South Asian Literature, Culture and Society

An Interpretative Exegesis

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Edited by
Mrinmoy Sarkar,
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&
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Foreword

The nearly 2 billion human beings in South Asia live on a land area of 5.2 million $km^{2.}$. We are one family, with one culture and almost all of us are descendants from the early migrants, probably from Africa. We must get together and live as one family. Yet we are divided into eight countries by political barriers, though geographically only Sri Lanka and Maldives are separated by the sea. We have several major religions in the region, but due to cultural and social intermingling, each has borrowed and adapted practices from the others, enabling peaceful coexistence. Language is not a major barrier among us, even with 13 major languages within four major language families, and altogether several hundred languages and dialects.

Literature, just like art, music and dance, through link languages and translations, offers one of the best ways to understand, accept and live in harmony. 'Ruminations on South Asian Literature, Culture and Society', is making a major contribution towards creating one South Asia, beyond all borders.

We cannot make the world a 'Global Village' overnight. We need to do it one step at a time. Our contribution, however small, has to make South Asia into one nation, irrespective of all the political barriers, because geographical and physical barriers have been brought down by the progress of travel and through digital communications. Let us learn about our people, our culture, traditions through our literature, and let us promote them throughout South Asia first. Let us first use the literature in English that exists in all the South Asian countries. The next step would be to translate writings in other native languages into English and to other major languages.

A major barrier in South Asia today is the Partition. We still find new literature, and films and documentaries about the partition. We need to study such creative works to try to

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breakdown the partition, literally, socially and culturally. The 'Partition' should never have been created. After almost the entire South Asia had been formed into one country by the British, as their parting curse, they undid what they had achieved, murdering millions, displacing more millions. The tragedy still lives in our minds, seven decades later.

We also have unnecessary labels to identify writers, identifying them within political borders. This creates issues. Bangla writers are divided between Bangladesh and West Bengal, and Urdu and Panjabi writers between India and Pakistan. We have writers now labeled as 'Diaspora Writers', by which we mean those who have left their homeland, to settle down in another country. Even if they write about their country of birth, often they would be describing their 'imaginary homeland', a homeland as they wish it would have been, or as the readers of their adopted country would like to read about.

We also have writers from other countries who have settled down, or had lived for many years, in South Asia. Ruth Prawar Jhabvala is considered as a German born American, but married to an Indian. Rudyard Kipling, was born in India, but is considered an English journalist and writer. Speaking of Sri Lankan writers, Anne Ranasinghe, was born in Germany to Jewish parents. She married a Sri Lankan doctor and settled down in Sri Lanka as a Sri Lankan citizen and wrote her poems in English. She won the Sahitya Rathana, the most prestigious State Award as a Sri Lankan writer. Ven. S. Mahinda thera was a Buddhist monk who was a very famous poet writing in Sinhala to rouse feelings of patriotism among the Sri Lankans. He called himself a Tibetan, born in Sikkim. Today it is not easy to give him a nationality, because Sikkim at the time of his birth was not a part of India, and Tibet may not have accepted him either but people in Sri Lanka have accepted him as Sri Lankan. British writer Leonard Woolf, is remembered as the author of the great Sri Lankan novel 'The Village in the Jungle'. Arthur C. Clark immigrated to Sri Lanka in 1956, where he lived to the end of his life in 2008. He was a Sri Lankan and was appointed as the Chancellor of the Moratuwa University.

When we read or review a literary creation, sometimes we are prejudiced because we identify the writer by his or her race, creed, nationality, gender and even caste. In the recent past, many writers were bold enough to declare their caste and we have a new literature in India as Dalit writings. Yet we could consider

all literature by and about the suppressed and oppressed society as Dalit Literature.

Inherited from the West, in South Asia too we have a category called Women Writers, even though in the past no one would have bothered about the gender of the writer. Yet unfortunately, society had compelled some female writers to hide their gender and use a male pseudonym, while today it is imposed by the publishers. We need not talk of Dalit Feminism, about those females who are twice oppressed in the households of the oppressed people.

The women writers bring out all the violence against women, due to ethnic, religious and caste based conflicts, but what we need is writing not about the violence as such, which only bring out the brutality of the male human. Instead what we need is to bring out instances where such brutality and violence had been avoided, or subdued without violence. We need to learn from such instances so we could prepare ourselves better in the future.

We also talk about Postcolonial Literature, which in a way is a hangover of colonialism, because till recent times many of the Postcolonial writers had received their English education during the colonial times, or in educational institutes which continued the colonial traditions. It is not always easy to draw a line between colonial and postcolonial literature.

Eco-criticism developed from the genre called modern or postmodern eco-centric literature, even though all our ancient literature in South Asia would have been eco-centric, because our people lived in perfect harmony with nature. The issues of culture vs. nature grew with industrial and commercial development.

When we read today the literature that evolved during the freedom struggle, we have to keep in mind the situation in colonial South Asia, which the young generation has to read-with an open mind, to understand the past as sometimes, there is danger in trying to act in a similar manner today. This would lead to conflicts surrounding nations, nation-states, nationalism and anti-nationalism. It would also give rise to temptations for further struggles for separation, which may not be in the best interest of anyone.

A major problem is failure to make all South Asian literature available in all the countries. This situation was created by the commodification and commercialization of literature. The reader and the writer are both at the mercy of the publisher. It is the

publisher and the bookseller who decides what is to be printed, promoted and distributed. That is why most creative works do not cross the political and commercial borders. We are all starved for the literary works of our neighbours. It is unfortunate that in most South Asian countries the readers are more aware of diaspora writers than the writers of the neighbouring countries and even writers in their own country.

We need more anthologies, literary reviews, conferences and online discussions about all literature published in South Asia. To enable online discussions and webinars, we need to go online with our literature, as e-books, and wherever possible by publishing them in the public domain, to be shared with all.

Ronald Reagan, on June 12, 1987, said in Berlin, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall". Let us appeal to all mankind, "Tear down all these walls", all the language barriers we have built between us. Books like 'Ruminations on South Asian Literature, Culture and Society' give an opportunity for writers of the world to unite, beginning in South Asia. United we could change the world to be a better place, not only for humanity, but for all life forms.

-Daya Dissanayake, winner of SAARC Literary Award 2013 and Sri Lanka State Literary Award, Sri Lanka

Acknowledgement

A conference is a platform for the exchange of thoughts and ideas. The organization of a conference is always a stressful adventure because of all the very small things and all the very important issues that have to be planned and managed.

It has been our pleasure to host all the participants of the conference on South Asian Literature, Culture and Society at Barabazar Bikram Tudu Memorial College, affiliated to Sidhu-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India. The participants were very enthusiastic. We are thankful to all the participants for coming to BBTM College to attend the conference. We are sure that the participants must have benefitted from attending this conference.

We have been fortunate to have some of the eminent persons from academia. We thank all those who agreed to deliver a key-note speech or to play the role of moderator and chair of sessions or round table.

As far as the organizing committee is concerned, our first very warm greetings go to Dr. Chandra Kanta Panda, Teacher – in – Charge of BBTM College and Patron of this conference, who not only encouraged us to organize the conference but also helped us in every possible way to make it a successful one. We are very much thankful to Dr. Ashis Kumar Nayak, co-ordinator of IQAC and HOD of the Department of Bengali, BBTM College, for providing the much necessary funding for this conference. Without his generous financial support, it would not have been possible to organize this conference.

In behalf of the organizing committee, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to all of you, in particular Dr. Pritam Rooj, Shyamal Sarangi, Soumiki Roy, Kalyani Roy, Archita Pathak, and Biswajit Mahato for their participation and expertise in the preparation of the conference. We take this opportunity to thank

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all the reviewers and technical committee members for providing their valuable comments in time and help towards the improvement of the quality of papers presented in the conference.

Our warm greetings go also to Mr. Sajal Kundu and other non-teaching staff of BBTM College who worked constantly behind the scene to provide us the best atmosphere during the conference.

We also acknowledge the unwavering support received from Ms. Gargi Biswas, M.Phil Scholar of the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Ms. Imana Pal, PhD Research Scholar of the Department of Home Science, University of Calcutta, and the students of BBTM College for their ready enthusiasm.

Finally, our warm thanks are extended to all who helped in making the Two- Day International Conference on South Asian Literature, Culture & Society a memorable and successful one.

-Editors

Editors

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Introduction

South Asia or Southern Asia is a term used to represent the southern region of the Asian continent. South Asia is composed of eight countries of impressive diversity in religion, culture and history. These politically divided autonomous eight countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an economic cooperation organization in the region which was established in 1985 and includes all eight nations comprising South Asia. South Asia covers about 5.2 million km, which is 11.71% of the Asian continent or 3.5% of the world's land surface area. The population of South Asia is about 1.891 billion or about one fourth of the world's population, making it both the most populous and the most densely populated geographical region in the world. Overall, it accounts for about 39.49% of Asia's population, over 24% of the world's population, and is home to a vast array of people. In 2010, South Asia had the world's largest population of Hindus, Jains and Sikhs. It also has a large population of Muslims, as well as over 35 million Christians and 25 million Buddhist. Consequently, there has been fascinating diversity in language, religion, society and culture. But despite all these diversities, an unknown stream of unity has tied them into a threat. For the impressive characteristics of this region, we have chosen South Asian Literature Culture and Society as the theme of our International Conference.

The history of core South Asia begins with evidence of human activity of Homo sapiens, as long as 75,000 years ago, or with earlier hominids including Homo erectus from about 500,000 years ago. The earliest prehistoric culture have roots in the mesolithic sites as evidenced by the rock paintings of Bhimbetka rock shelters dating to a period of 30,000 BCE or older, as well as neolithic times. The Indus Valley Civilization, which spread and flourished in the northwestern part of South Asia from c. 3300 to 1300 BCE in

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present-day Northern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, was the first major civilization in South Asia. A sophisticated and technologically advanced urban culture developed in the Mature Harappan period, from 2600 to 1900 BCE.

The Vedic period, named after the Vedic religion of the Indo-Aryans, lasted from c. 1900 to 500 BCE. The Indo-Aryans were pastoralists who migrated into north-western India after the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization, Linguistic and archaeological data show a cultural change after 1500 BCE with the linguistic and religious data clearly showing links with Indo-European languages and religion. By about 1200 BCE, the Vedic culture and agrarian lifestyle was established in the northwest and northern Gangetic plain of South Asia. Rudimentary state-forms appeared, of which the Kuru-Pañcâla union was the most influential. The first recorded state-level society in South Asia existed around 1000 BCE. Increasing urbanization of India between 800 and 400 BCE, and possibly the spread of urban diseases, contributed to the rise of ascetic movements and of new ideas which challenged the orthodox Brahmanism. These ideas led to Sramana movements, of which Mahavira (c. 549–477 BCE), proponent of Jainism, and Buddha (c. 563-483), founder of Buddhism, were the most prominent icons. From about 500 BCE through about 300 CE, the Vedic-Brahmanic synthesis or "Hindu synthesis" continued. Classical Hindu and Sramanic (particularly Buddhist) ideas spread within South Asia, as well outside South Asia.

Islam came as a political power in the fringe of South Asia in 8th century CE when the Arab general Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sindh and Multanin southern Punjab in modern-day Pakistan. By 962 CE, Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms in South Asia were under a wave of raids from Muslim armies from Central Asia. Among them was Mahmud of Ghazni, who raided and plundered kingdoms in north India from east of the Indus river to west of Yamuna river seventeen times between 997 and 1030. The Ghurid Sultan Mu'izz al-Din Muhammad began a systematic war of expansion into north India in 1173. Mu'izz sought a Sunni Islamic kingdom of his own extending east of the Indus River, and he thus laid the foundation for the Muslim kingdom that became the Delhi Sultanate. The state religion of the Bengal Sultanate was Islam, and the region under Sultani rule, a region that ultimately emerged as the modern nation of Bangladesh, saw a growth of a syncretic form of Islam. The transitional history period of South Asia, that

is 16th-century onwards, witnessed the start of the Central Asian dynasty named the Mughals, with Turkish-Mongol roots and Sunni Islam theology. Mughal Empire was marked by a period of artistic exchanges and a Central Asian and South Asian architecture synthesis, with remarkable buildings such as the Taj Mahal. At its height, the empire was the world's largest economy, worth almost 25% of global GDP, more than the entirety of Western Europe.

Maritime trading between South Asia and European merchants began after the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama returned to Europe. After the death of Aurangzeb and the collapse of the Mughal Empire, the region came under the rule of many small Islamic sultanates and Hindu kingdoms. British, French, Portuguese colonial interests struck treaties with these rulers, and established their trading ports. After the death of Ranjit Singh, the British Empire expanded their interests till the Hindu Kush region. In the east, the Bengal region was split into Muslim East Bengal and Hindu West Bengal, by the colonial British Empire, in early 1900s, a split that was reversed. However, after the World War II, at the eve of India's independence, the region was split again into East Pakistan and West Bengal. East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971. The common concept of South Asia is largely inherited from the administrative boundaries of the British Raj, with several exceptions (like Singapore). The current territories of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, which were the core of the British Empire from 1857 to 1947, form the central region of South Asia, in addition to Afghanistan, which was a British protectorate until 1919, after the Afghans lost to the British in the Second Anglo-Afghan war. Myanmar is included by some scholars in South Asia, but in Southeast Asia by others. South Asia is surrounded by three water bodies – the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea – and has acutely varied climate zones.

The term "South Asian literature" refers to the literary works of writers from the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora. Countries to which South Asian literature's writers are linked include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Works from Bhutan, Myanmar, Tibet, and the Maldives are sometimes also included. South Asian literature is written in English as well as the many national and regional languages of the region. Bangladeshi literature, Bengali literature, Angika literature, Assamese literature, Bhojpuri literature, Braj Bhasha literature, Gujarati literature, Hindi literature, Indian English literature, Kannada

literature, Konkani literature, Kokborok literature, Malayalam literature, Marathi literature, Mizo literature, Nepali literature, Odia literature, Punjabi literature, Rajasthani literature, Sanskrit literature, Tamil literature, Telugu literature, Urdu literature, Nepali literature, Kashmiri literature, Pakistani literature, Sri Lankan literature etc are included in South Asian literature. South Asian literature has been produced in about forty major languages, including translations into Persian, Portuguese, French, and English. Apart from the male writers there have been many great female writers in the south Asian literature as well. Many female writers have written novels on different topics but mainly their concern has been the mistreatment or ill treatment of the women in our society. They have also written novels on the taboo topics such as widow-marriages, child marriages, love stories, sexual content and certain family issues.

The culture of South Asia encompasses the collective and diverse customs and traditions of art, architecture, music, literature, lifestyle, philosophy, politics and religion that have been practiced and maintained by the numerous ethnic groups of the continent of Asia since prehistory. Identification of a specific culture of South Asia or universal elements among the colossal diversity has emanated from multiple cultural spheres. So summarizing their culture in a single lesson is an incredibly difficult task. The Tamil region of South India has a language, script, musical tradition, dance forms, and an artistic heritage that are quite distinct from those found in, say, Punjab in the north. It is this diversity that makes the artistic traditions of India so complex and rewarding to follow. Language and ethnicity are even more complex and diverse. In terms of languages, there are two main groups: Indo-Aryan languages and Dravidian. Indo-Aryans are in North India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Dravidians are more in select areas: mostly Southern India and parts of Sri Lanka and Pakistan. But then there are lots of smaller language families, just to make things even more complicated.

One of the big cultural patterns in the plural society of South Asia is the contrast between egalitarian ideals and caste systems. Egalitarian ideals say that everyone is of equal value, and nobody is born superior to anyone else. The caste system is basically the opposite. Some people really hated this caste system, and those people formed the Buddhist faith, which is more egalitarian. So,

there is a clear cultural distinction between egalitarian Muslim countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Maldives, and Bangladesh, egalitarian Buddhist countries like Bhutan and Sri Lanka (though Sri Lanka is more religiously mixed), and Hindu countries like India and Nepal.

Generelly art and architecture have grown with the transformation of religions of South Asia. Temples were built to enshrine the image of the chosen deity, and the exterior walls of these temples were covered with numerous sculpted images and masses of decorative carvings. Relief carvings from the myths of the enshrined deity played an important role in glorifying the god whose various manifestations found a place in the niches on the temple walls. In addition, sculptors carved a variety of auspicious motifs that included overflowing foliage, figures of women, and images of embracing couples, all of which suggested growth, abundance, and prosperity. Side by side with the flowering of the plastic arts, philosophy and literature, as well as music and dance, flourished in the Hindu context. India's best-known philosophical system, Vedanta, associated with the philosopher Shankara, proposed a monistic belief in the identity of the human soul with the divine principle. A rich body of secular literature, including poems and dramas, fables and epics, was written first in Sanskrit and later in a number of regional languages, from southern Tamil to northern Kashmiri, from western Gujarati to eastern Bengali. Music and dance played an important part in the religious and secular life of the subcontinent.

The papers of our conference presented thereon delved into many dimensions- history, literature, folk culture, politics, and society of South Asia. It should, however, be made unequivocal that the narratives, exposition and conclusions vented in the papers included in this volume are those of the authors concerned and those are based on their scholarship and research insights.

-Editors

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