

Of Indianness in Indian Literature: Facing the Amnesia

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Abstract: What is the idea of Indian Literature? Does anything like Indian Literature really exist? What had been the literary situations over a time in pre-British India? What is the difficulty in defining the term Indian Literature in a multilingual multicultural nation like India? Much had been said and written in last few decades. The views range from those who consider Indian literature as an essentially multilingual phenomenon bound by the threads of minimum common cultural conditions to those who narrowly recognize Indian Literature merely as the one written in English. The article takes a review of different polyglot conventions in literary scene in India from time immemorial till contemporary period. It also discusses the nature of the issue of Indianness in Indian English literature as a post colonial happening in light of discussion on a genre of poetry.

Keywords: Indian Literature, English language, multilingual, polyglot, oral literature, Bhakti tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article is an attempt to know the nature of the element of Indianness in Indian Writing in English. The study has been made in the light of the age old stricture questioning the validity of Indians writing in English. Despite many questions writing in English has come to stay in India. The present study is an attempt to study various types of discourses in the history of Indian writing in English and to verify their status in comparison with the Indian Native literary traditions and the traditions of world literatures in different languages.

The term Indian literature because of the wide geographical and multilingual multicultural existence of India becomes an umbrella term. The history of India had been the history of invasions of powers and cultures. These political realities of history had a great impact over the making of Indian literature. The nature of Indian Literature had been like a melting pot with so many additions and subtractions. Dr. Ganesh Devi describes the difficulty in defining the term. The scholarship on the issue is divided into two groups. The first group attempts to find the genesis of every regional literature in Sanskrit tradition while the other in the English both denying their independent existence. Talking about the effect of the British over Indian Literature Dr. Devi opines, "However it can be said with certainty that the violent intrusion of alien literary pressure produced many undesirable tendencies in bhasha literature. The most damaging effect of this phenomenon has been a cultural amnesia, which makes the average Indian intellectual incapable of tracing his tradition backwards beyond the mid-nineteenth century. And even when traditions are traced back, the sense of discrimination in that act appears to be largely absent." (Devi: 2009)

Mapping the nature of the Indian writing in English in post colonial times, Devi observes, "At the time that status was accorded to the English language by the Indian Constitution some Indians had already been using English for creative writing. Tagore and Coomarswamy had used it for their critical writing and literary translations; Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu had used it to write poetry. Sri Aurobindo used it also for dramatic compositions; Jawaharlal Nehru had been using it for philosophic and literary prose." (Devi: 1995, pp 107)

At some level, of course, every work written by an Indian, inside the country or abroad, is part of thing called 'Indian Literature'. But the institutions that could produce a coherent and unified knowledge of the various language-literature clusters in India, either in strictly comparatist framework or as a unified albeit, multilingual object of knowledge have had

a rather sporadic development: so that despite a superb work by individual scholars, there are very few individual sites where such knowledges may be systematized and disseminated among large numbers of students and teachers. As a result, the intelligentsia that could reproduce on an extended scale remains quite dispersed and in some key areas largely underdeveloped, leading to several kinds of difficulty.

Lacking public institutions of overlapping translations, direct knowledge of an 'Indian' literature presumes the knowledge of so many languages that only rare specialists could command them all, and considering that public rewards for such labors are minimal, competences of that kind presume rare kinds of linguistic abilities combined with very exceptional kinds of individual industry and devotion- indeed most of the work in this integrated field has been assembled so far; if present trends in English will continue, English will become, in effect, the language in which the knowledge of Indian Literature is produced. The difficulty is that it is the language least suitable for this role, not because it was inserted into Indian in tandem with colonialism, but entirely because it is among all the Indian languages, hence least able to bridge the cultural gap between the original and the translated text. This disability is proportionately greater the closer the original text is to the oral, the performative, the domestic, the customary, the assumed and the unsaid. Its mirror in any other Indian language would make sense. In English nothing much better than doggerel is really possible without fundamentally altering the original to the point of unrecognizability. Certain kinds of modern, realist narratives work perfectly well in English; the rest works very infrequently. This is quite additional to the fact that the vast bulk of literary intelligentsia in India is not and has not been very proficient in English, even as a reading public, regardless of what the upper layers of half a dozen cosmopolitan cities may believe.

Oral tradition in India: Bhakti Poets despite the signature line in poems does not make overall oeuvres. They fundamentally belonged to oral performative domain. Literary criticism, a product of print capitalism, presumes the existence of printed texts: it presumes a stable textual object, even when comparison of texts is to be undertaken and the objective is, precisely to establish a stable text; it distinguishes itself from other ways of knowing by choosing for itself objects which are said to disclose their meanings primarily through their verbal construction. At its widest, it admits biographical background, social origins of their author, the sociology of aesthetic effects; but it presses us to return, always, to poems as printed units in relation to other poems, also as printed units. With the arrival of printing presses however, 'literary' has come to mean that which we see in printed form. Due to the dominance of leisured, professional poetry of bourgeoisie class over print, other modes of transmission were neglected. The question of the relationship between oral, performative and print- which in the urban setting of high culture is seen as a relation between literature and the other arts (i.e.theatre) but is more fundamentally a relation between rural and urban, popular and elite. It is a difference between that which is authorized as literature and that which is not.

To define the entity called Indian Literature had never been an easy task. As has been stated by Aijaz Ahmad, "The transition from Sangam to Bhakti, which was also a Tamil phenomenon, is known only in very broad outline, but not really as a transition, more as a discrete epochal shift, after a gap of centuries and the intercession of an epic tradition. Nor is it clear how this phenomenon, of Tamil origin spread through the Deccan plateau and then across the Vindhyas, eventually to all corners of the land-if indeed, the Northern forms of Bhakti were in some fundamental way a constitution of the Southern which is again not entirely established, except, through discrete places of evidence in the work of individual poets. Histories of individual languages as discrete entities also tend to be misleading, since multilinguality and polyglot fluidity seem to have been chief characteristics- which gave 'Indian Literature' its high degree of unification in the pre-modern phase unilinguality seems to have been the aspiration only of certain types of canonical scholasticism, whereas mass literary cultures, and even many of the elite formations, remained polyglot well into the nineteenth century."

The 'national' literature of India finds its principle of unity not in linguistic uniformity but in civilized moorings and cultural ethos, hence in histories of literary movements and even compositional forms which have crisscrossed geographical boundaries and linguistic differences. In this respect, the marked difference of Indian poetic culture from the European one is that the period in which print capitalism established its power in India is precisely the one in which the multilingual anti-colonial nationalism spread from one end of the country to the other; even the divisions which come within that nationalism- on religious, communal, class lines-were themselves multilingual.

While commenting the multilingual characteristic of Indian Literature Ahmed quotes Mohan Singh Diwana : "..... there were hardly any poets from Gorakh of the 10th century to Gulham Farid in the early half of the 19th century belonging to

Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal, Agra, Oudh, Belar, Delhi, Punjab or Sindh, who had not written in three languages- the mother tongue, the provincial language and the common Hindustani language, Hindi besides Persian, in Sanskrit such as he could command. Even Zafar and Sauda wrote Punjabi, even Guru Gobind Singh wrote in Persian, in Braj, in Rekhta and in Khyal; even Guru Nanak Dev wrote in Persian, in Sanskrit, in Kafi, in Lahndi; even Namdev, Kabir, Raidas and Dadu wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. In Bengal the writers of Brajbuli thrived. Miran wrote in Rajasthani in Gujrati and in Hindi.” (Diwana quoted by Ahmed:2006)

The difficulty in thinking of an Indian literature therefore is not that it is spread over many languages, with histories of very uneven development, not that the state boundaries which have historically contained these literary productions have been shifting through all the centuries we know of. It is in comparison with these other kind of histories that the relative underdevelopment of the research genre of literary history in India stands in sharpest relief, especially as regards its theoretical premises. One of the consequences of these uneven developments is undoubtedly that it is in these other kinds of histories, rather than the straightforward literary histories, that one come across some of the most profound insights about what we could generally designate as literary, especially for the earliest century.

Despite the multilingual canvas of Indian Literature due to lack of efficient translation activity both among Indian languages themselves and into English these conventions in India hardly find any international readership. For a wide group of international readership, what is written in English is what all Indian Literature is.

How does the Indian writers in English handle the issue of Indianness? Dr. Vilas Sarang has discussed the issue at length with the example of genre of poetry. Most pre-independence poets, tried to be English poets or were Indian in a superficial or heavy-handed way, when they should have tried above all, simply to be good poets, letting the Englishness or Indianness take care of itself. In peculiar situation, that of Indian writing in English, created a double bind, from which Indian English poets have freed themselves very recently. Literatures in regional languages are written by the people belonging to all strata of society including the lowest in terms of wealth, education and social status. Indian English poetry can come only out of limited stratum of society. One can't imagine a phenomenon like Dalit Literature in Indian English poetry.

Most Indian Languages possess homogeneous, geographically compact literary cultures; English in India doesn't. English that has come to India with the British colonialism especially has not yet been able to answer the question of linguistic local. As Said observes, “ The oriental (for most European writers) is irrational, depraved, childlike, “different’, thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal.”” (Said:1995 pp 40) The first two generations of Indian writers adhered and supported this notion. They preferred to write what was pleasing to British and the Europe, both in manner and mode.(Sarang:2004, pp.32) (Naik:1982, pp. 82.) The exoticism about India which they served through their writing didn't precisely brought them to the forefront to fight the question of geographical local. They tried to please their readership based in Europe for whom India is always the past. It is very recently with the poets like Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and R.Parthasarathi, the Indian Writing in English has handled the issues of truly Indian people and places. A poetic culture needs groups and movements that determinedly attempt to work out an aesthetic; it needs the fuel of rebellion, of opposition and reaction and also return to some aspects of the tradition, it needs tensions, a continuous process of churning of the ocean Dalit poets in Marathi rejecting the prevailing aesthetic of Marathi literature and saying that they have one of their own, have stirred up the entire Marathi literary world. The Indian English poetic culture needs the dynamic play of forces and counter forces, which is the proper mode of building a living and lively tradition.

Lack of academic and conceptual integrity in the issue of Indianness among Indian English writers had remained a matter of concern. Dr. Sarang observes, “The question of Indianness is not merely a question of material of poetry, or even sensibility, It is tied up to the factor called audience. The Indian English poets write for an Indian audience, but they also write, quite inevitably, for non-Indian readers. The Indian English poet cannot but help falling into this trap off and on. Poets in the Indian languages are free from this bedevilment, for they do not have to flaunt their Indianness before their very Indian readers. The best that the Indian English poet can hope to do is try to be as natural and honest as possible, and to concentrate up on the poetical enrichment of material that may have come to him for extra poetic reasons, and not be content with a decorative use of Indian imagery, with which even the best known poets often seem to remain content.”

There is no doubt some truth in the belief that an Indian English poet, by expressing an Indian sensibility, will speak more authentically and achieve greater depth and possibly greatness, than by assuming a cosmopolitan stance. But the problem lies in defining the idea of Indian Sensibility. One often goes by one's feeling that this or that is 'very Indian'. Defining the Indian sensibility leads one no farther than to some clichéd generalizations.

In order to avoid the disparity both in matter of defining Indian literature and its true representation what is needed is to improve honest and qualitative efforts in translation so that for coming generations Indian Literature will emerge as convention with rich heritage and high potential of future prospects. Anand patil commenting on the critical paradigms in Indian Writing in English comments that lack of developing this writing as a homogeneous entity has also affected the possibility of profound and original critical paradigms in India. The critical paradigms so far remained derivative, depending either on the Sanskrit or on English. He Writes, "There is a mushroom growth of so called 'influence' studies mainly dealing with the Euro-American influences on Indian literatures. But, the network of indigenous and alien 'texts' in a work of art remains still unexplored. Much fuss is made about alien allusions and quotations" (Patil: 1997 PP.177)

English in India had long been the language of Elite. But with growing demand of the English Medium Education it is widely becoming the language of middle and upper middle classes. The prospects of Indian Writing in English will keep growing in future. As King observes, "Just as English has become the link language for inter-regional communication for such groups as administrators, academics and the professional class, English translation serves as a link cultural language, making available to the middle classes the various regional languages and classical tradition." (King:1994, pp. 06)

2. CONCLUSION

Though Indian Writing in English has occurred in India as a part of colonial legacy, It has long been settled in India. With the wide spread of English education assures its place in Indian literary history. But in order to achieve the truly Indian character it has to assimilate the various native trends along with the truly International ones. Along with literature the challenges preside in realms of critical theory and translation. Such assimilation will provide energy to escape the age old stricture of derivativeness. The Indian English writer therefore needs to write in real space and time with true Indian Ethos. The Indian Ethos had always been multicultural and multilingual. An in depth understanding of this great heritage along with the present secular sensibility of India will provide a true Indian character to their writing and undoubtedly the writers should be conscious about writing good literature than being Indian writer or otherwise.

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