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(Re)thinking Indian Literary History

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Abstract

Literary history basically deals with the methodology, framework, and deep structure of literature. There are two almost similar terms namely—history of literature and literary historiography. History of literature as defined by critics is a chronological account of existing literature/ literary text; whereas literary historiography has to do with methodology involved in writing history of literature. These terms look very similar but are different in approach. This paper tends to explore various critical frameworks of literary history, practiced both by Western and Indian thinkers. The paper tends to explore certain critical approaches towards literary history. The paper also explores the various issues related to the history of Indian literature and specific problems of literary history in India, suggesting a few critical frameworks and methods to make it more inclusive and viable.

Keywords: History of literature; Indian literature; Literary history; Literary historiography.

India has a very long history of literary traditions but Indian literature cannot be treated in singularity as there have been a number of works to define Indian literature. Indian literature is composed in various languages and sociology of every language differs from one another. Therefore, it cannot be treated in a single framework. Hence, a theoretical inquiry into the framework of literary historiography or history of Indian literature is essential. To understand the process and progress of Indian literature, it is pertinent to understand its theoretical structure which has been a long practice of the country. Earlier, there were number of works—in the discipline of history of literature written in various styles, genres, forms etc. These were—The History of Hindostan (1770) by John Dow, A Grammar of Persian Language1771) by Sir William Jones, A Literary History of India (1907) by R. W. Frazer, A History ofIndian Literature (1927) by Maurice Winternitz, Indian Thought: Past and Present (1915) by R. W. Frazer, The History of Indian Literature (1878) by Albrecht Weber, Indian Literature(1951) by Louis Renou. Despite all these given volumes, there

were hardly any theoretical works available to define the framework, methodology, and functions of Indian Literary history.

The term 'literary history', 'history of literature' and 'literary historiography' is often misunderstood as synonyms or substitute to each other; however, these terms are different in practice and characterization although there exist some similarities between both 'literary history' and 'history of literature'. Primarily both history of literature and literary history run in chronological order but history of literature basically deals with the chronological order of the events whereas literary history is quiet advance and along with chronological order it also accommodates the fundamental structure of literature such as themes, events, genres etc. They cannot exist in isolation and both are equally important for a clear understanding of literary historiography. Historiography is essential for a number of reasons; primarily it explores how historical events have been interpreted over time. It provides a framework to examine the broader characteristic of history itself as it is based on the critical examination of sources and narratives. In general, it refers to the studies, critical methods and interpretation used by the researcher to develop the history of Indian literature. In the late 20th century, there have been four major schools of historiography in India. These are—Cambridge School, Nationalist School, Marxist School, and Subaltern School. Cambridge School approached historiography from the imperialist point of view and it is widely criticized for its Eurocentric approach. Nationalist school focused on Indian freedom movement and it is criticized for being elite. Marxist school focused on economic development and class conflict and it is criticized for being 'too much ideologically influenced'. Subaltern school emerged as a counter reaction to the elite historiography in India and this school advocates historiography from the point of view of lower social class and marginalized groups.

Early twentieth century has witnessed some of the fundamental works on literary historyalthough in India, it appeared in the late twentieth century. Thus, it is pertinent to explore a range of definitions and practices of literary histories across the globe. This paper tends to explore, ideas of theoreticians of the West and India on literary history. Indian critics like Sujit Mukherjee, Ramvilash Sharma, Sisir Kumar Das and G N Devy have extensively worked on the theoretical positions of 'literary history'. In their analysis, to an extent, they have disapproved the methods of 'literary history' propagated by the Western critics. Therefore, it is essential to rethink about the theoretical practices of 'literary history' in our terms and Indian critics have explored the various dimensions of literary history before the advent of colonialism. They also pose some questions on

the idea of literary history and examine if we really had sense of literary history before the arrival of the British? Further, they discussed that if entire structure of literary history is based on Western approach, then why are we compelled to follow their structure? Their argument is not against the knowledge system of West rather they believe to develop Indian approach to flourish and they have also suggested certain lacuna of literary history.

This paper basically runs into two parts, while the earlier part discusses the different approaches of Western critics, the later part discusses the approaches of Indian critics. Towards the end, the paper explores certain pitfalls of literary history in India and possible areas of inclusion. There have been a number of works on the theoretical approaches of literary history: René Wellek is among the first few theorists who have worked on literary history and his works, *The Rise of English Literary History* 1941, "Six Types of Literary History" 1946 and "The Fall of Literary History" 1973 are some of the ground breaking works on this discipline. Hans Robert Jauss's "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" 1970, Jeoffray Hartman's "Toward Literary History" 1970, R S Crane's "Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History" 1973, David Perkins's *Is Literary History Possible*1992 are some other acknowledged ones. Northrop Frye, Stephen Greenblatt, Harris Wendell, Cleanth Brooks, Sheldon Pollock, Mario Paz, and Paul De Man are among other leading Western critics who have extensively worked on literary history. Whereas in India, Sujit Mukherjee's *Towards a Literary History of India* in 1975 and *Some Positions on a LiteraryHistory of India* in 1982, Ramvilas Sharms's *Bharatiya Sahitya ke Itihas ki Samsyein* in 1986, and G N Devy's *Of Many Heroes: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography* 1998 are some of the fundamental works on the theoretical aspect of literary history in India.

Ideological domination is inevitable on works of history as usually disciplines are dominated by the ruling dispensations. Be it in the West, India or any other part of the world; ideological concern always appears in the writing of a work. Therefore, works on literary history may also have some ideological aspirations. In the 20th century, René Welllek has extensively explored different dimensions and approaches of literature and in his work, *The Rise of English Literary History* he observes, "the emergence of literary history as a 'subject' is intimately linked with the rise of literature as a means of social domination" (Devy 5).When such discourse gets institutionalized it becomes a tool of domination in the hands of ruling dispensation. According to Devy, Thomas Warton's work, *History of English Poetry*(1774-81) is the beginning of system-

atic practice of writing literary history. There are very few works on this area and if any earlier work is available it lacks a proper method and framework. Gerard O'Leary's work *English Literary History* published in 1930 is a kind of bibliographical work with a short commentary and evaluation and for him, the rise of literary history is a part of 'the greatest revolution in the intellectual history of mankind'. Thus we understand that to understand literary history a 'historical sense' is required. In this context, Wellek observes "The rise of literary history was dependent on a general growth of the "historical sense" which can be described as recognition of individuality in its historical setting and an appreciation of the historical process into which individualities fit" ("Rise" 48). He traces that earlier to Thomas Warton's work, a practice of writing literary history in verse form was in existence. Alexander Pope's essay "Essay on Criticism" in 1711 is one such example that existed, which provides a brief account on literary criticism.

René Wellek in his essay "Six Type of Literary History" defines literary history as an apparatus of cannon formation, which basically draws and redraws limitations of literary production in terms of what is socially acceptable or what is socially unacceptable. For Ralph Cohen, literary history is a series of literary works, arranged chronologically. During the neoclassical and renaissance period this term was merely used to refer to books or catalogues. William Cave's book *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Historia Literia* (1688) is one of the earlier accounts in the discipline of literary history. During the course of period Francis Bacon has popularized the term with his proposal to write comprehensive history of various academic disciplines. In this direction Henry Hallam in his work *Introduction to the Literary History of the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, conceived it as a history of ideas and enlightenment. These are the earlier accounts in the field of literary history. Wellek observed that Germany has played an important role in the field of literary history. He believes that history can be written in isolation without considering social conditions. He observed "I allude to the view that there is an internal development of literature, that literature has its own history, and that this history can be written in comparative isolation from that of the social conditions under which literature was produced" (Wellek "Type"112). Therefore, he suggested six different categories/ types of literary history namely—history of books, intellectual history, history of civilizations, sociological methods, historical relativism, and internal history of literary development. Both history of books and history of ideas/ intellectual history emerge problematic for him, since both impose certain standards. History of national civilization also emerges problematic as he

believes that use of literature may not be a reliable source for the history of any civilization. As it is a well established fact that literature written in any part of the world carries some kind of fictional affinities.Sociological method seems quite relevant to literary history, since they comprise certain issues pertinent to society and culture. He regrets that sociological methods are not properly explored and applied to literature. Historical relativism carries some sense of imagination, and the last method, internal history of literary development is quite important for the students of literature. John Neubauer agrees to the points made by him, that literary history should be internal, primarily subject matters be restricted to literary texts only.

Praz Mario in his essay "Literary History" explains Croce's idea of literary history. Croce believes that, literary history should be explained in isolation. He believes that, works on literary history should be dealt in individuality. For example, if history of poetry has to be taken into account, then only poets, poetry should be discussed. Similar methods are supposed to be applied for similar works. In nutshell, Mario observed Croces's idea of literary history "In a word, the only kind of proper literary history which, according to Croce, can be conceived is a collection of monographs on single artists" (Mario 98). To this argument, I disagree because if such methods are applied, then such monographs may lead tolack of critical rigor and intellectual inquiry among other disciplines. Therefore, literary history cannot be seen in isolation, its associated constituents must get proper attention. Hans Robert Jauss in his essay "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" believes that literary history may be seen in the context of challenging literary theory. He stresses on the reception aesthetic and suggests a few methods for the approach. For him, to look into literary history through a new dimension, it is essential to rewrite it. Traditional methods should be taken off and reception aesthetic should be applied to literary history. To get aesthetic pleasure, we need to make it reader centric. First of all, literary historian must become reader and then they should compile literary history. If this method is applied then, it may create a dialogue between reader and writer and also it may promote re-reading of text, not just facts. He further clarifies it:

History of literature is a process of aesthetic reception production which takes place in realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic and author in his continued creativity. The continuously growing "literary data" which appear in the conventional literary history are merely left over from the process; they are only the collected and classified past and therefore not history at all, but pseudo-history. Anyone who considers such literary data as history confuses the eventful

character of a work of art with that of historical matter-of –factness (Jauss 10).

For him, historical contexts explained in history of literature are doubtful; they are not factual. Therefore, analysis of the literary experience of the reader needs to be delineated and methods of reception theory be followed. Further, he explains that ordering of individual work is required and the task of literary historians is not only to provide an account of synchronic and diachronic literary history in sequence, but to develop a unique understanding and relation between special history and general history.

Leon J. Goldstein in his essay "Literary History as History" makes two general distinctions between historical constitution and historical explanation in context of perceptual knowledge and indirect knowledge. Historical constitution, similar to perceptual knowledge can be witnessed directly whereas historical explanation similar to indirect knowledge cannot be understood in isolation. Therefore, literary history should be dealt with intensive care of the facts and what constitutes past in literary history. Another leading critic, Northrop Frye, in his short essay "Literary History" believes that literary history has grown from name and date to genre and form and he also emphasizes on the language of literary history. He categorizes literature into three major periods—age of god, age of heroes and the age of people. Likewise, he constitutes three phases of language—hieroglyphic, individualized, and sense of experience. In his argument, first phase is concerned with the sign system or using words as sign, in second phase, words are primarily expression of thoughts and in the last, a sense of experience. Through his theory of language, he explains the history of literature from Bible to the Bacon. Frye has also observed that literary history is nothing but a recreation of past. For him, everyone recreates the past and the reader recreates the past through his readings and imagination, a poet recreates past through his poetry. It seems that everything is recreation of past where 'text' does not exist at all.

Wendell H Harris observes various changes in the theory of literary history in last four decades. He observes two fundamental problems with literary history —its ambiguity of the use of term and debates over the possibility of linguistic reference. The term does not have a uniform definition and its meaning overlaps with other similar approaches hence it is subtle to make a proper reference to what it really stands for. Secondly, words always cannot refer to 'extra linguistic realities' and it is difficult to explain social realities. Therefore, to his understanding, literary history is history of stipulated literature or national literature. Wendell also ar-

gues to construct proper distinctions between literary history and historical scholarship. At the end he emphasizes on the role of historical scholarship as the determining source of literary history. He explains historical scholarship as: "Historical scholarship is the source of facts which are then employed in the service of determining possible intended meaning, of writing histories of all permutations, and, to a lesser extent, of inducing extra-authorial meanings" (Wendell 447). Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes on the theoretical understanding of colonial subjection, racial memory, exile, immigration, and wandering; these also play an important role in shaping the idea of literary history.

While writing literary history, these issues should be properly taken into account. He further explained, "to write literary history, we need more a sharp awareness of accidental judgments than a theory of the organic; more an account of purposes mistook than a narrative of gradual emergence; more a chronicle of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts than a story of inevitable progress from traceable origins" (Greenblatt 62). American literary Historian Robert E Spiller defines literary history: "Literary history is concerned with describing the expression *in literature* of a people during a period of time, in a place, and usually in a specific language" (Spiller 55). For him, literary works have a primary concern for literary history and historians. Facts are secondary but they are a legitimate concern for literary historians. There are other critics in the West who have come up with different issues to deal with the methods and frameworks of literary history. In nutshell, they have come with different opinions such as question of language, isolation, reader centric approach etc. and their accounts of theoretical positions are still relevant.

In Indian context, literary history was seen entirely different from what Western theoristhas suggested. German thinker, Hans Harder, who has extensively worked on South Asian languages and literature, believes that it also possess a well considered plot. India is a land of diverse cultures, languages and literatures; therefore, literary history cannot have a single framework and method. In any country, language, literature, cultures are essential constituents of literary history. Sisir Kumar Das, distinguished literary history and history; in history, past is constituted on the basis of facts whereas in literary history, literary text itself constitutes past. In literary history, past is not reconstructed but their relationships with other existing disciplines are reconstructed. Sujit Mukherjee noticed two major concerns for literary historians—literary works and facts. These two things formulate major contributions to literary history and in India, unlike the West; literary historians enjoy liberty while writing literary history. Literary history in India is not confined to one language and region.

It has to deal with multiple languages, cultures and literature. Therefore, it becomes a history of a region, language and culture as well and literary historians have to compile these histories. Hence, concerns related to methods for compilations of large chunk of literature takes centre stage. These issues need to be addressed; connection has to be established, in order to have a proper theoretical understanding of literary history in India. Amiya Dev has also made a distinction between literary history and history of literature. In his view, history of literature is all about data collection and chronology whereas literary history has a deep sense of structure. Both these concepts are intertwined but these concepts need to be looked at, separately.

Literary Historiography was earlier treated as the methodology involved in writing history of literature/ literary history. Now with the advent of new theories after 1980's, the term has become more inclusive, and is called 'nonfictional metanarrative'. Sisir Kumar Das defines the scope of literary history as, "Literary History cannot be anything but a study of the relation between the events shaping the nature of literature and the forces controlling and regulating the production and transmission of the texts which are the components of the literary system. The business of a historian is to concentrate on that system and to investigate the changes occurring in it" (Das 43). Ipshita Chanda believes that the organizing principle of any narrative of literary history must be literary. Hans Harder believed that "Literary histories, in a very general sense, are obviously about literature and literary narratives; they claim to somehow contain, cover, describe or treat the latter. The division between primary and secondary literature may come in handy when one attempts to determine the status of literary histories. They are secondary in that their existence depends upon the primary textual production" (Harder 2).

In a customary view, both these concepts are usually presented for a similar meaning. Sometime it seems that history of literature and literary history are same. B Rajan, observed that literary history is taken as a fashionable rewording of history of literature. Sujit Mukherjee believes that literary history is relatively a new discipline. It has received serious attention during nineteenth century. For him, Francis Bacon's work *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) may have sensed the need for literary history. He along with many other Indian and Western critics also believes that the systematic beginning of literary history was started with Thomas Warton's work *History of English Poetry* 1774. Historians have suggested different methods to write literary history. Literary history is not only a history of language unlike what Western critics suggest, it also include ideas, cultures, habits, values etc., therefore, in India a single literary

historian cannot master in literary history. Hence, Indian literary history needs to be composed by a group of literary historians who have mastered one particular language and culture.

Since the concept suggested by Western critics has its origin in the West, it seems very surprising and difficult to accept that a country like India does not have a sense of literary history at all. Such questions arise in the mind of literary historians. Therefore, it is very essential to enquire whether it is a colonial invention or has literary history existed in India before colonialism? India has long history of literary past so the question seems quite irrelevant that India does not have a sense of literary history. There can be instances of literary history in Sanskrit, Persian and other *Bhashas.* G N Devy in his work *Of Many Heroes* traces that Rajashekhara, a tenth century poet and critic in his work *Kavyamimansa*has talked about the sociology of literary history. Devy observed that literary history refers to two different interdependent signs "the past of a literary tradition as it *was*, the system of sign that literary text form, and a narration *about* the past of a literary tradition, the system of signs that represents the past" (Devy 7). Literary history has a number of concerns like narration, narrator, history, past, text, ideology, literary events, and historical events and these terms are interrelated to each other. Literary historian has to be very careful about the events while dealing with a crucial subject like literary history. Indian literary historians were more concerned about the methods and frameworks of literary history. Mukherjee believed that it has a Western origin but Devy believes that systematic approach of literary history may have originated two centuries ago somewhere in the West but different form of literary history had existed in India.

India has multiple languages, so there can be multiple literary histories in India. Devy traces that during tenth century, literature was classified into six major categories in India. These six major categories belonged to Sanskrit and Tamil and they were: *Suta* literature, *Mantra* literature, *Shastra* literature, *Akshara* literature, *Prakrit* literature and *Sangam* literature . These literatures embodied oral traditions, histories, secular political traditions, systematic analysis of a particular subject, philosophical positions, aesthetic pleasure, variety of genres and forms etc. These belong to three different literary traditions—oral literature, textual literature and para literatures[1]. Hence, it seems that there was a sort of literary history in practice, before the nineteenth century. Apart from this, there may be some more examples of literary history in different forms in India before colonialism. These can be viewed, in form of royal chronicles, hagiographies, *bhat* poetry (court poetry), diary, autobiographies, travelogues, official records, and gazettes etc.

The process of writing literary histories in the West started in eighteenth and nineteenth century but in India as Devy claims has begun in seventeenth century. During Islamic period, a number of literary histories were composed. Mughal court poet Abu'l-Barakat Munir Lahiri in his work *Matnawi* has recorded several literary and cultural details about seventeenth century Bengal. Al Badaoni's *Muntakhab ut tawarikh*, is an account of native and expatriate poets and writers at the court of Akbar written in Persian language. These are some of the accounts of systematic writing of literary history in India. Therefore, Indian historians definitely had a sense of literary history before colonialism. There were some works on history of India or Indian literature by the Western writers. To name a few: *History of Hindostan* 1770 by Alexander Dow, *A Grammar of Persian Language* by Sir William Jones 1771, *The Practical and Vulgar Dialects of the Indostan Language Commonly Called Moors*by George Hadley 1772, *A Code of Gentoo Laws* by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed 1776, *A Dictionary of English, Persian and Arabic* by John Richardson 1780. *The History of British India* by James Mill 1826 were some of the earliest accounts by the Western writers. George Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* is also one of the important works in this area.

Ramvilas Sharma believed that history of modern Indian languages needs to be analyzed again and the relationship between the different languages requires to be revisited again. In a customary belief, history of any language is measured by the oldest work published in that particular language but Sharma has debunked this customary belief, establishing the notion that the structure of language and grammar needs to be analyzed. For example, he believes that Malayalam is older than Tamil language but in general, Tamil is considered the oldest language in modern Indian languages. He has also suggested that the relationship between these languages needs to be studied to establish facts and for a proper understanding.

In Indian languages, literary history has come up but there were certain issues which were not addressed properly and therefore, we need to rethink literary history in India. For example, Tamil literature is very rich, but in a usual note, if we notice Tamil literary traditions, most of them are very devotional, spiritual and religious. Tamil region has a history of trade with foreigners and with people from different regions, making them to have close contact with other cultures but the imprints of other cultures are hardly visible on Tamil literary historiography. Torsten Tschacher, a German academician in his essay "Drowning in the Ocean of Tamil: Islamic Texts and Historiography of Tamil Literature" observed that the Tamil literature has always been very devotional and religious.

It does not have any space for the Islamic literary texts. Hence, he propagates to include such areas as part of Tamil literary traditions. Similarly, in Malayalam, as Prof. Uday Kumar in his essay "Shaping a Literary Space: Early Literary Histories in Malayalam and Normative Uses of the Past" observed that sometimes, literary histories ignore certain important areas and does not include entire corpus of writings in a particular language. Govind Pillai published a history of Malayalam languages in 1881 which basically focused on languages, its development, and importance, and to pay tribute to the poets and writers who had developed and contributed to this language. His ideas were based on territorial, linguistic and historical approach. But he has not provided any space to literature written in English, Tamil, Arabic and other existing languages in Kerala. Udaya Kumar defines literary history as "Literary histories, it must be noted, often perform an important role in giving shape to a literary field not only by determining which texts count as valuable literature but also by establishing relationship of inheritance, transmission and transformation among them" (Harder 22).

Likewise, in Hindi literary tradition, oral traditions were not given importance in literary history and Ramchandra Shukla's *History of Hindi Literature* a popular text, does not give importance to poets like Kabir. His poetry and his other contemporaries are labeled as saints not as poets. These are some of the examples from the literary history in India and there are number of works, before colonialism, mostly composed by foreign authors which basically dealt with the history of ancient India. Works of R.W. Frazer, Maurice Winternitz and others, on history of Indian literature are examples that dealt with ancient literature. There are very few works, which gave space to medieval literature in their histories. Besides this, they are hardly concerned with the methods and framework of literary history. Indian authors who had worked on this field have provided a proper space to the medieval period and literatures in modern Indian languages. Works of V K Gokak, Nagendra are some examples of it. In this sequence, three volumes on *A History of Indian Literature* by Sisir Kumar Das is a groundbreaking work. These volumes have two sections, one section deals with the systematic literary history, and the other sections provide a chronological account of that period.

Tribals are ignored in the literary history, in process of writings literary history, historians tend to ignore the oral tradition or to some extent whatever is not in print form, never becomes a part of it. Sisir Kumar Das also, believes that none of tribal, oral and other discourses find their space in the literary history. They were always kept on periphery and during the colonial period they were further marginalized. They were treated as if

they do not belong to same race, are from a different race and they were thrown out from the centre and also left out from the so called civilization.

Sujit Mukherjee in his work *Some Positions on a Literary History of India* (1981) makes some significant point. He pointed out that India has a wealth of literary resources therefore we can reconstruct narratives of remote historical periods, or more specifically ancient period. Literary historiography needs to look into the other fields of knowledge and there is a lack of correspondence between conceptual framework and surrounding realities. This gap needs to be filled to have a keen social awareness of the context in which a piece of literature is produced. A general framework of critical standard is required which can help historians to evaluate any work of Indian literature. Principles of literary historiography for the different periods, i.e. ancient, modern and medieval does not have proper correspondence, the reason for this was that it was developed by Western scholars. Therefore, we need to have consistent historiographical strategies. He also proposes to develop indigenous methods, framework and historical perspectives; which should be culture specific. Apart from this, Ranjit Guha editor of *Subaltern Studies* series also observed that colonial historiography was inadequate to narrate micro process of history. Hence, he believed the dire need to narrate history from the periphery to the centre.

Therefore, we need to rethink literary history in India and need to develop certain modules which can be applied to the umbrella term Indian Literature. Subjects, ignored by the literary history, should be given proper treatment. Indian literary history includes many existing languages and literatures but still there are some areas which need to be given a proper space. Methods and frameworks can be invented to deal with particular literature and culture and oral literature should be included in the literary history. Literary history should give proper space to new emerging approaches and movements and only if these suggestions are fulfilled, we may have a more inclusive literary history, a people oriented literary history.

Notes:

[1.] Para literature occupies middle space between literature and non-literature. It is not literature, because it is not accepted in literary canons. It is also not non-literature, because it has some attributes of literature. It contains folklores, proverbs, mantras, tantras, liturgical verses, lullabies, oral narratives etc.

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