Comprehension of Poetry

CHAPTER 4

Teaching of Poetry at the Undergraduate Level

Teaching of Poetry: Background

Poetry is the result of creative activity. It is as old as language. It arises as soon as language becomes organised simply for the purposes of expressing emotion. As soon as poetry arises, a new emotion comes into being the pleasure in language; this is the basis of a love for poetry. Just as the language of poetry is a refinement, an organization, a selection of the best in every day language; poetry itself is a refinement, an organization and a selection of the best in human experience.

Poetry represents a different kind of language. It provides an enjoyable experience of language. It should be thought as an experience derived after listening to and reading poetry.

Poetry can mean nothing to a student who has only a rudimentary understanding of language. The exposure to poetry leads only to incomprehension, bewilderment, frustration.

Poetry employs words and syntax in a manner that would not be considered normal or acceptable in ordinary communication.

Poetry is purely a personal affair. It makes its appeal in a very special way to the aesthetic and intuitive sides of the personality, it makes a strong appeal to the introverted personality, giving shape and integration to his
COMPREHENSION OF POETRY

fantasy. Poetry is a method of facing life with heightened emotion. It provides the student with a kind of language used which is creative and imaginative. It provides an enjoyable experience of language. Poetry is an expression in beautiful words of the fleeting moments of beauty - beauty of form, beauty of language, beauty of thought, mood or feeling. Poetry is a "thing of beauty and a joy for ever". The teacher is supposed to impart this sense of joy to his pupils. Poetry has to be felt. The appreciation is an intellectual activity and therefore it comes after emotional experience and imaginative understanding. Appreciation consists in pointing out the beauties of the poem. The central experience is derived from the images through which the experience is presented: from the music, the rhythm and rhyme, and the words which express the tone and the inner spirit of experience.

The teacher's personal enjoyment of poetry is a cardinal element in success. In teaching poetry the teacher should create an atmosphere, in which the emotion or sentiment of the poem can be felt. This can be done by explaining the background of the poem. The teacher should give the setting of the poem and the situation in which the poet's feeling were moved. He may also provide a glimpse of history or biography. For this purpose the poem may also be introduced with a picture.

Poetry is a written thing to be read aloud and recited. Poetry comes alive when it leaves the written page. For a happy communion between the poet and the pupils through the poem, the reading should be perfect. Rhyme, rhythm,
pauses, pitch of voice, everything matters. A good reader of poetry can be a good teacher of poetry. The teacher should read with marked emphasis. Such reading communicates emotion. The reading may be done twice - once in the beginning and then after the appreciation questions.

Silent reading of the poem by pupils is necessary. After silent reading the teacher should explain meanings of difficult words. There should be a second silent reading. When a poem has been grasped the teacher may put questions to bring out its beauties. After this the reading a poem aloud by the pupils in chorus should be done.

Every poem requires a different approach to teach it. Some poems need explanation, others require more comments. For some the difficult words are to be explained. In reading aloud the poem, the class should not have their books open, while a poem is read to them for the first time. Reading poetry aloud should be reserved for the best readers. A poetry lesson is something of a special occasion.

Students should follow the text visually while a poem is read aloud for the second time. Choral speech may be described as a critical method of teaching poems. On the right occasion a teacher may give a lecture on a poem. Pupils may be asked to refresh their memories of the poem out of several other poems already studied.

In the process of teaching a poem there are three main stages - 1. Preparation, 2. Presentation, 3. Discussion.
COMPREHENSION OF POETRY

Preparation - consists in equipping the pupil for a quick grasp of the main outline of the poem from the first reading by familiarising him with the most important words and expressions and ensuring that the ideas involved are not beyond his reach.

Presentation - and reading - including a great deal of reading and calling for intense concentration on the words of the poem, any paraphrase or summary being followed by a return to the actual words of the poem. This reading must be relatively quick, the first reading not being attempted until there is a reasonable certainty, that most of the class will be able to follow the essentials of the poem and establish in their minds a correct general impression of its significance and scope. Books should not be opened until the poem has been made thoroughly familiar to the ear for there is likely to be the danger of conflict between what is imagined by the ear as it is read and the printed word.

Discussion - It should be based on a thorough knowledge of the text of the poem, and be designed to lead to deepen an allround perception of the poem and the ideas it embodies.

After this work has been completed, the poem may be considered as learnt, the teacher may leave rest of the work on it to the pupil.

The choice of the best and most memorable poems that can be made use of to accompany the language is supremely important. We should never choose a poem only because it is easy. The poetry lesson should be lively and methods should be constantly varied. No poem should be studied for a longer
time if the interest is not sustained. Young children should read and enjoy poetry uncritically; their interest can not be expected to be profound, analytical or even sustained. Choral speech is the ideal method of bridging the gap between critical and uncritical reading. It contains the germs of articulate aesthetic appreciation. Conscious literary appreciation can only be taught in the later stages. The teacher's part in all poetry lessons will vary, he may read a new poem, he may talk about a poem or its writer, he may ask prepared questions and direct critical enquiries or he may take a quite passive role, encouraging the class to choose its own poem, organize its own choral presentation and study the poem silently. He must keep the lesson moving, avoid monotony and preserve the elements of surprise, wonder and enjoyment, while teaching poetry.

The more effective the teaching of poetry, the better the comprehension will be.
II Teaching of English Poetry and Marathi Poetry

The teaching of English poetry helps the sublimation of instincts, it favours the reader with an eye of beauty and rhythm, and it ultimately develops a better aesthetic sense. Poetry makes its appeal in a very special way to the aesthetic and intuitive aspects of the personality. Over and above this what it provides is creative enjoyment, harmless and entertaining pleasure in the dullest hours of life. This aspect of learning poetry cannot be too much emphasized. So, naturally, we feel that poetry ought to be taught with a due regard for the pupils' capacity, age, environment and above all their linguistic ability.

In our country where English is taught as a compulsory subject, poetry forms an essential part of the syllabus. Therefore the cultural background of English poetry must be explained to the students for comprehending it in a proper way.

In teaching poetry we must adopt certain principles such as -

1. No poem should be taught at a very early stage that is in the first year.

The poem should be within the range of subject matter familiar to the pupils. The sounds, sights and topics should be familiar to students. The subject matter should be narrative, enjoyable and be within the experiences of the pupils. The principle of graded structures and vocabulary should be strictly observed. Rhythm and charm should be the first requisite of teaching poetry.
COMPREHENSION OF POETRY

Methods of Teaching and Procedures to be followed

Poetry is not to be taught as a language exercise. It has the charm of thought, word, signs, sound and music. Our business is to motivate the instinctive urge and emotional spirit of the pupils - and to heighten them to such an extent that they are fully absorbed in the poem. Our aim is to make pupils grasp it. We have to reach to poetry naturally, so no method or process can afford to sacrifice this aim. Our aim is to make the pupils enjoy it with comprehension, if possible to develop a sense of beauty that poems have and to appreciate the beauteous forms of language. But to expect the pupils to write an appreciation is beyond their reach in the present circumstances. We can sow the seed for it, but can not expect any fruit at the harvest time.

In teaching poetry we can introduce the following steps and procedures -

1. The first step is to introduce the background of the poem. The teacher can use suitable devices for this. He can use pictures and motivate ideas. He can present a similar poem in the mother tongue or he can narrate a short incident in the mother tongue. He can directly read the poem in a rhythmic way. There can be a number of techniques for this, but the principle remains the same that is to arouse the pupils' perception.

The simplest way to introduce the poem is to supply the pupils with the background and the substance of the poem in simple lucid prose. The stanza or verse may be
COMPREHENSION OF POETRY

discussed with the help of a few questions. Enough time
should be given for independent reading both oral and
silent. Even new words can be introduced at this stage.
With this background and explanation of new words, the
pupils will be able to receive heartily, what they read in
the poem.

ii. After this the pupils may be allowed to listen to the
poem once, twice or thrice. The teacher should feel
satisfied that the pupils are impressed and touched by
the music of words and are eager to read the poem.

iii. Then pupils are to read silently the poem with the
teacher as he reads, enjoying various sounds and rhythm.

iv. With the help of a few questions, the teacher leads the
pupils to describe, narrate or explain the subject
matter of the poem.

v. Finally the teacher and students should read aloud the
poem in a pleasant mood.

In teaching poetry we must follow the procedure, so
that as a literary form it will be understood by the pupils,
and the different roles of language, the different uses of
language will also be understood properly.

Ample use of speech should be made in teaching
poetry. Special attention should be paid to careful
recitation because rhyme and assonance, alliteration and
rhythm appeal primarily to the ear.

For better and effective teaching of poetry it must
be read and re-read aloud as it is easier to understand when read aloud by a good reader.

The teacher, teaching poetry should have profound interest, joy and emotion and enthusiasm, and for all these he must have a good and effective voice.

The attention of the pupils should be concentrated on the reading and on the general effect of the poem. The teacher should not try to explain poetry or its beauties because too much explanation is a mistake. Verbal peculiarities should be passed over while teaching a poem. Poetry is a piece of art and should be allowed to make its own impact on the students.

Teaching English Poetry requires a process by which the pupils will learn it by heart and comprehend it. It should be introduced in a natural manner and according to the process. As English is the second language of the pupils in India, it should be taught in a rather different manner than the poetry in the first language.

As Marathi is the first language of the majority of pupils in Maharashtra, the pupils will have less difficulties in grasping the language, theme, images, etc. in the poem. Comparatively, learning poetry in the first language will be easier because of their familiarity with the language, its usage, culture etc.

Teaching Marathi Poetry also should be done according to the procedure as is used in the teaching of English Poetry. Teaching Poetry in the Marathi language will need some explanation of the social background. in a multilingual
class, students may belong to different dialects of Marathi. The background of a poem should be explained to the students. Then reading it aloud and asking questions can help the students to comprehend poetry.