

English Literature and Diplomacy

(Talking Points for the first Hridayakumari Memorial Lecture by Former Ambassador T.P.Sreenivasan at the University College, Trivandrum on March 24, 2015)

I welcome another opportunity to pay my respects to Prof.Hridayakumari, a teacher, scholar, educationist and social activist, who left us recently. To speak of her in this college, where she taught me English Literature for five years is a particular privilege. Even after half a century, I can vividly recall her poise, style, diction and eloquence. She made a great impact on our young minds and inspired us to explore the charms of the English language and literature, which she taught us. We owe much to her for our subsequent accomplishments in different walks of life. It is for this reason that, speaking in her memory, I have chosen to speak on how the study of English Literature has helped me in my chosen profession of diplomacy.

This topic could be considered at two different levels. Several studies exist to bring out the interface between early modern literary and diplomatic forms of representation with a particular focus on the writings of Shakespeare, John Dunne, Edmund Spenser etc. Diplomatic encounter is a scene of cultural exchange and linguistic negotiation. Diplomacy deploys tools of literary tradition to articulate new theories. Conversely, diplomatic theorists helped shape the emergence of new literary forms. Literature provides a lens through which we can learn to read the language of diplomacy, just like in my new book, my editor, Divya Iyer looked at diplomacy through the prism of mythology. Literature is also a part of the soft power that countries project, but good literature on many countries is not seductive and attractive.

I am adopting a different approach to literature and diplomacy by focusing on how what I learnt in this college helped me in my diplomatic career spanning more than thirty-seven years.

The most important reason why I chose to join English Literature for my bachelors and masters degrees was my impression that it would help me to compete successfully in the civil services examination. Of course, my interest in reading literature in English and Malayalam was also an important factor. At that time, the age limit was such that it was not common for engineers and doctors to take the examination and it was the students of literature who did well. For several years, those who stood first in English MA were able to secure high ranks in the civil services. My English masters degree, with the first rank, therefore, was a guarantee to success.

When I started my training and work as a young diplomat, I felt that learning politics, economics or history may have been more useful in my functioning. But once I acquired the basic knowledge of these subjects, I began to discover that knowledge of

English language and Literature was an asset in the Foreign Service. As I have observed in my book, diplomacy is all about words, written, spoken and unspoken. For that reason, I titled my first autobiographical work as “Words, Words, Words”, borrowing the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. To make it clear that it is not a book on linguistics, I gave it a sub-title, “Adventures in Diplomacy”.

I can recall many occasions when I was able to get the better of my interlocutors by choosing the right word on the right occasion to the right effect. In the diplomatic profession, in which elegance of words is as important as substance, this is not a surprise.

I cannot but recall how I learnt the basics in international relations even when I was studying Literature. Dr. N. S. Warriar, the Principal, kept reminding us of the vast world outside. I remember him calling some of us to his room on the day China exploded a nuclear bomb for the first time in 1964 and saying that this was a very significant development for India. At that time, it did not seem significant to us, but looking back, I know how it altered the very power balance in Asia. Another Principal, Dr. E. P. Narayana Pillai asked us to write an essay not on plays or poems, but on “The Long Term and Short Term Measures to meet the Chinese Aggression” for the Harvey Memorial Prize. I must have let my imagination run wild and given more than a dozen measures to defeat China. I do not recall all of them, but I remember suggesting that the Dalai Lama should be allowed to set up a Government in Exile and also explode a nuclear bomb. I won the prize not just for the ideas, but also for the language, I was told.

It must have been my competence in the language that got me into the College debating team, though the others were students of Economics. Interestingly, all the members of the team joined the Civil Services, three in the IAS and one in the IFS. The flourish in the language, together with depth of research enabled us to do well in the debates. The confidence that I gained in the debating team and the experience of teaching English in the Mar Ivanios College stayed with me when I addressed the UN and other international assemblies. Fear of public speaking, it is said, is only next to the fear of death! The dreaded UPSC personality test also was smooth for me because most of the questions were on English literature. I could easily recite one of the stanzas from Tagore’s Gitanjali during the interview, as it was in my textbook.

One unforgettable experience of that time was a production of Bernard Shaw’s Saint Joan in Trivandrum after I qualified for the IFS. Prof. Savitrikutty, sister of one of my teachers, Prof. Santhakumari, directed the play. Though I had only the relatively minor role of the French Commander, Dunois, who is charmed by Joan, that experience stood me in good stead when I found myself roped in to the Rangoon Theatre Club in the early eighties by the British Ambassador to Burma. I played leading roles in plays like ‘Charley’s Aunt’ and ‘Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew’. The theatre work in Burma was

very valuable for my wife and myself for becoming part of an elite constituency. In their profession, diplomats create constituencies through golf, bridge, tennis, squash etc and the theatre also created bonds among diplomats.

English students dream of visiting hometowns of legendary writers in the UK, but very few of them get an opportunity to visit them. IFS gave me the opportunity to visit Stratford-on –Avon and watch a Shakespearean play within the first few years in the Government. My mind went back to the days when I acted out scenes from Othello and King Lear in the English Association in the University College.

The drafting skills in English are a great asset in the United Nations. We have to negotiate hundreds of documents in which we need to protect and promote our interests. Often, the negotiations drag on for days and even collapse for want of the right phrase or word. Diplomats with linguistic skills are much sought after on these occasions. On many situations, I was able to resolve tough issues by supplying the right word at the right time. Each time it happened, I remembered my English teachers. I shared some of these with Dr.Ayyappa Panikar, one of my favourite teachers when he spent time with us in New York when he was researching at the Yale University.

One amusing incident took place when we were discussing the conditions for mounting UN peacekeeping operations. We insisted that the consent of all states concerned is essential for establishing peacekeeping operations, while others, notably Pakistan, maintained that consent of one state was enough. So the debate went on between ‘state’ and ‘states’ for long. Finally, I suggested a compromise between the two by using the word ‘State(s)’. This was accepted, though it was protective of our position. We came to know later that since such a format is not possible in Chinese and Arabic, those texts fully reflected our position!

I must also warn against overdoing literature in diplomatic discourse. I had an Ambassador, who filled his telegrams with Shakespearean language and images, creating total havoc among the readers. He was finally reprimanded for using too much Shakespearean jibberish!

Using of a Shakespearean image helped me to make an immediate impact in Delhi. When I reached Vienna to take over as Ambassador, I sent a dispatch to the Foreign Secretary, describing the scene in the Embassy as the final act of a Shakespearean tragedy. The previous Ambassador had been recalled to Delhi because he had a fight with his deputy and the others in the Embassy were equally divided. I said that the hero was lying dead on the stage and the villain was relishing the scene. The chorus, the public, was singing the praise of the dead hero, while others were solidly behind the Villain. I said that it was absolutely essential to remove the debris before I could begin my work. The language and the image had an immediate effect and I was given a free hand to clean up the mess. I am sure that a more traditional description of the scene would not have had the same effect,

I could go on like this for long, but I shall conclude here with the thought that the study of English Literature stood me in good stead in my diplomatic profession. I am particularly indebted to Prof. Hridayakumari and my other teachers of the University College for preparing me for the challenges of the diplomatic service.

Thank you.