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Agenda Ahead for Classical Languages in the Context of National Education Policy – 2020

Abstract: The term classical is also liberally used in the sense of excellence in quality along with antiquity, universality, idealism, clarity/reason, and humanitarian outlook. As Sheldon Pollock points out, “These books [classical texts] are not just for rasikas or lovers of poetry or the professional historian. If you look at the definition of ‘classical’ in the Western tradition, they use the phrase ‘perpetual contemporaneity’. The classical is always what is already familiar to us. It’s as if you go to the classical because you want to rediscover yourself.” The present paper examines the challenges and opportunities in the field of classical Kannada literature in the light of National Education Policy 2020. The author concludes that according to new reports, as a part of the process to implement the new National Education Policy, the government has asked the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) to come up with National Curriculum Frameworks (NCFs) for school, early-childhood, teacher and adult education. University Grants Commission (UGC) had sought suggestions to the revised draft National Curriculum Framework on the guidelines of “fostering social responsibility and community engagement in higher education institutions in India”.

Keywords: Classical Kannada literature, halagannada, classical literature, texts, translations, NEP 2020.

Abbreviations:

CCL is Centre for Classical Languages,
CIIL is Central Institute of Indian Languages,
IIMs is Indian Institute of Managements,
IITs is Indian Institute of Technologies,
NCERT is National Council for Education Research and Training,
NCF is National Curriculum Frameworks,
NEP is National Education Policy,
NLS is National Law School,
UGC is University Grants Commission.

urdhvordhavam aruhya yad arta-tattvam
dhih pashyati sranthim avedayanti
phalam tad adyaih parikalpitanaam
viveka-sopaana-paramparanaam

Abhinava-gupta (*Abhinava-bharati*, 6.31)

*The mind perceives the ultimate
By tirelessly ascending higher and higher
It is the fruition of a flight of stairs
Fashioned by the ancients*

Introduction

What is the definition of “classical literature” that forms the basis for a language to be termed classical? The term “classical literature” is used for the literature of any language in a period notable for the excellence and enduring quality of its writers’ works. In ancient Greece such a period extending from about 500 to 320 BCE. The Golden Age of Rome ran from about 70 BCE to 18 CE. French literature of the second half of the 17th century is considered classical, as is English literature of 1660–1714. In Japanese language, the literature of the period from 794 A.D. to 1185 A.D. is considered to be classical. In the Indian context, classical literature is also characterized by the element of timelessness and continuing relevance and a large part of it is space and time neutral.

The term classical is also liberally used in the sense of excellence in quality along with antiquity, universality, idealism, clarity/reason, and humanitarian outlook. As Sheldon Pollock points out, “These books [classical texts] are not just for rasikas or lovers of poetry or the professional historian. If you look at the definition of ‘classical’ in the Western tradition, they use the phrase ‘perpetual contemporaneity’. The classical is always what is already familiar to us. It’s as if you go to the classical because you want to rediscover yourself.”

The study aims to examine the challenges and opportunities in classical Kannada literature in the light of National Education Policy 2020.

According to the purpose, there were fellow study tasks:

- analyse history of classical language status in India;
- describe important issues of the topic;
- conclude examining the challenges and opportunities in the field of classical Kannada literature in the light of National Education Policy 2020.

In the course of the study, the works of K.D. Kurtukoti, R.S. Mugali, Sh. Pollock, T.R.S. Sharma, M. Spotti, O. Garcia, N. Flores, H. Tipperudraswamy, A.R. Venkatachopathy, B.A. Vivek Rai, and C.N. Ramachandran were studied and applied. The authors used National Education Policy 2020, too.

Results

Brief History of Classical Language Status in India

The Tamil people were the first to make a call for classical language status. The then government considered the demand, consulted the Central Sahitya Akademi and constituted an expert committee to lay norms/guidelines to accord the status of Classical Languages. The Sahitya Akademi’s expert committee mentioned four criteria for a classical language, which was accepted by the Government.

The four criteria are:

1. High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500–2000 years
2. A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers.
3. The literary tradition to be original and not borrowed from another speech community
4. The classical language and literature being distinct from modern, there may also be a discontinuity between the classical language and its later forms or its offshoots.

After a language is notified as a Classical Language, the following benefits are provided by the Ministry of Education:

1. A Centre of Excellence for studies in Classical Languages will be set up.
2. The UGC is requested to create, to start with at least in the Central Universities, a certain number of Professional Chairs for the Classical Languages so declared.
3. Two major annual international awards for scholars of eminence in classical Indian languages.

As on date, six Indian languages Tamil (2004), Sanskrit (2005), Telugu (2008), Kannada (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014) have been accorded the Classical Language status till now.

For Classical Kannada the Education Ministry has established a Centre of Excellence in the CIIL, Mysore. In addition to this, UGC has approved CCL in Kannada in Central University of Karnataka, Gulbarga.

In November 2021, the Union Government constituted a ‘high-powered’ committee to explore and recommend pathways for the promotion and growth of Indian languages as envisaged in the NEP 2020.

Important Issues

Throughout the talk I will be giving examples from Kannada, my mother tongue and the language it each, as it gives me a sense of authenticity. I beg the audience not to mistaken it as chauvinism. However, I am sure the examples will be relatable. One often hears that soon there will be no one studying the classical texts in Karnataka. One can also witness the dearth of students for classical studies in literature. Hence, the point is what is the use of giving “classical” status if there is hardly anyone to study/read it? Decades ago, every university in Karnataka, and I am sure across the country, had a department of Indian classical studies. However, we are hardly left with any now. With the advent of modern technology and globalization, it has become difficult even for departments of philosophy, science and literature to survive. This being the case, subjects like Halagannada becomes unpopular with students rather early. The best of students generally goes to engineering, medicine and management. What we are left with is a disinterested bunch.

This should change. Every challenge provides with new opportunities. We have shown that we are capable of achieving eminence in a lot of things. Let us take the examples of IITs, IIMs, NLSs. Why should we not think of an institute or a set of institutions dedicated to the cultivation of classical knowledge with the same kind of funding and seriousness as the IITs and IIMs.

For example: Karnataka has 25,000 to 30,000 inscriptions. Epigraphica Indica, the first volume of which was edited by James Burgess in 1888 is the most comprehensive. The later

editions are just photographs of these inscriptions with no critical analysis. This gap can and should be filled.

As mentioned earlier, in the Indian context, classical literature is also characterized by the element of timelessness and continuing relevance, as ours is largely a living tradition. NEP should encourage education system to resonate within its pages the eternal spirit of the Vachanakaras to the poetic genius of Pampa, Ponna and Ranna, the historical pre-eminence of Halmidi inscription, Srivijaya, Vidyaranya to the new dimensions in classical music, dance, folk and other art forms related to classical Kannada literature explored by contemporaries. In other words, the content should be *space-and-time neutral*.

The NEP states that, “In addition to Sanskrit, other classical languages and literatures of India, including Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Pali, Persian, and Prakrit, will also be widely available in schools as options for students, possibly as online modules, through experiential and innovative approaches, to ensure that these languages and literature stay alive and vibrant.”

Classical languages of India contain vast treasures of mathematics, philosophy, grammar, music, politics, medicine, architecture, metallurgy, drama, poetry, storytelling, and more. They are written by people from all walks of life and a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds over thousands of years. It is imperative that this classical part of the literature be taught in ways that are interesting, experiential as well as contemporarily relevant and make its study truly enjoyable.

It is here that interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches should be taken. I should cite the example of the BGL Swamy, an eminent Kannada writer and an outstanding botanist who was trained at Harvard. BGL Swamy worked on areas such as plants mentioned in ancient Kannada inscriptions and ancient Kannada works. This, BGL Swamy says, helped a lot to gain unique perspectives for his studies and research in Botany. He even tried to locate the time and space of such works in the background of botany. Hence, for the enrichment of the children along with the preservation of classical languages students should have the option of learning/studying classical language with an emphasis on classical literature its associated disciplines with integration of technology.

This will not only relate to the students of literature but to the students of history, sociology and epigraphy as well. As the famous adage from the Bible goes, “...the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.”

With quickly changing employment landscape and global ecosystem, it is evident that children not only learn, but learn how to learn, how to think critically and solve problems, how to be creative and multidisciplinary, and how to innovate, adapt, and absorb new material in novel and changing fields. In this regard, the NEP aims to make the education pedagogy more “experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable.”

How will these be achieved as far as the classical literature is concerned is not given in detail in NEP.

As far as I have observed, projects under the classical language status have largely been by and for academia and academic scholarship. However, there are interest groups across the state of Karnataka who are interested in Halagannada and are working towards, for example, bringing

back the glory of well-structured poetry, i.e., prosody. One such example is a group called “Padyapaana” in Bengaluru.

Tens of members, young and old and from various professional backgrounds, from the “Padyapaana” circle are adept in composing poetry set to classical meters. Some of them are extempore poets as well. It is high time that we take the classical studies to the common people, like it was a millennium ago and during the medieval periods. Technology and crowdsourcing, with extensive participation of the people, will play a crucial role in these efforts.

The Classical period in Kannada literature marks one of the highest peaks of achievement in the history of Kannada literature. The era was marked by gifted poets and thinkers, who were also social critics, such as Srivijaya, Shivakotyacharya, Pampa, Ranna, Nagavarma, Nagachandra, Kumaravyasa and the whole galaxy of Vachanakaras from Basava to Allama to Akka Mahadevi. However, ironically, such a distinguished and rich body of literature has largely remained inaccessible to the non-Kannada readers. This is mainly because our universities and education institutions have not made a systematic and sustained attempt to make available to non-Kannada readers. On the other hand, while it is important to draw the attention of the non-Kannada readers to classical Kannada literature, it is inevitable that Kannadigas, however one defines the term, need to be sensitized about their own literature. This lacuna is worth filling with earnestness. On the one hand, major Kannada works should be translated into English and on the other hand they need to be translated into other Indian languages as well, especially classical languages. However, this exercise should be done with a genuine aim of making students and the general public want to read them in the original. Till now, whatever work has happened in this regard has been minimal.

NEP can focus on the following areas to achieve this objective:

1. Publish research of scholars in subjects related to cultural heritage of Kannada literature, with a special focus on classical Kannada literature.
2. Produce lucid English translations and translations into other Indian languages of valuable literature in these areas.
3. Identify, curate, and make available in the public domain primary texts related to various aspects of Kannada antiquity and build an online archive.
4. Go beyond just publishing books in conventional way and produce, for example, renderings and audio books and use other forms of arts including theatre, music and dance.

Discussion

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously asked Henry David Thoreau because he quit Harvard, because, after all, Harvard taught all the branches of knowledge. Thoreau replied: “Yes, all the branches and none of the roots.” I was reminded of this brilliant anecdote while preparing this talk on the agenda ahead for classical languages in the context of National Education Policy-2020 (NEP) as much of these discussions are about strengthening of roots and expanding of branches of our classical languages.

Conclusion

According to new reports, as a part of the process to implement the new National Education Policy, the government has asked the NCERT to come up with NCFs for school, early-

childhood, teacher and adult education. UGC had sought suggestions to the revised draft National Curriculum Framework on the guidelines of “fostering social responsibility and community engagement in higher education institutions in India”.

The national curriculum framework serves as a guideline for syllabus, textbooks, teaching and learning practices in the country. India is currently following its fourth national curriculum framework that was published by the NCERT in 2005. Officials at the education ministry said the timeline for the development of new framework is three years.

Earlier, in September 2021, the Union education ministry constituted a 12-member national steering committee to develop the new NCF, which serves as a guideline for syllabus, textbooks, teaching and learning practices in the country. The committee has been constituted to develop NCF in line with the NEP 2020.

We will have to wait and watch how the NEP is implemented.

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