



Forum on Contemporary Theory

A National Seminar on

The Literary Across Cultures:

Cultural Poetics of *Bhasha* Literatures in Theory and Practice

25-27 February 2019

Venue:

Centre for Contemporary Theory, Baroda

As part of its new initiative, Forum on Contemporary Theory will organize a national seminar on the topic “The Literary across Cultures: Cultural Poetics of *Bhasha* Literatures in Theory and Practice” during 25-27 February 2019. This seminar is a sequel to FCT’s earlier brainstorming session on “Critical Thinking through Indian Literary and Cultural

Resources” held during 17-18 November 2017. The seminar will focus on the way the underlying interlinkages between Indian languages and literatures transform and transcend unitary and essentialist notions and narratives of social and cultural formations. The objective of the seminar is to bring out an edited volume of select papers that will contribute towards informed debates on *bhasha* literatures.



Thematic Introduction

The encounter with the Sanskrit cosmopolis was a defining moment for Indian languages as they internalised the literary poetics of a tradition that had produced remarkable texts which had stood the test of time. Modern Indian languages, with the exception of Tamil, emerged around 9th/10th century. It was by translating the best works of Sanskrit that they came of age, became literary languages and gave their speech communities the political confidence to confront the world on their own terms. Poets such as Jnaneswar, Sarala Das, Thunchat Ezuthachan, Kambar, Tulsi Das etc. chose to translate works such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* incorporating the everyday world of their speech community into the imaginative textures of the narrative. In his last days, Kabir left Benaras and came to Magahar, rejecting the possibility of salvation that death in Kashi promised. He says: “Kashi, Magahar: for a thoughtful man/ they are one and the same.” This act of defying the normative to seek the truth characterises the various literary traditions as they evolved in India. They created a new poetics through their creative engagement with history and society. This is what makes the early texts of *bhasha* literatures foundational works of regional cultures in India. These texts, while remaining in the mainstream, also spoke to the margins and succeeded in weaving a fabric out of the spoken idiom of the living people. We hear the searching voice of the iconoclast, the dissenter and the lonely seeker in the best of Indian writings in all the major literatures of India over the centuries.

The encounter we had with English was of a different kind, in the sense it demanded approximation to an epistemology that was shaped by enlightenment modernity. Modern Indian *bhasha* literatures reinvented themselves by engendering new genres of prose such as the novel, travelogue, biography, autobiography, the short story, the personal essay and the argumentative essay, modern play and also in poetry, many forms of the lyric and narrative verse. It is in the context of colonial modernity that the study of literature became institutionalised. As a result, the discourse of literary criticism, the idea of the canon and canonised forms of literary genres became part of our literary disciplines. The conventions of literary historiography and literary criticism we followed also created a crisis which we are living through: we are unable to relate to the pre-modern traditions of literatures except through the institutional frameworks provided by the colonial systems of knowledge. This has meant that the imaginative forms that were shaped by the people through their engagement with history and society have become largely alien to our educated class.

This occasions a crisis of reading, evaluation and also understanding. We would like to address the nature of this crisis by examining the nature of relationships that

existed between creative traditions of literatures in India. The seminar would identify the nature of intercultural and interlingual exchanges between Indian languages in an attempt to decipher the defining features of their cultural poetics. While it is granted that major Indian literary traditions have passed through long periods of evolution interacting with many languages, both Indian and foreign, it is not always acknowledged that the shared heritage of Indian aesthetics is hybrid and plural and carries the traces of many cultures and traditions. The performance, story-telling or poetic traditions in India have created their own critical knowledge about society and history. Binaries such as classical/folk, marga/desi, mainstream/marginal, pre-modern/modern etc. may not be of much relevance to understand the making of the cultural poetics of Indian literary texts, as they exist in complex networks of dissemination and circulation through retellings and translations.

The study of Indian *bhasha* literatures demands a close attention to the reciprocity between multiple strands of everyday culture as something embodied in the practice of communities. The critical models that regulate our understanding tend to view texts, genres and discourses in isolation as bounded within the singularity of a particular language and literature or within the academic frames of close reading. We need to theoretically think through the linkages and dialogic frames that sustain the imaginative grid of *bhasha* literatures. Their inherent polysemy and plurality will not reveal themselves to our critical analysis unless we relate the diversity of their articulations through their underlying unity. We need to go beyond the fictions generated by orientalism and new criticism. The tendency to reduce Indian literatures to metaphysical and spiritual codes has not served the study of Indian literatures well. We need to critically explore the tradition of retelling that existed in various forms across India, which included translation, commentary, interpretation, comparison, evaluation and elaboration. We need to view some of these as genres in themselves which may help us map the cultural poetics of *bhasha* literatures from fresh perspectives.

Despite belonging to four different language families, their literatures share a metaphoric universe that has roots in the lived experiences of the peoples who belong to different religions, regions, geography, climate and cultural practices. Literary texts are informed by their historical contexts and cultural practices. The question of epistemology and ideology cannot be separated from the question of literary meaning as embedded in the text. Here again there have been many conversations between traditions and texts, the pan-Indian discourses and the local/regional practices. Languages like Prakrit and Pali have shaped the idioms in Sanskrit, Marathi, Kannada, Hindi and Malayalam. The relationships between

Tamil and Malayalam, Marathi and Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu, Kannada and Telugu, Bengali and Assamese/Odia etc need to be reimagined as their cultural boundaries overlap and their post-colonial evolution has been shaped by emotive issues that cloud the movements across porous boundaries. Performance traditions were also shaped by migrations and circulations of communities across several boundaries. Hence they are deeply implicated in the history of physical dispersal of population and absorption of ideas from multiple sources. *Bhakti* as a cultural universe opens up several possibilities to examine the questions of travel, culture, communitarian identity assertion, radicalisation of resistance against the ritualistic hold of hegemonic structures of power.

In the period after the coming of the printed book, *bhasha* literatures have undergone revolutionary transformations in the very idea of the 'literary'. We need to debate the idea of the 'literary' across cultures, in order to understand how the idea functioned in different languages and cultures. Do we have a term for "Romantic Imagination", "Modernism" or "Post-Modernism"? Can there be synonyms between what is essentially defined and conceptualised locally through the templates of dialects and dialectics? Genres such as the novel and the short story have internalised narrative traditions which existed before the onset of print and its way of organising the real. It would be interesting to see how the twentieth century novels revisit the folk and the mythical in an attempt to critique the very idea of the modern as it has been shaped by the colonial legacy. It is in the domain of poetry that this crisis of expression has assumed complex forms of articulation. Modernist poetry in *bhasha* literatures has often gone back to the resources of orality as given in *bhakti* poetry. The question of form is rooted in the quest for knowledge and literature as critical knowledge always rejects conformist ideas that reinforce hegemonic structures of power in society. From this perspective we may argue that any inquiry into the cultural poetics of *bhasha* literatures has to examine literature as a convergence of politics and poetics, ideology and epistemology.

The following sub-themes may be helpful for formulating your proposals:

1. Dynamics of Convergence in Indian Literary Traditions
2. Indian Literature as Knowledge System
3. Literary Historiography in India: Conflicts and Contestations
4. Retelling/Commentary/ Translation as Literary Genres
5. Multilingualism in Indian Poetics and Performance Traditions

Abstract and Paper Submission

Please send your abstract (maximum 300 words) as an email attachment to the Conveners by **15 October 2018**. Selected participants will be informed by **30 October 2018**. Full paper should reach the Conveners by **10 February 2019**.

Registration

Each participant has to pay a registration fee of Rs. 1000/ (Rupees one thousand only) payable to Forum on Contemporary Theory by a multi-city cheque by **30 November, 2018**. Please send the cheque to Forum on Contemporary Theory's address. You may transfer the money directly to our account; the details of bank transfer will be shared with you on request. The fee will take care of the lunch and tea during the Seminar. The registration fee is non-refundable and does not include the cost of accommodation. For details of accommodation in Baroda, please contact Prafulla C. Kar, one of the Conveners. The participants are required to make their own travel arrangements.

Conveners of the Seminar

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