

**Topic: Sisir Kumar Das : ‘Comparative Literature in  
India: A Historical  
Approach’**

This e-content is for  
**M A (English) Semester-IV Class**

It contains material for the Paper. Unit and Text as indicated below.

**Paper-XIV(C) : Comparative Literature, Unit I, Sisir Kumar  
Das : ‘Comparative Literature in India: A Historical  
Approach’**

**Lecture Six  
15.4.21**

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M A (English) Semester-IV Class

S M Mirza

**Paper-XIV(C) : Comparative Literature, Unit I, Sisir Kumar Das : ‘Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Approach’**

**Lecture Six**  
**15.4.21**

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I'm sending the text of Sisir Kumar Das's 'Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Approach'.

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**Bionote**

**Sisir Kumar Das (1936–2003)** was a poet, playwright, translator, comparatist and a prolific scholar of Indian literature. He is considered by many as the "doyen of Indian literary historiographers".<sup>[1]</sup> Almost singlehandedly Das built **an integrated history of Indian literatures** composed in many languages, a task that had seemed to many important scholars of Indian literatures to be "a historian's despair".<sup>[2]</sup> His three volume (among proposed ten volumes) *A History of Indian Literature (Western Impact: Indian Response 1800–1910; Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy 1911–1956; From Courtly to Popular 500–1399)* is credited for having devised hitherto absent methods necessary for situating diverse Indian literary cultures in history. Apart from this, another monumental work in Das' scholarly oeuvre is the multi-volume *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by him. He also wrote the following book: **Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice** (co-edited with Amiya Dev).

**Sisir Kumar Das:**

The literature departments have erected walls between literatures. New thoughts would start blowing only when these walls are shattered down.

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**Text**

**Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective**

**Sisir Kumar Das**

Long before comparative studies of literature emerged as a formal academic discipline, many scholars felt the inadequacy of the framework within which individual literatures were studied. Many of them realized that literatures did not evolve in isolation from one

another and the study of a single literature more often than not obliged one to look beyond one's own language and literary tradition. The necessity for a wider perspective involving more than one language and one literary tradition was felt in different periods of history whenever two literatures came into contact. There had been many occasions in every civilized society when different cultures and different literary traditions came into close contact with one another, and all such occasions did pose a challenge to man's exclusiveness. One can think of the Romans coming in contact with Greek literature, the Medieval Christian Europe with the Pagan Europe, Persian with Arabic, Japanese with Chinese and Indians with the literatures of Europe. All these contacts have resulted in certain changes, at times marginal, and at times quite profound and pervasive, in the literary activities of the people involved, and have necessitated an enlargement of critical perspective. One realizes that diversities of literature do not necessarily prevent one from discovering deeper affinities between them. The necessity for the study of literatures in relation to one another, which is the basis of comparative

19

*Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India*  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

literature today, was felt very strongly only in the nineteenth century but some of its regulating concepts appeared even earlier though in their embryonic form. We do not find anything comparable to the method of Sun-crisis (*or comparative method*) so popular among the Romans, in Indian literary criticism, though Sanskrit and ancient Tamil, languages belonging to two different families, came into contact. Neither the ancient scholars of Sanskrit literature nor the scholars of ancient Tamil studied their literature in relation to one another. Nor did they raise the question of influence or impact of one literature on the other. The scholars of Sanskrit, however, studied Sanskrit along with Prakrit literatures. In classical Sanskrit plays several Prakrits have been used in the dialogues of different characters. The kings and the priests speak Sanskrit, the women the Sauraseni Prakrit, the people of the working class the Magadhi and the songs are invariably in Maharashtri. This reflects, no doubt, the multi-lingualism of the society and the functional hierarchy of these languages, but also of an idea of literature that could be written in more than one language. Some scholars have argued that the various Prakrits used in Sanskrit dramatic texts were actually mutually comprehensible class dialects, functionally similar to the role of dialects in modern plays and novels which add distinct socio-linguistic dimensions to the characters. The mutual comprehensibility between the Prakrits to a varying degree and Sanskrit notwithstanding, the separate status of the Prakrit languages, different in their sound system and grammar, and they belong to a different stage of linguistic history of the Sanskritic languages. That the ancient Indian writers could use more than one language within one text without qualms, and the ancient critics found that practice normal enough, is itself an evidence of a view of literature that extends beyond one language. The Buddhists and the Jains produced a literature in more than one language. But instead of dividing them in terms of the language employed in them, they viewed them as parts of one single literary corpus unified by one religious vision. One must admit, however, that the early Indian scholars thought that the linguistic differences between Sanskrit and Prakrit only reflected two stages of evolution of the

same language, they were otherwise linked by a common cultural heritage and their literatures were dominated by the same set of literary canons. In all probability, the Prakrit literature that flourished in Southern India maintained a close relation with the folk traditions as well as with the ancient Tamil literature. George L. Hart in his *The Relations between Tamil and Classical Sanskrit* (1976) has tried to argue that the *Gatha Sattasai*, an anthology of poems in the Maharashtri Prakrit, (compiled some time between 200 A.D. and 800 A.D.) has some connection with Tamil literature. Whatever

20  
*Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India*  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

be the worth of such assumptions, the Indian scholars of the ancient period never tried to discover any relation between the Sanskrit and the Tamilian literary traditions. In our medieval period, various literatures written in different languages came into close contact particularly those spoken in neighbouring areas. Most of these literatures shared a common Sanskrit heritage and were exposed to arabic and Persian influences in varying degrees. The medieval Indian scholar naturally studied his own literature with reference to Sanskrit but rarely thought about the inter-relationship between the Indian literatures produced in yonger languages like Telegu or Malayalam, Marathi or Gujrati, Punjabi or Sindhi. Some of the popular sayings current in different parts of the country reflect the common reader's understanding of the relationship between texts written in different languages, or between poets separated by time and distance. For example, a saying in Andhra Pradesh—Vivamangal was reborn as Jayadeva, Jayadeva as Narayanatirtha, and Narayanatirtha as Ksettreya—speaks volumes about the common reader's attempt to discover connections between four poets of different regions and of different time. We are not certain about the date of Vilvamangal—tradition places him in the ninth century, though many scholars think him to be living in the twelfth. We are not absolutely sure whether he came after Jayadeva, a twelfth century poet, or not. But the similarities between *Srikrishna Karnamritam* of Vilvamangal and the *Gitagovindam* of Jayadev—both written in Sanskrit are indeed striking. Narayantirtha and Ksettreya, both seventeenth century poets, wrote in Sanskrit as well as in Telugu. And both of them had remarkable similarities with Vilvamangal and Jayadeva in respect of the spirit of their poems and treatment of themes. Links between texts can be established by positive evidences, as similarities can be often mere coincidences. The comparatist tries to build a framework within which similarities can be studied and appreciated. The medieval Indian reader almost intuitively felt the existence of links between texts written in different languages and having a common theme or ideological backdrop, though he failed to construct any critical apparatus to establish them. The interactions between neighbouring literatures, however, continued throughout the medieval period resulting in the growth of new genres and themes and occasionally styles. One of the intersecting evidences of such interactions between two languages, to be found in the growth of a style known as *Manipravalam*. It was an attempt , a succesful one, towards the creation of a hybrid style composed of Sanskrit and Malayalam. Such hybrid poetic language is found in Tamil and Telugu as well, but in Malayalam alone *Manipravalam* developed into a rich body of literature and critics had to take notice of this phenomenon created by the interaction between two languages belonging to two different linguistic families. The fourteenth century text, *Lilatilakam*, written in Sanskrit,

deals with grammar and rhetorical devices of the *Manipravalam*. It is the first work in  
21

Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

Indian criticism which analyses a literary phenomenon which cannot be adequately understood without involving two languages and two literatures. Another artificial language, *Brajabuli*, extensively used in sixteenth century Bengali poetry, and to some extent in Assamese and Oriya, was a hybridization of Maithili, the language in which Vidyapati wrote, and Bengali/ Assamese/ Oriya. Such stylistic experiments went beyond the linguistic boundaries of any particular literature and called for a more flexible, critical framework.

With the introduction of Persian in Indian letters, its influence on various Indian literatures became more and more apparent. The influence of Persian began infiltrating into Sindhi and Panjabi and Bengali—through translations and adaptations of Persian texts – in respect of themes and forms and styles. A new language, Urdu, emerged out of the interaction between Persian and Khariboli, a form of Hindi, which grew into a supple and sophisticated instrument of literary expression by the end of the seventeenth century. Many great Urdu poets not only borrowed themes and motifs from Persian and grafted them into this new Indian language but imported a considerable number of poetic forms and metrical structures, some of them were also welcomed into other Indian literatures. An appreciation of Urdu literature and an understanding of its growth will remain incomplete without a reference to its intimate and fruitful relation with the great Perso-Arabic literary awareness. Had Indian literatures formed a regular part of the academic curriculum of the medieval period, this awareness would have certainly taken the shape of a critical framework insisting on the study of literatures cutting the barriers of languages and geography. In the nineteenth century when the literatures of modern India were finally thought to be proper subjects of study in our academic institutions, they were compartmentalized according to their linguistic affiliations and a false impression about their autonomy had percolated too deep in the minds of many individuals.

But the nineteenth century was also the period when a sense of inadequacy had begun to be felt about the insularity of literary studies not only in Europe, but also in India. The discovery of Sanskrit by the European scholar gave a tremendous impetus to the growth of comparative linguistic, and later comparative religion and mythology. Even eight years before Sir William Jones talked about the Sanskrit language bearing to both Greek and Latin a stranger affinity, in his famous inaugural speech at the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, his friend N.B. Halhed was astonished to find the similitude of Sanskrit with Persian and Arabic, and Greek and Latin. In his *A Code of Gentoo Law* (1786) Halhed talks of remarkable affinities between India and Europe at various levels. The initial excitement at the discovery of similarities between different languages and  
22

Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

body of myths, and religious thoughts made the orientalists think of certain universals, and they continued to look for archetypes in cultures with great enthusiasm and created a climate congenial for the growth of comparative literature as well.

Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of India, in his introduction of Charles Wilkin's translation of *Gita* (1785) into English pleaded for a comparative study of the Gita and European works of great merit. 'I should not fear' he wrote, 'to place, in opposition to the best French version of the most admired passages of *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, or the 1st and 6th books of our own Milton, highly as I venerate the latter, the English translation of the *Mahabharata*.' (1) Hardly any Indian of that time was aware of this statement but it certainly created an impact on those for whom it was written. In the College of Fort William, which was established in 1800 for the general education of the young civil servants, many British scholars were exposed to Oriental literatures, and some of them raised interesting questions relating to the problems of inter-literary relationship of divergent literary cultures. T. Macan, a student at the college, who proposed to translate the Persian poem, *Shahnamah*, observed that 'the laws of composition by which the poets of Europe have been generally guided since the works of Homer became generally known, have never been established or recognised in the Eastern world and consequently the rules of criticism founded upon these laws are wholly unapplicable to the writings of Firdoose. Of his merits indeed a fair estimate can be formed only by his countrymen or the inhabitants of those other Eastern narratives to whom the language, customs, and laws of the ancient Persians are comparatively familiar, and such it may be safely affirmed that he is admired, esteemed and venerated in a degree not unsurpassed by the most ardent lovers of Homer and Virgil.(2) The familiarity with Eastern literatures created certain critical problems for the Western readers particularly those believing in the infallibility of Western critical canons. They either dismissed oriental literatures as necessarily inferior or pleaded for a different set of canons for their evaluation. But there were some who felt the necessity for a new poetics that would accommodate works of art of diverse nature, rooted to different cultures. Lord Minto, commenting upon the English reading of the *Meghadutam* by the famous nineteenth century British Sanskritist H.H.Wilson wrote 'the work of Kaleedas unfolded now for the first time to such distant generations as our own displays this uniformity in the characters and genius of our race which seems to write at once the most remote of regions of time and space, and which always gratifies the human mind to discern through the superficial varieties in which some slight difference of external or even intellectual fashions may even disguise it. In Kaleedas we find poetical design, a poetical description of Nature in all her forms, moral and material, poetical imagery, poetical inventions, just and natural feeling, with all the finer and keener sensibilities of

23

*Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India*  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

the human heart. In these great and immutable features we recognize in Kaleedas, the fellow and kinsman of the great masters of ancient and modern Poetry.'(3)

This is one of the most significant pronouncements on the universality of letters defending the study of literature as a manifestation of the unifying spirit of human creativity. This statement was made in 1806 long before Goethe thought of the possibility of a world literature. And one must remember that Saint-Beuve made a similar statement about fifty four years later when the term 'Comparative Literature' has been already coined by Mathew Arnold in English and French term *Literature Comparé* first used by Villemain in 1829 was fairly well- established. Saint-Beuve wrote,

‘Homer, as always and everywhere should be first, like a god, but behind him like a procession of three wise kings of the East, would be seen the three great poets, the three Homers, so long ignored by us, who wrote epics for the use of the old people of Asia, the poets Valmiki, Vyasa of the Hindus, and Firdousi of the Persians, in the domain of taste; it is well to know that such men exist and not to divide the human race.’ (4) An assumption of basic unity of the human race was certainly one of the main factors in the growth of comparative studies of religion and mythology and at time scholars in their anxiousness to vindicate the universality of spirit overlooked the importance of diversities and ‘differntness’ of cultures without any prejudice. The visitor at the college of Fort William in a lecture in 1806, for example, observed that the Bengali version of the *Aeneid*, translated by a student of that college, would ‘set before the native scholars of these provinces present or to come, that model of epic genius and Augustan taste’ and in future the Indian writers would choose between the Western model and the Oriental one. Indeed, knowledge of literatures, other than one’s own, does present different models of literary works, and a new world of experience. The novelty of that world is as important as the realization of the unity of the human race.

With the spread of English education and with the growth of an English educated community in India also grew a new critical awareness which prompted the Indian scholars to evaluate the emerging literatures, and in some cases the ancient texts written in Sanskrit or Tamil, with reference to English literature in particular and European literature in general. The initiative came from European scholars, many of whom could not pronounce any critical judgment on Indian literature. Albrecht Weber, for example, talked of a possible influence of *Iliad* on the *Ramayana* as well of Greek influence on Sanskrit plays.(5) Similarly, G.U. Pope in the introduction to his English translation of the Tamil Classic *Kural* (1896), pointed out the resemblance between the Tamil couplets and the gnomic poetry of Greece, not only in respect of their epigrammatic wit and brevity, but also in their themes and sentiments. He is found in the style of *Kural*

24

**Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India**  
**Number 1 (February, 2011)**

‘something of the same kind’ that is found in Greek epigrams, in martial and the Latin elegaic verses. There is a beauty in the periodic character of the Tamil construction in many of these verses that reminds the reader of the happiest efforts of Properitus.”(6) In the preface to his celebrated edition of *Tiruvacakam* (1908) he pleaded the Tamil scholars to study the anthologies of religious verses available in English only to share his conviction that ‘no literature can stand alone.’

The belief that every literature is not only distinctive but should be studied in isolation persists with many. One of the problems that kept the Roman critics busy, soon after Latin came in contact with Greek, was that of *contamination*. The word is derived from the verb *contaminare* meaning to bring one thing in relation to another. This term was used to describe the practice of putting together scenes from original Greek, or sometime, of borrowing heavily from another play. This is linked up with various problems of imitation, adaptation and influence. Terence defended his right contaminate literature and appealed to the examples set by Navius and Plautus. The conflict of ideals between Terence and his opponents was actually about the measure of freedom with which Greek originals should be handled.

But it has another dimension too: how 'pure' a literature can remain and how to keep literature free from the impact of other literatures. These questions were raised in India in mid- nineteenth century by the makers of modern Indian literature which drew heavily upon European literature. In 1858 Michael Madhusudan Dutta wrote to his friends, 'Do you dislike Moor's poetry because it is full of orientalism? Byron's poetry for its Asiatic air, Carlyle's prose for its germanism?' And in 1874 Bankim Chandra Chatterjee defended 'imitation' in literature citing instances from social and literary history. His spirited defence of imitation was not merely a justification of actions of the contemporary Bengali writers, but also the creative spirit that refused anything as alien in the process of expression. In the same way Michael Madhusudan Dutta's question actually pleaded for a new critical model and a new methodology as opposed to the model sustained by the idea of exclusiveness of national literatures.

While the Indian writers in the nineteenth century tore off the illusion of the exclusiveness of national literature, some of the critics tried to lay the foundation of comparative studies of literature. In his essay, "Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona" (1873), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee tried to evolve a new critical framework within literatures as distantly related as Sanskrit and English could be studied. The most significant outcome of this critical temper was the abolition of all nationalistic considerations in literary evaluation. The 'father of Hindu nationalism' had no hesitation

25

**Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India  
Number 1 (February, 2011)**

in placing Shakespeare above Kalidasa, and comparing Vedic hymns with the nature poems of Byron and Shelley. In another essay entitled 'Uttiracharita' he compares the play of Bhavabhuti with some of the works of Shakespeare and his comparison does not appear to be odious if only because of his insistence not on some accidental and superficial similarities, but on the generality of literary process and literary techniques involving borrowing and transcreation. Similarly, in another essay, he compares *Kumarsambhava* with *Paradise Lost* to consider the general treatment of the supernatural. Modern critics may have different opinions about the value of these essays, but what remains undisputed is the fact that Bankim Chandra wanted to give a new direction to our literary studies. He presented a new universe of literary discourse unfragmented by languages and nationalities. One can talk about a literary genre or a form of text in terms of distinctiveness with reference to other genres or forms or text, and finally can construct a poetics which will account for all diversities.

The first person to plead eloquently for a comparative study of literature and that too as an academic discipline in India was Rabindranath Tagore. The newly established National Council of Education or *Jatiya Siksa Parisad* (1906), formed by some of the leading men of that time to create a parallel system of education outside the University of Calcutta, invited Rabindranath in 1907 to speak on Comparative Literature. The title of Rabindranath's lecture in Bengali was *Visva-Sahitya* meaning world literature.(7) It is interesting that Tagore used the English expression 'comparative literature' to explain what he meant by 'world literature', a term immediately reminds one of *Weltliteratur* used by Goethe in 1827. This being the first pronouncement on comparative literature by an Indian writer an abridged summary of the essay made by Buddhadeva Bose is reproduced here: (8)

I have been called upon to discuss a subject to which you have given the English name Comparative Literature. Let me call it World Literature in Bengali. If we want to understand man as revealed in action, his motivation and his aims, then we must pursue his intentions through the whole of history. To take isolated instances, such as the reign of Akbar or queen Elizabeth, to merely satisfy curiosity. He who knows the Akbar and Elizabeth are only pretexts or occasions; the man, throughout the world of history is incessantly at work to fulfill his deepest purposes, and to unite himself with the All – it is he, I, say, who will strive to see in history not the local and the individual, but the eternal and universal man. His pilgrimage will not end in observing other pilgrims, or he will behold the god whom all pilgrims are seeking.

26

*Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India*  
*Number 1 (February, 2011)*

Likewise, what really claims our attention in world literature is the way in which the soul of man expresses its joy through the written word and the forms which he chooses to give to his eternal being. Whether he portrays himself as a sick man or a voluptuary or an ascetic – the impulse is always the same, and that is his joy in uniting himself with the world. It is in order to realize the truth of relationship what we must enter the world of letters. It is absurd to think of literature as artificial; it is a world whose science no individual can ever master; as in the world of matter, its process of creation is perpetual, and yet in the heart of this ever-unfinished creation there is an ideal of stillness and completion...

What I am trying to say amounts to this. Just as this earth is not the sum of patches of land belonging to different people, and to know the earth as sheer rusticity, so literature is not mere total works composed by different hands. Most of us, however, think of literature in what I have called the manner of the rustic. From this narrow provincialism we must free ourselves; we must strive to see the work of each other as a whole, that whole as a part of man's universal spirit in its manifestations through world literature. Now is the time to do so.

When Tagore wrote this, comparative literature as an academic discipline was still in its infancy in Europe and America and its introduction in universities was vehemently opposed by many scholars of eminence. Even in the 20s of this century Lane Cooper described 'Comparative Literature' as a 'bogus term' that makes 'neither sense nor syntax'. Moreover none of the British universities, which acted as models for Indian academic centres in the colonial days, thought highly of Comparative Literature as a worthy subject to be included in their literary faculties. Therefore, although many scholars of Indian literature responded to Tagore's call to free ourselves from the 'narrow provincialism' of literary scholarship and some of them indeed made significant contribution towards the enlargement of our literary perspective, the first department of Comparative Literature came into existence in this country fifty years later in 1956 at Jadavpur University. It is indeed a pleasant coincidence that National Council of Education where Tagore delivered his lecture on comparative Literature, is the ancestor of Jadavpur University.

Tagore's equation of comparative literature with world literature is not accepted by

many. But even if one intends to maintain a distinction between the two, these are, as  
27

*Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India*  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

Buddhadeva Bose points out, 'large areas where two overlap, in intention if not scope.' The main point is that comparative literature, whatever be its scope, is expected to study several literatures together. The syllabus of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University concentrated on, to use the words of Buddhadeva Bose, the first professor of the department of that university, 'the most intense moments in Western Literature, from antiquity to the present times' along with 'the living literature and the classical tradition of the native soil.' This department has certainly presented a new model of teaching of literature and of literary scholarship in India but various socio- economic factions, in addition to general resistance from single literature disciplines have averted the spread of this discipline to any other university till today. However, a growing sense of inadequacies about the existing single-literature discipline prompted many Indian scholars to identify a new area of literary scholarship.

The search for a new area, however, began from the second decade of this century, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, at whose initiative the first department of modern Indian languages in this country was established in 1919, thought that courses exclusively devoted to any one Indian literature would be unwise and academically unsound. That very year in his presidential address to the Howrah Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan he wanted the Bengali scholars to look beyond Bengali and study other Indian literatures. 'We shall have to think of ways', he said, 'by means of which Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Gujarat, Rajputana, and Punjab can all be weaved into one garland, and can all be assembled on the same shore of the ocean of literature.' As his idea of Jatiya Sahitya (national literature) went beyond individual languages and literature, so did his plan of Indian language study in Indian universities. His idea of Jatiya Sahitya did not emerge merely from a political consciousness and nationalistic demand. It was only later that linguistic chauvinism and academic complacency narrowed the scope of the study of Indian literature and separate departments of Indian literatures without any relation to one another became the accepted features of the Indian universities. Almost about the same time when Sir Ashutosh was building up the department of Modern Indian Languages in the University of Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo wrote a series of articles entitled 'Indian Literature'.<sup>(9)</sup> This is perhaps the first attempt by an Indian scholar to view Indian literature as an expression of the Indian mind and the multiplicity of languages did not deter him from viewing Indian literature as one complete whole. Perhaps criticising the orientalist obsession for Sanskrit which prevented him to take a complete view of Indian literature, Sri Aurobindo continued, 'Nor is it in the Sanskrit tongue alone that the Indian mind has done high and beautiful and perfect things; though it couched in that language the large part of its most prominent and formative and grandest creations. It would be necessary for a complete estimate to take into  
28

*Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India*  
Number 1 (February, 2011)

account as well as Buddhist literature in Pali and the poetic literature, here opulent, there more scanty in production, of about a dozen Sanskrit and Dravidian tongues. The

whole has almost a continental effect and does not fall so far short in the quantity of its really lasting things and equals in its things of best excellence the work of ancient and medieval and modern Europe.'

The idea of an Indian literature was mooted by Sarojini Naidu in her presidential address at the first All India Writers' Conference organized by the Indian PEN in 1945. '... India is one and indivisible. While her children speak with many tongues', declared Sarojini Naidu, 'they can only speak with one undivided hear.' The very idea of unity of Indian literature was reiterated by S. Radhakrishnan—'Indian literature is one though written in many languages'. Several scholars, V.K. Gokak, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Nagendra, as well as the newly founded Sahitya Akademi (10) tried to present the view of the indivisibility of Indian literature and the basis of a common heritage, analysable in terms of themes and movements and ideas, of all the Indian languages. These efforts by many distinguished scholars and writers, however, did not have much impact on the literature programmes in our universities. The Bengali Department of Calcutta University did include courses on English Romantic poetry and selections of Sanskrit literature in its Bengali M.A. programme, and called them 'Comparative Literature', as early as 1958-59, but no one thought of a full-fledged programme of comparative literature or Indian literature. One of the recommendations on the seminar of Indian literature organized by the Indian Institute Of Advanced Study in 1970 was 'the acceptance of the reality' of the 'common denominator of Indian literature' which can give 'a wide base and healthy orientation to the study of various Indian languages and literatures'. Four years later the Department of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi, under the leadership of Professor R.K. Dasgupta started a post M.A. course in Indian literature which came to be known as 'Comparative Indian Literature'. Since then the term Comparative Indian Literature has gained an all India currency and several language departments in different universities in this country have started courses on Comparative Indian Literature as a part of their literature programmes. Several seminars on Comparative Indian Literatures have been organized since 1976 and debates in all those seminars inevitably centred round the question of comparative literature as an academic discipline and its relation with the existing single literature departments. The debate is not a nomenclature, Comparative Literature or Comparative Indian Literature, but of the identification of the area of literary study. The Western scholars of comparative literature have made major European literatures as their area study even when they are aware of the existence of many great literatures outside the western world. Eurocentrism may not be the only explanation for it. It is a question of feasibility, a question of limited competence. Comparative Literature provides a methodology, a wider perspective and a more catholic attitude to several literatures together. If the Indian scholar feels obliged to concentrate on the various literatures within the geographical limit or literatures bound by certain cultural affinities, it is not necessarily because of any political or cultural isolationism. He is free to make European or African literatures, or Asian literatures as a part of scholarly universe provided he has the competence and the facilities. Indian literatures provide the natural basis of a comparative study, if only because of its *own literature*: he understands it better than any other literature. Comparative Indian Literature is not merely a search for national literature counteracting the search for universal literature which is the professed aim of the study of Comparative Literature. Comparative Literature is not an exercise of discovering

abstract universalities of literature. It must deal with literatures in their concreteness and hence the study of Indian literature together is but a part of comparative literary studies as an academic discipline. The future of comparative literature in this country will naturally be directed towards an intensive study of various Indian literatures in the main, but so long it realizes that its texts and contexts are Indian, its methodology comparative, but its main subject is literature, it will serve the cause of Comparative Literature.

#### Notes

- (1) *The Bhagavat – geeta or Dialogues of Krishna and Arjuna* (London, 1785) p.10
- (2) Quoted in Sisir Kumar Das, *Sahibs and Munshis, An Account of the College of Fort William* (Delhi, 1978) p. 113
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 114
- (4) “What is Classic?”, English tr. by E. Lee, Harvard Classics, xxxii, 1938, p. 130.
- (5) *The History of Indian Literature* (London 1852), tr. J. Mann and T. Zacharie, 1882, p.207f.
- (6) *Kural*, (London, 1886) reprint 1958 ,p.xxii
- (7) Later included in his collection of essays, *Sahitya*, 1907.
- (8) See Buddhadeva Bose, “Comparative Literature in India”, *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 8, 1959 also included in *Contribution to Comparative Literature Germany and India*, ed. Naresh Guha (Jadavpur 1979).
- (9) *Arya*, 1919. Later included in *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Sri Aurobindo Library (New York, 1953); Indian edition, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1958, reproduced in *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, Vol. XIV (Pondicherry 1971)
- (10 ) See V. K. Gokak (ed.), *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, (New Delhi, 1957); Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Languages and Literatures of Modern India*, (Calcutta 1963); Nagendra (ed.), *Indian Literature*, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal (Agra, 1959); *Contemporary Indian Literature : A Symposium* (New Delhi, 1957, 2nd ed., 1959).

30

#### Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India Number 1 (February, 2011)

- (11) A. Podder (ed.), *Indian Literature*. (Simla, 1972).  
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- Comparative Literature:
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