

**Sujit Mukherji Memorial Lecture:Central  
University, Hyderabad  
The Idea of an Indian Literature**

I am thankful to Professor Tutun Mukherji and the Central University, Hyderabad for inviting me to give the Sujit Kumar Mukerji Memorial lecture. Sujit and his wife Meenakshi were my friends of long standing. But this friendship had a queer beginning. It was in 1984 we were all present in a Comparative Literature conference at Delhi University in its Tagore Hall. I don't remember the subject on which I made my presentation. I only remember that in my paper I used a critical cum philosophical term or jargon, 'epistemological rupture' which was introduced by the French Philosopher, Gaston Bachelard and later used by Louis Althusser. After the presentation, Sujit in the recess period, made real fun of me for using such difficult critical jargons and practically tore me off. Later on I realised that Sujit is very careful in not using any jargons, specially borrowed from the West to explain our Indian realities. Sujit, later on, became a good friend particularly, when he and Meenakshi shifted from Hyderabad to Delhi and this friendship grew rather deep when Sujit stayed with me in our London house for a week.

He was a true pioneer in developing the translation studies in India and created awareness among the scholars towards Indian literary historiography. I borrowed the title of my lecture from Sisir Kumar Das's most illuminating paper on the same subject published in 1973 which was later on used by Sujit as the title of one of his articles in his book, 'Towards a Literary History of India', published in 1975 but without citing or giving credit to the source. However, Sujit, in his edited book of readings, published in 1981, used the same title again but this time not only gave credit to Sisir babu for using his title 'the Idea of an Indian Literature' but also included Sisirbabu's article of the same title in his book but made a comment about the title, 'though fairly old, is yet to emerge as a distinct literary concept.' He made this comment in 1981 and after 34 years can't I say, it is now a recognized literary concept to reckon with.

The sahridyas or connoisseurs, who are present here, let them judge if I am correct.

In Indian Literature, the vibrant Indianness (unity) emerges only when one understands it in pluralistic context or in the context of diversity. It speaks of the fluidity of Indian ness as it is symbolic and inclusive rather than logo centric and exclusive.

The western view is to reduce all the problems into binary oppositions but Indian mind believes in holistic view of life and hence unity - diversity set of opposition is accepted as complementary to each other which creates a vital relationship in literature between local, regional and pan-Indian link and national identities.

Indian Literature demonstrates unity through acknowledgement of differences and that what India has to offer to the world. This model of diversity leading to unity is unique for India. In a series of articles on Indian Literature in the 'Arya' Journal around 1920 by Sri Aurobindo, which were later collected in 'The Foundation of Indian Culture' (1953), Sri Aurobindo tried to introduce this very notion of Indian Literature and justified the basic unity of Indian culture and also established its uniqueness. This model of one and many are mutually inclusive.

Umashankar Joshi spoke only of the basic unity and said that the writers in every Indian language worked more or less in isolation, hardly caring to compare notes and to benefit from the experiences of one another. Much less did they visualize that their efforts in vitalizing the existing languages were leading to the building of a literature that was bound together because of a shared historical situation as well as common

urges and aspirations. (1) This was the view of the nationalists, who participated in the struggle for freedom, and thought about the idea of Indian literature as one literature

In fact Umashankar Joshi echoed the sentiments of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, who as Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, opened the first ever Department of Modern Indian Languages in Calcutta University in 1919 and described Indian literature as “Jatiya Sahitya” (national literature) in one of his essays. What Asutosh Mukherjee wrote in his essay, Subramania Bharati, likewise, wrote in his poem but ten years earlier in 1909, urging all Indians to sing the unity of India as expressed through modern Indian languages:

*Seppu mozhi padhinettu udayal,  
Enil chintanai onrudayal.*

(She [India] has eighteen languages to speak, even then the *chintanai* [thinking] is one.)

Let us raise here a fundamental question to understand the above model in its true perspective: Is Indian Literature singular or pluralistic? Or it is both singular as well as plural and which are mutually inclusive. Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters accepts it in the singular. The

objective is to understand the unity of Indian Literature. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the then Vice-President of the Akademi had given a slogan to the Akademi that Indian Literature is one though written in many languages. It is a clever but tired rhetoric; the uniqueness of Indian Literature is missing in it. The aphorism may satisfy foreigners, but no right thinking Indian would accept such a statement until it has been fully explored and its validity established beyond doubts. (2)

On the contrary, Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his book "languages and literatures of India" uses it in plural. While we are accustomed to using the term in the singular when we refer to literature in India and use it in the plural when referring to the languages. However, now many of us are not prepared even to accept Dravidian literature as a whole what to talk of the entire Indian Literature as a single entity. But at other times, when we look at the Indian Literary scene then at any given moment the common patterns as manifested in the literary texts can be accepted on one single level of organization.

But does this vacillating tendency reveal our fear of the vision of unity? Do we think that any imposed centrality tends to dominate the parts? Does it minimize, be little and ignore the varieties of experience? Surely, we must not deceive ourselves by ignoring the departures under the pretext of the unity of

experience: nonetheless, we should not allow ourselves to be victims of regionalism.

However, regionality has always been defined in Indian poetics as a matter of style and nothing to do with mode of experience and content. Dandin, a seven-eight century poetician employs the term *marga* to imply mode, manner or style and distinguishes *vaidarbhi marga* or style from the *gaudia marga or style* as two types of poetry obtaining in two different regions:

Dandin says that alliteration, the recurrence of some special sound in words in close succession, is not the style of the writers of the south or the *vaidharbha* style. :

*Ato naivamanuprasam daakshinatyaah prayunjate* 1/60(3)

Dandin speaks of 10 gunas like, *slesha*, *prasaada*, *samataa*, *madhuryam*, *sukumarataa*, *artha-vyakti*, *ojas*, *kanti* etc as the characteristics of the poetry of the people of the south. One finds just the opposite in the *gaudiya* style of Bengal:

*Esham viparyayah prayo drishyate gaudavartamani* 1/42

Unpopular string of verses and bombastic use of language, or use of long compounds and exaggeration is the habit of the people of Bengal:

*Dipta mitya parairbhumna krichordyamapi badhyate 1/70*

Hence, style represents regional variations. Regional variation is not variation of content but of style. However, locale and socio-historical forces of a particular region impacts and adds uniqueness to the literature of that area. Sujit Mukherji, however, says that ‘locale and socio-historical forces have been and are being shared by more than one Indian language (area), hence their literature tend to give expression to the same consequences.’(Towards a literary History of India, 1975, p.15). In other words regional variations are just not variation of style but also of content and also unity of content.

Hence one can argue that in spite of the cultural variations in content, the common patterns as manifested in the literary texts create a sense of unity in literature and therefore, the tension between regionality and universality, between *kshetra* and *desa*, between region and nation-state is visible but then they are accepted as complementary to each other. The whole question of diversity and unity is to be understood on these lines. *Kshetra* converging into *desa* almost like Van Gogh's shoes.

Those shoes make you feel that some peasant has worn them. He must have been working in his own field for a long long time, and his shoes are worn out. You can see the sweat, the labour, the anxiety, the suffering of the farmer who has worn those shoes in a particular field at a particular time in a particular set of circumstances. Yet, they are great shoes, with a universal appeal and significance, universally existing. (5)

In Indian context, the *desi-margi* contrast or regional and classical or universal contrast in fact represents two different expressions of the same tradition and not different traditions. Here unity and differences are bound with each other. It is this solution – unity through acknowledgement of differences – that India has to offer to the world. This cultural plurality contributes to our shared experiences in the field of languages and literature.

As a result the tension between *kshtra* and *desa*, between region and nation, between particularity and universality, between scriptures and *lokavidya* (popular lore) or between written and oral is unravelled by accepting them as complementary to each other. This being the reason, even word like *desa* means sometimes region, or otherwise nation.

Before we proceed further, one thing should be made clear that Indian literature does not consist only of written texts but orality is a dominant part of Indian literature and even in the

modern times folk and tribal literature or *loka* has a very strong presence in the Indian literary scene. It was for the first time Professor Sisir Kumar Das in his two volume history of Modern Indian literature (6) recognized oral/ folk /tribal/*loka* literature as a strong voice of the literary tradition of India.

While describing the literary scene after British crushed down the 1857 war of independence, Professor Das reveals that there was a complete silence in the Indian literary world about the war of independence and if there was any voice to be heard only of praise for the British as described in the *kasidas* of Mirza Ghalib or in the Gujrati poetry of Narmad or in Bengali by Ishwar Chandra Gupta.

However the bards of oral poetry gave vent to their feeling of anger and frustration against the British during that period of silence subjection.

This oral voice became a constant refrain later for the Indian poets to write poetry of revolt and freedom which became a major thrust in the making of Indian literature. The folk *aalahas* of Madhya Pradesh inspired the Hindi poetess Sumit ra Kumari Chauhan to write her famous poem “*Khub lari mardani vaha tou Jhansivali rani thi*”.

Here in India the glory of “main stream” literature rests not by marginalizing but by accepting oral or folk or *loka* as complementary.

It is important to remember that modern history writing in India began with the coming of the British. When the British came to India, they found that there was no literature in India which approximated to what they thought was history – a linear teleological notion of history. Instead what the British found were mythological stories, folklore, religious texts where time is not always linear, time is sometimes cyclical and where there is no clear narration of events. So the British basically said that India was ahistorical, that Indians had no sense of history. Alexander Dow in ‘The History of Hindostan’(1770) asserted that India had an abundance of history ( as the past) but little history (as the narrative of the past). (7) What they couldn’t understand was that these ancient texts were a combination of different kinds of time and they didn’t know how exactly to use and read these texts. Also, there was in India another body of literature which they completely ignored i.e. the oral literature.

Till we reach the modern period, oral word more than the written word i.e. manuscripts (now, books) was used for transmission of knowledge and communication of the message of the sacred through poetry. Both oral and written became the basis to serve as instruments of communication and dialogue between different levels of society and across regions but it would be fallacious , however, as explained by A.K.Ramanujan, to assume a notion of linear development between the oral and written or folk and classical. It is more

profitable to imagine a history of texts that is made up of written and oral forms contained within cycles of transmission that move up and down through time resulting in manifold possible recompositions within a ‘simultaneous order’ of texts.  
(8)

In the Indian context, the *loka* and *shastra/marga* (folk/tribal and elite) contrast is contrary to the western contrast between great and little traditions. India does not believe that non-literate cultures are ‘knowledge blanks’ which need to be filled in with the modern knowledge of different discipline and dominant cultures.

Cultures are never ‘blanks’. In some matters, e.g., in the ecological management practices used by tribals are far superior to anything we could teach them. The tragedy is that modernism has imposed a single perspective in dealing with human culture and today this kind of fixed perspective is challenged by the indeterminacy of experience. The search for one truth in the many is at odds with the relativist experience of anthropology.

These folk literary approaches are not liquidated or co-opted by core literary tradition but assimilated as alternative models of human expressions or as parts of the whole.

In fact regionality or *kshetra* and *loka* have a larger implication in understanding ancient and medieval Indian culture till post-

Enlightenment discourses did not become an indicator of civilization.

This could be understood on the basis of the notion of concentric circles representing different regions of India.

The first circle is the three classical core region prevailing during that time consisting of Kuru-panchal (north), Dakshinatya (south) and Gandhara-valhika (west). This is the Brahminical Sanskrit literary tradition. These three regions are both geographical and cultural regions, but conscientiously it is more cultural rather than geographical, and hence, a book like Bhagavata, created by a Brahmin, on the banks of the Kaveri river, cuts across the geographical barrier, and becomes a property of every region.

The second circle, belongs to Anga, Banga, Kalinga, Kashmir and Kambouj, and was incorporated in a selective way into the classical core regions. With the passage of time, the notion of *shaktipuja* belonging to the second circle, gets absorbed into the first, and can be taken as one of the examples of selective assimilation.

The third circle belongs to those regions which indicate India's cultural and racial periphery like Naga, Shabara, Dasya and Kirata and are also incorporated to share the making of Indian Literature. In this way, classical Sanskrit literature describes, on one side, the core regions, and, on the other, peripheries. In Bana Bhatta's Kadambari a *chandala* girl becomes an

important character in the weaving of the story and in Bharavi's Kiratarjuna Lord Shiva appears as a *shabara*, a hunter. Similarly by subverting or interrogating norms Somdeva/Kshemendra translate the stories of Gunadhya's Vrihat Katha Sarit Sagar from the peripheral Paisachi language into Sanskrit. These are the examples of contacts between the classical creative mind and the culture of excluded peoples and classes. In the Indian context, the peripheral regions are represented by the oral/folk. Tribal literature, which is not held in low esteem in India, is contrary to the Western concept of great/ little tradition.

The complementariness of *loka* and *shastra* is very deep and intricate.

In the folk stories of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, the words of praise for Shiva are *shastra* oriented but the words of praise for Paravati who is the mother of the universe, are folk in content.

Similarly the notion of Shakti puja belonging to Anga, Banga, Kalinga and Kamboja regions gets absorbed into the Puritanical Brahminical orthodoxy of the classical core regions which felt psychologically assured to relate itself with tantric Hinduism.

These are examples of such contacts between the classical creative mind and the culture of excluded peoples and classes. To give another example of such contacts is the loom of a

weaver or the wheel of the potter which are used to explain many intricate literary philosophical and classical theories.

Similarly Rajasthani folk singers use classical forms with their folk singing to create a universe of vibrating melody.

In Indian context oral, tribal or folk lore are neither the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life worthy. Kapila Vatsyayan by taking the cue from a *sloka* (couplet) of the Upanishads rounded up the issue by stating that the oral and the written are two birds on the same branch: if the oral is sacred, so also is the written word. (5)

Bharata (2<sup>nd</sup> BC to 2<sup>nd</sup> AD) recognized *pravritti* or regional distinctiveness as an intrinsic component of culture and its literary expressions and also in chapter XV of his *Natyashastera*, referred to a group of languages, which we today call oral languages or dialects and hence there can be no discussion on Indian languages and literature without taking into account the rich and vibrant storehouse of knowledge and linguistic diversity of a section of a people, who are *loka* and an inherent part of Indian culture.

In the introductory chapter of *Mahabhashya*, Patanjali clearly pronounces, *prayukto lokarthah* and accordingly the *loka* is the

authority of word, meaning and the relationship between them and not the classical rules. *Loka* is one of the important guides of human behaviour and *loka-mata* (views of common people) constitutes a significant part of behaviour before *nrpanaya* (polity) and even the *nigama nicoda* (the essence of the Vedas) and the views of the *prajnavan* (wise).

This process of socio-cultural interaction is a dominating factor in India's literary scene which swept all the regions, and with the passage of time, created different important literary movements including the *bhakti* movement, which fostered a sense of identity in the use of languages and cultural specificities, and the historical functioning in the context of the community.(13)

But, at the same time, the pan-Indianness of the content structure of *bhakti* (devotion) once again established the fact that the unitary vision of art and literature, consisted of profound speculations contained in the systems of Sankhya, Vedanta and Yoga philosophy and were transformed into the living harvest of the people's literature and in this way *loka* and *sastra* were merged together to reveal the essence of Indian philosophical discourse and literary theorizations.

*Bhakti* or devotion (14) is poetry of connection, poetry that connects the devotee with God. Love is the connecting factor and hence *bhakti* is love, love towards God. This devotional tradition sprang from orality, though having classical background, and also from the common people of India having deep perceptive minds but called themselves illiterates. They did not talk of worldly love which binds you in temporality. The love of *bhakti* unbinds you from your worldly state and leads you to eternity. It appeared first in Tamil-speaking areas in the 6th-7th cen. AD. From there, it moved to Karnataka and then chronologically, it found expression in Marathi and Gujrati and later in Rajasthani. By this time, it was 13th Century. During this time, it spread across Kashmir. Then by the 15th-16th Century A.D. it spread in the whole of Central India and slowly it became a pan-Indian movement when due to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's influence the Oriya, Manipuri, Bengali and Assamese languages were adopted for writing devotional poetry. It was a revolution that took the imagination of people by storm. In spite of diversity of this literature written in different Indian languages they are connected by common belief, faith, myths and legends.

The *bhakti* poets were all against the imposition of the elitist Sanskrit language on their mother tongues, *bhasas*. Kabir of

North and Manikkavacakar of South showed their displeasure by saying:

Sanskrit is the standing water of a well,  
Bhasa is flowing water of a river.’ Kabir

‘We have not seen hearts  
Melt and eyes flow with tears  
When people read the Vedas.  
But when they read the Tiruvachakam even once,  
Black stony hearts melts  
And tears flow as from  
Springs in the sands.’ Says Manikavacakar

In their view, God lives inside us as a mother tongue does, and we live in God as we live in language - a language that was there before us, is all around us in the community and will be there after us. To lose this first language is to lose one's beginnings. Thus, they empowered language, the mother tongue, and toned down the influence of Sanskrit, known as the language of the gods. So Eknath wonders that if Sanskrit is the language of gods, what then his language? Is it the language of thieves? In this way a new pan-Indian sensibility in the use of mother tongue was created by the *bhakti* poets

*Bhakti* poets attacked the caste system and a caste-ridden society. Not learning, or belonging to a high caste, but their opposite may endear one to god, and hence, it is the poetry of touch, contact, it thrives on contagion, so nobody is untouchable, out caste. *Bhakti* poetry of touching, sharing, seeing the many in the one, is poetry of connections, of continuities. It connects God, gods, and all creation - the god of myth, the god of philosophy, the god in the temple and the god within.

Now God is no more inaccessible, out of bounds - now he is brought to stay in the house from the temple, because *Bhakti* poetry is the poetry of sharing, touching, seeing the many in one. It is domestication of godhood. The *Bhakta* needs to possess Him and be possessed by Him. He needs also to sing, to dance, quarrel, to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture, to embody him in every possible way. But in reality, God does not come to stay with you. It only hints at a truthful living with god residing in you as says Guru Nanak, and also at the harmony of life which only love can bring.

Vedas are *sruti* or heard or revealed. Puranas, epics and Gita are *smriti* or remembered. Upanishad means 'that which is learnt by sitting at the feet of a teacher'. All these terms suggest passive or receptive modes. *Bhaktas* prefer the active mode. Nammalvar's text is called 'divine utterance' (*tiru-vay-moli*), Manikka Vacakar called his work 'holy utterance' (*tiru*

*vacakam*). Vira Saivas called their poems *vacanas* or ‘saying’ and signature lines of the poetry of Meera or Kabir indicate that this is what the poet is doing. Now the emphasis shifts from hearing to speaking, from watching to dancing, from a passive to an active mode, from a religion and poetry of the esoteric few to a religion and poetry of anyone who can speak.

The pan-Indianness of this poetry can be understood by the very fact that the gods of this movement Rama and Krishna belong to the North of India and the *acharyas* who taught us as how to worship these gods are all from the South of India.

There is no doubt that bhakti movement fostered a sense of regional identity in the use of languages and cultural specificities and the historical functioning in the context of the community but at the same time pan-Indianness of the content structure of *bhakti* literature once again created the situation of conflict and compromise and convey the complementariness of *kshetra* and *desa*.

The idea of Indian Literature is not based on language-literature equation because of India's multilingual situation and writers writing in many languages and hence identification of Indian literature only by its affiliation to a particular language is not possible. Moreover, Urdu and Bengali which are Indian languages are also languages of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Further, the idea of Indian Literature means there is a

geographical India and a political unity. There is no doubt a geographical India exists but what about a political India? What is our political structure? Our unity is based on our diversity on our multi-lingualism, multireligious and multiracial existence. It is not a nation-state but what Nehru would say a nation in the making. Our nationalism is Indian in a syncretic manner. It is based on our pluralism, spiritual tradition, ideas of truth and tolerance preached by Gandhi and non-alignment advocated by Nehru. However, the literature of the country is identified not in terms of language alone or geographical territory or political unity but more in terms of people and in the process, a unified cultural space is created. The very idea of national literature is partly recognition of the relationship existing between people and literature. The idea of Indian Literature gives us a perception which recognizes the relationship between different literatures, each having its own peculiar character and temperament and identifies certain features cutting across the limitations of ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries.

The perception of the unity of Indian Literature promoted our poets to create a territory more stable and abiding than a political concept of nation state and that has been a part of the psyche of the Indian people. Indian Literature is an expression of that psyche. In Mahabharata in Bhismaparva - the reference

of geographical and cultural territory *Swaptadeep-Bharatdesa* is described. In 14th Century Amir Khusro talks of the ninth sky *Nuhu Sifir* which is India. In 16th Century, Shankar Dev talks of a unified cultural space. In spite of the geographical changes, Ashok's India, Akbar's India, British India and present India the idea of a unified cultural space remains. Indian literature is a record of memorable utterances of the Indian people, again an entity which is not determined by political exigencies but defined by a feeling of communality that runs through centuries. It is this sense of communality which is the force unifying the Indian people and their activities. This was not a reaction to colonialism nor a result of nationalist movement but an all time reality. Even the word for literature, which is *sahitya*, means meeting of minds, which is not possible without this sense of communality.

This sense of communality brought Islamic Sufi philosophy and Vedantic philosophy close to each other. The Muslim bauls and darvesh of the medieval India and Nath and Siddha Hindu yogis, by following the Indian folk tradition, ushered in the true spirit of cultural unification. Sufi music in the form of Qawwalis and songs is a true initiative to understand the basic nature of Indian cultural homogeneity and rapprochement. Similarly one can find in Urdu gazals the message of the unity of creation, oneness of God and expression of both earthly and divine love and rejection of all forms of orthodoxy. This was possible only in the atmosphere of give and take and cultural

assimilation which the Indian conditions provide and is the clue to the unity as well as variety of Indian literature.

The idea of Indian Literature is a natural outcome of India's multilingualism. But the unity of Indian Literature, which no one denies is not derived from the unity of languages but of thought and ideas. In Indian Literature the vibrant Indianness emerges only when you understand it in our pluralistic context. Prof. U.R. Anantha Murthy says in this respect that if we take the popular slogan, unity in diversity one will understand that with over stressing diversity, one begins to see the unity. And if one insists on looking for unity in India then what one sees is nothing but diversity. This model of diversity leading to unity is unique for India and as said earlier it is not based on unity of languages but of thought and ideas. This being the reason one can see Ashokan inscriptions in many dialects but giving just one message. Similarly, *Shakuntala* of Kalidasa is a play with a message that man will have to make a journey from attachment to non-attachment and this is presented in the play written in four languages, Sanskrit, Saursheni, Maharastri, Magadhi. There are multilingual writers like Vidyapati writing in Abahatta, Sanskrit and Maithili. *Guru Grantha Sahib* is a multilingual text. Munshi Prem Chand wrote in two languages Hindi and Urdu. So are many other modern Indian writers who are mostly bilingual. One can conclude that there are many

languages but one literary universe. A common core of metaphors and symbols, myths and legends, conventions and norms has evolved during the last 1000 years and despite all diversities, linguistic and non-linguistic, the literatures produced in different languages tend to converge, as do the various language families at several points.

All Indian languages and the literatures produced in them have acquired two identities, one linguistic and the other a cultural one cutting across linguistic boundaries and that is the reason why Indian writings in Persian and English although neither is an Indian language are considered as part of Indian literature. Indian literature is a history of the total literary activity of the Indian people, an account of literary traditions, their ramifications and changes, their recessions and revivals, dominance and decline. Upanishadic thoughts from the north go to south re-emerging as monism and modified monism at the hands of Shankara and Ramanuja. Similarly *bhakti* goes from south to north, Shaivism from Kashmir, finds a home in Tamil region. Tagore's search for beauty in man and nature or Gandhi's experiment with truth and non-violence travels from one end to another end of the country.

Let us take the example of India's modernity. In India, modernism as a phenomenon or value is not an absolutely unrelated one without reference to the past or the future. A great work of art in Indian context is the expression of both the

tradition and the actual. It absorbs in it traditional values as well as new innovations, and is indicated by the term 'continuity'. It is essential to do that, because, for example, however innovative classical vocalists, Bhimsen Joshi and Kumar Gandharva, are, they can never be termed modern singers like Jazz or rock singers. The whole question of continuity in Indian situation can be understood by two terms, *kula* and *sheela*. (15 ) *Kula* is heredity, inheritance, tradition. *Sheela* is the making of a man, his demeanour and personality, which, however, are conditioned by *kula*. *Sheela* in his own given time and space goes on discarding elements of *kula* which have lost their potency, and in the process generates new modes of thought and action and thereby ensures the continuity of a culture, which enriches and invigorates *sheela*, making our present sharp and effective. This can be interpreted as a search for *swadeshi* and *swaraj* for the creation of categories of modernism. *Swadeshi* is *kula* which is, as explained by Gandhi, is just not indicative of tradition only but which is a synthesis of both old and new, where each culture is assured its legitimate place, and not of the American pattern where one dominant culture absorbs the rest, and where the aim is not towards harmony, but towards an artificial and forced unity. The challenge, therefore, is not a search for *swadeshi* only, but *swaraj* also which is *sheela* and which does not mean only self-rule or freedom. *Swaraj* also means freedom of mind. Tagore

while defining modernity, once said that modernity is freedom of mind and not slavery of taste.

One who understands the *kula shila* concept of our existence understands it well that for us both the wings and the roots are important. In other words, both change and continuity are important and hence the interpenetration of India's pluralistic cultural tradition with the new elements of contemporary western civilization is obtained for our modernity to define its place and role in a fast changing world.

In Western terminology, modernism is a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, and implies fresh ways of looking at man's position and functions in the universe, and inheres, in some cases, remarkable experiments in form and style. In India, on the contrary, nothing is rejected; new alternatives are created which become part of the continuity of thought and creativity. Hence Indian thinking, as said earlier, is not logo-centric and exclusive, but symbolic and inclusive. The West develops through substitution. It rewrites itself again and again. India develops through accommodation. New ideas may supplant older ones but the older ones linger on. They are allowed to coexist with what is new. Here you do not reject to create your modernity. Here, whatever you can say rightly about India, the opposite is also true. India represents a space in which certain life forms and life choices

are available. The alternative that India offers is not spirituality verses materialism but as says Gandhi the choice of both verses the forced acceptance of one.

This has been brilliantly explained by Satyajit Ray, the famous Indian Film Director. He writes:

"What should you put in your films? What can you leave out? Would you leave the city behind and go to the village where cows graze in the endless fields and the shepherd play the flute? You can make a film here that would be pure and fresh and have the delicate rhythm of a boatman's song.

Or would you rather go back in time - way back to the epics, where the gods and the demons took sides in the great battle where brother and lord Krishna revived a desolate prince with the words of the 'Gita'? One could do exciting things here using the great mimetic tradition of the Kathakali, as the Japanese use their Noh and Kabuki.

Or would you rather stay where you are, right in the present, in the heart of this monstrous teeming bewildering city and try

to orchestrate its dizzying contrasts of sight and sound and milieu."

These differences - the "dizzying contrasts" co-exist together and indicate the various life choices which are available to us. The Indian literary concepts like *Margi-Desi* (classical-folk), *shastrachara-Desachara* (theoretical norms - local conventions), *Natyadharmi-Lokadharmi* (presentational and representational ) reveal the dialectics of continuity and change rooted in the Indian tradition. In our heterogeneity and in our openness lies our pride, not our disgrace.

In Indian literature, the vibrant Indianness (unity) emerges only when you understand it in our pluralistic context. The unity-diversity set of complementary oppositions identifies a language writer; say a Tamil writer, first as a local monolingual writer, then as a Dravidian writer belonging to South-Indian region and finally as a pan-Indian writer and thereby a vital living relationship at all the 3 levels is established. A history of Indian literature is a history of the total literary activity of the Indian people - both the unity and variety of literary traditions not in isolation from one another but as related components in a larger complex literary situation.

The works in different languages make a deep impact on the Indian readership as they project visions of Indian nationalism as well as of regional and communal aspirations. In our multi-lingual situation the dilemma has arisen because of our faith in the western view which is linear and binary and hence all the language and literary problems are reduced to binary oppositions and therefore all integrative solutions become redundant. Indian mind believes in holistic views of life and hence it is cyclical and spiral and it creates a vital relationship between local, regional and pan-Indian link and national identities. Our sky is big enough to allow diversity and our earth small enough to guarantee the underlying unity of literary sensibility of writers of different languages and regions.

## **Notes and References**

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13.

14. I am deeply influenced by A.K. Ramanujan and his

seminal book on Indian devotional literature, ‘Hymns for  
the Drowning’, : *Poems for Vishnu* by Nammalvar,

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while writing this part of the paper.