

INDIAN LITERATURE: DIVERSITY, NATION AND TRADITION

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1

In post-independent India the term 'Indian Literature' appears as a complex and problematic section of discourse. The partition of the subcontinent and the rebirth of a secular nation within a multiple culture, variety of traditions, minor and foremost religions, hierarchy of class and caste structures, twenty two official languages, more than hundred unofficial languages and thousands of dialects in diverse geographic settings produce a literature both multi-layered and multidimensional. A particular section of the literature in a particular time and place produced in this nation can be called as 'Indian Literature' or the literature both oral and written since the Vedic ages to 21st century Indian Writing in English will be branded as the canon of 'Indian Literature'. Else the newly emerging Diaspora Writings by NRI writers from the West, or the radical Dalit and Tribal Writings and the recently materialized Women Writings in India will do that? Can the copious production of the rich and vibrant regional literatures in different Indian languages alone cater towards the construction of 'Indian Literature'? At present state to determine what 'Indian Literature' is – perhaps appears as a dilemma of the canon.

2

My discourse of the topic 'Indian Literature' arises with my interest in the regional literatures -produced in this nation at different historical time and place. Recently I find the *Indian Literature: An Introduction* (2006) brought out by Delhi University entirely attending my intention. It is designed for the literature foundation course on 'Language, Literature and Culture' for the under graduate studies (B.A.). Rajiva Verma writes in the preface to this bilingual1 edition,

For various, mainly practical reasons, it was not possible to include works in all the major languages. But the shortcomings of the anthology can perhaps be excused in view of its purpose, which is to make the students aware of the wide range of Indian literature in its broadest outlines and of the main phases of its development across time and space, and to do this through an engagement with specific texts rather than through a 'survey' or 'history' of Indian literature (Verma 2006: ix).

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‘Indian Literature’ which becomes pluralistic discourse of the academia in our time is not a distinct unity of the literary expectations of a historical nation, rather it is the sum total of the specific regional literatures created during our time that engages plural discourses in the interest of the problems and the expectations of this sub-continent with their definite mode of addressing the national issues. Aijaz Ahmad in his essay “Indian Literature: Notes towards the Definition of a Category” in *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* propounds the idea of ‘Indian Literature’. He notes,

One of my arguments here is that we cannot posit a *theoretical* unity or coherence of an ‘Indian’ literature by assembling its history in terms of adjacent but discrete histories of India’s major language-literatures. A ‘national’ literature, in other words, has to be more than the sum of its regional constituent parts, if we are to speak of its unit theoretically’ (Ahmad 1992: 243-244).

Ahmad argues on the nation-state cultural and literary identity of ‘Indian Literature’. He describes ‘Indian Literature’ as more than a collective association of the massive production. Ahmad’s nationalistic view point compares the position of ‘Indian Literature’ and that of Western and African Literatures. Western and African literatures have historical signifiers in addition to their geographical labels and ‘Indian Literature’ has a homogeneous tradition which is associated with it since a period of three thousand years and more. Ahmad sees the versatility of the archive of ‘Indian Literature’ – a fountain of multiple languages, and he concerns for its unified association and the tremendous influence on each other. On Ahmad’s emphasis I examine the experiments in Odia fictional writing tradition and the emergence of the realistic fiction in Odia literature in the late 19th century. Sisir Kumar Das observes the tradition of fictional writing in Odia literature. He writes,

Experiments in the Oriya novel began from the late seventies. Ramashankar Roy made

several attempts, but the first Oriya novel *Padmamali* by Umesh Chandra Sarkar appeared in 1888.Both *Padmamali* by Umesh Chandra and *Bibasini* (1891) by Ramashankar were influenced by the novels of Bankim Chandra (Das 2008 (1991) : 295).

Ramashankar Roy and Umesh Chandra Sarkar were both educated Bengalis settled in Orissa. They were the products of the Western education that functioned in British India by sanction and acceptance of Macaulay’s Minutes of 1835. Their early experimental fictional writing as a new genre in Odia was inclined by Bankim Chandra’s fictional writings in Bangla. The tradition of Odia novel established a distinctive identity in the realistic writings of Fakir Mohan Senapati. Sisir Kumar Das notes the viability of Senapati’s social realism,

Whatever be the value of these feeble attempts, the Oriya novel actually started off with Fakir Mohan Senapati. His first novel *Lachama* (1901) deals with the past, its story is of the Maratha invasion of Orissa.....Apart from a close resemblance to Bankim’s technique, the moving theme and the character of a heroic woman in *Lachama* made an immediate impact upon the reading public.

The greatest work of Fakir Mohan, *Chamana Athaguntha* (1902) is not only free all traces of the Bankim tradition, but it created a new world of fiction which was further expanded and enriched

latter in the century by several writers, particularly Premchand and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (Das 2008 (1991): 295-296).

The first Odia novel of Senapati is influenced by the popular themes and immediate styles of Bankim Chandra. Later his social realistic writings in *Chamana Athaguntha* did influence the fictional writings in other Indian languages; Hindi, Bangla etc. The novel in 'Indian Literature' is the outcome of the association of styles, themes and techniques in regional literatures in India in the late 19th and the early 20th century. In the progressive era it flourished in almost all major Indian languages; Asomiya, Bangla, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Urdu etc. and in English. It catered to the rise of nationalism in British India.

To understand the concept of 'Indian Literature' it is foremost to know what is 'Indian' is constitutes of. In a multi-culture, multi-linguistic and multireligious nation the term 'Indian' has been seen very differently by different social and political groups in India. The political problem of being 'Indian' is discussed by PP Raveendran. In his essay "Genealogies of Indian Literature" he writes :

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" (Raveendran 2006: 2258).

Hence the term 'Indian' in post-independent India is not a unified term. It is understood and realized in its regional context as per the socio-political and cultural need of the region falling under the distinct geographical and political map of the Republic of India. Literature a bi-product of the troublesome time discussed in Raveendran hence can't withdraw its organic body from the sociopolitical and cultural practices of the post-colonial 'nation'. Raveendran examines the nature of class structure prominent in 'Indian Literature', especially he looks into the status the new literature in India; the Dalit Writings and the Women Writings. He argues,

...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" (ibid: 2558).

The status of the literature in India depends upon the democratic and nondemocratic dynamics of the nation. Emerging print capitalism, electronics media, political views of the sovereign country, existing class-caste structure and the developing industrial economy in India doesn't allow reading the term 'Indian Literature' with a single definition. To brand the voluminous writings in regional languages and in English alone can't serve the purpose. One can't exclude the canon of Vedic and Medieval literature, or the large number of the texts translated into and out of regional literature, the newly formed Dalit literature, Feminist literature by Women and the canon of Indian fiction in 21st century. What about the oral literature of our indigenous people? In India the oral literature enjoys the same status symbol as the Dalit Writings. Placing the canon as a

status symbol of the elite groups will exclude the literature of the minority communities in India. The 'Indian' and the 'Literature' of the 'Indian Literature' can't exclude a portion of the population by the name of the elite canon.

3

Comparative Literature plays a significant role in a multi-linguistic nation. It affords a compact room and creates literary relations among the academia, minority and the elite within the diverse boundary of the nation. In his essay "Why Comparative Indian Literature?" Sisir Kumar Das provides a categorical definition of 'Indian Literature'. He notes,

In order to make it a significant category, Indian literature must be taken as a complex of literary relations and any study of Indian literature must reflect that. It is not an enquiry into their unity alone, but also a study in their diversity which enables one to understand the nature of literary facts (Das 1989: 95).

Das defines the nature of 'Indian Literature' as a whole in its diversity that enables one to know its literary facts; its diversity in culture, religion, tradition, geography, political views etc. Das quotes Goethe and his '*Weltliteratur*' (1827) which he applies in defining his idea of 'Indian Literature'. He notes,

But we assume that by *Weltliteratur* he meant the memorable works in all languages of the world, rather than the assemblage of all literatures. The early exponent of Indian literature, too, must in all probability have meant the great works in the different languages of India, those which has withstood the test of time, rather than the total mass of writing in all Indian languages (Das 1989: 96).

Das's examination of the idea of 'Comparative Indian Literature' and 'Comparative Literature' from the prospective of Western thinkers brings forth the model of national literature in India; it is the voluminous literatures or the national literatures written in many languages. He writes,

Even if the exponents of comparative literature still insist on the study of relationship between different national literatures rather than on literatures of any group of people, then they have to come to terms with nations which have many literatures or with national literatures written in many languages. India provides a case in point (Das 1989: 99).

Comparative study of 'Indian Literature' will enable critics, scholars and the academia to look into the diversity of this voluminous canon through its three thousand years and more historical prospective. The other activity is translation; in multi-lingual nation it will promote the cross-cultural happenings within regional languages. 'Indian Literature' understood within its multiple productions range of its regional literatures brings forth a new definition for the existing canon. Comparative studies and translation studies are the literary techniques and may be applied within the multiple production range of 'Indian Literature' to understand and influence the political region through literature. Nothing can be speculated as a static concept for 'Indian Literature'; it will stand, grow and survive on its diversities.

NOTES:

1. Bilingual – This unique collection of Indian literature in *Indian Literature: An Introduction*. (New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2006) is published both in English and Hindi languages and is incorporated into a single anthology to serve a large number of readership in academics and outside.

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