

towards a Synthetic History of Indian Classical Literature

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I. Introduction

We have all studied histories of different literatures. But what do we mean by that study? What is 'literature', and what is 'classical literature'?

Language is either Spoken or Written. Further, in either form, it can be informal or formal.

Literature (derived from Latin *littera*, meaning 'letter') is a body of letters or a written piece. Classical literature is formal, polished or refined writing.

Literature is a reflection of human culture. Now, cultural activity is apparent in every bit of human activity, and thus literary activity too is comprehensive.

II. Vastness of Indian Literature

A) Few countries in the world like India enjoy a cultural activity and a sustained literary activity spread on the subcontinent and continued over nearly three thousand years. Sanskrit has been one of the few languages of the world which is a carrier of this extensive culture. Thus, the variety and the quality of writings in it are really staggering. Prakrit and Pali, with their rich store of literatures, are not far behind. And, any student, knowing these languages but not knowing any of the South Indian languages, cannot hope to judge accurately all aspects of Indian culture, and his understanding of it must remain only partial or one-sided. For, Tamil and Telugu literatures rival Sanskrit literature in scope and quality. All these languages have similarly developed Canonical and Philosophical literature, Secular literature and Scientific literature, such as: the Belles Letters including Epics, Dramas, Poems, Prose Romances, Historical Poems, Lyrics, Anthologies, Didactic Poems, Fables, Subhaashitas Alliterative Poems, *Anyokti-s* i.e. Allegories or Parables, Digests, *Stotras*, Satirical Poems, Biographies, small or popular poems like *Samasyaapoortis*, and what not.

B) Also, one must remember that a country like India, with its vast geographical expanse but with want of easy means of communication, did not enjoy free and smooth access from one part to another; and thus there necessarily grew numerous local or regional cultures.

C) Thus, by not being aware of these facts and by neglecting the study of Praakrit and Dravidian languages, one would be cutting oneself off from the totality of Indian culture with a variety of its sub-cultures.

III. Presentation of History

How to present a 'History' of such literature? What should be its mode?

A) 'Histories' that we know generally depict a chronological development. In the large sense, 'History' is also a picture of the regional variation. This understands 'History' in two dimensions, or, as it is called, in Space-Time Contexts.

B) Literary writings are usually classified under different Heads or Subjects or Branches. Their presentation is therefore usually done group-wise or subject-wise. Thus, there are histories of drama, poetry, poetics, philosophy, music, of each of the technical sciences, etc. Thus, there have arisen isolated histories of literature, which show no signs of mutual relationships.

IV. Isolation or Integration?

A) Now, does literature grow in such isolation, i.e. without traces of mutual influences? Is such totally independent growth possible? Side by side with poetry, philosophy also grows; and so also music, prosody or even physical sciences flourish on the same soil and in the same period. All these are departments of the composite human culture not without mutual influences.

B) There can also be stray cases of stubbornly not yielding to neighboring influences. But these are rare.

C) Acceptedly, there are also merits in the writing of specialised accounts or histories.

V. Possibilities of Presenting a Co-ordinated History

A) How then to present the various sections or branches of Literature in a way which can throw light on their inter-relationships? It is of course impossible to cast the net wide enough for a consideration of all types of literature. What is important is basically developing a strong awareness and a viewpoint of the contexts of Space (Region) and Time in every aspect and branch of literature. Thinking on and finding the practical ways and means of presenting such a co-ordinated picture is the next step. Suggestions can be made in this latter regard.

B) 1. It should be possible to prepare region wise Accounts or Histories (such as the standard ones for Kerala, Gujarat etc.)

2. These accounts can be recorded century-wise for which there would be different Chapters.

3. Within each such Chapter, developments in different branches of literature can be recorded.

This would facilitate noting comparisons, influences etc.

4. Century-wise developments under each branch can be compared.

5. Region-wise developments in each century can be compared.

6. A small Tabular Conspectus of the material collected can be prepared as under.

| C | R à | R1 | | | R2 | | | R3 | | |
|----|-----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| â | | | | | | | | | | |
| C1 | | B1 | B2 | B3 | B1 | B2 | B3 | B1 | B2 | B3 |

C2

C3

(R = Region; C = Century; B = Branch)

- C) 1. The focus must be on discovering the relationships (i) among texts belonging to different branches of literature, (ii) among branches within different centuries or periods, and (iii) among contributions of different periods in specific geographical regions.
2. When the picture of mutual influences gets somewhat clear, a study of their causes can be further undertaken.