

INDIAN LITERATURE – 20th Century

Part I : EARLY 20TH CENTURY

- Poetry
- Drama
- Fiction
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- Essay

POETRY

Overview

Poetry, the oldest, most entrenched and most respected genre in Indian literary tradition, had survived the challenges of the nineteenth century almost intact. However, if colonialism and Christianity did not substantially alter the writing of Indian poetry, the modernism of the early twentieth century did. We could say that Indian poetry in most languages reached modernity through two stages: first romanticism and then nationalism. Urdu, however, was something of an exception to this generalisation, inasmuch as its modernity was implicated in a romantic nostalgia for the past.

Urdu

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.

Progressives Politics came to dominate in the next phase of Urdu poetry, from the 1930s, when several poets formed what is called the 'progressive movement.' Loosely connected, they nevertheless shared a tendency to favour social engagement over formal aesthetics. 'Miraji' (Muhammad Sanauallah, 1912-1949) wrote satirical verse, drawing on his knowledge of French poetry, while Sardar Jafri (b.1912) was influenced by Walt Whitman in his use of free verse, and Majruh Sultanpuri (1912-1955) went back to the traditional *ghazal* to express his reformist ideas.

Hindi

Dwivedi The new poetry in Hindi was pioneered by Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi (1864-1938), whose verse broke from the mannerism of earlier poets, particularly those who used the Braj dialect. Through the magazine *Saraswati*, which he edited for a while, Dwivedi popularised a poetry inspired by nationalism and by an awareness of social evils.

Chayavad A more lasting influence on Hindi poetry was exerted by the *chayavad* ('reflexionist') movement in the 1920s and 1930s. These poets, influenced by the English romantics, Tagore's Bengali lyricism and Indian mysticism, wrote with self-reflection about sensual love and nature.

Nirala A key figure of this 'neo-romanticism' was Suryakant Tripathi '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.

Bengali

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, such as *Balaka*, 'Wild Geese,' 1916.

Kallol poets The modernist movement in Bengali poetry was self-consciously announced by the Kallol ('Sound Waves') poets, a term taken from a magazine of the same name that published their poetry in the 1920s and 1930s. Influenced by Marx and Freud, Pound and Eliot, and distancing themselves from Tagore's 'soft' humanism, some (like Premendra Mitra, 1904-1988) preferred a gritty realism, while others (like Buddhadeva Bose, 1908-1974) produced 'art for art's sake.'

English

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.

Sarojini Naidu Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was a poet and politician, whose career nicely illustrates the two strands of early twentieth-century poetry. She was the first woman to serve as governor of a state and the first Indian woman to be elected leader of the Indian National Congress. Her poetry, harking back to the lyricism of Bengali poets of the previous century, has been criticised as a faded voice from the past, while others have pointed out that it was an authentically Indian voice, finely tuned to the composite reality of India. Her major works include *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wings* (1917) and *The Sceptred Flute* (1946)

Tamil

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. He brought also free verse into Tamil and wrote poems that sung.

Malayalam

Kumaran Asan Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) was one of three Malayalam poets who were collectively known as the 'trio'. Asan was the poetic voice of a low-caste uplift movement. For instance, in his poem 'Simhanadam' ('The Tiger's Roar,' 1919), urges his readers to respond 'where the caste-demon rears its ugly face.'

All his poems are similarly devoted to raising awareness of caste inequality, but he was capable of delicate lyrics, too, as in 'Vina Puvu' ('Fallen Flower,' 1908). One of his last (and perhaps greatest) work 'Karuna' ('Compassion') is a meditation on the universal need for empathy.

Vallathol Narayana Menon Vallathol Narayana Menon (1879-1958) was a more conventional poet, utilising the traditional themes of Indian mythology. He was, however, a committed nationalist and refused to accept a gift offered by the British government in honour of his poetry. Like Subramania Bharati in Tamil, he used traditional images to articulate new feelings, as in 'Gangapati' (1913), in which Parvati challenges her husband Siva

Uloor Parameswara Iyer Uloor Parameswara Iyer (1877-1949) also followed tradition, especially in his epic poem about the history of Kerala ('Uma Keralam,' 'The Glory of Kerala,' 1913). However, his later poems move away from traditional themes and use more conversational language.

Questions/Discussion

1. Two outstanding poets on this period, Sri Aurobindo in English and Subramania Bharati in Tamil, were jailed by the British authorities for the seditious ideas in their writing. Both subsequently fled to Pondicherry, where they became friends and talked about the role of poetry in colonial India. One observer commented that their 'conversation was a sort of variety entertainment. Only the level was very high, both of them being, in cricket language, "all-rounders".' No historical document exists of their conversations, but imagining their exchange would make a fascinating short story or a play.
2. Sarojini Naidu and Mahadevi Varma were both excellent poets and the best-known women poets of their generation in English and Hindi, respectively. Yet, they were very different people. Naidu was a high-profile public figure, while Varma, though serving as Vice-Chancellor of a minor women's university, was more retiring. A good research topic would be to determine the extent to which one influenced the other.
3. Modern poetry (and fiction) in most major Indian languages was promoted by literary journals and magazines, often edited by key literary figures. Sometimes these periodicals were very small operations, poorly produced and continued for only a few years, yet their impact was enormous. The role of these minor periodicals in forging a new Indian literature would be a fascinating topic for research.

Reading

Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956* (Sahitya Akademi, 1995)

Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* (Oxford India, 1998)

Subramania Bharati and Usha Rajagopalan, *Selected Poems* (Hanchette India, 2012)

K.M. George (ed.), *Modern Indian Literature, Vol. 1. Surveys and Poems* (Sahitya Akademi, 1992)

Vijay Dwarwadker and A.K Ramanujan (eds.), *Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (Oxford India, 1996)

Texts

1. From Tagore's *Gitanjali*

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.

It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune. The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!'

The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'

2. Subramania Bharati's poems

trans. S. Vijaya Bharati (the poet's granddaughter)

They are fools who cultivate the flames of enmity

Insisting on the existence of several Gods

God is One, Which exists in all beings.

There should be no cruelties of caste .

The world will flourish only by love."

God blessed woman with wisdom

A few fools on earth destroyed their intellect.

trans. A.K. Ramanujan

Wind, come softly.

Don't break the shutters of the windows.

Don't scatter the papers.

Don't throw down the books on the shelf.

There, look what you did — you threw them all down.

You tore the pages of the books.

You brought rain again.

You're very clever at poking fun at weaklings.

Frail crumbling houses, crumbling doors, crumbling rafters,
crumbling wood, crumbling bodies, crumbling lives,
crumbling hearts —

the wind god winnows and crushes them all.

He won't do what you tell him.

So, come, let's build strong homes,

Let's joint the doors firmly.

Practise to firm the body.

Make the heart steadfast.

Do this, and the wind will be friends with us.

The wind blows out weak fires.

He makes strong fires roar and flourish.

His friendship is good.
We praise him every day.

3. From Nirala's poems, trans. David Rubin

As T. S. Eliot tossed out
A stone from here, a pebble from there

His readers, with
their hands on their hearts,
exclaimed,
'He's described the whole world!'

I know I've crossed
The rivers
and torrents I had to cross.
I laugh now
as I see
There wasn't any boat.

Whoever's spent
these days of sorrow
counting and counting
the minutes,
the trifles,
has strung
a necklace
of tears
like pearls
and tossed it around
his lover's throat
to see the fair face
serene and bright,
in the night of sorrow.

DRAMA

Overview

During this period, traditional and regional theatre was gradually overtaken by drama as a literary form. While the Parsi theatre continued well into the 1930s, and Kutiyattam and Kathakali in Kerala remained popular, writers in all languages, especially English, were drawing on western models as well as responding to the social and political issues of the day. Still, the authors of these new plays, which were generally idealistic and reformist, had to be satisfied with small audiences and little critical notice. Publishers were reluctant to print 'new' dramas, and plays in English by Indian authors had neither a stage nor a public. As a spoken form of literature, plays were considered *deshi* ('provincial') and disregarded by the literary elite. If traditional theatre emphasised visual effects, the new theatre focused on themes. Yet, all drama needs an element of wonder, and modern Indian theatre continued to seek the optimal balance between story and spectacle.

Urdu

Agha Hashr (1880-1936) is the best-known Urdu playwright of the period. Born into a family of shawl merchants in Benares, he wrote more than thirty plays for the Parsi theatre, established the Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company and went on to adapt many of his works for the silent era of Indian cinema. His most famous play, *Yahudi ki Larki* ('The Jew's Daughter,' 1913), is an historical drama, adapted from an early nineteenth-century English play that tells the story of the persecution of Jews by the Romans in Palestine. With its mixture of spoken and literary language, it remains a favourite and has been made into a film on two occasions.

Bengali

Rabindranath Tagore Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) continued to break new ground in Bengali drama in the early twentieth century. He criticised his fellow playwrights for their slavish imitation of English, especially Shakespearean, models, including an 'obsession' with realism and technical accessories. In response, he wrote a series of plays imbued with what he thought was a 'freer', Indian spirit: *Raja* (1910), *Dakghar* ('Post Office,' 1912) and *Phalguni* ('Cycle of Spring,' 1915). Critics thought these efforts unconvincing on the stage, however, and Tagore only found popular and critical success when he translated (and radically edited) his earlier Bengali plays into English. The outstanding example, which had success in London, was 'The Post Office.'

Girish Chandra Ghosh One playwright whose plays filled the theatres in Calcutta in the first decade of the century was Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1911). He was not only a fine writer, but also a director, actor and lyricist. He wrote more than forty plays, beginning with adaptations of traditional Indian stories but ending with his own original plots. In the period 1904-1908, he wrote two plays that dramatized the early history of British rule in Bengal (*Siraj-ud-Daula* and *Mir Qasim*, each telling the story of its eponymous hero), a biting social satire on dowry (*Balidan*, 'The Sacrifice') and, finally, an historical play praising a Hindu king who defeated the Mughals (*Chatrapati Sivaji*).

Kannada

T.P. Kailasam T.P. Kailasam (1885-1946) was a colourful and complex figure. Although a Tamil, he was born and educated in Mysore, spend several years in England (doing nothing, according to his disappointed father), but then became a leading playwright-actor who wrote plays in both Kannada and English. His Kannada plays annoyed critics because he introduced colloquial language and poked fun at contemporary figures, but his satires won huge audiences. In line with his contemporaries elsewhere, he also wrote about social issues, including education (*Tollu Gatti*, 'The Hollow and the Solid', 1918), the dowry system (*Tali Kattoke Cooline*, 'Wages for tying the Wedding Necklace'), corrupt religion (*Bahishkara*, 'Open Prison,' 1929) and prostitution (*Soole*, 'Prostitute', 1945). Swallowing his pride, one critic managed to concede that he was a 'bohemian genius.'

Tamil

Shankaradas Swamigal An outstanding figure in Tamil drama in this period was another playwright-actor-director Shankaradas Swamigal (1867-1922). He wrote dozens of plays, mostly adapted from traditional mythology, which were performed in Madurai, where he had set up his own a theatre company,

and in Madras. He was also associated with several theatre companies known as 'Boys Companies' because they used the traditional *gurukula* system (in which young men lived together and were trained by a guru) to teach the profession of acting.

Sambandha Mutaliyar Modern Tamil drama gained an institutional base through the efforts of Sambandha 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 made him a success on the stage. The popularity of his plays meant that, finally, publishers began to print them, audiences paid to see them and drama earned a foothold of respectability in Madras.

TKS Brothers More literary backbone was inserted in the new Tamil theatre by the TKS Brothers Dramatic Group. It was founded in Madras in 1925 by a man who had trained in a drama company linked to Shankaradas Swamikal. The brothers then recruited successful fiction writers, from a newly-established literary magazine, instead of employing the traditional playwright who had more experience with the stage than the page. These new writers produced powerful plays on social reform (*Uyiroviyam*, 'Life Portrait') and historical themes (*Rajaraja Colam*, a Chola king).

Assamese

Jyotiprasad Agarwal In the far northeast corner of India, Jyotiprasad Agarwal (1903-1951) succeeded in almost singlehandedly creating a new theatre in Assamese. Born into a wealthy tea-planter family, he completed his education in Calcutta and Edinburgh, where he absorbed influences from Shaw and Ibsen, especially the technicalities of staging. His plays, like those of his contemporaries in other languages, foreground social and political struggles, but they also introduce a strong romantic element. Again, following many other literary figures at the time, he served a jail sentence for his nationalist activities but went on to even greater fame as a film screenwriter.

English

Sri Aurobindo The influential poet and philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) also wrote several powerful plays during the first decades of the century. For various reasons, including the seizure of his papers by the British police, only one (*Perseus the Deliverer*, 1907) was published during his lifetime. Although the plots of these plays are largely taken from Indian, Greek, Roman and Norse history, Aurobindo infuses the stories with a spiritual nationalism. In *Perseus*, for example, the Greek myth is stripped of its cultural elements and turned into a universal 'myth of the hero', who must revive the lost spirit of a nation. All his plays are finely wrought literary accomplishments, though not, one suspects, good entertainment on stage. In some of them, Aurobindo skilfully mixes delicate verse with colloquial banter, while in others he uses pure poetry to create an atmosphere of deep tragedy.

Harindranath Chattopadhyay Another Bengali Brahman who made a substantial contribution to English-language Indian drama in this period was Harindranath Chattopadhyay (1898-1990). He was born outside Bengal, in Hyderabad, to a philosopher-educationalist father and a poet mother. His wife was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the famous leader of women's organisations; their divorce marked the first time a court in India recognised legal separation. His most famous drama, *Five Plays* (1929), covers a spectrum of social ills, including exploitation of textile workers and child marriage. After independence, he went on to write scripts for the booming cinema industry.

Questions/Discussion

1. Many Indian plays written during this period were either translations or adaptations of English plays or borrowed from the reservoir of traditional Indian literature. Many were translated from one Indian language (usually Bengali) into another, and sometimes by the original writer an Indian language into English. This initial lack of original narrative material was overcome by the growing pressure of nationalism, which supplied numerous stories.

2. Sri Aurobindo perhaps illustrates another trend, and possible problem, in modern Indian drama. His subtle intelligence and literary skills produced complex and ambiguous plays, which did not appeal to the theatre-going public. What are the historical roots of this split between aesthetic and popular drama in India. Is it found in other literary cultures?
3. The touring theatre company was a mainstay of Indian theatre right up to the end of this period. (See, for example, the 1965 film 'Shakespeare Wallah' by James Ivory.) Modern drama, however, required a financially viable theatre in the large cities, which Calcutta, Madras and Bombay struggled to achieve. How does this contrast between two models of drama help us to understand the status of drama in modern India?

Reading

Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956* (Sahitya

Akademi, 1995)

Nandi Bhatia (ed.), *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* (Oxford India, 2011)

G.P. Deshpande, *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (Sahitya Akademi, 2006)

Texts

1. Sri Aurobindo in his preface to *Perseus the Deliverer*:

Acrisius, the Argive king, warned by an oracle that his daughter's son would be the agent of his death, hoped to escape his doom by shutting her up in a brazen tower. But Zeus, the King of the Gods, descended into her prison in a shower of gold and Danaë bore to him a son named Perseus. Danaë and her child were exposed in a boat without sail or oar on the sea, but here too fate and the gods intervened and, guided by a divine protection,

the boat bore her safely to the Island of Seriphos. There Danaë was received and honoured by the King. When Perseus had grown to manhood the King, wishing to marry Danaë, decided to send him to his death and to that end ordered him to slay the Gorgon Medusa in the wild, unknown and snowy North and bring to him her head the sight of which turned men to stone. Perseus, aided by Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, who gave him the divine sword Herpe, winged shoes to bear him through the air, her shield or aegis and the cap of invisibility, succeeded in his quest after many adventures. In his returning he came to Syria and found Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopea, King and Queen of Syria, chained to the rocks by the people to be devoured by a sea-monster as an atonement for her mother's impiety against the sea-god, Poseidon. Perseus slew the monster and rescued and wedded Andromeda.

In this piece the ancient legend has been divested of its original character of a heroic myth; it is made the nucleus round which there could grow the scenes of a romantic story of human temperament and life-impulses on the Elizabethan model. The country in which the action is located is a Syria of romance, not of history.

Indeed a Hellenic legend could not at all be set in the environments of the life of a Semitic people and its early Aramaean civilisation: the town of Cepheus must be looked at as a Greek colony with a blonde Achaean dynasty ruling a Hellenised people who worship an old Mediterranean deity under a Greek name. In a romantic work of imagination of this type these outrages on history do not matter. Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger; fantasy reigns sovereign; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get an easy admittance, ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle; myth, romance and realism make up a single whole. For here the stage is the human mind of all times: the subject is an incident in its passage from a semi-primitive temperament surviving in a fairly advanced outward civilisation to a brighter intellectualism

and humanism – never quite safe against the resurgence of the dark or violent life-forces which are always there subdued or subordinated or somnolent in the make-up of civilised man – and the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his ultimate destiny to become.

2. From 'Purpose' by T.P Kailasam

DEDICATED
IN
ALL HUMILITY
TO
MY YOUTHFUL BROTHERS
OF
MY MOTHERLAND
IN
HAPPY MEMORY
OF
MY YOUTHFUL YEARS

**"IF Youth but knew!
If Age but Could!"**

Personae:

BHEESHMA	The Patriarch of the Royal Kuru House
ARJUNA,	Bheeshma's Grandchildren
NAKULA and SAHADEVA	
DRONAACHAARYA	Preceptor to the princes
EKALAVYA	A Nishaada (Non-Aryan) Boy

Period:

The Aadi Parva of THE MAHAABHAARATA

ACT I

Place: THE ROYAL ATHLETIC GROUNDS: HASTINA

DISCOVERED: **In the Background:** *Stalwart Youths at Mace and Sword exercise*
In The Mid-Ground: *Arjuna practising with bow, his target swung by a tree-branch*
In The Fore-Ground: *Dronacharya with Nakula and Sahadeva; the former with a riding whip and the latter with a bow taller than his own self.*

Sahadeva: *(With a wry face)* Gurujee! I cannot use this bow! It is too big for me! I c a n n o t even lift it!

Drona: *(Feigning astonishment)* Bow too big for you? But my little man, you seem to forget you are a Kshatriya! Why, no bow in the world is really too big for a Kshatriya -- not only to lift, but to bend, string, and shoot with!

Sahadeva: *(With a more pinched face)* I AM remembering I am a Kshatriya, Gurujee! But *(Straining at the bow)* this is too big and I canNOT lift it!

Drona: Oh! You mean YOU are not big enough to lift it?

Sahadeva: *(Puzzled)* It is the same thing, I suppose?

Drona: "Same thing"? By no means! For, if it is the bow that is too big for you, no one can make that BOW smaller; but if it is YOU that is not big enough and strong enough to lift and use that bow... you can make yourself big enough and strong enough... can you not?

Sahadeva: *(Stragglingly)* I s u p p o s e I can.

Drona: "Suppose"? Why, of course you can: Look at your big brother yonder! Last week he made out that his GADA was too big for him. But now it turns out it was HE that was not strong enough then to lift it! For look, he is wielding the SAME gada as it were a flower! And you know where Bheemasena has been these past eleven days?

Sahadeva: I know! The Vyayaamasaala!

Drona: Yes. And that is where you will spend your next eleven days. *(Looks at Nakula for a moment and looks away)* YOU will do the same too, Nakula!

Nakula: *(Startled)* I, Gurujee! Why?

Drona: *(Still looking away)* You thought perhaps that I was not watching you this morning whilst you were riding at day-break! But I was!...The MANE of a horse, Nakula!... *(Nakula bites the tip of his tongue guiltily)* is not meant for the rider to hold on to... unless he be a... *(meeting Nakula's eyes)* FRIGHTENED HORSEMAN!
(Scandalised) "FRIGHTENED"! I was NOT frightened, Gurujee! It was not fright that made me...do...what...I...did.

Drona: What was it then made you...do...what...you...did?

Nakula: I held on to the mane because...I did not want to slip off that very very big horse!...the horse was really much too big for me, Gurujee!

Drona: *(Feigning disgust and anger)* "Horse much too big"! And you are a Kshatriya! And to think I have just told your little brother that...I mean...

Nakula: *(Interrupting)* I KNOW what you mean...Gurujee...!

Drona: And what do I mean?

Nakula: You mean, Gurujee. I must never forget I am a Kshatriya! And that no bow in the world...I mean, no HORSE in the world is really too big for a Kshatriya to lift...I mean, to RIDE without holding the mane; that it was not the horse that was too big...as no one can make that horse smaller...but it was I that was not big enough and strong enough...so a MANDALA for me too in the Vyaayaamasaala...and when I come back...

Drona: *(Suppressing a smile)* Yes...It is CHATHURTHEE today; and even as you can watch the MOON wax bigger and brighter every night—so must you watch your limbs and frame grow bigger and stronger everyday... and on, POORNIMA DAY—when your Royal Grandsire comes to visit us—you, Nakula, will be riding his big big, very very big, but—"never never much TOO big" war-horse DEERGHAKESHA, *(adding significantly)*—without holding the mane! And you, *(to Sahadeva)*—my little hero, will not only be lifting this bow, but bending it, stringing it and shooting with it!

Sahadeva: *(Clapping his hands)* Will I, Gurujee!?

Drona: Of course you will. Now, my little men, run away and start your SAADHANAAS this very now!

FICTION

Overview

Indian fiction came of age in this period. Quickened by the nationalist spirit that swept the country, writers found new content and techniques with which to tell stories that spoke to a wider public. Literary magazines played a large role in popularising the new fiction, mostly short stories but also serialised novels. Having assimilated techniques from western literature, Indian writers were now charting the journey that would lead to international fame by the end of the century. As these developments in each of the fifteen literary languages of India follow a general pattern, only a few of the most interesting examples are presented below.

Urdu

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).

Hindi

Premchand Beginning with its first novel in 1882, Hindi fiction had been dominated by romance and adventure until Premchand (1880-1936). His father was a large landowner, who had his son educated in Persian and Urdu. Devastated by the early death of his mother, Premchand became a bookseller, studied English at a missionary college and taught school. His first novel was serialised in an Urdu weekly between 1903 and 1905, but thereafter he wrote in Hindi, publishing a dozen novels and more than 300 short stories.

Assessment Premchand not only wrote stories with contemporary social relevance, but also used fiction as a medium for change. Taken altogether, his fiction gives the reader a panoramic view of rural north India in the first half of the twentieth century. His output was uneven, sometimes falling prey to sentimentalism, as when corrupt officials and money-lenders are reformed, but often he creates characters with depth and emotional complexity. And if from time to time he lapses into idealistic didacticism and offers a happy ending, he still presents an objective picture of the realities and injustices of his society.

Sevasadan Premchand's first novel, *Sevasadan* ('House of Service', 1918), is representative of his work and reveals the hypocrisy of the 'pillars of society.' A liberal Hindu lawyer is unable to reform his ne'er-do-well nephew and later, through a few unconvincing plot twists, is implicated in forcing a married Brahmin woman into prostitution. He atones by funding an institution for former prostitutes, where they learn music and dance (courtesan's skills), work with their hands and raise children in a healthy environment.

Godan Published in 1936, *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 villains and heroes. There is the village, with every kind of character, plus the *zamindar* (landowner). And there is the city, where the *zamindar* also lives, along with 'modern' women, professionals, intellectuals, traditional Hindus and Muslims. The main character is Hori, a villager burdened with the obligation to keep a cow. Cheated by a Brahmin landowner, Hori remains loyal to the system he was born in and ends up dying in a ditch. His urban counterpart, the educated professor, is similarly unheroic. Failing to practice his self-professed Gandhian ideals, he is violent at times and takes a self-serving vow of chastity.

Bengali

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, and 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 emotions, often focusing on women's lives. However, 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. Indeed, his biography reads like a blueprint for creating a modern Indian literature with its blend of tradition and innovation. His grandfather was an Ayurvedic doctor, while his father was a Sanskrit scholar and professional storyteller (*kathak*). Born as the eldest of five children in a rural village, Bandyopadhyay went to college and studied for an MA at Calcutta University. 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). His eclecticism is notable but not uncommon among educated Bengalis of the time.

Pather Panchali *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 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. Rarely has an Indian novelist entered into the mind of a character as successfully as Bandyopadhyay does with the young boy Apu, and we are also treated to beautiful descriptions of the Bengali countryside. This is largely an autobiographical novel, which gives it a ring of truth but also enables the author to enhance fact with the dramatic power of fiction.

Tamil

Manikkodi It is characteristic of Indian literature that a short-lived literary magazine (*Manikkodi*, 'The Jewelled Flag') changed the history of Tamil fiction. Published in Madras from 1933 to 1936, it featured short stories that challenged the accepted manner of telling stories. Narratives were fractured, told from different points of view, and they highlighted the grotesque and the psychotic, sex and violence. The magazine launched the careers of most of the best fiction writers of the inter-war years, including B.S. Ramiah, Chellappa, Mauni and Putumaipittan.

Putumaipittan The most radical and interesting of these Tamil writers 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).

God and Kandaswami Pillai Putumaipittan's best story, by critical consensus, is 'Katavulum Kantacuvami Pillaiyum' ('God and Kandaswami Pillai', 1934). The author anthropomorphises god and makes him endure the hardships of human existence, as he is led by Kandaswami Pillai (a publisher) on a tour around Madras. In a series of clever and humorous scenes, both god and his human guide reveal their vulnerability and dignity.

Kalki The Tamil novel, which had 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 no one could argue with his popularity.

Kalki's Life Kalki's father was a poor Brahmin who served as an accountant to a rich landowner in an isolated village. Kalki was educated there but did not finish high school. Instead he answered Gandhi's call for non-cooperation and joined the Indian National Congress in 1921. He was arrested and went to jail twice but also worked on and later edited literary magazines, most famously *Anantavikatan*.

Tiyaga Bumi Kalki combined his politics and his powerful storytelling in his most popular novel, *Tiyaga Bumi* ('The Land of Self-less Sacrifice,' 1939), which was also made into an equally famous film. Its hero is a Brahmin priest who offers shelter to Harijans made homeless by a hurricane and is excommunicated for this act of charity. Then his daughter is ill-treated by her westernised husband, finds herself homeless, gives birth to a child whom she entrusts to her father and goes wandering. Her father, the Gandhi-like figure, embarks on a programme of Harijan uplift. In the end, his daughter becomes rich and rejects her husband's request to return to him.

English

Indian fiction in English during the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by three novelists whose lives spanned all ten decades: Raja Rao (1908-2006), Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and R. K. Narayan (1906-2001). Raja Rao's most famous novel (*Kanthapura*, 1938) describes the reception of Gandhian ideals in rural India, while Raj Anand was an even more committed political writer, who helped to establish the Progressive Writers' Association. His novels (especially *Untouchable*, 1935) took on the task of exposing the indignities and inequalities in Indian society. However, it is the novels by R K Narayan, cleverly told with both empathy and humour, that have stood the test of time.

Questions/discussion

1. 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 correlation between print, nationalism and the novel found elsewhere in the world?
2. In this period, unlike the second half of the century, most popular fiction was written, published and read in regional languages, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi and so forth. This would change, after Independence, in favour of English-language Indian literature. What accounts for this radical shift in so short a time?
3. Recent research has cast doubt on the contrast often drawn between the romance of early Indian novel and the social realism of novels in this period. It is now suggested that the supposedly realistic novelists also invented imaginative worlds and experimented with new aesthetics. Certainly, many writers of fiction in this period went on to work in the film world. How did this shift of medium affect their storytelling?

Reading

Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956* (Sahitya

Akademi, 1995)

K.M. George (ed.), *Modern Indian Literature, vol. 1. Surveys and Poems*

(Sahitya Akademi, 1992)

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

Amit Chaudhuri (ed.), *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*
(Picador, 2001)

Text

'The Shroud', by Premchand, trans. F. Pritchett

At the door of the hut father and son sat silently by a burnt-out fire; inside, the son's young wife Budhiya lay in labor, writhing with pain. And from time to time such a heart-rending scream emerged from her lips that they both pressed their hands to their hearts. It was a winter night; everything was drowned in desolation. The whole village had been absorbed into the darkness.

Ghisu said, "It seems she won't live. She's been writhing in pain the whole day. Go on-- see how she is."

Madhav said in a pained tone, "If she's going to die, then why doesn't she go ahead and die? What's the use of going to see?"

"You're pretty hard-hearted! You've enjoyed life with her for a whole year-- such faithlessness to her?"

"Well, I can't stand to see her writhing and thrashing around."

It was a family of Chamars, and notorious in the whole village. If Ghisu worked for one day, then he rested for three. Madhav was such a slacker that if he worked for an hour, then he smoked his chilam for an hour. Thus nobody hired them on. If there was even a handful of grain in the house, they both swore off working. When they'd fasted for a couple of days, then Ghisu climbed trees and broke off branches, and Madhav sold the wood in the market; and as long as that money lasted, they both spent their time wandering idly around. *When their hunger grew intense, they again broke off branches, or looked for some work.* There was no shortage of work in the village. It was a village of farmers; for a hard-working man there were fifty jobs. But people only sent for those two when they were forced to content themselves with getting out of two men the work of one.

If only the two had been ascetics, then they wouldn't have needed any exercises in self-discipline to achieve contentment and patience. This was their very nature. Theirs was a strange life. Except for two or three clay pots, they had no goods at all in the house. Covering their nakedness with torn rags, free from the cares of the world, laden with debt-- they suffered abuse, they suffered blows too, but not grief. They were so poor that without the smallest hope of repayment, people used to lend them something or other. When peas or potatoes were in season, they would dig up peas or potatoes from the fields and roast and eat them, or break off five or ten stalks of sugarcane and suck them at night. Ghisu had spent sixty years of his life in this pious manner, and Madhav, like a dutiful son, was following in his father's footsteps-- or rather, was making his name even more radiant.

This time too, both were seated by the fire, roasting potatoes that they had dug up from somebody's field. Ghisu's wife had passed away long ago. Madhav's marriage had taken place the year before. Since this woman had come, she had laid the foundations of civilization in the family. *Grinding grain, cutting grass, she arranged for a couple of pounds of flour,* and kept filling the stomachs of those two shameless ones. After she came, they both grew even more lazy and indolent; indeed, they even began to swagger a bit. If someone sent for them to work, then with splendid indifference they demanded double wages. That woman was dying today in childbirth. And these two were perhaps waiting for her to die, so they could sleep in peace.

Pulling out a potato and peeling it, Ghisu said, "Go see what shape she's in. We'll have the fuss over a ghost-witch-- what else! And here even the exorcist demands a rupee--from whose house would we get one?"

Madhav suspected that if he went into the hut, Ghisu would finish off most of the potatoes. He said, "I'm afraid to go in."

"What are you afraid of? I'm here, after all."

"Then *you* go and see, all right?"

"When my wife died, for three days I never even left her side. And then, won't she be ashamed in front of me? I've never seen her face-- and today I should see her naked body? She won't even have bodily ease: if she sees me, she won't be able to thrash around freely."

"I'm thinking, if a child is born-- what then? Dried ginger, brown sugar, oil-- there's nothing at all in the house."

"Everything will come. If Bhagwan [god] gives a child-- those people who now aren't giving a paisa, will send for us and give us things. I've had nine sons. There was never anything in the house, but this is how we managed every time."

A society in which those who labored night and day were not in much better shape than these two; a society in which compared to the peasants, those who knew how to exploit the peasants' weaknesses were much better off-- in such a society, the birth of this kind of mentality was no cause for surprise. We'll say that compared to the peasants, Ghisu was more insightful; and instead of joining the mindless group of peasants, he had joined the group of clever, scheming tricksters. Though indeed, he wasn't skillful in following the rules and customs of the tricksters. Thus while other members of his group became chiefs and headmen of villages, at him the whole village wagged its finger. But still, he did have the consolation that if he was in bad shape, at least he wasn't forced to do the back-breaking labor of the peasants, and others didn't take improper advantage of his simplicity and voicelessness.

Pulling out the potatoes, they both began to eat them burning hot. They had eaten nothing since the day before. They were too impatient to wait till the potatoes cooled. Both burned their tongues repeatedly. When the potatoes were peeled, their outer parts didn't seem so extremely hot. But the moment the teeth bit into them, the inner part burned the tongue and throat and roof of the mouth. Rather than keep that ember in the mouth, it was better to send it quickly along inward, where there was plenty of equipment for cooling it down. So they both swallowed very fast, although the attempt brought tears to their eyes.

Then Ghisu remembered a landowner's wedding procession, in which he had taken part twenty years before. The repelation that had been vouchsafed to him in that feast was a memorable event in his life, and even today its memory was fresh. He said, "I'll never forget that feast. Never since then have I had that kind of food, or such a full stomach. The girl's family fed puris to everyone. As much as they wanted! Great and small, everyone ate puris-- ones made with real ghee! Chutney, raita, three kinds of green vegetables, a flavorful stew, yoghurt, chutney, sweets. How can I tell you now what relish there was in that feast! There was no limit. Whatever thing you want, just ask! And however much you want, eat! People ate so much, ate so much, that nobody could even drink any water. And there the servers were-- setting hot, round, sweet-smelling pastries before you! You refuse, saying you don't want it. You push away the tray with your hand. But that's how they are-- they just keep on giving it. And when everybody had wiped their mouths, then everybody got a *pan* as well. But how could I be in any shape for a *pan*? I couldn't stand up. I just staggered off and lay down on my blanket. He had a heart as big as the ocean, that landowner!"

Enjoying the story of these grand festivities, Madhav said, "If only somebody would give us such a feast now!"

"As if anybody would feast anybody now! That was a different time. Now everybody thinks about economy-- 'don't spend money on weddings, don't spend money on religious festivals!'. Ask them-- what's this 'saving' of the poor people's wealth? There's no lack of 'saving'. But when it comes to spending, they think about economy!"

"You must have eaten twenty or so puris?"

"I ate more than twenty."

"I would have eaten up fifty."

"I couldn't have eaten less than fifty. I was hale and hearty. You're not half of what I was!"

After eating, they both drank some water, covered themselves with their dhotis, curled up, and went to sleep right there by the fire, as if two gigantic serpents lay coiled there.

And Budhiya was still moaning.

In the morning, when Madhav went into the hut and looked, his wife had grown cold. Flies were buzzing on her face. Her stony eyes had rolled upward. Her whole body was covered with dust. In her stomach, the baby had died.

Madhav came running to Ghisu. Then they both together began loudly lamenting and beating their breasts. When the neighbors heard the weeping and wailing, they came running. And following the ancient custom, they began to console the bereaved.

But this wasn't the occasion for an excessive show of grief. They had to worry about the shroud, and the wood. Money was as scarce in their house as meat in a raptor's nest.

Father and son went weeping to the village landlord. He hated the very sight of their faces. A number of times he had beaten them with his own hands-- for theft, or for not coming to work as they had promised. He asked, "What is it, Ghisua, why do you weep? Nowadays we don't even see you around. It seems that you no longer want to live in the village."

Ghisua fell prostrate on the ground, and said with tear-filled eyes, "Master, I'm in great trouble! Madhav's wife passed away last night. All day she was writhing in pain, Master; we two sat by her bed till midnight. Whatever medicines we could give her, we did. But she slipped away. Now we have no one to care for us, Master-- we're devastated-- our house is destroyed! I'm your slave. Now who but you will take care of her final rites? Whatever money we had at hand was used up on medicines. If the Master will show mercy, then she'll have the proper rites. To whose door should I come except yours?"

The Landlord Sahib was a compassionate man. But to show compassion to Ghisu was to try to dye a black blanket. He felt like saying, "Get out of here! *Keep the corpse in your house and let it rot!* Usually you don't come even when you're called-- now when you want something, you come and flatter me! You treacherous bastard! You villain!" But this was not the occasion for anger or revenge. Willingly or not, he pulled out two rupees and flung them down. But he didn't open his lips to say a single word of consolation. He didn't even look in Ghisu's direction-- as if he'd discharged a duty.

When the Landlord Sahib gave two rupees, then how could the village merchants and money-lenders have the nerve to refuse? Ghisu knew how to beat the drum of the landlord's name. One gave two paises, another gave four paises. In an hour, Ghisu had collected the sum of five rupees in ready cash. Someone gave grain, someone else gave wood. And in the afternoon Ghisu and Madhav went to the market to get a shroud. Meanwhile, people began to cut the bamboo poles, and so on.

The sensitive-hearted women of the village came and looked at the body. They shed a few tears at its helplessness, and went away.

(3)

When they reached the market, Ghisu said, "We've got enough wood to burn her, haven't we, Madhav?"

Madhav said, "Yes, there's plenty of wood. Now we need a shroud."

"So let's buy a light kind of shroud."

"Sure, what else! While the body is being carried along, night will come. At night, who sees a shroud?"

"What a bad custom it is that someone who didn't even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she's dead."

"After all, the shroud burns along with the body."

"What else is it good for? If we'd had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine."

Each of them inwardly guessed what the other was thinking. They kept wandering here and there in the market, until eventually evening came. [Sometimes they went to one cloth-seller's shop, sometimes to another. They looked at various kinds of fabric, they looked at silk and cotton, but nothing suited them.] The two arrived, by chance or deliberately, before a wine-house; and as if according to some prearranged decision, they went inside. For a little while they both stood there in a state of uncertainty. [Then Ghisu went to the counter and said, "Sir, please give us a bottle too."] *Ghisu bought one bottle of liquor, and some sesame sweets.* [After this some snacks came, fried fish came]. And they both sat down on the verandah and [peacefully] began to drink.

After drinking a number of cups in a row, both became elevated.

Ghisu said, "What's the use of wrapping her in a shroud? After all, it would only be burned. Nothing would go with her."

Looking toward the sky as if persuading the angels of his innocence, Madhav said, "It's the custom of the world-- why do these same people give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins? Who can tell whether a reward does or doesn't reach them in another world?"

"Rich people have wealth-- let them waste it! What do we have to waste?"

"But what will you tell people? Won't people ask where the shroud is?"

Ghisu laughed. "We'll say the money slipped out of my waistband-- we searched and searched for it, but it didn't turn up. [People won't believe it, but they'll still give the same sum again.]"

Madhav too laughed at this unexpected good fortune, *at defeating destiny in this way*. He said, "She was very good, the poor thing. Even as she died, she gave us a fine meal."

More than half the bottle had been finished. Ghisu ordered two measures of puris, a meat stew, and spiced liver and fried fish. There was a shop right next to the wine-house. Madhav ran over and brought everything back on two leaf-plates. The cost was fully one and a half rupees. Only a few paise were left.

Both then sat eating puris, with all the majesty of a tiger in the jungle pursuing his prey. They had no fear of being called to account, nor any concern about disgrace. They had passed through these stages of weakness long ago. Ghisu said in a philosophical manner, "If my soul is being pleased, then won't she receive religious merit?"

Madhav bowed his head in pious confirmation. "Certainly she'll certainly receive it. Bhagwan, you are the knower of hearts-- take her to Heaven! We're both giving her our heartfelt blessing. The feast I've had today-- I haven't had its equal in my whole life!"

After a moment a doubt arose in Madhav's heart. He said, "How about it-- we'll go there too someday, won't we?"

Ghisu gave no answer to this childish question. *He looked reproachfully at Madhav.* [He didn't want the thought of heavenly matters to interfere with this bliss.]

"When she asks us, there, why we didn't give her a shroud, what will you say?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"She'll certainly ask."

"How do you know that she won't get a shroud? Do you consider me such a donkey? I've lived in this world for sixty years-- and have I just been loitering around? She'll get a shroud, and [a very good one]-- *a much better than we would have given*."

Madhav was not convinced. He said, "Who will give it? You've gobbled up the rupees! [It's me she'll ask-- I'm the one who put the sindur in the parting of her hair.]"

Ghisu grew irritated. "I tell you, she'll get a shroud. Why don't you believe me?"

"Who will give the money-- why don't you tell me?"

"The same people will give it who gave it this time. But they won't put the rupees into our hands. *And if somehow we get our hands on them, we'll sit here and drink again just like this, and they'll give the shroud a third time.*"

As the darkness deepened and the stars glittered more sharply, the tumult in the wine-house also increased. One person sang, another babbled, another embraced his companion, another pressed a glass to his friend's lips. Joy was in the atmosphere there. Intoxication was in the air. How many people become 'an ass with a glass'! *They came here only to taste the pleasure of self-forgetfulness.* More than liquor, the air here elevated their spirits. The disaster of life seized them and dragged them here. And for a while they forgot whether they were alive or dead-- or half-alive.

And these two, father and son, were still sipping with relish. Everyone's eyes had settled on them. How fortunate they were! They had a whole bottle between them.

After he had finished eating, Madhav picked up the leaf-plate of leftover puris and gave it to a beggar who was standing there looking at them with hungry eyes. And for the first time in his life he felt the pride and delight and thrill of giving.

Ghisu said, "Take it-- eat your fill, and give her your blessing. She whose earnings these are has died, but your blessing will certainly reach her. Bless her with every hair on your body-- these are the payment for very hard labor."

Madhav again looked toward the sky and said, "She'll go to Heaven-- she'll become the Queen of Heaven!"

Ghisu stood up, and as if swimming in waves of joy he said, "Yes, son, she'll go to Heaven! She never tormented anyone, she never oppressed anyone; even while dying, she fulfilled the greatest desire of our lives. If she doesn't go to Heaven, then will those fat rich people go-- who loot the poor with both hands, and go to the Ganges to wash away their sin, and offer holy water in temples?"

This mood of piety too changed; variability is the special quality of intoxication. It was the turn of despair and grief. Madhav said, "But the poor thing suffered a great deal in her life. Even her death was so painful!" Covering his eyes with his hands, he began to weep, [and sobbed loudly].

Ghisu consoled him: "Why do you weep, son? Be happy that she's been liberated from this net of illusion. She's escaped from the snare; she was very fortunate that she was able to break the bonds of worldly illusion so quickly."

And both, standing there, began to sing, "Temptress! Why do your eyes flash, temptress?"

The whole wine-house was absorbed in the spectacle, and these two drinkers, deep in intoxication, kept on singing. Then they both began to dance-- they leaped and jumped, fell down, flounced about, gesticulated, [strutted around]; and finally, overcome by drunkenness, they collapsed.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Overview

During the first half of the twentieth century, life-writing gradually gained in popularity and by the end of the period had established itself within the literary culture of the country. For those writing in English, or for those writing in regional languages who were conversant with English literature, autobiography and biography were already accepted literary forms in the first years of the century. But for others, they remained associated with an external culture, the culture of the colonialists. Soon, however, the biographical impulse overcame this prejudice, and Indians were writing the lives of figures from the turbulent 19th century, such as Raj Mohun Roy and Karl Marx, and those who were still alive, especially M.K. Gandhi. Autobiography also flourished in modernising, urban India, where individualism was becoming both more respectable and necessary. Private space, traditionally the preserve of the ascetic, became a more widespread. Indeed, autobiography became a quest not just for an individual but an independent India. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru used autobiographical writing to think through the political and ethical dilemmas that faced them.

English

M.K. Gandhi M.K Gandhi (1869-1948) wrote one of most influential autobiographies in world literature. *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* inspired freedom movements across the globe, including those led by Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Gandhi began the diary that became his book while in prison in 1921, when his greatest achievements still lay ahead of him. The final book was later serialised in a Gujarati-language magazine and in translation in an English-language magazine between 1925 and 1929, appearing in book form in English in 1940. Gandhi explains that he had severe doubts about writing an autobiography because it was thought to be a genre written by westernised Indians. He explained his decision to write it with this, far from clear, logic: 'It is not my purpose to write a "real" autobiography; I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with the Truth.'

Truth 'Experiments with Truth' is not a standard narrative of one's life. Rather than a chronology of events, it is an intense self-examination, and at times self-condemnation, of the author's adherence to his philosophy of *satyagraha* or 'truth force.' As such, it is a deeply personal and yet detached scouring of the soul. However, this most private of literary forms had a massive public impact. Gandhi's search for an inner truth led to an independent India.

Jawaharlal Nehru The convergence of self-examination and nation-building is even more explicit in the thoughtful autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). Like Gandhi, Nehru began his book (*An Autobiography*, 1936) while serving a prison sentence for this political activism. And he, too, subjected himself to extended self-analysis, but for Nehru the self was a psychological not a spiritual entity. He had read a great deal of Freud during his lonely prison life. Nevertheless, Nehru also records fascinating details of his own family and leading figures of the 1920s and 1930s (describing Gandhi as 'an introvert'). As such, it is an incomparable source for understanding the political and social developments that led to the independence of India.

Bengali

Sibnath Sastri Sibnath Sastri (1847-1919) was a leading reformer in the Brahmo Samaj movement in Calcutta. His *Atmacarit* ('Autobiography,' 1918) is a report of his religious life, partially inspired by the confessional strand of Christianity, which influenced the Brahma Samaj. Unlike Augustine, or Rousseau, or even Gandhi, however, this Bengali intellectual does not disclose a private self. Instead, he writes without personal intimacy, documenting his experiences in simple language and without any attempt to teach. But precisely because it is so artless, his autobiography provides deep insight into the complex thinking of the 19th-century reformers in Bengal.

Oriya

Fakir Mohan Senapati Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918), credited with the modernisation of Oriya literature (one of India's lesser regional literatures), also wrote a remarkable autobiography. Although *Atmajeevancharita* was begun in the 1890s, and although it was serialised in magazines soon after, it

only appeared in book form posthumously in 1927. The author, who had penned several well-received novels and short stories, claimed that his life was 'too insignificant' to make the book 'worthwhile', but he did agree that Oriya needed an autobiography. Here we see how this non-traditional literary form became a prerequisite for a modern literature.

Tamil

U. Ve. Swaminatha Iyer The life of U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer (1855-1942), the last in a two-thousand-year tradition of Tamil pundits, was remarkable. He discovered, edited and published many of the oldest texts of Tamil classical literature; without his diligent searching for crumbling manuscripts in the attics of disused houses, we would have lost about 500 years of Indian literary history. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the most important autobiography and biography of this period in Tamil were both written by this man.

Autobiography Swaminatha Iyer published his autobiography *En Carittiram* ('My Life') in the Tamil weekly *Anandavikatan*, from January 1940 to May 1942. It was later published as a book in 1950. Running to 762 (sometimes monotonous) pages, it is an unparalleled account of village life, especially in the Thanjavur district in the late 19th century. The language is simple and peppered with many observations on people as well as descriptions of school life and life in a monastery (*matta*). The book also reveals the enormous perseverance of Swaminatha Iyer in his quest to find and preserve old manuscripts.

Biography Swaminatha Iyer's definitive study of his teacher, Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai (1815-1875), was the first prose-biography in Tamil. He published the first volume in 1933 and the second in 1940. It was a massive undertaking, which he approached like any other scholarly project.

In 1900, he issued a call in a magazine for any materials that people might have concerning his subject. In the end, after working for nearly forty years, he produced a flowing and detailed account of his mentor. We learn, for instance, about how he prepared palm-leaves for writing, what he had for breakfast and how he enjoyed locking horns in debate.

T. Selvakecavaraya Mutaliyar T. Selvakecavaraya Mutaliyar (1864-1921) was a fine literary biographer in Tamil during this period. He wrote a number of life-studies, including those on the two giants of Tamil literature (*Tiruvalluvar*, 1904, and *Kamban*, 1909), but his best biography, paradoxically, is that of the Marathi nationalist Ranade (*Madava Govinda Ranade*, 1920), which is based on a memoir by Ranade's wife.

T.S.S. Rajan *Ninaivu Alaikal* ('Waves of Reflections,' 1947) by T.S.S. Rajan (1880-1953) is the most sophisticated political autobiography ever written in Tamil. Through 400 pages, the author, who was a doctor and politician, describes his family's early struggle with poverty, his own education and his rise to become a minister in the provincial government in Madras.

Nammakal Ramalingam Pillai For sheer reading pleasure, however, the best Tamil autobiography of this period is *En Katai* ('My Story,' 1944) by Nammakal Ramalingam Pillai (1888-1972). A poet and a freedom-fighter, the author entertains us with portraits of his mother—who was uneducated but could recite the epics and many myths by heart—and his father, who was an unassuming postman. Pillai describes his first love, who jilted him for another man, his career as a painter and a musician, his journey to Delhi in 1912 for the coronation of George V and his tour of the Northwest Provinces. The most moving sections narrate his arranged marriage to a cousin, a village girl who was forced on him and whom he mistreated. Eventually, though, he was shamed by her patient suffering and learned to love her.

Marathi

One of the most gifted biographers of this period was N.C. Kelkar (1872-1947). Like many of his literary contemporaries in other parts of India, Kelkar wrote poetry, fiction and non-fiction, edited a newspaper and played a leading role in the nationalist movement. He began his biographical writing with a long study of the Italian patriot Garibaldi, though he dedicated most of his time to a study of Lokmanya Tilak (1856-1920), who stirred nationalist feelings even before Gandhi. Kelkar published four separate books

on this man, whom he had known during his lifetime, the most important being the three-volume *Lokmanya Tilka Yanche Charitra* ('The Life and Times of Lokmanya Tilka,' 1928).

Questions/discussion

1. Biography and autobiography are both considered 'life-writing', but are their differences greater than their similarities?
2. Some scholars have used the phrase 'the invention of private space' to describe the emergence of autobiography in late 19th and early 20th century India, arguing that it was created to express a new sense of individualism. Others have shown that individual lives were not separated from the wider social and public contexts in which they were written. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that autobiography created a bridge between the private and the public.
3. Autobiography as a literary form may have emerged in the modern era, but contemplation, meditation and other forms of self-examination have been a part of Indian culture for a very long time. What link, if any, might exist between these traditional meditative practices and modern life-writing?

Reading

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Biography, Autobiography and Life History (Permanent Black, 2004)

Tridip Suhrud, 'Indian subcontinent: auto/biography to 1947,' In Magaretta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* (Routledge, 2001).

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South Asian Languages (Heidelberg, 1979)

ESSAY

Overview

Essay-writing in this period took diverse forms. While the scholarly treatise and commentary continued, and while the beginnings of literary criticism were evident, most discursive prose-writing engaged with the two pressing debates of the day, both in response to the heyday of the British Raj. First, the reform movements of the nineteenth century continued to argue for change in religion and society. Second, again picking up threads from the previous century, there was a demand for political freedom and eventually independence. The genius of Aurobindo and Gandhi was to combine the clamour for religious and political change, although each spent many years in British jails. Although controversial pamphlets calling for radical change in religion and society did not much trouble the British authorities, they cracked down hard on political writing that they considered seditious. Newspapers, as established businesses, proved easy to control through legislation, but not so the pamphlets that could appear and disappear in a day. In these times of campaigning journalism and political pamphleteering, the essay moved out of the university and into the public imagination.

Gujarati

M.K. Gandhi Although Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) is not always appreciated as an essayist, his early writings display the argumentative power (acquired as a lawyer in South Africa) that would later persuade even his enemies. He edited newspapers in Gujarati, Hindi and English, and produced numerous essays on a wide variety of topics from vegetarianism to economics. He usually wrote in Gujarati and then translated himself into English.

Hind Swaraj A good example of his prose and his process is *Hind Swaraj* ('Indian Self-Rule'). It was written in a little over a week, as he travelled by boat from South Africa to India in November 1909. When this political tract was swiftly banned by the British, he translated it into English, and the authorities, believing it would have little impact on English-speaking elites, let it sell. The book takes the form of a dialogue between author and reader (a typical Indian), whose doubts about independence are swept aside by the cogent reasoning of the author. For instance, when the reader says that he would be content for the English to leave, the author replies that not just the people but also the system of government must change. An independent country with an English-style government would not be India, he says, but 'Englishtan.'

Marathi

Vinod Damodar Savarkar The religious nationalism begun by Gandhi took a virulent anti-Muslim turn with V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966). His extremism began when, as a student in London and Paris, he learned bomb-making from a Russian émigré and planned the assassination of Lord Curzon (responsible for the hated partition of Bengal in 1905). When a member of his revolutionary group shot and killed an officer of the India Office in London, Savarkar was arrested. But when the ship carrying him back to India docked at Marseille, he escaped and claimed asylum on French soil. Recaptured, he was sent to the Andaman Islands to serve a fifty-year sentence but was released in 1921 and subsequently led the Hindu Mahasabha, an extreme Hindu nationalist organisation.

Essays Savarkar wrote extensively in Marathi, although much of it was translated into English. An example, with an amazing history, is his book *1857-The War of Independence*, which was originally written in Marathi in 1908, but was published in English, in Holland. The British authorities had tried to suppress its publication in Marathi and then again in English, in both England and India, even stealing two chapters of the manuscript in London—all because the book dared to recast the 'mutiny' of 1857 as an act of insurrection. Savarkar's most famous work, *Hindutva-Who is a Hindu?* (1923), was written in English, while he was in prison, but its author was named only as a 'Maratha'.

English

Rabindranath Tagore The essays written in this period by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) represent a mixture of interests. Although he wrote about nationalism (a collection with that title was published in 1917), he devoted himself more to aesthetic and spiritual issues. *Personality* (1917) is a collection of six essays, (including the famous 'What is Art?'), while *Sadhana* ('The Perfection of Life', 1913) expresses his mystical idealism. Tagore transcended many categories, as is illustrated by his eclectic collection of writings entitled *Bicitra Prabandha* ('Miscellaneous Essays,' 1907), which includes letters, poems and reminiscences. Always an original thinker, he did not hesitate to criticise what he saw as Gandhi's error in calling on Indians to burn their foreign-made clothes ('The Call of Truth,' 1922).

Sri Aurobindo Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950) was a patriot who became a mystic. He participated in the nationalist movement at the highest level before retreating to Pondicherry in 1910 to escape another term in a British jail. Even his political essays, however, reveal a spiritualism not dissimilar to Gandhi's. Indeed, he wrote a series of essays as early as 1907 outlining the philosophical foundation of passive resistance to aggression. In other early prose writings, he argued passionately for the revival of Hinduism in the service of nationalism. Later essays moved away from temporal problems and urged his followers to act for world peace as 'instruments of the Divine Will.'

B.R. Ambedkar B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was one of the most extraordinary men in this period of remarkable people. Born into an untouchable caste, he went on to gain a PhD from Columbia University and pass the bar from Grey's Inn, London. He made his mark on the nationalist movement in the 1930s, when he broke ranks with Gandhi and argued the case for the millions of Harijans in India. While others saw Hinduism as the antidote to colonialism, Ambedkar argued that Hinduism was itself as oppressive as foreign rule.

Essays Ambedkar bravely published his ideas in a series of fiercely argued books and essays. In 1936 he wrote a speech called 'The Annihilation of Caste' to be delivered at a conference in Lahore. He sent it

in advance to the organisers for printing and distribution, as was the custom, but they objected to its condemnation of the caste system. When they requested changes, he printed it on his own. Later, he published *What Gandhi and the Congress have Done to Untouchables* (1945), which is a closely argued polemic, citing facts and statistics to condemn the Gandhian position that the caste system (including Untouchables) was desirable. The book was banned by the Indian government after Independence in 1947. In the early 1950s, he wrote *Buddha and His Dhamma*, in which he explained why he had converted to Buddhism.

Tamil

E.V. Ramaswami Naicker E.V. Ramaswami Naicker (1879-1973) epitomises this age of the fervent pamphleteer. He, like Ambedkar, opposed Gandhi on the question of caste, but Naicker's protest was on behalf of all non-Brahman Tamils (not just Untouchables). He protested endlessly against what he saw as the historical domination of Sanskrit/Hindi and Brahmins over the language and people of south India. His 'rationalist' movement attacked superstition and idolatry, while his 'self-respect' movement aimed to restore dignity to Tamils. He also championed women's rights in the form of 'self-respect marriages', which were conducted without a Brahmin priest. A tireless orator (even in old age he would speak for three or four hours), he edited several newspapers (such as *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai*). He is still the guiding spirit behind every political party (DMK and its offshoots) that has held power in Madras.

Essays Naicker articulated his unorthodox, even offensive, views in a florid but easily understood Tamil. It was a Tamil ostensibly scrubbed clean of all Sanskrit influences (an impossible task), so that his language would embody his political message. Perhaps his most famous pamphlet is *Iramayanam, Unmaiyaana Katai* ('Ramayana, the True Story', 1936?), in which he unmasks Rama, the symbol of Hindu virtue, as an unethical coward. Other important works include *Namatu Kurikol* ('Our Aims,' 1938) and *Pen Yen Atimaiyanal?* ('Why did Women become Enslaved?', 1942).

Questions/discussion

1. The British Library holds an enormous collection of essays, books, pamphlets and tracts that were banned by the British government in India prior to Independence. Most of these sources have never been studied by scholars. The story of Indian Independence has yet to be told in full.
2. Most of us know the names of Gandhi and Nehru, and understandably so, but their influence was closely matched by Ambedkar and Naicker. These latter two did not always write what people wanted to read, but they reflected the views of a very large segment of India's population, then and now. Again, it is salutary to realise that Gandhi did not speak for everyone.
3. In the end, however, Gandhi's vision of a future Indian society won the day. Why is this? Is it because of he practiced what he preached in terms of non-violent political action? Is it because his vision was rooted in traditional Hinduism? Is it because he used his lawyer-trained powers of persuasion, in print and speech, to convert the masses to his cause? We could also ask what role did the media, most of it British, play in creating the image of the 'Mahatma' ('Great Soul').

Reading

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Amiya Sen, *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India* (Oxford, 2003)

Texts

1. From *Bicitra Prabandha*, by Tagore

OUR REAL PROBLEM in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing in India, but among all nations. I do not believe in an exclusive political interest. Politics in the West have dominated Western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you. We have to remember that in Europe, where peoples had their racial unity from the beginning, and where natural resources were insufficient for the inhabitants, the civilization has naturally taken the character of political and commercial aggressiveness. For on the one hand they had no internal complications, and on the other they had to deal with neighbours who were strong and rapacious. To have perfect combination among themselves and a watchful attitude of animosity against others was taken as the solution of their problems. In former days they organized and plundered, in the present age the same spirit continues - and they organize and exploit the whole world.

But from the earliest beginnings of history, India has had her own problem constantly before her - it is the race problem. Each nation must be conscious of its mission and we, in India, must realize that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be political, simply because we have not yet been finally able to accomplish what was set before us by our providence.

This problem of race unity which we have been trying to solve for so many years has likewise to be faced by you here in America. Many people in this country ask me what is happening as to the caste distinctions in India. But when this question is asked me, it is usually done with a superior air. And I feel tempted to put the same question to our American critics with a slight modification, 'What have you done with the Red Indian and the Negro?' For you have not got over your attitude of caste toward them. You have used violent methods to keep aloof from other races, but until you have solved the question here in America, you have no right to question India.

In spite of our great difficulty, however, India has done something. She has tried to make an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity. This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and others, preaching one God to all races of India.

In finding the solution of our problem we shall have helped to solve the world problem as well. What India has been, the whole world is now. The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you also must find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity. There is only one history - the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one. And we are content in India to suffer for such a great cause.

2. From the 'Doctrine of Passive Resistance', by Sri Aurobindo

We have defined, so far, the occasion and the ultimate object of the passive resistance we preach. It is the only effective means, except actual armed revolt, by which the organised strength of the nation, gathering to a powerful central authority and guided by the principle of self-development and self-help, can wrest the control of our national life from the grip of an alien bureaucracy, and thus, developing into a free popular Government, naturally replace the bureaucracy it extrudes until the process culminates in a self-governed India, liberated from foreign control. The mere effort at self-development unaided by some kind of resistance, will not materially help us towards our goal. Merely by developing national schools and colleges we shall not induce or force the bureaucracy to give up to us the control of education. Merely by attempting to expand some of our trades and industries, we shall not drive out the British exploiter or take from the British Government its sovereign power of regulating, checking or killing the growth of Swadeshi industries by the imposition of judicious taxes and duties and other methods always open to the controller of a country's finance and legislation. Still less shall we be able by that harmless means to get for

ourselves the control of taxation and expenditure. Nor shall we, merely by establishing our own arbitration courts, oblige the alien control to give up the elaborate and lucrative system of Civil and Criminal Judicature which at once emasculates the nation and makes it pay heavily for its own emasculation. In none of these matters is the bureaucracy likely to budge an inch from its secure position unless it is forcibly persuaded.

The control of the young mind in its most impressionable period is of vital importance to the continuance of the hypnotic spell by which alone the foreign domination manages to subsist; the exploitation of the country is the chief reason for its existence; the control of the judiciary is one of its chief instruments of repression. None of these things can it yield up without bringing itself nearer to its doom. It is only by organised national resistance, passive or aggressive, that we can make our self-development effectual. For if the self-help movement only succeeds in bringing about some modification of educational methods, some readjustment of the balance of trade, some alleviation of the curse of litigation, then, whatever else it may have succeeded in doing, it will have failed of its main object. The new school at least have not advocated the policy of self-development merely out of a disinterested ardour for moral improvement or under the spur of an inoffensive philanthropic patriotism. This attitude they leave to saints and philosophers, – saints like the editor of the *Indian Mirror* or philosophers like the ardent Indian Liberals who sit at the feet of Mr. John Morley. They for their part speak and write frankly as politicians aiming at a definite and urgent political object by a way which shall be reasonably rapid and yet permanent in its results. We may have our own educational theories; but we advocate national education not as an educational experiment or to subserve any theory, but as the only way to secure truly national and patriotic control and discipline for the mind of the country in its malleable youth. We desire industrial expansion, but Swadeshi without boycott, – non-political Swadeshi, – Lord Minto's "honest" Swadeshi – has no attractions for us; since we know that it can bring no safe and permanent national gain; – that can only be secured by the industrial and fiscal independence of the Indian nation. Our immediate problem as a nation is not how to be intellectual and well-informed or how to be rich and industrious, but how to stave off imminent national death, how to put an end to the white peril, how to assert ourselves and live. It is for this reason that whatever minor differences there may be between different exponents of the new spirit, they are all agreed on the immediate necessity of an organised national resistance to the state of things which is crushing us out of existence as a nation and on the one goal of that resistance, – freedom.

3. From the author's unpublished preface to *The Buddha and His Damma*, by Ambedkar

A question is always asked to me: how I happen[ed] to take such [a] high degree of education. Another question is being asked: why I am inclined towards Buddhism. These questions are asked because I was born in a community known in India as the "Untouchables." This preface is not the place for answering the first question. But this preface may be the place for answering the second question.

The direct answer to this question is that I regard the Buddha's Dhamma to be the best. No religion can be compared to it. If a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the Religion of the Buddha. This conviction has grown in me after thirty-five years of close study of all religions.

How I was led to study Buddhism is another story. It may be interesting for the reader to know. This is how it happened.

My father was a military officer, but at the same time a very religious person. He brought me up under a strict discipline. From my early age I found certain contradictions in my father's religious way of life. He was a Kabirpanthi, though his father was Ramanandi. As such, he did not believe in Murti Puja (Idol Worship), and yet he performed Ganapati Puja—of course for our sake, but I did not like it. He read the books of his Panth. At the same time, he compelled me and my elder brother to read every day before going to bed a portion of [the] Mahabharata and Ramayana to my sisters and other persons who assembled at my father's house to hear the Katha. This went on for a long number of years.

The year I passed the English Fourth Standard Examination, my community people wanted to celebrate the occasion by holding a public meeting to congratulate me. Compared to the state of education in other

communities, this was hardly an occasion for celebration. But it was felt by the organisers that I was the first boy in my community to reach this stage; they thought that I had reached a great height. They went to my father to ask for his permission. My father flatly refused, saying that such a thing would inflate the boy's head; after all, he has only passed an examination and done nothing more. Those who wanted to celebrate the event were greatly disappointed. They, however, did not give way.

They went to Dada Keluskar, a personal friend of my father, and asked him to intervene. He agreed. After a little argumentation, my father yielded, and the meeting was held. Dada Keluskar presided. He was a literary person of his time. At the end of his address he gave me as a gift a copy of his book on the life of the Buddha, which he had written for the Baroda Sayajirao Oriental Series. I read the book with great interest, and was greatly impressed and moved by it.

I began to ask why my father did not introduce us to the Buddhist literature. After this, I was determined to ask my father this question. One day I did. I asked my father why he insisted upon our reading the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which recounted the greatness of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and repeated the stories of the degradation of the Shudras and the Untouchables. My father did not like the question. He merely said, "You must not ask such silly questions. You are only boys; you must do as you are told." My father was a Roman Patriarch, and exercised most extensive Patria Pretestas over his children. I alone could take a little liberty with him, and that was because my mother had died in my childhood, leaving me to the care of my auntie.

So after some time, I asked again the same question. This time my father had evidently prepared himself for a reply. He said, "The reason why I ask you to read the Mahabharata and Ramayana is this: we belong to the Untouchables, and you are likely to develop an inferiority complex, which is natural. The value of [the] Mahabharata and Ramayana lies in removing this inferiority complex. See Drona and Karna--they were small men, but to what heights they rose! Look at Valmiki--he was a Koli, but he became the author of [the] Ramayana. It is for removing this inferiority complex that I ask you to read the Mahabharata and Ramayana."

I could see that there was some force in my father's argument. But I was not satisfied. I told my father that I did not like any of the figures in [the] Mahabharata. I said, "I do not like Bhishma and Drona, nor Krishna. Bhishma and Drona were hypocrites. They said one thing and did quite the opposite. Krishna believed in fraud. His life is nothing but a series of frauds. Equal dislike I have for Rama. Examine his conduct in the Sarupnakha [=Surpanakha] episode [and] in the Vali Sugriva episode, and his beastly behaviour towards Sita." My father was silent, and made no reply. He knew that there was a revolt.

This is how I turned to the Buddha, with the help of the book given to me by Dada Keluskar. It was not with an empty mind that I went to the Buddha at that early age. I had a background, and in reading the Buddhist Lore I could always compare and contrast. This is the origin of my interest in the Buddha and His Dhamma.

Part II : LATE 20TH CENTURY

- Poetry
- Drama
- Fiction
- Autobiography
- Essay

POETRY

Overview

Poetry, the premier literary form in India for three thousand years, did not recover from the onslaught of modernity in the twentieth century. There is no modern counterpart to the court-poet or the poet-saint, unless we speak of the lyricist whose lines are sung in Indian cinema. Unlike the Indian novel, poetry has largely lost its cultural status and public profile. It is still written in regional languages, but audiences and book sales are small. Indian poetry in English does enjoy some success, although it retains little from premodern Indian poetry except on the level of content. There are, however, bright spots in Indian post-colonial poetry. We can, for instance, point to the rise of women poets in all languages, as part of the broader feminist movements in the late 20th century. The brevity of poetry also means it can be read with pleasure in a matter of minutes. And, so, in the age of the internet, a poet in a small town in India can reach an audience in Tokyo and Melbourne and Warsaw.

Urdu

Gulzar These trends are illustrated by the career of Gulzar (*Sampooran Singh Kalra*, b. 1934), who is today described as a 'poet-lyricist'. He 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 troubles and hopes of the common man, which he has composed for films, starting with '*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 the song '*Jai Ho*' in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Hindi

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.

Anamika Among a younger generation of Hindi poets is Anamika (b. 1961). Born after Independence, she belongs to another cultural world, more cosmopolitan and less connected to tradition. Anamika writes poetry and novels in Hindi, literary criticism in English and translates from English into Hindi. Her work, especially the poetry, reflects a feminist, social activist and global perspective. Among her collections, critics have single out *Anushtup* ('Invocation,' 1998) and *Khurduri Hatheliyan* ('Rough Palms,' 2005).

Marathi

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.

Tamil

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.

English

Dilip Chitre Like many of his contemporaries, Dilip Chitre (1938 -2009) was a poet who travelled back and forth between his mother-tongue and English. Born in Baroda and brought up in Bombay by a Marathi-speaking family, he was educated in English and later spent time in several countries, including the USA. He published his first book of Marathi poems in 1960 but gained an international reputation in 2008 with his collection of English poems (*As Is, Where Is*). His bilingual poetic powers are evident in a famous translation of devotional poems from the 17th-century Marathi writer Tukram (*Says Tuka*, 1991). Chitre was also a talent painter and musician.

Nissim Ezekiel Nissim Ezekiel (1924 –2004) was another 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.

Questions/discussion

1. One explanation for the decline of poetry in Indian languages in the twentieth century is that the nationalist and reformist ideas that dominated India until after 1950 were more effectively articulated in fiction and the essay.

2. To what extent can we compare the poet-saints of medieval and pre-modern India with the lyricists of today's cinema? Both composed and sang songs, but is this only an irrelevant, albeit interesting, commonality?
3. Many of the best English-language poets either wrote in or translated from a regional language. What role does bi- and tri-lingualism play in the formation of literary culture in contemporary India?

Reading

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Eunice De Souza (ed.), *Nine Indian Women Poets* (Oxford India, 2001)

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Texts

1. 'The Black Hen,' by A.K Ramanujan

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all

yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it's all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you're afraid.

2. 'Father returning home,' by Dilip Chitre

My father travels on the late evening train
Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light
Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes
His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat
Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age
fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.
Now I can see him getting off the train
Like a word dropped from a long sentence.
He hurries across the length of the grey platform,
Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,
His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onward.

Home again, I see him drinking weak tea,
Eating a stale chapati, reading a book.
He goes into the toilet to contemplate
Man's estrangement from a man-made world.
Coming out he trembles at the sink,
The cold water running over his brown hands,
A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists.
His sullen children have often refused to share
Jokes and secrets with him. He will now go to sleep
Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking
Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass.

3. from *Jejuri*, by Kolatkar

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down
on the windows of the state transport bus.
all the way up to jejuri.

a cold wind keeps whipping
and slapping a corner of tarpaulin at your elbow.

you look down to the roaring road.
you search for the signs of daybreak in what little light spills out of bus.

your own divided face in the pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see.

you seem to move continually forward.
toward a destination
just beyond the caste mark beyond his eyebrows.

outside, the sun has risen quietly
it aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin.
and shoots at the old man's glasses.

a sawed off sunbeam comes to rest gently against the driver's right temple.
the bus seems to change direction.

at the end of bumpy ride with your own face on the either side
when you get off the bus.

you don't step inside the old man's head.

4. 'Oppantam' ('Contract'), by Salma, trans. N. Kalyan Raman

My sister hisses at me in anger
what my mother whispers tactfully:
that all failures
on the conjugal bed
are mine alone.

The first words I hear

every night in the bedroom:
'What's with you tonight?'
These are, most often,
the final words too.

A finger points to whorish barter.
Upon the air of timorous nights, awaiting redemption
from ten million glowing stars,
float words of wise counsel

Unable to feed its young,
the cat sobs like a child;
and its wail
seizes my heart.

You, too,
must have your complaints.
My stand, though,
has been made clear
by time and history.

To receive
a little of your love,
dreary though it might be –

To fulfil
my duties
as the mother of your child –

To have you bring
sanitary towels and contraceptives
From the outside world;
And to seek more such petty favours –

To order you around a bit,
if I could –

To affirm a little
of my authority –

My vagina opens,
knowing all that it should.

5. *Pacai Devatai* ('Green Angel') by Salma, trans. Lakshmi Holstrom

In the midst of a thicket
beside a pond that has fed on the morning
and spreads out in beauty
I search for the pathway that I have lost.
Just as the darkness of the dense trees
threatens to snatch me up and swallow me
a compassionate angel appears
to close up my dark hole of fear
and to retrieve three pledges
even from the depths of the mysterious pond:

to light up the path I lost
to re-thread a shattered dream from my youth
to imagine an entirely new dream.
And while I find again my path,
straighten an old dream that was askew,
relish a new dream once more,
through tongues of fire that flame my eyes
I see the angel treading the earth
her clothes steeped in green.

DRAMA

Overview

Like the poets of post-Independence India, many of the country's leading playwrights eventually migrated to the world of the cinema, where their monetary reward and public recognition is far greater. As a spoken literary form, drama does connect more directly with audiences, but its costly production requires a cast of actors and an infrastructure that militates against success. Some of this problem has been mitigated by the establishment of cultural organisations on the state and central level. These well-funded organisations promote classical forms of theatre, such as Kutiyattam, folk forms, such as Terukuttu, and the new theatre written by urban elites. Outside these institutions, politically-motivated theatre continues to attract audiences, but not on a regular basis. Thus there remains a divide between urban elites and the bulk of the population, which some playwrights have attempted to bridge by using traditional techniques, colloquial language and stories from mythology and epics.

Radio-plays

An obscure episode in the history of Indian drama in the twentieth century is the radio-play. At first these plays were written as if for the stage, but producers soon realised that the new medium of radio required a drama stripped of all its visuality and commissioned scripts based on the concept of 'total action.' In Calcutta, Birendra Krishna Bhadra and Bani Kumar rewrote old classics and adapted new work to fit these requirements. Among the best of these early experiments, all written in the 1950s, are *Rachodlal* by Yashodhar Mehta, *Vani Mari Koyal* by Chunilal Madia and *Anant Sadna* by Shivkumar Joshi.

Bengali

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 dramas 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, which 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.

Marathi

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.

Sakharam Binder In *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar tells the story of its eponymous protagonist, a book-binder who picks up discarded women and employs them in his home as servants and sex partners. He convinces himself that he is a social reformer by giving each woman a new sari, 50 rupees and a ticket to wherever she wishes to go. Slowly, the psychological damage is revealed. The play was banned in 1974.

Ghashiram Kotwal Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* is an equally powerful play about political ambition and corruption. It was written in 1972, during the rise to power of the Shiv Sena, a right wing Hindu party in Maharashtra. Tendulkar, however, sets the action in the court of a Hindu king in Pune in the late 18th century. With its use of broad satire, and song-dance routines from Tamasha (Marathi folk theatre), it proved extremely popular and has been performed in more than 20 countries.

Kannada

Girish Karnad What Tendulkar did for Marathi theatre, and Sircar did for Bengali, Girish Karnad (b. 1938) has done for Kannada. An intellectual 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

Hindi

Mohan Rakesh Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) is credited with starting the new theatre movement in Hindi in 1958 with his first play, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* ('One Day in Ashadh'). It tells the story of Kalidasa, the great classical Sanskrit playwright, and his broken marriage. Although on the surface it appears to be a traditional historical play, it introduces Rakesh's trademark themes of a lack of communication, guilt and alienation. Our inability to understand each other is the cause of our tragedy. It might be relevant to note that Rakesh's own, arranged marriage ended in 1957, as did a second one in 1960.

English

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 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 Mahesh Dattani (b.1958) 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 male chauvinism hidden 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. Modern drama in India is not a thriving business. Audiences do not flock to the theatre, and playwrights (as playwrights) do not gain national attention. Producing a play is expensive, and the returns are minimal. One solution has been to put drama on the life-support machine of government funding through cultural organisations (Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi and its regional affiliates). Is state-supported drama ('drama in a museum', as one critic put it) a viable long-term solution? What is the level of state support for drama, or opera, in other countries?
2. On the other hand, various forms of regional, folk and 'street' theatre do manage to survive, if not thrive, especially when there is a local or national issue to address. Perhaps we should think of two distinct genres: literary drama and performed theatre.

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FICTION

Overview

In the immediate aftermath of Independence, Indian short stories tended to reveal a sense of loss and confusion. While the politically motivated writing of the previous decades did not disappear, the point of view shifted from an examination of external material conditions to a probing of the interior states of individuals. Over the course of this period, however, the short story gradually gave way to the novel, and the 'Indian novel' became virtually synonymous with the 'Indian English novel.' This is largely the result of the globalisation of English literature. When the economic policies of the Indian government were relaxed in the 1990s, western publishing houses set up offices in the country to scout new talent and offer lucrative contracts. They were aware that there *are* approximately 125 million English-readers in India and roughly 400 million worldwide. Indians writing in English had achieved international attention before, but the recent success is impressive. V. S. Naipaul won the Booker Prize in 1971, Ruth Praver Jhabwala won in 1975, Rushdie in 1981, Arundathi Roy in 1998, Kiran Desai in 2006 and Aravind Adiga in 2008. A less publicized trend has been the emergence of Dalit writers, especially women, in regional languages.

Short story

Nirmal Verma Nirmal Verma (1929-2005), also a novelist, is 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.

Mahashweta Devi Whereas Verma wrote about the urban middle-classes, Mahashweta Devi (1926-2016) was a Bengali academic and a committed political writer, focusing on the lives of tribal communities.

She wrote close to 100 novels and published 20 collections of stories. She, too, was a communist and was fired from her job at the post office for her political activities.

U.R. Anantha Murthy Anantha Murthy (1932-2014) was an elegant writer of short stories (and novels) in Kannada. Although he was a professor of English literature, he stirred up controversy by repeatedly

stating that an Indian writer in English has a less immediate contact with an Indian audience than does a writer in a regional language.

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 refusal to use standard Malayalam and instead to rely on the dialect of his Muslim community. His fiction contains both fierce social realism (criticism of the backward practices of Muslims in Kerala) and explorations of 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 *Cirukukal 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.

Novel

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.

Malgudi Unlike most successful Indian authors, Narayan is not known for any single novel. He didn't write a masterpiece (which probably explains why, though shortlisted several times, he never received the Nobel Prize). Instead, all his books were equally brilliant, especially in their evocation of Malgudi, their fictional setting. Like the most memorable fictional settings, it is both true to experience and manipulated for effect.

The Guide Most critics regard *The Guide* (1958) as Narayan's best novel. It is both a parody of Indian culture and a poignant love story. Its hero is Raju, the guide of the title, who loiters at the local railway station, waiting to fleece the next innocent traveller. Before long he meets and falls in love with Rosie, ends up in jail for fraud and forgery but on release is mistaken for a holy saint by a villager. When he undertakes a fast and prevents a flood, his reputation, seemingly but not entirely without his contrivance, grows and grows until he becomes known all over India, attracting film crews, even from Hollywood. But no plot summary can tell the story of this novel, with its shifts in narration, doubling back in time and adding layer upon layer of irony.

Contemporary

Novelists Following R.K. Narayan's generation, high-quality novels have been written by several authors. Anita Desai (b.1937), who was shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times, wrote a sensitive and moving portrait of a Delhi family in *Clear Light of Day* (1980). More lyrical are the novels by the Kerala-born Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), whose *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) was a best-seller. In recent years, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri and Rohinton Mistry (shortlisted for the Booker in 1991,1996 and 2002 respectively) have all won international reputations.

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

Shoba De One name that rarely appears on a list of Indian English writers is Shoba De (b. 1948), yet she is the most popular novelist and journalist in the country. To date she written 17 novels that, with

titles such as *Starry Nights* and *Sultry Days*, might be called 'soap opera literature' and compared to Jackie Collins. Her sales figures are impressive, and she has filled a (rather large) literary niche.

Chetan Bhagat If De's novels tell the tale of middle-class women in contemporary India, those written by Chetan Bhagat (b. 1974) hold up a mirror for the men. His eight novels (beginning in 2004) have broken all sales records by selling in the millions. By comparison, the Booker-winning novels by Roy, Desai and Adiga have sold in the range of 50,000-100,000 copies each. In describing the success story of young men, Bhagat's novels are entertaining, youth-focused and aspirational.

Dalit writing

Marathi Since the early 20th century, Indian writers had created Dalit (Untouchable, Harijan) characters, but in the second half of the century Dalits themselves began to write their own stories. The landmark publication in 1978 of Daya Pawar's *Balute* ('Share') was followed by several more novels in Marathi in the 1980s. One researcher has found 86 life-stories by Marathi Dalits. One of the best, *Akkarmashi* ('Outcaste,' 1984) by Limbale, is the life-story of a bastard son born to a Dalit woman seduced by her landlord. Marathi is the natural home of such writing because it is the region where a major Dalit liberation struggle began in the 1920s.

Tamil Another major anti-caste movement during the same period, this time in the Tamil country, might explain the emergence of Dalit life-writing in Tamil. The two most important of these Tamil novels have been written by Bama: *Karuku* ('Blades') in 1992 and *Sangati* ('Events') in 1994. *Karuku* tells the life-story of a Dalit Catholic woman, using the idioms of her community rather than standard Tamil. The novel demands the reader's attention, an effort that is repaid by insights into a spiritual journey outside the Hindu mainstream.

Hindi *Joothan* ('Left Overs', 1997) by Omprakash Valmiki tells the story of a caste of scavengers, who subsist on what others throw away. Starting in the 1950s, the novel reveals the hollowness of Gandhian programmes of Untouchable uplift. Through sheer force of will (and reading the real-life novelist Premchand), the scavenger boy becomes educated and achieves literary success as a poet.

Questions/discussion

1. 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 about 150 years and 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.
2. It is also true that the international success of the Indian novel in English is both a legacy of colonialism and a manifestation of today's globalised literary culture. The lasting effect of the success of Indian English fiction on the regional literatures of India, though too early to assess, is likely to be substantial.
3. The major development in fiction written in regional languages has been the popular success of Dalit writing, which is very different to the English-language, block-busting best sellers of Shoba De and Chetan Bhagat. However, they all share the theme of aspiration. Perhaps mass-market, English-language fiction is closer to contemporary realities than the critically-acclaimed English-language fiction of international festivals.

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Text

'A Devoted Son,' by Anita Desai

When the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them barefoot and in his pajamas, at the garden gate, then went up the steps to the verandah where his father sat sipping his morning tea and bowed down to touch his feet.

"A first division, son?" his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.

"At the top of the list, papa," Rakesh murmured, as if awed. "First in the country."

Bedlam broke loose then. The family whooped and danced. The whole day long visitors streamed into the small yellow house at the end of the road to congratulate the parents of this *Wunderkind*, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colors of a festival. There were garlands and halwa, party clothes and gifts (enough fountain pens to last years, even a watch or two), nerves and temper and joy, all in a multicolored whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened: Rakesh was the first son in the family to receive an education, so much had been sacrificed in order to send him to school and then medical college, and at last the fruits of their sacrifice had arrived, golden and glorious.

To everyone who came to him to say "*Mubarak*, Varmaji, your son has brought you glory," the father said, "Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet." This moved many of the women in the crowd so much that they were seen to raise the ends of their saris and dab at their tears while the men reached out for the betel-leaves and sweetmeats that were offered around on trays and shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary filial behavior. "One does not often see such behavior in sons anymore," they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps. Leaving the house, some of the women said, sniffing, "At least on such an occasion they might have served pure ghee sweets," and some of the men said, "Don't you think old Varma was giving himself airs? He needn't think we don't remember that he comes from the vegetable market himself, his father used to sell vegetables, and he has never seen the inside of a school." But there was more envy than rancour in their voices and it was, of course, inevitable—not every son in that shabby little colony at the edge of the city was destined to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?

And that was only the beginning, the first step in a great, sweeping ascent to the radiant heights of fame and fortune. The thesis he wrote for his M.D. brought Rakesh still greater glory, if only in select medical circles. He won a scholarship. He went to the USA (that was what his father learnt to call it and taught the whole family to say—not America, which was what the ignorant neighbors called it, but, with a grand familiarity, "the USA") where he pursued his career in the most prestigious of all hospitals and won encomiums from his American colleagues which were relayed to his admiring and glowing family. What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony, right at the end of the road where the rubbish vans tipped out their stinking contents for pigs to nose in and rag-pickers to build their shacks on, all steaming and smoking just outside the neat wire fences and well tended gardens. To this Rakesh returned and the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father's feet.

As for his mother, she gloated chiefly over the strange fact that he had not married in America, had not brought home a foreign wife as all her neighbors had warned her he would, for wasn't that what all Indian boys went abroad for? Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl she had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled in like a charm,

seemingly too lazy and too good-natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done. What was more, she was pretty—really pretty, in a plump, pudding way that only gave way to fat—soft, spreading fat, like warm wax—after the birth of their first baby, a son, and then what did it matter?

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital, quickly rising to the top of the administrative organization, and was made a director before he left to set up his own clinic. He took his parents in his car—a new, sky-blue Ambassador with a rear window full of stickers and charms revolving on strings—to see the clinic when it was built, and the large sign-board over the door on which his name was printed in letters of red, with a row of degrees and qualifications to follow it like so many little black slaves of the regent. Thereafter his fame seemed to grow just a little dimmer—or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown accustomed to it at last—but it was also the beginning of his fortune for he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this was not accomplished in the wink of an eye. Naturally not. It was the achievement of a lifetime and it took up Rakesh's whole life. At the time he set up his clinic his father had grown into an old man and retired from his post at the kerosene dealer's depot at which he had worked for forty years, and his mother died soon after, giving up the ghost with a sigh that sounded positively happy, for it was her own son who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne.

For it had to be admitted—and the most unsuccessful and most rancorous of neighbors eventually did so—that Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humor his wife and show concern equally for his children and his patients, but there was actually a brain inside this beautifully polished and formed body of good manners and kind nature and, in between ministering to his family and playing host to many friends and coaxing them all into feeling happy and grateful and content, he had actually trained his hands as well and emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon. How one man—and a man born to illiterate parents, his father having worked for a kerosene dealer and his mother having spent her life in a kitchen—had achieved, combined and conducted such a medley of virtues, no one could fathom, but all acknowledged his talent and skill.

It was a strange fact, however, that talent and skill, if displayed for too long, cease to dazzle. It came to pass that the most admiring of all eyes eventually faded and no longer blinked at his glory. Having retired from work and having lost his wife, the old father very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim. He sat huddled on his string bed most of the day and developed an exasperating habit of stretching out suddenly and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to fly around him in a flap, wailing and weeping, and then suddenly sitting up, stiff and gaunt, and spitting out a big gob of betel-juice as if to mock their behavior.

He did this once too often: there had been a big party in the house, a birthday party for the youngest son, and the celebrations had to be suddenly hushed, covered up and hustled out of the way when the daughter-in-law discovered, or thought she discovered, that the old man, stretched out from end to end of his string bed, had lost his pulse; the party broke up, dissolved, even turned into a band of mourners, when the old man sat up and the distraught daughter-in-law received a gob of red spittle right on the hem of her organza sari. After that no one much cared if he sat up cross-legged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned gray as a corpse. Except, of course, for that pearl amongst pearls, his son Rakesh.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea, not in one of the china cups from which the rest of the family drank, but in the old man's favorite brass tumbler, and sat at the edge of his bed, comfortable and relaxed with the string of his pajamas dangling out from under his fine lawn night-shirt, and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from spitting. It was Rakesh, too, who, on returning from the clinic in the evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, as bare and desolate as a cell, and take the evening air

out in the garden, beautifully arranging the pillows and bolsters on the divan in the corner of the open verandah. On summer nights he saw to it that the servants carried out the old man's bed onto the lawn and himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, soothing him and settling him down for a night under the stars.

All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was that he even undertook to supervise his father's diet. One day when the father was really sick, having ordered his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of *soojie halwa* and eaten it with a saucerful of cream, Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor, and declared, "No more *halwa* for you, papa. We must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little *kheer*, that's light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can't have this happening again."

The old man who had been lying stretched out on his bed, weak and feeble after a day's illness, gave a start at the very sound, the tone of these words. He opened his eyes—rather, they fell open with shock—and he stared at his son with disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? No, it was unheard of, it was incredible. But Rakesh had turned his back to him and was cleaning up the litter of bottles and packets on the medicine shelf and did not notice while Veena slipped silently out of the room with a little smirk that only the old man saw, and hated.

Halwa was only the first item to be crossed off the old man's diet. One delicacy after the other went—everything fried to begin with, then everything sweet, and eventually everything, everything that the old man enjoyed.

The meals that arrived for him on the shining stainless steel tray twice a day were frugal to say the least—dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables and, if there were a bit of chicken or fish, that was boiled too. If he called for another helping—in a cracked voice that quavered theatrically—Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and shake his head, saying, "Now, papa, we must be careful, we can't risk another illness, you know," and although the daughter-in-law kept tactfully out of the way, the old man could just see her smirk sliding merrily through the air. He tried to bribe his grandchildren into buying him sweets (and how he missed his wife now, that generous, indulgent and illiterate cook), whispering, "Here's fifty paise," as he stuffed the coins into a tight, hot fist. "Run down to the shop at the crossroads and buy me thirty paise worth of *jalebis*, and you can spend the remaining twenty paise on yourself. Eh? Understand? Will you do that?" He got away with it once or twice but then was found out, the conspirator was scolded by his father and smacked by his mother and Rakesh came storming into the room, almost tearing his hair as he shouted through compressed lips, "Now papa, are you trying to turn my little son into a liar? Quite apart from spoiling your own stomach, you are spoiling him as well—you are encouraging him to lie to his own parents. You should have heard the lies he told his mother when she saw him bringing back those *jalebis* wrapped up in filthy newspaper. I don't allow anyone in my house to buy sweets in the bazaar, papa, surely you know that. There's cholera in the city, typhoid, gastroenteritis—I see these cases daily in the hospital, how can I allow my own family to run such risks?" The old man sighed and lay down in the corpse position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left in the old man now (his son's early morning visits and readings from the newspaper could no longer be called that) and those were visits from elderly neighbors. These were not frequent as his contemporaries were mostly as decrepit and helpless as he and few could walk the length of the road to visit him anymore. Old Bhatia, next door, however, who was still spry enough to refuse, adamantly, to bathe in the tiled bathroom indoors and to insist on carrying out his brass mug and towel, in all seasons and usually at impossible hours, into the yard and bathe noisily under the garden tap, would look over the hedge to see if Varma were out on his verandah and would call to him and talk while he wrapped his *dhoti* about him and dried the sparse hair on his head, shivering with enjoyable exaggeration. Of course these conversations, bawled across the hedge by two rather deaf old men conscious of having their entire households overhearing them, were not very satisfactory but Bhatia occasionally came out of his yard, walked down the bit of road and came in at Varma's gate to collapse onto the stone plinth built under the temple tree. If Rakesh was at home he would help his father down the steps into the garden and arrange him on his night bed under the tree and leave the two old men to chew betel-leaves and discuss the ills of their individual bodies with combined passion.

"At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you," sighed Bhatia, having vividly described his martyrdom to piles.

"Look after me?" cried Varma, his voice cracking like an ancient clay jar. "He—he does not even give me enough to eat."

"What?" said Bhatia, the white hairs in his ears twitching. "Doesn't give you enough to eat? Your own son?"

"My own son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says no, papa, I weighed out the *ata* myself and I can't allow you to have more than two hundred grams of cereal a day. He *weighs* the food he gives me, Bhatia—he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to."

"Never," murmured Bhatia in disbelief. "Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?"

"Let me tell you," Varma whispered eagerly. "Today the family was having fried fish—I could smell it. I called to my daughter-in-law to bring me a piece. She came to the door and said no. . . ."

"Said no?" It was Bhatia's voice that cracked. A *drongo* shot out of the tree and sped away. "No?"

"No, she said no, Rakesh has ordered her to give me nothing fried. No butter, he says, no oil. . . ."

"No butter? No oil? How does he expect his father to live?"

Old Varma nodded with melancholy triumph. "That is how he treats me—after I have brought him up, given him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors treat their fathers, Bhatia," for the son's sterling personality and character now underwent a curious sea change. Outwardly all might be the same but the interpretation had altered: his masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.

There was cold comfort in complaining to neighbors and, on such a miserable diet, Varma found himself slipping, weakening and soon becoming a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills and mixtures were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach but became a regular part of his diet—became his diet, complained Varma, supplanting the natural foods he craved. There were pills to regulate his bowel movements, pills to bring down his blood pressure, pills to deal with his arthritis and, eventually, pills to keep his heart beating. In between there were panicky rushes to the hospital, some humiliating experience with the stomach pump and enema, which left him frightened and helpless. He cried easily, shriveling up on his bed, but if he complained of a pain or even a vague, gray fear in the night, Rakesh would simply open another bottle of pills and force him to take one. "I have my duty to you papa," he said when his father begged to be let off.

"Let me be," Varma begged, turning his face away from the pills on the outstretched hand. "Let me die. It would be better. I do not want to live only to eat your medicines."

"Papa, be reasonable."

"I leave that to you," the father cried with sudden spirit. "Leave me alone, let me die now, I cannot live like this."

"Lying all day on his pillows, fed every few hours by his daughter-in-law's own hand, visited by every member of his family daily—and then he says he does not want to live 'like this,'" Rakesh was heard to say, laughing, to someone outside the door.

"Deprived of food," screamed the old man on the bed, "his wishes ignored, taunted by his daughter-in-law, laughed at by his grandchildren—*that* is how I live." But he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was an incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain. Only once, when old

Bhatia had come to see him and they sat together under the temple tree, they heard him cry, "God is calling me—and they won't let me go."

The quantities of vitamins and tonics he was made to take were not altogether useless. They kept him alive and even gave him a kind of strength that made him hang on long after he ceased to wish to hang on. It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break, it was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying.

In the evening, that summer, the servants would come into his cell, grip his bed, one at each end, and carry it out to the verandah, there sitting it down with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. In answer to his agonized complaints they said the doctor sahib had told them he must take the evening air and the evening air they would make him take—thump. Then Veena, that smiling, hypocritical pudding in a rustling sari, would appear and pile up the pillows under his head till he was propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache.

"Let me lie down," he begged. "I can't sit up any more."

"Try, papa, Rakesh said you can if you try," she said, and drifted away to the other end of the verandah where her transistor radio vibrated to the lovesick tunes from the cinema that she listened to all day.

So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket, in danger of getting one of their hard-spun balls in his eye, and at the gate that opened onto the dusty and rubbish-heaped lane but still bore, proudly, a newly touched-up signboard that bore his son's name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago.

At last the sky-blue Ambassador arrived, the cricket game broke up in haste, the car drove in smartly and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag from him, others to escort him up the steps. "Will you have tea?" his wife called, turning down the transistor set. "Or a Coca-Cola? Shall I fry you some *samosas*?" But he did not reply or even glance in her direction. Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken, at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son. But he stopped gobbling air with his uncontrolled lips and set his jaw as hard as a sick and very old man could set it.

"Papa," his son said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.

Old Varma tucked his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the yellow air of the summer evening.

"Papa, I'm home."

Varma's hand jerked suddenly, in a sharp, derisive movement, but he did not speak.

"How are you feeling, papa?"

Then Varma turned and looked at his son. His face was so out of control and all in pieces, that the multitude of expressions that crossed it could not make up a whole and convey to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him, his skill, his art.

"I'm dying," he croaked. "Let me die, I tell you."

"Papa, you're joking," his son smiled at him, lovingly. "I've brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, papa."

Varma's mouth worked as hard as though he still had a gob of betel in it (his supply of betel had been cut off years ago). Then he spat out some words, as sharp and bitter as poison, into his son's face. "Keep your tonic—I want none—I want none—I won't take any more of—of your medicines. None. Never," and he swept the bottle out of his son's hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective.

His son jumped, for the bottle was smashed and thick brown syrup had splashed up, staining his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running. All around the old man was hubbub once again, noise, attention.

He gave one push to the pillows at his back and dislodged them so he could sink down on his back, quite flat again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Overview

During this period, life-writing gradually assumed a firmer foothold in the literary culture of India. The lives of writers, politicians and other public figures, from film stars to cricket heroes, have a sizable market, though mostly in English. Among these somewhat predictable books, however, several stand out for their brilliant writing or original technique. A notable development has been the popularity of other lives, the lives of marginal people, men and women from low-castes and tribes. These books, usually the result of oral interviews written up by someone else, pose questions about the genre of 'auto'-biography.

English

Prakash Tandon Prakash Tandon (1911-2004) was one of the leading businessmen in twentieth-century India. After eight years in England, where he met his future wife, from Sweden, he eventually became head of Unilever and later the Punjab National Bank. None of this prepares the reader for his remarkable book, *Punjabi Century, 1857-1947* (1963). It is ostensibly an autobiography, but he takes the reader back to his grandparents' generation and tells his family's story as part of the wider historical forces that shaped the subcontinent.

Nirad Chaudhuri Nirad Chaudhuri (1897-1999) was born in a small town, in what is now Bangladesh, was educated in Calcutta, steeped himself in English literature and eventually emigrated to England in 1970, where he spent the rest of his life and became a 'Commander of the Order of the British Empire.' His literary output covers history, literary criticism and sociology, but his masterpiece is the controversial *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951). In his stubborn, contrary and mischievous examination of his own life, Chaudhuri offers a compelling description of how of one culture can penetrate another. Even the book's dedication is complex:

To the memory of the British Empire in India,
Which conferred subjecthood upon us,
But withheld citizenship.
To which yet every one of us threw out the challenge:
"Civis Britannicus sum"
Because all that was good and living within us
Was made, shaped and quickened
By the same British rule.

Published in 1951, at the mid-point of a life that spanned the twentieth century, this fiercely personal story also manages to be a provocative history of modern India. He brought his story up to date in 1987 with another memoir, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*

R.K. Narayan R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), like Nirad Chaudhuri, lived through every decade of the twentieth century, but there the similarities end. Narayan spent most of his life in a small town in south India, where his entertaining novels are set. Indeed, his autobiography *My Days* (1975) reads like one of those novels. With self-deprecating wit, he tells us about his hometown, his indifferent school years and how he became a writer. Beneath the jibes and journalistic reportage, however, we glimpse the anxieties of a young man struggling to find his way. An early marriage, widowhood six years later, a spot of journalism and haphazard participation in politics, but always the aspiration to become a writer. It is this

combination of nonchalance and desire that makes his autobiography as gripping as the melodramas he loved to read.

Ramachandra Guha An equally talented yet completely different type of writer, Ramachandra Guha (b. 1958) completed his education and early career in India before teaching in universities in America and Europe. An historian with interests ranging from environmentalism to cricket, Guha has written three original biographies. *Makers of Modern India* (2012) supplements biographical accounts of these leaders with substantial excerpts from their own writing. Among its nineteen figures is an English anthropologist, who spent his life documenting India's tribal groups. In *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, his Tribals and India* (1999), Guha examines the mixed motives and results of Elwin's dedication to the cause of tribal uplift. Lastly, in *Gandhi Before India* (2013) Guha again combines biography with social history to produce a portrait of a man we thought we knew but didn't.

Bengali

Mahesweta Devi A prolific Bengali writer and passionate social activist, Mahesweta Devi (1926-2006) is best-known for her novels, but she also wrote an excellent biography. Very different to most of the biographies written in this period, which tell the lives of persons known to the author, Devi's *Jhansir Rani* (1956) reconstructs the life of a figure from the 19th century. Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi (1828-1858), was killed by a British soldier during the revolt of 1857-1858, making her the first martyr of the nationalist movement. Devi did extensive research, aided by the Rani's own archive of documents held by her grandson.

Hindi

Visnu Prabhakar Visnu Prabhakar (1912-2009), a gifted writer of poems, novels and short stories in Hindi, also wrote a dozen influential biographies, mainly of political figures. One of his books covered the life of a man at the centre of one of the most sensational events in the Independence movement. Not Gandhi, or another recognisable name, but Bhagat Singh. In 1928, Singh murdered a British police officer (as revenge for an Indian protestor who had earlier died of police brutality) and was then himself hanged. Completely different in tone, *Aawara Masiha* ('Great Vagabond,' 1974), Prabhakar's biography of novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, is regularly cited as a model of the genre. The biographer describes his subject's experiences almost as if he had been present, with vivid detail and emotional insight.

Marginal Lives

Phoolan Devi Married at ten to a man twenty years older, Phoolan Devi experienced a life of brutality. She was raped several times, including by the police, and put in jail. Eventually she became the leader of a gang who attacked upper-caste villagers, held captives for ransom and eventually killed 22 men. After serving eleven years in prison, she was twice elected to the Indian Parliament and then shot dead in 2001.

Her Autobiography This is the story told in *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* (1995). The book is based on oral interviews with Phoolan in Hindi that were translated into English and then turned into a book by a French TV presenter and a British writer on rock music. This book, an immediate best-seller, raised issues of agency and voice, so fundamental to the production of an autobiography. Still, there is no doubt that her life became (and to an extent still is) a powerful symbol of female resistance, and not only in India.

Viramma The life of another marginal woman was published two years later. *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1997), however, is scrupulously authentic. An agricultural worker and mid-wife, Viramma belongs to the Paraiyar ('pariah') caste, who live in virtual bondage to the upper castes in her village. She has no land and no money. Nine of her twelve children die. Her hardship is leavened only by the pleasure she takes in the songs and dance all around her.

Her Autobiography Viramma told her story in Tamil over a period of ten years to two anthropologists, Josiane Racine (a native speaker of Tamil) and Jean-Luc Racine, who then produced this 'autobiography.' It is a gripping if harrowing read, describing the forces that determine Viramma's life, religion, relations with other castes, modernisation and political initiatives to reduce poverty. Told in

Tamil, translated into French and then English, the narration is not always smooth, but it is a raw and vivid portrayal of a life lived by millions of Indians today.

Questions/discussion

1. How can we explain the international popularity of books about the lives of marginal people in India? Is it part of a wider global interest in human rights and suffering?
2. Another question raised by these books is their motive. Are they, as some have claimed, a call by the subjects for recognition of personhood? Where is the agency in books that are often two or three times removed from the words of their subjects?
3. Collective biography, telling the lives of a group of people, has been a part of Indian literary tradition for a long time, reaching back to the compilation of biographies of medieval saints and poet-saints. Ramachandra Guha's *Makers of Modern India* (2012) and Sunil Khilnani's *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives* (2016, also a BBC radio series) have revived this technique.

Reading

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ESSAY

Overview

Several strands of essay-writing are now practiced in India, most of them continuing on from the first half of the century. Journalists and critics write in all regional languages, notably in Hindi, Tamil and Bengali. However, as with fiction and poetry, writers in English have a far greater reach, and many command international audiences. This English-language essay-writing can be divided into different types (periodical journalism, literary criticism and campaigning journalism). Unsurprisingly, many of the best essay writers are novelists, as well.

Hindi

Kuber Nath Rai As a specialist in the essay, Kuber Nath Rai (1933 –1996) was unusual among his contemporaries in Hindi. Although he was a student of English literature and a scholar of Hindi literature, his essays ranged over many topics, from agriculture to folk songs. His romantic outlook, lamenting the loss of tradition in the rush to modernity, combined with a keen eye for beauty, endeared him to a wide Hindi-reading public. His most important essays have been published in two collections (*Kuberanatha Raya ke pratinidhi Nibandha*, 1991, and *Kuber Nath Rai Sanchayan*, 1992).

Tamil

Venkat Swaminathan The Tamil cultural critic Venkat Swaminathan (1933-2015) was an iconoclast, whose witty essays gave pleasure even to his enemies. He delighted in puncturing the inflated balloons of his contemporaries. At a time, when any self-respecting Indian intellectual was a communist, he argued that the Soviet Union was destroying human enquiry in the arts and science. When the Tamil literary world was enamoured of the poet Bharatidasan, he wrote an essay to show that his poetry had been corrupted by work in the film world.

Swaminathan was prolific, writing caustic but revealing essays about painting, sculpture, film, music and theatre. His book *Kalai-Anubhavam, Velipadu* ('Art -Experience, Expression,' 2000) is a collection of essays, articulating his central idea that art derives from experience, not from ideology.

English

Arun Shourie Among the many distinguished journalists in this period is Arun Shourie (b. 1941), who came to national prominence during the 'Emergency' in 1975-1977, when the government of Indira Gandhi used the pretext of national security to suppress civil rights across the country. Shourie wrote courageous articles in the *Indian Express* newspaper protesting against these measures, and he fought hard to prevent censorship in the media. In 1979, he became editor of the paper and continued to campaign against corruption and for a free press. Later he served in government, but even today writes fearlessly about politics.

M.J. Akbar M.J. Akbar (b. 1951) is a younger gadfly, who has gained international acclaim for his journalism. He distinguished himself first within India by his investigative reporting on several newspaper and magazines, particularly *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in the 1970s. He vigorously opposed the censorship and dictatorship during the Emergency in 1975-1977. Later he created India's first 'modern' daily newspaper when he set up *The Telegraph* in Calcutta. He edited several other periodicals, and spent time in politics, as well. However, he is best known outside India for his books on Nehru, the intractable Kashmir issue, Islamic politics and Pakistan. Perhaps his most influential book is *India: The Siege within -Challenges to a Nation's Unity* (1996), which examines the centrifugal forces in India's fragile nationhood and concludes with a memorable sentence: 'If India learnt more of the truth of its own past, it would perhaps have fewer problems today.'

Pankaj Mishra Pankaj Mishra (b.1969) represents a different strand of journalism in contemporary India. Rather than working at a particular paper or magazine, he is a free-lancer, who roams across a broad spectrum, from travelogue to fiction to politics. He has published several full-length books, many of which explore the problems posed by globalisation, but with a focus on India and China. At the same time, he frequently appears in periodicals, such as the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New York Times*, with pieces on literature and culture that challenge accepted views.

Arundhati Roy Arundhati Roy (b. 1961) first came to international attention in 1997 when she won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, but she has since devoted herself to reporting on controversial social and political issues. She is now an indefatigable campaigning journalist with more than a dozen books, scores of major essays and hundreds of newspaper articles to her name. She has covered armed insurgency, the Iraq war, India's nuclear policy, the Kashmir dispute and a controversial dam project. Perhaps her most influential reportage resulted from the time she spent living with tribal rebels in the jungles of central India in 2010 (see Text below). Using her storytelling skills, she produced a number of articles, published around the world, explaining the rebels' grievances against the Indian government. She has won many awards for her original writing, but has also been criticised in some quarters for her 'anti-India' views.

Amit Chaudhuri Amit Chaudhuri (b. 1962) is an award-winning novelist, short-story writer, poet and classical musician who also excels as an essayist. His primary territory is literary criticism, but he mixes in social history and personal anecdote. Having grown up in Calcutta and received his education there, he now spends half his life in England, primarily as a professor of comparative literature. His writing ranges very widely, from a book-length critical study of D.H. Lawrence to essays on Indian politics to memoirs about Calcutta. His anthology (*The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, 2001) has played a role in forming the canon of modern Indian literature.

A.K. Ramanujan A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) was an internationally-known poet, scholar and critic. Born in a Tamil Brahmin family in Mysore, he received his PhD in linguistics in the US, where he eventually settled as a professor at the University of Chicago. His essays, which covered a wide spectrum from folklore to Sanskrit poetics, had the precision and concision of his poetry. But they also brimmed with new ideas, which often ruffled established feathers. An example is his 'Three Hundred

Ramayanas,' in which he celebrated the diversity of Rama stories and argued that there is no 'the' Ramayana. This angered traditionalists who regard the Sanskrit Rama story as a sacred text and who then lobbied successfully to have the essay removed from libraries and university syllabi.

M.K. Rukhaya M.K. Rukhaya (b. 1980) belongs to the newest generation of essayists in India who use new media to communicate their ideas.

She works as a professor of English in a small town in Kerala, but she has an international following through e-journals, blogs and other social media. She is a young Muslim woman whose views on contemporary events and literature are unpredictable and refreshing.

Questions/discussion

1. Literary criticism in India is almost entirely in English about English literature (written in India and elsewhere). Moreover, many of the leading essayists live part of their lives outside India. Is this a necessary condition of a post-colonial, global literary culture, which indicates a long-term decline in the literary culture of India's regional languages? Or does it reflect the strength of a literary culture that is both international and regional?
2. The other major strand of essay-writing in India addresses social and political issues. Here, too, though to lesser extent, English-language journalism predominates. One could argue that this linguistic link to the rest of the world has given India a place on the international stage that it would not otherwise have. However, this also means that the great majority of Indians, who do not read English, are left out of these public debates.

Reading

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G. N. Raghavan, *The Press in India: A New History* (Gyan Books, 1994) *Contemporary Literary Review India* (a quarterly journal, edited by Khurshid Alam)

Amit Chaudhuri, *Clearing A Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (Peter Lang, 2008)

Text

From Arundhati Roy's 'Walking with Comrades,' 2010

In Dantewada, the police wear plain clothes and the rebels wear uniforms. The jail superintendent is in jail. The prisoners are free (three hundred of them escaped from the old town jail two years ago). Women who have been raped are in police custody. The rapists give speeches in the bazaar...

Across the Indravati river, in the area controlled by the Maoists, is the place the police call 'Pakistan'. There the villages are empty, but the forest is full of people. Children who ought to be in school run wild. In the lovely forest villages, the concrete school buildings have either been blown up and lie in a heap, or they are full of policemen. The deadly war that is unfolding in the jungle is a war that the Government of India is both proud and shy of...

It's easier on the liberal conscience to believe that the war in the forests is a war between the Government of India and the Maoists, who call elections a sham, Parliament a pigsty and have openly declared their intention to overthrow the Indian State. It's convenient to forget that tribal people in Central India have a history of resistance that predates Mao by centuries. (That's altruism of course. If they didn't, they wouldn't exist.) The Ho, the Oraon, the Kols, the Santhals, the Mundas and the Gonds have all rebelled several times, against the British, against zamindars and moneylenders. The rebellions were cruelly crushed, many thousands killed, but the people were never conquered.