



# CLASS NOTES ON COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN INDIA BY AMIYA DEV

FOR  
M A  
ENGLISH  
SEM - II

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# WHAT IS THIS ESSAY ABOUT?

- ✘ India has many languages and literatures thus representing an a priori situation and conditions of diversity
- ✘ To speak of an Indian literature in the singular is problematic
- ✘ To speak of Indian literature in the plural is equally problematic
- ✘ Such a characterization, he urges, either overlooks or obscures manifest interrelations and affinities

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- ✘ Dev compares the unity and the diversity thesis, and identifies the relationship between Indian commonality and differences as the prime site of comparative literature in India.
  - ✘ He surveys the current scholarly and intellectual positions on unity and diversity and looks into the post-structuralist doubt of homogenization of differences in the name of unity.

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- ✘ Dev also examines the search for common denominators and a possible pattern of togetherness and underlines location and located inter-Indian reception as an aspect of interliterariness.
  - ✘ Dev perceives Indian literature, not as a fixed or determinate entity but as an ongoing and interliterary process: Indian language and literature ever in the re/making.

# UNITY AND THE DIVERSITY THESIS

- ✘ India, a country of immense linguistic diversity and, thus, a country of many literatures.
- ✘ Based on history, ideology, and often on politics, scholars of literature argue either for a unity of Indian literature or for a diversity and distinctness of the literatures of India.
- ✘ Instead of this binary approach, Dev's proposal involves a particular view of the discipline of comparative literature, because he argues that in the case of India the study of literature should involve the notion of the interliterary process and a dialectical view of literary interaction.

# LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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- ✘ Censuses in 1961 and 1971 recorded a total of 1,652 languages
- ✘ While in the census of 1981 some 221 spoken languages were recorded excluding languages of speakers totalling less than 10,000
- ✘ Many of the 221 language groups are small and it is only the 18 listed in the Indian Constitution (Today the number of languages listed is 22) as major languages which comprise the bulk of the population's speakers

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- ✘ In addition to the eighteen languages listed in the Constitution, four more are recognized by the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters) for reasons of their significance in literature

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- ✘ However, this total of twenty-two major languages and literatures is deceiving because secondary school and university curricula include further languages spoken in the area of the particular educational institution.
  - ✘ This diversity in languages and literatures, however, is not reflected in either the general social discourse or in literary scholarship. In general, the perspective of India as a hegemonious language and literature area is ubiquitous.

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- ✘ Major Indian literatures are ancient - two of them (Sanskrit and Tamil)
  - ✘ Ancient in the sense of Antiquity while the rest of an average age of eight to nine hundred years -- except one recent arrival in the nineteenth century as an outcome of the colonial Western impact (Indian English).

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- ✘ We also know that although some of these literatures are more substantial than others and contain greater complexities, no further gradation into major and minor major ones is usually made.
  - ✘ A writer in any one is counted as much Indian by the Sahitya Akademi as a writer in any other and no distinction is made between one literature prize and another.

# INDIAN LITERATURE/S?

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- ✘ Thus, while we have a plurality of so-called major literatures in India, we are confronted by a particular problematic:
- ✘ Is Indian literature, in the singular, a valid category, or are we rather to speak of Indian literatures in the plural?

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- ✘ Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western Indologists were not interested in this question, for Indian literature to them was mainly Sanskrit, extended at most to Pâli and Prakrit. For example, with all his admiration for Sakuntala, William Jones was not aware of literatures in modern Indian languages

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- ✘ Non-Indian Indianists today, too, are more often than not uninterested in the question. Although they do not consider Sanskrit-Pâli-Prakrit as "the" only literature of India, these scholars are still single literature specialists.
  - ✘ Similarly, literary histories written in India by Indian scholars also focused and still focus on a single literature.

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- ✘ This single-focus perspective is a result of both a colonial and a post-colonial perspective, the latter found in the motto of the Sahitya Akademi: "Indian literature is one though written in many languages" (Radhakrishnan).
  - ✘ However, this perspective was opposed by scholars who argued that a country where so many languages coexist should be understood as a country with literatures (in the plural).

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- ✘ Instead of Indian literature, singular, we should speak of Indian literatures, plural
  - ✘ The resistance has emerged to the unity thesis is called "hegemonic apprehensions"
  - ✘ Dev responds to Akademi's motto with "Indian literature is one because it is written in many languages."

# GURBHAGAT SINGH'S PROPOSAL OF DIFFERENTIAL MULTILOGUE

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- ✘ Dev takes into account Gurbhagat Singh's notion of "differential multilogue"
- ✘ Singh does not accept the idea of Indian literature but prefers calling it 'literatures produced in India'
- ✘ He rejects the notion of Indian literature because the notion as such includes and promotes a nationalist identity

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- ✘ Not only linguistic but cultural aspects of literatures need to be taken into consideration
  - ✘ Singh rejects both the French and the American schools of comparative literature
  - ✘ He rejects the idea of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*.
  - ✘ He stands for a celebration of differences
  - ✘ For Singh, comparative literature is thus an exercise in differential multilogue

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- ✘ Singh's proposal of differential multilogue as a program will perhaps enable us to understand Indian diversity without sacrificing the individualities of the particulars.

# WHAT SHOULD THE INDIAN THEORIST DO?

- ✘ And it cannot be denied that in the pursuit of "Indian literature" some of us have shown negative discrimination towards texts produced in "less important" and "different" literatures.
- ✘ The theorist must make sure that commonality will not be turned into an ideological and political commodity.

# AIJAZ AHMAD'S *IN THEORY: CLASSES, NATIONS, LITERATURES*

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- ✘ Ahmad describes the construct of a "syndicated" Indian literature that suggests an aggregate and unsatisfactory categorization of Indian literature
- ✘ The notion of Indian literature is different from the notion of European literature
- ✘ 'European literature' is at best an umbrella designation and at worst a pedagogical imposition
- ✘ While 'Indian literature' is classifiable and categorizable

# DEV'S DISAGREEMENT WITH AHMAD'S VIEWS

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- ✘ Dev disagrees with Ahmad's views
- ✘ Ahmad's concern is with the hegemony of English, although he does not suggest its abolition in a way which would be close to Ngugi's arguments
- ✘ In addition to the argument against this construction of a national literature advanced by Ahmad, there are other problems with the notion and its implementation. It is true that the ideal of one language in India has been made real by now by ideological and political mechanisms.

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- ✘ The official national language is Hindi and if literary texts from the other languages could be in toto translated into Hindi, we could possibly arrive at a national Indian literature.
  - ✘ However, in this case we would again arrive at a hegemonizing situation. On the other hand, it is clear that in the realm of education, English is the largest single language program in our colleges and universities.

# THE INTERLITERARY CONDITION OF INDIA

- ✘ Indian literature is not an entity but an interliterary condition in the widest possible sense of the concept which is related to Goethe's original idea of Weltliteratur and its use by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*.
- ✘ The interliterary condition of India reaches back much farther than its manuscript or print culture. For instance, bhakti -- a popular religious movement as both theme and social issue (stretching from the eighth to the eighteenth century) - had a variety of textual manifestations in various Indian languages.

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- ✘ It is possible to think of a series of such sub-systems in which the individual literatures of India have been interrelated with one another over the ages.
  - ✘ For example, Swapan Majumdar takes this systemic approach in his 1985 book, *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions*
  - ✘ Majumdar suggests that Indian literature is neither "one" nor "many" but rather a systemic whole where many sub-systems interact towards one in a continuous and never-ending dialectic.

# SISIR KUMAR DAS

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- ✘ Sisir Kumar Das has taken with his planned ten-volume project, *A History of Indian Literature*, whose first volume, *1800-1910: Western Impact / Indian Response*, appeared in 1991.
- ✘ Das has taken methodologically pragmatic approach
- ✘ Das's method and results to date show that Indian literature is neither a unity nor is it a total differential

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- ✘ The method of Comparative Literature allows for a view of Indian literature in the context of unity and diversity in a dialectical interliterary process and situation
  - ✘ Dev understands Indian literature as ever in the making.

# CONCLUSION

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- ✘ Problematics of unity and diversity are not unique to India
- ✘ Dev suggests that we should first look at ourselves and try to understand our own situations as thoroughly as possible.
- ✘ Let us first give full shape to our own comparative literatures and then we will formulate a comparative literature of diversity in general.

THANK YOU