

Echos from Every Corner: Exploring the Kaleidoscope of Indian Literatures

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Abstract

The paper tries to explore questions such as the reasons why the categorization of Indian literatures are needed to be discussed, and how the categorization of Indian literatures such as, Indian Literature, Indian English Literature undermines many literatures produced in India. How does the Western influence help or hinder the journey of recognition and misrecognition of many Indian Literatures? The paper plunged into the richly diverse and multi-layered world of Indian literatures, reflecting its vast cultural, linguistic, and social landscapes. Indian literatures, spread over centuries and regions, depict a highly vibrant tapestry of narratives that mirror the complexities of Indian society. This paper explores how literature foregrounds the cultural identities of present-day India. The process will naturally underscore this multilingual nature of Indian literatures as regional languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, and other languages provide unique narration styles and cultural content. Situated at the core of Indian literature is a vortex between tradition and modernity, in which oral traditions, folklore, and classical poetry blend together with experimental fictions, Dalit literature, and postcolonial narratives. Forms and voices are so interwoven here that the literature is kaleidoscopic and echoes the nation's pluralism. The paper also addresses how a country stands by itself with its distinctive identity. Is it a collective consciousness shared by the citizens of a landscape, a common language, a common culture, a common religious practice, a common administrative body, or a common sense of being and belongingness from a common root that helps it gain a unique identity? Do we agree to all the questions asked above? How does the idea of nationalism and nation formation take place? Is it just the idea of a common shared language, culture, ethnicity, and a shared territory of a geographical location that decides one's national identity? If yes, then what about countries like Belarus, Belgium, Canada, Finland, India, Ireland, South Africa, and Switzerland, where there is no single language, no single culture followed, or no single religion?

Keywords: Indian literatures, Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, Oral Traditions, Regional Narratives.

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How does a country stand by itself with its distinctive identity? Is it a collective consciousness shared by the citizens of a landscape, a common language, a common culture, a common religious practice, a common administrative body, or a common sense of being and belongingness from a common root that helps it gain a unique identity? Do we agree to all the questions asked above? How does the idea of nationalism and nation formation take place? Is it just the idea of a common shared language, culture, ethnicity, and a shared territory of a geographical location that decide one's national identity? If yes, then what about countries like Belarus, Belgium, Canada, Finland, India, Ireland, South Africa, and Switzerland, where there is no single language, no single culture followed, or no single religion? The idea of nation and nation-building in the Indian context is not a recent phenomenon. It gained increased attention from critics following the pivotal event of India's Independence in 1947.

The idea of Nationalism and nation-building is a prerogative of Enlightenment thinking, which also inspired the Indian national movement and Indian thinkers like B. R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi, Swami Vivekanand, and others, who saw the nation as a body that evolves and develops as humans do and becoming more rational, hence the term, "modern", in which all nations, eventually become free from slavery, monarchy, colonialism, and join the world republic of nations. Linguistically, India is one of the most diverse countries in the world, with over one hundred twenty-one languages and two hundred seventy mother tongues, while the Indian constitution has recognized twenty-two languages. There are narratives, folklores, stories, literatures across the country in these languages. So, categorizing Literature seems to be a nationalist project of recognition and self-defining. Benedict Anderson's ideas have profoundly impacted the study of Nationalism, inspiring scholars to investigate how cultural products shape identities and political movements. His seminal book, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), explores the concept of Nationalism and its development. Anderson argues that nations are "imagined communities" because members of a nation will never know of their fellow members. Yet, they feel a connection to them through shared culture, language, and identity. His book remains influential in understanding the rise of Nationalism and its implications on global politics, identity, and culture.

Before diving into the major arguments regarding the category of Indian Literatures, we need first to address some of the significant questions that have not been discussed at length so far in the context of Indian Literatures - Firstly, why is there an urgent need to discuss the category of Indian Literature/Literatures? Secondly, do we undermine many pieces of Literature that have taken birth and blossomed in India merely because of our utter ignorance and lack of

knowledge about those literary pieces? Thirdly, if yes, then how does the Western influence help or hinder the journey of recognition and misrecognition of many Indian Literatures?

Agreeing with the idea that the Literature of a country where almost every citizen is multilingual, where literatures are produced almost in every corner of the nation, has different languages, narratives, folklores, cultural practices, traditions, and experiences. Confining them within a term like “Indian Literature” or “Indian English Literature” misrecognizes and undermines all this diversity, as these terms treat this diversity as a single voice, Indian Literature or Indian English Literature. There is a considerable amount of debate among literary critics regarding these supposed umbrella term. It has been found to be quite a narrow term lately, especially after the emergence of a blossoming discipline, Comparative Literature. The terms that previously were in fashion in regards to addressing Indian Literature, such as Indian Literature, and Indian English Literature count only those Literature which is at the canon or instead in the language spoken or known by the majority of the Indians, i.e. Hindi and English; these terms, on the other hand, do a injustice to the Literature of the periphery and margin; folklores, oral literatures and the literatures of translation are not even counted within these umbrella terms.

The argument becomes even more relevant after the New Education Policy of 2020, where the government of India lays more emphasis on mother tongue-based education, tri-language formula, and promotion of Indian Literatures in Education where institutional support would be given to regional languages, which will encourage research in Indian languages resulting in the revitalization of endangered languages that encourages local infrastructures for the IT consultancy and firms while at the same time a global workforce. India had traditionally supplied the required labor force-through voluntary supply by its IT consultancy firms or involuntary supply by its diasporic dual-citizen NRIs. The NEP aims to fill language gaps, bring work opportunities to India, and localize the market. Aside from being a significant economic asset, literature becomes a prime tool for integrating and socializing workforce from its cultural roots.

Fredric Jameson’s famous yet controversial essay, *Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* (1986), states that nations still categorize and periodize because the world we live in now is a globalized neoliberal world with a free flow of information and goods. So, a national market is competing with international demands. The national market plays a vital role in localizing the loca. An example could be Hollywood audiences,. Thus, the local market produces ultra-localized movies, uses vernacular phrases, and focuses more on small families, village stories, etc. Jameson goes a step further and says that this chain creates another

thing: a very narcissism of the small nations makes them more desirable to the international market. Indian Banarsi saree has a massive demand in the global market; lotus us seeds or makhana has a considerable demand in the international market; Palestinian Literature has a wide-ranging audience internationally to get the feeling of revolution, anti-oppression, and nationalist fervour. Indian Literatures have a similar audience. Categorization is a necessity and a problem in our post-independence globalized third world, which has become so desirable to the First World: World Literature. The world market is in a race to canonize, and nations of the world are rushing to sell their national books, but first, they have to get their own shelves in order. So, literatures of India must be Bharatiya first as the world expects it, and only then can it be the author's, reader's and so on.

Critics suggest a substitute umbrella term, "Literatures of India". This term is appreciative of the different literatures of our country, irrespective of the language it is produced in. Translated texts, folklore, literatures from the margin, and oral narratives are given place and respect. Discipline like Literature has a huge influence which owns power; it can make or break a society; especially because of this, merely the idea of how the older terms in practice have shown such a disregard to the literatures of India while being a literature discipline, it should instead have flaunted the diversity and beauty of Indian tradition and folklore that took a different shape in every passing kilometer.

This divide between the centre (canon) and the margin raises major questions that need to be answered- Is "Indian Literature" or "Indian English Literature" distinguished from regional or local Literature? If yes, are these marginal pieces of literature less Indian, so they are not counted under the Literature of a Nation umbrella? M. K. Naik in his paper, Indian Pride and Prejudice, adds, "Indian writing in English is the equivalent of 'Vandhyaputra' (son of a barren woman)", suggests that marginal literatures of India are unfortunate and the son of a barren women whose existence and position is endangered.

Literatures of India encompass a variety of perspectives, showcasing a rich tapestry of diverse and extensive beauty where a wide array of beauty complexity prevails. Putting them together in one picture and naming it "India Literature" would ignore its wide range, breadth, and variety. As Sisir Kumar Das puts it in his prologue to A History of Indian Literature even for literary historians it is important to recognize the diverse literary traditions of India and the complexity of multilingualism to write an authentic literary history of India. He puts it beautifully as:

"It Is not possible to write a literary history of India without a framework that accommodates not only the diverse literary traditions existing in the country but also the complexity of its

multilingualism". He further adds, "change in the geographical distribution of a language can led to the emergence of the diverse literatures within that language".

Even the literatures written in a single language have no single voice. For instance, Literature written in the English language has no single identical voice. Instead, it voices the laments and joys of different countries across the globe. For instance, literatures in English, written in countries like America, Britain, Australia, and Africa, are different literatures, they deal with a variety of narratives, styles, experiences, and voices.

Having a common language does not give a common identity to two or more different communities or countries. Instead, it is not only language that brings a common identity to literature but also a community that shares a common experience. Das's argument appears very valid in this context; therefore, he says:

Greek Literature is the Literature of people, certainly not politically united but sharing a community which one can call Sahitya, a feeling of togetherness as inhabitants of Hellas. It would be too facile to think Aeschylus of Athens and Pindar of Sparta as creators of one Literature because both wrote in the same language, which assumes that any work written in a particular language automatically becomes a part of that Literature. It is not the language alone, but a community that goes beyond the exigencies of politics making the tragedian and ode maker partners of the same Literature. it is the identity of the people, which may or may not be politically determined, that gives Literature its distinctiveness.

To categorize the Literature of India as Indian Literature, India needs to have a single voice, a common essence, a single narrative, and a single form, shared by all the writers of India across the country, which could be regarded as the authentic identity of "Indian Literature". Considering the Literature of India as "Indian literature" would be submitting to a single power, a central authority, which dismisses other deviations and diversities. Maurice Winternitz, as Das puts it, was the first European, scholar of "Indian Literature" to recognize that, "the history of Indian Literature in the most comprehensive sense of the word is the history of a literature which not only stretches across great periods of time and an enormous area but is also one which is composed in many languages."

As per Das's observation, the traces of the recognition of India as a multi-ethnic country can be traced back to Mahabharata where Sanjay (the charioteer and friend of Dhritarashtra), calls Bharatvarsha, the country of many rivers, mountains, and provinces. Literatures of India share a commonality or bears differences, not because of the languages only, but also because of the messages, the thoughts, and the ideas that these languages contain. While in reverse, languages used by the same author in different texts, or in the same text itself (Shakuntala by Kalidasa), will contain the same worldview, because it voices the same ideology. Amaritjit Singh in his essay entitled, Indian Literatures and Multilingualism points out that Indian writers write over

the number of languages. This diversity represents their divergent voices across the cultures and sub-cultures of the Indian milieu. Despite the different shared experiences, they have a shared consciousness that has contributed to the rich tradition and folklore of our country. A biased selection approach towards Indian and foreign languages in India does not help in the true representation of Indian Literatures. Thus, multilingualism bridges the connections between cultures. Singh puts it as:

A very large number of Indian writers, both old and new, have written in two or even three languages, or else have written in languages other than their native tongues. For example, Swati Tirumal of Kerala wrote plays and songs in Hindi. Farid wrote in Punjabi, Urdu, and Braja Bhasha. In medieval Rajasthan, the poet Chandkoti, an ancestor of the better-known Surya Mall Mishran, is believed to have spoken and written in six languages. Kaka Kalelkar and R.R. Bandre write in Gujarati and Kannada. Yashpal and Mulk Raj Anand have written in Hindi and English respectively.

Thus, sometimes language can be merely a medium for a writer to give voice to his ideas, but it can also be representative of his identity. For a multilingual writer, defining his writing technique, his style, or his subject is complex, because he might be using many languages, but his writing might have a single essence.

The question of the unity or oneness of Indian Literature or one nation, one Literature has been debated extensively in the 1960s and the 1970s. P. Lal has discussed the issue at some length in his *Concept of Indian Literature: Six Essays* (1968), originally published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. Critics have argued that despite differences, India has a large area of shared attitudes, beliefs, and values, despite many surface differences in region, religion, language, and custom. Krishna Kripalani's keynote address at the May 1970 seminar at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla says that "this unity is more conceptual and inward than mechanical and outward."

Literature of any place or region represents its ethos, and that ethos would be distinct to that specific culture only, because that Literature is based on the experiences of the people of that place, and those characteristic features are the result of these experiences, and the narrative that the writer has built his life upon. In India, even a single state has so many languages, cultures, and traditions of its own, hence, the languages spoken within a state differ from each other and sometimes are entirely different that it seems those cultures, and languages belong to completely different states. For example, languages spoken in Bihar are very different from each other. Languages such as Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Maithili have, to some extent some similarities, but other languages such as Pali, Prakrit, Magahi, and Angika are entirely different. And these languages have their own identity and cultural significance of their own.

The land division of the Indian state is rather a recent phenomenon, and these languages, and cultures within a single state is a way too old. Even the national boundary of India was defined much later, after the birth of these cultures and languages. Thus, identifying which Literature is purely Indian, and authentic is very difficult. Hence, declining these diversities and giving it a single name would be to overlook and do injustice to this diverse beauty. As Niharranjan Ray says, “Literature is absolutely language-based and language being a cultural phenomenon, it is all but wholly contained by its local and the socio-historical forces that are in operation through ages in the particular locale.” (Poddar, Indian Literature, p. 6)

While discussing Indian Literatures, the question of an author’s identity also comes under question. M. K. Naik asks this question extensively in his essay, Indian Pride and Prejudice, that, “does an Indian become an Englishman, simply because he speaks only English acquires a British citizenship, and lives in England for a number of years? Moraes himself has gone to almost absurd lengths in proving his putative ‘Englishness.’ He proudly flaunts Verrier Elwin’s certificate to him: “you are a very English person. Your reactions aren’t Indian” (Moraes, 1971, p.162). He tells us, “So English was my outlook, I found I could not fit in India. When eventually, I came to England, I fitted in at once” (Moraes, pp.183-84)”.

Naik further argues that how the colonial hangover is consciously or unconsciously deeply rooted and feeds some of the Indian writers with the so-called flawed identities which is often mistaken as the key to becoming more English or more advanced or literally excellence. But the irony is, as our critic, Naik mentions, by the time this hangover gets over and when this hangover defies the person, it already gets too late. In Dom Moraes’ case, the deceptive nature of this hangover came very late when he already found himself disillusioned in England after an undesirable career and personal life with two divorces came only to an end when he returned to India and remarried an Indian girl. Naik puts it as, “Moraes was born of Indian parents in India in a family of Hindu Saraswat Brahmins converted (possibly by force, as was very common in Goa after the Portuguese conquest) to Christianity...if the poet found himself fitting in England so easily, a rather unkind question may be asked, with due apologies: why did he return to India — two British wives and two divorces later, and finally marry an Indian wife?”

The history of the marginalized position of Indian Literatures draws its reason far back from the colonial past where Englishmen had evidently far greater reason to dismiss Indian Literatures. This exposes the anxiety of the colonial past regarding the rich tradition of the Indian Knowledge system. This anxiety is quite evident in the minutes available to the Indian audience now; Macaulay’s minute is one such example. Indian Literatures was dismissed under the false accusations laid against the writers writing in English at that time that their writings

“lacks the fineness of nuance that makes literature possible...” as pointed out by John Wain. Since then, Indian literatures has kept on struggling for validation and to be counted in the mainstream. “Indian English Literature” reminds us of the colonial past that bluntly cuts the rich heritage of the Indian knowledge system into pieces on the basis of so-called excellence, language. The central question that needs to be addressed here is who decides what “good” and “bad” literature is and what literary and non-literary literature is. The more we try to study this complexity the more it appears to be intricate; it seems to be an open loophole where no fixed and “right” answer can be provided. Again, because who decides what is right and what is wrong? Raja Rao, in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*, tries to resolve this debate and says:

We cannot write like the English, we should not: We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.
(Raja Rao, 1938, p.5)

Years later, Raja Rao said, “As long as we are Indians... Indians of the Indian psyche, we shall have the English language with us and amongst us, and not as a guest or friend, but as one of our own, of our caste, our creed, our sect, and of our tradition” (Rao, 1978, p.420). Sri Aurobindo also says, “It is not true in all cases that one can’t write first-class things in a learnt language.” (Sri Aurobindo, 1971, p.454). If all the accusations against the Literatures of India had been correct, then the two Indians Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, whose mother tongue was not English, would not have won the prestigious Booker Prize; and Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* was actually adjudged as the ‘Bookers’ Booker’ of the last quarter century. What more must the poor Indian English writer do to establish his credentials? Asks Naik.

No literature is fake. Readership does not decide the credential of Literature. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice Candy-Man*, Marathi novel, *Zanzavat* and Bengali novel, *Anandmath* and *Pather Dabi* do have similar themes of freedom struggle, colonial rule and partition and one should not be compared with the other because they represent Indian ethos by different pens and perspectives.

It is very unfortunate that even after decades of Independence, colonial hangovers are being discussed. In 1980, K. N. Daruwalla brought out an Anthology entitled, *Two Decades of Indian Poetry*, comprising Indian English poetry alone, as if no poetry worth the name had been written during this period in numerous regional languages in India. Nearly two decades later, Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West brought out their *Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, they too followed Daruwalla’s footsteps.

To conclude, the regional marginal and the Literature from the periphery of vigorous, vibrant, and divergent India are evidence against Westerners' false beliefs. Mahatma Gandhi in his essay, *Indian Civilization and Culture* points out the very same idea of how our civilization has survived over millennia, reaching foreign influences, by changing and adapting to new situations. He compares Indian civilization (the Gujarati equivalent to "good conduct") have shared quite a different fate; "...Rome went, Greece" met the same end, "Japan got westernized", "China got nothing", but "in the midst of all this, India remains immovable and that is his past glory". Scholars like Gandhi were well aware of the Western influence that might lead to the loss of our own identity. It is high time we recognize our richness suppressed under the colonial hangover of the colonial past and acknowledge the diversity of Indian literatures and enjoy "Home Rule" (Gandhi, *Indian Civilization and Culture*). Suppose we are considerate of every piece of Literature written in India, old or new, canonical or non-canonical, dominant or marginalized, popular or obscure. In that case, we will have to consider its existence. In order to do so, we will have to choose a term which will encompass all the literatures under an umbrella; hence, Literatures of India seems to be the most appropriate term.

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