taunted and joked for not being able to speak English. In my international school, whenever I spoke Hindi with my friends, teachers would scold me for not speaking English. Furthermore, the history books would often speak highly about invaders such as the Mughals and the British than important Indian rulers and freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives to protect the nation. Thence, I spent most of my life thinking how great Mughal rulers were, who in reality were thieves who looted our nation and religiously persecuted several ethnic groups. With the rise of westernization, we started looking up to the West as the more civilized society and our culturally weakened society's condition deteriorated further. Most of us never really understood the Vedic philosophies and reasoning behind these rituals and merely performed them as a task.

Upon reaching high school, I could not make sense of these practices and the constant portrayal of negative elements of my community through media disconnected me from my culture and seemed to snatch away my identity. Until high school, I read books describing stories relating to Indian mythologies but they were still stories for me as I could not comprehend the implied meaning in them. This disconnect from my culture grew to such an extent that it eventually lost value in my life.

The situation remained unchanged until the end of junior year of my high school when I was given an assignment to speak for a few minutes about an image presented in Hindi. The image shared great similarities with Ramayana- the book that I had read throughout my childhood. Thus, to prepare for this assignment, I read the Ramayana again but used a different approach this time. I analysed it thoroughly, read the interpretations and watched videos of scholars, after which, the incidents from the Epic made greater sense to me from a philosophical perspective. After this, I got interested in knowing more about my culture and thus I watched several videos and read works of Vedic scholars such as Jay Lakhani and Dr. David Frawley to get answers for the questions that I once had. Their philosophical and spiritual perspective enhanced my understanding of the festivals, rituals/practices such as Sandhyavandhanam, yoga, Ayurveda. They made greater sense and relevance in my life. Moreover, reading about the academic contributions of

ancient Indian scholars thousands of years ago reconnected me to my roots. This exposure increased my literacy and the respect towards my native culture and the traditions of India.

In addition, as I read more about invaders and how they religiously persecuted, looted my ancestors of their wealth and identity, the concern for the preservation of my culture and religion increased. It ignited, within me, a sense of responsibility and accountability towards my ancestors who struggled and sacrificed their lives to preserve the native culture and traditions of an ancient land from getting completely destroyed at the hands of the invaders.

In conclusion, my experience with literacy in my culture, tradition and religion saw a sinusoidal behaviour over time where I was superficially connected to it as a naïve child, then got disconnected as I grew up and later reconnected even stronger than before. My accountability for my ancestors by reading about their struggles was what strengthened this reconnection.
