

## Many Languages, One Literature

Indian writing is a celebration of linguistic diversity and literary cohesion

Indian literature is plural and multivocal, drawing inspiration from both Shruti, or revelation and Smruti, or recorded memory. The great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana remain the seminal sources of the literature of the Subcontinent and South Asia. Mythic gods and heroes continue to dominate the popular imagination, adapting and reinterpreting themselves into contemporary issues and attitudes. It is difficult to describe or comprehend this continuous sensibility and fluid legacy.

The sacred literature of the Rig Veda dates to approximately 1400 BC. From perhaps 1000 to 500 BC, this body of hymns and epiphanies was codified and interpreted. The genius of the grammarian Panini formalised a predominantly oral tradition into written Sanskrit in the 5th or 6th century BC. The classical status of the 'tongue-perfected' Sanskrit language remained in constant and dynamic interaction with Prakrit or popular languages.

The epic style of Mahabharata is recorded in shlokas, rhyming couplets sustaining the same metre. With more than 100,000 shlokas, the Mahabharata is the longest poem in history, more than seven times the length of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey taken together. At the core of the heroic bardic narrative lies the Bhagavad Gita, revered as the essence of Hindu religious philosophy.

The Ramayana, the other, roughly contemporaneous, dominant myth of the region, credited to the sage Valmiki, was a formative influence in the development of much of South Asian literature, especially Java's and Cambodia's. The Buddhist canon found expression in the Pali tongue, spawning an expanse of reflective, yet deeply vital, literature, including the Jataka tales, which recount the supposed previous lives and incarnations of Gautama Buddha. Jain mythography and cosmography evolved into another distinctive style of fable and allegory.

Meanwhile, Sanskrit writing was achieving new heights of sophistication and rarefied aesthetic lyric poetry and delighted in romancing the word. The mahakavyas of Kalidasa and of poets like Magha and Bharavi abounded in metaphor, allusion and wordplay. The sheer plastic delight in language and expression was paralleled by the popular Prakrit styles of animal fables, like the Panchtantra or complex narrative clusters, such as the Katha Sarita Sagar. The rich theatre tradition used a free and spontaneous interplay of high and low language, Sanskrit and Prakrit.

Tamil literature possesses a venerable classical tradition, yet the Sanskrit lexicon and imagery impacted the different strands of Dravidian literatures, such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana and Pauranic tales cross-fertilised and fed the imaginations and vocabulary of local myth and memory. Sixth-century Tamil literature saw the first seeds of the Bhakti movement with the Nayanar poets projecting a mystical unity of vision. By medieval times, the preoccupation with valour and martial themes began giving way to an upsurge of Bhakti or religious surrender. Kamban's Tamil version of the Ramayana renewed the pan-Indian interest in the epic. Across the land, individual voices began asserting a humanism that cut across the accretations of ritualism and tired habit. 12th century Kannada literature saw the emergence of poet-saints like Basava and Allama Prabhu, who used forms like the Vacana or prose poem to emphasise the oneness of philosophical experience, rejecting caste, creed and sexual difference. Women saints like Mahadevikiyaya wrote love poems to the god Shiva.



Contd.

## Cultural Calendar for January 2007

### January 5

Manipuri - Lecture cum demonstration by Shri Hemanta Kumar Yaikhom, Senior Lecturer, Vishva Bharathi, Shanthi Niketan, India  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

### January 10

A programme to mark World Hindi Day - performances by students from various Hindi Institutes of Sri Lanka  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

### January 12

Film : The Making of a Nation Part 1 – 5 (English)  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration : 2hrs 17 mins

### January 16

Film : The Making of a Nation Part 6 – 10 (English)  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration : 2hrs 15 mins

### January 19

Thiagarajar Aradhana – Carnatic Music Festival to celebrate the genius of Thyagaraja, Carnatic music composer All Carnatic musicians & music lovers are invited to join in the event  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

(Admission to all programmes is free on first come first served basis except 25th January 2007 programme, which is by invitation)

From the 13th century Bhakti poet Jnanesvara to Tukaram and Eknath in the 16th century, the genius of Bhakti literature saw both local stimulation and the influence of larger cultural movements. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, the resurgence of the Krishna cults inspired Vaishnava poets like Narasmha Mehta and the ecstatic woman-saint Meerabai. Kashmir, in northern India, found poetesses like Lalla Ded and Habba Khatoon asserting their individual voices. In the East, Assamese, Oriya and Bengali traditions found new momentum, while maintaining a continuum with their ancient literary sources.

The mystic and syncretistic nature of the Bhakti movement found further literary impetus through interaction with Muslim sufi traditions. Linguistically, too, the Indo Aryan tongue and its dialects, such as Braj Bhasha, Awadhi and Sindhi, were influenced by the vocabulary and imagination of Arabic and

Contd.

### January 23

Film: Mother India (with English subtitles)  
Language: Hindi  
Directed by: Mehboob  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration : 3 hrs

### January 25

Performance by renowned Kathak danseuse Geetanjali Lal & her troupe from India to celebrate the 58th Republic Day of India. Sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi  
Venue & Time: Ananda College Auditorium, Colombo 10 at 6.30p.m.

### January 29

Lecture cum demonstration by Geetanjali Lal & her troupe from India  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

(Performance by renowned Kathak danseuse Geetanjali Lal & her troupe on 27th January 2007 in Kandy)

# SANDESH

The monthly newsletter of the Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo

- Geetanjali Lal, Kathak danseuse in Sri Lanka for Republic day 2007
- World Hindi Day - January 10th
- Thiagarajar Aradhana Carnatic Music Festival and other programmes details inside



ICCR

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## Past Events

10th November

Bharatha Natyam Recital By Saravanapava Guhendran



Saravanapava Guhendran student of Padmashri Adyar K. Lakshman gave a brilliant dance performance. Among the items he performed was a scintillating varnam in raagam Nattai Kurinji.

11th November

Painting, Drawing and Essay Competition for children to commemorate Birth Anniversary of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru



The Indian Cultural Centre celebrated Children's Day, which falls on November 14 to mark the birthday of Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, by hosting a painting, drawing and essay writing competition for children on 11th November. Around 300 children from all over the Island participated in this competition with enthusiasm. All entries completed at the Centre were sent to India to be adjudged in the Shankar's International Competition 2007.

17th November

Hindustani Vocal Music Recital by Nishadi Prageetha Meddegoda



M s . N i s h a d i P r a g e e t h a M e d d e g o d a , p r e s e n t e d a c a p t i v a t i n g Hindustani vocal music recital at the

Centre on 17th November. She commenced her programme with raag 'Jog' continued with a Thumric, Bhajan and concluded with a Ghazal. Nishadhi completed her training in vocal music at the Banaras Hindu University.

24th November

Screening of 2 films on Koothu & Kathakali



The Indian Cultural Centre screened two short films on Koothu, Sri Lankan Tamil traditional dance drama & Kathakali, Indian traditional dance drama

directed by Mr. Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, Director of the TrikonE Arts Centre. Mr. Dharmasiri Bandaranayake introduced his films. After the screening Prof. K.Sivathamby gave a description of Koothu, its historical background and its areas of influence in Sri Lanka & India.

## LIBRARY

### Recent Library Accessions

#### Lets know Festivals of India

Bhalla, Kartar Singh  
New Delhi : Star Publications,2005,40p.  
002580  
263BHA

#### Lets know Dances of India

Sinha, Aakriti  
New Delhi : Star Publications,2006,39p.  
002582  
790SIN

#### Indian Performing Arts : a mosaic

Banerjee, Utpal K  
New Delhi : Harman Publishing,2006,220p.  
002571  
790BAN

#### Lets know Hindu Gods & Goddesses

Gupta, Manju  
New Delhi : Star Publications,2004,31p.  
002581  
294.5GUP

#### Complete Indian Wine Guide

Rathore, Aakash Singh  
New Delhi : Lotus Collection,2006,175p.  
002575  
394.13RAT

#### Cambridge Economic History of India Vol.1 c.1200-c.1750

New Delhi : Orient Longman,2004,543p.  
002587  
330.54CAM

#### Cambridge Economic History of India Vol.11 c.1757-2003

New Delhi : Orient Longman,2005,1115p.  
002588  
330.54CAM

#### Common birds of India

Rahmani, Asad R.  
New Delhi : Min. of Information & Broadcasting,2005,106p.  
002583  
636.6 54RAH

## Films in January



### The Making of a Nation

The Making of a Nation is a thought provoking series evaluating fifty years in India since Independence. Through dramatisation and archival footage the programme contemplates the institutions that existed and the ones that took shape; weighing their performance against the opportunities that were present and the impediments that hindered their functioning during the last fifty years.

### Mother India (with English subtitles)

A film that was considered a defining film about rural India - its problems, its ethos and its sorrows & joys. Made in the 1950s, it quickly gained cult status and achieved for Nargis, the actress who played the main female protagonist, an eternal place in the Indian film firmament.

Language: Hindi  
Directed by: Mehboob



## Many Languages, One Literature... Contd.

Persian men of letters. The great Sufi poet Amir Khusro, born in Northern India in the later part of the 13th century, exemplified this assimilation. His poetry remains in the language and poetic consciousness of Indians through folk music, metaphor and idiom. Although Guru Nanak wrote in what would be categorized as 'Old Hindi', the writings of the seers were compiled into 'Guru Granth Sahib' a in Punjabi. Muslim Sufis, such as Bulle Shah, invigorated the new tongue and a tradition of intense love ballads such as Heer Ranjha and Laila Majnu remains an integral part of Punjabi literature today. Writers like Amrita Pritam and Dilip Kaur Tiwana continue the tradition.

The Urdu language evolved through inter-mediate phases like Hindawi and Dakkhani and the Hindustani dialects of Northern India such as Khari Boli. The new language developed its own distinct lyrical style, with the ghazal form finding sublime expression through the works of Mir Taqi Mir in the 18th century and Mirza Ghalib in the 19th century.

In the early 19th century, the colonial experience brought with it a new appraisal of Indian tradition. While 'modern' reform minded Indian like Raja Ram Mohan Roy used the Western model to examine the stagnancy and prejudice within the structure of Indian society, prose writing, and the novel, became an instrument of social enquiry and reform. Testimonial literature, in the form of biographies and memoirs recording the process of social change flourished in English and the Indian languages. Indulekha by Chandu Menon, written in English in 1889, debated social issues such as the marriage-customs of the Nair community. Pandita Ramabai translated the Bible in Marathi, and wrote The High Caste Hindu Woman, a powerful critique of social prejudices. Reinterpretations of mythological themes were another vehicle of literary questioning, such as the Meghnad Kabya by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, another reexamination of the mythic territory of the Ramayana. Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for Gitanjali symbolized the genius of the Bengal renaissance, but there was also a huge repository of realized talent in writers such as Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and many others.

Hindi writing found its greatest exponent in the stories of Munshi Premchand, which, in their humanism and empathy, convey the core of Indo-Gangetic culture. The metaphysical Chyawadi poets of the 1930s, such as Mahadevi Verma, Sumitranandan Pant and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, also brought psychological introspection and rich layering to the Hindi language.

Today, the amazing linguistic diversity and literary cohesion of Indian writing gives it a unique position in global culture. India has 24 official and recognized languages, and many more regional languages and dialects, with particular and ancient literary traditions, in dynamic interaction with each other and modern realities. Post-Colonial writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Rama Rao and R.K. Narayan wrote powerfully and naturally in English. After Independence, the emergence of radical Dalit writing, particularly in Marathi and Hindi, articulates the affirmation of justice and equality with vitality and literary value. In Bengal, Mahasweta Devi's passionate espousal of social causes has impacted the national imagination across language barriers. Writers like O.V. Vijayan and Basheer Vaikom Mohammed in Malayalam, U.R. Ananthamurthy in Kannada and Ashok Mitran in Tamil, have all kept literary consciousness alive.

English is now accepted as an Indian language, having acquired a unique local resonance. Salman Rushdie's Midnights Children won both the Booker and the Booker of Bookers. Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy, a W.H. Smith Literary Award winner, is a liminal narrative bringing alive the inner life of the extended Indian family.

Arundhati Roy was another Indian to receive the Booker prize for The God of Small Things, internationally one of the best-loved novels of recent times. A new generation of diaspora writers, such as Jhumpa Lahiri in the USA, draw their inspiration from dual identities. In times of accelerated change, as India changes and grows, this constant remapping and reassertion of identity brings depth and maturity to its literature and culture.

Source: Namita Gokhale, India Timeless Splendour