

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN LITERATURE

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview Indian literature began with the ancient oral texts of the Vedas, the bedrock of Hinduism, and now it produces Booker Prize-winning novelists. In addition to the rich corpus of Sanskrit classical literature, India has a second classical tradition in Tamil, beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era. Other major regional literatures appear after 600 CE, and an entirely new element of Persian literary genres and sensibilities was introduced with the coming of Muslim rule to India in about 1000 CE. Historically, probably until the mid-19th century, poetry has been the genre of status, composed at courts, recited at rituals and copied by scribes in manuscripts. Fiction, especially the novel, developed from colonial influences and today dominates Indian literature.

I: INDO-ARYAN CIVILISATION

Poetry

Vedas The four Vedas (Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva) were composed in Sanskrit between about 1200 and 900 BCE. The Rig Veda, which is the oldest and most literary of the four Vedas, contains 1028 hymns to be used at sacrifices. The Sama Veda is more abstruse, being a re-arrangement of certain verses from the Rig Veda for liturgical purposes. The Yajur Veda, composed probably two centuries after the Rig Veda, is a compilation of verses to be sung by an assistant priest at the sacrifice. The last, the Atharva Veda, is very different from the other three in that it mainly contains charms and imprecations

Composition The Vedas were not written. Vedic literature was composed, performed and transmitted orally, using a complex set of mnemonic techniques, metrical schemes and literary conventions, by a series of poets, over a period of several hundred years. In other words, Vedic literature is speech (indeed, speech is deified as the goddess Vac). This fact cannot be repeated too many times. The Vedas were not read. They were heard.

Metre The metric system of the Vedas, like that of most early and later Indian poetic traditions (and most Indo-European literatures) is measured by long and short syllables and not (as in English) by stress. A syllable was counted as 'long' if it contained a long vowel or a short vowel and two consonants. Most of the hymns are arranged in quatrains, although divisions of three and five also exist. Similarly, while the standard metre is iambic, there is considerable variation in metre.

Rig Veda The most literary of the Vedas, the Rig Veda contains 1028 hymns in praise (*ric* means 'praise') of various deities, most of whom are not worshipped today but whose stories have been preserved by later myths and epics. The literary brilliance and cultural authority of the Rig Veda lies in vivid imagery, cosmogonic conundrums and dramas enacted by priests, natural forces and the gods.

Creation myths The Rig Veda contains several creation myths. One verse proclaims that sound (the goddess Vac) created the world. (Cf. 'In the beginning was the word.') Elsewhere, the world emerges from a primeval sacrifice of a man, who is then divided into four parts corresponding to the four major caste groups. The world also comes out of a 'golden womb' as well as a 'universal egg.' Later, creation becomes the work of a figure named Prajapati. But where did the original substance come from? 'How,' ask the ancient sages, 'did being evolve from non-being?' There is no certainty, not even among those 'who look down on it, in the highest heaven.' When we 'read' these lines in the Rig Veda and feel a quickening of uncertainty, we enter a dialogue about the human condition that stretches back three thousand years.

Prose

Texts From about 900 to 500 BCE, the Indo-Aryans composed three types of mainly prose texts to complement the ritual texts of the Vedas. These three later types of texts, composed orally in Sanskrit (like the earlier ritual texts but in an already distinctly different form of the language) are the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. At the same time, they also include many verses, either as samples to be used in ritual or as quotations from the ritual texts.

Brahmanas The *Brahmanas* are mainly prose explanations of how to perform sacrifices, that is, a sort-of manual to be used by men less learned than the priests. For example, the opening section of the *Chandogya*

Brahmana, one of the oldest Brahmanas, lists the hymns to be used during a marriage and at the birth of a child. It also then instructs the user in how to perform the ritual, how to hold one's fingers or how to pronounce the ritual words. This is followed by a short exposition of the social importance of marriage.

Aranyakas The *Aranyakas*, or 'Forest Books,' are less functional and more contemplative, to be used by men toward the end of life when, by convention, they enter the forest for meditation. They are transitional texts, in that they provide a bridge from the ritual and mythology of the four Vedas to the philosophical speculation of the Upanishads. This point is crucial since it parallels the overall shift in Hindu thought from the correct external performance of a ritual to the internalised vision of the ritual. In other words, from action to thought. And from the exuberant and sanguine outlook in the four Vedas to doubt and contemplation in the Upanishads.

Upanishads While there are more than 200 texts bearing the title 'Upanishad' (lit. 'sitting near [a sage]'), only twelve are considered major texts. These major texts were composed over a number of centuries, probably from about 800-300 BCE. Like all early Indian literature, the major Upanishads were orally composed and transmitted; however, tradition maintains that they were created by named sages. The earliest surviving written texts date from about the 14 century AD, although, like other Vedic texts, they were probably written down much earlier.

II CLASSICAL PERIOD

Court Poetry

Sanskrit Classical Sanskrit poetry was dominated by *kavya*, a capacious category that is perhaps best understood as a meta-genre containing several sub-genres. The most common, prominent in Sanskrit court poetry, is the lyric verse devoted to love and longing and using a repertoire of 'adornments' (*alankara*), such as stock epithets, alliterations and metaphors. *Kavya* poets flourished during the Gupta Empire (3rd-5th c. CE). Long poems were called *maha* ('great') *kavya*.

Buddhacarita The *Buddhacarita* ('Life of the Buddha') by Asvaghosa is often recognised as the earliest classical Sanskrit poem. Composed approximately 100 CE as a hagiography of the historical Buddha, it is also composed in one of the simplest Sanskrit metres. Of its 28 chapters, or cantos, only the first 14 are found in extant Sanskrit versions, although complete versions do survive in Chinese and Tibetan.

Kalidasa The most influential classical Sanskrit poet was Kalidasa (5th c. CE), who was patronised by Gupta kings. Kalidasa was prolific. He wrote two long poems or *mahakavyas* (*Kumarasambhava*, 'Birth of the War God Kumara' and *Raghuvamsa*, 'Dynasty of Raghu'), plus a well-loved lyric poem (*Megaduta*, 'The Cloud Messenger') and a still-performed play (*Shakuntala*). He was also a famous playwright.

Bhartrhari Little is known about Bhartrhari, though most scholars believe he lived in the 5th century CE and wrote important Sanskrit texts, such as the *Vākyapadīya* (an original discourse on Sanskrit grammar and philosophy). He is best known, however, for the poems in the *Śatakātaya*, a collection of short verses in which each group is dedicated to a different *rasa* (the distillation of an aesthetic mood in a reader/listener).

Tamil Classical Tamil poetry is known as *cankam* ('academy'), after the academy of poets who, by tradition, composed this corpus of nearly 2,400 poems probably between 100-300 CE. Most of the 473 named poets composed only a single poem, although a few (Kapilar 235 poems and Ammuvar 127) were prolific. Avvaiyar, one of the few female poets, wrote 59. Unlike the Sanskrit poets of the Gupta court, these Tamil poets were patronised by the rulers of small kingdoms, and many were itinerant. Tamil poetry has two overarching genres: *akam* ('interior') and *puram* ('exterior'). This dichotomy, which refers to both the topographical and psychological dimensions of a poem, may be translated as 'love' and 'war' poems.

Epic Poetry

Mahabharata The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* ('Great War') was composed over a number of centuries. When completed about 400 CE, it had amassed 100,000 couplets (more than 8 times the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together). The core of the *Mahabharata*, interspersed with large chunks of didactic and mythological material, is the story of a dynastic struggle between two groups of cousins: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. While war is the centrepiece, the background is equally important to the dramatic tension. We watch as the cohesion among fraternal kin (a high priority in a patrilineal and patrilocal society like Hindu north India) slowly breaks down. Jealousy, poor judgement, childlessness, a curse, sexual humiliation of a wife and a disastrous game of dice breed animus and lead to the exile of one group by the other.

Ramayana The Sanskrit *Ramayana* ('Way of Rama' or 'Story of Rama') was composed over several centuries (about 200 BCE to 300 CE), drawing on versions of the story circulating in oral tradition. It was thus composed by different poets, but its author is said by tradition to be the legendary sage Valmiki. We thus speak of the *Valmiki Ramayana* because there are hundreds of other versions of the story, and more than 25 in Sanskrit alone. The multiple versions, simple metre and frame story all point to the origins of the Rama story in oral tradition. The core story is the life and adventures of Rama, *avatar* of Visnu and heir to his father's throne.

Cilappatikaram The 'Lay of the Anklet' (*Cilappatikaram*) is an epic composed in Tamil about 500 CE, probably by a Jain monk. Consisting of more than 5,000 verses, it is a tragic story of jealousy, deception, undeserved death and the power of a woman's love. While it bears some similarity to contemporaneous Sanskrit court poetry, especially in its ornate descriptions of place and nature, its deeper message of loss and revenge sets it apart. The heroine, Kannaki, became a popular goddess in Tamil culture, reversing the usual sequence in which a deity becomes a literary figure.

Fiction

Fable Early fiction appeared in this period in the form of short moral stories or fables (known as *nithi katha*). These are generally in prose, although sometimes the 'lesson' itself is in verse. Nearly all these numerous stories began as oral tales before being collected and written down in manuscripts by scribes and scholars. There were two major collections, the *Pancatantra* and the *Jataka*. The collections often use what is called a 'frame-story' to give a narrative coherence to the otherwise disparate tales. These originally oral tales were collected and redacted in manuscript form sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era. Some were composed in Pali, but most were in Sanskrit, although all were eventually written down in every Indian language.

Pancatantra The *Pancatantra* ('Five-Books') is a collection of nearly 100 animal fables. The frame-story is that a pundit instructs three ignorant princes in the art of statecraft, using these moral stories as lessons. The work is divided into five sections, each focusing on an aspect of statecraft, although each has more general significance. The five topics are: The Separation of Friends, The Gaining of Friends, War and Peace, Loss of Gains and ill-Considered Action. Each of these sections is itself introduced by a frame-story, within which animals take turns telling a story.

Jataka The *Jataka* tales are similar to those in the *Pancatantra* (some tales are found in both collections) with the important difference that they were adapted to tell the story of the previous lives of the historical Buddha. In most variants of the text, each tale has a similar structure. First there is a folktale in prose, in which the Buddha-to-be appears as one of the characters, either human or animal. This is then followed by a brief commentary in verse that links the story to an aspect of the Buddha's teaching

Drama

Early texts Fragments of a drama by Asvaghosa date from the 1st c. CE, although it seems likely that dramatic performance must have occurred earlier. Two early Sanskrit texts, the *Mahabhasya* ('Great Commentary [on grammar]') and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* ('*Treatise on Theatre*'), from about the same period, provide evidence of a developed drama form. The earliest extant complete plays are those by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Sudraka (all 5th c. CE).

Greek influence Some scholars have detected Greek influence in early Indian drama, arguing that plays enacted at the courts of Indo-Greek kings (c. 250 BCE-50 CE) inspired Indian poets to develop their own form. Indeed, the curtain that divided the stage is called *yavanika* (from the Sanskrit word for 'Greek'). The famous 'Clay Cart' (see below) also bears a superficial resemblance to the late Greek comedy of the school of Menander.

Content Classical Indian drama, like most of Indian literature, did not hold with tragedy. Heroes and heroines might suffer defeat and loss, but a happy ending was not far away. There was, however, sufficient melodrama to satisfy the emotional needs of the audience. Innocent men are led toward execution, chaste wives are driven from their homes and children are separated from their loving parents.

Bhasa Very little is known about Bhasa, the earliest (and arguably the greatest) of the classical playwrights. He is dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, and all that is certain is that he pre-dated Kalidasa and that 13 plays

are attributed to him. Many of those plays retell episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and some are tragedies, which was unusual in classical Indian theatre. For example, the *Pratima Nataka* tells the story of Kaikeyi from the *Ramayana*, usually considered the evil step-mother responsible for the sufferings of Rama and his father. *Bhasa*, however, shows how she herself suffered from her guilt.

Kalidasa The best-known playwright of the classical period is Kalidasa (5th c. CE), whose fame rests also on his poetry. Three of his plays have survived: *Malavika and Agnimitra* (a palace intrigue), *Urvashi Won by Valor* (the Vedic story of Urvashi) and *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. This last has always been considered his finest work and is still performed today, around the world.

Sudraka The only other surviving play of significance in this period is *Mrcchakaṭika* ('The Little Clay Cart') written by Sudraka, a contemporary of Kalidasa. This story is one of the most realistic and the plot one of the most complicated in the large corpus of classical Sanskrit literature. The central narrative concerns a love affair between a poor Brahmin (whose son can only have a little clay cart instead of grander toys) and a virtuous courtesan, but quickly moves into political intrigue, stolen jewels, a vivid court scene and the overthrow of a wicked king. With this moving story, 'The Little Clay Cart' is the most easily appreciated of classical dramas.

III EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Poetry

Sanskrit Following Kalidasa, the great exponent of classical Sanskrit poetry and drama during the Gupta Empire, Sanskrit poets continued to experiment. Perhaps the most highly regarded of Kalidasa's successors was Magha, who lived in the seventh century CE and lived in a small court in Rajasthan. His most enduring work is *Shishupala Vadha*, a *mahākāvya* based on a story in the *Mahabharata*. Bhatti (probably 7th c. CE) wrote *mahakavyas* based on episodes from the Rama story, the most famous being the *Ravanavadha*. Bharavi (probably 6th c. CE and probably from south India) wrote the *Kirātārjunīya*, modelled on earlier tellings of same story from the *Mahabharata* and considered one of the finest of the *mahakavyas*. Bana (7th c. CE), who was also a playwright, wrote poems collected under the title *Candisataka*. Kumaradasa (7th c. CE) is remembered for his retelling of the 'rape' of Sita (*Janaki-harana*) from the Rama story.

Tamil Tamil devotionalist (*bhakti*) poets who composed songs in praise of Siva were collectively called the Nayanmars ('Servants of the Lord'). They usually focused on a specific form of Siva associated with a specific place or mythic story. Some of their poems have a raw, wounded quality, often literally in the description of bodily mortification. Sometimes that poetic ferocity is directed against Jain and Buddhist scholars, philosophers and mendicants, who had considerable influence in south Indian kingdoms and towns at the time. These songs (often called 'hymns') in praise of Siva were later collected in the *Tirumurai* ('Sacred Way') a 12-volume compendium. From this massive work we know the names of 63 poet-saints who composed thousands of hymns. A second group of poets were those who sang in praise of Visnu. They were called the 'Deep Ones' (*Alvars*) because of the passion of their verse, through which they sought to immerse themselves in god.

Fiction

Sanskrit The most impressive and perhaps influential fictive work of this period is Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita* ('The Tales of the Ten Princes'). This entertaining story, written in Sanskrit in the 7th century CE, is a collection of exciting tales held together by a frame-story, which reveals its debt to oral tradition. The tales of the ten princes themselves are mostly secular, often amoral and usually humorous, a little like the ethos of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Another major writer was Bana, the court poet of Harsha, whose kingdom dominated north India in the 7th c. CE. Bana is known for two prose works: *Kadambari* and *Harshacarita*. A major piece of fiction that circulated in this period is the *Brhatkatha* ('The Great Story').

Tamil The Tamil retelling of the *Brhatkatha* is the *Perunkatai* ('Great Story', a literal translation). From references to this text in other Tamil sources, we can date it to the 8th or 9th century CE. It was written by Konkuvelir, obviously a Jain scholar since Jaina maxims and terminology are abundant (remember that the original *Brhatkatha* was also written by a Jain). The 16,000 verses use a common Tamil metre (*akaval*). A second, major Tamil narrative epic poem of this period is the *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* ('The Glorious Civaka'). It, too, was written by a Jain scholar (Tirutakkatevar), and it, too, borrows from Sanskrit originals as well as the *Perunkatai*. In turn, the beauty of its 3000-plus verses influenced the greatest of all Tamil epic poems (the *Ramayana* of Kamban, 12th c. CE). Two further major works are *Nilakeci* and *Culamani*, both composed by Jains.

Drama

Bhavabhuti Following the high water mark of Sanskrit drama during the time of Kalidasa (5th c. CE), the tradition was ably continued by Bhavabhuti (7th or 8th c. CE). Fortunately, three of his plays have come down to us in more or less complete form: 'Malati and Madhava', *Mahaviracarita* ('The Deeds of the Great Hero') and *Uttararamacarita* ('The Later Deeds of Rama'). The first of these is a melodramatic story, full of incident and terror, in which a heroine is repeatedly rescued from death. The other two texts rework the Rama story. Critics judge Bhavabhuti as inferior to other dramatists of this period in terms of plot and characterisation, while at the same time praising his ability to express sorrow and loss.

Visakhadatta Visakhadatta (6th c. CE?) wrote plays about politics, although only one entire play and fragments of another have survived. The partial text (*Devichandragupta*, 'The Queen and Chandra Gupta') is an ambitious attempt to tell the story of Chandra Gupta II and his rise to power in the 4th c. BCE. The other, complete play is the justly famous *Mudraraksasa* ('The Minister's Signet Ring'), which focuses on high-drama intrigue during the same historical period.

Harsha Three plays are ascribed to Harsha, although they may all be the work of a 'ghost' writer. *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarshika* are both comedies based on the lives of the ladies of the harem, in which the eponymous heroines display wit and charm through banter. The third play, *Nagananda* ('Joy of the Serpents'), is a religious story in which a prince gives his own life in order to stop the sacrifice of snakes to Garuda, a divine bird.

IV: LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Poetry

Kannada The immediate successor to the earlier Tamil *bhakti* tradition was devotional poetry in Kannada, another Dravidian language in the adjacent territory to the north. These Kannada poets (c. 1000-1200 CE), who included non-Brahmans and women, created a new and simple form of verse (the *vacana*, 'speech') in which they sang songs to Siva. Known as Virasaivas ('Militant/Heroic Saivas') or more commonly today as Lingayats, they used this simple verse form to propagate their spiritual vision and egalitarian social ideals. The best known poet was Basavanna, a Brahmin who threw away his sacred thread to establish a community of equals.

Tamil Following the group of Tamil poets (*Alvars*) who sang in praise of Visnu, a court poet composed a Tamil version of the *Ramayana*. The poet Kampan (12th c. CE?) did not simply retell the Sanskrit story; he reinvented it as a full-blown devotional epic in which Rama is indisputably the avatar of Visnu. (The epic text of 24,000 lines is actually called *Rama-avataram*.) The son of a temple drummer, Kampan wrote a work that is considered the jewel in the crown of Tamil literature. His writing is witty, and often satirical, powerful and imaginative. In his composition, Rama and Sita become characters with the full spectrum of emotions and ambiguities. No one since Kampan has combined such beautiful language with such depth of feeling.

Hindi One of the most celebrated, and revolutionary, poets of north Indian *bhakti* is Kabir (15th c. CE). Born into a low caste of weavers that soon converted to Islam, Kabir's intense poetry reveals a mixture of Hindu and Islamic mysticism. He is most remembered for his rejection of caste and sect in favour of a humanism, which has been lauded by later Indian figures, including Tagore and Gandhi. His universal appeal is underlined by the fact that many of his poems/songs are included in the Sikh holy scriptures.

Bengali In the manner of Kabir, the Bengali poet-mystic Chaitanya (15th c. CE) also renounced caste, ritualism and idol worship, perhaps through the influence of iconoclastic Islam. Chaitanya's poems, however, show a more sectarian slant and glorify Krishna as the supreme reality.

Sanskrit The outstanding work of Sanskrit devotionalism in this period is *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva (12th c. CE). Ostensibly a poem in praise of Krishna, it in fact reveals the dark dangers of passion and the pain of separation, in both human and divine attachments. The poem includes a dramatization of the 'eight moods' of the heroine that provides inspiration for Indian classical dance, music and literature.

Indo-Persian Indo-Persian writers produced their most subtle work in the *Gaza*, a short lyric of rhymed couplets mixing the conventions of a love poem with those of drinking song. The verses draw almost entirely on landscape, flora and fauna from Iran for imagery, the most famous example being the contrast between the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). The language uses a highly complex poetic vocabulary, made even more

enigmatic by the Sufi religious themes that supply the content. Many *ghazals* express deep emotions of longing and loss, on both the level of ordinary human experience and the mystical experience of god.

Amir Khusrau Among the many *ghazal* compositions in this period, those of Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) are regarded as the finest. Critics both then and now admire his concise style, in which each verse encapsulates a complete moral point of view. Like most accomplished Sufi poets, his work combines asceticism with aestheticism. Amir Khusrau, who served as court poet during the Delhi Sultanate, was a prolific and popular writer. In addition to writing odes, riddles and legends, some of which are still studied today, he is credited with developing the influential *qawwali* genre of devotional song by fusing Persian and Indian music traditions.

Fiction

Kathasaritsagara The *Kathasaritsagara* ('The Ocean of Streams of Story') is a 12th-century Sanskrit version of the earlier (and lost) text known as *Brhatkatha*. Like that earlier text, the *Kathasaritsagara* is a rambling compendium of tales, legends and the supernatural composed in an easy metre with prose sections interspersed. The author, Somadeva, put the story of a legendary prince at the centre of his narrative and built a number of other stories around it. He drew on the vast repertoire of Sanskrit story literature, including tales from the *Pancatantra*.

Hitopadesa The *Hitopadesa* is another Sanskrit collection of tales. Rather than the entertaining adventures of the vampire tales, however, this text is a series of moral fables. The primary source for this text is the *Pancatantra*, borrowing not only many of its tales but also its frame-story. Like all collections that borrow from earlier texts, the dating of the *Hitopadesa* is difficult. Some scholars, relying on internal references to other texts, favour the 9th or 10th century CE, but as the earliest surviving manuscript carries a date of 1377 CE, a later date seems reasonable.

Masnavi Indo-Persian writers of the period adapted the *masnavi* genre (rhyming couplets in a religious poem), made famous in Persia by Rumi, to tell stories based on Indian folk tales. One of the earliest is the *Esq-nama* by Hasan Dehlavi of Delhi (13th-14th c. CE), which was inspired by an oral tale from Rajasthan.

Tuti-Nama Another famous adaptation from Sanskrit story literature is the 'Story of the Parrot' (*Tuti Nama*) by Nakhshabi in the 14th century CE. Nakhshabi's life is typical of many during this period. A Persian physician born in Persia, he migrated to north India and found patronage under a minor Muslim ruler. While still in Persia, he had translated a Sanskrit version of the story (*Sukasaptati*, 'Story of 70 Parrots') and adapted this to write the *Tuti Nama*. In his text, a single parrot tells 52 tales over as many nights in order to prevent its mistress from having a love affair while her husband is away (a delaying tactic of storytelling that is familiar to us from the *Thousand and One Nights*).

V EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Poetry

Arunagirinathar The tradition of Tamil devotional poetry reached its apogee with Arunagirinathar, whose dates are uncertain but late 15th or early 16th century seems likely. Other poets came later, but his verse is the culmination of a rich interaction between Sanskrit and Tamil poetics that had been brewing for a thousand years. The result, particularly in Arunagirinathar's masterpiece (the 1400 stanzas of *Tiruppukal*) is a magical confection of dazzling images and linguistic juggling. Some might say that the formal cleverness of the writing outshines its emotional depth, but even today his songs are sung by ordinary people with great pleasure.

Ravidas An influential mystic, poet-saint and social reformer of this period is Ravidas (late 15th/early 16th c. CE?), who wrote searing songs in Hindi. Born to a low caste of leather-workers in the Punjab, his poems were heavily influenced by the egalitarianism of the Sikh movement and are included in the Sikh scriptures, which remain our primary textual source for Ravidas' work. Like Kabir, Ravidas articulated the *nirguna* concept of god, that is, a god without attributes.

Surdas An equally influential Hindi poet-saint, and probable contemporary of Ravidas, is Surdas (late 15th/early 16th c. CE?). Surdas, however, wrote in Braj (a language closely related to Hindi and spoken in the Mathura region) and envisioned god (Krishna, in his case) as very much with attributes (*saguna*). His collection of poems (*Sursagar*) is said to have contained 100,000 poems, though only 8,000 survive, in which the poet achieves a subtle blend of mystical and sensual love.

Mirabai Among Surdas' contemporaries was Mirabai, a Rajput princess, who composed poems in a mixture of Braj, Rajasthani and Gujarati. As one of the few female poets recognised in literary histories, and one caught up in the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of her age, she has attracted a wealth of legends and attributions, many of which are considered spurious. The poems credited to her show an intense devotion to Krishna.

Mangal-Kavya *Mangal-kavya* ('poems of benediction') were composed in Bengali as early as the 13th century CE, but the flowering of the genre took place in the 16th to 18th centuries. Most of these devotional poems are dedicated to a specific god or goddesses, the three most popular being *Manasa Mangal*, *Chandi Mangal* and *Dharma Mangal*. This poetic genre is representative of the early modern period in that the poems represent a synthesis of classical and local literary-cultural traditions.

Tulsidas The most influential of all these Ramayanas, however, was that composed in Hindi by Tulsidas (1532-1623 CE). His *Ramcaritmanas* is often called the 'bible of north India,' and certainly no other Hindi text matches the literary skill and cultural status of this epic rendering of the Rama story. Tulsidas transformed the Sanskrit text so thoroughly that recitation of his poem became (and still is) an act of worship. The influence of this text is underpinned by the fact that it is the textual basis for an immensely popular dramatic enactment of the Rama story in north India.

Abul Faizl Among the many poets patronised by the Mughal emperors, the outstanding name is Abul Faizl (Shaikh Abu-al-Fazal-ibn Mubarak, 1547-1595). In addition to his well-known biography of Akbar (Akbarname, for which see the article on 'auto/biography'), he translated Hindu story literature into Persian, produced a list of 59 poets (including several Hindus) at Akbar's court and wrote letters that have survived. Somehow, he also found time to compose a large number of poems in the Persian genres of *qasida*, *ghazal* and *rubai*.

Fiction

Hamzanama The *Hamzanama* (or *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, 'Adventures of Amir Hamza') is representative of the multiple literary and cultural influences that converge in this period. The picaresque text draws on the Indo-Persian genre of oral storytelling (*dastan/qissa*) to narrate the story of Amir Hamza, the legendary uncle of the prophet Muhammad. The hero is put through a series of escapades, including narrow escapes from deceitful friends and dangerous animals. Many versions of the work circulated orally and in manuscript, but a canonical text was produced when an illustrated Persian manuscript was commissioned by Akbar in about 1562 CE.

Padmavat Another multi-layered historical narrative in this period, with many versions and influences, is the *Padmavat*. Epic in scope, like the *Hamzanama* (and other narratives of the period), it is a fictionalised account of a 14th-century battle between a Hindu king and a Muslim attacker. Although written from a Hindu point of view, it shows the influence of Indo-Persian literary models. The story turns the bare bones of history into a morality tale that expresses the joy of transcendental love and the union of a human soul with god. We have a 1540 CE manuscript written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in Awadhi (a north Indian language closely related to Hindi), but the story is much older and generated many later textual versions.

Urdu Urdu, which received little encouragement at the Mughal court in Delhi, developed under the patronage of Muslim rulers in the Deccan, especially at the courts of Golconda and Bijapur. Sufficiently distant from Delhi, writers in these smaller kingdoms still drew on Persian literary forms but injected more Indian substance to forge a new literary identity of Deccani Urdu. The long historical narrative, in the *masnavi* genre, was their preferred vehicle of literary expression.

Kamal Khan Rustami Among the many talented writers of Deccani Urdu was Kamal Khan Rustami (17th c. CE). Supported by Muhammad Adil Shah of Bijapur, in 1649 he wrote *Khawar Nama*, which borrowed its title from a 14th-century Persian text. This long (23,000-line) *masnavi* is a historical narrative story based on the military exploits of Ali, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad.

Nusrati Nusrati, Rustami's contemporary, also wrote epic *masnavis* as court poet of the Bijapur ruler Adil Shah II. He was a prolific writer, but his most-celebrated work is *Ali Shah* (1665), a narrative poem chronicling the military campaigns of his patron. With vivid imagery and religious fervour, Nusrati describes how his Muslim patron defeated the Mughals and later the Mahrattas.

Drama

Ram Lila Based on the text of Tulsidas's *Ramayana* (16th c. CE), Ram Lila ('Play of Rama'; *lila* carries both

meanings of the English 'play,' plus a connotation of divine play) is a hugely popular drama that is still performed annually throughout the Hindi-speaking regions of north India. With elaborate costumes, it is staged outdoors over a series of nights, typically ten, though in Varnasi it stretches to 31. Dialogue is minimal, and reciters are used to chant verses from the Hindi text. Although we have no reliable evidence prior to observations by Europeans in the 19th century, it seems reasonable to assume that the Ram Lila formed sometime in the 17th century and 19th century.

Nautanki By contrast, Nautanki is a secular theatre tradition, drawing on popular tales from Hindu and Muslim traditions. Dialogue is usually in Hindi, while libretti are often in Urdu. There is a strong satirical strain in the plays of Nautanki, as revealed by its original name of *svang* ('impersonation', 'mime'). As with the other north Indian theatres of this time, its history is poorly documented, although most scholars believe it coalesced into its present form sometime around 1600 CE.

Terukkuttu Terukkuttu ('Street Theatre') is a ritualised enactment of episodes from Tamil versions of the epic text. The plays, which are performed over a series of nights (from one to 18), focus specifically on the character of Draupadi, the wronged wife of one of the Pandava brothers, and are performed in temples dedicated to her. Again, song dominates over dialogue.

Kathakali Kathakali ('Story-drama') is a highly sophisticated theatre, or opera, performed in central Kerala. One of several related drama forms found on this southwest coast region, it consists of a number of plays written in a Malayalam heavily influenced by Sanskrit and dating from the late 16th century and early 17th century CE. Sanskrit verses recited by vocalists explain the action, while the actors, in elaborate costumes and face paint, 'speak' the dialogue by dance, gesture and eye movement.

Yakshagana Similar in performance mode, but not textual base, Yakshagana is a theatre form performed in the Kannada- and Telugu-speaking areas of south India. The Telugu tradition, which emerged in minor courts during this period, employs a high-literary Telugu (mixed with Sanskrit) to create plays ostensibly devotional but laced with mockery, usually directed at Brahmins. The Kannada tradition, which uses stories from the epics, is more serious, ritual theatre performed in temple precincts.

VI 19th CENTURY

Poetry

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 love, 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 ritualization 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.

Narmad 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.

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 sang 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.

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 19th 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.

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 19th-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 poetic world shone with his passion for the natural world and his understanding of human emotions. Like other great poets of this century, he married the sensibility of his regional (Bengali) tradition with that of modernity. At the age of 16, he composed poems later published (under a pseudonym) as *Bhanusimha Thakurer Padabali*. His most famous work, *Gitanjali*, which was published in 1910, earned him the Nobel Prize in 1913.

Fiction

Urdu 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 all these brief prose narrative genres were published by the British, aided by Urdu scholars, at Fort William College in Calcutta.

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 was written in 1864 in English and was soon forgotten. His first Bengali novel, *Durgensandini*, came a year later and, though somewhat clunky and melodramatic, was wildly popular and began 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 (as in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*). Most scholars, confirming the author's own assessment, agree that his 'best' novel, or that 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 exquisite 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.

Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai A first, 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 'real' 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 petty nature of some people, but also the genuine grief and confusion of others. It is a novel of critical realism, something that few other Tamil writers have managed to produce till this day. It uncovers the injustice of a woman's position in a rural Brahmin family, but it does so with wit and panache.

Drama

Michael Madhusudan Dutt Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) contributed to 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 every thing 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 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 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), better known as a poet, also contributed to the new Bengali theatre, which in turn influenced new drama throughout India. He wrote several plays in the 1880's and 1890s, based on English models (including Oscar Wilde) or utilising traditional Indian stories. *Prakrtir 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.

Vedanayaka Sastri During the first half of the century, Tamil drama, like most Indian drama, was dominated by traditional forms and 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. 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. However, his famous *Bethlehem Kuravanci* ('The Fortune-Teller Lady of Bethlehem', 1809) does just that.

Sambanda Mutaliyar Modern Tamil drama gained an institutional basis in the 1890s through the efforts of Sambanda Mutaliyar (1873-1964). Encouraged by his father to see performances in Madras, Mutaliyar also read Shakespeare as a child and, when only 19 years old, established a theatre company in Madras (the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, 'Society for Respectable Drama'), which exists to this day, though only as a men's club. Despite his full-time job as a lawyer, and later judge, Mutaliyar wrote dozens of plays, including an adaptation of *Hamlet*, which after several revisions, made him a success on the stage.

Parsi A new theatre form appeared in Bombay in the 1850s. The Parsi theatre (named after the Parsis, or Zoroastrians who came to the city from Iran in the 18th century) was written in Urdu, Gujarati and Marathi, which was a challenge to existing drama, exclusively performed in English. By the 1870s, however, it had spread across India, and 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.

VII EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Poetry

Mohammad Iqbal Mohammad Iqbal (1877?-1938) was the last major Persian poet of South Asia and the most important Urdu poet of the twentieth century. A philosopher and politician, as well, he is considered the spiritual founder of Pakistan. His finely worked poems combine a glorification of the past, Sufi mysticism and passionate anti-imperialism. As an advocate of pan-Islam, at first he wrote in Persian (two important poems being 'Shikwah,' 1909, and 'Jawab-e-Shikwah,' 1912), but then switched to Urdu, with *Bangri-Dara* in 1924. In much of his later work, there is a tension between the mystical and the political, the two impulses that drove Urdu poetry in this period.

Nirala A key figure of the new poetry in Hindi (the *chayavad*, a neo-romanticist movement) was 'Nirala' (1896-1961), a Bengali Brahman, who nevertheless wrote his poetry in Hindi. Equally conversant with ancient Indian philosophy and modern English literature, he had the intellectual power to synthesise various strands in his humanist and revolutionary writing. Often using free verse, his work was considered too unconventional to be popular in his lifetime.

Mahadevi Varma The only woman poet in the *chayavad* movement, was Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987), who went largely unrecognised in her time. She drew on the more traditional reservoir of Sanskrit poetry and the medieval lyrics of Mirabai (a woman poet of the 16th c. CE) to create sensual love poetry.

Rabindranath Tagore Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who had already helped shape modern Bengali with his poems and fiction in the late 19th century, continued to influence its future with his poetry in the 20th. In 1901, he established a rural retreat (Shantiniketan), where he wrote his Nobel Prize winning *Gitanjali* ('Song Offerings') in 1912. Although these poems are rightly regarded as mystical (and often derided as such), they were deepened by his grief over the recent deaths of his wife and two of his children. Tagore, however, was moving away from spiritualism at the time and soon produced a collection of robustly humanist verse (*Balaka*, 'Wild Geese,' 1916).

Sri Aurobindo While Tagore was leaving behind the mystical traditions of Indian poetry, another Bengali poet, Aurobindo Ghose (later Sri Aurobindo, 1872-1950), was entering into a very deep spiritual plane in his poetry. Having spent 15 years in England, he returned to India in 1893 and became a passionate advocate of Indian nationalism. His radical politics landed him in jail, where he had spiritual experiences, though was later forced to leave British India to escape an arrest warrant and live in the French enclave of Pondicherry. There he wrote his masterpiece, *Savitri*, an epic poem of 23,000 lines in blank verse, which was only published after his death. It is the poetic expression of his philosophy, which explains the evolution of the human soul through the history of mankind and its hopeful future.

Subramania Bharati Tamil had no poet of with the international fame of Tagore, but in Subramania Bharati (1882-1921) it had a poet of equal skill and status, who fired the imagination of the south Indian literary world. Burning with a revolutionary fever for political change, he famously hailed the 1917 Russian revolution as a manifestation of the power of *shakti* (female force in Hindu mythology). Like the best of his contemporaries, he combined traditional learning with western thinking, using well-known metres and *bhakti* imagery to condemn the caste system and women's oppression. Like Sri Aurobindo, he fled to Pondicherry to escape being jailed for sedition, and there he continued to publish poems that drew on Hindu, Christian and Islamic traditions.

Fiction

Sadat Hasan Manto Fiction in Urdu was raised to a new level by the storytelling art of Sadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). Unusual among fiction writers in India of this period, he specialised in the short story, and like Chekhov and Maupassant, he told stories with a fine eye for detail and character motivation. Some critics condemned his apparent fascination with violence and sex, but others praised his stories featuring prostitutes and pimps for their unsentimental humanity. Certainly he was prolific, publishing no less than 15 collections during his lifetime, with several more published posthumously. Among his best books are *Atis Paray*, ('Spares of Fire,' 1936) and *Cughad* ('The Fool,' 1948).

Premchand Beginning with its first novel in 1882, Hindi fiction had been dominated by romance and adventure until Premchand (1880-1936). His first novel, *Sevasadan* ('House of Service', 1918), is representative of his work as it reveals the hypocrisy of the 'pillars of society.' *Godan* ('The Gift of a Cow')

was Premchand's last novel and his masterpiece. In it he created a social world that stands for all of India, without obvious heroes. There is the village, with every kind of character, good and bad, plus the *zamindar* (landowner). And there is the city, where the *zamindar* also lives, along with modern women, professionals, intellectuals, traditional Hindus and Muslims.

Rabindranath Tagore Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great poet, also wrote a series of provocative novels in the early decades of the century: *Cokher Bali* (1902), *Gora* (1910) and *Caturanga* (1916). Perhaps the most powerful was *Yogajog* (1929), a story of the struggle between masculine power and feminine resistance, coarseness and culture, featuring a marital rape.

Sarat Chandra Chatterji The Bengali novel, however, found an even more outstanding practitioner in Sarat Chandra Chatterji (1876-1938). Like Tagore, he used the Bengali family as a prism for exploring the world of the emotions, often focusing on women's lives, but his stories move more quickly, with few authorial interventions, relying instead of sudden and dramatic shifts that maintain suspense. His novella *Badadidi* ('The Elder Sister,' 1913) brought him instant fame and he remained extremely popular for his entire lifetime. While his most popular novel is arguably *Binder Chele* (1914), critics prefer *Srikanta* (1917-1933), a four-volume family saga.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (also Banerjee, 1894-1950) was a transitional figure between the early novelistic experiments in the 19th century and the fully-developed form of the 20th. In total, he published 17 novels, 20 collections of short stories and several miscellaneous books (a travelogue, an autobiography, a translation of *Ivanhoe*, a Bengali grammar, and works on astrology and the occult). *Pather Panchali* is the novel that catapulted Bandyopadhyay to national and then international fame. Published in 1929 as the first part of a trilogy known as *The Apu Trilogy*, it was quickly translated into several languages and was brought to an even wider audience with the film adaptation by Satyajit Ray in the 1950s. The excellence of the novel lies more in its emotional atmosphere and characters than in plot structure or suspense.

Putumaipittan The most radical and interesting Tamil writer in this period was Putumaipittan ('The Crazy One,' 1906-1948). In his brief literary career, he wrote nearly 100 short stories (some of which were unpublished and are being discovered even today), translated 50 stories from English into Tamil and wrote four non-fiction books (promoting his socialist ideals and condemning fascism, notably in his biography of Hitler).

Kalki The Tamil novel, which had several capable, even creative, practitioners, gained a wider following in the 1940s with the emergence of a storyteller who knew how to please readers. Kalki (R.A. Krishnamurthy, 1899-1954) used his magazine *Anandavikatan* as a vehicle for serialising his fabulously popular stories told in easy but rhythmic prose. Most of his novels are historical, transporting the reader back to the splendour of ancient Tamil kingdoms. Some critics felt his work was escapist, but Kalki himself was not uninterested in politics.

VIII LATE 20TH CENTURY

Poetry

Gulzar Gulzar (Sampooran Singh Kalra, b. 1934) writes in several languages (Hindi, Punjabi, Braj and Urdu) and has published several well-received collections of poetry, the latest in 2014 (*Green Poems*). However, his reputation rests on the Urdu lyrics, featuring the trials and hopes of the common man, which he has composed for films, starting with songs like 'Mora Gora Ang' (in *Bandini*, 1963) and 'Humne Dekhi Hai' (in *Khamoshi*, 1969). In 2008, he shot to international fame when he won the Oscar for 'Jai Ho' in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Ashok Vajpeyi Hindi writer Ashok Vajpeyi (b. 1941) represents another kind of modern poet. More a 'man of letters' than of song lyrics, Vajpeyi is an academic poet, critic, essayist and cultural administrator. He has published more than twenty books, including poetry collections, starting with *Shaher Ab Bhi Sambhavana Hai* ('The City is Still Likely') in 1966 and continuing with *Vivaksha* ('Implication') in 2006. He has also had a parallel life in government, beginning in 1965 and culminating in his chairmanship of the country's elite arts organisation in 2008-2011.

Arun Kolatkar Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004), who wrote in both Marathi and English, is widely recognised as an outstanding modern poet. Although he published widely as a young man, mostly in small magazines and newspapers, his first book of English poems (*Jejuri*, the name of a town) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1976 and another collection (*Kala Ghoda*, 'Black Horse,' a neighbourhood of Bombay) won a Sahitya

Akademi Award in 2004. *Jejuri*, however, is still regarded as his finest. Named after an old town, with a famous temple, it describes the experience of a traveller, who arrives on a state transport bus and wanders about the town, confused and alienated, and yet at the end leaves the place with a sense of wonder. It is a haunting portrait of psychological disorientation.

Salma The story of Tamil poet and novelist Salma (Rajathi Salma, b. 1968) is almost the stuff of legend. Born into a conservative Muslim family in a small town, she was taken out of school at age 13 and forced to marry. Undeterred, Salma continued to write her poems surreptitiously. She hid the scraps of paper, smuggled them out of the house and posted them to a publisher in Madras. Eventually, in 2000, a collection of poems (*Oru Malaiyum, Innoru Malaiyum*, 'An Evening and Another Evening') was published, followed by another (*Pacai Devatai*, 'Green Angel') in 2003. Reactions to these often overtly sexual and sensual poems have ranged from disgust to high praise. Today she is a central figure in new Tamil poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) was a polymath best-known for his poetry. Born into an Indian Jewish family in Bombay, he was brought up by his professor father and school-principal mother. After four years studying in London, where he immersed himself in the world of film and the visual arts, he returned to India (working on a cargo ship) and worked as a critic and editor. His first poetry collection (*A Time to Change*) was published in 1952, followed by a dozen others. When his language was criticised as 'old school' and 'colonial', he experimented (unsuccessfully) with 'Indian English.' His best poems ('Patriot' and 'The Night of the Scorpion') display a wicked wit and deep humanism.

A.K. Ramanujan A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) was perhaps the most brilliant of all the Indian English poets. Trained as a linguist, famous for his translations from ancient poems, and fascinated by Indian folklore, he brought to all his work a deep knowledge of Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada and English literature. At the same time, he balanced this classical learning with an appreciation of Indian oral traditions. For example, he opened up the study of the *Ramayana* with an essay 'Three Hundred Ramayanas', which was subsequently banned in major Indian universities but continues to enlighten generations of students and researchers. His poetry (*The Striders*, 1966; *Relations*, 1971; *Selected Poems*, 1976; *Second Sight*, 1986) displays a similar originality in its Haiku-like lapidary concision.

Fiction

Nirmal Verma Novelist Nirmal Verma (1929-2005) was also one of the founders of the 'new short story' movement in Hindi. He published twelve collections of stories, starting in 1959 with *Parinde* ('Birds'), whose title story is often cited as his best. Like so many of his contemporaries, Verma was active in politics and spent ten years in Prague as the guest of the Soviet-controlled government. He resigned from the Communist Party in 1956 after the invasion of Hungary.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994) wrote a series of powerful short stories (and novels) in the 1950s and 1960s. He, too, created a national debate through his insistence of using not standard Malayalam, but rather the dialect of his Muslim community. His fiction contains both fierce social realism (criticism of the backward practices of Muslims in Kerala) and the interior experiences of his characters.

C.S. Lakshmi C.S. Lakshmi ('Ambai, b. 1944) is a feminist critic, scholar and author in Tamil. Her journalism ranges widely over current affairs, but she is best known for her short stories, especially *Cirukukul Muriyum* ('Wings will be Broken,' 1968) and *Vitin Mulaiyil oru Camaiyalarai* ('A Kitchen in the Corner of the House', 1988). Her stories are not distinguished by literary style or language, and neither are they humorous or original. Instead, they look uncompromisingly at the everyday reality of women, revealing both their vulnerability and their strength.

R. K. Narayan R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) dominated the field of Indian English fiction for most of the century. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Narayan was never a political writer, and his fiction is often criticised for its apolitical stance and neglect of colonialism. However, he was too keen an observer of human nature to be indifferent to injustice. Most of his novels, in fact, explore some kind of social problem, though not the spectacular ones favoured by many of his contemporaries.

Aravind Adiga The most recent Booker-winning novel by an Indian is *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga (b. 1974). Written in the form of letters from its hero (Balram) to the Chinese Premier, 'from one entrepreneur to another,' as Balram says, it chronicles the effect of global capitalism on India. Balram himself, a poor village boy, goes to the big city and makes a success, but only by murdering and stealing along the way.

Like R.K Narayan, Aravind Adiga has great fun in lampooning the official rhetoric of progress, but the bitter cynicism is a long way from Narayan's gentle irony.

Dalits Since the early 20th century, Indian writers had created Dalit (Untouchable, Harijan) characters, but now Dalits themselves are writing their own stories. The landmark publication in 1978 of Daya Pawar's Marathi-language *Balute* ('Share') was followed by several more novels in Marathi in the 1980s. The major Dalit writer in Tamil is Bama, a Catholic woman, who has written three powerful novels: *Karuku* ('Blades') in 1982, *Sangati* ('Events') in 1994 and *Vanmam* ('Vendetta') in 2002. In Hindi, *Joothan* ('Left Overs', 1997) by Omprakash Valmiki tells the story of a caste of scavengers, who subsist on what others throw away.

Drama

Utpal Dutt The career arc of Utpal Dutt (1929–1993) charts the fortunes of Indian modern theatre in general. He began as an actor in Bengali theatre performed in Calcutta, later founded the Little Theatre Group and twice toured the country in the early 1950s with the Shakespearean International Theatre Company. With the later company he was famous for his passionate performances of Othello. However, his reputation primarily rests on the political drama he wrote and directed in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Kallol*, *Manusher Adhikar*, *Louha Manob*, *Tiner Toloar* and *Maha-Bidroha*. The radical views expressed in his plays earned him a jail sentence in 1965 and meant that several were banned, despite their wide popularity. In the 1980s and 1990s he rounded off his life with several starring roles in Hindi and Bengali cinema.

Badal Sircar Badal Sircar (1925–2011) was another radical Bengali playwright of the late twentieth century, who tried to bridge the gap between elite theatre and folk drama by creating what he called the 'third theatre.' He came to prominence during the Naxalite rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s when he took his plays out into the countryside. Earlier, his 'day job' as an engineer had taken him to England and Nigeria, where he entered theatre as an actor. Soon he wrote *Ebong Indrajit*, 'And Indrajit'), a play about the alienation of youth in post-Independence India that brought him national attention. In 1976, he established his own theatre company, Shatabi, which performed in open spaces in Calcutta without elaborate props or lighting. There was no ticketing, and audiences were encouraged to participate in the productions.

Vijay Tendulkar Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) also attempted to create a new theatre that would combine the best of traditional drama with western-inspired writing. He wrote more than 30 full-length and many more one-act plays (plus short stories and film scripts) in Marathi, focusing on major social themes such as poverty, women's rights and political corruption. His most famous plays include *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* ('Silence! The Court Is in Session,' 1967), *Sakharam Binder*, 'Sakharam the Binder', 1971) and *Ghashiram Kotwal* ('Ghashiram the Constable,' 1972). In his later life Tendulkar wrote numerous successful film scripts.

Girish Karnad What Tendulkar did for Marathi theatre, and Sircar did for Bengali, Girish Karnad (b. 1938) has done for Kannada. An intellectual (he was educated at Oxford) as well as a writer, Karnad has more consciously than the others attempted to create a theatre that reflects the complexities of post-colonial India. As he has explained, contemporary India is a convergence of anxieties and dreams from the past and the present. He mines the rich resources of traditional Indian stories, layering them with modern technique, to reveal the passions and absurdities of human existence. His most performed play is one of his first, *Tughlaq* (1964), which tells the story of a Sultan in 14th-century Delhi, widely interpreted as a comment on Prime Minister Nehru, whose idealistic vision of a modern India collapsed in disillusionment. Karnad has also been active in the cinema, where his film scripts have won a long string of awards

Lakhan Deb Although Lakhan Deb (b.1953?) is not a household name in India, two of his plays are regarded as original contributions to modern theatre in English. In both *Tiger's Claw* (1967) and *Murder at The Prayer Meeting* (1976), Deb uses blank verse to portray two key events in Indian history. The first play dramatizes the killing of a Muslim general (Afzal Khan) by a Hindu king (Shivaji) in 1659, which some historians believe was the death-knell of the Mughal Empire. *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* enacts a second seminal death, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, with a strong echo of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Mahesh Dattani Another important contemporary playwright in English is Mahesh Dattani (b.1958), who began his working life in an advertising firm and did not write plays until he was 30 years old. *Tara* (1990) was hailed as breakthrough in revealing the hidden male chauvinism beneath the polite, educated veneer of modern Indian society. Homosexuality is another taboo topic that Dattani explores in his writing, especially in 'Bravely Fought the Queen' (1991). Other plays address the complex identity of eunuchs (*Seven Steps Around the Fire*, 1998), patriarchy and feminism (*Where There's a Will*, 1988) and the institution of marriage (*Do the Needful*,

1997). Several of these works were written as radio-plays for the BBC. In 1993, Dattani was the first playwright in English to win the annual national prize (from the Sahitya Akademi) for drama with his *The Final Solution*.

Questions/discussion

1. The oral composition and transmission of the Vedas is one of the most astonishing achievements in world history. However, even today scholars persist in saying that the Vedas were 'written'. Why does the written word have a superior status in today's world? When did writing overtake orality in status? How does an oral/aural culture differ from an essentially graphic/visual culture?
2. The trail of the *Pancatantra* leads from India to Europe, and some early Indian stories found their way into European oral tradition. Not many, however. How do stories cross linguistic and cultural borders? Does it really, as the cliché goes, take only one bilingual person? Why do some stories migrate and other not?
3. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* turn on the loyalty and betrayal of brothers. The strength of fraternal bonds is not a unique theme in world literature, especially in epics. Compare the Indian articulation of this theme with two other examples from epics in world literature.
4. Indo-Persian writers did more or less the same thing as their native-born Indian writers: they adapted pre-existing, mostly Sanskrit story literature. However, they often used genres borrowed from their native Persian. How does this change the fiction they wrote?
5. The first European to write a major text in any Indian literature was the 18th century Italian missionary J.C. Beschi in Tamil. A close study of his epic poem *Tempavani* reveals an eclectic mixture of European and Tamil elements. What later contributions did Europeans make, not the study but to the writing of Indian literature?
6. Many of the major 19th century novels are written in an early form of what we would call social realism. For more than two thousand years, poetry, myth and folk tales had dominated the literary imagination. Then, within three decades of its beginnings in the 1860s, this new genre had become a critical and popular fashion. What are the antecedents, if any, for this apparently radical shift in Indian literary history?
7. The quantity and popularity of Indian fiction in this period might be partially explained by non-literary factors. With the rise of print and literacy, there were clearly more publications and more readers. And the nationalism fervour meant that more of them were anxious to read, not just books, but also newspapers and magazines. Is this triple correlation between print, nationalism and the novel found elsewhere in the world?
8. No matter how one theorises post-colonial literature in India, it is difficult to avoid the fact that the novel is an imported genre. Although it has developed in India for more than 150 years and has become indigenised, it remains unconnected to the deep historical patterns of literary culture in the country. That may explain why (with few exceptions) Indian novelists have yet to find a way to write historical novels that integrate the past into the present.

Reading

- Wendy Doniger (trans.), *Hindu Myths* (Penguin, various editions)
William Buck (trans.), *Mahabharata* (California, 2000)
William Buck (trans.), *Ramayana* (California, 2000)
Amit Chaudhuri (ed.), *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (Picador, 2001)
R.K. Narayan, R.K. *The Guide* (Penguin, 2006)
Premchand, *Godan. The Gift of a Cow* (trans. Gordon Roadarmel, Indiana, 2002)
A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Nammalvar: Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu* (Penguin, 2005)
A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Speaking of Siva* (Penguin, 1971)
A..K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* Columbia, 1985)
Anisla T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1 (Columbia, 1988)
Daniel Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry* (Harvard, 2000)
Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 500-1399: From Courtly to the Popular* (Sahitya Akademi, 2005)
Mohammad Sadiq, *History of Urdu Literature* (Oxford, 1964)

Frances Pritchett, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamzah* (Columbia, 1991)

John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford, 1988)

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

Usha Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge, 2012)

Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* (Oxford, 2009)