

The Paradoxical India

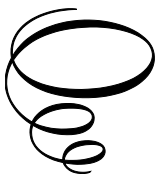
The Paradoxical India:

Reflections on Indian Literature and Culture

By

K. Sreenivasarao

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FOREWORD

For over a decade, Dr. K. Sreenivasarao has been a distinguished and influential presence in the public sphere of Indian literature. It would be safe to say that there may be a very few writers across the country's many languages who would be unfamiliar with him, just as there would be few whom he does not know.

As the Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi, he holds a position of great prominence, not merely by virtue of the distinguished office he occupies but also due to the unwavering dedication, profound commitment, and keen acumen he has demonstrated throughout his career. Since joining the Sahitya Akademi's regional office in Mumbai in 1988, he has infused his work with remarkable vision and diligence. His exceptional abilities and diverse talents found even greater expression when he moved to the Akademi's central office in New Delhi in 1993. Over the past three decades, he has firmly established himself as an indispensable impresario of India's literary and cultural landscape.

Dr. Rao has further set himself apart through his remarkable personal qualities. His cheerful humility, unwavering organizational acumen, and an ever-curious mind, eagerly absorbing the wisdom and virtues of the greatest Indian writers of our time, many of whom he has had the privilege of observing from a close quarter. They have all contributed to his distinguished stature, as he graciously acknowledges in this volume. This rare blend of self-effacement and an osmotic receptivity to excellence has not only served as an inspiration to his colleagues at the Sahitya Akademi but has also left a lasting impression on the broader literary community.

This volume brings together a selection of lectures and addresses that Dr. Rao has had the privilege of delivering to diverse audiences across a wide array of venues. These engagements span events organized by the Sahitya Akademi, as well as invitations from esteemed institutions, including public and private universities, and organizations such as the National Book Trust, the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and the Press Council of India, along with

select international forums. His words have resonated far and wide, from New Delhi to Beijing, and from Prayagraj to Tirupati. The breadth of subjects he has explored is even more remarkable, ranging from Sanskrit literature to the rich heritage of India's tribal and unwritten languages, from the intricate relationship between literature and the arts to the evolving role of media, and from the depths of ancient mythology to the pressing concerns of planetary precarity in the contemporary world.

The remarkable thematic breadth of this volume is perfectly complemented by the inclusivity and depth of Dr. Rao's insights. A single passage from this collection serves as a fitting illustration, drawn from a lecture he delivered in Beijing.

Just imagine the scenario of India, China, Japan, all Far East nations, all Mideast nations, presenting themselves as one entity. There is nothing to beat that entity, be it religion and spirituality, science and technology, literature and culture, tourism and industry, and a whole lot of human activity.

This is a stirring and idealistic view. Dr. Rao remains deeply attuned to the present, keenly observing the world around him, yet he also raises his gaze to envision a future full of promise and possibilities. He has been an extraordinary representative of one of our major literary institutions, and this volume nicely complements another volume of his, *Bharatiya Sahitya aur Sanskriti in Hindi* (2023) and his other works, *Myths, Plays & Girish Karnad* (2021) and an edited volume, *Vitasta: Uniting Cultures* (2023). He can only go on from strength to strength.

August 2025

Harish Trivedi

PREFACE

Experiences are the prized possessions of human life. Every experience carries an inherent value regardless of whether it leaves an impact on the person undergoing it. This value is enduring, for it neither diminishes with time nor disappears once the experience has passed.

When these experiences are recollected and articulated coherently, they foster a sense of relatability among others. Regardless of how they are expressed, experiences remain inherently universal, even though individuals may perceive them as specific to a particular time and place.

This book is a collection of impressions arising out of my experiences. Some of them are speeches made on different occasions and different platforms, some of them mere jottings while some others, written for specific occasions.

A few articles in this volume don't pertain to the main subject of the book but I have included them because, in my opinion, in this globalized world no culture can exist in isolation. What affects society today is bound to impact other societies as well sometime in future.

When experiences are recollected and conveyed with clarity, they create a sense of connection among others. No matter how they are expressed, experiences remain inherently universal, even if individuals perceive them as unique to a specific time and place.

I consider myself immensely fortunate to have had a diverse range of experiences. Some earned through my own efforts, but largely shaped by my long and enriching association with the historic institution, Sahitya Akademi. I say this with a sense of humility, as I am often uncertain about how much I truly deserve these experiences. At times, I have felt as though they were bestowed upon me, not in a sense of superiority, but rather as a vessel, humbled and in awe of all that I have received.

I had to sort out and selectively choose the articles for this volume. As a result, there may not be a continuous thread connecting one piece to another. Instead,

readers may find them to be my reflections on a diverse range of subjects, shaped by the distinct occasions for which they were written.

If all goes well, I may compile and present another collection of articles in the future. But that is a task for another time and another endeavour.

As I present this volume to readers, I fondly and gratefully remember the former Presidents of Sahitya Akademi, Prof. U. R. Anantha Murthy, Dr. Ramakanta Rath, Prof. Gopi Chand Narang, Dr. Sunil Gangopadhyay, Prof. Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari, and Dr. Chandrashekhhar Kambar. My sincere gratitude to the current President, Mr. Madhav Kaushik, for his unwavering encouragement. Their guidance has been a constant source of support throughout my journey. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Dr Rajmohan for his invaluable efforts in bringing this book together and to Ms. Gayatri Manchanda for going through the manuscript thoroughly and editing it.

This is not a book for entertainment; nor is this a book of serious academic research. I will be very happy if this volume brings home a fresh perspective or knowledge to an only few. With that in mind, I sincerely hope that readers like this book and find it enriching.

August 2025

K. Sreenivasarao

UNDERSTANDING INDIA FROM LITERARY, MULTILINGUAL AND COMPOSITE CULTURE PERSPECTIVES

Many nations are multicultural and multilingual by nature, but somehow, India stands apart as a uniquely diverse multicultural society. While it is widely acknowledged that India is a multilingual country with a rich tapestry of religious beliefs, what is less often recognized is that, unlike many multicultural societies that have emerged in recent history, India has been inherently multicultural for thousands of years.

Since ancient times, India embraced diversity in every aspect of its existence. References to various communities, cultural groups, religious systems, ethnic people etc. appear in the ancient Indian texts in some of the world's oldest languages like Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali and Prakrit, offering testimonies to its diverse multicultural identity.

Interestingly enough, references also exist to Indians' interactions, especially through trade, with societies across the globe. In many cases, archaeologists have unearthed coins from Mediterranean countries in coastal places of India, and literary evidences highlight Indians' interactions with the Far East globally. The legend of Bodhisena's visit to Japan and his contribution to the *Siddham* script, as well as the story of Bodhidharma teaching martial arts in China, are particularly fascinating.

India is a truly multicultural society, shaped by its many religions, traditions, languages, and varied cuisines. For centuries, its people have followed diverse customs, worn region- or customs-specific ethnic attire, and embraced unique social practices, making the country rich in cultural diversity.

Many aspects of this multiculturalism are distinctive features of India, which also bewilders people visiting this country. The most striking example of this is the prevalence of countless Gods across Indian religions.

The accounts of travellers into medieval India are engaging and informative, especially those of some very well-known figures, such as Marco Polo and Fa Hian. Their accounts reveal how unique a place India is when it comes to cultural pluralism, diversity in beliefs and local practices.

Another distinguishable feature of the land is the multitude of languages and varied dialects in which these cultural variations and diversity find expression.

A simple Google search reveals different types of data on the number of languages spoken across different regions in India. However, the variants in each language are very often missed out. For instance, my mother tongue is Telugu; there are at least 10 variants of Telugu, and within each variant, several sub-dialects exist. Rayalaseema Telugu, for example, is different from that of, say, Godavari Telugu but Rayalaseema Telugu practiced especially near border areas incorporates words and sounds that are from other languages.

One of the most amazing underplayed aspects of India is the existence of numerous spoken languages, and how Indians have managed to overcome the problems of meanings getting lost in translation for over 3000 years.

It is often stated that Bible translations were the first translations in the world. It may be pertinent to point out at this juncture that much before that time, translations and adaptations from and into various languages were a regular practice in India. On this basis, one can confidently say that translation is ingrained in the national consciousness of India.

Further, the languages, cuisine, costumes, culture, practices, mores, customs, and even the fragrance of the earth and taste of the water changes every 100 km or so in this vast country. This may very well be a fact and not an exaggeration to any account.

For instance, if one travels from Chennai to down south of Tamil Nadu or from Jhunjhunu to Udaipur in Rajasthan, one can physically experience the difference in taste of the food, smell of the sand and water, differences in religious practices and beliefs, costumes and nearly every facet of life.

Given such variety in culture, beliefs and practices, it is indeed remarkable that people are even able to possess a perception of the country as one, or even to have a sense of "Indian-ness."

Diversity is the reality; the literature within that reality is also bound to be varied. Literature reflects reality. As such, the literature that emanates from all the written and unwritten languages of India truly reflects this cultural variedness of the country in its entirety.

There is a key distinction in Indian literature compared to that of other countries. Regional literature is incredibly diverse, reflecting the unique landscapes and cultures of different areas. For example, Telugu, Bengali, and Gujarati literature depict settings ranging from mountains and coastal regions to freezing plains, showcasing the rich variety of India's literary traditions.

The most noteworthy feature of India's economic life is the fact that the basic needs of life are fewer than in colder countries; the resources needed for a meaningful life. The influence of climate and economic resources on the material aspects of culture, for example, food, dress, modes of living etc, have moulded the pattern of physical and economic environment. And this is well reflected in the regional literature of India.

Speaking of unwritten languages, the large number of oral traditions of the country adds spice to India's cultural strength. Only mono-cultural societies worry about "combinatorial explosion" and fears of a similar nature.

All this gives rise to an exotic mixture of cultural friendship and societal balance. For instance, singular societies often tend to crumble at the slightest sight of alien ideas and cultures. The fact that India not only withstood the onslaught of many cultures and invading armies for 2000 years, the country also managed to sustain its unique identity primarily because of the cultural diversity ingrained in its DNA.

This background knowledge is a prerequisite to understanding how multiculturalism is part of people's everyday existence and one can feel the presence of multilingualism in every aspect of life in this country. Discerning minds can easily understand that human life, by nature, is multicultural.

Every human being is different and the values, customs, practices, mores etc are bound to differ from family to family, place to place, community to community, society to society and continent to continent. If one were to take a closer look at life and how life pans out, one would come to realize the variation and diversity in life.

There are various interpretations and levels of understanding regarding the concept of culture, especially at a collective level. This is the reason why we occasionally hear statements such as “That country has no culture” or “They lack culture” etc.

Truth be told, no community, settlement or society can exist without culture. A community’s customs, habits, costumes, language, literature, beliefs, practices, religions, rituals, cuisine, technology, economics etc collectively form that community’s culture.

It comes as no surprise then that values, culture and cultural practices vary from place to place and time to time. Even within a given community, culture varies from time to time.

So, what does one refer to when speaking of cultural tradition if culture itself is subject to change? The practices, perceptions and rules about them keep varying with time. However, every society retains certain basic threads or commonalities that connect the ancient to the modern. These commonalities are passed from generation to generation, making up a tradition or set of cultural traditions of a community.

Similarly, despite a large number of linguistic and cultural traditions in the country, there is a sense of composition; a national identity to the Indian way of living. For example, Hinduism may be a mere word, but within its meaning lie several religious and cultural practices and traditions. In Hinduism, one finds *vaidika* or religions that subscribe to the Vedas, and *avaidika* or religions that do not subscribe to the Vedas alongside different moral and legal digests and traditions etc.

Furthermore, Indian culture extends beyond the past few centuries; it carries a collective national identity nurtured over thousands of years, and this common identity has been absorbed, propagated, passed on and expressed in diverse ways. It is not a matter of simply saying “Here is a thing, and we shall pass it on to the next generation.” Even Gods, myths, tales, legends and traditions have been passed on in a very complex manner (from the outside perspective) but a highly indigenous method evolved over time.

For example, if one takes the figure of Lord Krishna. The journey of how this figure has been passed on to successive generations in bewilderingly different

ways in different cultures of India is truly fascinating. Krishna is a God of power, a God of truly gigantic proportions, a sublime God, a God of Mercy, a protective God etc; these legends have been passed on in different regions and cultures. Despite these regional variations, the essential figure of Krishna as a deity remains intact. Similar examples can be given from different walks of life.

When it comes to expression of culture, language and literature play an enormous role. Language and culture are considered inseparable from one another. However, despite the diverse linguistic peculiarities in India, the regional literature rises above the local influence. It reflects National flavour in full measure, all the while depicting the peculiar nuances of the local culture. Regional literature has often contributed to fostering of a national identity, a national consciousness and a national culture.

Honestly speaking, many regional literatures fostered the patriotic feeling among the masses during the independence movement. It is fascinating how literature forayed into the folklore of the countryside and the countless ballads, songs and street plays created during this period. Majority of people during the time did not have the faintest idea of India as a nation, and most of them hardly ever travelled beyond their villages. That is the power of regional literature.

In the times gone by, nay, aeons gone by, ancient India was perceived as a homogenous country and the literature emanating from the land was characterized as 'Indian' literature. The differences were seen as mere aberrations than contributions.

This instance refers to the ancient literature composed in a single language and covering a single region called *Arya Varta* in the ancient lore. This is the reason literature of the time reflected a singular reality rather than a multicultural society. Much of the literature of the time from different regions, except maybe Tamil or Hale Kannada, has been unfortunately lost to the sands of time.

However, modern India, especially contemporary India, basks in the glory of diversity in unity, and the literature of contemporary India transcends 'sans boundaries.'

When taken as a body of writing about any subject, the India of today produces vast amounts of literary material. There are stories, novels, poems, plays,

critique, political, economic, scientific, and religious literature, now more than ever before.

The reason for such diversity and depth is because India is a multicultural and multi-linguistic society. The sheer variety of cultures gives rise to a wide range of writing in a large number of languages. This is a distinctive feature of Indian literature, which, for a long time, remained largely unrecognized beyond the country's borders.

In the contemporary times, everything connected with literature is blooming. Printing presses, publishing houses, the number of books published, various genres in which books were written, the number of writers, how literary works are produced and of course, without doubt how they are received or read. All these aspects about Indian literature saw an expansion like never seen before. Purely from this point of view, Indian literature is one of the hotspots in the World Literature today and has been so, for at least the past two decades.

But nothing gives more joy than the mushrooming of literature. Such mushrooming has not only helped in strengthening Indian literature but also portrays and brings out the diversity of Indian culture in true spirit.

Today we have fantasy novels, science fiction, Dalit literature, feminist literature, writings about subcultures, regional cuisines and costumes, subaltern literature in regional languages, auto fiction, writings about indigenous cultures and traditions, nature and wildlife in many forms and much more.

Another noteworthy trend associated with contemporary Indian literature is the number of youngsters taking to writing. India is a young country, and therefore it should not be surprising that many youngsters have taken to blogging, writing etc, but what is truly heartening is that a large number of them have taken off to serious literature, and thousands of books published by young writers in the past three decades are testimonies to this fact.

One standout feature in Indian contemporary regional writing is the depth and volume of criticism. Never before has India experienced critique in such abundance. The quality of criticism has sharpened. It is at par with global criticism, covering a wide array of subjects.

Gone are the days when criticism in regional languages would only amount to responses to queries or reactions to certain situations or writings. Self-reflection, desire to progress and penning down critical thoughts are the hallmarks of contemporary Indian criticism.

Two key points highlighted in the abovementioned thoughts are, how culture varies with time and how literature reflects reality. If one were to perceive India through literature, these two critical aspects are truly reflected in literary perspective. Regional literature, in addition to countless oral and tribal literature in a large number of languages, aptly portrays the cultural diversity of India and also captures changing cultural patterns over time.

For example, smoking was a taboo in the olden days and the literature of that era truly depicted that belief. In the contemporary scenario, smoking is not considered a taboo as before and it is therefore reflected in contemporary literature. Thus, every cultural change is reflected in the literature of the time. Today, contemporary short stories are no longer confined to imaginary stories, but often deal with a variety of present-day circumstances like workplace conflict, problems arising due to lifestyle changes and so on.

This is monumental, as a society is often judged by outsiders via the literature it produces. If one were to ask whether the splendour of India in all its diversity is being reflected in the literature, that is, being consumed by people beyond its shores, the honest answer would not in most cases. More about promoting Indian literature abroad detailed in Chapter 10.

Courtesy few wonderful writers of contemporary India, this aspect is shining marvellously overseas. There were, of course, other contributors; Indian epics and Gita were famous abroad, Tagore and a handful of scientists garnered glory, but ultimately it is writers like Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, V.S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor and Vikram Seth who have brought spotlight back on India. More and more people from various countries are becoming curious about our diverse cultures.

Much of what goes beyond the boundaries is Indian writing in English, and without a doubt, it has been a turning point in raising awareness levels about India and Indian culture to a great extent. Additionally, there is a vast amount

of treasure lying hidden in regional literature, which needs to be shored up in translations and portrayed efficiently so that the full gamut of Indian culture can be properly highlighted.

Incidentally, the consumption of Indian English writing is on the rise among the Indian population living within the country, often at the expense of regional literature. This leaves quite a large population, if not already, at least the current generation is at risk of not knowing its own culture and cultural roots.

It is more serious than people imagine and often starts with the decline in the use of the mother tongue in contemporary society. Today, in urban spaces at least, it has become fashionable to impart alien languages to the children in infancy without even a single thought. It is fast becoming an epidemic; an epidemic that is threatening to engulf and drive millions of children away from their cultural identity. The scenario is also fast threatening to become a serious linguistic environment issue, as the decline in native speakers will eventually lead to the death of languages.

Literature connects people and regions, and as such it should be united and not divided by nature. The literary perspective of the country will remain incomplete unless the composite culture of India as gloriously reflected in all the languages of the nation is also visible in all its literature.

Accordingly, India's premier literary institution, Sahitya Akademi, promotes cultural unity through literature. It carries the best of literature from one region and language to other regions and languages of the country through translation. This enhances the level of awareness of other traditions, and increases understanding of a wider world, thereby leading to acceptance and cooperation, and eventually to amity and peace. That is Sahitya Akademi's literary contribution to nation development and national integration.

The example of Sahitya Akademi is used here to illustrate the power of literature in uniting and building a nation. The strength of literature is often underplayed in the world. Well-written and powerful works have moved the nations, ignited revolutions and united people. Few prime examples of these are the writings of Gandhi, Marx and others.

People are generally aware of how the writings of Marx enabled and empowered communities across the globe to counter the hegemony of all types. It might have originated in a particular part of the world. It may have been concerned at that time with a specific societal problem, or more precisely, a problem with a particular type of societal construction. But in the end, it gave voice to the voiceless, marginalized and oppressed sections of humanity all over the world. In a similar vein, the powerful writings of Mahatma Gandhi inspired highly faction-ridden and narrowly focused communities to unite, and the very same writings are still being used to inspire unity across regions and borders to this day.

There can be no better example of unity in diversity than India and Indian culture. In today's fragmented world, understanding India's complexities and its contradictions, yet its ability to foster unity and cooperation, is more important than ever. The world can learn from this balance. Therefore, there is an urgent need to promote Indian culture in its true form, without filtering or diluting its contradictions, while also highlighting the shared values and underlying principles of unity that transcend these differences.

EVOLUTION AND GROWTH OF INDIAN LITERATURE

India is a land of literature since time immemorial. When taking stock of the history of human societies and civilizations, this is one area where India surpasses other civilizations and societies.

A hallmark of Indian literature over the past 3000 years or so is its remarkable diversity. The sheer variety and volume of literature produced in the sub-continent is astounding. The key to this diversity is the linguistic density of the Indian sub-continent, and the willingness to adopt and assimilate all wonderful things from any language or culture that people encounter.

The number of languages, language families and dialects in the country is mind-boggling. These thousand-plus languages and dialects have provided a perfect platform for people to pour out their thoughts, feelings and imaginations, resulting in an eclectic mix of the finest literary creations.

Moreover, the fact that each person was able to produce their literary creation without paying much attention to any formal classification has led to a rich and dense collection of literature in each language.

The abovementioned aspect can be easily obtained from the Persian literary texts produced in the sub-continent during the medieval period. In fact, during the medieval period, the amount of Persian literature produced in the sub-continent would far exceed than what was produced in Persia at that time.

Much before civilization dawned on many parts of the world, Indians were dabbling in and producing literature in a variety of genres. This head start gave a distinct advantage to Indian litterateurs when new genres popularized elsewhere in the world came to India. They simply embraced them with open arms.

This is because our foundation was already strong. To be precise, the diversity of genres and the ability to pick up new ones were present from the beginning.

Today, people around the world wonder how Indians are doing so well on social media, especially on platforms like Twitter.

Brevity is in the genes of Indians. This is the land that gave birth to heterogeneous *Sutra* literature, *Thirukkural*, and *Dobas*, to name a few. So, it is not surprising that Indians are excelling in cryptic expressions. They are not creating anything new, but extending the traditions that have been in existence for thousands of years.

But how it all evolved, hence the title, is very fascinating.

In the initial days, there were no hard and fast rules in art and literature, and therefore no separation between form such as singing, poetry, dance, philosophy etc. A particular discovery would be the *Kavis* [in the early days the term was used to denote seers, and later it was restricted to poets] outpouring most astonishing poetry and music [as in *Sama Veda*], highest philosophy [as in *Rig Veda*] etc.

Further, the evolution was not limited to a singular language. If all this was developing on the northern plane, exotic poetry and grammar were being developed in southern regions, in Tamil. Thus, we see early Sangam poetry that not only reflects the poet's thoughts and emotions, but also provides clues to the highly civilized society in existence at that time.

If Bharata produced *Natya Sastra* in the North, we see Tolkaappiyar producing an astounding exposition of not just grammar, but also plenty of societal rules.

Moreover, it is not as if literature in India was being produced only in these two languages. Plenty of oral traditions flourished across the land, and the songs, tales, proverbs, legends etc persist to date since that era in all the languages.

From the earliest times to the commencement of the medieval period, the majority of the literature of India was predominantly oral with poetry and play dominance on the scene. The prose was also present, but poetry dominated the literary scenario.

As the genres began to widen and literature started covering technology, astronomy, agriculture, governance etc, literary prose gained prominence.

Furthermore, as the number of languages rose, so did writing systems, grammar etc, leading to the written literature slowly gathering pace and gaining prominence over oral literature.

However, oral literature was still dominant. Given the vast number of languages and dialects of the land and the strong roots of oral traditions, this is not particularly surprising. The emergence of a variety of literature in a large number of languages during the medieval period, and on almost all the subjects of human endeavour, marks the medieval period as the Golden Era for India.

This is in stark contrast with Europe and the West, where the medieval period is referred to as the Dark Age. Religious literature, Scientific Literature, Economic Literature, Political Science, Poetry, Drama, Stories and every allied field gained prominence in India during this period.

Today, oral and tribal traditions of the country are looked down upon, but it would do well to remember that it was a slow process from oral to writing tradition that literature evolved here, to this point.

With the writing system getting fresh faces from time to time, with the printing press arriving, Indian literature never looked back. With education opening up for all, the number of authors, the number of books increased exponentially.

Before exploring the modern and contemporary literary landscape, it is essential to consider translation. Discussions on the scope of translation often highlight Bible translations, many of which have taken place over the past 300 years or so.

Long before that, for nearly a thousand years, India has engaged in extensive translation. Staying true to the spirit of the term '*Anuvad*,' most classics were adapted across regions and languages to align with the local cultural contexts.

These were not mere literal translations, nor were they distortions of the original texts. So, the epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, became some of the most adapted works across the subcontinent.

Numerous religious classics and other texts were adapted and integrated into the local cultural milieu. This is one of the main reasons why there is

commonality of cultures and traditions in India, despite vast cultural, linguistic and literary divergence across the country.

The role of translation is not just a cornerstone of Indian literature but of the Indian culture itself. This is one aspect that has been highly underrated and even downplayed not only outside the sub-continent but within India. It is particularly unfortunate, given the inherently multilingual and multicultural nature of Indian civilization since its inception.

Coming to the modern times, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many writers across the languages sought to emulate their Western counterparts especially when it came to the literary forms of stories and novels. That is not surprising, given the immense success these two genres had achieved in the West.

During this period, up until 1947, a unique literature movement called Independence literature emerged. Almost all the genres, particularly prose and poetry were infused with patriotic fervour, reflecting the spirit of the freedom struggle.

In the first two decades after Indian Independence, as the country grappled with development and modernity, literature across various languages, poetry, stories, novels and plays, largely centred on the rural landscape, bringing out the travails of agrarian societies. While there were exceptions, this theme predominantly defined the literary mood of the time.

Then came the phase in which Indian literature evolved into something new. Over the next three decades, stories and novels began addressing emerging societal challenges such as labour unrest, the struggles of working women, urban narratives, and more. This period also witnessed the evolution of Indian cinema, which drew inspiration from these stories and novels.

In the contemporary scenario, many new genres and sub-genres have come into existence. Fantasy, Science Fiction, Flash Fiction, Mythology in the new Avatar, Instagram poetry etc.

Rapidly advancing technology and the digital world have reduced the gap between the author and the reader. It has encouraged many youngsters to take

up literature in a serious way. Self-publication and digital platforms have also helped in this cause.

Concerns about the quality of the emerging subgenres exists, but I believe these will balance out over time, leaving little cause for worry. Indian literature has always found newer ways of reinventing itself overcoming minor setbacks on the way. There is no reason to doubt that it will continue to do so for centuries to come.

However, what is truly heartening is the growing prominence of Children's literature in a variety of ways. While poetry publishing has seen a decline, more publishers are actively embracing children's literature. India's youthful demographic further supports this trend, making it a promising development for the literary landscape.

Even in this genre, the rise of translations between languages is particularly encouraging. The phenomenal success of Harry Potter and other young adult literature in the West, along with their widely acclaimed translations, has undoubtedly contributed to this growing trend.

Indian literature has maintained its distinct style from the very beginning. Contrary to the popular perception two decades ago, it has not merely followed Western trends. A key example of this is the resurgence of mythology across various languages, reinterpreted to resonate with the sensibilities of the 21st century.

Whether novels or stories or poems or plays, Indian literature is going very strong. The process might have been slower compared to the expectation but there is a saying that 'slow and steady wins the race.' There is a reason for that.

CRITICAL TRADITIONS IN INDIA

India is the land that gave rise to the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* long before civilizations were born in the rest of the world. This land has given rise to lofty philosophies, sublime poetry, and rich artistic traditions, all of which have flourished uninterrupted for at least two millennia.

When such an all-round growth and evolution is witnessed across the Thought spectrum, it would be naive and childish to assume or imagine that critical elements never evolved. It is being pointed out here because the latter appears to be a prevalent opinion outside academia and sometimes even within it.

In Indian traditions, criticism is not a mere commentary or reaction to the obvious, given, everyday occurrence or moment or movement, reflection on the phenomena or expressed thoughts.

But, rather, in our traditions the practice is to get to what lies behind, something which gives rise to all things including expressions, thoughts and reflections, get intimate with the essence and theorize about that essence along with the outward expressions and movements.

In contrast, the majority of Western approaches to criticism are more of reactions to what lies outside, what is expressed and any other approach is conceived and given a nomenclature, esoteric or mystical. There are wonderful critical theories of the West that are exceptions to this but what I am talking about is the majority because it is this majority that is what many modern Indians are trying to ape.

As a result, one gains only a vague and opaque impression of the essence of a subject rather than a clear understanding of what it truly is. Such attempts and theories have not, and will not, contribute to meaningful or lasting criticism anywhere in the world.

Again, one more prevalent misconception within India about the criticism and critical traditions is that it is predominantly Sanskrit-based. Nothing can be farther from the truth than that.

In India, critical traditions were born, thrived, flourished and are alive in many languages and cultures. India is a linguistically and culturally diverse country where language and many expressions of culture such as costume, cuisine, art forms, practices and literature vary wildly in every region and community.

Given this diversity, criticism could not have thrived in just one language. Sanskrit might have been a link language many years ago but it is important to note that many languages developed grammar, literature and criticism of their own.

Further, grasping and contemplating on 'what is' rather than merely on the 'given' has ensured that even minor aspects of languages, literature and philosophies were commented on and theorized upon.

From Bharata Muni to Abhinavgupta, Mammata, Anandavardhana and later day theoreticians were instrumental in the evolution of Indian critical traditions, in equal measure. Other great thinkers such as Tholkaappiyar, Nannaya, Shiva Sharanas and many others too contributed to the overall growth of literary critical traditions in India.

One can find critical traditions not merely in the Indian literary scenario, but across the entire spectrum of Indian culture.

Development of Indian logic and theory is equal to or in many senses, superior to the development of logic and syllogism in the West. From the time of Gotama to Gadhadhara to Annambhatta, the critical inquiry has continued into modern times via the theoretical works of Matilal, Sibajiban Bhattacharya and Kota Sachidananda Murthy, to name a few.

Again, critical thinking and tradition are not merely confined to one religion or theism alone. Countless Buddhist and Jain scholars equally contributed in this direction. The materialism and atheism in India are not mere denials of the ultimate but rather engaging reflections on life as a whole. This is an ongoing trend, from Carvakas to Ajivikas, Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay to many other modern critics.

This collective critical acumen, gathered, preserved and propagated through various traditions of the country were not mere dry theories. We find them expressed in the scientific and philosophical theories of great scholars.

So, the works of Kanaada, Caraka, Susruta, Patanjali, Dhanvantari, Bhaskara, Varahamihira and countless other scientific theorists, or for that matter, philosophical works of three great *acharyas*, Adi Shankaracharya, Sri Ramanujacharya and Sri Madhvacharya or modern-day thinkers such as Sri Aurobindo and Jiddu Krishnamurti are all part of the living Indian critical tradition. The Indian critical tradition is a living tradition indeed.

WAYS TO RETAIN INDIAN LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

India is one of the few nations in the world with an unparalleled level of linguistic diversity. Some countries have numerous dialects, but India stands out as one of the rare countries with an array of both languages and dialects. This rich linguistic tapestry makes India truly unique on a global stage.

There are roughly 6,500 spoken languages in the world today. However, about 2,000 of those languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers.

In addition to the large number of languages spoken in the country, India is also a host to several language families such as Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai and Great Andamanese languages.

India is home to approximately 1,500 languages, including a vast number of oral and unwritten ones. Among them, nearly 1,000 languages have fewer than 10,000 native speakers, and around 200 have been classified as endangered languages. The rapid disappearance of these languages is a growing concern, highlighting the urgent need for preservation efforts.

The disappearance of a language cannot be overlooked, even in a linguistically rich country like India. With each lost language, invaluable knowledge vanishes, we lose the insights on the society, the level of evolution of the civilization and language, scientific information, the details of the times, history, possible movements of population, nature, literary and cultural traditions. Each language carries a unique repository of wisdom. So, a loss of language is not an insignificant incident but rather a big loss for any given society.

A language is threatened if it has only a few users and a weak political status, and especially, if children are no longer learning it, that is, when the language is no longer transmitted to the next generation.

An even greater concern is the rapid disappearance of tribal languages. It is easy to blame colonial rule, globalization etc; but a certain share of the blame

also lies with us. We Indians have long neglected tribal communities and their rich cultural heritage, ultimately leading to this crisis.

Elitism within the caste hierarchy deeply rooted in the country, influenced by English education has shaped our perception of many tribal communities as backward, as untouchables, as the ones whose history is defined solely by superstitions and outdated practices.

Indians have long failed to recognize that tribal literature (even though most of them are oral) holds rich heritage, a vast reservoir of literature that is thrown open to the listeners and readers with very lofty philosophies and refined poetry. However, it is time we finally open our eyes and acknowledge this reality.

Language is the most direct expression of culture; it is what makes us human and gives each of us a sense of identity. The co-existence of numerous languages has been the distinctive feature of India for centuries. Most modern citizens across the world appear to be fast losing appreciation for the benefits of multilingualism.

Languages serve as crucial bridges between cultures. Learning a new language is not just about communication. It is an exploration of new ways of thinking, different value systems, and a means to broaden our horizons, embracing the richness of diverse cultures and ideas. Without the languages, the world would not be what it is today. This is not an exaggeration. Languages help individuals to express their thoughts and innermost feelings. Languages help us to visualize beyond the narrow limitations of one culture, community or society.

Each language is a repository of the culture and history of the region(s) where it is practiced. Learning new languages expands one's knowledge of different cultures and introduces new ways of thinking and problem solving.

Our adaptive success as a species with over seven billion people in such diverse environments as jungles, deserts etc is due to "culture," implying the transmission of ideas through language.

Linguistic diversity is closely related to adaptability in all human endeavours. The loss of linguistic diversity weakens our ability to adapt as it reduces the pool of knowledge from which we can draw.

The following are some advantages of multilingual societies and of people with knowledge of multiple languages within such societies:

- a) They tend to have a keener awareness and a sharper perception of language.
- b) Are more capable of transmitting and propagating the richness of their native languages to other languages/traditions.
- c) Have a greater propensity to raise awareness of other traditions and cultures within their communities and contribute positively to peace and cooperation.
- d) Possess a broader vocabulary to describe emotions, events, and natural phenomena in a more refined manner, making them capable of enriching their literature.
- e) Capable to serve as the bridge to wisdom from other linguistic and cultural traditions, bringing knowledge from other communities and enriching their traditions.
- f) Tend to have a broader vision, shaped by a range of perspectives and therefore, have access to more refined paradigms.
- g) Have better spatial and cognitive abilities at their disposal.
- h) Have greater chances to obtain social/ employment benefits all over the country.

Globalization is often blamed for the change in the lifestyle of people, the mode and medium of education they receive and the decline in the number of speakers of a certain language. However, the same globalization has also provided strong empirical evidence of the success of multilingual society.

Further, a monolingual society will find it extremely difficult to engage with other cultural/linguistic societies. They will face difficulty in conducting business, interacting and passing on their cultural heritages to other cultural and linguistic communities. Some may argue that multilingualism and multiculturalism in one society may lead to increased hatred, conflict and bigotry. But history has unequivocally proven otherwise.

Given the above, it is perplexing to see the indifference of modern society toward linguistic diversity and benefit it brings. Any decline in the linguistic diversity of the country will inevitably lead to negative consequences.