UNIT 10: MAX MULLER: "WHAT CAN INDIA TEACH US?"

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- appreciate the prose piece "What can India teach us?" in its proper context
- describe the life and works of Max Muller
- analyse the major themes of the prose piece
- gain an idea about its narrative style

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will analyse the prose-piece entitled ''What can India teach us?'' which is one of a series of lectures delivered by Max Muller to the candidates for the Indian Civil Service, upon an invitation received from the Board of Historical Studies at Cambridge. In this speech, he attempts to situate the contribution of India towards the gradual flowering of world civilisation through the ages. This lecture was supposed to acquaint the aspiring civil servants who would be sent to British India to carry on with the

administration of the country, and who have been thoroughly educated in Greek and Latin, with the marvels of Sanskrit literature and culture.

10.3 MAX MULLER: THE ORIENTALIST

The following sub-sections will discuss the life and works of Max Muller, the Orientalist.

10.3.1 His Life

Max Muller was born on December 6, 1823 in Dessau, Germany. His father, Wilhelm Muller was a renowned Romantic poet of the time. His mother, Adelheide Müller belonged to the family of the then Chief Minister of Anhalt-Dessau. Max Muller received his education in Philosophy from Leipzig University from where he received his Ph.D. in 1843 for a dissertation on Spinoza's *Ethics*. He was well-versed in Greek and Latin, and equally proficient in the knowledge of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. Muller studied Sanskrit under the tutelage of Eugene Burnouf. It was Burnouf who encouraged Muller to compile and publish the complete *Rig-Veda* in Sanskrit.

In 1846, Muller moved to England to study the Sanskrit manuscripts in the collection of East India Company. After 1860, he set about working on the translation of the *Rig Veda*. He prepared simultaneously notes and commentaries on themes in comparative philosophy and mythology. Throughout the last thirty years of his life, Indology remained the central focus of his research. In 1868, Muller was the first one to occupy the chair of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford. This was followed by the publication of *Introduction to the Science of Religion* in 1873.

He contributed immensely to the on-going spurt of research activities in the Vedic studies in Europe, in which the processes of language and culture were not seen as parallel courses, but rather

as emanating from the same field of factors. Muller traced the ancestry of the Indo-European language groups to the ancient Vedic culture of India. After publishing *The Six Systems of Hindu Philosophy* in 1899, Max Muller passed away at his home in Oxford the following year.

10.3.2 His Works

Max Muller made a significant contribution to the contemporary scholarly discourses in Indology and Comparative Philology. Some of his important published works include *The Sacred Books of the East* (1878-1894, 50 vols.), *Rig Veda* (1849-1873, 6 vols.), *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature So Far As It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans* (1859), *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1864, 2 vols.), *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867-75, 4 vols.), *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), *India, What can it Teach Us?* (1883), *Biographical Essays* (1884), *The Science of Thought* (1887), *Six Systems of Hindu Philosophy* (1899), Four volumes of *Gifford Lectures* (Collected Works, vols. 1- 4): *Natural Religion* (1889), *Physical Religion* (1891), *Anthropological Religion* (1892), and *Theosophy, or Psychological Religion* (1893), his two volumes of biographical reflections *Auld Lang Syne* (1898), *My Autobiography: A Fragment* (1901) and *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Muller* (1902, 2 vols.)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Say True of False:

a. Max Muller received his education in Philosophy from Leipzig University. T/F

b. In 1868, Muller was the first one to occupy the chair of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford. T/F

c. Max Muller did not make any significant contribution to the contemporary scholarly discourses in Indology and Comparative Philology. T/F

d. Muller's *My Autobiography: A Fragment* was published in 1902.

T/F

Q 2: List the names of the works written by Max Muller.

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10.4 EXPLANATION OF THE ESSAY

The text "What Can India Teach Us?" is a lecture which was delivered by Muller for the candidates of the Indian Civil Service. As an Orientalist, Muller raises the question of pursuing Sanskrit or the study of "ancient poetry, the philosophy, the laws, and the art of India" in comparison to the excitement involved in the study of Greek or Latin in the West, Britain in particular.

At the same time, Muller also points out that many countries of the West like France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Russia are enthusiastic towards the study of ancient Indian literature. However, he laments the notion that scholars of Indian literature are not considered to have sufficient calibre in Britain. Thus, the idea of being 'Indian' restricts the work of an Oriental scholar.

This lecture by Muller is an attempt to break down this rigid notion about India as being represented in the West. In order to do so, Muller first of all emphasises on the importance of the ancient Sanskrit literature which is vast as well as rich in terms of its encompassing knowledge and wisdom. Instead of comparing Indian literature with other literatures, Muller positively deals with how Indian literature has the potential to shape the minds of people across the globe. Interestingly, his Orientalist inclination defines his preference for India.

Muller points out that "a study of Sanskrit literature has its own purpose" and also adds that "Sanskrit literature, if studied only in a right spirit, is full of human interests." As the lecture was intended for the Civil Servants, Muller's lecture emphasises on how developing interest in Sanskrit literature can contribute to both their understanding and knowledge. This allows them to cope with the Indians in a better way. In the course of his lecture, he justifies his views regarding the choice of Indian literature. His

main concern is ancient India, two to three thousand years ago, and not urban India. He particularly focuses on "India of the village communities, the true India of the Indians".

In acknowledging the importance of Sanskrit, he appreciates the wide range of Indian literature which can be applied to any branch of knowledge because it provides an insight into the deeper thought as well as sympathies of the human mind. Through such a representation of India, Muller shatters the idea of India as depicted in the West of being a 'distant', 'strange' or 'curious country'. No other literature can surpass Indian literature in its study of the history of human mind. Any kind of discipline, be it language or philosophy owes its origin to India.

Muller tries to highlight the concept of liberal education. To him, a subject like History should be "freely interpreted" in any educational institution– combining examples from countries of both East and West.

According to him, a European without any knowledge of "the Jews, the Greeks, and the Saxons" cannot be considered as 'enlightened' since Europeans owe a lot to them right from religion to alphabets and so on. But India is not the intellectual ancestor of Europe as Greece or Egypt. However, he claims that the study of ancient Sanskrit literature of India can provide the Europeans with the "missing links" in the history of human mind. In fact, study of Sanskrit, to him, should be cultivated for its "antiquity" which shall definitely help them to understand the history of their own language because Sanskrit sprang from the same branch as Greek or Latin. Sanskrit was indeed known to all even before Greek. Muller thus emphasises that a common source of language can unite the Europeans with the Indians. He also describes how as a child himself, Muller was surprised to know that Sanskrit can be paralleled to not only Greek and Latin but also German and Russian. Therefore, Muller justifies his emphasis on the knowledge of India as a necessary step towards liberal education. The study of Sanskrit has its own definite share in adding to the historical consciousness of all the Europeans.

Hence, Muller concludes his lecture by pointing out that the science of language which has been fostered by Sanskrit literature is like the key to

the treasures of ancient knowledge ranging from the arts, sciences and history. Through this lecture, Muller tries to inculcate in the Civil Servants a 'homely' and 'brotherly' feeling about India where they are to serve for the next few years of their life. By upholding the significance of Sanskrit literature, Muller thus states that: "[w]e all come from the East-all that we value most has come to us from the East…"

You are advised to read the full text for a better understanding and appreciation of the prose piece.

10.5 MAJOR THEMES AND NARRATIVE STYLE

As you must have already realised, this lecture by Max Muller discusses the manifold aspects of Indian culture and civilisation. In fact, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the times when many European scholars in the likes of William Jones and Max Muller were deeply engaged in exploring various facets of the Indian knowledge system, including studies on language, literature, epigraphy, architecture, archaeology, religion and so on. This trend of developing new understandings on India gave rise to an important system of thought which came to be known as '**Orientalism**'. These scholars espoused the ancient knowledge systems of India, and carried out the task of translating and interpreting many texts and treatises into English. It would be worth our while to understand that most of our current perspectives on India and its ancient and medieval cultural heritage had been developed initially through their research and scholarship.

This prose-piece was basically designed as a lecture for the candidates of Indian Civil Service. These candidates were soon embarking upon their maiden journey to India, as part of the obligations to conduct the administrative affairs of British India. Through this lecture, Max Muller gives them a many-hued glimpse into the 'wonder' that was India. He makes his lecture replete with examples and anecdotes, which shed light on the various features that make up the Indian civilisation. Throughout his lecture, he addresses the candidates directly with his rhetorical questions and witty rejoinders.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: State briefly the major themes of the prose piece "What can India teach us?"

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Q 4: Comment on the narrative style of the prose piece.

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10.6 LET US SUM UP

We have had a glimpse into the life of Max Muller, and have also taken note of the major works composed by him. We have also gone through the text of the lecture under discussion, and have attempted to understand the basic themes of the lecture, along with its narrative style.

To wind up our discussion, it should suffice to say that ''India, What can it teach us?'' introduces us to our own homeland – India. There are so many aspects of Indian culture and civilisation about which we have little or no knowledge. This lecture by Max Muller takes us back through the pages of history, and explores various possibilities of acquiring more knowledge about our own heritage.



10.7 FURTHER READING

1. Muller, Friedrich Max. (2002). *India: What can it teach us?* New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

Websites:

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Muller

www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=127



10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a. True

b. True

d. False

e. False

Ans to Q No 2: *The Sacred Books of the East, Rig Veda, A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature So Far As It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans, Lectures on the Science of Language,* etc.

Ans to Q No 3: Various facets of the Indian knowledge system, including studies on language, literature, epigraphy, architecture, archaeology, religion and so on are being dealt with by Muller in this prose-piece.

Ans to Q No 4: His lecture is replete with examples and anecdotes, which shed light on the various features that make up the Indian civilisation. Throughout his lecture, he addresses the candidates directly with his rhetorical questions and witty rejoinders.



10.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Discuss briefly the life and works of Max Muller.

Q2: What are the themes that are being reflected in the prose piece "What can India teach us?"

Q3: Write a short note on the narrative style employed by Muller, keeping in mind the fact that this prose piece was basically designed as a lecture.

Q4: Do you agree that this prose-piece has brought out many aspects of Indian culture? Justify your answer.

Q5: Comment upon Muller's praise for India with particular reference to Sanskrit literature.

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