

Genealogies of Indian Literature

Since who or what is “Indian” has always remained a matter of contention, the term “Indian literature” becomes even more difficult to define and understand. Literature in India is as old as its paintings or its sculpture, but a sustained pursuit of its history began only at the dawn of the 19th century. That is when Indian literature became a theoretical category. But from the Sanskrit bias of early European Indologists, to the reformist-nationalist-modernist projects, to the ease with writing in English, literature in India has traversed diverse terrains.

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In recent days there has been a great deal of debate on the significance of the two words “Indian” and “literature,” though not always in a contiguous context, and certainly not on the same level of theoretical and political resonance. Taken separately, neither “Indian” nor “literature” would elicit uniform response even from the common reader. While who or what is “Indian” has always remained a matter of contention among sections of the citizenry, especially in post-independence India, what constitutes “real” literature has also been a matter of serious debate, more particularly in these turbulent times when the conflicting claims of a fragmented public on the society’s cultural capital have proved to be a little too difficult to settle. The wrangles on the political and social fronts that the country witnessed after the events in post-Babri Ayodhya and post-Godhra Gujarat, are pointers to the semantic difficulties associated with the word “Indian”. Similarly, at the centre of the newly proliferating body of dalit and female writing appearing in almost all the Indian languages today is an uncertainty regarding its status as “literature” or perhaps as “Literature”.

To link the two terms and talk about a unified “Indian literature” in such a contested terrain would seem a little perverse. More perverse is the attempt to elaborate a concept of Indian literature connected by a commonly shared sensibility. In the fast-changing global scenario of economic liberalisation and cultural re-colonisation, where artistic sensibilities are expected to lose their regional flavours and merge into an international sensibility of global currency, such an attempt might lead to further problems. Alternatively, just as the advocates of liberalisation and globalisation nurse fond hopes of a strengthened Indian polity and economy to emerge from the present global climate, the proponents of cultural globalisation too visualise a reinforced Indian sensibility and Indian literature to come out of the present imbroglio. But if we examine things a little more closely, we realise that unlike in the spheres of economy and polity, the warring supporters of global and Indian sensibilities are not likely to remain at loggerheads with each other in the literary sphere. This is primarily because there has been in vogue, at least since India came into contact with the European literary ideology, a strong perception that the literary experience is perhaps universal in significance. Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* and Tagore’s *Viswasahitya*, both meaning “world literature”, were attempts at theorising this perception, though the Euro-centric bias of the two concepts escaped the notice of the two visionaries in their own times. The perception certainly was at the heart of ancient Sanskrit poetics as well, which obviously was one reason why the European view

found immediate acceptability in the Oriental world in the era of modernity and colonisation. What all this suggests is that the cultural roots of Indian literature and Indian sensibility should be construed as running deeper and stronger than the roots of the corresponding tendencies in the socio-economic realm.

We are grappling here with questions of knowledge formation, and in this context it is worthwhile to remember that knowledge is not a neutral category that gets circulated in a society in an unmediated way. In fact certain segments of the society decide what is to be counted as knowledge in given moments of social development. If knowledge in India with its long history of imperial rule continues to be tainted by colonial ideology even after 57 years of independence, it only proves Gramsci’s thesis that material presence is not essential for the exercise of cultural leadership by a dominant group over an underprivileged group. Imperialism must have come to an end, but not the “Empire”, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri recently proclaimed.¹ This, notwithstanding the theoretical distinction they want maintained between the two concepts, as the lineaments of the decentred and deterritorialised cultural empire evolving in India today does not seem to be far removed from the global scenario appearing in their cartography. Literary scholars in India then will have to be self-critical about colonialism’s impact on their own cultural responses that leads to the building up of a new empire. This will also make it imperative for them at this juncture in time, that is, after more than five decades of independence and 500 years of colonial and imperial rule, to rethink concepts like Indianness, Indian sensibility and Indian literature a little more closely and critically than has been done before, so that they might uncover the complicity of these concepts with the ideology of colonialism on one hand and that of globalisation on the other.

Indian Literature: A Contested Category

A literary sensibility, needless to say, always operates in the context of a unified body of literature and an integrated literary culture. Can we in the present context speak about such a unified body of Indian literature and an integrated environment of Indian literary culture? Before attempting to answer that question it might be pertinent to point out that “Indian literature”, an ontologically unified object that is theorised as connected by a shared discursive history and shared epistemological concerns, is not the same as “literature in India” or “literatures in India”. Very few accounts of Indian literary history are seen to maintain this

vital distinction. The title of the influential Chicago University primer, *The Literatures of India*, seems to recognise this point, although the individual essays clearly do not share this recognition.² Literature in India, as any textbook history of Indian culture would tell us, is as old as its painting or its sculpture, perhaps a little less old than its community life. Sustained scholarly pursuit of the history of this literature, however, is of fairly recent origin and would not go back beyond the dawn of the 19th century. This indeed is the moment of the constitution of Indian literature as a theoretical category.

This certainly is not to deny the self-knowledge of the identity of the several regional literatures in India by regional language scholars in the past, though historiographic accounts of these literatures too do not go far back beyond the early 19th century. In fact the first histories of most regional languages too get written only during this time. It is around this time, again, that Indian literature gets constituted as a self-validating body of knowledge. It has been pointed out that the first scholar to use this term was not an Indian, nor were Indian scholars particularly interested in tapping the unifying potential of the term in the 19th century. It was the German romantic theorist Wilhelm von Schlegel, who in 1823 used it synonymously with Sanskrit literature.³ Since then a number of western Indologists have used the term to refer to the unified literature of India, mainly Sanskrit, but at times also, along with Sanskrit literature, literatures written in Pali and the several dialects of Prakrit. Very rarely did modern north Indian languages like Bengali, Urdu or Hindi find a place in the accounts of these writers, though literary histories pertaining to some of these linguistic cultures were appearing in parts of India during this period. The strong tradition of Tamil literary culture that had deep roots in entire south India or the Kannada tradition of a somewhat later period also went unrepresented in their works. M Garcin de Tassy's two-volume *History of the Literature of Hindu and Hindustani* (French original, 1839-47; revised, enlarged and published in three volumes in 1870-71), Albrecht Weber's *History of Indian Literature* (German original, 1852), George A Grierson's *Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan* (1889), Ernst P Horowitz's *A Short History of Indian Literature* (1907), Maurice Winternitz's three-volume *History of Indian Literature* (German original, 1908-22) and Herbert H Gowen's *History of Indian Literature* (1931) are some of the literary histories that contributed towards the constitution of the category of Indian literature.⁴

T R S Sharma in the preface to his three volume anthology of *Ancient Indian Literature*, is indirectly referring to the Sanskrit bias of early European scholars when he dwells upon the practical problems that he encountered in locating translations of literature from ancient India. He says: "While many European scholars had translated entire works of Sanskrit, few of them had ventured into Prakrit and Apabhramsa and none into Kannada."⁵ Even today European scholars of modern south Asian languages and literature feel compelled to legitimise themselves and their fields of study, working as they do in departments of south Asian studies – at times designated even now as departments of Indology – that are dominated largely by classical Sanskrit scholars. This is what one should infer from the introduction to a volume of modern south Asian literature and film written by scholars working in European universities in which the editors unambiguously state that one of the motives behind the compilation of the volume is the need to let the world know of the "seriousness" of their discipline.⁶ The unabashed eurocentrism of this statement apart,

what one is to understand from this is that in spite of the enormous scholarship that has been produced on Indian literature by scholars of various hues from the south Asian subcontinent, the European scholarly attitude to this archive remains unchanged from what it was in the 19th century represented by the works mentioned. All these works without exception also shared the class and caste bias of the tradition of Sanskrit-based Hindu orthodoxy. Some present-day critics recognise this, as is indicated by the following comment of Sheldon Pollock in his introduction to a recent anthology of essays on literary cultures from south Asia. Making references to the early work in Indology by western scholars starting from Hegel and Schlegel, Pollock says:

Sanskrit was posited as the classical code of early India, congruent with new linked conceptions of classicism and class. . . . The real plurality of literature in south Asia and their dynamic and long-term interaction were scarcely recognised, except perhaps incidentally by Protestant missionaries and British civil servants who were prompted by practical objectives of conversion and control.⁷

The Theoretical Category

The works by western Indologists mentioned above would bring the story of the constitution of Indian literature down to the first quarter of the 20th century. It is now that we see Indian scholars show interest in the emerging genre and pick up the blueprint of what was virtually a project conceived in the west. Indian scholars who have theorised Indian literature in diverse ways in the 20th century include K R Srinivasa Iyengar, Sri Aurobindo, Krishna Kripalani, Umashankar Joshi, V K Gokak, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Sujit Mukherjee, Sisir Kumar Das, G N Devy and Aijaz Ahmad. Most of these scholars with the obvious exception of Aijaz Ahmad, whose sensitive and highly nuanced elaboration of the category of "Indian literature" is in effect an acknowledgement of the impossibility of positing such a category, arrive at the broad possibility of conceiving an Indian literature either as the expression of an essential Indian culture or as the unity of discrete literary formations.⁸ The reformist-nationalist-modernity projects that were under way in all parts of India in the early 20th century acted as a great unifying force at this juncture. So did the progressive literary movement (Indian Progressive Writers Association, IPWA), which launched in 1939 a journal under the title *New Indian Literature* from Lucknow. Since its inception in 1954, the Sahitya Akademi, under the tutelage of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was also the first president of the Akademi, has been propagating the idea of the unity of Indian literature by using the slogan "Indian literature is one though written in many languages". The title of the Akademi's journal *Indian Literature*, echoing the name of its short-lived IPWA forerunner, is more than symbolic in this sense.

That Indian literature as a theoretical category was constituted in the 19th century would nowadays be disputed only by bigoted adherents of cultural revivalism. Many thinkers of liberal persuasion can be seen, sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly, to be opposing this bigotry. Sisir Kumar Das's move in publishing the last two volumes, the ones pertaining to the period since 1800, of his projected multi-volume history of Indian literature can be read as an implicit criticism of this bigotry.⁹ Though the reasons given for publishing the eighth and ninth volumes ahead of the volumes pertaining to the earlier periods is the easy

availability of material pertaining to the modern period, one cannot ignore the fact that in doing this he is also focusing on the period when Indian literature actually came into being as an object of knowledge. Perhaps he is also suggesting that this object's chronological extension back into the past is yet to be properly realised. This indeed is how all subject disciplines are conceived and constructed. An object of knowledge is constituted as a discipline with well-charted boundaries and well-defined objectives in answer to certain political compulsions. Indian literature too, when constructed as a discipline, was meant to answer certain political and ideological needs.

What are the ideological compulsions that rendered the constitution of Indian literature imperative in the 19th century? A closer look at the nature of the scholarship produced on Indian literature during the period in question would help us to understand this problem. The 19th century and after in Indian history, it may be remembered, is the period of colonialist and capitalist expansion, of social reform movements, of nationalist awakening and the freedom struggle leading finally to the country's independence. It is also the period of increasing modernisation of the society with its attendant good and evil effects, of an expanding English studies programme, of a proliferating print culture, of the democratisation of the reading public and, in the sphere of literature, of an overall consolidation of the western ideology of the aesthetic. The impact of these diverse developments can be seen imprinted in the kind of scholarship on Indian literature that got constituted during this period.

The developments indicated above are too panoramic and complex for us to do justice to all of them in an analysis of this kind. But we'll briefly examine three issues that are intricately related to the question of Indian literature and see how they have interacted with one another to produce the kind of scholarship associated with the category of Indian literature. We have already made a passing reference to the first of these in our preliminary remarks on the tradition of Sanskrit-based Hindu orthodoxy that animated much of the work connected with Indology. We shall also examine the question of language that has played a crucial role in the construction of the category. The co-option of the category by the nationalist discourse for the production of the metaphysics of a national literary sensibility will be the third issue under analysis.

Orientalism and After

Much of course has been written on western Indology and the scholarship on Indian culture that it has generated. This especially after Edward Said's path-breaking critique of Orientalism was published in 1978. One certainly cannot underestimate the enormous amount of research carried out on India by European Orientalists of the 18th and 19th centuries. Much of what would otherwise have been lost of classical Indian scholarship was salvaged by the painstaking research of scholars like Charles Wilkins, Albrecht Weber, William Jones, Henry Colebrooke, Nathaniel Halhed, Max Mueller and Maurice Winternitz. However, as several later scholars have pointed out, there is an important lacuna in their work plan and their output, which is too systematic and too consistent to be treated as an instance of casual oversight. This relates to the tacit concurrence that they gave to the division of Indian history into a predominantly Hindu ancient India, a Muslim-dominated medieval India and a British designed modern India. Further, the general framework of their

analysis assumed that real and valuable contributions to Indian literature were made in ancient India, that is, in the past of India prior to the Islamic conquest. Very little of the present of literary India is explored in the literary histories mentioned above. Weber's *History of Indian Literature* discusses only the Vedic and Sanskrit periods of the Indo-Aryan language, while Winternitz surveys Vedic and Upanishadic literature as well as the writings in classical Sanskrit and Prakrit in his *History*. In doing this the two were only following in the footsteps of Sir William Jones, Indologist and the founder of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, who as early as 1786 had declared that in his studies he would be confining his researches "downward to the Mohammedan conquests at the beginning of the 11th century, but extend them upwards, as high as possible, to the earliest authentic records of the human species."¹⁰ Though some later scholars like George A Grierson have deigned to consider specimen texts from the regional languages too, a good majority of early Indologists were resolutely opposed to the idea of treating works that belonged to Indian regional literatures of the modern period as part of the Orientalist canon.

It is against this background that Said's general observations on the politics of the Orientalist scholarship assumes significance. There are problems with *Orientalism* both in terms of theory and methodology, that led to the assumption, widespread among post-colonial thinkers today, of the presence of an ahistorically homogeneous other in parts of what is called the third world, though one might find it difficult to concur on the basis of this with Aijaz Ahmad's assessment of it as "a deeply flawed book".¹¹ An important reality that the book has allowed us to see is the deep ideological complicity between Orientalism and the project of colonialism. This indeed is a complex question on which much has been written by researchers, historians and social scientists of all persuasions, so that it might be well-nigh impossible to summarise the arguments or keep track of the direction in which the research is progressing.¹² In fact, it is possible that the conflicting interests of the European powers on the Indian subcontinent during the 18th and 19th centuries might be said to have cast their shadow on the Orientalist discourse, though Said has nothing to say on this. Whatever little has been done by recent researchers on this question is enough to indicate that this discourse was saturated from the very beginning with the claims and counter-claims of rival colonial powers, especially the English and the French in the Indian context.¹³ It is the presence of such competing interests that goes to make this body of knowledge ideological and its complicity with colonialism real. The Orientalist's refusal to recognise the value and authenticity of the several kinds of modern literature in Indian languages, then, is to be read as a manifestation of this complicity. One of the general studies on Indian literature by the Indologist Edwin Arnold, entitled *Literature of India*, was issued in 1902 from a press in New York called the Colonial Press. The suggestion might sound a little too cynical, but it would not be altogether absurd to say that 'Colonial Press' would have made a suitable imprint for a great deal of the Indological material published during the period even outside the New York press.

The above complicity can be seen at work, though at a less conspicuous level, in the scholars' handling of the language question. This becomes important because this was the key issue debated by the literati, especially the Anglicists and the Orientalists in both India and Britain, for over three decades in the early years of the 19th century till it was finally resolved by Macaulay's

“Minute on Education” (1835). The establishment in 1917 of Hindu College in Calcutta – an institution meant to propagate secular values through “modern” (English) education, but which nevertheless flaunted a non-secular banner in its name – is a significant moment in this debate that has been characterised by contradictions and paradoxes. Outwardly the Orientalists were against the introduction of English in India in place of Sanskrit and Persian. Perhaps they earnestly believed, contrary to the position taken by many social reformers in India, that this was a gravely mischievous step to take for the British administration in India. But the deep-seated identity of ideological interests between the Orientalists and the British government on one hand and the Orientalists and the Anglicists on the other can be seen in the refusal of all to honour the present of India represented by its regional languages. Looking at things in retrospect we realise that the real dispute was not between the Orientalists and the Anglicists, but between regional or local cultures and the big event represented by the great tradition of Indian culture that both the Orientalists and the Anglicists in their own separate ways propped up. Macaulay did not want to do business with the regional languages. As his Minute makes clear, the coloniser’s objective in spreading English education was to form a class of persons who could be depended upon in interpreting the land and culture of India for the Britisher – a class immortalised in Macaulay’s oft-cited phrase, “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste and opinion”. The Orientalists and the Anglicists both concurred with this view enshrined in the Minute. One might perceive a subtle transition of intellectual authority taking place here, a symbolic exchange, so to say, between the past glories of Sanskrit and the present powers of English. The Orientalists – and through their work the elite public opinion in India – appeared to be conceding the modernised, Anglicised present of India to the colonial rulers in return for an acknowledgement of the glories of the country’s Vedic and Sanskrit past, in a process that Nigel Leask has aptly described, in a related context, “reverse acculturation.”¹⁴ The process involved a legitimisation of the colonial rule whose burden it was to recover the past glories and traditions of India that had fallen into decay arguably under the Muslim rule. This perhaps is how Said should make sense to us. For if we followed this logic, what Said said was that the imperialists used the Orientalist’s intellectual mastery over India’s past to legitimise and reinforce their own physical control of the present.

“Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste and opinion.” Macaulay’s telling phrase invites to be deconstructed in the context of the debates on language carried out with reference to Indian literature. Was Indian literature, at the time of its constitution, fashioned out to cater to the taste of the English? One should assume it was indeed so, as the works that were circulated in the name of Indian literature in the 19th century were all classics in Sanskrit that were translated and – inasmuch as translation constitutes misreading and misrepresentation – misread and misrepresented. Here then is a cartography of misreading whose founding principles have been the subjects of debate from very early days. The debate was carried out with a great deal of vehemence in the first half of the 19th century, especially in relation to the rationale of developing an Indian literature written specifically in English. The history of Indian English literature would reveal that all early Indian English writers suffered from a profound sense of divided linguistic identity, so much so that Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the author

of the first Indian novel in English, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, one of the early Indians to make a name for himself as an accomplished poet in English, both renounced, like Ngugi wa Thiong’O of Kenya was to do a century later, their youthful enthusiasm for the English language and turned, at a more mature stage of their respective careers, to their own native language, Bengali, and distinguished themselves as creative writers in that language.

The Language Question

History repeats, and not always as farce. This is what we are to gather from the recurrence of the debate on the feasibility of using the English language by Indians for creative purposes in post-independence India. But what scholars like Budhadev Bose and P Lal could not prove through their theoretical perambulations in the 1950s and 1960s, the novelists of Rushdie’s generation a few years later have shown through practice: that the language question, framed as a question pertaining to the perceived spontaneity of creative expression, after all, was a non-question as far as the politics of writing was concerned. One could excel and prove to be a creative genius in an alien language, evading in the process all questions pertaining to the politics of writing. This observation gains immense value when we remember that such politics was precisely what Bankimchandra and M M Dutt were indirectly concerned with when they thought it fit to reject the English language as the medium of creative expression in the 19th century. And certainly, one should also remember that the writers of Rushdie’s generation are working in an altered cultural environment in which literature itself has been enlisted in the service of an unscrupulous global and globalised economic order by contemporary capitalism. Since this is not the place to go into the details of that development, let us leave that aspect unelaborated for the present.

This problem concerning the language of literature will appear to be more relevant in a discussion of Indian literature, as literature is always written in a specific language. O V Vijayan who brought about a radical change in the literary sensibility of the Malayalam readers in the 1960s with his groundbreaking novel *Khasakinte Itihasam* (1969), was in the habit of saying that one knows a region by its characteristic fauna. The variety of fish that one gets in Chennai will be different from what one gets in Mumbai, Tunis or Manchester. A place name can act as a metaphor for a whole lot of characteristics – and this would include the smell of the fish one eats – that make up the identity of the people who inhabit the place. Language, a system of metaphors, at a certain level can also be treated as a metaphor for the system built up around a place. One is known by the language one speaks. This is one reason why theorists say that language is ideological. What this implies for the theorists of Indian literature, however, is that an exclusive focus on the language of literature would render unsustainable formulations like “a literature written in several languages.” One might talk about Hindi literature, Tamil literature or Bengali literature, because these are kinds of literature based on specific languages and linguistic cultures. But can one talk about Indian literature, unless by that one means, as many 19th century Orientalists did, Sanskrit literature, or as several present-day western critics mean, Indian English literature?¹⁵

This question emanates centrally from the politics of writing and in this sense is closely affiliated to the question that agitated

the minds of the likes of MM Dutt and Bankimchandra in the 19th century. It is in this context that the observation regarding the Orientalist constitution of Indian literature becomes a fact of critical significance. If the real specimens of Indian literature are to be found in the regional languages of India, the chimera called Indian literature that exists outside the nation's linguistic system must be construed as an invention of somebody. The scholar Niharranjan Ray has been quite emphatic about this point. He says:

Literature is absolutely language-based, and language being a cultural phenomenon, it is all but wholly conditioned by its locale and the socio-historical forces that are in operation through the ages in that particular locale. If that be so, one may reasonably argue that the literature of a given language will have its own specific character of form and style, images and symbols, nuances and associations, etc.¹⁶

Politics of Writing

This brings us back to the questions of the politics of writing and the relation between ideology and literature that were raised only incidentally in these pages. It may not be possible, either theoretically or in terms of a cohesive methodology, to carry forward a sustained argument in support of the presence of an ontologically related body of knowledge with a shared discursive history called Indian literature. We can, however, do this by invoking the ideology of nationalism and the sense of cultural identity that the project of nationalism during the last phase of the colonial rule made room for. This precisely was what the Indian scholars, who took up the task of elaborating a concept of Indian literature in the 20th century were aiming at. The Tamil nationalist poet Subramania Bharati who said that the Indian nation speaks 18 languages, though her "*chintana* [i.e., thinking] is one"¹⁷ was articulating a nationalist position of an essential Indian spirit animating all the writings from the Indian subcontinent that was echoed later in the slogan of the Sahitya Akademi. Though the full-fledged spirit of nationalism and the politics implied by it emerge in India only at the turn of the century, it is possible to argue that the Indologists of the 19th century were operating within the conceptual framework of the (Indian) nation, however crude and vague that framework might have been at that point in time. It is true that it was left for the nationalists of the 20th century to elaborate that framework. But it was natural for several 19th century Orientalists, inspired as they were by the spirit of the many newly emergent nations in Europe vying with each other for cultural capital by making claims on folk and literary traditions, to invent a glorious past for the culture of India that was so dear to them. India thus emerges as a land-mass of divided interests in the present, but connected by a common and glorious past. Indian literature, then, is both a product of this constructed past and an active agent in the construction of that past.

The three issues examined above are also crucial for understanding the dynamics of the modernity project in India. For while talking about Indological scholarship, the debate on language and the nationalist question, we are in a deeper sense, asking questions concerning the nature and spread of the colonialism-driven modernity project and its impact on the country's polity and culture. Modernity is often regarded as a mindset rather than a physical condition, or a mindset emerging from a physical condition, that, in spite of its perils and contradictions, welcomes

change, growth and progress. It is an experience of unity binding the entire humankind together, cutting across distinctions of class, caste, race, gender, language and nationality. Though individual is important in this dispensation, one is an individual only inasmuch as he – often he, and seldom she – crystallises within himself the universal, humanistic values sacralised by modernity. There indeed are contradictions, which account for the demoniac aspects in the writings of several European romantic and modernist writers of the past centuries. Marshall Berman, one of the few commentators of modernity who gives a balanced evaluation of it, defines it as:

...a body of experience [that finds] ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology.¹⁸

Tradition, which is often placed in opposition to modernity as its other, encompasses the obverse of the above attributes. Tradition epitomises ignorance, changelessness, narrow-mindedness and lack of power. Traditional India was a compendium of all these vices in British historical accounts.¹⁹ The British counted it as their historical responsibility as enlightened members of the civilised world to change this situation. This is the background of the colonialist's grand project of reform and the accompanying discourse of modernity, complex, contradictory and elaborate, in which scholars from both India and Britain participated with varying degrees of commitment. It would have been impossible for 19th and early 20th century scholars from India, whether of the Orientalist, Anglicist, reformist or nationalist cast of mind, to remain uninfluenced by this project and this discourse. The contradictions and complexities that we noticed in Indian responses to orientalism and nationalism are in fact, linked to the divided logic within modernity itself. That is why a Nehruvian nationalist slogan like "India's unity lies in its diversity" also becomes the credo of Indian modernity. One need not be exceptionally intelligent to realise that the slogan "Indian literature is one though written in many languages" is only the literary critical analogue of the nationalist modernity's precept concerning India's unity lying in its diversity.

This genealogy of Indian literature, however, does not preclude, as several scholars point out, the presence of myths, legends and stories, as well as perhaps even patterns of narration of stories, that have for centuries bound a variety of literature of India together. This may be treated as an aspect of the dialectic of India's modernity. One might come across myths, motifs and patterns of story telling that appear and reappear throughout India in both the ancient and medieval periods of its history. Scholars like Ayyappa Paniker would say that there is a specifically Indian way of narrating stories that has existed in India from the earliest times.²⁰ The Sanskrit stories in the *Panchatantra* and the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the Pali *Jatakakathas*, the *Brihatkatha* stories written in the Paisachi language, the *Gathasaptasati* in Prakrit and the *Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* stories in Tamil have for centuries circulated across the subcontinent in all languages in various forms and have remained a perennial source of inspiration for all Indian writers. In medieval times the Tamil and Kannada 'Bhakti' tradition of writing that spread from the southern regions of India towards

the northern parts of the country also threw up patterns of feeling and thinking that have affected the entire literature in the subcontinent. A process of synthesis and cross-fertilisation can be seen at work here, whose fruits in the form of great imaginative literature have accrued not only to the people of India but, as Umashankar Joshi observes, to “the peoples of far-off lands, making...the idea of Indian literature relevant from the point of view of the foreign appropriators even in those early days.”²¹

Joshi’s reference to the point of view of the foreign “appropriators” in the statement above is significant in that it draws focused attention on the single sense in which the concept of Indian literature becomes meaningful today. One might invoke it as a theoretical category in order to signify the distinctiveness of India’s literature in relation to the literature in the rest of the world. One posits it in opposition to the non-Indian literature and from the perspective of the non-Indian reader. What we do when we take this position is to recognise India’s status as a nation in the political map of the world.²² A nation obviously should have an army and a currency, but it should also have a literature of its own. In the context, one certainly cannot present Indian literature as the expression of an essential Indian spirit or of a commonly shared sensibility, because the nation in question is stable only on the map of the world. Its borders keep changing from writer to writer, from reader to reader and from subject to subject. This is what one is to deduce from the lack of a perfect fit that exists between the images of India appearing in, or the nations constructed by, Saadat Husain Manto, Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Laxman Gaikwad, Bama, VKN, U R Anantha Murthy and Shashi Tharoor, to mention a few representative “Indian” writers from various languages. No one would dare to talk about an essential Indian spirit running through the works of these writers who share the same nationality and perhaps the same period of writing, but whose histories, contexts, mindsets, experiences, lifestyles, languages and sensibilities are different, from the other. These writers dwell in different Indias, and to speak of them as sharing a common culture and a common sensibility is to beguile oneself. If one still wants to talk about a common Indian literature with reference to these writers, one might say, twisting somewhat the spirit of the Sahitya Akademi motto regarding the oneness of Indian literature, that they are writers divided by the same literature. [E]

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Notes

- 1 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2000, p xii.
- 2 Edward C Dimock, Jr et al, *The Literatures of India*, Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1974.
- 3 Umashankar Joshi, *The Idea of Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1990, p 7; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes Nations Literatures*, Verso, London, 1993, p 340.
- 4 The excellent bibliography that Sujit Mukherjee has provided at the end of his pioneering literary historical account of India, *Towards a Literary History of India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1975, pp 92-103, is an exhaustive listing of work done on the history of Indian literature in the colonial period.
- 5 T R S Sharma, ‘Preface’, *Ancient Indian Literature: An Anthology*, T R S Sharma et al (eds), Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2000, pp 1:12.
- 6 Vasudha Dalmia and Theo Damsteeg, ‘Introduction’, *Narrative Strategies:*

- Essays on South Asian Literature and Film*, Research School, Leiden, CNWS, 1998, p iii.
- 7 Sheldon Pollock, ‘Introduction’, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, S Pollock (ed), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, p 5.
 - 8 Aijaz Ahmad, ‘“Indian Literature”: Notes toward the Definition of a Category’, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, pp 243-85. Throughout this essay Ahmad consistently uses the term ‘Indian Literature’ within inverted commas to draw attention to its problematic identity.
 - 9 See Sisir Kumar Das (ed), *A History of Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1991. The published volumes are Volume 8: 1800-1910 *Western Impact, Indian Response*, 1991; Volume 9, 1911-1956 *Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*, 1995.
 - 10 Quoted in G N Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1992, p 5.
 - 11 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* 161, Ahmad’s chief objection is to Said’s methodology, especially to his use of specimens of humanist scholarship to undermine the ideology of humanism that the Orientalist work embodies. Ahmad is also critical of Said for his dependence on a theorist like Nietzsche who does not believe in language’s ability to tell the truth in revealing the “truths” about the Orient.
 - 12 This has become a pet theme with several Marxist, post-colonial and, more particularly, subaltern historians, though they do not share the same position or perspective on this and Marxist historians seem to be more guarded in their response. An assorted collection of the names of such scholars would include Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, Gyanendra Pande, K N Panikkar, Gyan Prakash, Tapan Raychaudhari and Sumit Sarkar. The reader will come across references to the work of some of them in this and the subsequent chapters of the present study. The work of researchers like Gauri Viswanathan, Javed Majeed, Nicholas Thomas and Rumina Sethi has also led to a new understanding of the aspects of this question that were not in the agenda of Said’s project. See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989; Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings*; James Mill’s, *The History of British India and Orientalism*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1992; Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Polity, Cambridge, 1994; Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1999.
 - 13 This is a question on which more research is to be undertaken. There is some discussion of this issue in chapter 2 of Nigel Leask’s book on romantic poetry. See Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp 103-08.
 - 14 Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East*, p 9.
 - 15 When Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West compiled an anthology of Indian fiction and published it on the occasion of the 50th year of India’s independence, they did not consider specimens of Indian language literature worthy of inclusion in the anthology. See S Rushdie and E West (eds), *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-97*, Vintage, New York, 1997.
 - 16 Quoted in Sujit Mukherjee, *Towards a Literary History of India*, pp 14-15; and in Umashankar Joshi, *The Idea of Indian Literature*, p 11.
 - 17 Quoted in Umashankar Joshi, *The Idea of Indian Literature*, p 9.
 - 18 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982, p 15.
 - 19 See, for example, James Mill, *The History of British India*, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, London, 1817 and Vincent A Smith, *The Early History of India*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1904.
 - 20 See Ayyappa Paniker, *Indian Narratology*, Indira Gandhi Centre for Arts, New Delhi, 2003.
 - 21 Umashankar Joshi, *The Idea of Indian Literature*, p 26.
 - 22 Though scholars like Arjun Appadurai have started talking about a post-nation phase in global culture, this seems to be by and large a diasporic obsession, at least for the present. Appadurai, however, advances an interesting theory of historical rupture which takes media and migration to be crucial for contemporary society. See for this argument that is also linked up with the question of modernity, Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1996.