

The Journey of Comparative Literature: India and Beyond

Keynote Address

Indra Nath Choudhuri¹

Anybody of my age and experience will be discomfited by a last-moment request to give the keynote address in such an important CLAI biennial conference. But, on the contrary, when I came to know that I had to replace Nabaneeta Debsen, I was happy as I got a chance to repay her a debt which I always felt I owed to her. It was 1974; I was then visiting Professor at the University of Bucharest and had come to Paris in Sorbonne to attend a conference on Oriental Studies. I was to speak on *sadharanikaran* and the issue of identification of the theatric universe in the session which was to be chaired by V. Ragavan, an outstanding Sanskrit scholar. *Sadharanikaran* is a very important term of rasa theory and in my paper I referred to the term as identification which was vehemently criticized by Kapila Vatsyayan— who does not need any introduction— in the question-answer session. Her contention was that these are culturally, critically loaded terms which cannot be translated. Then I saw a pretty attractive woman, with a big red teep on her forehead, exuding academic sharpness with a challenging demeanour, got up to speak in my favour and in a crowd mostly of foreigners, she won her point. A professor from Washington University also took my side. I was immensely relieved by these detailed interventions and felt that there were scholars to support me and later came to know her: she was Nabaneeta Debsen. Since then we are friends and today I got the chance to repay my debt by presenting this keynote address in the conference, which she could not due to her illness.

There is a small footnote to this whole episode: within a year or two we both came to realize that Kapila was right.

In this era of post-modernity, from the 7th decade of the last century, India took a stand to redefine herself and understand her traditions, world view, ethos, *ganga-jamuna tahajeev* or what Nehru called *hindustaniat*. In this context, it became crucial for us to discuss Indian culture, literature, social realities in order to understand what the idea of India is. The study of Comparative Indian Literature is essential in this respect.

¹ Indra Nath Choudhuri is the Director of Tagore Studies, Edinburgh University.

I need not emphasise that Indian literature in itself is comparative because it deals with literature of 22 languages recognised by the constitution of India. Otherwise, also if my mother tongue is Hindi and I want to understand the history of Hindi literature intimately, then in Indian context I will come across a very astonishing situation. Discovering any part of Hindi literature will automatically lead me to search for another similar part in Indian literature, forexample, any discovery on our part of the medieval devotional bhakti literature in Hindi will take me to Tamil Alwars who were the originators of bhakti in literary and spiritual context.

Similarly, in the context of Bengali literature, any discussion on the mystical poetry of Tagore is bound to lead us to Kabir and Dadu and in this way we come to realize the total cultural universe of India.

CIL, in other words, means to develop the idea of Indian literature. It is not possible to conceive this concept just by collecting literature written in 22 Indian languages. The methodology of the study of CL can only be helpful in the realization of this conceptual idea.

India's vision is never narrow and unilinear. With its holistic vision and multi-linear understanding, it has maintained its relationship with the rest of the world. When Tagore in 1907 referred to the term *viswa sahitya* and was thus emphasising on the importance of comparative understanding of literature, the meaning was clear: that with the help of international contextualism, the study of literature is to be cultivated.

To associate oneself with the world was not a new thing for India— pithy sayings like *sarve bhavantu sukhinah* or *vasudhaiva kutumbukam* establish the fact that we do not differentiate between *swa* and *para*, or the self and the other.

As the time given to me for preparing the keynote address was too short, I asked Ipshita to give me some cues to confine myself to those points only, and Ipshita gave me the right cue that the journey of CL in India is as much about the discovery of the self as about that of the other. Ipshita gave me another cue that the journey is a metaphor for the philosophy, the ideology, in fact, the method of Comparative Literature. Let me confine only to these two issues and also stick to the metaphorical meanings, which I have no reason to contradict. In fact, these issues cover the theme well in its entirety. The only thing for me is that journey of CL in India is about the discovery of the self through the other and not just self and other.

Journey, one makes to unknown or even known lands to come to know the other and to recognize the other through dialogues. Let us not forget that the primary focus of CL is not

evaluation but recognition, not to give judgement but to facilitate dialogic interaction to know each other in a better way.

A central idea of ‘Orientalism’ is that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts or reality, but from pre-conceived archetypes that envision all “Eastern” societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally dissimilar to “Western” societies. This discourse establishes “the East” as antithetical to “the West”. Such Eastern knowledge is constructed with literary texts and historical records that are often of limited understanding of the facts of life in the East. A true perception of the East and also of the West by the East is the first prerequisite in our understanding of each other. Here, I have to admit that while I concur with this critiquing in a large measure, I also acknowledge the contribution of the Orientalists— as distinct from ‘Orientalism’— in bringing to light important aspects of the heritage of this country. We still refer to their works, for instance, Cunningham in Archaeology and Princep in Epigraphy, not to speak about Griffith and Wilson.¹

Dialogue is a form of hermeneutical quest for inter-civilizational reflection on the modes of global existence of the self and the other. One of the important aspects of dialogue is to know each other, each other’s culture and also their creativity and meditative thought.

In order to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at better understanding of the Eastern and the Western civilizations, every individual has to be prepared to exercise:

- (i) Tolerance towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than their own. Let us remember the well-known quote by Einstein that, “a person starts to live when he can live outside himself”, and hence tolerance alone is not enough.
- (ii) Equally important is the notion of responsibility for other cultures as well as for one’s own culture. While tolerance means not to interfere with others’ ways of living or thinking, responsibility actually suggests responsiveness to the “otherness” of the other.
- (iii) Besides tolerance and responsibility there is another term—ethics used by two distinguished philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to explain the self and the other relationship. Levinas says that the foundation of ethics consists in the obligation to respond to the other. In being for the other only the sense of responsibility (goodness, mercy, and charity) calls forth. For Derrida, the foundation

of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and the inclination to welcome the other into one's home.

Levinas's and Derrida's theories of hospitality and ethics hold out the possibility of an acceptance of the other as different but of equal standing. This is a broad view of particularism as evinced in the cosmopolitan concept of Diogenes the stoic of Sinope, who lived in 412 BC, and of whom it is said that, "Asked where he came from, he answered: 'I am a citizen of the world'", but it does not in any way prove one's identity as a member of a family (*vasudhaiva kutumbukam*). India goes even a step further as said in the Upanishads that one who perceives all the beings in his own self and his own self in all the beings does not hate any one anymore. This Upanishadic mantra was used by Tagore while giving the acceptance speech at Stockholm after 8 years of the declaration of the Nobel Prize in 1913. This notion of complete identity is not to be found in the West. This realization depends upon one's deep understanding of the existence of the one Supreme Reality and that the Self is identified with that Reality. This is Vedantic oneness. But in Vedantic oneness, where the self and the other are one and the same, no dialogue is possible in that kind of a state of transcendentalism.

India's role, it is said, in the intellectual encounter has been passive. It looks at least apparently true, but it is not true. India believes that there is such a thing as higher learning and this kind of learning, one learns best about others by learning about oneself. This kind of learning about others does not analyze, compare and judge all the time but it accepts them as they are. This method gives a benign, a compassionate knowledge of others. In fact in this kind of knowledge, there are no others. India has never tried to find Europe, but discovered it when she was herself discovered and started responding to it while being discovered, subdued and objectified by it. Otherwise also Hindus never showed any curiosity or interest in others. There is complete lack of interest among the Hindus, either silence or evasiveness, towards other cultures. Hindus were constantly beleaguered by the *yavanas* (Greeks) and *mlechhas* (Muslims and Christians) but it survived the continuous and violent incursions of foreigners and remained immune to them even if it failed to resist their physical or political domination.

We all know about the legendary biography of Alexander that became well-known in large part of Asia but was completely disregarded by Hindu India. We can know all that we need to know about the Hindus and their ancient customs from the Greek and Chinese travellers or later

from the chronicles of Muslim historians, but there is hardly any account available to us about what the Hindu natives thought of their 'guests' from abroad. Nor do we find any account of philosophical or religious debates with Ulemas in traditional Hindu literature.

Buddhism, however, posed a challenge to Hinduism which was quite different from other traditions both in its origins and in its philosophical content. It was both the other and at the same time not the other. If Hindu scholars and seers felt compelled to engage in passionate

intellectual discussions with their Buddhist counterparts, it is precisely because, Buddhism, while being the other, at the same time shared with Hinduism some of the most fundamental concepts of common reference; for instance, the questions of *moksha*, i.e., liberation and *nirvana* of self and nothingness. The dialogue with others with a view to conquering one and all absolutely does not fit in the thought frames of Indians. Debates for them create suicidal ego. Only service to people alone can fill one's heart with love. More than that, Hindus believed in a meaningful factual and self-analyzing dialogue—*atmanam viddhi*. Though external dialogues were practiced, yet mostly among themselves, not with others.

The reason for this lack of curiosity for the other is that the other was never a source of reference necessary to define their own identity, as it was for the Europeans. The self was always accepted as self-referential, the other was never a threat to their identity, nor a source of confirmation of their uniqueness. This was very different from the European notion of the other, an inalienable entity external to one self, which were both a source of terror and an object of desire. Sartre's famous statement 'hell is the other', carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defined one's identity as 'identity against the other', either to be appropriated or to be destroyed. Hegel even sometimes used disparaging language about India. In the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, the 'East' was a central theme of intellectual debates, and interaction between two cultures became a reality, though sometimes, it was mentioned in a derogatory language as Hegel once said, "though unconsciously much of master's behaviour is adopted from the slave's behaviour" (111-19). By defining the identity of the self in this manner a European, however, finds himself entrapped in his own contradiction. If he succeeds, in completely subjugating the 'other' the identity of his own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing.

Even in the present times, characterized by the globalization of culture, there remains a big gap in the Western understanding of the East. Against globalization, which tends to go for one homogenized culture by appropriation, homogenisation and co-option, a fierce debate is continuing for the last 30 years to speak in favour of particularism and exceptionalism. Amartya Sen, by quoting Tagore, says that Tagore's everlasting credit is that his great cosmopolitan vision never sacrificed the richest possible sense of tradition:

The main point of cosmopolitanism, which is taken to be world-citizenship claim, need not militate against valuing elements in one's own tradition. It is particular cultural traditions that can provide the bases for understanding and morally relating to others and ultimately a vision of universality is developed .

Let me here, by endorsing the view mentioned just now, reject a well-entrenched opinion about Tagore that his main contention was to bring synthesis between the West and the East for a true resurgence of India and a well-meaning message of spirituality to the West. On the contrary, his theory was (by borrowing from G.L.Mehta) that there is no other way open to us in the East, but to go along with Europeanization and to go through it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and strange can we win back our own selfhood. Going through does not mean acceptance but understanding it, recognising it. In "Home and the World" Tagore further justifies this view:

I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, and reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity. ... Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of the same great India cry for rejection of the West I feel hurt... We must discover the most profound unity the spiritual unity between the different races .

Gandhi's achievement lay in embracing an 'inclusivist' vision and a philosophy devoid of a polarization of "us" and "them". His understanding of religious plurality and cultural diversity went hand in hand with reaction to a cultural conformity. As he once said:

I do not want my house to be walled in on sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about

my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any .

But in the West one can still realize a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could have borrowed anything of significance from the East, or to see the place of eastern thought within the western tradition. One glaring example of this attitude is that the European literary historiography uses the paradigm of a single dominant literary tradition. Occasional debates about particular preferences of styles and periods do take place, such as T.S. Eliot's preference for the metaphysical over the romantics. But at no stage it allows the inclusion of a non-British writer in the British canon, even when some very good works were produced in the language of the British Isles outside. On the other hand, India believes in multiple parallel literary traditions, use of many languages together and accepts the writers of the foreign origin as their own:

- 1) Here loka and shastra or folk/ popular and classical are not two separate traditions, but two pillars of the same literary and cultural tradition, two pillars of the same continuum.
- 2) Here two versions of the same story of Shakuntala of two different traditions— epical reality and dramatic imagination— exist together. Panini talked of two discourses together, one by common people and other which is grammatically correct. Similarly Bharata spoke of two types of theatre together; one caters to the public and the other is based on dramatic conventions.
- 3) Aswaghosha, a famous Sanskrit poet, is of Greek ancestry. Sister Nivedita of Irish nationality and Ibn Battuta of Arabic tradition are accepted as Indian writers.
- 4) Rajshekhar Basu wrote plays in Maharashtri and Sanskrit. Jaydeva of 12th Century used Bengali and Sanskrit to write though his famous narrative poem *Gita Govindais* in Sanskrit. Hemchandra wrote in Gujrati, Sanskrit and Prakrit; Namdev in Hindi and Punjabi; Tyagraj in Telegu in metre of Gujrati poetry; Amir Khusro in rekhta-desi and Persian; Tagore in English, Abahatta and Bengali; Premchand in Urdu and Hindi.

All these indicate India's amazing capacity of assimilation of alien cultures, code-mixing of languages and intertwining different literary traditions. The acceptance of the Vedantic oneness has always paved the way in obliterating the difference between *swa* and *para*, self and the other. The vision of the one in and behind the many (Vivekananda) is the secret of India's cultural foundation of human unity or the self and the other.

In this era of post-modernity and globalization, the search for roots to understand the self better and to ward off the threat to Indian culture from foreign cultural onslaughts or inversely, to assimilate the West in our Indian cultural context, became the most important part of our debates on culture. Also in due course we came to realize that in CL by achieving (1) Linguistic rigour, (2) Historical savvy or shrewdness and (3) Universal oneness, the study of any literature of the world becomes possible. Linguistic rigour does not mean that one needs to acquire many languages to do CL. CL, in fact, is not language study but literature study and, therefore, translation becomes an essential part of CL. The whole issue of universal oneness is problematic because, though initially CL was accepted as a universal category, yet the discipline of CL, founded in the West in the middle of the 19th century, was to study literature universally, but universalizing the Western culture and literature and establishing the supremacy of England and Europe and later America came out to be the net result of this discipline. There were three reasons for this:

- a) Euro-entrism: The West which has recently seen an unprecedented globalization of Western science, technology, and philosophy can rightly be proud of Eurocentricism, but this can be taken too far.
- b) Limited competence about other literature of the world and
- c) Colonial bias towards Asian and African literature.

People objected to the notion of homogenised universality of CL of the West and protested against the colonial bias for two reasons:

- i. As soon as you go for more than one literature you are bound to be a part of history because you cannot possibly ignore the cultural peculiarities of a particular literature. Edward Said says that a text is always “worldly” and remains associated with society, history and politics in an “inextricably” complex way and hence particularity of a text cannot be ignored.
- ii. To accept the whole issue of literature by separating it from history has in its background a western bias and a racial prejudice. African writer, Chinua Achebe, in his essay on “Colonialist Criticism”, talks against this western construct of a homogenized universalism that in the nature of things; he says that the work of a western writer is automatically uniformed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. Fredric Jameson’s statement, which is no doubt inadequate and slanted, describes the third world literary works as national allegories, which has nothing to do with universal cosmopolitanism. In this regard, U. R. Ananthamurthy says that when

we read western literature we read it as literature per se, but the west reads our literature as sociological or anthropological material and tries to raise questions about the Indian society as to

- a) why Indian man is afraid in going to a hospital,
- b) why Indian women are reluctant to sit with their men folk to eat their food, or
- c) why still mother in law reigns supreme in a house hold,

and similarly many other issues like this. Hence Chinua Achebe says that he should like the word “universal’ banned altogether from the discussions on African— or to add Indian— literature until such time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include the entire world.

With the establishment of Indian universities from the middle of the 19th century, the comparative literature methodology came to be used in the research work of Indian literature written in different Indian languages, but being ignorant of the methodology of comparative literature most of these research works turned to be a sum total of literature in different Indian languages without looking at IL as a compact whole. Being a multilingual nation we live with a complex sensibility. For us the regional, social and historical characteristics of our literature in different languages are as important as the Indianness at the pan-Indian level. In the regional and pan-Indian historical functioning, on one side, there is regional identity and on the other, a common core of metaphors and symbols, myths and legends, conventions and norms, which has evolved during the last 1000 years; and despite all diversities, linguistic and non-linguistic, the literatures produced in different languages converged, as do the various language families at several points. In the Indian context the dichotomy between the Pan-Indian and the regional may be accepted as a useful and critical category of differentiation and also identification, for e.g., the categories such as elite and folk: they are different and at the same time they converge with each other. In the folk (*Loka*), the elite (*Marga/shastra*) enters, and vice-versa. Folk represents protest, sarcasm and pain while elite is order, discipline and bliss.

The most important issue of CIL is comparative methodology which separates the study of single literature school from the study of CL. For example, the Bengali poet Michel Madhusudan Dutt started writing first in English and then turned to Bengali, similarly Premchand, the Hindi novelist, wrote first in Urdu and later came to Hindi. The methodology of single literature study will only inform you about this but CL methodology will tell you the reason for it as who were the writers during that time writing in English, Urdu and why did they

like to do this. Writing in multiple languages is an age-old convention of a polyglot country like India. With reference to Premchand, the methodology of single literature study will inform us that Premchand turned from Urdu to Hindi in his writings, but CL methodology will give you the reason for it with the help of letters and other material, which was primarily to gain a wider readership. Single literature methodology will inform the impact of Tagore on certain poems of Nirala, the Hindi poet, for e.g.,

Navjeevan ki prabal umang
Jarahi mai, milne ke liye parkar seema
Priyatam asim ke sang.

But CL methodology will analyse it and present to us how Nirala assimilated the influence of Tagore as a whet stone to sharpen his literary sensibility and make the idea as his own. However, for this kind of study the data is important and in the initial stage of CL study, data was made available from French and European literature and with the help of that data the methodology was prepared, but in African and Asian context this methodology is unusable. The reasons are very clear:

1. In comparison with Europe, in India the difference between religion and art is minimal.
2. Indian literature gives importance to the celebration of life and European literature's primary concern is to explore life. However, this kind of comparison can be very odious.
3. In Europe there is one dominant literary tradition, In India we live with many diverse literary traditions and because of this in the modern times Tagore writes his *Gitanjali*, a modern text but based on the spiritual and mystical tradition of medieval India and similarly Jai Shankar Prasad presents to us his *Kamayani* based on Sanskrit literary tradition of myth and religion, and in the modern era the Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz speaks of the presence and absence of God in the Sufi literary tradition of Hafiz or Rumi of the medieval times. He speaks of the supreme beloved as:

Jo gayab bhi hai , hajir bhi
Jonazir bhi hai, manjar bhi (who watches and can be
watched)
Uttega al haq ka nara

Jo mai bhi hun aur tum bhi ho|
Aur raj karegi halke khuda
Jo mai bhi hun, aur tum bhi ho

4. Here unity is found in diversity, in other words here if you give credence to diversity, you see unity prevailing in and around us or if you speak of unity only, what you see is just diversity. This kind of a model is unthinkable in the West.
5. West is logo-centric and exclusive, India is symbolic and inclusive and hence here diversity of thought is so important.
6. West grows by substitution, India develops by amalgamation.
7. The modernity of the West comes by rejecting the past here in India past does not pass off, we live in continuity with our ancient and the present together.
8. In Indian context nation and region are complementary to each other and Indianness is an experience of pan- Indian as well as regional identities.

Hence, in Indian context, if we create a CL methodology with the help of data from the West, it will be accepting the Euro-centric absolute authority. This is the politics of CL methodology and to free our self from it is very important. Rene Wellek and Etiemble and many others on the basis of a universal argument has extended the politics of methodology and with the help of a so-called universal methodology explained the data-based material. It has become clear for the scholars of CIL that one cannot ignore the socio-cultural contexts to create imaginary universals.

It is true that CL has some universal rules:

1. The recognition of the unity of human race is responsible for the development of the study of comparative religion, mythology and literature.
2. Comparative literature is also the result of enlightenment project as in its background there existed the influence of a latent idea of universalism.

But one must keep in mind that where the elements of change are predominant, the universal rules do not apply. With the advent of feminist discourse and dalit literature the new avenues of creativity are opened in literature which cannot be studied with the help of universal method. On the basis of data the new methodology is being developed. The self-awakening of the dalit women can be the basis for our understanding of the Indian selfhood and it is to be realized that the Indian selfhood is not uniform in different fields of human existence. The secret is that here

the marginalized dalit literature or feminist discourse or folk and classical traditions go on changing their positions. As soon as a dalit writer is awarded by the “main stream” or becomes a minister, the change in his selfhood becomes obvious and similarly when the folk and classical traditions become complementary to each other, they change their positions.

CL elucidates the mutual relationship between literature and history and combines the living reality of the society with history and politics, but there is a mystery behind this. The cold war politics promoted area studies which became a strong political handle for both the political camps of the cold war period, specially for wooing the underdeveloped countries to be on their sides, and slowly because of these compulsions CL also came to be known as cultural studies.

Sisir Kumar Das, by producing the two volumes of the History of Modern Indian Literature re-designed the contour of history of IL; because for him, if one accepts HIL as a category, one will have to add in it oral, folk, tribal and the dalit texts, to make it a complete whole. In the Indian context, oral, tribal or folklore are neither the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized, but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life-worthy. This process of socio-cultural interaction between loka and shastra (folk and classical) is a dominating factor in India’s literary scene which swept all the regions, and with the passage of time, created different important literary movements including the Bhakti movement, which fostered a sense of identity in the use of languages and cultural specificities, and the historical functioning in the context of a community. In this way Sisir-babu, by defining IL as the literature of the people, gave importance to collectiveness rather than universality and this is different from the Western institutionalized notion of the history of literature and also different from the concept of master narrative. Against the term master grand narrative (The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge), Jean-Francois Lyotard in 1979, brought into prominence the term meta-narrative with his claim that the postmodern was characterised precisely as critical edge of the humanities, on one side: to establish a stand against globalization and, on the other side, it is an inauguration of the collectiveness of literature.

Now the time has come to deviate from the global cultural configuration of written culture, on the basis of our own literary culture and develop ICL. This has already been initiated in India by

1. creating our own theory of translation and there was an urgent need to do this, for instance, while translating dalit literature due to the in-between meanings of a text, the

western concept of degree of loss or addition becomes inconsequential and for many other reasons also; and

2. Also by developing a new literary criticism or poetics which was possible only by bridging the gap between our ancient and modern western poetics and including in it the regional poetics, which flourished during the medieval period in bhasas, Jain and Buddhist poetic texts and also as Saran Kumar Limbale says, intertwining all with a new poetics of dalit literature.

In this way, CIL has given a new formulation of itself where literature and collectiveness join together to establish the fact that IL is a literature of many heroes and legends, of folk and classical and the human understanding of the self through the other.