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IJMASRI, Vol. 2, issue 1, pp. 310- 315, Oct. -2023

<https://doi.org/10.53633/ijmasri>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY ADVANCED SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (IJMASRI)

ISSN: 2582-9130

IBI IMPACT FACTOR 1.5

DOI: 10.53633/IJMASRI

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

We have many literatures and many linguistic culture or sub-culture. Hence, the definition of Indian literature must be more complex than the one offered earlier. One needs to explain and explore the term further. In fact, both India and Indian literature need to be thought more clearly. The first important point to note is that Indian Literature has always meant “ancient literary works in Sanskrit. It is important to pause here and to think of what of what the term means to you, especially the term Ancient Indian Literature, or the term Classical Indian Literature. The oldest known piece of Indian literature is known as the Rig Veda, which consists of 1028 hymns written in Vedic Sanskrit. Although the majority of the ancient Indian literary works that have survived are religious texts, it is erroneous to characterise ancient Indian literature exclusively in terms of religion.

Indian literature spans a variety of literary forms, including epics, songs, dramatic and didactic poetry, narrative, and scientific writing, as well as oral poetry and music. Two ancient Indian epics are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Prior to the Gupta dynasty, a lot of secular literary works were produced. During this time, poetry and drama were in their prime. The principal topics of these works included political events, allegories, comedies, romances, and philosophical issues. In Southern India, ancient Indian writings were written in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, four Dravidian languages that also established their own literature and script. The earliest of these, with literature from the first decades of the Christian era, is Tamil. Three Sangam’s (meetings of poets and writers) held at separate eras resulted in this development. Sangam literature frequently explores the topics of politics, love, and war

Introduction

The earliest Indian literature took the form of the canonical Hindu sacred writings, known as the Veda, which were written in Sanskrit. To the Veda

were added prose commentaries such as the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. The production of Sanskrit literature extended from about 1500 BCE to about 1000 CE and reached its height of development in the 1st to 7th centuries CE. In addition to sacred and philosophical writings, such genres as

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erotic and devotional lyrics, court poetry, plays, and narrative folktales emerged. Because Sanskrit was identified with the Brahminical religion of the Vedas, Buddhism and Jainism adopted other literary languages (Pali and Ardhamagadhi, respectively). From these and other related languages emerged the modern languages of northern India. The literature of those languages depended largely on the ancient Indian background, which includes two Sanskrit epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as the *Bhagavata-purana* and the other Puranas. In addition, the Sanskrit philosophies were the source of philosophical writing in the later literatures, and the Sanskrit schools of rhetoric were of great importance for the development of court poetry in many of the modern literatures. The South Indian language of Tamil is an exception to this pattern of Sanskrit influence because it had a classical tradition of its own. Urdu and Sindhi are other exceptions.

Beginning in the 19th century, particularly during the height of British control over the subcontinent, Western literary models had an impact on Indian literature, the most striking result being the introduction of the use of vernacular prose on a major scale. Such forms as the novel and short story began to be adopted by Indian writers, as did realism and an interest in social questions and psychological description. A tradition of literature in English was also established in the subcontinent.

Ancient Indian Literature

Perhaps no other region in the world has created such a substantial amount of literature about knowledge and wisdom than India. For more than 300 years, Sanskrit—first in its Vedic form, then in its classical form—dominated India’s literary tradition.

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The principal topics of these works included political events, allegories, comedies, romances, and philosophical issues. In Southern India, ancient Indian writings were written in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, four Dravidian languages that also established their own literature and script. The earliest of these, with literature from the first decades of the Christian era, is Tamil. Three Sangam’s (meetings of poets and writers) held at separate eras resulted in this development. Sangam literature frequently explores the topics of politics, love, and war.

Vedic Literature

Between the end of the Indus Valley Civilization and the start of the second urbanisation in the central Indo-Gangetic Plain in 600 BCE, India’s history is known as the Vedic period, or Vedic age (c. 1500–c. 500 BCE). When the Vedic literature, which includes the Vedas, was written in the northern Indian subcontinent (1300-900 BCE). The Vedas are vast collections of religious writings from ancient India that were written in Vedic Sanskrit. They are the earliest texts in both Sanskrit literature and Hinduism. It is said that the Vedas were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. They are frequently referred to as Shrutis as a result. The four Vedas are Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda, and Veda. The mantra text of each Veda is known as a Samhita.

There are two types of Vedic literature:

- Shrutis Literature
- Smritis Literature

Shrutis literature

The term “Shrutis Literature” refers to the sacred texts, which include the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyaka’s, and Upanishads and is derived from the

word “Shruti,” which means “to hear. “Since it is canonical, contains revelation, and contains unquestionable truth, shruti literature is regarded as eternal.

Smriti literature

The word “Smriti,” which refers to supplementary information that could change over time, literally means “to be remembered.” Vedanga, Shad Darshana, Puranas, Itihasa, Upaveda, Tantras, Agamas, and Upangas are all part of the Smriti literature.

Ramayana and Mahabharata

Two ancient Indian epics are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These have been in their current form for millennia and represent the ethnic memory of the Indian people. They were transmitted orally over the years by singers and storytellers, and they were probably first recorded in the second century BCE. Generally credited to Maharishi Valmiki is the epic Ramayana. The 24000 verses that make up the Ramayana are organised into seven Khandas, or volumes. It’s written in a poetic style with both entertainment and education in mind. It is Rama’s story, and it describes how to achieve the four Purusharthas of human existence: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. With one million lines, The Mahabharata is the longest poem ever written. The Itihasa Purana, or Mythical History, is what it is called (because this history is not merely the depiction of events that happened, but these are the events that will always happen and repeat).

It was written by Vyasa and recounts the succession struggle between the Pandavas and the Kauravs for the crown, weaving together numerous incidents to create one epic. In addition to the main story of the fight, a later addendum to the Bhagavad Gita also includes an integrated view of Dharma (performance of righteous duty in the selfless way of Nishkama Karma).

Puranas

They helped Hinduism develop from the ancient Vedic faith. In Sanskrit, the word “Purana” literally translates as “to resurrect the old. “Most likely during the third and eleventh centuries AD, the Puranas were written.

The literature of the Puranas is broad and addresses a variety of subjects, including but not limited to: Cosmology, Genealogy/Medicine, Astronomy, Goddesses and Gods, Grammar, Demigods, Heroes, Sages.

They were written in order to show the populace the veracity of the Vedas. The Puranas impart philosophical and theological principles via well-known folklore and mythological tales. The Puranas contain numerous tales and anecdotes from India’s religious, social, and cultural past when paired with the Itihas (Ramayana and Mahabharata). Based on the writings of Lomaharshana (a Ved Vyasa), the 18 Upan Puranas

Earlier Buddhist Writings

The Buddha’s teachings were rehearsed and approved in the First Council in 483 BC, and then they were divided into the Three Pitakas. His instructions were recorded in Pali somewhere around 25 BCE. The earliest Buddhist literature is in Pali. The Sutta Pitaka is a collection of conversations between the Buddha and his followers. A compendium of rules for monastic organisations is known as the Vinaya Pitaka. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is a systematised philosophical analysis of monks’ academic and teaching output. The Divyavadana, Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, and Milind Panha, among others, are important Buddhist texts. Milindapanho is a compilation of conversations between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the Buddhist Nagasena. The Jatakas are an important part of early Buddhist literature and are a collection of tales that have been incorporated into many sculptures. Ashvaghosha is the author of the Sanskrit book Buddhacharita, which details the Buddha’s life.

Important Indian ancient Sanskrit literary works

Some of the ancient Indian literary works include the following:

Mudraakshasa

Time period-4th century to the 8th century CE. Author –Visakhadatta. Vishaka Datta's political intrigue Mudra rakshasa, which was written in the sixth century CE, is set in an intriguing era of Indian history. At the beginning of the play, Chanakya tries to persuade Rakshasa to join his cause so that Chandragupta can have a capable minister on his side. The name Mudra rakshasa alludes to Rakshasa's signet ring. It was taken by a spy for Chanakya.

Arthashastra

Time period-2nd century BCE and 3rd century CE. Author-Kautilya. An ancient Indian text written in Sanskrit on statecraft, political science, economics, and military strategy is known as the Arthashastra. The Arthashastra is a text on politics, economics, military strategy, governmental function, and social organisation that is attributed to the philosopher and prime minister Kautilya (also known as Chanakya).

Malavikagnimitram

Time period-5th century Author-Kalidasa. Kalidasa wrote the Sanskrit play Malavikagnimitram. It is his first play, and it is based on several incidents that took place under Pushyamitra Shunga. The tale of Agnimitra, the Shunga Emperor in Vidisha, and his love for the lovely handmaiden of his chief queen is told in Malavikagnimitram.

Vikramorvasiyam

Time period-5th century CE. Author-Kalidasa. In the fifth century CE, Kalidasa wrote the play Vikramorvasiyam. The plot centres on a human who develops feelings for a celestial girl. The piece is renowned for a "crazy scene" in which the bereaved monarch wanders through a beautiful forest while apostrophizing different flowers and trees as if they were his love. One interpretation states that the term

"Vikrama" in the title refers to Vikramaditya, the patron king of Kalidasa.

Raghuvamsa

Time period-5th century Kalidasa. The great poet Kalidasa created the literary masterpiece Raghuvamsa. The drama's creator, Raghuvamsa Kalidasa, is honoured. The drama centres on Lord Rama's ancestors, descendants, and the legendary warrior Raghu. The heroism and power of the legendary warrior Raghu are major themes of Raghuvamsa. It chronicles the lives of some of India's greatest military rulers. Lord Rama is without a doubt the most well-known of them all, as his life's story was preserved in the ancient epic Ramayana.

Mricchakatika

Time period – 5th century CE. Author-Sudraka. Mricchakatika is a drama that takes place during the rule of King Plaka of the Pradyota dynasty in the historic city of Ujjayanai, India. Vasantasena is a wealthy courtesan or nagarvadhu who falls in love with Charudatta, a noble but poor young Brahmin. The play stands out among the existing Sanskrit plays for concentrating on a hypothetical situation rather than a classic tale or legend.

Kiratarjuniya

Time period-6th century Author-Bharavi. The epic poem Kiratarjuniya by Bharavi is regarded as the most potent piece of Sanskrit literature. In eighteen cantos, Lord Shiva's battle with Arjuna (who took the form of a kirata, or "mountain-dwelling hunter") at Indrakeeladri Hills near Vijayawada is described. It is one of the three main Sanskrit mahakavyas, or great epics, together with the Naisadhacarita and the Shishupala Vadha.

Sisupalavadha

Time period- 7th or 8th century. Author- Magha. Magha created the Shishupala Vadha, a masterwork of classical Sanskrit poetry, in the 7th or 8th century (kavya). This Sanskrit poem, or kavya, is based on one

of the epics, specifically the Mahabharata. Lord Krishna is enraged by Shishupala, the king of the Chedis in central India after he insults him repeatedly in an assembly. Shishupala is then killed.

Kamasutra

Time period-400 BCE to 300 CE. Author-Vatsyayana. The Kamasutra stands out among Sanskrit literature for having a nearly complete disregard for caste and class (varna) (jati). The writing style combines prose with poetry in the anustubh metre. The literature refers to the Purusharthas, or acceptable life goals, which are defined as desire, sexuality, and emotional fulfilment. The chapters of the book cover a variety of topics, including courtship, finding a partner, flirting, and maintaining authority in marriage.

Sangam Literature

Around the third century B.C. to the third century A.D., South India (the region south of the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers) saw the Sangam Period. Four Dravidian languages —Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—evolved their own literature and script and were used to transcribe ancient Indian manuscripts in Southern India. The best work was published in anthologies, which were censored by distinguished thinkers who congregated at the Sangam. These literary works served as the earliest illustrations of Dravidian literature. The earliest of them, Tamil, has literature that dates back to the very beginning of the Christian era. This developed throughout the period of three Sangam's, which were gatherings of poets and scribes that took place at various times. Politics, love, and war are all common themes in Sangam literature. Ettutogai, Pattuppattu, and Tolkappiyam are two significant works from the era. The most well-known author of our time is Thiruvalluvar, who wrote Kural, a book that touches on many facets of life and religion. Elango Adigal penned Silappathikaram, and Sittalai Sattanar wrote Manimegalai, the two sagas. Additionally, they provide insightful information on Sangam politics and society.

Importance of Ancient Literary Works

There is a great deal more to understand and absorb from ancient Indian literature than only the Vedas and epics. Ancient literature also explains the Dharma shastras, which define a person's obligations and describe how a person should develop as a character. Shastras encompassed mathematics and science. Kautilya's book Arthashastra, written in Sanskrit, discusses economic and governmental policy. The popularity of Buddhist literature written in the Pali language also increased. It includes works of Buddhist literature like poetry, philosophy, and some grammar. Ancient Indian literature is both beautiful and challenging to read and understand. The formation of a person's character and the quest for happiness are both facilitated by the Vedas, Shastras, and Upanishads. The primary subjects of old Sanskrit poets included love, nature, panegyric, moralising, and narrative. The ancient poets spoke passionately of physical love when it came to love; they saw nature in connection to man rather than for its own sake. The Sanskrit Kavya reaches a level of quality and perfection unmatched in Kalidasa's literature.

Conclusion

In its broadest sense, Indian literature encompasses both religious and commonplace writing, epic and lyric poetry, dramatic and didactic poetry, narrative, and academic prose, as well as oral poetry and music. There is perhaps no other region of the world that has produced such a vast array of knowledge and wisdom books. Indian literature from the past is both beautiful and challenging to read and comprehend.

Thus, we can see that the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two pillars on which the edifice of Indian culture is built, these and the puranas have travelled across the land and found avatars in almost all Indian languages. We can also see that there is a great deal of cross-pollination in Indian literatures, and that they go through similar phases and movements. This is because the political structures, the social institutions, the cultural roots and traditions, the literary influences, are shared across the land by all the people. Thus, one can talk of Indian Literature, where languages have established themselves separately, often define

themselves in opposition to other languages, and yet show the same characteristics and are a result of the modern period as well, in the years leading to our independence from British rule, and band in the years after our independence.

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