

Literary History, Region, and Nation in South Asia: Introductory Note

Author(s): Sheldon Pollock

Source: *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23, No. 10/12 (Oct. - Dec., 1995), pp. 1-7

Published by: Social Scientist

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3517879>

Accessed: 13-05-2019 12:29 UTC

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## *Literary History, Region, and Nation in South Asia* *Introductory Note*

Literary history is back on the agenda of critical studies in the humanities. There are many reasons for this recentering, but among them I would highlight the following. We have come to recognize, albeit late in the day, that the histories that construe the complex processes by which texts are created that come to count as "literature," are, like all histories, political stories, with particular relevance to the self-understanding of communities, regions, nations. Narratives of the nation in particular seem to require—or turn out to be mere distillations of—the narrative of their literatures. But we can put this more generally: literary history has begun to recognize and to foreground the fundamental sociality of literature. It is particular social groups seeking a voice that create new languages, texts, and definitions of the "literary," and social groups that, in writing the histories of how all this happens, are writing the histories of themselves.

There are few in-depth analyses of such historical phenomena as these for any cultural region of the world, and fewer still that marshal comparative evidence; none can be said to address truly long-term change. In part this last absence is due to the relative novelty of literacy, and it is literacy that allows not only for diachronic cultural analysis, but in an important sense—transcending the etymologies of the Latinate words we are using—for the idea of literature itself. South Asia offers a cultural arena in which these processes can be studied more complexly than anywhere else. For it is a fact, though rarely acknowledged, strikingly untheorized, and hardly exploited, that South Asia has a longer continuous multilingual literary history, over a vaster spatial expanse, than any other cultural area in the world.

However, the models of literary history as this discipline has been and continues to be practiced in South Asian studies exclude, as a rule, most of the crucial issues: how literary languages are created, how their histories are narrated, what social and political conditions are pertinent to both. The standard organizing paradigm of South Asian literary history remains defiantly and stubbornly positivist chronology, one typically unaware of its own presuppositions and stipulations. Works and authors, rendered canonical by a process that is tacitly naturalized, are simply linked by a chain of temporal moments, and succeed each other in what is presented—often with the organicist tropes of birth, flowering, decay—as a natural process. This is true for the many and ambitious literary histories of the past thirty years, including

*Social Scientist*, Vol. 23 Nos. 10–12, October–December 1995

the contributions to the multivolume series on Indian literature published in the 1960s and 1970s by the Sahitya Akademi; the History of Indian Literature currently under publication in Holland (twenty-odd books published since the early 1970s), and the nine-volume project being edited by Sisir Kumar Das, History of Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi, 1991). South Asian literary studies have yet to show evidence of their ability to address the kinds of opportunities the South Asian literary archive uniquely offers them. The challenge is to rethink literary history in a way that moves beyond the range of questions posed by colonial, positivist, or nationalist models of European literary history (not to speak of formalist or thematic literary history), and especially to reflect on how and why new literary languages arise, how cosmopolitan and vernacular identities have interacted (and how both the cosmopolitan and the vernacular have been transformed in the process), and importantly, what it means and has meant to reflect on the literatures of the Indian subcontinent and their histories.

In view of all this, members of the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council/American Council of Learned Societies in New York set out in 1991 to stimulate interest in developing a new research agenda for the history of South Asian literary cultures. The first step in this project was to organize the workshop called "New Literature, New Power: Literary History, Region, and Nation in South Asia," which took place at the Central University, Hyderabad in December, 1993. The Workshop invited reconsideration of any of three large features of literary cultures in history: the processes by which literary languages are created in South Asia; the narratives of literary history; and the social and political groups and institutions that constitute such languages and narrate the story of their literatures.

A defining dynamic of the history of literary cultures in this region of the world—though it is one that most literary histories have succeeded in occluding—is the presence of transregional literary languages and their dynamic interactions with more localized forms of expression. It seems to be the case here that once they emerge, cosmopolitan literary languages in South Asia enjoy sustained supremacy but then ultimately become subject to contestation from other newly emergent, and sometimes ideologically insurgent, literary languages; such contestation leads finally to compromise, co-optation, and a negotiated settlement of relative superiority. But so little attention has been paid to given cases, let alone to comparative analysis, that we remain ignorant of most of the detail in these key processes of cultural change and identity.

We are still unclear, for example, about the conditions under which Sanskrit emerged as one such literary language. Scholars have long called attention to the fact that the first *kāvya*s derive from self-conscious movements such as Sanskritized Buddhism at the beginning of the common era, but no one has offered a good argument for why this might be so, nor explored the character of the social communities—often, it appears, newly migrating into the subcontinent—that may have contributed to these developments. Another way to express this specific historical problem is not that Sanskrit became literary, but that "literature" as such,

literature as dominant Indian traditions have defined it, came into being at the moment in question. Evidently, what the self-conscious Indian traditions have identified as “literary” must itself be a subject of critical historical analysis as well. We know little, too, about the use of “counterlanguages” for making literature among Jains, Buddhists, and others, which may actually antedate and stimulate the emergence of literary Sanskrit. What these developments represent is an early instance of an enduring and constitutive issue in South Asian cultural history, that of language-choice in a multilingual space. Literary language choice itself is part of a larger cultural strategy for establishing or discontinuing associations, addressing more important, or larger, or different audiences, and creating new identities.

Once Sanskrit did emerge as a literary language it came to exert profound influence on other, newly emerging literary languages. This is something it seems to share with other examples of cosmopolitan languages in South Asia, especially Persian and English. It is not clear that either of these came or has yet come to penetrate the literary consciousness of South Asian writers so profoundly and so extensively as Sanskrit did, but that said, we have little analysis of where further differences lie in the careers of these cosmopolitan codes. How more regional languages interact with cosmopolitan languages remains largely undertheorized (or wrongly theorized), and certainly unexamined in a historical and comparative spirit; we have no very clear idea of the role of cosmopolitan language literary concepts and genres on the development of regional literatures; we have no well formulated conceptualizations of how such forms of cosmopolitanism—forms of “globalization,” in the current idiom—differed, and so how cultural modernity and premodernity contrast.

V. Narayana Rao’s paper in this volume is a superb exploration of a number of these questions in the world of sixteenth-century Telugu. He shows how the very question of what language to adopt for making literature in the multilingual world of the Vijayanagar empire was at the center of consciousness of the ruling elites of the period. My own paper seeks to put this same question in a long historical perspective, touching on Sanskrit in the immigrant communities of western and northern India at the beginning of the common era, and Kannada at the kingly centers of eighth and ninth century Karnataka, as well as parallel developments in Europe, from the invention of Latin literature with the rise of Roman hegemony to the literization of vernacular languages that marked the transition to modernity.

The late medieval period is a particularly important and fertile area for examining the role of literary language and literature in the construction of regional identities, the politics and discourses of regionalization and what Pierre Bourdieu calls their “performative” dimension (which aims to impose as legitimate “a new definition of frontiers”). The essay by S. Nagaraju is a careful analysis of such issues at their commencement in early medieval Andhra. He uncovers the social history in which to locate the first literizations of Telugu poetry, namely, in the challenges and opportunities presented to vernacular intellectuals in southwest Andhra during the regional struggles between the Bādāmi Cālukya polity of central Karnataka and the Pallavas of Kāñcīpuram throughout the eighth and ninth centuries.

The cultural centrality of Persian and its competition from and eventual supersession by “Hindavi” or Urdu in the late Mughal period raises anew the question of language and community. The relationship between Persian/Arabic and Urdu suggestively recapitulates that between Sanskrit and the regional languages, which exhibit now formative emulation, now self-conscious distancing. All South Indian languages have shown a pronounced concern throughout the centuries with the quantity of Sanskrit in their literary productions. An instructive example from the modern period is the literary movement that took place in Andhra Pradesh in the 1930s that envisioned an “ethno-linguistic cleansing” of the Sanskrit lexicon from Telugu. But such purification movements are known elsewhere and from a much earlier period, e.g., in Tamil and Kannada; it is central, for example, to the cultural politics of Viraśaivism. The Persianization of Hindavi by Valī under the fluid conditions of the late seventeenth-century Mughal rule has been noted by various scholars (if variously interpreted, as in Shamsur Rahman Faruqi’s paper in this volume). An ethnopolitics of literary languages is not of course peculiar to South Asia; something similar occurs in Atatürk’s “purification” of Turkish by the elimination of Arabic and Persian in the 1920s, or in the de-Normanization of Middle English in the fourteenth century in reaction to French hegemony. But scholars have paid little attention to such literary movements and to determining the socio-historical processes that inform them.

With the displacement in the nineteenth century of both Sanskrit and Persian by English as a subcontinental, supra-ethnic language, a new cycle of hegemony and regional identity has been set in motion. To these developments, at the same time, questions of self-definition and “authenticity” have been added. “Can the Indian poet speak ‘authentically’ in an English voice?” is often treated as a hitherto unprecedented question, and with some justice, for “authenticity” or being true to oneself has been related to a new understanding of individuality that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe. But this question takes on added precision when we ask what understandings of self and of the literary voice were at work in the choices earlier South Asia poets made among literary languages? “Can the Indian poet speak ‘authentically’ in a Sanskrit or Persian voice?” is possibly an anachronistic question as formulated, but it points us toward an important problematic.

We don’t have a deep enough understanding—or even the epistemological space to develop it—of a history of the literary self in South Asia, or of other categories just as basic. The received notion that “modernity” and colonialism arrived together in South Asia, for example, presupposes European primacy in the definition of what counts as “modern,” and really needs more intensive testing on a range of regional literatures. We know little about South Asian regional varieties of literary modernity even in the conventional sense, about the impact of English literary concepts and genres on regional literatures, or generally what distinguishes the career of English from those of the earlier cosmopolitan languages of the subcontinent in terms of their social and political conditions of possibility.

Along with the histories of literary languages and literatures we need to attend also to the history of literary sensibilities, especially evaluative sensibilities. India

has often witnessed struggles between rival “schools” in literature and literary criticism, which were often settled by co-optation and ingeniously innovative readings of old texts. With the impact of nineteenth-century Western modes of literary experience, a range of entirely new readings of old literature emerges. These are not natural changes occurring with biological necessity, as they are typically represented to be, but rather arguments and position-takings in new conditions of life. The essay by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi on Muhammad Husain Āzād shows this with magisterial learning. Faruqi places this first historian of Urdu literature squarely in the world of colonial power—both a material power of politics and a mental power of epistemology—and explores the origins and influence of what might called comprador historicism and collaborationist aesthetics. It is a model of what a new history of reading and canon-formation under the sign of colonialism can be. Sitanshu Yashaschandra explores a not unrelated problem from the point of view of a history of writing rather than of reading. In a critical sketch of the history of modern Gujarati prose (especially Narmad and Mehta), he reveals the micropolitics of literary production under the watchful eye of colonialism, and shows specifically the process by which Gandhi, in *Hind Swaraj*, turned this prose into an instrument to destroy the power that sought to shape it.

The late-colonial and post-colonial periods bring the problem of literary history into particularly sharp focus. A standard analysis of the role of literature in nationalism holds that one of the defining traits of nationhood on the European model is the presumed existence of a “national” literature. Here Bengal provides a telling example, as Mahasweta Sengupta’s contribution shows. That literary history is the critical arena within which the story of the nation is narrated is shown by the fact that the historiography of Bengali literature actually antedates political histories of Bengal; through the colonial period literary history remained a singular instrument for projecting a national character and culture. And yet modernity did not invent all relationships between poetry and polity; some papers in this volume—Nagaraju’s, and, in a way, my own—show that other kinds of cultural politics underwrote other kinds of literary developments for other kinds of polity in writing before the nation.

The study of the sociality of literary cultures needs to frame above all the question of who gets to speak literarily, and who is literarily censored. One of the specific communities for whom access to a literate-literary voice was frequently disallowed is women. Much has been done recently to recover the lost history of women’s writing in India; the collective work edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (New York 1991–93) is an impressive instance. But as Jancy James demonstrates in her essay on women’s literature in Malayalam, there are still deep and complex histories to be excavated—histories not just of subaltern misery and madness, but of passion and a kind of heroic resistance.

To be sure, reproblematising the history of literary cultures in South Asia, of which I have given a brief selection of issues dealt with at the Hyderabad Workshop and in the resulting papers, is part of a larger theoretical and political turn in post-Orientalist and post-colonial studies these past ten years have witnessed. I want to

take a moment to broadly characterize this shift, and so to identify the conceptual framework within which our project fits.

One key development in this period has been the growth of understanding that the study of the past of South Asia, like all studies in the human sciences, is a situated practice, and cannot escape the effects of being situated. The processes of actual South Asian decolonization from the end of the 1940s have inevitably stimulated an ideational decolonization of the European interpretations of the Asian worlds that colonialism, and to some extent neocolonialism, had invaded. However persuasively some may wish counter the historical arguments that colonial knowledge created an "India" in order to dominate India (some have argued, for example, that crucial ideologemes, such as those constituting patriarchy, pre-existed colonialism and were easily appropriated by it); however much one may worry about the epistemological cages in which such arguments may be thought to imprison us (one may justifiably worry about who, finally, is to arbitrate between what is an "imagination" and what is a "truth" of India), the world and the text have now been so securely joined that we necessarily ask, What is it about this world of mine, or yours, that may be at work in my or your understanding of those texts?

The understanding that there are different but connected worlds in which the interpretation of South Asian texts is situated is another crucial development in the self-awareness that characterizes contemporary scholarship. What I mean is that, however minor or even trivial it at times may seem, literary history is a consequential practice. It has slowly dawned on many of us working in Europe and the United States that people in South Asia happen to have interests in the interpretations of the texts that have been produced, and continue to circulate, in their worlds. The study of the South Asian past plays as powerful a role in the construction of present-day post-colonial South Asian worlds—whether nationalist, indigenist, reactionary, internationalist, or other constructions—as it did in the construction of the colonial world, only the locus of dominant agency has changed. And whether one does or does not care about the relationship between scholarship on texts and the people who consider those texts to be theirs, no one can any longer ignore the fact that such a relationship exists.

There is a third component to the new self-consciousness in the study of South Asian texts and languages, in addition to the awareness that it is both a situated and a consequential practice (one that affects real people with real interests). It is corollary to all this, and perhaps best expressed in the question posed by a South Asian participant at a recent conference I attended: Whose culture is it, anyway, and who can represent it? If the historical moment that situated and enabled the Western study of Asia was colonialism, and if such study is thought to be really consequential above all for Asian peoples, what reason is there any longer for anyone but Asians to study Asian texts and languages? Of course it is by now generally well understood that Europe's self-understanding was linked to the creation of Asia as deficient opposite, and therefore that the critique of Orientalism is at once the critique of Occidentalism—but there should be better reasons we can offer than that, comprising some kind of reconstructive knowledge. For the moment, however, what I want

to put on the table is the notion that the question of “representation” at this level, too, can no longer be avoided and is part of the long mental revolution this past decade has seen.

My perhaps idiosyncratic review of why we are where we are now thus highlights three components in the critique of “Orientalism.” As I have already suggested, I consider some of this critique in its strongest formulation epistemologically unsound, empirically and linguistically weak, and worse, historically deficient, for it presupposes a post-Orientalist history of precolonialism—how else to chart the ravages wrought by the Raj?—that is only beginning to be written. Yet the questions it has posed are hard and good and will not go away, and in one way or another they do their work in the issues and questions with which the essays in this volume are concerned, and continue to inform our studies in the history of literary cultures in South Asia.

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The Workshop on “Literary History, Region, and Nation” was made possible with seed money from the Social Science Research Council and a generous grant from the Smithsonian Institution. I would like to thank Francine Berkowitz of the Smithsonian for her support. Itty Abraham of the SSRC and other members of the Joint Committee on South Asia provided intellectual as well as financial assistance as the literary histories project was developed. V. Narayana Rao was the first to press upon the Committee’s attention the theoretical, historical, and political importance of an inquiry into regional literatures, and has remained throughout a valued collaborator. Professor K. K. Ranganathacaryulu of the Department of Telugu, Central University of Hyderabad, gave unstinting help in organizing the meeting. Dr. Atluri Murali, also of Hyderabad and an associate of the Social Scientist, who was also an important voice at the Workshop itself, invited publication of the papers in this journal. I want also to thank Bronwen Bledsoe and Alyssa Ayres of the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, The University of Chicago, for their editorial assistance.

SHELDON POLLOCK

*Hyderabad, December 1993/Chicago, June 1995*