If it is one area in which Indians have excelled in all their long history garnering a golden culture, it has been in the area of communication. Looking back on what they have achieved, one can only marvel that they overcame the obstacles of geography, class and racial disparities, climate and the rest and spoke in a language that is understood even today with electrical ease. Many reasons contributed to this, but chief was their image-making faculty. From the Vedic times onwards, images flowed freely in their literature which records a marvellous methodology of communication. They felt that communication must lead to unity of hearts and minds and so the \textit{Rig Veda} concludes after all those \textit{anuvakas} of sublime \textit{sukthas} with a stirring call for such union in speech and thought:

\begin{quote}
Meet together, speak together,
Let your minds be of one accord,
As the Devas of old, being of one mind,
Accepted their share of sacrifice.

May your counsel be common, your assembly be common,
Common the mind, and the thoughts of these united.
A common purpose do I lay before you,
And worship with your common oblation.

Let your aims be common,
And our hearts be of one accord
And all of you be one mind,
So you may well live together (1).
\end{quote}

With the coming of the \textit{Upanishadic Age}, communication was honed into a fine set. There are no misunderstandings in the conversations of teachers and disciples in the great \textit{Upanishads}. This was because education was never a technology with them. Education was initiation, nothing less. This called for a direct contact between the teacher and the taught. As Nolini Kanta Gupta said in 1926:
In olden times, in our country, nay in China, Egypt, Greece and amongst all ancient nations there was in practice a highly respected tradition which upheld that in order to have one’s education one must take refuge under a particular Guru. The learner had to take initiation from him to start with and only then he could begin his education. There could be no education without such an initiation. Today, large-scale movements concerning education are taking place all around us claiming that without a universal education, without a compulsory education, the progress of our country is not possible. In the midst of all these clamours and controversies, we have forgotten this hoary practise of the ancient world, or, if not forgotten, we do not at least feel the need to pay enough attention to it (2).

The student was encouraged to question and learn. There had to be respect but not fear in the disciple’s approach to a teacher. The student imbibed the thought-process of the teacher as well as his idiom and language. Proficiency in his language was achieved with comfort. Another way in which communication was perfected was through story-telling. The *Pancha Tantra* and *Hitopadesa*, the *Kathasarit Sagara* and *Dasakumara Charitha* as well as the numerous branch stories in *the Mahabharatha* were born to communicate racial experiences and in the very act of communication perfected the instrument of communication that was Sanskrit. And a millennium ago the story telling was repeated in a bi-way to help the linguistic variations blossom into full-fledged languages when the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were translated into India’s many languages like Bengali, Oriya, Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu. Today Indian literature stands out as a fine example for achieving better communication through the English Language.

About ten years ago, I happened to attend the Thunjathi Ezunthachan festival at Thirur. M.T.Vasudevan Nair had invited me to give a talk and the other speaker at the meeting was the Minister for Culture of Kerala. He gave a very passionate speech in Malayalam and the audience laughed and cheered and looked sombre by turns. After it was over when we were coming down the Dias, the Minister was amused and somewhat contrite that I knew no Malayalam. “I am very sorry, it must have been tiresome for you, having to listen to a talk and not knowing what it is about.” I said: “On the contrary I could follow your speech because of some familiar names. You were speaking of Jambavan *kaalathu* bureaucracy, and I gauged that you were unhappy about bureaucratic red-tapism that would not allow quick decisions to be taken by the minister.” He was delighted.

That is how Indian literature has achieved communication possible throughout the length and breadth of India. Here is a vast amount of literature waiting for the teacher to use the communication skills to the student. For this literature is a source for orality. To tell a tale with all the drama that can catch the child’s attention do you need the witches and bizarrerie of Harry Potter? No! Just begin the story of Kumbhakarna’s tapasya and how he would have become all powerful but for the Goddess of Learning made him pronounce “Nithyathva” as “Nidrathva”! When telling the story in English, the child gets initiated into a bit of Sanskrit too. What does Kumbhakarna mean? Pot-like ears!

The stories from the *Upanishads* about gurus and disciples living together in *ashramas* are a never-failing source to kindle the interest of the child. The image-making faculty of the child is allowed to open a million petals by listening to the story of Nachiketas waiting at the entrance to the abode of Yama; of Sunahchepa tied to the post of sacrificial pillar; and of Satyakama Jabala whose face shone with the utterance of truth. Children or youth - Indian literature never fails to touch some vital source in their image-making faculty. Here even ethics comes as an image. There is the Tamil *Pathinenkilkanakku* work, *Pazhamozhi Naanooru*. Each verse is that has image coils of suggestion. A couple of examples would suffice.

Slim-waisted lady! If you ask a lazy fellow to do a job, he will do it in such a way as never to complete it. Making such a lazybone to get your work done so like using a dodderly bullock to plough the field (3).

Frog in the well thinks that there is no potable water anywhere else. So one should not think that he can be self-educated. More than learning, it is important to listen to the learned ones (4).

Here are a couple of wonderful images. One is of an ancient bull and a farmer trying in vain to drive it to drag the plough; the other is of a frog in a well. Teaching these verses helps the student take the images along with him in his memory to be used at the appropriate places.

As in image-making expertise, Indian literature has been a great communicator through symbolism. Consider the names given to characters. The *Devi Bagaavatham* describes the death of Rakthabija, one of the *raakshas*. The problem with the killing of Rakthabija is that even as he is being cut down, each
drop of blood that falls on earth becomes a rakthabija (blood-seed). So innumerable Rakthabijas appear on the battle field and it is well nigh impossible to put an end to him. Finally, the Devi drinks his blood in a cup and kills him. What is behind this image of drops of blood springing up as live rakshasas? Well, Rakthabija symbolizes desire. Desire is insatiable and if you think you have satisfied on desire, another rises its head and so on and so forth. Naturally desires are indestructible.

Indian literature has also been at the forefront in communicating through visuals. The pictures of Ravi Varma. For us Mahalakshmi is now for ever balancing on a red lotus; Mahasaraswathi is always playing the lute, sitting on a rock; Damayanti is keenly listening to the swan's message; and Viswamithra is rejecting baby Sakunthala offered by Menaka with outstretched hands. The cosmic gods and goddesses as well as our epic and puranic characters are now seen through Ravi Varma’s eyes by us and that is because Ravi Varma has taken the essence of a particular tale and communicated it to us through just a turn of the hand (Viswamithra) or the anxious look on Parvathi’s face as Ganga leaps down upon Paramasiva’s crown. There are the miniature paintings of Rajasthan which gives a visual look even to ethereal subjects like raga and raginis. The Srirangam Sesharayar Mandapam sculptures; the broken hand of Narasimha of Belur communicates to us an entire history of depredation and rampage mounted by an alien religion on India’s great culture. For, Indians did not think of painting and sculpture as secular jobs done for business. For them art has been a religious and spiritual adventure as is indeed brought out well by Masti Venkatesa iyengar’s great story in Kannada, “Masumathi”.

Even communicating a movement through language can be done by an expert story teller. There was the Gandhian movement that gave great importance to the sale, purchase and wearing of the Khaddar. Plenty of propaganda was undertaken for that purpose. But just a story could do more in teaching the contemporary audience about the Khaddar movement and its impact on young minds in the thirties, as Kumudini’s story “Thangappan Sami”. A subtle humour masks the high seriousness of the author’s intent. People who opt for ornaments and silks are ultimately made to look foolish and the simplicity and utility of khaddar is upheld.

It is not merely myths, stories or legends that are important for camaraderies between the teacher and the taught in the Indian literature. Just four lines of a Purananooru verse and you are done. You have impressed upon the students the need for sterling character:

“What does it matter if it is a city
Or a forest? What does it matter if it is uplands
Or lowlands? Where good people live
That is a great land” (5).

Finally, Indian literature is most suited for communication for it gives space for retelling a given tale. The story of Ahalya, of Sita, of Arjuna, of Karna... they have all been told to help convey a contemporary message so much so names like Dhritarashtra and Sakuni and Bhishma and Kaikhey and Ekalavya are used even today by politicians and people spearheading socio-political movements. This is because of the nature of Indian culture which allows the phenomenon called Nindha stuthi. In fact, one may go on trying their very best in contemporary India to communicate with others in any language and this includes English, they can do nothing without bringing in Indian Literature. Such has been the power of the World that was given a high status as Vak Ambhrini in the Vedas. This was realized long ago when Romesh Chunder Dutt and Toru Dutt who retold Indian legends and Sister Nivedita gave us Cradle Tales of Hinduism. It continues till now when Indian literature is made use of by writers in English including Sri Aurobindo, R.K.Narayan, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar and Maha Nand Sharma. The golden age of literature in English is round the corner!

References