

Words of Wisdom Woven with Wit: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a Patron of Indian Knowledge System

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ABSTRACT

It is the predicament of modern world that the flood of information can't quench the thirst for knowledge. The torrent of virtual experiences can't push aside the craving for actual essence. The youth with brighter career prospects has bleaker perspectives. A plethora of techs- Edutech, Infotech, Nanotech, Agrotech, Greentech, Astrotech, Fintech, Medtech or Neurotech fails to teach the purpose of life. Futuristic AI tools falter in navigating the way to spiritual upliftment. The reason is obvious. There is a void between information and knowledge, experience and essence, prospects and perspectives, technology and teaching, intelligence and upliftment. This widening gap threatens intellectual, social, economic, psychological and spiritual growth of man. This chasm can be bridged over by a system that combines traditional wisdom with modern advancement. A system that has not exhausted but evolved itself over the ages. A system that has not diluted itself on the routes but has distilled itself through the roots. An umbrella term for this system is "Indian Knowledge System". With its balanced, holistic and sustainable approach, it offers enduring solutions to the myriad global concerns. When a system is introduced organically through culture and literature, it tends to be readily embraced and effectively integrated. This is what Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the first-generation immigrant writer has been doing through her writings. The present paper delves into Divakaruni's profound contribution to the transmission and revitalisation of the Indian Knowledge System at global platform. It is a humble attempt to explore her magnificent ability to intermingle the traditional values with modern resonance. This paper also reflects on the role of women as crusaders of IKS in Divakaruni's narratives.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Spiritualism, Holistic Approach, Modern Resonance.

Introduction

We owe a lot to India and the Indians.

-Albert Einstein

It goes without saying that Indian wisdom and Indian knowledge system have made the world indebted. Be it any domain of life -language, culture, cosmology, science, religion, law or ethics India has forged an enduring legacy. The Vedas, the Puranas, and the Upanishads have been enlightening the world since time immemorial. In modern times of mayhem and chaos, the timeless wisdom found in these ancient texts needs to be revived and recontextualized. In this reference Indian Knowledge System is now seen as a dynamic system which is capable of fostering innovation while upholding cultural roots. IKS include fields as diverse as philosophy, architecture, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, metrics, sociology (dharma sastra), economy and polity (Artha sastra), ethics (Niti sastra), geography, logic,

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military science, weaponry, agriculture, mining, trade and commerce, metallurgy, mining, shipbuilding, medicine, poetics, biology and veterinary science.' (Kapoor, 2020, p.18). IKS has experienced a resurgence in the recent past. Even the Ministry of Education has dedicated an exclusive cell to IKS namely Indian Knowledge Systems Division. National Education Policy 2020 has integrated IKS into curriculum of higher education. UGC has mandated acquisition of 5% of total credits through IKS credit courses. In this campaign of propagating and preserving IKS, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the renowned South-Asian writer has also done her bit through her life and literature. Divakaruni herself straddles two diametrically opposite worlds- India and America. In her writings she has churned up her own experience as first-generation immigrant woman who has comprehended the disparity of both the cultures. Moving away from her culture to a completely new world at the age of 19 remained a very poignant yet powerful experience for her. She started writing to recollect her past, her roots, her own culture and heritage. Thus, connecting people and cultures became her prominent thematic concern. Patrick Sullivan rightly discerns, "Her [Divakaruni's] life, like her fiction, walks a careful line between the two worlds. ...Like the characters in her book, she sometimes finds herself struggling to balance the demands of family and career, tradition and modernity. The key . . . is to combine the best parts of both." (Sullivan, 1999)

To the immigrants IKS bridges the gap between roots and routes. The distance from tangible culture is compensated by associating oneself with the intangible part of it. The idea of home entails the preservation of culture, traditions, heritage, and their continuity. In that sense immigrants have created a virtual home for themselves in a foreign land. Especially in case of Divakaruni and her immigrant characters the idea of 'third space' is preferred. Home is enlivened through Indian rituals, festivals, cultural practices and moral values. Even a routine activity of eating Indian meal becomes emotional and cultural anchor. Cultural habits like going to temple, reading Indian scriptures or keeping a fast on *Ekadashi* gives them a sense of fulfillment and they observe these habits almost like a ritual. Divakaruni has very poignantly shown how the act of looking at Hindu calendar becomes a reverie into Indian culture:

Little diagrams mark full moons and no moons, and the thin sliver of the eleventh night, which is a time for women without husbands to fast and pray for purification. Handwritten notes on the bottom of each page warn us of the dangerous hours: *rahukal*, which shift each day with the movement of the planets, when it is good to lie low. (VOD, p. 149)

Divakaruni celebrates the opulence of her native culture by showcasing its customs, culinary traditions, vibrant festivities, and sacred rituals of marriage, childbirth, and death through her narratives. She gives minute details of how traditional Bengalis keep track of presiding stars, holy days, auspicious hours, and bad-luck hours. They hold that the first night after a child is born Bidhata Purush comes down to decide his future. Therefore, "they bathe babies in sandalwood water and wrap them in soft red malmal, color of luck. That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle...If the child is especially lucky, in the morning it will all be gone." (SMH, p.15) These elements become living embodiments of the Indian Knowledge System. She reveals how these cultural practices pass down moral principles, spiritual insight, and social unity from one generation to the next. Divakaruni breathes new life into these by highlighting their relevance, moral significance, and spiritual profundity in modern scenario. Thus, she grabs every opportunity to enshrine her native tradition.

Divakaruni continues the legacy of IKS through translation, recreation, recension, and adaptation of ancient mythology, myths and folklore. In *Grandma and the Great Gourd* Divakaruni has translated the famous Bengali folk tale into English without making major changes to the original story. She has only added to it, pictures and illustrations, innovations of pattern, rhythm, and rhymes. Through this little stroke she has made local, the global.

Myths are found across cultures and there are certain universal symbols, images, figures or cultural functions that myths of different cultures and countries share. These motifs and images are known as archetypes. If we approach her works through mythological and archetypal lens, we find that Divakaruni has used archetypal images of the sea, river, fire, serpents and mountains. Along with images she has also created archetypal figures like wise old man (Abhaydatta), wise woman (Tara ma) and mother healer (Sita and Tilo). Tilo is 'life giver, restorer of health and hope.' Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* runs a healing house. Merely by touching a plant, she knows its healing properties. She can tell which grasses cured headaches and colds, which seeds fended off infections, which herbs to give women when their monthly blood flowed too long and which potions healed the shaking sickness or gladdened a long-depressed heart. Divakaruni introduces cultural myths in a magical way which inspires

awe, reverence, and amazement "The old tale says this also: in the wake of Bidhata Purush come the demons, for this is the world's nature, good and evil mingled. That is why they leave an oil lamp burning." (SoMH, p. 15)

Being the grand Indian epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are full of traditional display of spiritual doctrines and ancient wisdom. Divakaruni has retold these epics from the stance of Panchaali and Sita respectively. She has drawn attention towards the women who "have been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten – or maligned and used as cautionary tales." (FoE, p.4) *The Palace of Illusions* is about Panchaali's dreams and desires of attaining love, wisdom, and power. She does not shy away from men and expresses her desire and demand for equal social rights. Her interest in reading and learning Nyaya Shastra, art of warfare, state administration, and political affairs, is very unconventional. Panchaali wants to be different from other girls who are only shadows of their husbands, father, or brothers. When Pandvas lose her in gambling, she puts forward her case and quotes the laws of household property from Nyaya Shastra saying, "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife." (PI, p.190) Her ready wit makes the Pandvas consult her about serious matters of the state. Her iconoclast approach is evident at every step. Divakaruni's has depicted her journey through three levels: liberal, matriarchal and metaphysical.

Likewise, Divakaruni's Sita is avant-garde in many ways. In *The Forest of Enchantments* Divakaruni has shown Sita taking lessons in martial arts and self-defense. She has presented Queen Sunaina as the real ruler of Mithila in some ways. She is sharp of intellect, clear of vision and counsels the king in thorny problems of the state. Divakaruni has underscored Sita's transformation from the 'daughter of earth' to 'daughter of fire'. The following statement of Sita shows her strength, agency, independence and resilience.

"Abandoned as I was by my husband, no one could save me. But I could save myself. Love and happiness might not be in my control but at least my dignity still remained mine. I might not be able to have the life I wanted, but I could choose the manner of my death". (FE, p. 244-245)

Divakaruni has manifested heretical approach by making Panchaali and Sita the chief characters. She has moulded these ancient epics to debunk the myths related to womanhood. She has challenged the gender stereotypes presented in them. Divakaruni announces her feminist agenda by saying "It is important to re-examine these powerful characters and thus re-examine what we feel about the lives of women, the rights of women, and the value of women in our society." (Mehta, 2017) The technique of transition from ancient to contemporary requires a balance that means the new system should consist of essentials of the traditions and the empowerment of modernism. This seamless transition is the forte of Divakaruni.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* appears like an Ayurvedic treatise. The role of medicinal plants in traditional health care systems extends beyond physical healing. They are often used in conjunction with spiritual and ritualistic practices, where the healing process involves a holistic approach that considers the mind, body, and spirit. (Das & Pandey, 2018). During her childhood in India, Divakaruni was introduced to the medicinal, therapeutical and ceremonial applications of spices. For her novel, she fused this inherited knowledge with insights gathered from studying ayurveda, folk traditions, and the mythical significance of spices. She has portrayed the richness of ayurveda by specifying the healing properties of ancient Indian herbs. Tilo the mistress of spices tells her customers that Lanka cleanses evils; Kalo Jire protects against evil eye; Lavang is spice of compassion; Cinnamon destroys enemies; Til when mixed with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver; Methi regulates hormones; Tulsi keeps away the worldliness and helps in meditation; Golden ginger relights the fire that simmers in the belly; Fennel aids digestion and gives mental strength; Phatkiri purifies; Chyavanprash gives mental and physical strength; Neem leaves when dipped in honey work best for healing skin and Neem powder mixed in boiled in milk kills disease. Not only this, but she also warns against the overdose of these herbs.

"And king of all, *makaradwaj*, rejuvenator whom the Ashwini Kumars, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers. Makaradwaj which must always be used with greatest care for even one measure too much can bring death..." (MoS p.82-83)

The way Tilo associates Methi with the Oldest woman Shabri, Tulsi with Lord Ram, Ginger with the ancient healer Charak, Fennel with Rishi Vashishtha hints at her in-depth knowledge of Ayurvedic history. The connection between Vedic astrology and ayurveda is apparent when Tilo calls Lanka- the fire child, kalo jire- the spice of dark planet Ketu, and Til-the spice of planet Venus. Divakaruni has

masterfully blended factual precision with imaginative flair. For example, black pepper is known for cleansing respiratory tract and opening up throat. Divakaruni gives it to Daksha saying 'here is seed of black pepper to be boiled whole and drunk to loosen your throat so you can learn to say No, that word so hard for Indian women. No and Hear me now.' (MoS, p.81) Thus she hits the goal of feminism.

The concept of *Panchmahabhuta* is at the core of Indian cosmology. It is believed that the five elements-Agni, Prithvi, Jal, Vaayu, Aakash collaborate to uphold the order of the cosmos and nurture all forms of life. Achieving equilibrium among these elemental forces is vital for maintaining the rhythm of life. This theory has been intricately woven into Divakaruni's narratives where these five elements are not merely picturesque natural motifs but active agents of identity and integration. The Earth embodies ancestral roots and enduring strength; Water conveys flexibility and free flow of emotions; Fire stands for passion and purification; Air reflects vitality and change; and Space alludes to spiritual transcendence and consciousness. The female protagonists of Divakaruni's novels are embodiments of these elements in themselves. Panchaali emerges out of fire (Agni), Sita is earth-born (Prithvi), mistress of spices Tilottama has affinities with water (Jal) and fire (Agni), queen of dreams Mrs. Gupta travels in the realm of dreams (Aakash) and the Silver Valley is under the sway of winds (Vaayu).

Furthermore, the Indian knowledge system views the world as a manifestation of the divine and emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature. This is reflected in practices such as yoga and Ayurveda, which focus on holistic health and well-being, and in the reverence for nature and its elements (Shukla, 2022). The Gurukul system and the oneness of man and nature emphasized in Vedas and Puranas have been shown at their best by Divakaruni through the Silver Valley. It is located in the lap of the Himalayas and is a microcosm for Vedic Gurukuls. Here the apprentices are trained in the rudiments of Transformation, Persuasion, Search, and Telekinesis. Since the land is very fertile, herbs and flowers grow naturally. The five elements are adored in the form of deities here. Nature is not merely a backdrop here. It is an independent active agency. It has an emotional connect with man. When Anand is afraid of falling down from the watch tower tree, the tree winds a green tendril around his wrist to grab him. The action and reaction of the tree is no less than that of a father. The objects of nature like conch shells, snakes and trees talk to men and guide them like true friends. Thus, both the human and non-human life forms live here in perfect harmony.

The infallible traditional concepts of *Karma*, *Dharma*, *Atman*, *Moh*, *Maya*, *Moksh*, Afterlife, and Destiny have been elaborated in most of Divakaruni's works. Not only the traditionally bred characters believe in them, but the modern-minded characters also confide in the universal law of cause and effect. In "The Perfect Life" Meera, a modern Asian American girl takes a 7-year-old poor brat into her house thinking that the universe has brought him to her door for a special purpose. Cameron from *One Amazing Thing* is an African American ex-soldier who has not only killed many in battlefield but has also compelled his girlfriend to abort her unborn child. He feels the weight of his bad *Karma* and to expiate for them he sponsors an orphan girl Seva in India.

Dharma, commonly understood as "responsibility" or "duty," refers to the moral and ethical principles that direct a person's behaviour in alignment with the social order. The *dharma* of a woman, a wife, a widow, a son and a king has been deliberated upon in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantment*. The sense of duty in modern context has been beautifully delineated by Divakaruni through Sudha who says:

Well, all my life, I lived with the concept of duty- how a woman should behave toward her parents, her husband, her in-laws, her children. Don't mistake me-I didn't think of it as a burden. It gave me the boundaries I needed, a wall of moral safety behind which to live. Duty took the place of love-it was love. Without it, I believed, society would fall apart. (VoD, p.175-176)

Interestingly enough, the concept of *Atman* has been related by Krishna to Panchaali in the Palace of Illusions. Panchaali is upset and sleepless after the great war of Kurukshetra. Krishna relieves her from the burden saying "Just as we cast off worn clothes and wear new ones, when the time arrives, the soul casts off the body and finds a new one to work out its karma. Therefore, the wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead." (PoI, p.258)

The doctrine of Spiritualism which is India's biggest heritage finds its due place in *The Palace of Illusions*. The divine protagonist Krishna keeps motivating Panchaali to strive for supreme state of being where honor and dishonor are alike. Panchaali finally attains it saying "I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable- but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego." (PoI, p.360) Here Divakaruni has emphasized that the quest for spiritual

enlightenment is beyond gender. Life lived on a spiritual plane can open up infinite possibilities because the landscapes of the mind and heart are inexhaustible. The faith in spiritualism also becomes a life force for Divakaruni's characters.

The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and community living eulogized in the Upanishads has been strongly endorsed by Divakaruni in her works. It promotes the idea of collaboration, cooperation and unity. Divakaruni advocates a community that is founded on harmony, affection and shared responsibility. The Silver Valley is a "self-contained community", which is founded on the harmony of man and nature. The dwellers of this valley have ascetic lifestyle; therefore, this valley never lacks in resources. They follow sustainable harvesting techniques and community-based conservation system. Having their meagre needs satisfied, the healers share their resources with the needy of nearby village. In this community rights and rewards are distributed evenly. In modern era of cloud kitchens, Divakaruni revives the idea of community kitchen through *Shadowland*, where people can eat together and laugh together. Unapologetically feminist as Divakaruni is, she makes women fashion a community of their own which is based on female friendship. The Island and the caves, where Tilo and Mrs. Gupta are trained respectively, are maternal space in themselves. They are inhabited by females only who nurture, educate, and train other females in special powers. Figures like the 'First Mother' and the 'Elder One' signify motherhood and sisterhood. The sense of reliability, dependability, and integrity gives strength to this community.

Divakaruni makes women the custodians of IKS across the generations and geographies. The smallest of the acts like storytelling, cooking, pickling, offering prayers, singing hymns, healing rituals and remedies are efforts to preserve their tradition. Women imbibe ancestral wisdom and assimilate it with the contemporary worldview and hand it over to the posterity. Transmitting the traditional legacy to the younger generations, has been the chief concern of Divakaruni's female characters. This is the reason Mrs. Dutta carries for her grandchildren, the "Ramayana for Young Readers" all the way from Calcutta to California. Gouri Ma ensures that in America Anju and Sudha are telling stories from Indian epics to little Dayita as these stories have 'much old wisdom embedded in them'. Divakaruni has not missed the ancient penchant for art and literature. She has endorsed art for heart's sake. The art of painting, singing, sketching, sewing and hobby of reading and journaling have a cathartic effect on women of her fiction. Their pent-up feelings, heartbreaks, unfulfilled desires are expressed through them.

The way Divakaruni strikes a balance between east and west, tradition and trend, self and society, past and present, physical and spiritual, material and ethereal, science-religion, real-hyperreal reflects the Buddhist philosophy of *Madhyam Pratipada*. Like Buddha she also prefers poise and proportion for the establishment of peace and harmony in family, community, society, nation and the world at large. Divakaruni evinces that a strict adherence to the binary extremes of yes/no, present/absent, visible/invisible mars the scope of exploration and adventure, wherein lies the actual experience of life. This tendency cripples the worldview as well as breeds prejudice and bias. In doing so she reflects Acharya Nagarjuna's dialectical technique which establishes that ultimate truth transcends both dualities. Clinging to fixed notions results in ignorance and suffering. (Awasthi, p.20)

Being an Indian American Divakaruni has a magnificent ability to depict the centuries old tussle between east and west, tradition and modernity with all its nuances. She breaks the myths related to their dichotomy and promotes integrative relationship. She holds that in this rapidly transforming and networked world; the timeless principles and practices of ancient tradition can illuminate our path toward a more mindful and harmonious way of life. The inevitable bonding with native geographical and cultural roots imparts distinction and enduring popularity to her art of fiction. It works as a panacea for the generation caught in the whirlwind of conflicting values. (Agarwal, p.72). Adaptation is crucial for evolution. Modernization is undoubtedly necessary but not at the cost of time-tested traditional values because if the foundation is destroyed it will ultimately destroy the whole culture. Looking at the need of the hour, traditional practices may be altered but the essence of tradition should not be missed. Divakaruni doesn't merely restore the indigenous philosophical, spiritual, intellectual tradition of India but reframes and repositions it in contemporary scenario. It affirms her traditional loyalty and modern outlook.

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