
Mapping the Contested Terrain of Indian Literary Historiography

DR. ASHA SUSAN JACOB
Department of English
St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry
Kerala
India

Abstract:

Mapping literary history has become an ambitious and daunting endeavour that demands a rethinking of the very concepts that underlie the process in the wake of the challenges and possibilities raised by the shifts in methodological paradigms. Re-thinking stipulates a fresh outlook that demands a reconsideration of all the terms and conditions for inclusion and exclusion. The terms “Indian” and “literary” themselves have become problematic terms of reference that necessitate a reframing in the contested terrain of the present that has hatched itself on the past to produce new systems of operation in power relations.

Key words: Indian Literary Historiography, inclusion, exclusion, power relations

“Economic, political, and broader cultural and social perspectives on issues like race or gender must be brought to bear in the constructing of any “literary” history today in a different way than they might have in the past. Newly theorized by post-colonial and gender theorists, these perspectives help make conscious the ideological underpinnings of the experience of producing and responding to literature —

and of writing literary histories”(Hutcheon). The very concept “*literary*” has ceased to be an uncomplicated, predictable notion since it has stretched out itself from the constricted view of literature as purely imaginative writing to include many other categories of discourses such as factual and fictional, oral, performed and written, vernacular and national, canonical as well as pulp. This altered notion of “literary,” institutionalised by the new transnational theoretical postulations, remoulds it to an interdisciplinary discipline necessitating fundamental changes in its definition.

Historiography analyses the past from the vantage point of the historian's present. The historian's perspective, impacted undoubtedly by gender, age, class, race, milieu, national and ideological affiliation, etc., contribute inadvertently to the construction of history. The agenda of the historian and the sources selected, intent on attesting certain preconceived notions, make history subjective and a construct corroborating the objective of the author. The literary historian, situated within a particular context, sheds light on a similar product situated in another cultural, or linguistic matrix and records it attempting “unity, continuity, and mastery of a documentary repertoire” (LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 1985, 32). Traditionally literary history has been equated with national history as both were intent on the agenda of national unification. Since the projection of a national entity is most scrupulously searched for in its literature, the reconstruction of literary history achieves a magnitude on par with its history.

Further, the collective identity of Indian nationhood, never been consistent till the 1970s which witnessed the birth of yet another nation in the subcontinent, remains a matter of “imagined community” (Anderson), complicated by issues of affiliation, language and religion. Hence any monolithic reconstruction of a national literary historiography from the colonial and anti-colonial endeavours at historiography is

indeed a taxing task that risks marginalisation of a wide range of linguistic, literary, cultural, and communal traditions.

In “Towards a Literary History of India,” Sujit Mukherjee furnishes “some grave and seemingly insuperable difficulties” that confront Indian literary historiography:

First the multiplicity of languages in which the literary imagination in India has expressed itself makes it impossible for any one Indian to know all the significant products at first hand. Second, no previous model exists anywhere in the world for the literary history of a country of this subcontinental size containing so many languages that have achieved a widely scattered and highly uneven literary culture. Third, the unequal development of Indian languages prior to Independence and the growth of linguistic sentiments in each language region after Independence make it more expedient for most Indians to think in terms of many regional literatures rather than of one subcontinental literature (220).

GN Devy’s remark that Indian historiography is a “historian’s despair” not only formulates the problematic, but exposes the challenges confronting an integrated historiography of the nation (Devy, 1).

As in any other epistemological field, Eurocentric parameters have been operational in the acknowledged efforts at Indian literary historiography. The postcolonial apprehension of the policies and schema that stigmatises the non-West as the “other” in epistemological discourses, necessitates a methodological amendment. “Metanarratives generated from colonial epistemology are incapable of representing experiences that subscribe to non-Western concepts of time or space” (Ramakrishnan, 5). The postcolonial defies the hegemonic approach that contrives exclusion of certain societies from narrations of history. Even the postcolonial falls short of projecting a monolithic perception on account of the racial, spatial, and temporal variations.

Indian literary historiography that shows no dearth in the formulation of canon-making still carries the orientalist

legacy. The colonialist perspective vehemently documented history privileging Sanskrit as the alpha and omega of Indian literature. William Jones is acclaimed as the pioneer scholar who realised and introduced India as a literary tradition with its own discursive terrain comparable to that of the Greeks. But Jones is critiqued for mythifying and mystifying India to the European audience, thereby generating a fantastic interest in Indology (Devy, 78). The suppression of ethnic local differences and the colonial discovery of India as a nation with a literature extending to remote antiquity “ in the interest of cultural homogeneity and political centralisation meant that plurality of literary discourses in the vast literary traditions of India were either eclipsed or edited out of view” (Ramakrishnan, 11). By confining himself prior to eleventh century, ignoring the literary output of the later centuries, Jones further distorted literary historiography. The followers of Jones also restricted Indian literature to the canonical texts of Sanskrit .The Macaulay generation was doing to the past what Jones was doing to the present, namely, attempting to wipe it out of India’s cultural memory (Devy, 81). Albert Weber’s *The History of Indian Literature* (1852) equates Sanskrit literature with Indian literature, despite realising its immensity. The sleuth of orientalist Indian literary historiography that ensued in the late 19th and early 20th centuries never acknowledged the literary productions of India other than those in Sanskrit. The pioneering orientalist attempts targeted at leveling the convoluted Indian terrain accessible to colonial administration convalenced Sanskrit with European languages, thereby relegating the vernacular languages to the margins. By equating multilayered Indian literature with Sanskrit literature, the literary expressions in the *prakrits* were prohibited entry into the canon. Sheldon Pollock quite rightly points out in the introduction to *Literary Culture in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* that with “very few exceptions,

European histories of Indian literature remained histories of Sanskrit and its congeners” (5)

Compared to these historiographic endeavours, *History of Indian Literature* by Maurice Winteritz published in three volumes, originally in German about eight decades ago and later translated into English, is a commendable attempt to compile the vast literature of India from the Vedic times. Volume I published in two parts in 1905 and 1908 provides an introduction to Indian literature focusing on the Vedas, epics, puranas and tantras. Section 1 relates to the Vedas, Brahamanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Vedangas and the literature of the Ritual. Section II recounts the two great epics of India: *The Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and provides a general survey of the Puranic literature, and information about the Tantras too. The second volume that appeared in two parts in 1913 and 1920 concentrate on Buddhist and Jain literature. The last volume that came out in 1922 offers a bird’s eye view of vernacular literature of modern India.

Sri Aurobindo’s *Foundations of Indian Culture* (1971) launched a campaign against orientalist perspectives, and offers a unique Indian historiography that “avoided Jones’s lopsided appreciation of the past and Macaulay’s thoughtless negation of the tradition of Indian literature” (Devy, 82). While acclaiming the ancient and classical creations of the Sanskrit tongue, both in quality and in abundance of excellence, the front rank among the world’s great literatures, Aurobindo insisted, “Nor is it in the Sanskrit tongue alone that the Indian mind has done high and beautiful and perfect things, though it couched in that language the larger part of its most prominent and formative and grandest creations” (315).

Aurobindo considered it necessary to take into account the Buddhist literature in Pali and the poetic literatures about a dozen Sanskrit and Dravidian tongues equal in excellence with the work of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe. Such qualitatively and quantitatively excellent mental activity

commencing more than three thousand years ago demands unstinting eulogy: “A criticism that ignores or belittles the significance of this unsurpassed record and this splendour of the self-expressing spirit and the creative intelligence, stands convicted at once of a blind malignity or an invincible prejudice and does not merit refutation” (Aurobindo, 315-16). He enlists some of the most representative master works of creative intuition ranging from the Vedas, Upanishads and epics to Vaishnava and other regional categories. No doubt Devy ranks him as “the first original historiographer during the twentieth century” (Devy, 82).

Devy argues that “culture” should be “the basic unit” (Devy, 165) for canon formation, the magic formula of creating a unified history from the multicuisine, multilingual, multicultural to an integrated whole. But culture in India became “the site of a dual struggle against the constraints of tradition on the one hand, and the hegemonic tendencies inherent in the process of colonialism on the other” (Ramakrishnan, 6). Typically the history of any literature is the history of canon formation and its consequent alterations. The process of canon formation is a process of inclusion and exclusion based on the yardstick of affiliation to the dominant ideology. Thus canon formation is never objective. Just as anti colonial movements at the local level were deleted from Indian historiography, metanarratives at the regional level in the vernaculars got concealed by the pan-Indian concept of literary canon formation.

The concept of Indian geographical unity also posits challenges to a comprehensive literary historiography taking in to consideration the fluid nature of the geographical entity until the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Sisir Kumar Das while venturing the task of composing a national literature asserts that it is not a politically unified concept, but “a sharing of communality which one can call *sahitya*, a feeling of togetherness” (2). His labour to shoulder the Sahitya Akademi

project of an integrated, multi-volume history of Indian literatures composed in its many languages, was an unprecedented task aimed at understanding the socio-political factors that create literary canons for every age and society. The challenge was to compile the multifaceted Indian literary history under an umbrella term without violating their entity. The three volumes--*A History of Indian Literature: Western Impact: Indian Response 1800-1910; Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy 1911-1956; From Courtly to Popular 500-1399*) deserve credit for situating multiliteratures in the Indian literary history without abating their regional significance and identity. His successful mission, though only three of the proposed ten volumes came out, to compile a plurality of linguistic expressions and cultural experience in diverse languages since the Vedic times to the contemporary with remarkable unity underlying them was “phenomenal . . . a model to any multilingual literary history” (Dev, 174).

With the publication of Sheldon Pollock’s *Literary Cultures in History* (2003), the study of Indian literature and South Asian culture and history takes a different turn. A pioneering comprehensive history of the magnitude of South Asian literature, it encompasses discourses on the multicultural, multilinguistic complexities of the literary expressions establishing the antiquity of the same through the wide range of narrative techniques practised down the centuries in the Asian languages including Hindi, Indian-English, Persian, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Urdu. Though not exclusively on Indian literature, it offers insights into the historical and cultural complexities to bring the eclipsed to the centre of scholarly attention from the marginal positions they occupy (Pollock, 2). The volume, based on the twofold theoretical aim to understand South Asia by looking at it through the lens of its literary cultures and to rethink the practice of literary history by incorporating non-Western

categories and processes, is a seminal working for mapping the history of Indian literature as well.

History is not a, linear, monumental narration of past events, but rather a collage of incidents, experiences and interpretations that have multilevel reverberations. The historical constructions emanate from the complexities that trigger these events in the past. Local, dalit, tribal and women writing which have been fringed and eclipsed by canonical literary tradition are hesitantly admitted to the peripheries in the post-colonial era owing to political and social compulsions. As E. V Ramakrishnan demands, “we need to relocate Indian literature in the context of caste, gender, region, religion etc., where issues of everyday struggles for subsistence in a living society find their expression” (18). The dissent and resistance narratives demand elucidation in terms of the cultural history of specific regions. Various unwritten folk narratives that formed cultural carriers, but got decentred by the sanctity of the written text too clamour for inclusion.

The postcolonial context challenges “the manner in which historiography has ‘plotted’ its narratives to the disadvantage of societies occupied by imperial powers” (Ramakrishnan, 48). Monolithic Indian literary historiography faces a challenge considering the hassle of a historiographic reconstruction affiliating the minority groups and cultures bypassed by nationalist, unified, elitist agenda that veils, degrades, disfigures or deletes the vestiges of their traumatic existence. Literary traditions of the local, be it oral or written, folklore or textual have been churned out of the lived in experiences of the people and any negation of it is equivalent to eliminating an integral slice of history from the grand national narrative creating wide fissures. Postcolonial perspective challenges the historiographic agenda that contrives strategies to make certain societies redundant, for literature studies often function as cultural litmus. As a revolt against progressively constructed elitist historiography, the subaltern

historiography materialised to situate the missing blocks from the official narrative of history and to ascertain the collaged nature of history as simultaneous occurrence of disparate events at different levels.

“Subaltern historiography seeks to re-establish the balance of knowledge by demonstrating that the ‘inferior’ is made so through discourses of power and politics” (Devy, 117). It is the condescending attitude of the upper caste Hindus and the Christian missionaries that competed to co-opt them and remould them in their own image that spurred Kacha Eliah to retort “Why am I Hindu?” The literary expressions of untouchables, tribals, and other liminal people have never found a space in any canonical literary historiography. Serious debates regarding exclusion and inclusion have generated subaltern historiography to break the silence regarding their presence. Ranajit Guha’s attempt at filling the missing blocks from the official narrative is historic. The group being “an assortment of marginalized academics” (Guha, xiv), and their daring venture to record history from below, focusing on margins and considering them as agents of political and social change, impacted on literary historiography as well.

Grand narratives of a homogenous literary tradition seems challenging when hitherto undocumented and “uncanonised” writings like Dalit and women writing confront traditional narrations of history. Even dalit or women literature that map dalit or female experience cannot be standardised by applying the familiar and accepted theories that never reckon the experiential complexities. “Dalit literature has to guard its own space. It stems from a collective experience of anti-casteismis a declaration of human freedom” (Stummer, 15). Though a comprehensive compilation of subaltern literary historiography, out of the maze of regional narratives is yet to materialise, path breaking attempts have generated many anthologies, a considerable number of testimonies and works of fiction in English translation in the

recent years. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (1992), *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, and *No Entry for the New Sun: Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry* edited by Arjun Dangle (1992) are pioneer texts that spearheaded the genre throughout India.

The recent proliferation of Dalit literary anthologies impress on the social and cultural history of the nation itself as they excavate certain submerged chunks of history.

In their *No Alphabet at Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier 1* (2011), the first of the two volumes documenting English translations of dalit writings from Tamilnadu and Kerala, and the second volume *Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier 2* (2013), comprising of literary explorations in Kannada and Telugu, Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana document the surge of dalit writing in this side of the nation. These archives form an eye-opener to the varied life experiences of the dalit worlds through conversations, tormenting testimonies, poetry or short fiction unveiling the concealed chronicle of India. The patterns of narration and language in them challenge the very notion of traditional concepts of literature. *An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature* by D.S. Mishra (2011) comprises of the literary explorations of Dalit writers that have ensued from their unique experiences. Committed to the plight of Dalit Community, particularly the SC, the ST and the Baxi panch groups, it emphasises the theme of exposition of the sufferings of these people and pays little attention to the forms of literary pieces.

The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing (2012), edited by M. Dasan, V. Pratibha, Pradeepan Pampirikunnu and C.S. Chandrika, another effort at documenting the creative expressions of Malayali dalits from the early twentieth to the present, includes fifty five selections from poetry, fiction, prose, and critical commentaries from

thirty six non-elite writers. *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012), edited by Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan, traces the literary creations of Tamil Dalits from the late nineteenth to the present. Both the anthologies provide comprehensive introductions to Dalit writing in the respective languages and by placing these non-canonical texts in its social, historical and political contexts, the volume offers a dalit historiography as well. Other regional compilations as well exist mapping the contours of literary historiography. *Nallapoddu* (2003), an amazing anthology of hitherto unknown Dalit women's writings, edited by Gogu Shyamala provides insights into the life world of the dalit female. *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India: Women* (2002), edited by Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva, is yet another endeavour to ventilate dalit creative sprout. *Anthology of Bangla Dalit Women Writing in Translation* by Ujjwal Jana is yet another encouraging enterprise in its making. *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing* (2013) edited by K.Styanarayana and Susie Tharu showcases the best of Dalit literature from the country arguing that Dalit literature is not merely a literary trend, but "a social movement invested in the battle against injustice": it is the exercise of freedom (7).

Counter-canons have emerged consequent on the covert and overt policies of inclusion/exclusion in/from mainstream culture. Women writers of India are yet another human species that clamours for a space in the constricted, patriarchal literary canon of India. "The emergence of women's writing and Dalit literature necessitated critical perspectives that questioned the unified view of Indian Literature" (Ramakrishnan 25). A feminist reading of Indian literary historiography would reveal how women writing, though sidelined till recently, form a major chunk in the mosaic of Indian literary history. India with its rich history of ancient civilisations and of matrilineal societies in the south has regrettably no written records of women's literary prowess predating the 6th century BC. The Susie

Tharu and K. Lalita edited *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C to the Present* brings forth “the issues of women writing in India that subsume and go beyond academic arguments about alternative canons and multicultural curriculum” (Gopal 287). The meticulously edited two volumes lay bare the contours of female writing in varying cultural contexts and historical moments over a span of 2600 years. This pioneering compendium of translated texts from the vernaculars makes visible a critical mass of otherwise throttled writings by women, and establishes itself as an unavoidable source book on Indian culture, and gender studies.

Volume I *600 B.C to the Early Twentieth Century* offers a wide repertoire of writings ranging from songs by Buddhist nuns, testimonies of medieval rebel poets and court historians, and the voices of more than 60 other writers of the 18th and 19th centuries. The significance of the volume rests on the rich cultural diversity offered in the judicious selection of literary expressions including that of an untouchable woman, the first feminist historian, and a selection from the first novel written in English by an Indian woman. The introduction and the critical commentaries extend the scope of the book to history and culture studies. Volume II *The Twentieth Century* through its choice of texts maps the trajectory of Indian female through the historical moments of the country culminating in the emergence of the nation and the new woman. This groundbreaking endeavour, offering a new reading of cultural history of India, has established its space in the corridors of literary and culture studies. *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* by Eunice De Souza (1997) with its introduction, poems by nine women and critical appraisal of each poet also offers a glimpse into the varied terrain of Indian literature.

The emergence of the writers of the Indian diaspora has further complicated the concept of a national literature. By sheer quality, quantity and the Indian sensibility projected in multifarious transmissions, Indian writing in English posits

claim in the literary canon of India. This contested terrain has established its rights of inclusion with a pan-Indian texture by luxuriantly branching out to many genres and geographical areas. *The Golden Treasury of English Poetry* edited by V.K Gokak published by Sahitya Akademi in 1970 is the first notable comprehensive anthology of English poetry in English containing 108 poets. Beginning with Derozio, of the first half of the nineteenth century to Kamala Das of the twentieth century the editor establishes in no ambiguous terms that the genre “is no more a satellite moving around the sun of English poetry” (23). *Indian Writing in English* by K.Srinivasa Iyengar is the most comprehensive literary historiography of Indian writing in English. It offers a comprehensive account of all the genres and periods and major writers till the middle of the twentieth century.

Salman Rushdie *et al.* edited *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing (1947- 1997)* has become controversial in its attempt to establish that “the prose writing - both fiction and non-fiction - created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what is being produced in the 16 'official languages' of India, the so-called 'vernacular' languages, during the same time: and indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, 'Indo-Anglian' literature represents the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books”.

The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature, edited by Amit Chaudhuri, published in 2001, despite its daunting task, fall shorts of reflecting the “endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity of Indian writing, ”(qtd.in Leela Gandhi) as it fails to accommodate all genres and regions. While two thirds of the book are dedicated to Bengali and English, and the rest to the vernaculars, Assamese, Gujarati, Marathi and Punjabi and all other genres except prose are completely denied a space. *A History of Indian Literature in English* (2003), edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, comprising of commentaries on

canonical as well as lesser writers, spanning two centuries of Indian literary tradition beginning from Raja Ram Mohan Roy to the present is remarkable that it has included a variety of known literary figures who have made significant contributions to the evolution of Indian literature in English. The book includes 150 rare and interesting photographs and sketches of writers and their contexts.

A sleuth of limited anthologies and literary historiographies have been produced but none comprehensive enough to be a compendium of the variety and vigour, and grandeur of the literary outpours from India. The privileging of the written text has bypassed the rich corpus of oral /folkloric expressions. No literary history of Indian literature has done justice to the oral literature of India and the folktales that form the foundation of Indian literature. Even G. N. Devy, in his argument against amnesia or the erasure of many a language and culture has relegated it to the category of para-literature in his seminal book on literary historiography, *Of Many Heroes*. Sisir Kumar Das, though attempted a discussion of it in the eighth volume admitting that “no history of Indian literature will be complete without a reference to it,” argues that because of its timelessness “the literary historian has to treat this body of literature separately’ (4) thus negating its rightful space in the new literary canon as an indigenous form of narration.

The rich khazana of regional writings is yet another challenging task in the compilation of a homogenous Indian literature. Compilations galore exist in all the languages. Tilottoma Misra edited *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India (2011)*, with all its limitations, maps the regions literature over the past six decades. *Cultural Heritage of India Series (1977)* ventured by Sisir Kumar Das, *Comparative Indian Literature 2 Volumes* by K.M. George and V. K. Gokak’s *Literatures in Modern India* are monumental attempts initiated by Sahitya Akademi to define and explore Indian literature in its plurality of languages, traditions and

genres. To any attempt at recording Indian literature despite their confrontation with the problem of defining the outer boundaries of Indianness” (Harder, 14)

Literary historiography, the benchmark for inclusion, treks a rough terrain with its own subliminal contours. The complexity of Indian literary historiography is posited not only on the plethora of literary expressions form divergent sectors but also since “essentialist positions on ‘India,’ and ‘lit’ can no more be held with conviction, we need to conceive Indian literature as a transnational and dialogic domain where texts in turmoil and traditions are routinely ransacked and remade’ (Ramakrishnan, vii-viii). Indian literary historiography has to be redefined on account of the postcolonial perspectives of marginality, region, resistance , translation, diaspora. The literary canon needs a reconstruction accommodating the pluralistic tradition of India, and the contemporary issues of what is literature?. Changes in the intellectual environment have reflected in the national narratives as well necessitating a re-imagination and re-invention of history. Further it is unreasonable to evaluate authors and works from different and cultures with a unified yardstick. Taine’s famous formula of race, milieu and time that considers the conditions in which the individual literatures flourished need to be applied in the appreciation and evaluation of the varied literatures. Since “literary historiography has multiple binds in both a methodological and teleological sense” (Harder, 4) the construction of a unitary Indian national narrative in a single language, be it national or international remains an ever elusive, taxing task. In a world where the concept of text, author, reader are being re-defined and reinvented , a unified national literary historiography reflecting and contributing to national history too has become complicated.

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