

Shrimati Indira Gandhi 's Speech at the
Jnanpith Award Function
(15 December 1980)

To attend a non -Political function is by itself a Pleasure and a relaxation, although it is no activity which is not to some extent permeated by politics. It is a special pleasure to participate in honouring a distinguished writer. I congratulate Shri Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya.

All literature, as all art , is part of our national wealth , so although Shri Bhattacharya lives in Assam and writes in Assamese we regard him as an Indian author.

There is a French saying that each person creates without knowing it. In some, this creative genius develops and emerges out of the depth of man's being in words, in colour or in sound. The artist creates consciously.

What is life but a series of experiences? True literature has no dividing walls or boundaries. It is one vast territory which invites us to share the more sensitively felt experience of artists. We are honouring Shri Bhattacharya as a person who has opened a new vista and added to our understanding of this vast region of experience . It is an unending area, one that can never be fully discovered or conquered or even described. Each new writer is a revelation.. Poetry, novels and plays will continue to be written and authors' Pens will ever be busy and prolific.

In our country and in many others, literary resurgence has gone hand in hand with the national renaissance which arose out of our fight for freedom , our search for our own roots and our yearning to reveal and elucidate our own identity. Authors have contributed powerfully to the spread of national consciousness and to the feeling

of oneness in our nation. Great men of letters in every language and every region have enabled our people to recognize their own inner strength. They have reiterated ancient ideals and pointed out the new values that are suited to our times and our tasks. Indeed this became not only a part of, but actually a source of strength to, our freedom movement and it was on this basis that linguistic states came into being. This helped us to develop our regional languages.

There is no conflict between love of state or region and loyalty to the Nation. India has proved that the two go together. Just as a strong sense of national pride in no way mitigates from the larger love of humanity and concern for international problems.

May I make a personal confession here? When my sons were very small, every morning on awakening they made a habit of climbing on to my bed and lying on either side of me. At that hour they were concerned with two problems. One was that if a mother had more than two children . Where would the others lie, and secondly would there be less love for each succeeding child? My answer was that love did not diminish but kept on growing so that no matter how many children one had , there was always enough love to go around.

Love of one's own province should not mean antagonism or lack of concern for other States. It is unfortunate that people do deviate from this in our, as well as other, countries. We have had too many inter provincial bickerings in our country and I would be lacking in candour if I did not say that in their zeal some authors seem to add to this.

I am not suggesting any code for writers. Time and again there is a demand for a particular book to be banned. Except in cases where such writings might

cause serious offence to a group of people leading to riots and even deaths. I am opposed to such bans. Authors must be free to write what their urges, their vision and their conscience dictate. But as persons who have the power to influence others, they also have responsibilities. And they lay themselves open to judgments by others as to whether or not they are using their power fairly.

Prejudice is mostly the result of lack of acquaintance with people, trends and wider issues. Through greater knowledge we gain deeper comprehension and balance. Systematic efforts must be made to enable people of one region to understand the achievements and difficulties of those of other regions – as also of other countries. Learning more languages is a help. When books of high quality appear in one language, people of other areas should be induced to learn that language in order to read them at first hand. Translations are essential but cannot always capture the original flavour. Awards are also helping the process of inter-cultural understanding.

Cynics and sportsmen speak slightingly of awards. But even men who are aware of their own worth and achievement – authors, artists, musicians, scientists, doctors – are pleased to be recognized and honoured. In fact an award is one way in which society acknowledges its debt to its benefactors and vicariously shares their achievements. When a Rabindra Nath Tagore or a Satyajit Ray is honoured, the whole of India feels elated. Similarly, Jnanpith Awards give pleasure and pride not only to the authors but to their own large circle of readers. Literature is a kinship.

Choosing recipients of awards is not easy. Countless articles have been written on the great writers of our century. Who have been ignored by the Nobel Prize for Literature – Tolstoy, Ibsen, Hardy, James, Joyce. And this is even more true of some of the other prizes, notably the one for peace which has now been so politicalised.

Recently a British Journalist members of the small committee of the Swedish Academy which , under Alfred Nobel's will, gives the Literature award. One of them argued that Asia and Africa had received very few prizes because their literatures were yet primitive. See how the old colonial narrowness of mind persists? But it is specially sad and shocking that it should do so in such so-called civilized and sophisticated quarters. Let us not get worked up about such verdicts. The world is the poorer for ignoring the writers of our continent. But even when committees are not so opinionated, it is not always possible to honour everyone who merits it .How much can we read?

In India we have many languages. The number of people who know more than one or two languages besides their own is limited. But thanks to AIR , the Sahitya Academy, the Book Trust and the better Journals, the work of outstanding people of one region is beginning to be more widely known in others. The Jnanpith has evolved a procedure by which the jury is representative as well as eminent.

It has been my privilege to know many of the Jnanpith award winners and to have read the works of a few of them. I must confess that I have not read Shri Bhattacharya's books. But I have read about his deep earnestness and humanism which captures the spirit of our people , the consciousness which gave birth to the freedom movement and the emotions which set aflame their hearts and minds

The fact that he hails from Assam gives me an opportunity to recall my own fondness for Assam. How impressive is the sweeping majesty of the Brahmaputra? The sinuousness of Assamese dances, the lilt of Bihu songs and the muted luminosity of the silks of the region are things of beauty. I have a partiality for the designs used in old mekhelas and chaddars of the last generation. Alas, today's taste is for the easier weave. This is no occasion to speak of politics, for the last few months the people of Assam

have gone through pain and turbulence of spirit . It is my fervent hope that Assam will regain calm and when there is a spirit of give – and -take, solution can be found in which all sides gain and none loses.

Each region must enrich its own personality and take pride in its heritage and achievement ,but not at the cost of others. This attitude of equal respect and mutuality is a basic feature of the Indian mind and of our constitution. From it arise our postulates of secularism and nonalignment in our national and international policies. India can survive and flourish only on the foundation of tolerance. This is equally true of the contemporary world. We look to literature to enlarge tolerance and sensitivity and to enhance our reverence for life.

My congratulations and good wishes to Shri Bhattachary and the Jnanpith.