

## **National Seminar on 'Indian Literature and Social Development: Theory, Practice and Community Impact' (05-07 April 2017)**

### **Concept Note:**

Literature is known to resonate with the social conditions prevailing in a time and place. The writer's art is linked to a context and history in a myriad ways, some of which are narratives of communities, heroism of individuals, human relations, representations of events, biographies and ideologies. While critical work on Indian literature has copiously studied subjects of a range such as class, caste, gender, poverty, socio-economic compulsions, family, romance, and communities, a comprehensive and integrated analysis of creative literature across time and across languages has not been attempted much. The reason lies in the complexity of plotting such a matrix.

The proposed seminar focused on the link between Indian social history and Indian literature charting the interactions between community life and creative writing. Not keeping only to mainstream and selected few texts from well-known writers, the seminar will expect to present a pan Indian perspective with a greater representation given to Indian languages and translations than is usual. In other words, the purpose is to build a platform for intellectual discussion on literature and social transformation. The scope of the seminar will be to explore historical periods, languages, emancipatory moments, national movement, dalit uprising, alternative sexualities and other such significant topics. The social and cultural impact of literature will be the focus.

### **Context of Theoretical Frameworks**

The relation between society and literature in contemporary theory has been explored through a few key perspectives which remain in dialogue with each other. Lucas George Lukács in 'The Theory of the Novel' (1914-1915) coined the phrase 'transcendental homelessness', and defined this as 'longing of all souls for the place in which they once belonged, and the 'nostalgia' for utopian perfection.' His arguments about class consciousness and dialectical materialism led to a modification of his earlier stand and built his evolutionary thoughts on 'historical realism' (1938). From that to the cultural materialist approach of Raymond Williams (Culture and Society, 1958) marks an irreversible track wherein society, literature and culture become inextricably linked. In parallel, the work of Michel Foucault in France, especially the text Madness and Civilization (1961) brought psychology into the ambit of discussing social construction of culture and language, making thereby a philosophical base for challenging the assumptions of 'normalcy', exclusions and inclusions.

The influence of the European thinkers found its resonance in India in the exploration of social reality that was structured rather differently from the West, caste being a major factor in the discourse of power. The early works of Ashis Nandy, for instance, began to critique the colonial imperatives that were assumed to have shaped Indian polity and he advanced the view that the counterforce of tradition interfered with the social constructions that were imposed by the decisions of colonial administration. Nandy, with his theory of the 'intimate enemy' (1983) has continued to

delve into the intricacies of Indian literature and culture to attempt mapping a collective as well as individual psyche in interest groups in India, his work on cinema being an outstanding example.

Mention must also be made of Sudhir Kakar's work which also examines the impact of colonial history and moves further into unravelling what stands paradoxically between one's aspirations and achievements, as in *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978). Later too, as in the collection titled 'The Indian Psyche' (1996) the canvas of analysis is the poly layered Indian society and a clash of interest exists between development goals and individuated, culturally determined circumstances.

In other words, the history of thinking on the subject of 'literature and social development' showed some common theoretical frameworks in Marxist ideology but the Indian aspect of social stratifications led to thought provoking modifications, and the creation of regional paradigms.

#### The Contentions, West and East

By the 1980s, the emergence of postmodernist Indian Writing in English, specially the appearance of Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' (1981), signaled a confident literary and social identity by which the colonial past was brutally subjected to questioning. The voice from 13 other languages in India was equally strong as in the work of Hindi writer Namwar Singh and Marathi writer Bhalchandra Nemade. Accepting the frame of Marxism but innovating within it, both the stalwarts created fresh vocabulary and concepts that rang true to their generation of readers. Nemade's theory of 'Deshivad'/Nativism (2009), a term that negates English language learning and globalisation wishes to emphasize native heritage and history. At some levels the commonality with Indian English critics may be worth considering. Aijaz Ahmad's bold incursions against the hegemonic control of Frederic Jameson is well known but let us recount that his book 'In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures' (1992) sharply rebuts the vocabulary and capitalist thought processes of a certain kind of American scholarship and interprets imperialism from a South Asian viewpoint.

#### Local and Global Issues Now

In a world saddened by the politics of trauma and terror, rendered helpless by climate change, beset with imbalances in equity principles, scholars in the 'west' and the 'east' are no longer as separated by ideological frameworks. Literature is recognized as a powerful tool for social analysis. Žižek's notion of 'ideological fantasy' has influenced a wealth of interpretations that keep the 'political community' at the core. Borders and boundaries are fluid entities when migration, displacement, wars and refugee conditions move human subjects in the largest numbers ever known in history. Concomitant upon such transitions are changes in culture and in literary articulations. Furthermore, in a world troubled by more questions than it has answers for, a revival of interest in the philosopher Jacques Rancière is perceptible. His book 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation' (1991) was written for educators and educators-to-be. It strongly advocates a breakaway from conventional learning into a self-learning mode because institutions carry no meaningful history for the immigrant or the compelled traveller.

Should one add to this the voice of Ganesh N. Devy, the language activist who is bravely carrying out a nationwide People's Linguistic Survey of India? Recuperating the roots of several languages in the post Sanskritik era, he reminds us of the lost links in the chain of Indian dialects and seeks to bring

dignity to the undocumented oral traditions of this country. Devy's essays 'The Being of Bhasha' and 'Countering Violence' pose a link between lost languages and the influence of globalization (The G.N. Devy Reader, 2009). If the cultural diversity of India is surrendered, he sees little hope in the possibility of social cohesion and peace.

#### The Objectives of the National Seminar

- To present theoretical frameworks that will examine the current discourse on Indian literature and social development.
- To explore linkages between specific literary histories of Indian languages and regional histories 1
- To share specific research in this area based on in-depth study or field work with literary/cultural material.
- To foreground translated material from Indian languages.
- To consider interdisciplinary methods for such explorations combining tools of research in Humanities as well as Social Sciences.
- To establish the current quality of scholarship and intellectual enquiry in this subject.
- To envisage a book publication based on the papers presented.

Themes for presentations are indicated below but should not be limiting:

1. Linkages between specific literary histories of Indian languages and regional histories
2. Bhakti literature
3. Sufi literature and its social contexts
4. The Progressive movement
5. Nation and Narration
6. Rethinking Gender
7. Evolving Society and changing aesthetic paradigms
8. Study of specific literary movements with their social implications
9. Literary texts/ authors that have caused attitudinal change in society
10. Literature and Class
11. Cultural diversity
12. Impact of globalisation on Indian Literature
13. Literature of trauma, terror, and conflict zones
14. Literature and Eco-aesthetics
15. Tribal/ Adivasi Awakening
16. Dalit Literature and Politics of change
17. The Region and the Nation
18. Translation for social impact
19. Linguistic Plurality
20. Literature and the social impact of Visual and Performing Arts.

A National Seminar on 'Indian Literature and Social Development: Theory, Practice and Community Impact' was organised in collaboration with the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi during 15-05-07 April 2017 at IAS. Professor Malashri Lal, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi and

Professor Sumanyu Satpathy, Fellow, IAS were the Conveners of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Vijaya Shankar Varma, National Fellow, IAS and Dr. K. Sreenivasarao, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. Professor Malashri Lal, Convener of the seminar gave introductory remarks. The Inaugural Address was given by Dr. Sudhir Kakar, Psychoanalyst, Novelist, Scholar, Benaulim, Goa.

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