



# Literary historiography and canon formation in Indian languages: a critical inquiry

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## Abstract

This essay highlights the intricate interactions between language, culture, and sociopolitical institutions by critically analysing the evolution of literary historiography and the processes of canon construction in Indian languages. Indian literary history has historically been told through selected frameworks that marginalize vernacular, oral, and subaltern literatures while favouring dominant language and socioeconomic groupings. The study shows how institutional, ideological, and educational systems have shaped which texts are canonized and why by following the historical paths of literary historiography from colonial to postcolonial eras. The issues of modernity, globalization, and multilingual literary pluralism are also examined in the article, with a focus on the necessity of an inclusive, critical historiographical approach that acknowledges various literary modernities and varied aesthetic traditions. The study makes the case for a rethinking of canon construction that is egalitarian, reflexive, and sensitive to historically excluded voices by drawing on theoretical viewpoints from cultural capital, postcolonial critique, and comparative literature studies. The study shows that literary historiography is a dynamic process that influences cultural memory, identity, and literary value rather than just being a record of texts. The study suggests a form of literary history that is dialogic, plural, and sensitive to India's diverse linguistic and cultural terrain by emphasizing inclusivity and critical interaction. In addition to improving our knowledge of Indian literature, this method offers a framework for reconsidering the canon of literature in ways that promote justice, diversity, and cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Literary historiography, Canon formation, Indian languages, Literary pluralism, Postcolonial critique, Cultural capital, Inclusive literary history

## Introduction

Writing literary histories and creating canons cannot be viewed as an impartial act of record in India's intricate and multilingual literary world. In Indian contexts, literary historiography entails not only following the chronological evolution of texts but also challenging the institutions, values, and power dynamics that determine what constitutes "literature" and why some works become canonical while others remain obscure or marginal. In this way, literary historiography serves as a critical lens that shows how language, culture, and sociopolitical forces interact with the construction, contestation, and legitimization of historical narratives. Fundamentally, literary historiography poses the question, "What histories do we write, and for whom?" Because literary creation and its histories are scattered over dozens of languages, each with its own traditions, literary norms, and critical frameworks, this topic is particularly pressing in India. In their examination of early Malayalam novels, Vinayan and Raj (2021) [13] note that "the overarching presence of a single work like Indulekha in literary histories has led to a skewed understanding of the evolution of the genre, eclipsing other contemporaneous texts that also contributed to its modernity" (p. 5). This implies that canon building entails decisions that favour some tales, forms, or aesthetic standards while disregarding others, frequently leading to a limited construction of literary histories that prioritize a few books over a large number of others.

Furthermore, it is impossible to separate canon construction in India from more general institutional and social power processes. Texts and languages connected to dominant social groups have historically been given preference in post-colonial curricula and national scholarly practices, frequently at the expense of subaltern voices. Structures like publishing gatekeeping, selective critical valuation, and curricular omissions continue to reinforce the exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi literatures from mainstream acknowledgment, as Sharma (2010) [11] critically observes in her research of postcolonial curricula (p. 142). This demonstrates how canonization is intricately linked to institutional structures, cultural politics, and historical injustices rather than being solely a question of aesthetic judgment. As a result, canon building becomes a contentious process where tradition, ideology, and identity come together. Attempts to narrativize a single literary past frequently reflects larger attempts to construct collective identities in the Indian context, where hundreds of languages and dialects coexist alongside historical concerns about nationhood and cultural unity. This is clear from discussions about whether and how to construct a "national literary canon." Decisions concerning inclusion and exclusion are inevitably made when writing literary histories, and these choices are influenced by issues of cultural authority and historical representation in addition to aesthetic principles. These interventions demonstrate that literary historiography is

about how histories are written as much as what is written about, and that cultural memory and identity are shaped by these historiographical decisions.

Furthermore, canonical narratives are significantly complicated by the diversity of Indian languages. In contrast to monolingual literary traditions, Indian literary historiography faces challenges with universal or solitary canonical schemas due to linguistic plurality, regional cultural particularities, and a variety of narrative forms. In edited volumes on Indian literary historiography, scholars such as Trivedi contend that this pluralism calls into question straightforward frameworks of canonization and encourages more inclusive, multi-layered understandings of literary histories that respect various linguistic traditions instead of absorbing them under a single hegemonic narrative (pp.ix–xii).

### Historical trajectories of literary historiography

In addition to tracking the historical development of literary texts, the history of literary historiography also documents the changing approaches, ideas, and ideological frameworks that authors and academics have used to analyse literary traditions. Literary histories initially appeared as celebratory, genre-based, descriptive accounts of literary accomplishment that reflected nationalist or cultural goals more than critical analysis. This early descriptive drive eventually gave way to more critical, analytical, and comparative frameworks that examine the ways in which social, political, and intellectual influences influence literary storytelling. Colonial interactions had a major influence on the early impulses of literary history in Indian contexts. Indian literary traditions were categorized into well-known Western categories by European scholars, who were sometimes inspired by Enlightenment historiographical approaches. These researchers occasionally reduced intricate, language-bound traditions into simplistic chronologies or value hierarchies. In his study of contemporary Indian literary historiography, Harder (2017) <sup>[6]</sup> points out that the earliest systematic attempts at literary histories were linked to an agenda that matched nationalist projects, utilizing standards influenced by Western literary paradigms and colonial educational frameworks (pp. 18–19). This meant that early literary histories unintentionally created limited canonical narratives by emphasizing dominant languages and styles at the expense of marginal or folk traditions.

Literary historiography in India underwent a radical change throughout the post-colonial era. Prominent academics like Sisir Kumar Das envisioned literary history as an integrated, comparative endeavour that was acutely aware of linguistic multiplicity, going beyond the compartmentalized, language-by-language chronicles. A History of Indian Literature, Das's massive multi-volume series, was an attempt to depict the interwoven trajectories of various linguistic literatures from Sanskrit and Tamil to regional vernaculars within the larger socio-historical milieu rather than just a catalogue of texts (Das, 1991/2005) <sup>[3]</sup>. By suggesting that literary traditions develop through dynamic exchanges, cross-cultural borrowings, and multilingual conversations, his work subtly contested the notion that Indian literature could be adequately

represented through separate literary histories. However, literary historiography in India has experienced critical self-reflection influenced by international theoretical trends, going beyond comparative synthesis. Scholars have challenged the fundamental tenets of previous historiographical presumptions in recent decades, highlighting the construction rather than discovery of historical narratives. According to this viewpoint, literary history is an ideological endeavour influenced by the context, objectives, and theoretical commitments of the historian rather than a neutral description of earlier literature (Hermeneutic/critical historiographical turn). In discussions of historiography, Hutcheon has contended that historians invariably apply their own interpretive frameworks, intentionally or inadvertently reshaping historical narratives to address modern issues. This process is equally applicable to literary historiography in India (cited in Jacob, 2014, p. 3687). The impact of poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, which emphasize the politics of representation in literary histories, has also significantly altered the course of history. These critical perspectives show how issues of power and identity who is included in the story and whose voices are left out are inextricably linked to the production of literary history. In this context, Indian literary historiography is being rethought as a complex interaction of cultural discourses, institutional structures, and interpretive logics that reflect and reinforce social hierarchies and exclusions rather than just a list of published writings. As a result, literary historiography in Indian languages has evolved from early descriptive accounts based on colonial or nationalist paradigms to critical and theoretically informed practices that emphasize the constructed nature of literary narratives through comparative and integrative efforts like Das's. This development emphasizes how literary historiography is constantly adapting to larger historical and intellectual currents and is not a static endeavour. It is evident from comprehending these paths that writing literary history is a discursive practice that influences cultural memory, identity, and the literary canon itself, rather than just an academic endeavour.

### Theoretical perspectives on canon formation

Theoretically, canon formation entails a deeper sociocultural process that establishes which books are acknowledged as typical of a literary tradition and why they are significant, rather than merely naming "great works." We can better comprehend how canons are created, which texts acquire legitimacy, and the frequently implicit norms and power structures that support these decisions by using a variety of theoretical vantage points. Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, particularly as it was developed in literary studies by critics like John Guillory, provides one fundamental theoretical lens. The canon is reframed in Guillory's seminal work *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation as a function of cultural capital socially acknowledged skill and legitimacy in assessing cultural goods rather than as a collection of eternal masterpieces* (Guillory, 1993/2013) <sup>[5]</sup>. According to this perspective, canon formation is a social and educational process in which texts acquire cultural significance that is

consistent with pedagogical systems and institutional norms that emphasize particular language and cultural skills. According to Guillory (1993/2013) <sup>[5]</sup>, the literary canon basically names the cultural capital of dominant groups, which is replicated through professional and educational institutions. By emphasizing cultural capital, this viewpoint demonstrates that canon construction is not impartial but rather involved in the allocation of cultural authority and educational power, impacting whose works are established as classics and whose voices are silenced.

From a different perspective, inherent literary qualities are emphasized as criterion for canonicity in classical aesthetic theories, as demonstrated by the writings of critics such as Harold Bloom. According to Bloom's *The Western Canon* (Bloom, 1994 <sup>[2]</sup>; see also Wikipedia summary), canonical works have distinctive features that transcend chronological and cultural change, supporting a canon based on enduring aesthetic excellence and profound intertextual effect. Bloom's viewpoint has been criticized for its narrow inclusivity and Eurocentric emphasis, but his idea of "canonical strangeness" the idea that canonical books inspire ongoing reinterpretation due to their intricate artistic depths remains significant in discussions over literary worth. Therefore, according to Bloom, canon building is a literary aesthetic endeavour based on how texts' unique expressive power engages readers over time.

Sociocultural and institutional frameworks provide another significant theoretical viewpoint. Academics contend that the institutions that influence reading habits such as publishing firms, educational institutions, universities, and literary criticism as well as the ideological frameworks they represent are inextricably linked to canon construction. The canon "relies on an economy of belief about the possibility and validity of agreement on literary value," according to the Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature, and it frequently reflects societal norms and beliefs rather than just aesthetic standards (Ross, 2019) <sup>[10]</sup>. Accordingly, canonicity is more about what communities of readers and institutions agree to respect and pass down through the generations than it is about fixed excellence. It also emphasizes how assessors, educators, and cultural gatekeepers are key players in the negotiated process of canon development. Post-colonial and critical sociological perspectives, which emphasize the politics of inclusion and exclusion, have also contributed to the theoretical study of canon. These viewpoints highlight how canons frequently mirror historical class, gender, and ethnic hierarchies, systematically elevating voices that support prevailing power systems while marginalizing others. Scholars researching post-colonial curricula in India, for example, note that institutional gatekeeping and hierarchical privileging of dominant language traditions have historically excluded Dalit, Adivasi, and other oppressed literatures from canon creation (Sharma, 2025). This critical lens sees canon construction as a location of sociopolitical conflict where disputes over representation, identity, and legitimacy affect literary histories, rather than just as a value judgment.

When combined, these theoretical stances show that canon creation is multifaceted, involving sociocultural power

dynamics, educational practices, institutional authority, and aesthetic judgments. The canon is constantly being negotiated, impacted by evolving cultural norms, scholarly discussions, educational changes, and growing perspectives on the value of literature. Comprehending these theoretical frameworks cultural capital, aesthetic standards, institutional influence, and sociopolitical critique offers a thorough basis for examining how literary canons develop in Indian languages and the reasons why some texts become canonical while others stay marginal.

### **Challenges of modernity and literary pluralism**

Our understanding of Indian literature, literary history, and canon construction is severely challenged by modernity. It reconfigures cultural sensibilities, narrative forms, and the underlying assumptions that underpin how we judge and classify literary works, rather than merely signifying technology advancement or social change. Modernity interacts with long-standing traditions of linguistic diversity and cultural expression in complicated, frequently contradictory ways in multilingual and multicultural cultures like India. Consequently, literary pluralism the presence of several literary traditions, languages, and forms emerges as a theoretical challenge for canon studies and literary historiography as well as a creative force. Modernity's historical affiliation with monolingual paradigms of literary scholarship and education is one of the main ways it opposes literary pluralism. Conventional historiographies, which assumed a more unified literary realm, frequently drew on models taken from European intellectual history. The *Oxford Handbook of Modern Indian Literatures* by Ulka Anjaria and Anjali Nerlekar, however, demonstrates how this presumption falls short in the Indian context: the endeavour to comprehend Indian literatures cannot be limited to monolingual frameworks because such models obscure the dynamic interaction among region, language, and genre that defines India's literary modernity. They contend that rather than adhering to competing hierarchies, contemporary Indian literature is better understood as a multilingual and comparative environment where writings from various languages engage in ongoing conversations. The idea of modernism itself gives rise to the problem of pluralism under modernity.

Modernism in Indian literature, as explained by academics such as Ramakrishnan and Kumar, does not present a single, cohesive style or historical movement; rather, it defies neat definitions because it reflects the social realities, colonial histories, and regional specificities that shape various linguistic traditions (Ramakrishnan & Kumar, 2016) <sup>[9]</sup>. According to Ramakrishnan and Kumar (2016) <sup>[9]</sup>, Indian modernism cannot be limited to Western canonical markers alone because it has numerous interpretations depending on the context. This challenges the notion of a single modern canon in favour of a more pluralistic environment where several modernities coexist and occasionally clash. By interacting with new media cultures and global cultural economy, modernity also undermines conventional notions of literary merit. Indian works produced in minor regional languages or oral traditions

are becoming more widely available in international literary markets through translation, performance, and digital media as literary creation crosses national and linguistic boundaries in the age of globalization. Because worldwide recognition frequently favours some forms (like the novel) or languages (like English) over others, this process has the potential to both increase pluralism and create new hierarchies. Here, it is not just about celebrating diversity; it is also about critically analysing how new forms of visibility, prestige, and institutional validation influence what is considered canonical in a global setting.

The conflict between modernity and tradition is another important part of its problem. Literary plurality in India has its roots in exchanges between oral, vernacular, religious, and classical traditions that date back thousands of years. The way literary historians describe the development of literary forms is complicated by the contradiction that modernity's emphasis on individualism, rationalism, and secular values frequently causes with these tradition-based practices. Reading Indian literary history through Western periodization's (such as romanticism or modernism) runs the risk of forgetting indigenous temporalities and forms of invention, according to critics. However, heterogeneous senses can reimagine modernity itself. In order to create fluid literary identities, authors in contemporary Indian literature have frequently used hybridity, translation, and intertextuality as methods of creative negotiation. They do this by deliberately fusing regional idioms, diasporic experiences, and global influences. This represents what academics refer to as alternative or vernacular modernities forms of modernity influenced by local histories and language networks rather than just western models. As a result, modernity's issues present chances to reconsider canon creation in ways that take plurality seriously rather than just being barriers. Modern literary historiography must take into account the variety, connectivity, and negotiation among various literary traditions rather than supposing a single trajectory of literary history. Then and only then will we be able to fully appreciate India's literary diversity in the context of the present.

### **Toward a critical and inclusive literary historiography**

As the study of literary histories and canon construction has developed, more and more academics contend that a critically reflective historiography that emphasizes inclusion, representation, and justice is necessary rather than merely describing literary growth. A critical and inclusive literary history examines how histories have been written, whose voices have been amplified and whose have been silenced, rather than merely listing the works that were published when. It aims to reveal the ideological forces that have influenced literary narratives and to make sure that historical narratives do not replicate exclusionary paradigms but rather reflect the multiple realities of social experience. The idea that historical narratives are created rather than merely discovered is one of the main tenets of a critical historiography. As a tool, critical historiography demands that histories be analysed in light of the institutional alliances, power structures, and social stances

that shaped them (see critical historiographical frameworks). These methods cast doubt on the conventional notion that the canon is an impartial compilation of objectively outstanding works; rather, they demonstrate how canons reflect and replicate specific ideals and passions. Stanley Fish has maintained that, in the context of English and European speech, a canon is invariably historical, political, and social, shaped by institutional and ideological objectives rather than by universal criteria of value (Fish, as explored in larger canon theory).

The linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic variety of India makes the need for an inclusive and critical historiography even more pressing. Canon formation has historically excluded Dalit and Adivasi literatures due to institutional gatekeeping, sociocultural hierarchies that favoured elite and colonial language traditions, and aesthetic judgments, as demonstrated by Preeti Sharma's study on exclusion in literary curricula (Sharma, 2013, p. 142). According to this critical viewpoint, literary history must examine not only what is included in historical narratives but also why these inclusions reflect and uphold preexisting power structures like caste, class, and educational advantage. Inclusive history is further enhanced by scholarly research on decolonization and decanonization. Canons cannot be understood in isolation from the colonial and cultural institutions that generated them, according to Divya Dwivedi's latest work in *Parallax on decentering Western canonical norms* (Dwivedi, 2007) [4]. Because it challenges historians to consider how traditional accounts have frequently paralleled Western frameworks, implicitly evaluating books according to imported norms rather than indigenous aesthetic registers, this viewpoint is extremely pertinent to Indian literary histories (Dwivedi, 2007) [4]. Therefore, a critical historiography needs to reconsider the standards of worth, allowing for a variety of artistic traditions and making sure that histories are not only Western models applied to rich multilingual situations. Multicultural and postcolonial criticisms of canon creation are also consistent with the theoretical shift toward inclusive history. In his work on multiculturalism and the canon, Sava argues that the process of defining a canon itself must involve discussions of power, representation, and cultural dynamics because, unless deliberately reconfigured to emphasize diversity, canons always represent the values of dominant groups. These observations offer a theoretical basis for an inclusive literary historiography that actively opposes homogenizing trends by demanding that historical narratives include a variety of voices and literary expressions.

Additionally, literary history is reframed as dialogic rather than monologic by an inclusive literary historiography. Instead, than viewing literary evolution as a straight path headed by a group of canonical authors, it views it as arising from numerous crossing traditions, exchanges, and conflicts. Translational practices, vernacular literatures, oral traditions, marginalized genres, and subaltern voices all aspects that traditional histories have frequently pushed to the periphery are given priority in such a historiography. Critical historiography undermines singular narratives of literary excellence and expands our understanding of literary evolution by identifying these varied

strands. Practically speaking, reevaluating curricula, anthologies, textbooks, and critical canons to prioritize equity and representation is necessary to move toward a critical and inclusive literary historiography. In order to ensure reflexivity and accountability in academic practice, it also calls on researchers to consider their own stances and the histories they create. In this sense, a critical and inclusive literary historiography reimagines the fundamental techniques and objectives of literary history writing rather than just enhancing conventional tales. It promotes just, plural, and dynamic historical understanding a crucial basis for more equitable canon formation in the twenty-first century by highlighting inequalities, challenging long-standing hierarchies, and embracing the full diversity of linguistic and cultural expression in Indian contexts.

### Conclusion

Literature cannot be reduced to a static hierarchy of “great works” or a chronological collection of texts, according to research on literary historiography and canon building in Indian languages. Instead, literary history is a dynamic, socially mediated process that illustrates the intricate relationships between language, culture, identity, and power. Literary narrative building has constantly balanced inclusion and exclusion, tradition and modernity, and local and global viewpoints, from early colonial and nationalist frameworks to modern critical methods. Instead of being impartial, canon construction has historically marginalized voices from oral, vernacular, and subaltern traditions while favouring particular linguistic, social, and institutional hierarchies. The diversity of Indian literary expression is highlighted by a critical and inclusive approach to literary historiography, which recognizes that various modernities, regional literatures, and language contacts coexist and influence the literary landscape. Scholars can identify the mechanisms of authority, representation, and legitimacy that define literary value by challenging the institutional and ideological frameworks that have historically guided canon creation. A more complex and democratic interpretation of literary history is also made possible by embracing multilingualism, translation, and the cultural practices of oppressed people. In the end, the goal of literary historiography in India is to reconsider the narratives we create about literary growth rather than just cataloguing books. Reflexivity, inclusion, and awareness of sociocultural diversity are necessary. A richer, more equitable literary canon for the present and future is fostered by such an approach, which guarantees that literary history becomes a space of critical engagement and cultural discourse capable of accepting multiplicity while challenging existing hierarchies.

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