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Research Article



## Consciousness of Religion, Mythology and Spirituality: A Study of Prof. Vikas Sharma's Novel *I.A.S. Today*

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### Abstract

Literature expresses the perceptions, feelings and desires of a writer. Indian English writers have predominantly been culturally conscious of religion. Religion and literature give peace to suffering humanity. *I.A.S. Today* is a novel written by Prof. Vikas Sharma. This research article delves into the intricate layering of religious, mythological, and spiritual themes present in Prof. Vikas Sharma's novel *I.A.S. Today*. Sharma, a prominent figure in contemporary literature, weaves a tale that juxtaposes the bureaucratic life of the Indian Administrative Service (I.A.S.) with profound reflections on India's rich tapestry of religious and mythological narratives. At the heart of the study is an analysis of how Sharma's characters navigate the complex moral and spiritual terrain,

influenced by ancient tales and modern-day challenges. The narrative isn't merely a portrayal of administrative life; it becomes a mirror to society, reflecting deeply rooted beliefs, cultural norms, and the internal conflicts individuals face when trying to reconcile their professional and personal aspirations with spiritual growth. Drawing from primary textual references and contextualizing them with classical Indian myths, the article underscores the ways in which the protagonist's journey in the bureaucratic labyrinth is symbolic of a larger cosmic journey. Sharma's work raises questions about dharma (duty), karma (action), and moksha (liberation) in the face of modern challenges. Various characters of this novel are influenced by the teachings given in Indian scriptures like *The Srimad Bhagavadgita*, *The Upanishads* and *The Ramayana*. They try to shape themselves by following the teachings and look for the right aim of human life. This paper aims to study the spiritual wisdom given in this novel which will open the right path for present generation. Furthermore, the research highlights Sharma's innovative approach to storytelling, melding the real with the mythical. Through meticulous character analysis and plot dissection, the article reveals how the novel acts as a conduit for introducing contemporary readers to age-old philosophical questions. By doing so, Sharma not only offers a commentary on the state of present-day bureaucracy but also delves into timeless existential queries. Through this analysis, the article establishes Sharma's novel as a significant contribution to Indian literature, bridging the ancient and the modern, the mundane, and the spiritual.

**Keywords:** Cultural consciousness, Morality, Myth, Religion, Spirituality, Environmental Humanities, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Perspective, Nationalism

Religion is a pillar which supports the suffering mankind to find peace and solace. Literature is a life imagined by a writer. It does have the limitations of the language in which it is written. But in general, the language of literature is comprehensive. It does express the perceptions, feelings, emotions and desires. Although T.S. Eliot through his "Burnt Norton" indicates that silence into which the words after speech, reach, yet we cannot deny that words too are enabling to some extent. Writers share their thinking by translating their ideas through their words. Many writers have indicated the limitations of words. But every word that expresses the deep ideas has its root elsewhere. Modern writers too show this in their writings. Thus, the expression of writers is more enabling, than one can anticipate.

Cultural consciousness in India has always been religious. The oriental philosophers claim that human imagination is somehow divine. When we survey the writings of western artists like Emerson, Wordsworth, Coleridge etc., we find that the writers had occasional blank moments and many times they had moments of fulfilment in nature. They could feel the presence of God in nature. They not only derived pleasure in nature but also desired fulfilment. It is expected that economics, religion, politics, or love will be in the growth of a culture at some moment. Many writers have chosen religion as supreme because it is the imaginative mind which can experience the transcendental aspect of religion. Coleridge too talks of it as essential for religious affiliation. "Or because the ultimate term appears to be religious and analogous to the divine act of creation."<sup>1</sup>

There has always been a close relation between religion and literature. All ancient cultures have had their literature having deep religious ideas. Although the ancient writings have been

primarily religious, but even the current writings have the subtle ideas of religion. Literature cannot be isolated from culture. “A great literary work may very well do without denominational religion, but not without *dharmā*, the sense of Right. And in that sense a work of art may not be completely divorced from *dharmā*.”<sup>2</sup> Any good literature has moral appeal. Both religion and literature give peace to suffering minds and when inter-twined they act with great force. “The entire world of humanity is in constant need for the supply of sobriety when they ought to maintain discipline and decorum in life. Both religion and literature provide the above with consistence.”<sup>3</sup> The contemporary world has suffered from various traumas like that of various wave of Covid. A great literature gives direction to mankind. It gives intellect to humanity to undergo sufferings boldly and be winners.

Writers often use mythology in their writings. “Mythology is a term that refers to a collection of Myths. The word Myth comes from the Greek *Mythos*, which means story. Myths are stories relating to religion and culture and come from a tradition of oral storytelling.”<sup>4</sup> People preserve stories from thousands of years through narration. Those were transmitted through generations. These generally had the lessons of morality about a good way of life in this world. In the present time mythology is preserved in literature for discovery, bearing and amusement of future generations. “We print literature that collects myths from cultures and religions that don’t exist in the world any more, like the myths of Norse peoples or the Romans.”<sup>5</sup>

When we survey the Indian English literature, we find that there has always been presence of cultural consciousness. Religious ideas were always there beneath the writings of great scholars. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a great humanist. Sri Aurobindo is full of religious ideas. He gave a mystical foundation to the universe created by him. Rabindranath Tagore’s writings have the deep essence of humanity, spirituality, love, and nature. This knowledge of Indian customs and traditions is reflected in his works. Thus, religious influence on Indian English literature has always been there. There has been in background a subtle presence of mythical and spiritual ideas. *I.A.S. Today* is a novel by contemporary author Prof. Vikas Sharma and it has the presence of these elements. A close study of this novel reveals this. The novel opens up portraying the life of an I.A.S. aspirant Romesh. He is a versatile reader. He accepted “Plato’s theory as mentioned in *The Republic* that idea comes first.”<sup>6</sup> He learnt ethics through reading the works of J. Krishnamurti. There is deep thought given to the satisfaction of human mind, role of fear in human life, comparison of good and evil, rational and irrational, protection from evil, significance of moral and spiritual powers in life. “What is real bliss in life? How does knowledge differ from wisdom and prudence?” (11) He remarks that learning is a noble means to gain the aim of life. Romesh has various dreams which show that how he was repentant for his ill deeds. He seeks forgiveness from God as Adam and Eve sought when they had committed the sin of disobedience by plucking the fruit of knowledge. The seekers of true knowledge are preoccupied with death which is eternal truth. Romesh too “found himself buried in a grave by the side of Thomas Gray” (12). This preoccupation shows that he looked beyond this life. The seekers of truth do so. He studies various British writers and elaborates the fact like Milton that “peace has its own glories superior to war” (17). We find that Shivangi plays the role of Radha and danced enthusiastically with Lord Krishna on Janmashtami. The mention of sailing on the sea is symbolic. It puts forth the inquisitiveness to know “What lies beyond the horizon?” (28)

Belief in Hindu religion is expressed as Shivangi asks the priest of Mahaluxmi Temple in Mumbai to pronounce slokas for her marital tie to Danny. Danny mentions some facts like time is beyond our grip, love surpasses time and what can't be cured must be endured. They both visit Lord Shiva's temple and offer prayer saying "There is no limit to your powers and miracles can be performed by you within minutes" (32). There is enactment of religious scene where Shivangi asks Danny to accept himself as Lord Krishna. The author mentions here that Danny "decided to follow the basic principles of *The Srimad Bhagwadgita* as suggested by Lord Krishna to Arjuna" (33). We find here the author's hidden desire to search for self. In Chapter 4 we find S.D.M. Bharat Bharati praying to goddess Luxmi and Lord Vishnu. There is universal truth in his prayer- "O Lord, the preserver of all animate beings as well as inanimate things, kindly grant me peace of mind and heart" (37). The Hindu belief of theory of Karma is very well put here when he further says that he had to suffer for the bad deeds done by him in the previous births. No one can escape from the outcome of his sins. He took one week leave to contemplate on the moral teachings of *The Upanishads* and *The Srimad Bhagwadgita*. Gannu and Kale offer prayer to Goddess Durga. There is also chanting of Gayatri Mantra.

Romesh's father asked him to study *The Ramayana* so as to "follow the character of Lord Rama" (45). He analysed the characters of this sublime epic. The author has elaborated some episodes of this epic in this novel. The episode of Rama's exile of fourteen years is taken where Sumitra is full of remorse for her failure to support Rama. From then onwards Rama will be her future guide forever and she decides to follow his instructions. When Rama was moving, "She came closer to him to remove the doubts about good conduct, righteousness and a decent approach to life so as to get mental and spiritual peace" (45). When Rama touched her feet to get her blessings she posed her query on this worldly life. Rama said that he was no one to guide a noble mother like her. The discussion on this issue was put for the next day. But Sumitra was full of mystical thoughts about her existence. She thought of saints who could solve the riddle of human existence. She was preoccupied with many worldly questions on her being a widow, the glory of the palace, if Rama could prove to be a successful king after his exile. Her self-realisation is expressed by the author in the following words:

Ultimately, she accepted that she is a mere soul as her body is mortal. All her energies are sure to die one day. Only truth triumphs towards the end of the journey of life. There was no material change in Ayodhya with the departure of King Dashrath and similarly, she will also leave an empty place after her death to be replaced by some other queen of the dynasty. Time moves regularly leaving its footprints on earth, palaces and huts equally. Nothing is in her control. (46)

The author feels that it is very important to study *The Ramayana* thoughtfully and only the scholars can answer the doubts of the other readers. Another character Bharati who is the mother of Tinny regularly prays for the well-being of her son. The author has tried to present the philosophical learning of Renaissance that beauty is truth. Further there is indication of knowledge of Greek and Roman philosophers. He mentions the paintings in the churches during Renaissance period.

Even the rogue like Gannu is shown to have bought stone statues of Lord Krishna and goddess Radha. Tinny meets and saves a widow Kanti Kant. She too offers her prayer to Lord

Krishna and says, “You are rightly regarded the preserver of helpless people” (54). Tinny marries her and asks her to trust him saying, “It is God who manages the life of miserable people and hence we all worship Him as our Lord” (55). Kanti Kant also thanks Lord for guarding her. The author’s preoccupation with the thoughts of self-realisation is seen spread throughout the novel. He writes about the column in “*The Times of India* daily with the title *The Speaking Tree* remarkable for self-illumination, knowledge, wisdom and prudence written by great scholars” (71). The transitory nature of human life is indicated throughout with the image of running of Time. The author also feels that there is a controlling power which controls the working of this universe. He says, “Things don’t happen as human beings desire them to happen” (89).

Again in Chapter 13 Gannu along with his wife Niharika visits a Jain temple. They both offered prayer with Gayatri Mantra. Gannu admits of his ignorance of Jain temple yet he prays for future bliss and joy. He says,

Lords can change the situation with their powers and ever help their devotees. I have brought no flowers and fruits to offer you. I don’t know the system with which Jains worship you whole heartedly. I promise to visit your grand temple with my wife again as we are going to start our married life. I am fully conscious of the sins committed by me so far. Enlighten me to lead a decent life as I repent in your presence. (97)

In the same chapter, it is shown that in the industrial city of Surat a character Tinny finds himself as rootless, homeless and without any friends. He suffers and feels himself lost. He does not know if he could trust anyone as he is cheated by his own companions who now had set him aside. A parallelism is created between him and a mythical character King Trishanku. King Trishanku requested saint Vashistha to help him reach Indralok in his human body. But he refused to help. Saint Vishwamitra was very proud of his meditation and powers attained by him. When King Trishanku made the same request to him, he made him sit in front of him and chanted some hymns. The king became very happy as he found himself ascending high in his body. The incident was immediately narrated by gods to Lord Indra so that the entry of the King could be hindered. No human being should enter there in human body. The result was that Indra used his divine power and checked the movement of the king towards Indralok. The novel puts:

To his dismay Vishwamitra found Trishanku hanging in the middle with tears in his eyes. He told the worthy saint that he can neither go up nor can he come down. Within no time Vishwatmitra recited other slokas and created another Indralok for Trishanku and diverted his route towards that. (106)

Trishanku was happy to reach there. When asked by the saint of his well-being, he complained of his arched back which was the result of the pressure put by Lord Indra to check his movement. He wanted to stand erect. It is remarked, “But the saint smiled- ‘You have reached Indralok of my creation and it has all the divine pleasures. If your back is permanently arched, compromise a little.’ Then Vishwamitra had no contact with Trishanku” (107).

Romesh has many limitations regarding his material needs. But he reminds himself of Late Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri who was poor and led a simple life. He consoles himself with the thought that all are not born great. He “was supposed to achieve greatness with his noble deeds” (109). Trishala Vasu too speaks of simplicity when she says, “There are simple people on earth even today who live like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle” (115). To keep himself mentally

encouraged, Romesh reads a few lines of *The Srimad Bhagavadgita* every day. Rewati repents for the sin committed by her and takes a vow not to repeat it again. In her dream she found Vallu going far away to another world and he remarks, “I have prepared cottage in the spring garden and flowers never fade there, the sun shines round the clock and you’ll never see any darkness at all” (190). Then after Anand, the disciple of Buddha appears in her dream and asks the reason of her sadness. On her desire to return home he remarks:

But there is no real home for earthy people. They come from a far and have to return one day to their eternal home. I myself renounced the earthy home as it does not belong to us forever. Like tenants, human beings stay for brief hours in the prison called home but then they have got to be liberated. Being a saint, I don’t desire to return to the life of bondage and early limitations.’ ‘Here, I have been wandering for years in search of self-illumination and divine light. The day I feel liberated after controlling my five senses, I will lose this physical body to become a part of divine soul. He continued- ‘... feel free and concentrate upon the Sun and Moon and try to understand the importance of their light. Om Shanti.’ (191)

She aimed to seek liberation by following the path of meditation, self sacrifice and service to mankind. She reaches the Ashram of Brahmkumaris. Now she believes in right conduct, virtuous living and in following the right philosophy. When Jay comes to know of this, the author remarks that every individual is allowed to pursue their aim in life. The author concludes the novel with the prayer of Swati before the statue of Lord Shiva-

Light the way for us with your torch

...

Teach us how to distinguish between night and day,  
Endless one, anantha,  
Show us the way. (199)

In modern age, when we find loss of values, literature presents wisdom, looks for brotherhood of mankind and puts forth deeper knowledge by encouraging contemplation on true spiritual beauty. The study of deep spiritual ideas paves way to right direction for the present generation. Modern age is suffering with various ailments. “The first step in any solution is a return to origins - to the primary texts of sacred literature, supported by art history and archaeology.”<sup>7</sup> We need to redeem the religious impulse and save the humanity from degeneration. Literature plays a great role in teaching religion as part of a culture rather than giving a dry moral education. The myths used in the background provide the readers vibrant and rich background through which they come to know their culture, build their character and face even greatest challenges in their life. They are built to face all the odds. “Teaching religion as culture rather than as morality also gives students the intellectual freedom to find the ethical principles at the heart of every religion.”<sup>8</sup> It is through self-experience and self-realisation through their writings that many contemporary writers are ascending on their journey towards their real self.

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