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# The Literary Situation in India: Search for an Identity

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meagerly—as if he were counting on her for life. His death was the last experiment which he wanted to succeed. He rejected everything, loving life so much, for some awesome game or riddle. As if he were returning, for the last time, to the sense of the words he had once written:

He  
who loves  
isn't the one who'll  
die

*Translated by the author and J. A. Laskowski*

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U. R. ANANTHAMURTHY / INDIA

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## The Literary Situation in India: Search for an Identity

### I

The situation could have turned into a series of laudatory speeches in these days of seminars in India to celebrate centenaries of well-known Indian and international figures. But the secretary of the Ministry of Education which hosted the seminar to celebrate the Aurobindo centenary was a sensitive Hindi poet, who made the occasion an excuse to discuss problems of contemporary writing in the Indian languages. After the Minister paid the expected tributes to Aurobindo and called upon the writers to uphold Indian culture, work for national integration, world peace, etc., we settled down to business. We had met in one of the dingy provincial capitals of North India, and among us we had writers in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada, and an internationally famous Indian painter.

The discussion inevitably turned into a topic that obsesses us Indian writers these days: why is the western mode of thought and writing the model for us? Why aren't we original in our treatment of form and content in the novel, drama, or poetry?

While Indian dance and music are uniquely Indian, why does contemporary Indian literature take its bearings from the literature of the West?

Are we really a nation of mimics, victims of English education which has conditioned the faculties of our perception so much that we fail to respond freshly to the immediate situation in India? Should we read Brecht in order to discover that our folk theater can be used? Why do we import even our radicalism via Ginsberg, Osborne, or Sartre? And our reaction against the West—isn't it often emotional, while intellectually we remain bound to western modes of thought?

But the language that we used to discuss these questions was English, as it had to be. And the names and examples that dominated our discussion were different from those fashionable ten years ago. In the place of Eliot and Yeats, dear to us for the impact of Indian philosophy on them, we used now the ideas of Camus, Kafka, Sartre, and Lukacs. We admired the achievement of Russian masters, who seemed better influences for us than the Anglo-Saxon writers who are anti-metaphysical and pragmatic in their outlook. Wasn't the Russian literary scene before the revolution very similar to ours, in its struggle between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles? Dostoevsky with his metaphysical brooding was closer to the Indian temperament than the writers of the novels of manners. Still it was Shaw and Galsworthy, rather than the more poetic Synge and Chekhov, who influenced the previous generation of writers in India.

As we were discussing these questions, ironically with examples from the West rather than from our own literatures, some of which have a history of a thousand years, and quite a few writers radical and disturbing in their vision, the painter narrated to us an incident which deeply moved me. Before I relate what he said, let me describe how we dressed, which is important for the point I want to make.

The Bengali writer and a Hindi writer wore white dhoti and collarless long Indian shirts, which nearly all nationalist Indians wore during our struggle for freedom. The Bengali writer had a Marxist background (only he spoke in Bengali which was translated to us), and the Hindi writer was a Gandhian socialist of the Lohia school. Two Hindi writers and a Marathi writer, who were in their thirties and modernists in their writing, wore pants and jubba and had long hair—now the accepted attire of bohemian and artistic Indian intellectuals. (Even in this dress one looks middle class in India. The film stars have popularized it among the young of the rich and middle classes.) Only the painter looked authentically unmiddle class—with his flowing hair and beard, collarless shirt and dhoti not elegantly gathered and worn in the Bengali fashion, but tucked around the waist carelessly in the South Indian style. He could have been genuinely taken for a wandering Indian *sadhu* except for his powerful and well articulated English. Perhaps a remark made by me in the course of the discussion on the search for Indian identity had prompted him to speak, or perhaps I am mistaken. Anyhow, this is what I had said.

Speaking of Kannada literature, I had observed that there were distinctly two generations of writers—those who belonged to the Gandhian era, and us. In order to clarify certain issues, I had ventured to generalize recklessly (which most of us were doing anyhow) and described these generations as “insiders” and “outsiders” respectively. Some “insiders” even grew a tuft, wore caste marks, chewed betel, and, more often than not, came from a rural background. Along with their Gandhian idealism, their sensibilities bore the distinctive features of their castes and regions, and they wrote as if the English education they received was inconsequential. I had in my mind some great Kannada writers like Bendre, Putina, and Masti, and I was of course rashly generalizing, for it was not unusual in the past to describe these writers as the Wordsworth, Shelley, Hardy, Shaw, etc., of Kannada. Yet I was not wholly wrong in thinking of them as “insiders” in comparison with my generation of writers. There is no doubt we look and think differently from them. We admire their insider’s knowledge of Indian tradition but reject their celebratory attitude toward Indian traditionalism. They made it possible for us to write, but we had to rebel against their conservative clinging to certain aesthetic modes. Some modern writers are, as a result, more inventive in their writing, but . . . haven’t we also moved closer to the West in our experimentation, thus risking rootlessness in our own tradition? I raised the question, but as a practicing modernist writer myself I also tried to argue that there was no need to be unnecessarily anxious about it. We all write in the Indian languages, and this fact has a profound consequence on what we actually do in our languages, however much we expose ourselves to the West in search of ideas and forms. The “insiders” and “outsiders” can’t remain mutually exclusive. The fact that we write in an Indian language, like Kannada, kept alive by the oral traditions of the illiterate rural people, as well as a thousand-year-long native literary tradition, which has behind it an even longer pan-Indian Sanskrit tradition, has its own influence on what its recent writers do with their exposure to the West. The medium shapes the writer, even when he is shaping it. The writer influenced by the West may think and feel like an outsider, and yet he has to be an insider to the language created by the peculiar congruence of indigenous and Sanskrit classical traditions, folk tradition, and now the impact of spreading western education. If you borrow western technology and science, its culture too is bound to influence you, and where else can the integration of conflicting strains in our life be achieved except in one’s language?

I was at pains not to appear eclectic in my approach. I wanted my friends to see the emergence of a new Indian identity in our literature as the result of a dialectic, not a mixture, of the living old and new, which would be germane to the genius of our languages. Kannada writers had such a relationship with Sanskrit literature once, and our achievement in the past was

not a copy of Sanskrit; in some writers at least it was unique—although within the context of Sanskritic tradition. In my argument I had assumed that language rejects what is willfully and artificially imported into it, and discerning literary criticism can distinguish between what is genuine and what is faked without going into the abstract and unsolvable question of how much of western influence is good for us.

Moreover, I argued, the language, Kannada, may have a literary tradition of a thousand years; still the contemporary writer can only use the current language that has become a part of his experience in his own lifetime. The search for the language adequate to one's creation is also a continuous one; it varies from one work to another.

When the writer influenced by western literatures chooses to write in a language like Kannada, he has made a moral choice. If the ideas that are still not of my language are embodied in my language creatively, then it becomes a part of the living tradition of my language.

I said that one uses only the current language of one's life time; but perhaps it is even narrower than this. As a writer I have felt often that my essential language is what I acquired during my childhood in a village and what I have been able to add to it—not superficially but experientially—in the process of growing up. In the actual business of writing don't we all know how much of our knowledge and our acquired language is really superfluous and useless? The magic of literary creation lies in actualizing new facets of experience; suggesting the inarticulate while articulating the particular and the given; conquering new domains of experience which are not yet the property of my language. If I should do all these in a language that has become my own only from the days of my childhood, then that language which has roots in me must have roots outside me as well—in its tradition of a thousand years, and what is affecting the lives of the people who speak that language today. If the western impact on us is a reality, how can we wish it away? I will have to relate myself to it with my language, which, if it has to have evocative power, should have its roots in the language of the ancient poets, and its current life in the idiomatic vigor of the illiterate peasant's speech.

As a creative writer I work on this assumption, but I can't wholly silence my literary conscience with that argument. Hence what the painter said, his extraordinary appearance and ability as an artist adding to the power of his argument, deeply disturbed me. In retrospect what he said may seem simple to me now, but the fact that I was disturbed by his argument (and a few other writers were also impressed like me), is an indication of a profound disquiet among the Indian writers today in their search for identity.

The painter was travelling through villages in North India studying folk art. A lonely cottage at the foot of a hill attracted his eye. As he approached

the cottage, he was puzzled by a piece of stone which he saw inside the cottage through the window; it was decorated with *kunkum*—the red powder that our women wear on their foreheads as an auspicious sign—and flowers. He wanted to photograph the stone that the peasant worshipped and he asked the peasant who was weaving a basket outside the cottage if he could bring the stone outside the cottage into the sun so he could take a picture. After taking the photograph, the painter apologized to the peasant in case the stone he worshipped was polluted by moving it outside. He had not expected the peasant's reply. "It doesn't matter," the peasant said, "I will have to bring another stone and anoint it with *kunkum*." Any piece of stone on which he put *kunkum* became God for the peasant. What mattered was his faith, not the stone. Do we understand the manner in which the peasant's mind worked?—the painter asked us. Can we understand his essentially mythical and metaphorical imagination which directed his inner life? Will Lukacs and Russell, who influence the structure of our thinking now, help us see instinctively the way this peasant's mind worked? That is why we don't understand the complex pattern of ancient Indian thought, its daring subjectivity, caught as we are in the narrow confines of western scientific rationality. In his simplicity the peasant still keeps alive the mode of thinking and perception, which at the dawn of human civilization revealed to the sages of the Upanishads the vision that Atman *is* Brahman. Shouldn't we prefer the so-called superstition of the peasant, which helps him see organic connections between the animal world, the human world and the nature surrounding him, to the scientific rationality of western science that has driven the world into a mess of pollution and ecological imbalance?

The painter continued: The western education has alienated us utterly from this peasant who belongs to the category of the seventy percent of the illiterate Indian mass. There is no gap for him between what he perceived subjectively and objectively. As his senses were actively engaged with the world outside him, he had no time to reflect on the luxury of the existentialist problem of whether life was meaningful. If we don't understand the structure and mode of this peasant's thinking, we can't become true Indian writers. Therefore we should free ourselves from the enslaving rationalist modes of western scientific thinking, from which even their great writers are not totally liberated. Only then we will be able to see what connects this peasant vitally to his world that surrounds him and to his ancestor, who perhaps plowed the same patch of land some three thousand years ago. The western modes of perception will not help us understand what sustains this peasant—whether it is liberalism, scientific positivism, or even Marxism—these European-born theories only serve to make us feel inferior and thus turn our country into an imitative copy of the West.

As I said, we were moved by the painter's argument. In the midst of

Camus, Sartre, Kafka, and Lukacs, he had stood before us, an authentic Indian who was untouched by the ideas of any of these writers whom we were using as points of reference to define our positions.

In retrospect a doubt nagged me. Isn't the authentic Indian peasant, whose imagination is mythical and who relates to nature organically, also a current radical reaction against western materialism, which has begun to exercise an influence on the educated middle class writers of India? What if these spiritual reactions to the West are their way of keeping fit, and the "decline of the West" theory is a glibly repeated humbug?

In India, Mahatma Gandhi, who himself approximated the Indian peasant in his appearance, in his mode of thinking, and in his political imagery, still chose Pandit Nehru, the westernized Indian, as his successor. I don't think that the children of that peasant will believe in the magic of transforming the stone into God, nor did the painter work on his canvas that way—he sought an objective form, there, on the canvas, for his perceptions and ideas, and he couldn't ignore the experimentations in western painting.

Still why did the painter move me with his argument? Why do we educated Indian writers of my generation—most of whom now belong to the middle class intelligentsia—suffer from a nagging self-doubt? Why are we all soliloquists and monologuists—stream of consciousness technique is very popular with our novelists—whereas the older generation of writers, who were also English educated and belonged to the upper classes and castes in India, did not think that their perceptions were limited to themselves? Perhaps as they belonged to a generation that was involved in the struggle to free India, they felt a common destiny with the masses of India, which in the post-independent India we don't feel. They did think that they wrote and spoke for the whole country—whatever be the quality of their writing, a good deal of which was sloppy, sentimental and revivalist. I even envy the home-spun plain khadi clothes they wore, which were egalitarian symbols in the post-independent India of Gandhi but which no longer are, because they are the clothes of our corrupt politicians and ministers. We do not think that we can be intensely personal and universal at the same time—a confidence which is important for the creation of great art. As a result we keep reacting rather than creating; we advocate the absurd, or in reaction to it admire the authentic Indian peasant—all of them masks to hide our own uncertainties. In the morass of poverty, disease, and ugliness of India, isn't the westernized Indian inauthentic, and inconsequential, and the traditional peasant an incongruous and helpless victim of centuries of stagnation?

Why did it seem to us that to be authentically Indian we should idealize the simple peasant? We had great Indian writers in the past who had a quarrel with the belief patterns of traditional India. In their search for an authentic mode of existence, twelfth-century mystical poets in my language,

Basavanna, Allama, and the woman poet Akka, were very impatient with the naive acquiescence and resignation of the traditional Indian mind. They didn't emulate the peasant, but tried to rouse him into an awareness of his inner potential. The great Indian tradition was not merely spiritual and devotional; we had the materialist Lokayata School, the Sankhya System, and Jainism and Buddhism which were atheistic. It is a tradition of an intense conflict of world views, yet our revivalists prefer to select only one aspect of it. Isn't this debilitating romantic strain in us also due to our obsession with the West?

I shall summarily try to pose the question like this: the continuity of tradition of rural India, and the gymnastics of the Indian intellectual which begin and end with him, have remained apart, unrelated. Why is there still no reaching out to each other? Why are we not fully possessed of the vital problems of India? And why don't we have the confidence and desire to affect the thinking of the peasant who, in turn, should become creative as some of them did in the twelfth century in my language? If and when the writers of our country give such immediate responsive attention to our situation, would we not then be less obsessed with the West, and wouldn't much that is happening in the West today seem irrelevant to us? The noble Nehru ran the affairs of the country with his face always turned to the West. What will the post-Nehru generation of writers do? Would Gandhism and Maoism, which have many similarities, create in our countries the situation that necessitates the kind of attention I spoke of? But then, wouldn't our literature become monotonous, burdened with one theme, one purpose, one attitude? As Yeats said:

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.

## II

I should take a more professional look at the problem and clarify issues as they are, rather than lose myself in wild speculation as I did now. Yet I do not regret revealing to you the tenor and trend of our minds in India today. I don't want to pretend that I have overcome the painter's argument; the peasant does bother me, like Anna Karenina's dream in Tolstoy's novel, and I am worried that the underlying assumption of the literary culture in which I write is potentially capable of making the peasant's mode of existence and thinking irrelevant to me. And a large part of the reality of my country is still him, and he is there in my language, whose vigor of expression has been preserved by him.

Between any two literatures there can be roughly three kinds of rela-



tions: first, the relation of the master and the slave; second, the relation of equals; third, the relation between a developed country like Europe or America and a developing nation like ours. The example for the first is the way the white men imposed their culture on the blacks in America. Yet no imposition can be completely successful—as in music, in literature too, the minority culture of the blacks may contain the creative nucleus that will influence the literature of the whole country. The interaction between the English and the French literatures illustrates the second kind of relationship. When a French historian writes the history of English literature, it is possible that he sees a French writer at the back of all the important English writers.

The third kind of relationship is more complex than the first two. I use economic categories to describe this relationship rather than terms like East and West, for the thought patterns arising from the division of mankind into East and West are often simplistic. In my own country, as it must be evident from my talk, it results in either imitation or frigid conservatism. Only because I am born an Indian I refuse to think that it is a crime to respond more to Tolstoy or to Shakespeare than, say, to Pampa's epic in my language. I must also be aware when I say this that the novels of Karanth in my language, although they fall short of the world masterpieces I admire, are much more relevant to me in forming my sensibility.

We are a very poor, humiliated nation now, but with a rich and highly sophisticated culture in the past. This creates many psychological complications in our relation to the West. The influence of western literatures may either sharpen our attention to our own reality, or it may take our minds away from what is most relevant to our situation. This is the heart of the problem—how can we have a mature relationship? Is it ever possible to have a mature relationship of equals, when the relationship is one-sided? America wants our gurus, but will she ever *need* our poets and novelists and respond to them, as we respond to American writers? And even this response is often out of proportion to the real merit of the writers—which is still another problem of uncritical acceptance of received opinions from the West.

Dr. Lohia, a great Gandhian socialist thinker of India, once described Indian intellectuals either as backward-looking, sideways-looking or forward-looking. The backward-lookers entertain the illusion that the solution to our problem lies in the revival of our past. (Which aspect of our past? The revivalists are highly selective; they ignore the skeptical and rationalist aspects of our past.) If this is the typical thinking of the conservative upper castes in India, the cosmopolites in India always look sideways. Shall we be like America? Or Russia? Or France? Or Britain? They too speak very emotionally about the ancient glory of India, yet they seek their intellectual motivations from the West. They can get very upset about the American atrocities in Vietnam, but they don't raise a finger against the burning of

the huts of the untouchable castes by the landlords of Andhra Pradesh in India. They admire Ginsberg's protest and ungentlemanly ways, yet when one of our earnestly radical legislators removed his *chappal* to beat the corrupt ministers in the Assembly, they were utterly shocked by his lack of manners. They wear the hippie costume, but the material is imported terylene.

But if you think that the great scientific and cultural progress of the West, with its exploration of space and its undoubted creative energy, is related to the famine and hunger among the illiterate peasants of the rural areas of Gulbarga and Bijapur in my state, and that these two interrelated phenomena are bound to react mutually as our people are roused to consciousness, then we have to become forward-looking; not only the people of the East but those of the West, too. The forward-looking Indian will then have to work for approximation among mankind—which is possible only through a new technology, and a new political and economic order—which are again related. For the writer in India who has such a vision, the famine in an Indian village, a new literary experiment in French literature, the science that has caused enormous wealth in one part of the globe and poverty in another, the ancient mystical poetry of Kabir and Basavanna—which he may read wearing western dress, but which still moves him to the depths—all these coalesce into an immediate contemporary reality. He has to make connections much more than he does now, or much of contemporary western literature which he reads does. As a writer, then, he will have to struggle to embody his vision in a language in which you can write like Blake and not analytically like Russell, and which unlike European languages is still rural.

I am sorry to have slipped into such a high note again. I spoke of the cliché postures of backward-looking orientalism, and imitative westernization—they are really the same. The great sage of the Upanishads, Yajnavalkya, was not an orientalist; he was not bothered about his Indian identity. Imitation either of our own past or of Europe leads to sterility; and attention to the immediate reality is warped. Also, as I have indicated earlier, the Indian orientalist chooses to uphold a highly simplified version of India, the image of India created during our freedom fighting renaissance, an image again molded in the Victorian narrow sensibility. Even Mahatma Gandhi was essentially a puritan and lacked the richness and complexity of ancient Indian thought.

In reaction against the orientalists and the westernizers, some of our really intelligent and sophisticated writers have created a new kind of work of art, which, apparently, looks Indian and original. Yet in a very subtle manner these works are also Indian equivalents of western models. The conceptual framework into which the material is organized is western. The material is Indian—the details of life, the myths, the folklore, the legends are all there, but you feel “Why should I read this after reading Kafka or Camus?” You

can't borrow the style or form of these writers without their philosophy, their concept of man; it is not neutral like classical realism. I would say there are some "mental frames" today in western literature, born out of certain definitions and concepts of man which dominate the literature of the world, and certainly of India, and this has resulted in monotony. Therefore the Indian writer looking for a new mode of perception is certainly attracted by the simple peasant who has remained through the centuries impenetrable to the cultures of the conquerors. It is important to know that he exists; our hypersensitive, highly personal nightmares will at least be tempered with the irony of such knowledge.

The question then could be put this way: in India, what should happen to the whole country so that we will be forced out of the grooves that I have been speaking of?

### III

I will not attempt an answer to this big question but will try to take another look at what makes these grooves in our cultural situation. Is there a relationship between what the writer creates and the expectations of an ideal reader? What I wish to say now is based on the assumption that the *implicit* awareness of his potential ideal reader is one of the important factors entering into the writer's creative process—the embodying process of bringing a work into existence in a particular cultural context. Let me see then what has been happening in my language. In the classical period of Kannada literature nearly a thousand years ago, the ideal reader, who belonged to the elite class forming a very small fraction of the society which could read and write, could presumably read Sanskrit also. Therefore he brought to his reading of Kannada aesthetic expectations formed from his study of Sanskrit. The best of Kannada literature in the past is original within the context of Sanskrit literature. Its departures are important, yet they are departures. No good writer limits himself to the expectations of the reader; he extends them, but within a given context. Even now the literates in my language are hardly thirty percent, and the discerning ideal reader of our literary works is one whose sensibility is formed by a study of English literature. This is the cultural situation in which we are writing; the peasant at the foot of the hill can't read me. His consciousness may enter my work as an "object" for others like me to read, which will be very different from what would have been if I were aware in my creative process that he was also my potential reader. The socio-economic process that will make him a potential reader may also make him a man of the sideways-looking middle class like us. Is it possible then to have a different context for writing in a country like India?

Yet there is literature in India which cuts across this framework. There were revolutionary periods in our history which saw important socio-cul-

tural changes brought about by great religious movements. These religious poets worked in the oral tradition, and therefore in the creative process itself they had before them both literate and illiterate people. Thus when the illiterate masses were not mere objects and themes of literary creation, but participants in the act of communication, our regional literature underwent a change not only in theme, but in its aesthetic structure. In an important way, this literature created in the oral tradition, since it was not conditioned by the expectation of the Sanskrit educated literati, becomes most daring and original in its imagery, metaphor, and rhythmic structures. There is a big gap between the language and rhythm of classical literature in Kannada of the twelfth century and the language I use today. But the language and rhythm of the mystical poetry of Basavanna, Akka, and Alama, who are also of the twelfth century, are like those of the language in which I write today. And these poets were radical in their attitudes too. I must make an important point here; their audience which cut across social barriers was an *immediate* one for them. It was not a mass audience to whose taste they catered. The difference is significant.

I don't foresee such a socio-cultural and religious turmoil challenging us to create outside the defined frameworks of the cultural and literary expectations of our highly limited reading public. The oral tradition is still there in India, but the urge to work in it is not found among our English educated middle class writers. The expansion of the reading public, whether it is brought about by the present system in India or by the kind of Indian Marxists we have now, will again be through a process of modernization and industrialization—and therefore such a literate mass may not create for the writers a qualitatively different writing situation. What we see of the Marxist progressive writing in India is propagandist; its relation with its audience is hackneyed and unproductive; it is not truly a dialogue in Pablo Ferer's sense.

I hope you will appreciate why I can't neatly end this paper. What is the best that a writer who has this awareness can do? Perhaps write for himself. But that is not even ideally possible—I would like to add—and yet . . .