

# INDIAN LITERATURE – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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## POETRY

### Overview

The nineteenth century was the long century of colonialism in India. From a few hundred officials in 1800, the British Raj grew into an empire by 1900. Christianity, English education and printing brought enormous changes, not least in literature. Rejection of the new was not possible, but a debate raged about the degree of accommodation, and the key literary battleground was poetry. The novel was too new—it had no Indian tradition with which to accommodate—and it came too late in the century. So it was in poetry (and, to a lesser degree, drama) that the battle between tradition and modernity was fought. With few exceptions, the result was the insertion of new content into traditional forms, but even that proved controversial. It was an exciting time to write poetry.

### Urdu

**Ghazal** The decline of Muslim power meant a loss of prestige for Urdu (and Persian), which then became the literature of lament. The *ghazal* was ideally suited for this role, since even classical form expressed the pain and sorrow of lost love, in both earthly and divine realms. The *ghazal* was not, however, ‘love poetry’ in the Western sense. Rather, it was poetry about a highly formalised and stylised love that enabled poets to leave the constraints of reality behind and reach transcendental heights of mysticism.

**Ghalib** The greatest Urdu poet (and arguably the greatest Indian poet) of the century was Ghalib (1797-1869), who was an aristocrat and a defender of the crumbling Muslim aristocracy. He was educated in Persian and Arabic, and wrote Persian verse, but his Urdu *ghazals* are considered his finest work. Although a conservative, he was also a mystic who criticised the ritualisation of religion and placed emphasis on personal experience. His verse is both complex and quotable, which is why he has come to represent the faded glory of the Mughal Empire.

### Gujarati

Narmad (Narmadashankar, 1833-1886) was the voice of poetic change in Gujarati, though he spoke for all of India when, in 1858 he wrote a manifesto (*Kavi ani Kavita*, ‘The poet and poetry’). In it, he eloquently defended the new poetry that self-consciously borrowed from English verse. In the same year, he demonstrated his ideas by publishing a collection of his poetry (*Narma Kavita*). It was hailed, even by reluctant critics, as brilliant, and soon became a landmark of Gujarati literature. Narmad himself became something of a literary hero, a patriot (despite appreciation of English literature) and a fiery social reformer. His attitudes, shaped by the revolt of 1857-1858, are most clearly expressed in *Hinduo-ni-Padati*, which is a glorification of the Hindu past.

### Tamil

**Vedanayaka Sastri** Devashayam Pillai (1774-1864) was born in a Tamil Catholic family but converted to evangelical Protestantism as a young boy and became Vedanayaka Sastri. He wrote more than 35 books in Tamil, mostly prose tracts, but his lasting contribution was as a poet of this age of transition, transposing

traditional devotionalism into the hymns that Tamil Christians sung in church. His accommodation between *bhakti* and the bible, however, met with resistance from some parts of the Tamil Christian community who objected to Sastri's inclusion of 'heathen' aesthetics and practices. Despite this, his collection of hymns (*Jepamalai*) remained extremely popular with congregations.

**Henry Alfred Krishna Pillai** A generation after Sastri, came another Tamil Christian who wrote one of the finest poems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in that language. Krishna Pillai (1827–1900) was born a Hindu but was educated in a Christian school in a small village. He was later baptised in Madras, adding the names 'Henry Alfred' but retaining his Hindu names. Like Sastri, his life's work was an accommodation of traditional Tamil devotionalism to Christian thinking. His greatest work, *Ratchanya Yatrigram*, which took him sixteen years to complete, was inspired by both Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Kampan's Tamil *Ramayana* (12<sup>th</sup> CE.)

**Ramalinga Swamigal** Despite the impact of Christianity, traditional Tamil poetry continued to flourish during this century, as evident in the work of Ramalinga Swamigal (1823-1874). Some scholars even consider him the greatest poet of the century, which is debatable, but certainly he was the last in the long line of Tamil Saiva poet-saints. Although he lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, little is known of his life, though today he is the centre of a cult whose members believe that he did not 'die' but was 'received by God.' His output was enormous (one modern print collection runs to 1500 pages), composed in many different verse forms and exhibiting a nimble use of language. However, the outstanding feature of his poetry, again deriving from the *bhakti* tradition, is its musicality.

**Mastan Sahab** Tamil poetry of a high quality was also written by Muslims, the most famous of whom is Mastan Sahib (b. 1830?). Like Ramalinga, he was a mystic, who withdrew from life, wandered in the forest and acquired disciples. He did not write many poems—only about 5,000 lines survive—but many display a subtlety and depth of feeling, again similar to that of the classical Tamil *bhakti* poets, in expressing his universal religion.

### Bengali

**Michael Madhusudan Dutt** As the capital of the British Raj, Calcutta was the seedbed for the new literature, and that city's most celebrated author (until Tagore) was Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873). A highly-respected playwright and essayist, Dutt also pioneered the Bengali blank-verse and the Bengali sonnet. One of his poems, 'Atma Bilap' ('Self-lament') nicely reveals the shift towards personalised literature that epitomises the period. However, his most celebrated work, and one that displays the transitional nature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Indian poetry is *Meghnad Bodh Kavya* ('Story of Meghnad's Killing'). In it, he adapts a story from the *Ramayana* using a variety of western romantic and classical influences, as well as Sanskrit poetics.

**Rabindranath Tagore** The most remarkable writer of this remarkable century, however, was surely Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Even before his concern for the destiny of his country brought him into politics, his poetry shone with an passion for the natural world and an understanding of human emotions. Like other great poets of this century, he married the sensibility of his regional (Bengali) tradition with that of modernity. In particular, he drew on the ballads of the itinerant Bauls, plus the Vaisnava devotionalism of his own language and that of Braj. At the age of 16, he composed poems later published (under a pseudonym) as *Bhanusimha Thakurer Padabali*. His most famous work, *Gitanjali*, a collection of verse published in 1910, earned him the Nobel Prize in 1913.

### Questions/discussion

1. Poetry has been the default position of Indian literature since ancient times. For more than two thousand years, it was regarded as the most cultivated expression of the literary arts, close to singing and close to god. Perhaps this longevity and cultural status is what enabled poetry not only to survive the encounter with western literary models, but also to enrich itself in the process.

2. The accommodation of Christianity with devotionism in Tamil poetry is a good example of this process. Yet, this, too, was controversial and generated debates about the unwanted 'heathen' elements in Indian Christian hymns and prayer practice. This situation was replicated all over the colonised world, in Asia and Africa. Today, however, the 'empire strikes back,' and the Church of England is facing a severe challenge to its unity from African churches who do not like the liberal drift of its leaders.
3. Compare the poetry of Dutt and Tagore. Separated by a generation, do they display traces of the significant political and social changes that had occurred by the end of the century?

### Reading

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### Texts

#### 1. From Ghalib's poetry

The Sheikh hovers by the tavern door,  
but believe me, Ghalib,  
I am sure I saw him slip in  
As I departed

Said I one night to a pristine seer  
(Who knew the secrets of whirling Time)  
'Sir you well perceive,  
That goodness and faith,  
Fidelity and love  
Have all departed from this sorry land.  
Father and son are at each other's throat;  
Brother fights brother.  
Unity and Federation are undermined.  
Despite these ominous signs  
Why has not Doomsday come?  
Why does not the Last Trumpet sound?  
Who holds the reins of the Final Catastrophe.'

From *Gitanjali* by Tagore

Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light! Ah, the light dances, my darling, at the centre of my life; the light strikes, my darling, the chords of my love; the sky opens, the wind runs wild, laughter passes over the earth. The butterflies spread their sails on the sea of light. Lilies and jasmines surge up on the crest of the waves of light. The light is shattered into gold on every cloud, my darling, and it scatters gems in profusion. Mirth spreads from leaf to leaf, my darling, and gladness without measure. The heaven's river has drowned its banks and the flood of joy is abroad.

#### 2. From poetry of Dutt, translated from the original Bengali by the poet

Where man in all his truest glory lives,  
And nature's face is exquisitely sweet;  
For those fair climes I heave impatient sigh,  
There let me live and there let me die.  
Long sunk in superstition's night,  
By Sin and Satan driven,  
I saw not, cared not for the light  
That leads the blind to Heaven.  
But now, at length thy grace, O Lord!  
Birds all around me shine;  
I drink thy sweet, thy precious word,  
I kneel before thy shrine!

[on his way to England]:  
Forget me not, O Mother,  
Should I fail to return  
To thy hallowed bosom.  
Make not the lotus of thy memory  
Void of its nectar Madhu.

## **DRAMA**

### Overview

Indian drama during the nineteenth century is a story of two halves, neatly separated by the rebellion of 1857-58. During the first five decades, traditional forms continued to dominate. In Kerala, for instance, Kutiyattam and Kathakali were popular, while elsewhere, regional forms that had emerged in the early modern period (Terukkuttu in Tamil, Yakshagana in Kannada, Nautanki in Hindi, and so forth) continued to flourish. During the second half of the century, however, the 'new drama' developed, inspired by English models and an increasing confidence in the ability of regional Indian languages to produce modern literature. A very significant exception to this generalisation was the growth of the Parsi theatre, which drew on traditional content and techniques (narrative, music, song and dance) to become a major contribution to Indian drama. In common with the so-called 'new' drama, Parsi theatre grew largely in the metropolitan centres of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay,

### Bengali

**Michael Madhusudan Dutt** Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) contributed to this radical change in Indian theatre. In 1858, he was commissioned by a raja to translate a Bengali play (itself a translation from Sanskrit) into English. Frustrated by the poor quality of the play, however, he instead wrote his own in Bengali (*Sarmistha*) and then translated it into English. Although the story was taken from the *Mahabharata*, the play did not follow the conventions of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Anticipating criticism, Dutt explained that he had written the play 'for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose ideas have been... imbued with western ideas... it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration of everything Sanskrit.' He went on to write plays based on a variety of sources (such as a Greek legend), but he is remembered also for two farces. *Ekei ki bale Sabhyata* ('So this is what you call culture?') pokes fun at rich, half-educated young men who ape western manners, while *Bure Saliker Ghare Rowan* ('The Dotard Sports a Plume') satirises a lecherous old landlord.

**Dinabandhu Mitra** While Dutt influenced thinking about the theatre, perhaps a more substantial contribution to the content of new drama was made by another Bengali, Dinabandhu Mitra (1829-1874). His *Nildarpan* ('Indigo Mirror', 1860) was the first experiment in what is now a long tradition of social realism in Indian theatre. In it, he exposes the cruelty of British indigo planters and the struggle of peasants against them.

Despite its popularity, ironically guaranteed when the government forbade its English translation, Mitra went on to write a number of farces and comedies, revealing his admiration for Moliere.

**Rabindranath Tagore** Although better known as a poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) also contributed to the new Bengali theatre, which in turn influenced new drama throughout India. He wrote several plays in the 1880s and 1890s, based on English models (including Oscar Wilde) or utilising traditional Indian stories. *Praktir Pratisodh* (1884), however, marked a significant departure from the mythology, historicity and musicality of most contemporary drama. It used verse to present a secular story set in the present, involving ordinary men and women in outside scenes, beyond the proscenium arch.

### Tamil

**Vedanayaka Sastri** During the first half of the century, Tamil drama, like most Indian drama, was dominated by traditional forms written by poets. Of these men, the most influential was Vedanayaka Sastri (1774-1864), who composed an intriguing play in the *kuravanci* ('fortune-teller woman') genre, one of the many diverse drama forms that had emerged in the early modern period. However, his choice of this genre, which focuses on the erotic and parodic elements of low-caste life, for a play promoting evangelical Protestantism is curious indeed.

**Bethlehem Kuravanci** On the other hand, Sastri's *Bethlehem Kuravanci* ('The Fortune-Teller Lady of Bethlehem', 1809) is a perfect vehicle for his purpose. The fortune-teller lady, who usually falls in love with a disreputable raja, here falls in love with God. Her traditional bird-catcher husband is transformed into a catechist, and other bird-catchers become biblical fishermen, who use the net (the Gospel) to trap birds (people) and thwart the attempts of the evil bird-catchers (the Catholic Church).

**Manonmaniyam** Another unusual 'new' Tamil drama was *Manonmaniyam* (1891) by P. Sundram Pillai (1855-1997). It was written in verse, not for performance but for reading, something that we might expect from a writer who was more a scholar than an artist. Unsurprisingly, the play, based on Lord Lytton's *The Secret Way*, was not successful on the stage, but it did become a rallying cry for Tamil activists in the independence movement. One of its verses was adopted in 1970 as the state anthem of Tamil Nadu.

### Parsi

**History** In the first half of the century, nearly all drama in Bombay was produced in English, largely by British actors and promoters. In 1835, however, the primary theatre venue in Bombay was sold to Parsi entrepreneurs, who sensed an opportunity to use culture as a platform for gaining wider participation in the public sphere. In 1853, a Parsi play in Gujarati, was performed there for the first time, and by the 1870s Parsi drama had spread across India. It remained the dominant form of drama until the 1930s, when it was replaced by another form of entertainment mixing story, song and dance: the cinema.

**Gujarati** Gujarati plays written by, and largely performed for, the Parsi community had a clear message. The writer of the very first play in this language announced in the preface his intention to promote what he called *swadeshi* ('self-reliant') plays for his 'fellow countrymen'. These Gujarati plays drew primarily on the Parsi heritage (Zoroastrians who came from Iran to Bombay, mostly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), especially the Persian *Shahnama*, in an attempt to reinvent their Persian past.

**Urdu** Urdu (often written in the Gujarati script) was later used in the Parsi theatre because it was recognised across India as a prestige language of Muslim elites and because it could draw on the rich legacy of Indo-Persian literature for story material. Urdu-language plays were performed all across the subcontinent by touring companies, who went west to Lahore, north to Delh, south to Madras and east to Dacca.

### Discussion/questions

1. The Parsi theatre, despite its widespread popularity, is still a relatively poorly-researched tradition. A good PhD could be written on the history of the Parsi theatre with a focus on how it influenced Indian cinema.

2. The pioneers of new drama in both Bengali and Tamil, respectively, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Vedanayaka Sastri, in Bengali and Tamil, were Christian. Yet, their plays have little in common. Is that contrast attributable to the difference in the historical periods in which they lived or to some other factor?
3. Many, though hardly all, new plays addressed the same social issues that stimulated most early novels. Consider how one common issue (child-marriage, caste domination or widow remarriage) was treated differently in these two different media.

### Reading

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### Text

From *Nildarpan*, by Dinabandhu Mitra, trans. James Long

[FIRST ACT FIRST SCENE. SVAROPUR GOLUK CHUNDER's GOLA OR STORE-HOUSE. GOLUK CHUNDER BASU and SADHU CHURN sitting]

Sadhu. Master I told you then we cannot live any more in this country. You did not hear me however. A poor man's word bears fruit after the lapse of years.

Goluk. O my child! Is it easy to leave one's country ? My family has been here for seven generations. The lands which our fore-fathers rented have enabled us never to acknowledge ourselves servants of others. The rice which grows, provides food for the whole year, means of hospitality to guests, and also the expense of religious services ; the mustard seed we get, supplies oil for the whole year, and, besides, we can sell it for about sixty or seventy rupees. Svaropur is not a place where people are in want. It has rice, peas, oil, molasses from its fields, vegetables in the garden, and fish from the tanks ; whose heart is not torn when obliged to leave such a place ? And who can do that easily ?

Sadku. Now it is no more a place of happiness : your garden is already gone, and your relatives are on the point of forsaking you. Ah ! it is not yet three years since the Saheb took a lease of this place, and he has already ruined the whole village. We cannot bear to turn our eyes in the southern direction towards the house of the heads of the villages (Mandal). Oh ! what was it once, and what is it now ! Three years ago, about sixty men used to make a daily feast in the house ; there were ten ploughs, and about forty or fifty oxen ; as to the court-yard, it was crowded like as at the horse races ; when they used to arrange the ricks of corn, it appeared, as it were, that the lotus had expanded itself on the surface of a lake bordered by sandal groves ; the granary was as large as a hill ; but last year the granary not being repaired, was on the point of falling into the yard. Because he was not allowed to plant Indigo in the rice-field, the wicked Saheb beat the Ma jo and

Sajo Babus most severely; and how very difficult was it to get them out of his clutches ; the ploughs and kine[cows] were sold, and at that crisis the two Mandals left the village.

Goluk. Did not the eldest Mandal go to bring his brethren back?

Sadhu. They said, we would rather beg from door to door than go to live there again. The eldest Mandal is now left alone, and he has kept two ploughs, which are nearly always engaged in the Indigo-fields. And even this person is making preparations for flying off Oh, Sir ! IT tell you also to throw aside this infatuated attachment (mayo) for your native place. Last time your rice went, and this time, your honour will go.

Goluk. What honor remains to us now? The Planter has prepared his places of cultivation round about the tank, and will plant Indigo there this year. In that case, our women will be entirely excluded from the tank. And also the Saheb has said that if we do not cultivate our rice-fields with Indigo, he will make Nobin Madhab to drink the water of seven Factories (i.e. to be confined in them).

Sadhu. Has not the eldest Babu gone to the Factory ?

Goluk. Has he gone of his own will? The pyedah (a servant) has carried him off there.

Sadhu. But your eldest Babu has very great courage. On the day the Saheb said, " If you don't hear the Amin, and don't plant the Indigo within the ground marked off, then shall we throw your houses into the river Betrabeti, and shall make you eat your rice in the factory godown ;" the eldest Babu replied, "As long as we shall not get the price for the fifty bigahs[measurement] of land sown with Indigo last year, we will not give one bigah this year for Indigo. What do we care for our house ? We shall even risk (pawn) our lives."

Goluk. What could he have done, without he said that ? Just see, no anxiety would have remained in our family if the fifty bigahs of rice produce had been left with us. And if they give us the money for the Indigo, the greater part of our troubles will go away.

[NOBIN MADHAB enters.]

O my son, what has been done ?

Nobin. Sir, does the cobra shrink\* from biting the little child on the lap of its mother on account of the sorrow of the mother ? I flattered him much, but he understood nothing by that. He kept to his word, and said, give us sixty bigahs of land, secured by written documents, and take 50 Rupees, then we shall close the two years' account at once.

Goluk. Then, if we are to give sixty bigahs for the cultivation of the Indigo, we cannot engage in any other cultivation whatever. Then we shall die without rice crops.

Nobin. I said, " Saheb, as you engage all your men, our ploughs, and our kine [cows], everything, in the Indigo field, only give us every year through our food. We don't want hire."  
On which, he with a laugh said, "You surely don't eat Yaban's\* rice."

Sadhu. Those whose only pay is a belly full of food are, I think, happier than we are.

Goluk. We have nearly abandoned all the ploughs ; still we have to cultivate Indigo. We have no chance in a dispute with the Sahebs. They bind and beat us, it is for us to suffer. We are consequently obliged to work.

Nobin. I shall do as you order, Sir ; but my design is for once to bring an action into Court.

\* The Mahomedans and all other nations who are not Hindus, are called by that name.

## FICTION

### Overview

Short pieces of fiction (sketches, short stories and the like) dominated the first half of the century. Longer narratives, with elements of social realism and a contemporary setting, appeared from the 1860s, often serialised in journals and mostly in the metropolitan centres of Calcutta and Madras. By the turn of the century, a shift had occurred: the function of literature was no longer to display skill and incite pleasure, but to inform and to instruct. The social issues taken up by these early novelists were serious, from child-marriage to colonialism.

### Urdu

**Genres** Urdu writers in the first half of the century continued the tradition of writing fiction in the Indo-Persian genres of *qissa/dastan* and *masnavi*. As before, they drew on a considerable repertoire of stories from both Persian and Indian literature. However, it is not always appreciated that novels in Urdu also benefited from other, short genres such as *lata'if* (witticism) and *naqliyat* (fable), as well as anecdotes and comic sketches. From 1800 to the 1830s, numerous collections of short stories in these genres were published by the British, aided by Urdu scholars, at Fort William College in Calcutta.

**Novels** These short pieces of fiction, along with Indian mythology and Persian legends, contributed to the later, full-length novels written in Urdu. In some cases, a humorous sketch was simply incorporated into a novel. An example is *Fasana-i-Azad* ('Story of Azad', 1878) by Ratannath Sarshar, one of the leading Urdu novelists of the nineteenth century. For the opening scenes, Sarshar simply borrowed two comic sketches he had previously published, one about a schoolmaster and father of a poor student, the other about a poetry competition. Another example is *Fasana-i-Mubtala* ('Story of an Afflicted Person', 1885) by Nazir Ahmad. Midway through the novel, the author throws in a comic scene in which a troupe of entertainers enacts a mock prayer ritual.

### Bengali

**Early fiction** A not dissimilar situation lay at the heart of the development of Bengali fiction in the nineteenth century. Again in Calcutta, early parodies and farcical writing paved the way for novels, although this time the short pieces were published in journals and newspapers. This kind of satire in Bengali was usually called *naksha* (from the Persian *naqshah*). The object of the parody was often the western-educated, Bengali urban clerk or office worker (the famous 'babu'), who is spoiled, pretentious and often ridiculous. An early example is *Nababububilas* ('The New Babus' Merry-Making,' 1825) by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, which is a merciless parody of the poor babu. A later example, published serially between 1855- 1857, is *Alaler Gharer Dulal* ('The Spoilt Son of a First-Rate Family') by Pyarichand Mitra. This text, written with social realism, forms a bridge from the early writings to the later, famous Bengali novels.

**Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay** The life of Bengali's greatest early novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) sums up the transitional nature of this century. Born in an orthodox Brahmin family, he was educated in English at Presidency College (now University of Calcutta) and became a magistrate in the Indian Civil Service until his retirement in 1891, but still found time to run a Bengali-language newspaper and write novels that are read today. One of his novels (*Anandamath*) contained a song ('Bande Mataram, 'Hail to thee, Mother') that became the rallying cry for Indian independence.

**Bankim's novels** Bankim's first novel, written in English in 1864, was soon forgotten. By contrast, his first Bengali novel, *Durgensandini*, came a year later and, though somewhat clunky and melodramatic, was wildly popular and led to the modern Indian novel. He went on to write a dozen more novels, mostly historical romances, with the inevitable triumph of Hindus over Muslim oppression, but also a few on social themes. He also pioneered the autobiographical narrative (made famous by Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*). Most scholars confirm the author's own assessment that his 'best' novel, which most approximates the modern genre in plotting and characterisation, is *Krishnakanter Uil* (*Krishnakanta's Will*, 1878).

**Rabindranath Tagore** Although Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is better known as a poet, he also made a considerable contribution to Bengali fiction in this century through his short stories. In the 1890s he wrote and published dozens of stories, some of which showcase his wit, technical skill and powers of observation. The 'Kabuliwallah' ('Fruitseller from Kabul') is a moving story, in which the eponymous trader speaks in the first person of his life in his adopted city of Calcutta and of his friendship with a four-year-old girl, who reminds him of his daughter back home in Kabul. An even more affecting story (filmed by S. Ray as 'Charulata') is 'Nastanirh' ('The Broken Nest'), which dissects the loneliness of a middle-class Calcutta family.

### Tamil

**Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai** A first and somewhat clumsy attempt at a novel in Tamil was made by Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai (1826-1889) with his *Piratapa Mutaliyar Carittiram* ('The Story of Piratapa Mutaliyar', 1885). The author was acquainted with both English and French literature, but the material and point of view for his novel came from his observations of life as a district judge. Unfortunately, he was not a creative writer, and he only managed to string together a series of improbably romantic episodes, interrupted by his homilies for reform. Nevertheless, and again despite the scholarly language, it was an important experiment.

**Rajam Aiyer** An altogether different man and writer was Rajam Aiyer (1872-1898), a Brahmin who wrote the first modern novel in Tamil, one that is now regarded as a classic. The plot of *Kamalampal Carittiram* ('The Fatal Rumour' or 'The Story of Kamalampal', 1893-1895) is a little implausible and the solution even more so, and it uses somewhat stilted prose. Nonetheless, it succeeds in creating believable characters. The author describes the pettiness of villagers but also their genuine grief and confusion. It also reveals the injustice of a woman's position in a rural Brahmin family, and it does so with wit and panache. This combination of social realism and literary skill has rarely been achieved in Tamil literature.

### Malayalam

**Indulekha** Early novels in Malayalam (the language of Kerala) are also mostly concerned with social issues. Considered the iconic early novel in this language, *Indulekha* (1889) by Chandu Menon (1847-1899) tells the story of the eponymous heroine, who defies convention and marries a man from another caste. Written by a high-caste man about high-castes, this novel of social reform replicates many late 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels in other languages.

**Christian novels** Malayalam, however, also has a more interesting set of novels that depict the problems of caste inequality, slavery and women's oppression written from the perspective of a low-caste, Christian convert. This is not unexpected since Europeans first came to India (in 1498) on the coast of Kerala, and Christianity has influenced that region more than any other part of the country. Two of these unusual novels are:

*Saraswativijayam* ('The Victory of Knowledge,' 1892) by Pothiri Kunhambu and *Sukumari* ('Sukumari', 1897) by Joseph Muliyaal. Both begin with a death, something missing in the rosy-picture of *Indulekha*, and both are narrated in gritty detail.

### Hindi

The detective novel, an overlooked strand of Indian fiction writing, surfaced in Hindi in the last decade of the century. Earlier Hindi fiction had elements of the detective novel (a crime and its solution), but in these fin de siècle works, suspense dominates and, crucially, the narration does not give everything away. A significant practitioner of this new kind of fiction was Devki Nandan Khatri (1861-1913), whose *Chandrakanta* (1888) is considered the first example of modern Hindi prose. Less well-known, however, is his detective novel *Virendravir athva Katora Bhara Khun* ('Virendravir or A Bowl of Blood', 1895), which owes a large debt to

Sherlock Holmes. The storytelling is skilfully handled by beginning in medias res (highly unusual at the time) and shifting the point of view from third to first person.

### Questions/discussion

1. Very many of the early novels in India are named after the heroine (Kamamalpal in Tamil, Chandrakanta in Hindi and Indulekha in Malayalam, to cite just a few examples). What does this female-naming of novels suggest about Indian literature?
2. Many of these same novels, and others as well, are written in an early form of social realism. For more than two thousand years, poetry, myth and folk tales had dominated the Indian literary imagination. Suddenly, however, within three decades of its beginnings in the 1860s, the new genre of the novel had become a critical and popular fashion. What are the antecedents, if any, for this apparently radical shift in Indian literary history?

### Reading

Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Early Novels in India* (Sahitya Akademi, 2002)

Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910. Western Impact, Indian Response* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991)

Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia (eds.), *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century* (Permanent Black, 2004)

### Text

From 'Nastanirh' by Tagore, trans. Lopa Banerjee

Bhupati had inherited a lot of money and generous ancestral property, so it was quite natural if he didn't bother to work at all. By sheer destiny, however, he was born a workaholic. He had founded an elite English newspaper and that was how he decided to cope with the boredom that his riches and time, which was endlessly at his disposal, brought to him.

Since childhood, Bhupati had a flair for writing and rhetoric and would relentlessly write letters to the editors of English newspapers. He also loved speaking in assemblies, even when he didn't have anything significant to add to the discourses.

Years passed by, and he grew increasingly confident and eloquent in his English composition and oratorical skills, which was further nourished as he continued to receive accolades and support from influential political leaders. They loved him as he was rich and accomplished and wanted him to join their ilk.

Eventually, his brother-in-law Umapati, a frustrated and failed lawyer, came to him with a plea: "Bhupati, it's high time you publish your own newspaper. You possess the perfect background and necessary skills for it."

Bhupati was not only convinced but even inspired by the proposal. He believed getting published in newspapers and journals, that were run by other people, was demeaning. As the owner of his own publication, he could wield his pen and his own persona, liberated, uninhibited, and complete. With his brother-in-law to assist him, he embraced his new role as the founder and editor of a new publication.

Bhupati was young, passionate about his editorial work, current affairs and world politics to the point of addiction, and there was no dearth of people to arouse his passion for dissenting on an everyday basis.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

### Overview

In one sense, biography in the nineteenth-century, particularly at the end of the century, was quite different to the life-writing in earlier periods. In place of the hagiographies of deities, legendary sages and medieval poet-saints, the new subjects tended to be historical figures, some of whom were known to the biographer. Beneath this change, however, the fundamental impulse of the biographer—to present exemplary lives, often as a part of a movement—remained the same.

Influenced perhaps by Caryle's *Hero and Hero Worship*, there were numerous translations of English-language textbook biographies of famous figures (such as Ashoka, Napoleon, Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln), but toward the end of the period the lives of important Indian men, usually social reformers, appeared.

### Urdu

**Altaf Hussain Hali** Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) is considered one of the key figures in the Aligarh reform movement. Poet, scholar and government employee in Delhi, he wrote three pioneering biographies in Urdu, which taken as a whole amount to a manifesto for change among Muslims in the rapidly shifting world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Hayat-e-Saadi* ('The life of Saadi,' 1886), he praised the religious and cultural views the 13-century Persian poet and thinker Saadi. His next biography was *Yadgar-e-Ghalib* ('Memorial to Ghalib,' 1897), which documented the life of his contemporary, Ghalib, and broke new ground in revealing unknown episodes in the private life of this famous poet. However, his most influential book was *Hayat-i-Javed* ('A Life Eternal', 1901), a biography of the great social reformer and champion of Urdu, Syed Ahmad Khan.

**Shibli Numani** Undoubtedly the most sophisticated Urdu biographer of the period was Shibli Numani (1857-1914), who was both a poet and a scholar. Like Hali, Numani belonged to the Aligarh reformist group led by Syed Ahmad Khan. However, if Hali's biographies succeeded in pointing the path to a Muslim future, Numani, who was first an historian, dedicated his to reclaiming a Muslim past. In both *Sirat-un-Nu'man* (1892-1893), on the life of an Islamic jurist, and *Al-Faruq* (1899), the life of the second Caliph, he demonstrated his ability to temper reformist zeal with critical skills absorbed from western historiography.

### Gujarati

**Mahipatram Rupram** Biography in Gujarati, as in Urdu, was wielded as a weapon in the fight for reform against an entrenched conservative elite. The biographer for Gujarati was Mahipatram Rupram (1829-1891), himself an ardent reformer, poet and novelist, who documented the lives of several fellow reformers with a mixture of anger and wit. The anger is understandable: as the first Gujarati Brahman to cross the sea (to England), he was excommunicated by his caste members on his return.

**Uttam Kapol Karsandas Mulji Charitra** A representative example of Rupram's biographies is *Uttam Kapol Karsandas Mulji Charitra* ('A Memoir of the Reformer Mulji,' 1877), a study of his friend Mulji. In the preface, Rupram declared that the book is dedicated 'to the rising generation who emancipated themselves from the thralldom of ignorance, superstition and priest craft.' The book is noteworthy for its detailed account of the famous Maharaj libel case (1862), in which Mulji was accused of defamation by a religious sect (Vallabhacharyas) to which he had belonged and then criticised in print.

### Tamil

A similar trend is evident in Tamil biographies of the late nineteenth-century. Here, too, life-writing is used to showcase men who have contributed to both social reform and literary reclamation. Perhaps the most representative, and influential, of these is Kanakarattina Upattiyayar's biography of Arumuka Navalar (*Srilasri Nallur Arumuka Navalar Carittiram*, 'The Story of His Holiness Arumuka Navalar of Nallur', 1892). The subject, Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879), was a Sri Lankan Tamil scholar and reformer whose life reveals the contradiction implicit in colonialism. Navalar received a Christian education, which he then used to fight against the mass conversion to Protestantism that he feared would destroy his culture.

### Bengali

**Rassundari Deb** Rassundari Deb (1809?-1899) achieved a milestone in Indian literary history when she wrote her autobiography *Amar Jiban* ('My Life,' 1876, with a second part added in 1897). While we have a 16<sup>th</sup>-century memoir in Persian by the daughter of a Mughal Emperor, Deb's is thought to be the first autobiography written by a woman in an Indian language. More important, Rassundari Deb lived in a village. Given the position of women in rural Bengali society, she waited until her husbands' death before writing her memoir, but she did not hesitate to include some distressing details of her life. Aged 12, she tells her readers, she woke up in a boat full of strangers, in the middle of a river, finding herself dressed as a bride. Later she bore twelve children, one of whom became an advocate in Calcutta. With little formal education (from a missionary woman), she taught herself to read devotional literature.

**Devendranath Tagore** Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905), father of Rabindranath Tagore, was a deeply spiritual man but also a radical thinker, who spearheaded the Brahmo Samaj movement, which fashioned a 'modern' Hinduism in this age of reform. His autobiography (*Maharshi Devendranath Thakurer Atmjivani*, 'The Autobiography of Maharshi [an honorary title used to address him when he was alive] Devendranath') was written in Bengali in 1898 and translated later into English by one of his sons as 'Autobiography.' In this nearly 400-page book, he describes his inner struggles and spiritual growth that resulted in his belief in a 'unified' god and a 'separate' nature. He records an early experience by the bedside of his dying grandmother, which taught him the 'unreality of things' and bred in him a fierce 'aversion to wealth.'

### English

Life-writing in English seemed to wait until the end of the century, when it displayed the two trends seen elsewhere. First, there were the memoirs, whose authors reflect the kind of person who had the ability and confidence to write about himself in English. These include a book with a revealing sub-title by Lutfullah (1802-1874), who was a tutor to British officers: *Autobiography of Lutfullah, a Mohammedan Gentleman, and his transactions with his fellow-creatures interspersed with remarks on the habits, customs, and character of the people with whom he had to deal* (1857). Similarly self-revealing is the *Diary of the Late Raja of Kolhapur during his visit to England, 1870* (1872). A more humble autobiography, but one that followed the pattern of reform-motivated life-writing, is *Recollections of My School Days* by Lal Behari Day (1824-1894). Serialised in the *Bengali Magazine* (1873-1876), it argued the merits of an English education over traditional Indian learning. Finally, we can note, Nishikanta Chattapadhyaya's *Reminiscences of German University Life* (1892).

### Collective Biography

The tradition of writing collective biographies, typically of a group of poets or saints, which was popular in the early modern period, was overtaken by the individual life-stories noted above. However, in the final decade of the century, the group biography re-emerged. Most of these composite biographies, like the earlier examples, were brief sketches of poets. Prominent examples include *Andhra Kavalu Charitramu* ('History of Andhra Poets', 1897) in Telugu by Kandukuri Viresalingam and *Kavi Charitra* ('History of Poets,' 1865) by Narmadashankar in Gujarati. The new politics of nationalism, however, required new subjects, as supplied in English by Parameswaran Pillai's *Representative Indians* and Manmathanath Dutt's *Prophets of India* (both 1897).

### Questions/discussion

1. Most Indian life-writing in the nineteenth century was put to the service of social and/or religious reform. How does this motivation differ from the purpose of biography and autobiography written today?
2. Make a list of known biographies and autobiographies in this period. How many were written by Christians? How many by Muslims?
3. Rassundari Deb appears to be the first woman to write her story in an Indian language. It is entirely possible that other such manuscripts have been lost, or destroyed, or suppressed. Consider also other means by which women in India have 'told their story,' such as oral tales and painting.

### Reading

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## Text

From Devendranath Tagore's 'Autobiography,' translated by his son

My grandmother was very fond of me. To me, also, she was all in all during the days of my childhood. My sleeping, sitting, eating, all were at her side. Whenever she went to Kalighat, I used to accompany her. I cried bitterly when she went to Jagannath Kshetra and Brindaban leaving me behind. She was a deeply religious woman. Every day she used to bathe in the Ganges very early in the morning ; and every day she used to weave garlands of flowers with her own hands for the Shaligram.\* Sometimes she used to take a vow of solar adoration, giving offerings to the sun from sunrise to sunset. On these occasions I also used to be with her on the terrace in the sun ; and constantly hearing the mantras (texts) of the sun-worship repeated, they became quite familiar to me.

I salute the bringer of day, red as the Java flower :  
Radiant son of Kashyapa,  
Enemy of Darkness,  
Destroyer of all sins.

At other times Didima used to hold a Haribasar festival, and the whole night there was Katha and Kirtan the noise of which would not let us sleep.

She used to look after the whole household, and do much of the work with her own hands. Owing to her skill in housekeeping, all domestic concerns worked smoothly under her guidance. After everybody had taken their meals, she would eat food cooked by herself ; I too had a share in her havishyanna } And this prasada of hers was more to my taste than the food prepared for myself. She was as lovely in appearance as she was skilled in her work, and steadfast in her religious faith. But she had no liking for the frequent visits of the Ma-Gosain. There was a certain freedom of mind in her, together with her blind faith in religion. I used to accompany her to our old family house to see Gopinath Thakur.

But I did not like to leave her and go to the outer apartments. I would sit in her lap and watch everything, quietly, from the window. Now my Didima is no more. But after how long, and after how much seeking, have I now found the Didima that is hers also; and, seated on Her lap, I am watching the pageant of this world.

Some days before her death Didima said to me, "I will give all I have to you, and nobody else." Shortly after this she gave me the key of her box. I opened it and found some rupees and gold mohurs, whereupon I went about telling everyone I had got mudi-mudki. In the year 1757 Shaka (1835 ), when Didima was on her death-bed, my father had gone on a journey to Allahabad. The vaidya came

and said that the patient should not be kept in the house any longer ; so they brought my grandmother out into the open, in order to take her to the banks of the Ganges. But Didima still wanted to live ; she did not wish to go to the Ganges. She said, "If Dwarkanath had been at home, you would never have been able to carry me away." But they did not listen to her, and proceeded with her to the river-side. She said, " As you are taking me to the Ganges against my wish, so will I too give you great trouble ; I am not going to die soon." She was kept in a tiled shed on the banks of the Ganges,

where she remained living for three nights. During this time I was always there with her, by the river.

On the night before Didima's death I was sitting at Nimtola Ghat on a coarse mat near the shed. It was the night of the full moon ; the moon had risen, the burning ground was near. They were singing the Holy Name to Didima :

Will such a day ever come, that while uttering the name of Hari, life will leave me ?

The sounds reached my ears faintly, borne on the night-wind; at this opportune moment a strange sense of the unreality of all things suddenly entered my mind. I was as if no longer the same man. A strong aversion to wealth arose within me. The coarse bamboo-mat on which I sat seemed to be my fitting seat, carpets and costly spreadings seemed hateful, in my mind was awakened a joy unfelt before. I was then eighteen years old.

## ESSAY

### Overview

Essay writing flourished in the hothouse of ideas that was 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. Muslim, Hindu and Christian movements all vied for public attention using the new medium of printed newspapers, magazines and journals. Many of these polemicists used the new language of English, and many of their writings were first serialised in periodicals. Argumentative prose-writing of this kind was produced in every major regional language, too, although Calcutta, as befits the capital of the British Raj, was the starting point.

### Urdu

**Syed Ahmad Khan** The case for Islam in a modern India was most forcefully articulated by Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) Islam, he argued in a series of essays, was compatible with science, English education and British Rule. Equally, after the Revolt of 1857-1858, he had to persuade the colonialists that Muslims were loyal subjects of the crown. His two-sided strategy is illustrated by the two books he wrote in the aftermath of the revolt. In *Asbab-i-baghavati-Hind* ('Causes of the Indian Revolt', 1859), he attempted to explain to the British that their mistakes in governance had caused the rebellion. And in *Sarkashi-yi zila Bijnor* ('A History of the Bijnor Rebellion,') he chastised the people of Bijnor for joining the mutiny. He also found time to write, in English, 'The Mohomedan commentary on the Holy Bible' (1862).

### Hindi

**Dayananda Saraswati** The voice of Hindu reform in Hindi was Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), leader of the Arya Samaj movement in north India. Scholar and orator, he was a fiery opponent of Islam and Christianity, who wrote more than 60 books on every aspect of religion and society. In 1875, he published his most

influential and most controversial tract. *Satyarth Prakash* ('The Light of Truth') attempts to be study in comparative religion, but misrepresents Islam so badly that it was banned in areas under Muslim rule.

**Bharatendu Harishchandra** An essayist with a more secular and literary reform agenda was Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-1885). He is considered the 'father of modern Hindi literature' for his poetry, drama and prose, and especially for his journalism. In 1867, at the age of 17, he established the first literary magazine in Hindi, the *Kavi-vachana-sudha* in 1868, followed in 1873 by *Harishchandra Magazine* (later called *Harishchandra Chandrika*) and *Bala Bodhini* in 1873. Under his editorship, he gathered around him a number of like-minded Hindi writers, who collectively set the modern standard for prose-writing.

**Balabodhini** Harishchandra's journalism can be illustrated by looking at *Balabodhini*, one of the several literary journals under his editorship. Though it lasted little more than three years, and though its agenda appeared to be Victorian (for example, in advocating separate spheres for men and women), he used it as a pulpit to argue for various reforms, from the elevation of Hindi to the eradication of child-marriage. Indeed, he was a clever champion of women's causes, using the shield of his traditional journal to advocate change. In the very first issue, for example, he wrote a rousing essay about the fact that equality between the sexes had once existed in India.

### Tamil

**C.W. Damodaram Pillai** One strand of Tamil essay-writing during this century was the traditional commentary on old texts. The master of this art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was C.W. Damodaram Pillai (1832-1901), who wrote discursive prefaces to his editions of Tamil classical poetry in order to establish the canon of classical Tamil literature.

**Arumuka Navalar** Another traditional Tamil scholar who contributed to the essay was Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879). Though educated as a Christian, Navalar led a Saivite revival movement to stop mass conversion to Protestantism that threatened southern Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. In 1851, he published a 250-page prose version of a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Tamil hagiographical text. As part of his anti-Christian crusade, he also used his knowledge of the Bible to publish a tract, *Bibiliya Kutsita* ('Disgusting Things in the Bible'), in 1852.

**G. Subramaniya Iyer** The essay in Tamil received an enormous boost from a leading journalist in Madras, G. Subramaniya Iyer (1855-1916). An influential member of the nationalist movement, in 1878 he established *The Hindu*, an English-language weekly (and later daily) newspaper, for the express purpose of campaigning for the appointment of an Indian to the High Court in Madras. He was the paper's owner and editor for twenty years. In 1882, he set up the first Tamil daily, *Swadesamitran*, in order to communicate with the majority of people who did not speak or read English. In 1898, he left the English paper and became editor of the Tamil paper, which he ran until his death in 1916. During his editorship of both these newspapers, he promoted the cause of Indian nationalism through his editorials. As one contemporary put it, his pen was 'dipped in fiery chilli sauce.'

**Rajam Aiyar** Another strand of Tamil essay-writing was dedicated more to literature (although, as we have seen, politics and literature were tightly intertwined in this period). Rajam Aiyar (1872-1898), an outstanding novelist whose bright flame burned briefly, first made his mark on Tamil literature through a series of critical essays published in the 1890s in a Tamil journal (*Vivekacintamani*) in Madras. His criticism of a famous play ('Manomaniyam') and an essay on humanism ('Man, his Greatness and his Littleness') are regarded as the first stirrings of literary criticism in Tamil.

### English

**Raj Mohun Roy** Raj Mohun Roy (1774-1833) is deservedly called the 'father' of modern India. A Bengali Brahman and founder of the Brahma Samaj movement, he wrote crusading essays in Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali and English. In 1803 he published an essay in Persian, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin*, arguing the cause of monotheism. From 1823, he edited a Bengali-language newspaper (*Sambad Kaumudi*), and in 1829, he published a Sanskrit tract condemning idolatry. In 1823, when the British government passed regulations restricting the press in India, he used his fluent English to write a 'letter' to King George IV in protest.

**Dadabhai Naoroji** If Roy was the ‘father’ of modern India, its architect was Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917). A Parsi businessman, Naoroji spent fifty years living in England, during which time he delivered speeches, wrote essays and submitted petitions, all with one purpose: to persuade the British government and people that Indians should be granted the same rights as other British subjects. A good example of his argumentative prose is found in *Admission of educated natives into the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1868). In 1892, he himself was the first Indian to be elected to serve in the Parliament at Westminster.

**Keshub Chunder Sen** The stormy times of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are illustrated by the life and writing of the Bengali reformer Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884). Born a Hindu, he followed Raj Mohan Roy in the Brahmo Samaj movement, later broke with it and later still left the organisation shattered into three separate parts. In his journalism (and indefatigable speechmaking), he resolutely championed a synthesis of Christianity and Hinduism, arguing that Christ was Asian and that all Indian religions should unite in one ‘church.’

**Swami Vivekananda** Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was the last in a long line of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengali reformers. Like them, he wrote in many languages but reached the world through English. He became an internationally recognised spokesperson for Hinduism after his barnstorming address to a conference of religions in Chicago in 1892. In his long, Bengali essay *Bartaman Bharat* (‘Modern India,’ 1887), he surveyed the history of India, arguing that castes rise and fall, and that the real purpose of life is to ‘love your brothers and sisters.’ An English-language collection of essays, taken from his lectures (*Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, 1897), is still widely read.

#### Questions/discussion

1. Benedict Anderson coined the term ‘imagined community’ in 1983 to explain how ‘print capitalism’ became a decisive factor in the emergence of nationalist movements in Asia. While Anderson focused primarily on Indonesia, he did consider India, as well. Now, however, there is a great deal more published scholarship on the growth of the media and of nationalist politics in India. A new study of print capitalism and nationalism in India is overdue.
2. Evaluate the role of English in creating this ‘imagined community’ in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. Only a small percentage of the population could read the language, but were they sufficiently influential to bring about change?
3. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Urdu was seen as the language of the fading Muslim aristocracy. Yet it was used by some Muslim reformers (Syed Khan, most famously) to promote change. Hindi, Bengali and Tamil were the other languages of reform. To what extent was a nationalist cause undermined by championing it in regional languages?

#### Reading

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- Sasha Ebeling, *Colonizing the Realm of Words: The Transformation of Tamil Literature in Nineteenth-Century South India* (SUNY, 2010)
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- Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910. Western Impact, Indian Response* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991)

## Texts

### 1. From Raj Mohan Roy's letter to King George III, protesting against press regulation, 1823

After this Rule and Ordinance shall have been carried into execution, your Memorialists [the signatories] are therefore extremely sorry to observe that a complete stop will be put to the diffusion of knowledge and the consequent mental improvement now going on, either by translations into the popular dialect of this country from the learned languages of the East, or by the circulation of literary intelligence drawn from foreign publications. And the same cause will prevent those Natives who are better versed in the laws and customs of the British Nation from communicating to their fellow-subjects a knowledge of the admirable system of Government established by the British.

### 2. From *Satyarth Prakash* by Dayananda Saraswati, 1875

They should also counsel then against all things that lead to superstition, and are opposed to true religion and science, so that they may never give credence to such imaginary things as ghosts (Bhuts) and spirits (Preta).

All alchemists, magicians, sorcerers, wizards, spiritists, etc. are cheats and all their practices should be looked upon as nothing but downright fraud.

Young people should be well counseled against all these frauds, in their very childhood, so that they may not suffer through being duped by any unprincipled person.

### 3. From *Bartaman Bharat* by Swami Vivekananda, 1899

O India, this is your terrible danger. The spell of imitating the West is getting such a strong hold upon you that what is good or what is bad is no longer decided by reason, judgment, discrimination, or reference to the Shastras [sacred laws]. Whatever ideas, whatever manners the white men praise or like are good; whatever things they dislike or censure are bad. Alas! what can be a more tangible proof of foolishness than things?