

Beyond Reverence: Why Civilisational Texts Must Also Be Examined

Civilisational Journal

Movement I: Return to Civilisational Inquiry

Essay 001

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Across generations, civilisations preserve themselves not merely through monuments, institutions or political continuity, but through memory. Some of that memory resides in rituals, some in customs, some in language and some in texts. These texts endure because successive generations continue to recognise value within them, even when the conditions that first produced them have long disappeared.

The need to engage with civilisational texts becomes particularly important in our own time. Across the world, societies are experiencing profound transformations. Traditional social structures have weakened, joint families have increasingly given way to smaller and more fragmented units and relationships that once drew strength from continuity and shared responsibility often struggle under the pressures of speed, mobility and individual aspiration. Digital technologies have brought unprecedented access to information and connection, yet they have also altered the manner in which people learn, relate and form communities. Virtual engagement frequently substitutes physical presence, while constant connectivity competes with sustained reflection. At the same time, public life increasingly rewards visibility over character, success over wisdom and acquisition over restraint. Anxiety, loneliness, distrust and social polarisation have emerged as defining features of many contemporary societies. These tendencies are not confined to individuals alone; they often scale upward into institutions, communities and even

states, shaping collective behaviour in ways that privilege competition over cooperation, domination over stewardship and immediate gain over long-term harmony.

Amidst these conditions, younger generations often encounter civilisational texts only through fragments, stereotypes or polemical narratives. Many come to view them either as objects of unquestioning belief or as repositories of mythology disconnected from contemporary life. In the process, a deeper possibility is overlooked. These texts were not preserved merely to recount extraordinary events; they endured because they wrestled with enduring human questions—questions of character, responsibility, family, duty, leadership, justice, self-mastery and social order. Even some of history's most influential scientific minds acknowledged the value of looking beyond the surface of ancient traditions in search of deeper patterns of thought and imagination. The challenge before us, therefore, is not to choose between modernity and tradition, nor between science and civilisation, but to recover the capacity to engage these inheritances with seriousness, curiosity and intellectual honesty. For if character shapes individuals, individuals shape societies and societies shape states, then the study of civilisational wisdom is not an exercise in nostalgia. It is an investment in the moral, social and intellectual foundations upon which peaceful coexistence ultimately depends.

India possesses one of the world's richest civilisational inheritances. Its epics, philosophical traditions, scriptures, commentaries and literary works have survived centuries of political change, social transformation and cultural encounter. They continue to be recited, discussed, celebrated and revered across diverse communities.

Yet reverence, important though it is, raises a question that is seldom examined.

Is preservation alone sufficient?

To preserve a text is undoubtedly an act of respect. To transmit it across generations is an act of responsibility. But if preservation becomes the final objective, something essential may gradually be lost. A text may remain physically present while its deeper possibilities remain unexplored.

Civilisations do not preserve texts merely so that they may be remembered.

They preserve them so that they may continue to be engaged.

There is an important distinction between remembering a text and examining it.

Remembering often asks what a text says.

Examination asks what a text is doing.

The difference may appear subtle, but its implications are significant.

A remembered text provides familiarity. An examined text generates understanding.

A remembered text offers quotations. An examined text reveals structures.

A remembered text preserves conclusions. An examined text revives inquiry.

The history of human thought offers countless examples of this distinction. Some of humanity's most influential works have survived not because people agreed upon them permanently, but because successive generations continued to ask questions of them. Their value lay not only in the answers they appeared to provide, but also in the intellectual conversations they continued to provoke.

The same principle applies to civilisational texts.

A text that cannot be questioned gradually becomes distant. A text that can only be repeated eventually becomes ceremonial. A text that continues to invite inquiry remains alive.

This is particularly relevant in the Indian context.

For many people, engagement with civilisational texts often occurs through inherited familiarity. Stories are heard in childhood. Characters become recognisable. Certain episodes acquire special prominence. Moral

lessons are remembered and retold. Such transmission performs an invaluable function. It keeps memory alive.

Yet familiarity can sometimes conceal depth.

When a text becomes deeply familiar, we may cease to notice how much remains unexplored. We begin to assume that recognition is equivalent to understanding. We know the narrative and therefore presume that we know the text.

But knowing a story and understanding its structure are not always the same thing.

A building may be familiar from the outside while its architecture remains unexamined. A river may be crossed daily while its source remains unknown. Similarly, a narrative may be remembered in great detail while the patterns that organise it remain largely unseen.

This is not a criticism of inherited modes of engagement. Reverence, devotion and cultural familiarity have played an indispensable role in preserving India's intellectual inheritance. Without them, many of these texts might not have survived at all.

The question is not whether reverence should continue.

The question is whether reverence alone is enough.

A civilisation that only preserves its texts eventually risks reducing them to symbols. A civilisation that also examines its texts allows them to remain sources of insight.

The distinction matters because civilisational texts often operate on multiple levels simultaneously.

They may function as narratives, as repositories of ethical reflection, as records of cultural memory, as vehicles of philosophical inquiry and as explorations of enduring human questions. Different readers may encounter different dimensions. No single reading exhausts the text.

Indeed, one of the marks of a genuinely enduring work is precisely that it continues to reveal new layers when approached from different perspectives.

This does not require irreverence.

Nor does it require abandoning tradition.

On the contrary, serious examination often begins with respect. One studies a text carefully because one believes it contains something worth understanding. Inquiry, in this sense, is not opposition to reverence. It is one of its highest expressions.

To ask difficult questions of a text is not necessarily to challenge it.

It may be to take it seriously.

When we examine a civilisational text, we move beyond asking whether an event occurred or whether a character acted correctly. We begin asking different kinds of questions.

Why has this narrative endured for centuries?

What concerns does it repeatedly return to?

What patterns become visible when individual episodes are viewed together?

What assumptions about human conduct, responsibility or social order are embedded within its structure?

What does the text appear to be investigating?

And perhaps most importantly, what questions was it trying to ensure would not disappear from collective memory?

Such questions do not diminish a text.

They deepen engagement with it.

They transform reading from consumption into inquiry.

For modern readers, this approach carries particular significance. We live in an age of extraordinary access to information but often limited opportunities for sustained reflection. Knowledge is increasingly fragmented into isolated facts, quotations and excerpts. Context frequently yields to immediacy. Attention shifts rapidly from one subject to another.

Civilisational texts invite a different posture.

They ask for patience.

They reward continuity.

They encourage the reader to remain with a question longer than contemporary habits usually permit.

In doing so, they offer something increasingly rare: the possibility of disciplined reflection.

Perhaps this is why civilisations repeatedly return to their foundational texts. Not because every age requires identical answers, but because every age encounters recurring questions. The circumstances change. The vocabulary changes. The institutions change. Yet certain concerns persist.

Questions of responsibility.

Questions of authority.

Questions of justice.

Questions of order.

Questions of human conduct under conditions of uncertainty.

Civilisational texts endure because they preserve long conversations about such matters.

To engage them only through reverence is to preserve the conversation.

To engage them through inquiry is to participate in it.

A civilisation remains alive not merely when it remembers its inheritance, but when it continues to think with it.

The task before us, therefore, is not to choose between reverence and inquiry.

It is to recognise that the two need not stand apart.

Reverence preserves.

Inquiry illuminates.

Together, they allow civilisational memory to remain not only inherited, but understood.

— End of Essay 001—

—About Manthan House

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