



Book Reviews

The Mahabharata through the ages

Prabhakar Shrotriya, *Bharat Mein Mahabharat* [in Hindi]. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith, 2014, 638 pages, Rs 700.

The Mahabharata has become an integral part of the Indian psyche. It has influenced literature, theatre, art, sculpture, painting and cinema. Attempts are continuously made to put together the works that *The Mahabharata* as a source text has given rise to. Prabhakar Shrotriya's work *Bharat Mein Mahabharat* can be seen as another book in the same line but where his work differs is that it leaves one astounded at the sheer vastness of his reading, which ranges from classical Sanskrit works to those in *bhasha*, from folk narratives to the text crossing the seas to South East Asia and then becoming globalized with Peter Brooks. Today there is an explosion of novels in English based on *The Mahabharata* as many in the new generation of writers belong to a certain class and may be more comfortable in that language. However, the very fact that they too are mooring their existential questionings in *The Mahabharata*, further reinforces the notion that what is not in *The Mahabharata* is not to be found elsewhere either. Shrotriya in his work written in Hindi chooses not to comment on this aspect of *The Mahabharata* as his work speaks with the same intensity to the Westernized urban middle class of India in the language of their choice as it does to others. Nor does he comment on cinema where characters from *The Mahabharata* are used in contemporary situations, including in corporate wars.

The book is divided into eight sections. In the first, 'Aadhar', Shrotriya lays out his critical paradigms. The second section begins with an introduction that explains the bases of choosing the works that Shrotriya deals with. This section is divided into two parts. Shrotriya begins with Jaimini, one of Vyasa's chief disciples, only whose *Ashwamedhika Parva* survives. He then moves on to other creations of *The Mahabharata* like Acharya Jinsen's *Harivamsha Purana* who uses the text to propound concepts of Jainism. Then he talks of *Raghav Pandiya* followed by Madan Bhatta's *Champu Bharat*.

Shrotriya then comes to recreations of *The Mahabharata* in modern Indian languages like Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, Oriya, Malayalam, Bengali, Assamese and Marathi. The third chapter continues with later works that attempt to recreate *The Mahabharata* in different contemporary Indian languages. The fourth chapter deals with works based on *The Mahabharata* in Sanskrit beginning with the plays of Bhasa and, following the organization of the second chapter goes on to similar works based on *The Mahabharata* in modern Indian languages. In these works Shrotriya tries to concentrate more on works based on the *upakhyanas* of *The Mahabharata* than on the main story line. As Shrotriya points out, the

upakhyanas provide greater room for exploring different points of view than the main story and that they are less commented upon in critical texts.

The fifth chapter takes us to *The Mahabharata* in various Indian languages and in other languages like Sindhi, Nepali and Kashmiri together with English. Why Kashmiri and Sindhi are clubbed with Nepali is not quite clear. The sixth chapter analyses some main characters of *The Mahabharata* and the seventh moves on to *The Mahabharata's* folk versions. The final chapter moves out of the Indian sub-continent to South East Asia, Peter Brooke's *Mahabharata* and finally to a comparison of other epics with *The Mahabharata*.

Shrotriya's critical vision is clearly laid out at the very beginning; he creates a narrative through the choice of works that he analyses which is rooted in the traditions of India. Brought up as many of us are in western critical traditions since the best quality South Asian studies are available primarily in the West, since one has to present papers and attend conferences there to be counted as a scholar even in India, the Indian critical narrative also gets driven by the West. However, what is often forgotten is that looking outward implies having one's own position from which to understand the standpoints of others. Prabhakar Shrotriya clearly articulates his position in a previous work of his, *Kaal Yatri Hai Kavita* (Poetry is a Time-Traveller):

Our past experiences have played a vital role in human history—in both a positive and a negative sense... Tradition is a river whichever flows and renews itself, and what does not flow is neither a river nor a tradition.... In this sense, when we drink a draught of water from a river, we partake of its whole journey.... Tradition similarly gifts us effortlessly and unknowingly all it has earned, whether we accept it or not.¹

This position is clearly reiterated in *Bharat Mein Mahabharat* as the continuum between the past, present and the future is emphasized:

The Mahabharata is in its totality a collective narrative of the extended experiences of human civilization. That is how we must interpret the long period that it took to compose and consolidate this epic. All the integrations and disintegrations, the disjunctures and dislocations, which it embodies are nothing but metaphorical endeavours constantly to attain coherence and cogent sequence (p. x).

Shrotriya comments on what is meant by *The Mahabharata* as a *dharma grantha* and as *itihaas*. Here again, as Shrotriya points out, the Indian philosophic traditions have to be understood because dharma is itself beyond definition, being subtle and tangled, changing according to the person, circumstances, place and time. There being no fixed tenets of dharma which are considered sacrosanct, *The Mahabharata*, continuously explores these and explodes many of them. The only underlying touchstone of dharma is that nothing is above human welfare and whatever upholds, nurtures and sustains human life is dharma. This was postulated in *Yoga Vasishtha* also. However, since human life itself is so problematic and full of infinite possibilities, *The Mahabharata* confronts the dilemmas of conflicting dharmas that the characters find themselves in. Possible resolutions are pointed to by presenting issues and characters from many different angles but these usually leave more questions than answers. It is this characteristic of *The Mahabharata* that provides space for future interpretations and creations according to a writer's own seeking and hence perspectives. What Shrotriya had earlier said of *Meghadootam* can be equally be said of *The Mahabharata*:

¹Prabhakar Shrotriya (1993), *Kaal Yatri Hai Kavita*. New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, p.11.

A classic imbues numerous human characteristics, systems and conceptions with its own flavour and resonances, just as the sun though fixed in one place irradiates and invests with significance all objects of creation, each in its own way.... That is precisely how a classic transmits its influence and inspiration.²

Hence the text itself provides for endless interpretations and recreations including ones where the names of the characters from *The Mahabharata* are used in completely different narratives and situations far removed from Vyasa. That is why Shrotriya agrees with poet Dinkar who says that every time change takes place in our society and its culture, the protagonists of *The Mahabharata* find new interpretations. The 'eye' of the reader too changes because if *The Mahabharata* has its own universe with its own norms, so do the recreations. The vastness of *The Mahabharata's* universe comes from *The Mahabharata* itself anarchically shattering the norms that it itself postulates and then regrouping the fragments. This enables new writers to create works in which any argument or point of view that a writer chooses can be supported by Vyasa's own narrative. This, if one pauses is not so different from oral retellings, the tradition to which *The Mahabharata* belongs where the narrative is always new, depending on the teller, the audience's response, the milieu in which it is being narrated and the occasion.

Again Shrotriya not only analyses *The Mahabharata* as an *itihaas* which really for Indians means, 'so it happened', but what is remarkable is his defence of the Indian notion of history. Moving away from the Western concept of history he points out has a value of its own. He asks the question, why does a nation need to know its history? Probably so that generations recognize the uniqueness and realize the dynamism of their traditions that allow them room to develop what is appropriate in them for them and leave out the dead tissues so that they can begin their journey from where the last generations left it. This is a continuous process and can hardly be attained by the mere knowledge of kings, their kingdoms or the wars that they fought. True history is gleaned from the achievements, actions, knowledge, experience and creative works of human beings.

The Mahabharata is *itihaas* because it holds a mirror to the diseased society through the fratricidal war for the throne of Hastinapur between the Kauravas and Pandavas. It projects what can happen in the future when the milieu is of ever changing values and understandings. That is why it is not so much a narrative of war but a negation of it as an instrument for establishing peace.

Having laid out his critical vision clearly, Shrotriya first looks at Sanskrit works and then takes us on a journey through time and languages to explore works that could be considered recreations of *The Mahabharata* or are based on episodes and characters from it. While Jaimini's *Mahabharata* seems to be dismissed by Shrotriya without too much critical comment, he presents an astute analysis of Kalidasa's *Abhijnan Shakuntalam*. As he points out, while Vyasa's Shakuntala is forthright in her condemnation of Dushyanta, Kalidasa's Shakuntala is a romantic figure. Further, mitigating factors are provided to Dushyanta by Kalidasa for his apparent lapse of memory in not recognizing Shakuntala that are not available to Vyasa's Dushyanta. Shrotriya also points out how Kalidasa's poetry adds to the

²Prabhakar Shrotriya (1995, rpt. 2005), *Meghdoot: Ek Antaryatra*. New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, p.17.

portrayal of Shakuntala as a beautiful girl awakened to her first love. Shrotriya makes an interesting comparison between Sita and Shakuntala and shows the possible influence of the *Ramayana* on Kalidasa:

Both of them finally arrived at or were conducted to an ashrama. Both were pregnant. Both gave birth to their sons in the ashramas of kind and sensitive rishis. Both had been banished because of the apprehension of a royal scandal (at least according to the Mahabharata in the case of Shakuntala). Dushyanta finally meets his son Bharata pretty much as Rama meets Lava and Kusha. That is just how a poet creates something new out of subconscious impulses. The *Mahabharata* already had implicit in its straightforward narrative many invisible dramatic turns which Kalidasa exploited to the full by filling them in with the hues of his classical artistry (p. 242).

Shrotriya also has a beautiful analysis of the symbolic elements in the Savitri story as it unfolds in Sri Aurobindo's English rendering of the *Savitri Upakhyan* from *The Mahabharata*. Savitri represents the Supreme Truth that has descended to earth to save human kind. Satyavana is the soul that has been overpowered by ignorance. Savitri's father Ashvapati is the lord of life. Savitri's journey, the confrontation with Yama, the lord of death and the eventual victory of truth over darkness points to Sri Aurobindo's belief of life divine on earth. Satyavana's 'rebirth' also shows that ultimately the soul in man is greater than his fate. As Savitri concludes: 'To experience love and oneness is the fulfilment of life. This is that ultimate truth which I wished to realize and have now realized' (p. 302).

While I am nowhere near the vast reading of Shrotriya, in some cases there might be some room for disagreement as in his reading of Bhyrappa's Kannada novel *Parva*. He finds Bhyrappa's novel unsatisfactory but it has to be acknowledged that it is a fascinating attempt by the novelist to demythify *The Mahabharata* and in the process bring out the exploitative relationship of the power structures of the urban and court cultures in their relationship with the various tribes of both the forests and the hills.

After analysing the narratives, Shrotriya takes some prominent characters from *The Mahabharata*—Krishna, Karna, Yudhishtira, Bhishma, Duryodhana and Draupadi—and analyses them according to his critical vision. It is interesting that only Draupadi is included in this gallery. One would imagine that Kunti too is as autonomous and pivotal as Draupadi when it comes to women characters. The book ends aptly with *The Mahabharata*'s journey among Bhil tribes and its journey beyond India's borders.

Shrotriya's book is a must-have for any serious student of *The Mahabharata*. Like its inspiration, s/he will find something new, something stimulating every time she picks it up. That is because it will always illuminate different and often hidden aspects of the reader's own being through a commentary on the various works and characters that it takes up. The crux of the matter cannot be better put than what Shrotriya says in a previous work of his, *Rachna Ek Yaataana Hai* (The Agony of Creativity): 'The journey of a writer cannot be from "self" to "self". It is the journey of the "self" from the "other" to the "other"... A sensitive critic, like a creative writer, can hardly escape this double agony.'³

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³Prabhakar Shrotriya (1985), *Rachna Ek Yatna Hai*. New Delhi: National Publishing House, p.vii.

From the Flame of Romance to the Furnace of Reality

Rakhshanda Jalil, *Liking Progress, Loving Change: A Literary History of the Progressive Writers Movement in Urdu*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, 482 pages, Rs 1,495. Social movements, and more so literary movements, do not sprout overnight. They evolve over time and surface gradually through expression in philosophic discourse, art and literature, and then eventually in life situations. Most critical writing on the emergence of the Progressive Movement in Urdu focuses mainly on literature of the second and third decades of the twentieth century. In her book, *Liking Progress, Loving Change: A Literary History of the Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu*, Rakhshanda Jalil does well in tracing the seeds of the progressive movement in the political consciousness triggered off in the 1857 War of Independence. She does not begin with the 1930s when the Progressive Writers' Association was actually hatched. In delineating the literary history of progressive writing in Urdu, Jalil takes pains to go into micro details of how 'progressive' ideas launched themselves more than half a century before getting consolidated into an Association of Progressive Writers. The research canvas is vast and the methodology meticulous.

The mapping of the evolution of progressive thought in Urdu literature in the first chapter of the book serves as a convincing backdrop to what was to culminate as one of the most powerful turning points in the history of modern thought. The narration begins with the interjection of political thought with a vital social consciousness gradually seeping into literary expression. Urdu poetry as well as fiction then began to move out of the world of magic, fantasy, sheer imagination or didactic moral tales. Jalil quotes Jameel Jalibi's comment on the shift from Persian to writing in Urdu: 'Urdu movement *was* the movement for Independence' (p.3). It is pertinent to note that when poets started breaking from tradition, language needed to be refashioned. From the established classical language to turn to the language of the soil—Urdu—in itself was a pointer at the new dynamics: the effort to slowly work out a 'down-to-earth' expression for an engagement with everyday social reality. The example given is that of poet Nazir Akbarabadi who in his 'chronicles', *Banjara Nama, Roti Nama and Aadmi Nama* articulated 'real' problems of real people without indulging in sentimentality! The well-translated samples that Rakhshanda Jalil provides from Nazir's texts support her point amply.

The responses of the poets to the 1857 Uprising are effectively recorded in the book. What is clearly stated is that the events of 1857 were 'a clarion call for the Muslims' to wake up. Two opposing camps of poets emerged, one hostile to the British and the other in favour of building bridges with them. Stellar poets such as Ghalib, Hali and Zakaullah belonged to the latter group. By highlighting the conflicting position, Jalil lays down the ground for what is to follow in the book, that is, the involvement of the writer/poet with the political and social reality of the times.

The role of two significant institutions in education, which contributed to the development of progressive ideals amongst the Muslims is also enumerated in the first chapter of the book. The Delhi Renaissance—rather short-lived—churned new ideas through education and the dynamic policies that were introduced by such institutions as the Delhi College and the Aligarh Muslim University through several scholarly stalwarts. In fact it is

noted that education got a new impetus with emphasis on science and translations of world knowledge into Urdu and Persian.

The reformist ideals of Syed Ahmad Khan inspired many a writer and scholar, who paved the way for 'social re-engineering' and opening up prospects for growth and enlightenment. Western Enlightenment had to be reconciled / counterpoised with Oriental traditions and as Jalil's thesis indicates, it is this period of transition that calls for greater understanding.

The doors to social realism lay open with the arrival of Premchand at this juncture, that is, at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Jalil puts it, this should be seen as a cornerstone for all progressive thought and writing. A whole breed of writers in Urdu came forward to carry the flame of reform and progress and create a mirror for society to look at itself in literature. Hali's *Majalis un-Nisa* (Conversations among Women, 1904–05) and *Chupki Daad*, for instance, pushed for understanding the value of education for women. There was a distinct change in subjects for literature then and Urdu journalism too began to flourish with fresh ideas.

The revolutionary strain in the works of Akbar Illahabadi and Mohammad Iqbal stands highlighted in the book through effective examples of their poetry: 'Understand the poetry of Akbar to be/The memorial to revolution.' Or then, 'The revolution is here; It's a New World, a new tumult' (Akbar Illahabadi). Iqbal, it is noted, spoke against injustice and inequality and wrote verses such as 'Break all the idols of tribe and caste/Break the old customs that fetter men fast!' The influence of Nietzsche, Bergson and Marx was tremendous and the transition in thought was also affected by industrialization, Westernization and indeed modernization.

The rise of 'Socialist Consciousness' is discussed in the second chapter of the book. Before the establishment of the Communist Party of India, socialist ideas influenced Urdu writers and there was an emergence of a new class of intelligentsia. Jalil narrates the political context of early twentieth century within which prospered socialist ideas of an educated Indian. Marxist-Communist documents became available in Urdu, the hatred for English imperialism became sharper and a new brand of revolutionaries came up on the scene. In fact as pointed out in this chapter, a thesis on Indian communism appeared that was widely circulated. What is fascinating is to see how the conflict between a modernist's romance with tradition was totally dismissed by the progressives who saw no hazy romanticism, as it is pointed out, in issues of poverty or inequality etc.

The language of Urdu fiction changed along with content and Jalil's dedicated research paints a convincing picture of the changing scene. Communist ideology now got more voices and writers such as Rashid Jehan, Mahmudzafar, Ahmed Ali and Sajjad Zaheer who came into their own as writers with a difference. These four writers published their stories together as *Angarey* in 1932, a book that was banned soon after—a landmark publication that created a furore. This volume was an attempt to suggest a new aesthetics of writing. Rakhshanda Jalil's book includes one of the rare critiques of *Angarey* in English, though this was preceded by Priyamvada Gopal's discussion on it in her book *Literary Radicalism in India* (2005). *Angarey* got to be more known for the reaction it received, rather than for its content. Not many people got to read the book for a long time.

Soon after the publication of this volume of literary history, *Angarey* was translated and published in English. This would make the analysis in English more meaningful for those

who cannot read Urdu. A chapter in this book focuses on the stormy reactions to the publication of *Angarey*. The depiction of the complexity of the varied reactions, it is hoped, will provoke other critics to debate the efficacy of different arguments. For instance, note the comment that there is no 'attempt whatsoever at social reform' in *Angarey*. It is interesting that Jalil chooses to end the chapter with a series of questions related to the significance of *Angarey* for the Progressive Writers' Movement.

The influence of Russian writers, the initiation of the Progressive Writers Association and the All India Progressive Writers Conference of 1936, all these and more are mapped closely in this book if only to bring out the process of establishing the dynamics of what was a very important literary component in the Urdu movement. The temper of the times was captured comprehensively. Questions related to the status of women, obscenity in literature and oppression of the poor were raised and discussed and writers such as Ismat Chughtai and others stepped forward boldly in realistically depicting social issues in their fiction.

The setting up of the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA), it is stated, is not to be isolated from the social and political context of the times. Not only does the author explore the Indian context, the Western scene too is examined through a close look at Sajjad Zaheer's life in London and the influences on him. Zaheer decided to return to India in 1935. He started *New Indian Literature*, as reported, with some funding from Moscow. The description of Sajjad Zaheer's attempts at establishing different branches of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) is extensive and it is interesting to read how he had no idea that his visit to Punjab would reap a golden harvest in Urdu literature. Writers such as Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Mirza Adeb, Sahir Ludhianvi and many others from the Punjab raised the banner of progressive literature high.

Premchand's presidential speech at AIPWA, *Sahitya ka Uddeshya* (The Aim of Literature) created a great impact. Jalil highlights the significance of many features of this speech in which Premchand seeks to 'redefine the parameters of beauty'. In this chapter other important speeches at the conference by writers such as Firaq Gorakhpuri, Mahmudzafer, Ahmed Ali and others too are summarized. This greatly helps the reader to participate in the ideas represented in the conference. The conference and its impact on a large number of people have been most appropriately pronounced as a landmark in this literary history.

This review of this voluminous literary history of PWM will in itself become massive if there is a detailed overview of the rest of the book. The subsequent chapters deal with writers and poets who actually demonstrated progressive ideas and helped develop a whole new aesthetics of writing. Jalil painstakingly covers poets such as Majaz, Faiz, Makhdoom Mohiuddin and others whose commitment to progressive thought gets reflected in their poetry clearly. Fiction writers, amongst others Ismat Chughtai, Bedi and Krishan Chander are presented in their glory of progressive ideals. One is a bit sceptical about Manto's inclusion in this list in the light of his refusal to be 'categorized', even though the themes of his fiction clearly fit into what is called 'progressive'.

The concluding chapter which discusses the decline of PWM effectively describes how the raging flame of the movement slowly faded away in the late 1950s after having ignited a radical change in thought and writing in Urdu. While this book of extensive research and an intimate examination of the Progressive Movement in Urdu literature in English is

most welcome, it would have been highly appreciated if the debate between the ‘modernists’ and the ‘progressives’ too had found some space. The subsequent merger of the two in modern times and the richness of Urdu literature thereupon would come home better with a sensitive understanding of the vital points of divergence as well as their confluence.

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The English language and Dalit empowerment

Aladi Uma, K. Suneetha Rani and D. Murali Manohar (eds), *English in the Dalit Context*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2014, 182 pages, Rs 625.

The English language is the *lingua franca* of India. Over recent decades its importance has grown more than ever before. In a globalized world, English language has got both national and international importance. Now it is seen as a language of economic opportunities and social and intellectual capital. Dalits in India have also realized the growing significance of English. They see it not only as a language of economic opportunities but also as a language of emancipation. How to equip themselves with this global language is a big challenge which lies before them.

English in the Dalit Context, edited by Alladi Uma, K. Suneetha Rani and D. Murali Manohar, is a collection of the proceedings of a national seminar organized by the UGC-DSA programme, Department of English, University of Hyderabad. It contains 14 scholarly articles along with a concise joint introduction by the editors. This anthology presents varied views both by Dalit intellectuals and non-Dalit scholars on the question of the English language in the Dalit context. Some key issues dealt with in this book are: what should be the medium of instruction? Is the English language essential for the emancipation of Dalits? Does English language empower Dalits or instead does it disempower them? Should English be taught as one of the subjects or should it be the medium of instruction? What should be the pedagogical approach in teaching and learning English language and Dalit literature in schools/colleges/universities?

Is the English language essential for Dalits for economic and social emancipation? This book problematizes this issue instead of just answering 'yes' or 'no'. Vellikkeel Raghavan in his article 'On Worshipping English, the Dalit Goddess: Manu, Missionary, Macaulay and the Market' argues that English is a language of emancipation and is beyond caste prejudices. His standpoint is in line with that of Savitribai Phule who said, 'through English casteism can be destroyed and Brahminical teaching can be hurled away'; B.R. Ambedkar who said, 'English is the milk of lioness'; Namishray who said, 'Dalits can use English as a weapon'; and Chandra Bhan Prasad who said, 'English-speaking Dalits are less disrespected' (p.127).

What should be the medium of education? Most of the chapters emphatically argue that the medium of education should be English from primary school education to higher education. At present two different education systems are prevalent in India. Public schools adopt English as the medium of instruction whereas government schools adopt the regional language. Most Dalit children cannot afford public school education and therefore have to study in regional languages. But higher education in India mostly uses English as the medium of instruction. Dalit children who have primarily studied in regional languages find it hard to cope with whatever subject they study at the higher levels. Proficiency in English is required today for all jobs, especially those in the private sector. Suresh Kurapati in his article 'Mother Tongue vs. English Medium of Instruction for Dalits: A Survey' stresses that studying English has become 'a life and death issue for Dalits as far as employment in the globalised private sectors is concerned' (p.82). He presents a survey he conducted among 26 Dalit Ph.D. scholars. He found that 'twenty-three out of twenty-six Dalit scholars strongly recommended

English as the medium of instruction for Dalits' (p.81). This does not mean the rejection of mother tongues. In the same survey Kurapati found that Dalit scholars also wish to study their mother tongues as one of the compulsory subjects.

Can English language remove caste discrimination? English may be a language of economic opportunities and empowerment in this globalized world but opinion is divided on the question of whether English language can remove caste discrimination. M. Dasan in his article 'Englishing Dalits: Problems and Perspectives' draws an analogy with the US, Australia and some African countries where racial discrimination continued even after the natives were able to use the colonial language to improve their social and economic status. He observes:

The recent slogan, 'English Dalit Goddess and as a saving grace,' suggesting that English is a panacea for all the ills of Dalits, seems to be reductive and ahistorical. Even if all Dalits attain proficiency in English, untouchability and discrimination based on caste, colour and gender will not cease to exist (p.52).

Dasan goes to the extent of arguing that Englishing Dalits only creates 'English-educated Dalit elites' who do not show solidarity with the masses. Instead, the more educated a Dalit, the more alienated s/he is from a majority of the Dalit masses (p.57). However, Sunny M. Kapikkad believes that in the context of Kerala, Dalits could reinvent and articulate themselves through English education as new 'social agents'. English became a powerful tool for Dalits to break the silence imposed by the caste-imprinted Kerala modernity and to attain their right to speak for themselves. He believes that English education definitely gave a voice and visibility to Dalits (p.67).

This book also attempts to bring out the politics of mother tongues and the nationalism built around them. Under the present school education policy which has encouraged upper caste people to embrace English, society and the government want Dalits to show patriotism by becoming the protectors of regional languages. Here it is important once again to note Vellikkeel Raghvan's opinion:

The essence of Sanskrit language was exclusivity. So also when Indian regional languages became 'standardised' they also became exclusive, mainly with respect to the Dalits and Adivasis. Thus through a tragic replication of history, the modern Indian mainstream languages became Sanskrits in their engagements with Dalits and their languages (p.127).

On the other hand, the English language which has no caste legacy attached to it becomes a language of emancipation. This language is venerated by some Dalit intellectuals like Chandra Bhan Prasad as the 'Dalit Goddess'. The acquisition of this language is seen as 'social capital' and 'intellectual capital'. It is a mass movement against the caste order, and against local languages. Thus writers like Raghavan see English 'not only as a tool for liberation, but also as a counter-narrative against the value-laden languages of India which are discriminatory and elitist' (p.137).

Not only does this book try to look at English as the language of emancipation and a language of the future but it also attempts to suggest a pedagogy of how to effectively teach the English language and Dalit literature in academic institutions. It notes that the introduction of Dalit literature/Dalit studies in Indian universities comes as a 'shock' to many academics. About the non-introduction of Dalit literature in university curricula, Raj Kumar, in his article 'Literature, Language and Pedagogy' says:

None of the universities of Orissa has thought of introducing Oriya Dalit literature as part of their syllabi till date. There is politics behind this lack of initiative on the part of these

universities. But Orissa is not the only state where no initiative has been taken to introduce Dalit Studies. Barring a few no university across India has felt comfortable about having a course on Dalit issues. And those universities which already have Dalit studies are facing many challenges in terms of student enrolment, infrastructural facilities, pedagogical approaches, etc. (p.73).

Raj Kumar emphasizes that ‘teaching Dalit Studies will definitely demand looking at Indian culture, civilisation, history, language, religion, and literature from a new perspective’ (p.74). Therefore a teacher must be sensitive to the various social and cultural practices from which literary practices have emerged.

Arguing for a new mode of pedagogy, Anand Mahanand in his article ‘English in Deprived Contexts’ emphasizes that both methods and materials are to be reoriented:

When our goal is to provide Dalit children education in English we need to be sensitive to their socio-cultural milieu. Our methods and materials should be in tune with their cultural context. It is important to integrate learners’ cultural resources; as we know these children come to school with a lot of cultural resources. Their culture is rich in oral traditions, which include songs, tales, music, games and so on.... following indigenous methods of learning, we should orient our materials and methods accordingly while teaching English. I have undertaken an experiment with such learners, using their cultural resources to teach English, and the materials have proved to be effective (pp.96–97).

On the whole, this book does not take a clear position on the issue of English in the Dalit context, nor does it take a stand on whether English is a panacea for Dalit emancipation. It does not reject the learning of local languages by Dalits; rather, it presents varied opinions on this and other related issues. The book constantly problematizes the whole issue of English versus regional languages and their politics in a caste-ridden society like India. The great strength of the book perhaps lies precisely in its polyphony, for it invites and even compels a reader to engage with the vital debate on English versus local languages. It makes one rethink which one is a goddess and which one a demon, and whether they can both co-exist and transform each other.

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Ecology and environmental humanities

Murali Sivaramakrishnan and Ujjwal Jana (eds), *Ecological Criticism for Our Times: Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry*. New Delhi: Authors press, 2011, 298 pages, Rs 549.

Murali Sivaramakrishnan and Ujjwal Jana's edited volume *Ecological Criticism for Our Times: Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry* positions itself as a sequel to the 'first book on ecocriticism' produced by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) India, namely Sivaramakrishnan's earlier work, *Nature and Human Nature: Literature, Ecology, Meaning* (2009). Although in the preface the editors lament the difficulties of publishing in the humanities, *Ecological Criticism* successfully navigates these hurdles and is an important addition to scholarship on environmental criticism, both in India and around the world. The volume consists of 16 chapters by scholars from India, Europe and North America, and covers literature from early times through the first years of the twenty-first century.

The introduction, written by Sivaramakrishnan and titled 'Continuities and Interdependence: Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry—Ecological Criticism for Our Times' notes that although ecocriticism as an academic discipline is relatively new to India, ecological wisdom and concerns have deep roots in South Asia. Arguing that ecologically sensitive criticism is an outgrowth not only of the founding of the ASLE (established 1992 in the United States) but also of the rise of environmental concerns, crises in the humanities and new perceptions of the relationships between gender and nature, Sivaramakrishnan also introduces readers to ASLE India and summarizes each of the book's chapters. In the first chapter, also written by Sivaramakrishnan and titled 'Echoing Eco-Spiritual Values for a New World: An Inter-reading of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*' he uses this 1922 German-language novel on a young man in search of fulfilment as a springboard for further discussion on the contemporary obsession with transitory forms as well as of the possibilities of an 'eco-spiritual vision'. He concludes, 'For our world of the present which is devoid of any semblance of the sacred where earth and sky and space are looked upon as mere resource for human beings, Sidhartha hastens an eco-spiritual, value-ridden, meaningful universe, that reverberates with the sacred and the beautiful' (p. 41).

In the chapter that follows, 'Ecomorphic Horizons: From the Dark Ages to the Romantic Big Bang of Culture and Beyond', Mihai A. Stroe explores the concept of the 'ecological man' in various schools of Western thought, from the *Bible* to the twentieth century. By 'ecological man' he means, a 'way of perception, a way of seeing our place in history and the cosmos' (p. 44). Arguing that 1866 was Year Zero of ecological thinking with the publication of Ernst Heinrich Phillip August Haeckel's *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* and his introduction of the concept of *ecology*, and that 1973 was Year Zero of deep ecological thinking with Arne Naess's introduction of the concept of *deep ecology*, Stroe goes on to discuss the significance of these developments and introduces a number of other key terms. He also speaks of his longing for a future that draws on the energies of past generations, 'all building up an interrelated system of thought with a view to forming a perfect knowledge of life—of the kind today's *ecosophy* is striving to attain... potentially having the power to revert today's ecocide into a universal feast of life' (pp. 86–87).

The fourth chapter, Reena J. Andrews's 'Ecocentric Dimensions in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers' focuses on this American writer's vision of 'inhumanism', his 'philosophical alternative to humanism, exhorting man to mature past the puerile efforts to subdue nature and attain a state of greater awareness of and concern for the physical world' (p. 96). This close look at the work of a single writer nicely complements the preceding chapters. So too does the following chapter 'Descriptions of Landscape in Sylvia Plath's *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees: An Approach*'. In this chapter B.S. Korde draws attention to the ecological underpinnings of Plath's poetry, looking at the many natural phenomena featured and at times glorified. He also remarks on the artificial nature of much of contemporary human existence, relating Plath's work to that of earlier writers including W. B. Yeats and William Blake. The sixth chapter, Margarita Carretero-González's 'The Other Wordsworth: A Female Gaze on the Natural World' continues in this vein with its focus on Dorothy Wordsworth, sister and confidante of William Wordsworth and a powerful influence on his work. Revealing the challenges that the elder Wordsworth faced as a woman in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, Carretero-González discusses the ecological resonances of her Grasmere journal, including the harmonious human- non-human relationships she enjoyed during long walks in the countryside, concluding that the Alfoxden and Grasmere journals reveal Wordsworth as 'one of the finest nature writers in English literature' (p. 136).

Ecological Criticism for Our Times pans out in the following chapter, Priyadarshi Patnaik's 'Embodying Nature through Aesthetic Experience'. Early in his essay Patnaik contrasts Western and Indian understandings of the relationship between nature and art. Attention then turns to the miniature art tradition of *rāgamālā* and its 'embodiment of nature in a miniature scale' in the context of music, spirituality and the codification of time. The chapter underlines the demands that *rāgamālā* places on connoisseurs. Wrapping up with reference to *Rāgini Bhairavi* and *Rāga Bhairavi*, Patnaik argues that 'the aesthetic experience which distinctively involves sensitivity to the subtle nuances of nature and its deep appreciation is achieved here through a process of internalization of certain cultural codes, which when correctly evoked bring about not only an aesthetic experience, but almost bring back nature to be experienced in all its immediacy' (p. 144). In the next chapter titled 'People and Forests: An Eco-Social Reading of Kadamanitta's Poems' P. Rohith continues this examination of Indian cultural products by bringing to light ecological consciousness in the late-twentieth-century writings of Ramakrishna Paniker, also known as Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan or simply Kadamanitta. This notable Indian poet joined the ultimately successful campaign against the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project (SVHP), which aimed to submerge nearly 1,000 hectares of ecologically significant rainforests and grasslands in the so-called Silent Valley, a forest in northern Kerala (southwest India) relatively devoid of human habitation. Rohith discusses how Kadamanitta addressed the intrusion of 'development' on this land by drawing on Marxist and Naxalite ideologies and in so doing introduced a new aesthetic into Malayalam writing. In sum, he argues that Kadamanitta's poems mount a 'major offensive against existing socio-economic and political patterns... these literary texts urge the existing social as well as political systems to seriously rethink and redefine human progress and development in a way that combines reverence of nature with respect for human need' (p. 158).

The ninth chapter turns to architecture and archaeology with Elmar Schenkel's 'Poppo Pingel and Hugo Kükelhaus—Exploring the Physical Roots of Architecture' while the tenth chapter returns to India with Usha V.T.'s 'Many Ecologies of the Self: Inner and Outer Spaces in the Poetry of Kamala Das/Suraiya, An Ecofeminist Reading'. Kamala Das/Suraiya was one of India's best known English-language poets, and Usha V.T. argues that her poetics 'lends itself to ecofeminist reading,' that it 'amply reflects her intense internal struggle against the reduction of the female into being a mere body and the patriarchal society's victimization of women' (pp. 169–70). Kamala is not a 'nature poet', but non-human landscapes and a woman's immersion in them are an integral part of her work which regularly breaks Indian poetic conventions. Focus on ecofeminism—which challenges the patriarchal oppression of women and the capitalistic exploitation of nature—continues in the eleventh chapter, K. Reshmi's 'Body as Colony: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*'. A futuristic novel set in 2195 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals environmental pollution, deforestation and other ecological abuse as having a greater impact on women than on men; women are deprived of their rights, men having taken complete control of female reproduction. As Usha V.T. argues, in this novel Atwood 'uses ecofeminist metaphors linking body with the earth ... Ecofeminist discourse attempts to expose the metaphors which keep women, nature and animals bound together, thereby revealing their collective subordination' (p. 189).

The twelfth chapter, S. M. Gupta's 'Ecocritical Reading of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*' likewise spotlights a celebrated Canadian novel, addressing this narrative's explorations of the interconnections between people and the natural world, including human cruelty towards the non-human especially in the context of the zoo. As Gupta points out, this novel, set on a boat in the Pacific Ocean, is replete with descriptions of natural phenomena and demonstrates the possibilities of peaceful co-existence. After a chapter on Shakespeare and the environment—Sumana Biswas's 'An Ecocritical Expedition into Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*'—Sivaramakrishnan and Jana's *Ecological Criticism for Our Times* concludes with three chapters on more general concerns of environmental criticism: Wanda Baxter's 'To Know "Place": Proposed Curriculum that Integrates Literature and Science, Imagination and Reductionism,' Ujjwal Jana's 'Representation of Nature in Ancient Indian Literature: Some Reflections' and S Sivaramakrishnan's 'Life Lines: Water, Life, and the Indian Experience—Cultural Meanings, Social Significance.' While Baxter offers advice on course development, describing how ecocriticism can have greater 'real, and "real-world" impact,' Jana overviews the place of nature in early Indian writings, emphasizing the nation's long convention of depicting the 'organic relation of humans to the biological nature' (p. 257). For his part, Sivaramakrishnan wraps up the volume with an examination of the socio-cultural significance and the imaginary implication of water as a 'vital element, aesthetic metaphor, image as well as symbol' (p. 265).

Together these chapters mark an important milestone in Indian and in fact global ecocriticism. Introducing readers to a variety of topics and perspectives related to environmental humanities, they ably demonstrate possibilities for future research and for the integration of perspectives from around the world.

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