

# Bridging Horizons: Tagore's Influence on Nirala and the Transformation of Hindi Poetry

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## Abstract

This paper aims to study the interliterary dynamics between Hindi and Bengali literature from the lens of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's engagement with Rabindranath Tagore's literary and philosophical contributions. Their literary interactions enriched Hindi *Chhayavaad* poetry and Indian literary traditions alike. This study employs comparative analysis to understand the influences and examines ideological exchanges to explore how literary systems evolve. The research highlights the role of cross-cultural dialogue in shaping poetic movements and philosophical thought across these interconnected literary landscapes.

**Keywords:** Bengali literature; *Chhayavaad*; Comparative literature; Hindi poetry; Literary interactions.

## Introduction

India's literary heritage is a tapestry woven with the threads of diverse languages, cultures, and philosophies. In this diverse literary landscape, interactions between different linguistic traditions plays a significant role in influencing the gradual evolution of literary systems. The exchange of ideas, philosophies, and styles has not only enriched individual literature but also promoted a sense of cultural unity amidst diversity. This paper examines one such significant interaction of the dynamic literary relationship between Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, a renowned figure in Hindi Chhayavaad poetry, and Rabindranath Tagore, the celebrated Bengali poet and philosopher.

Nirala's engagement with Tagore's writings shows a trend in Indian literature as it reflects a cultural and literary borrowing that helped in its evolution. Nirala faced harsh criticism for supposedly imitating Bengali

traditions from his contemporaries. To which he argued that cross-cultural influences were vital for the development of Hindi literature. Hence, his writings show a deep understanding of the links between various literary systems. This paper analyses Nirala's reception of Tagore's works, not as an act of passive borrowing, but as an active engagement that enriched Hindi poetry while redefining its scope and essence. This study highlights the power of such interliterary interactions in a multilingual society like India while examining the interplay of socio-political, cultural, and literary dynamics. Through a comparative analysis, this study examines allegations of literary contamination and cultural dilution, while aiming to present a fresh perspective on the inherently collaborative nature of Indian literary traditions.

Rabindranath Tagore, a luminary in Indian and global literature, profoundly influenced the Indian literary canon through his innovative poetic styles, thematic richness, and philosophical depth. His writings have had a lasting impact on Indian poetry by blending modernist ideas with traditional Indian sensibilities, influencing both his contemporaries and emerging authors. V.K Gokak asserts "Tagore's work has this quality in an abundant measure. He stands with Valmiki and Vyasa, with Shakespeare, Goethe, and Tolstoy, in his capacity to inspire singers from diverse lands and epochs" Among those most significantly influenced was Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, a leading figure of Hindi literature.

Critics believe that Tagore bridged the gap between the classical and the modern, enriching the poetic heritage. His writings, such as *Gitanjali*, are prime examples of this convergence, where modern humanist challenges intersect with the spirituality of the *Bhakti* tradition. His poetry's devotion frequently strikes a chord with the ecstasy of Radha and Krishna's love or the mysticism of Kabir. This distinctive fusion of introspection and mysticism provided Indian poetry a fresh perspective, bringing it into line with global ideals while maintaining its cultural identity. Nirala believed that "Like the word *Brahm*, which is so immensely vast, (Rabindranath's) poetry and his art transcended the boundaries of his time and his nation." Deeply influenced by literary and philosophical notions of Tagore, Nirala frequently drew criticism from literary circles for allegedly copying Tagore's ideas and style in his poems.

A major theme in Tagore's poetry is nature, which is shown as a living, breathing entity interwoven with spirituality and human emotions. Tagore uses striking imagery to depict elemental tensions and the harmony of the natural world in works such as *Manasi*, signifying the boundless es-

sence of existence. His poetic portrayal of nature encouraged Indian poets, such as Nirala, to examine its beauty in more detail and use it as a mirror to examine the divine and human emotions. Both Nirala's appreciation and the subsequent criticisms were strengthened by the frequent analogies to Tagore's writings in his nature-focused poetry.

"Juhi Bud" by Nirala is a powerful illustration of how Tagore's theme and stylistic approaches impacted Nirala's poetry. The poem, which is evocative of Tagore's writings like *Gitanjali*, evokes strong emotional resonance via the use of natural imagery. Tagore's propensity to portray nature as a mirror to human emotion is instantly apparent in the opening lines, "On a vine in the deserted wood / she slept, blissful in dreams of love," where the Juhi bud stands for innocence and purity and the "deserted wood" for desolation. Described as "tormented by separation in a distant land," the southern breeze mirrors Tagore's recurrent themes of memory and desire, which are evident in his depictions of wind, rivers, and moonlight as both separating and connecting forces. Furthermore, the imagery of "the midnight drenched in moonlight" is strikingly lyrical, a quality often attributed to Tagore's verses. Through this fusion of natural elements and human emotions, Nirala channels Tagore's style while making it uniquely his own, crafting a narrative of love, separation, and the eternal yearning for union.

Tagore's poetry has deep philosophical and spiritual overtones that contribute to the richness of Indian literature. Poems such as "*Jivan Devata*," in which he presents the 'Lord of Life' as a creative force influencing creation, demonstrate his skilful exploration of subjects like death, immortality, and the divine. Deeply ingrained in Indian culture, these concepts were also essential to Nirala's writing. Critics said that Nirala's poetry lacked originality and was overly dependent on Tagore's theoretical framework since poems like "A Look at Death" frequently echoed the same philosophical concerns.

Tagore's exploration of poetic forms was another significant contribution. Tagore extended the possibilities of Indian poetry by bringing lyrical free verse and a narrative style full of melody. This creativity is literature as a mere source of inspiration or influence, Nirala engaged with Tagore's works in a manner that best demonstrated by his collection *Sonar Tori*, which crafts an autonomous poetic sphere that blends artistic skill with spiritual exploration. Nirala brought similar innovations to Hindi poetry, drawing inspiration from Tagore's experiments. It is possible to study his poems such as "Love Song" and "From Mushroom" as a testament to

Nirala's endeavours with poetic form and style. These artistic decisions were not, however, well received by all critics, who regarded Nirala's work as more derivative than innovative. Rather than approaching Bengali demonstrated the complex interplay between regional literary traditions. His approach was not one of passive reception but of active engagement and transformation, which exemplified the sophisticated nature of interliterary exchange in early twentieth-century India. Ipshita Chanda in her work *Reception of the Received* states that "Nirala seems to advocate the study of literariness that Comparative Indian Literature claims for its own unique province. In acknowledging the importance of reception in the formation of a literary system, and in the shaping of literary practice as an individual act as well as in the forging of a tradition, Nirala exhibits his sensitivity to the inner workings of literary system"

Tagore's impact is rooted in his ability to balance the personal with the metaphysical, the local with the global, and tradition with modernity. Poets like Nirala get inspired to explore the depths of human experience by his impact, which is evident throughout the Indian literary canon. While Nirala's writings capture Tagore's ideas and inventions, they also show how difficult it is for poets to live in the shadow of such a powerful person. Notwithstanding the criticisms, Nirala's appreciation of Tagore influenced his Hindi poetry. Rather than approaching Bengali literature as a mere source of inspiration or influence, Nirala engaged with Tagore's works in a manner that demonstrated the complex interplay between regional literary traditions. His approach was not one of passive reception but of active engagement and transformation, which exemplified the sophisticated nature of interliterary exchange in early twentieth-century India. Gokak writes about Tagore that "Instead of turning his contemporaries and successors into mere shadows, pale reflections of his glory, he made them their own taller selves."

The accusations of "borrowing" that Nirala faced from his contemporaries provide a crucial window into understanding the dynamics of literary exchange in colonial India. Significantly, Nirala did not outright reject these accusations but rather reframed them within a broader understanding of literary interaction. He pointed to the example of Yeats and Radhakrishnan's engagement with *Gitanjali* (1912) to demonstrate how literary borrowing could serve as a mechanism for mutual enrichment rather than mere imitation. This perspective challenged the simplistic notion of unidirectional influence and instead proposed a more nuanced understanding of literary exchange. Nirala states that "any form of creation to remain progressive/dynamic, it is imperative that diverse thoughts and feelings

enter it to strengthen it" (Rachnavali 5,449). Nirala insists that foreign or neighboring influences multiply and enhance native literature, much like "the rays of a single sun contain all the brilliant colours of the rainbow."

Nirala's analysis of the relationship between Hindi and Bengali literature was particularly insightful in its recognition of the broader implications for Indian cultural identity. He understood that the interaction between these literary traditions was not merely a matter of aesthetic exchange but was intimately connected to the emergence of a national literary consciousness. His work was deeply informed by Tagore's poetic practice and philosophy, yet he transformed these influences through his own creative lens, demonstrating how regional literary traditions could maintain their distinctiveness while engaging in productive dialogue with other traditions. Nirala believed that "Hindi is the language of the nation, the *rashtra-bhasha*. The immense reality of the nation should be expressed in its contemporary forms and its current work"

The significance of Nirala's engagement with Tagore extends beyond the realm of literary influence to touch upon fundamental questions of cultural identity and nation-formation. Chanda writes "Nirala gives a detailed socio-political background to the literary system in Bengal, locating the source of its excellence in the knowledge of other cultures and the larger world. The most prominent example of this all-encompassing knowledge is none other than Rabindranath himself. His approach to literary interaction suggested that the formation of an "Indian" literary identity need not come at the expense of regional literary traditions. Instead, he proposed that it was precisely through the dynamic interaction between different literary systems that a truly representative Indian literary identity could emerge. This understanding was revolutionary for its time and continues to offer valuable insights into the nature of literary exchange in multilingual, multicultural societies.

Through his engagement with Tagore's works, Nirala demonstrated that the study of interliterariness between Hindi and Bengali was crucial for understanding the dynamics of the emerging Indian nation. His work suggests that literary systems do not exist in isolation but are constantly being shaped and reshaped through their interactions with other traditions. This perspective challenges us to move beyond simplistic models of influence and borrowing to consider how literary traditions actively participate in shaping each other through complex processes of reception, transformation, and exchange. These interactions between Nirala and Tagore's works serve as a compelling example of how interliterary ex-

change operates not just at the level of text and language, but also in the broader context of cultural and national identity formation. Their relationship demonstrates that literary exchange is not a zero-sum game where one tradition must diminish for another to flourish, but rather a dynamic process of mutual enrichment that contributes to the development of both individual literary traditions and broader cultural identities.

Roman Jakobson, a pioneering figure in literary theory, introduced the concept of “literariness” as the defining feature of a text that makes it distinctly literary. Jakobson believed literature’s essence is in its form and language. It should focus on structure, not just themes or ideologies. This concept allows us to examine how the works of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala and Rabindranath Tagore are not merely vehicles of cultural expression but are also distinguished by their artistic and formal innovations. By finding the literary qualities in their works, we better understand the dialogue between their poetic traditions. When Roman Jakobson’s definition of literariness is applied to the writings of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala and Rabindranath Tagore, it becomes clear how well they grasp creative expression and beautiful language. Using symbolic imagery like rivers and journeys Tagore’s *Gitanjali* illustrates defamiliarization by converting spiritual and devotional concepts into profound poetry experiences. His statement, “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!” emphasises the aesthetic function of language by fusing symbolic choices (the divine as ubiquitous) with relational contrasts (ritual against spirituality). In a similar light, Nirala uses natural imagery in *Juhi Bud*, where the line “On a vine in the deserted wood / she slept, blissful in dreams of love” turns the blossom into a symbol of desire and innocence.

Dionyz Durisin in his work *Theory of Interliterary Process* extends Jakobson’s ideas into the realm of “interliterariness,” which explores the dynamic interactions between distinct literary systems. His ideas of “interliterariness” depicts that when different literatures (from varying cultures, languages, or traditions) interact, influence, or share affinities, they create a broader network of literary connections. It becomes a crucial framework that emphasises the connections between literary works across various cultures and traditions, extending beyond the confines of specific literature. He claims that literariness is the “basic and essential quality” of literature, which develops into interliterariness when it is read outside of the borders of a nation. This idea makes it possible to investigate literary connections in an intercultural and interethnic setting, which eventually advances our understanding of world literature as a systematic collection

of literary phenomena with similar typological or genetic roots.

Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's "*Maran - Drishya*" and Rabindranath Tagore's "*Freedom*" both examine spiritual, societal, and artistic freedom. A common desire to escape the weight of the past, societal inertia and inescapable fate is expressed in Tagore's poetry. This perspective is consistent with his wider interest in Indian spiritualism and Romanticism, resulting in a body of work that unites indigenous traditions with universal humanist values. In the same vein, Nirala personifies freedom via his highly personal yet universal subjects and his innovative poetic style (*mukta-chhanda*), which liberates Hindi poetry from classical constraints. His writings, such as "*Saroj-Smriti*" and "*Maran-Drishya*", combine modernist uniqueness with Bhakti influences to portray freedom as an introspective journey. In their quest for freedom, both poets cross linguistic and cultural barriers to join a common interliterary zone that increases their global significance. From the perspective of Đurišin's interliterariness theory, Tagore and Nirala serve as prime examples of how literary traditions collaborate to express universal human concerns. The creative power of interliterary interaction is demonstrated by Tagore's blending of Indian philosophy with Western modernist ideas and Nirala's combining of mediaeval religious components with modern socio-political critique. Through cross-cultural influences, local traditions are enhanced and reinvented in their works, which contribute to a global discourse on freedom. Tagore and Nirala highlight the dynamic engagement of individual and collective freedom by addressing universal concern while remaining rooted in their respective contexts.

One can refer to T.S. Eliot's idea of Tradition and Individual Talent, which highlights the fluid relationship between inherited literary traditions and a poet's creative vision, can be studied to analyse Tagore's "*Peace, My Heart*" and Nirala's "*A Look at Death.*" Both poets address the timeless themes of death and transcendence, but their distinct voices transform these contemplations into unique, distinctive poems that add to the developing canon of Indian and global poetry. Eliot's concept of a "historical sense" is best illustrated by Tagore's "*Peace, My Heart,*" which blends modernist ideas with Indian spiritual traditions. Tagore turns personal anguish into a serene acknowledgement of life's unavoidable ends by drawing on the Vedantic concept of death as a transition to wholeness. While his poem's lyrical simplicity and universal tone reveal his connection with modernist literary methods, the imagery of the "folding of the wings over the nest" and the "lamp to light the way" places it within a tradition of Indian mysticism. By fusing the spiritual with the universal,

Tagore, in Eliot's words, reshapes tradition and adds a distinctively Indian yet universally relevant voice to the literary canon.

This tradition is carried on and altered by Nirala's "A Look at Death," which responds to Tagore's literary and cultural heritage while bringing his own unadulterated emotional intensity to it. In contrast to Tagore's serene acceptance, his depiction of death as a lover presenting a "cup brimming with poison" reveals a more visceral existential conflict. However, Nirala arrives to a similar conclusion—death as a kind of liberation—demonstrating how he allocates Tagore's ideas while reinterpreting them in the context of his grief and the sociopolitical unrest of his era. Eliot's view that a poet must modify tradition to suit their unique gift to produce something new that engages with the past is further demonstrated by his usage of free verse (*mukta-chhanda*), which was influenced by both Tagore and modernist experimentation.

Nirala boldly embraced Bengali influences, especially Tagore's works, despite fierce criticism from Hindi literary circles. He saw this as enriching Hindi literature, not betraying it. Critics decried his "borrowing" as impure, but Nirala argued all creativity draws from diverse sources. He viewed literary cross-pollination as progressive, not imitative. Tagore's collaboration with Yeats on *Gitanjali* exemplified this fruitful exchange. For Nirala, engaging other traditions wasn't theft—it was necessary evolution. He championed a dynamic literary ecosystem where ideas flow freely, nourishing new forms. This bold stance challenged notions of cultural purity and championed artistic growth through synthesis. Resistant Hindi writers clung to literary purity, but Nirala challenged their narrow views. He envisioned literature as inherently fluid, thriving on the interaction between systems. This interplay, Nirala argued, enhances vibrancy and relevance. He likened the mingling of native and foreign elements to sunlight producing a spectrum of colours. This metaphor symbolises growth and multiplicity in literary creation. Nirala's defiant stance advocated for an expansive, inclusive approach. His vision redefined the paradigm of literary creation in India's multilingual, multicultural context. By rejecting rigid notions, Nirala defended innovation and sparked a transformative shift in literary thinking.

One can argue that by embracing Rabindranath Tagore's literary tradition, Nirala demonstrates a deliberate attempt to enhance Hindi literature by incorporating distinctive aspects of his own, rather than copying it. Nirala modified these inspirations to explore the intricacies of Hindi literature and India's sociopolitical reality, drawing inspiration from Tagore's

fusion of humanist principles and social subjects. In contrast to Tagore's frequent emphasis on spiritual universality, Nirala criticised the rigidity of Hindi literary elites that valued language purity above diversity and emphasised on providing a voice to the marginalised. By interacting with Bengali literary traditions, Nirala emphasised the parallels across Indian literary traditions and envisioned a Hindi literature that could transcend language and geographical barriers. Instead of undermining Hindi literature, Nirala's determination to appropriate Tagore's ideas and modify them to fit his own vision made Hindi writing more profound, richer, and pertinent to a contemporary, heterogeneous India.

Nirala's engagement with Bengali literature highlights the dynamic exchanges of India's multilingual literary canon. His perspective redefines community identity as a shared heritage and promotes interdependence. Nirala places Indian literature in a global framework and promotes receptivity to external influences. He acknowledges the impacts of external influences by stating that "To borrow some elements from another literature... is not harmful or meaningless when... we are attempting to join ourselves to humankind" The exclusivist ideas of literary purity that inhibit development in heterogeneous communities are contested by this approach. Furthermore, Nirala demonstrates how national and regional works influence and add to a broader cultural narrative. His criticism of Hindi literature's inclination towards parochialism emphasises inclusion while cautioning against insularity.

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