Penchant for letters

SCHOLAR David Shulman's attainments include a doctorate in Tamil literature and mastery of South Indian religion.

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Hebrew, Yiddish, Persian, Tamil — these are linguistic milestones that mark David Shulman's route into South Indian culture. Currently working as a professor at the Department of Indian, Iranian and Armenian Studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Shulman is a scholar with formidable attainments that include a doctorate in Tamil literature; proficiency in more than a dozen languages, Eastern and Western, authorship of more than fifty published articles and a dozen books (some of them co-authored); mastery of an equally wide range of topics that includes South Indian religion through translations of Tamil and Telugu poetry to Buddhism and history. The only aspect modest about Shulman is the man himself. He was in Chennai recently to deliver the Dr. D. Dennis Hudson memorial lecture on 'Haunted by compassion — Vedanta Desika's Daya Satakam' for Prakriti Foundation.

David Shulman.
PHOTO: S.S.KUMAR

Exploring languages

Curiosity about his Indian connection and intellectual passions lead us to the story of his childhood. Shulman's grandparents conversed in Yiddish. It kindled in Shulman a fervent desire to explore its classical cousin, Hebrew.

In 1967, eighteen-year-old Shulman enrolled at the department of Arabic and Persian studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Israel's spoken language, Hebrew, satiated David's thirst for the classical tongue. His passion found a poetic expression and 23-year-old Shulman published his first collection of Hebrew poems.

However, Shulman's passion for the letter transgressed artificial boundaries of geographical borders, language and religion. Love for Persian poetry soon had him touring Iran.

At Jerusalem, Yohanan Friedmann, Shulman's Persian teacher, had other plans for his student and awaited eagerly his return. Friedmann's suggestion that Shulman do his doctorate in some India-related subject shocked the youngster.

Danny Sperber, a close friend of Shulman had been so inspired by India that he had walked from Istanbul to Calcutta three times. He was determined to dispel his friends ignorance about India.

Every day Shulman returned from the University to find at his doorstep a book related to India's culture. Shulman flipped through the pages of the first book casually but soon the spell of India gripped him. And Shulman put down one book on India only to pick up another.

A meeting with Chaim Rabin, a faculty member of the Hebrew University, gave the final twist to this chain of events. Rabin, an expert in Semitic languages, was fascinated by Tamil. His ardour influenced Shulman and Interior landscapes a translation, by A.K.Ramanujan of the Aham poetry, initiated him into Sangam literature. At the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Shulman enrolled for his Ph.D programme. The year was 1972 and the topic chosen — Tamil Saiva sthalapuranams.

Shulman's Ph.D. guide and guru, John Marr, was a great Tamil scholar and musicologist. Shulman had already been initiated into Sanskrit. He now added Carnatic music to his repertoire. Frequent visits to India, study of South Indian temples and Carnatic music were all part of Shulman's India experience.

Gradually, Shulman's interest progressed beyond the intellectual to the emotional. "I began to visit temples as a pilgrim," he says. In 1980, a meeting with Velcheru Narayana Rao at the University of Wisconsin drew him into studying Telugu language and literature. The association had Shulman not only mastering the language but also co-authoring with Narayana Rao, books on Annamayya and Kshetrayya.

Shulman's Indian experience continues to spur him on. As he doggedly translates Vedanta Desika and Appaya Dikshitar, David Shulman dreams of learning Malayalam (I feel strongly that South Indian languages should not be studied in isolation); delving deeper into Advaita; having someone make Kalidasa's Vikramorvaseeyam as a film. Shulman has never stopped with just dreaming.