

International Conference on ‘Purifying the Dialect of the Tribe: Cross-Cultural Concerns in Colonial and Postcolonial India’. (17-19 May 2017)

Concept Note:

Different regions of what now constitutes India came under the British rule, no doubt; but, they were also either hegemonized by or were hegemonic towards, other internecine cultures. With the advent of colonial modernity came one of the major new ideologies, that of linguistic (Modern Indian Languages) nationalism in line with European (Modern European Languages) nationalism. It is not as if, for nearly four centuries, these languages and their cultures had not mutated under diverse social and political pressures: Pali (Buddhism), Perso-Arabic (Mughal / Islam). But communities inhabiting ever-changing kingdoms and sultanates are not known to have made much of their linguistic identities, and they were somewhat polyglot. But, linguistic identities, along with those of others, hardened under the impact of European colonialism. The nascent forms of linguistic nationalism in India fought their own local battles, but, in time, these were quickly turned into identitarian modes of resistance in the face of newer, pan-Indian anticolonial struggles. Even so, the stamp of European grids were never gotten rid of, giving rise to the idea of a ‘national’ literature, Bangla, Kashmiri, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Odia etc. Simultaneously, radical revisions and inventions following the impact of English education brought in a whole range of new modes of cultural expressions into each of the Indian languages. The past was both repudiated and reinvented; the modern and foreign were welcomed but domesticated.

Against this backdrop, primary and perhaps radical questions must be posed concerning sahitya/literature and literary traditions as the primary metaphoric place where tradition, collective memory, and identity take shape in their different Indian languages in terms of a sense of belonging to a collective multilingual place/space. What does it mean to be Indians? What has literature, and the literary, cultural tradition to do with this? Indians speak and write different languages, and yet in the same language they have different cultures all merging into one multi-lateral, differential identity. Is it possible to retrace those processes from the early nineteenth century onward?

These are urgent issues needing to be posed as the very basis of any idea of Indian political unity in respect of all national, linguistic, cultural differences of all the linguistic ‘states’ involved, or to be involved in these important processes. There are linguistic and cultural differences marked as borderlines between national traditions and identities, yet those borderlines seem often blurred so that distinctions are not always easily made. On the other hand, the historically stratified Indian literary production, the Indian tradition, shows that there are common emblems, symbols, genres, modes of writing, themes which must be considered as belonging to a whole, to one literary tradition expressing itself in different languages.

THEMES AND ISSUES

- New disciplines, European education and textbooks
- Newspapers and periodical press, literary periodicals
- The older, indigenous cognitive category, ‘Sahitya’ vis-à-vis European notions of the ‘literary’

- The emergence of the 'literary field,' and augmenting 'cultural capital' in mutually symbiotic linguistic regions.
- Reinventing and Understanding the Past: Regional histories to literary histories
- Language-Dialect Controversies
- New genres and conventions in mutual linguistic interface
- Prose and its uses across kindred linguistic cultures
- Popular, folk and other forms of entertainment
- Caste, tribe and gender
- Of desaja/bidesia and jatiya and bejatiya bhasas etc.

An International conference on 'Purifying the Dialect of the Tribe: Cross-Cultural Concerns in Colonial and Postcolonial India' was organised at IAS during 17-19 May 2017. Professor Sumanyu Satpathy, Fellow, IAS was the Convener of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Anand Kumar, Fellow, IAS. Professor Sumanyu Satpathy, Convener of the seminar gave introductory remarks. The keynote address was given by Professor Javed Majeed, Department of English and Comparative Literature, King's College London.

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