

# Cultural Diversity, Linguistic Plurality, and Literary Traditions in India

**Dr. Anu Singh**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English,*

*Narottam Singh Padam Singh Government P.G. College, Magarhan, Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh*

## ABSTRACT

*This research paper endeavours to emphasise the need for a fresh look at India as a nation. Known as a socialist, secular, and democratic republic, India has its own history, heritage, and culture. Unity in diversity sets it apart from other nations. Since the dawn of civilisation, people irrespective of caste, creed, and region have been living together in a spirit of harmony. A rare confluence of cultures as diverse as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, to name but a few, makes India a unique civilizational space. India has also witnessed the rise and growth of Sufism and the Bhakti Movement simultaneously. There seems to be no dramatic break with its cultural, linguistic, and literary traditions so far.*

**Keywords:** *Secular; Democratic; Republic; Tradition; Heritage*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is India? Does the name evoke a picture of snake charmers? What does the name India really signify? Here is Sir John Strachey, a British civil servant, in his own words:

*"There are no countries in civilized Europe in which the people differ so much as the man of Madras differs from the Sikh, and the languages of Southern India are quite as unintelligible in Lahore as they would be in London."*

A.L. Basham's *The Wonder That Is India* is a seminal work on the history, heritage, and culture of India. The diversity it documents is enough to demonstrate that the citizens of a socialist, secular, and democratic republic can take pride in their culture — a mosaic of races, religions, and languages. There is something that may be termed an Indian way of thinking, a habit of mind distinct from that of other civilizations. The linguistic diversity of northern India is defined by its own system and techniques, while the southern part of the country has a different story to narrate. Accommodation, negotiation, and respect for one another are striking features of India's cultural diversity, all of which are reflected in the plurality of Indian languages.

## 2. INDIAN LITERATURE AND LINGUISTIC PLURALITY

It is commonly said that Indian literature is based on a pan-Indian language, Sanskrit, considered the true vehicle of Indian literary expression. However, this theory could not stand the test of time. The total vision of Indian literature appears not to have been taken into adequate consideration, and the essential unity of Indian literature is often ignored. Even legends of other traditions — Arabic, Persian, and Christian — have not been given their due. Students of English language and literature have long been concerned about the role of English in Indian literature, while Indian

writing in regional languages has made enormous contributions to the literary heritage of the nation.

Indian literature in the oral tradition is in no way inferior to that of the written tradition; the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are among the foremost examples. The spoken word has always held an edge over the written word in cultures of oral transmission. Our Puranas and epics have been recited down the generations. Although eventually written down, these works remain part of the oral tradition. The written culture assimilates into the oral culture to such an extent that a layer of orality often runs through written discourse.

### 3. THE RISE OF LITERARY THEORY

The birth of Literary Theory as a formal discipline takes us back to the 1950s. New Criticism is said to have dominated literary criticism in the United States from the mid-1930s to the 1970s, with far-reaching implications for students of literature on both sides of the Atlantic. Literary Theory dealt with the basic assumptions concerning the nature, purpose, and value of literature. As a distinct branch of critical discussion, it has been intellectually fashionable and a source of vigorous debate in European and American universities, especially from the 1970s onwards. By the 1990s, Literary Theory had been institutionalized to the extent that it is now commonly taught as an academic subject in its own right.

### 4. HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THE INTERFACE: HAYDEN WHITE

Anyone interested in history, myth, and orality is inevitably reminded of Hayden White's *Figural Realism*, a seminal work in which he introduced the concept while discussing the interface between literature and history. It is often said that the boundaries separating literature from history are blurring and porous. White, however, has something distinctive to say in this regard:

*"Historical discussion is actualized in its culturally significant form as a specific kind of writing — that we may consider the relevance of literary theory to both theory and the practice of historiography." (Figural Realism: Studies in Mimesis Effect, p. 2)*

We may infer that historical writing is as much a piece of writing as a work of literature is. How truth is portrayed in both disciplines is the prime concern of students of history and of literature alike. Events, persons, and structure play a major role in history, which is written before it is read. White adds:

*"Literary theory has a relevance not only to historiography but and especially to the philosophy of history." (Figural Realism: Studies in Mimesis Effect, p. 4)*

As a Metahistorian, White sees the similarity between literature and history in the treatment of the narrative mode of representation as common to both. This suggests that history and literature are, at one level, narratives that tell us a story. Both have a plot with a beginning, middle, and end, and both feature characters that merit attention. White defines history as a "verbal artifact" and also as a structure of language. It is common knowledge that literature is, in Ezra Pound's words, "language charged with meaning." The linguistic component is common to both. Both are replete with figurative elements. White elaborates:

*"Language is never a set of empty forms waiting to be filled with factual and conceptual content or attached to pre-existent referents in the world — it is already freighted with figurative, tropological, and generic contents before it is actualized in any given utterance." (Figural Realism: Studies in Mimesis Effect, p. 5)*

Even historical discourse seems to possess poetic and rhetorical features. Other notable traits include metaphorical language, symbolic language, and allegorical representation.

White further holds:

*"The chronicle is moulded into a story. The argument of a historical discourse is a second-order fiction, or a fiction of fiction-making, bearing the same relationship to the plot that the plot bears to the chronicle." (Figural Realism: Studies in Mimesis Effect, p. 6)*

An important term that figures in White's discussion of the interface between literature and history is tropology — not merely a theory of language, but a more or less systematized cluster of notions about figurative language derived from neoclassical rhetoric.

## 5. MYTH, HISTORY, AND ORALITY IN INDIAN LITERATURE

Is it appropriate, in relation to Indian literature, to focus on myth, history, and orality? The answer is unequivocally in the affirmative. The study remains relevant. One reason is that it helps us understand contemporary Indian society. Myth, history, and orality enrich our understanding of the past reality of India and its connection with contemporary life. The fundamental impulse behind such research is to challenge certain entrenched notions of western theorization of history — notions that are deeply rooted and difficult to dislodge — as well as traditionally held beliefs about our cultural and literary heritage.

The West has at times raised an accusing finger at the "literariness" of Indian literature, partly because, as Kipling famously put it, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Yet, notwithstanding all such criticism, there is an Indian literature, and there is an Indian way of looking at things that sets it apart from its western counterparts. Gone are the days of the West basking in its colonial glory. The notion that Kalidasa is the Shakespeare of India and that Samudragupta is the Napoleon of India now seems antiquated. The entire western world reads the classical works of Aristotle and Plato in translation. Yet in India, citizens of the socialist, secular, democratic republic, engaged in the daily ritual of teaching, do not show the same enthusiasm for Bharata's Natya Shastra. This speaks for itself.

## 6. THE QUESTION OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Is there an Indian literature? "Does it exist, can it exist? Is it singular or multiple, and what about the place of English in Indian literary studies?" (Panja, Many Indias, Many Literatures, p. 1). These well-formed and meaningful questions occur in the opening paragraph of Shormishtha Panja's essay "Is There an Indian Literature?" The manner in which she introduces this topic leaves nothing to be desired; it startles the reader and causes one to pause and reflect.

It is no wonder that this question was addressed by none other than Professor Sisir Kumar Das, who wrote: "The nineteenth-century Indologists Albrecht Weber and Maurice Winternitz implicitly created a perception of Indian literature based on a pan-Indian language, and that language was Sanskrit." (Panja, *Many Indias, Many Literatures*, p. 1). It was rather difficult to agree entirely with Professor Das's views and all the more difficult not to challenge his contention that a single language can constitute the whole of Indian literature. Ours is a multilingual society, and despite the differences in our languages, our literature is defined more by its unities than by its differences.

It is a historical fact that cultural diversity exists in India, and indeed has come to stay. Here it will not be out of place to quote some lines from Amir Khusrau's *Nuh Siphir*:

*"As I belong to India, it is only befitting that I also speak of things Indian. There is a different language in every corner of this land, each with its own system and technique. Sindhi, Lahori, Kashmiri, Kubri, Dhur-Samudri, Tilangi, Gujar, Maabri, Ghouri, Bengali, Oudhi, Delhi and around it — within the boundaries of this land are the languages of India. All these are Hindavi languages, languages of India since olden times, spoken by the people at large." (Kumar, *Cultural Diversity, Linguistic Plurality & Literary Traditions in India*, p. 9)*

The poet reminds us of the linguistic diversity of northern India at a time when his own ancestors had barely begun to engage with the history, heritage, and culture of the subcontinent. Accommodation, negotiation, and understanding were the three defining features of Indian society shaped by its linguistic plurality.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it may be said that the rise and growth of Literary Theory has had a strong impact on the study of literature. That Hayden White made enormous contributions to literary studies by illuminating the interface between literature and history is by now well established. Myth and history shed valuable light upon the present and aid our understanding of contemporary social life, culture, and morality. Of the two modes — written literature and oral literature — the latter is as effective as the former. It communicates through folkways, songs, and dances. The narrator of oral literature in general, and of the epics in particular — whether Maharshi Vyasa or his western counterpart Homer — is unique. Each has a vision and knows how to articulate and communicate the experiences of life in an extraordinary manner.

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