Reverse Influences: The Poetics of Little Literatures

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The anti-provinciality of the Indian English Writing articulated by Rushdie and Naipaul, for example is a continuation of the Sanskrit tradition that pursued the anti-provinciality ever since the beginning of the bhasha tradition. The anti-provinciality in effect is against the literary diversity and the principle of literary equality. Unlike linguists, who believe and practice the premise of linguistic equality, creative writers and critics privilege a particular literary tradition by denigrating the dormant traditions of the new genres of bhasha literatures. The poetics of the privileged literature, though imaginary/constructed, is seemingly influential, but synchronically receptive from the non-privileged literatures because of the organic character, being drawn from life, living on account of practice by the people. An attempt is made in this paper to argue that it is illogical and incongruous to obtrude Sanskrit or European conceptions upon bhasha literatures, and the conceptions of bhasha literatures on the little literatures. Contrarily, the paper focuses on the reverse influences by freeing bhasha literatures from the Sanskrit conceptions. The term ‘reverse influences’ denotes the influences of the little literatures as the ‘hypotext’ (influencing text) and bhasha literatures as the ‘hyper-text’ (the influenced text), to use Gerard Gennette’s terms.

The term ‘Little Literatures’ is used in this paper in lines with identical terms ‘Little Magazines,’ popularly in use and ‘Little Communities,’ coined by Robert Redfield. The term is meant to encompass the literatures of those communities sharing the qualities of distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity and all-providing self-sufficiency’ (Redfield 4). Sharankumar Limbale,
in his attempt to define dalit literature described it as the writings about “all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as adivasis, landless farm laborours, workers, the suffering masses and nomadic and criminal tribes” (Limbale 30). Though Limbale’s context was confined to the dalit literature, the literature of the social categories Limbale referred to suitably informs the term little literatures.

The little literatures however need to be problematized in opposition to the mainstream bhasha literatures (the vernaculars Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi, among others). For instance, the body of Telugu dalit literature needs to be understood in opposition to Telugu literature since the forms, language and other literary sources of Telugu and dalit literatures are different: the former is non-distinctive, national in character, heterogeneous in representation bound together by the linguistic and nationalist ethos; and the latter is distinctive, small, homogenous, self-sufficient and sub-national. Regarding themes, the bhasha literatures are by and large conformist, but the little literatures are subversive. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, “as in the works of the best Indian language writers today, words like marginality and hybridity seem irrelevant” (Mukherjee 2000:185). Subversive in nature, the little literatures destabilize and deconstruct the oppressive order whereas the bhasha works would preserve it explicitly or disguisedly. Therefore it is illogical and incongruous to obtrude Sanskrit, European or bhasha conceptions upon the visions of the little literatures since they looked down on the literatures of little communities.

Therefore the bhasha and the little literatures are contrastive, not complimentary. The bhasha literatures by and large conform to the poetics of the exclusionist Sanskrit tradition. The literary tools of bhasha literature do not inform the emergent little literatures within each of the
bhasha literatures. Anisuya Sivanarayanan, for example defines dalit literature in opposition to Tamil literature, “dalit literature is an entirely new genre within Tamil literature, and Tamil scholars—many of them non-dalit—find themselves scrambling trying to find a new poetics for this emergent literature” (2004: 56). The same view echoes in what Gayatri Chakravartihy Spivak explains the relationship between bhasha literature and IWE: “The relationship between the writer of ‘vernacular’ [bhasha] and Indo-Anglian literature is a site of class-cultural struggle…By class-cultural struggle is meant a struggle in the production of cultural or cultural-political identity” (Spivak in Mukherjee 2000: 200).

However there has been a transition in the bhasha writing vis-à-vis literary resources. The transition has been so drastic that the bhasha writings metamorphosed from being transliterations from Sanskrit to imitative of the little literatures assuming, borrowing and accepting the influences from below. An attempt has been made in the following analysis about the influences of the literatures on the bhasha writings, a process which has been termed ‘reverse influences.’ Bhasha literatures being too divergent and varied regarding trends, genres, movements, histories and languages, examples and data are drawn mostly from Telugu as an example of bhasha tradition. The aspects of reverse influence considered include what have been termed privileging the spoken, the dialect and the identity.

Three components constitute the composition of any body of writing. The first one is the writer, the second one the written about and the third, the most essential, is the consciousness or perspective. This framework helps understand what constitutes the little literatures. Once again the framework of Limbale described in relation to dalit literature could be adopted for the understanding of the little literatures: “By Dalit literature I mean literature written by dalits
about dalits with Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus” (19). By extension, the little literatures, in a broader sense, serves the identical purpose of informing the readers at large of the slavery, pain and suffering of the subjects.

The Spoken Word

The written word in the beginning imitated morpho-phonemic properties of the spoken word. For instance, there is evidence of written Telugu works, being close to the spoken language, before Nannaya: “It appears that literature also existed in Telugu about the same time, because we find literary style in the inscriptions some three centuries even before Nannaya's (A.D. 1022) Mahabharatam. During the time of Nannaya, the popular language had considerably diverged from the literary language” (Gazette). With the institutionalization, the written word de-privileged and subordinated the original—the spoken word. The lettered brahmins privileged the written word and expected the spoken word to imitate it. The reversed modes of communication led to the binariness of the language forms and traditions—written and spoken; marga and desi; grandhika and vyavaharika. The alienated and corrupted written, marga, grandhika traditions needed reformation, which took place in different points of the history of the vernaculars restoring dignity to the spoken, desi, vyavaharika traditions.

The emergence of prose in bhasha literatures in the nineteenth century was made possible by the reform and the modernization undertaken by the English bureaucrats turned linguists. Necessitated by the British-Indian administration, the English officers had learnt the Indian languages to understand and serve the people better. Not stopping with proficiency, they
mastered the languages, evolved the grammars and served the languages and literatures. Notable among them were C.P. Brown, Charles Wilkins, A.D. Campbell, who reformed Telugu; William Jones, Sanskrit; Benjamin, Malayalam; William Carey, Marathi, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Telugu; Schultz, Gordon, Pritchett, among others.

Guided by the ‘principle of economy,’ approximation of the spoken to the written form and the learner friendly approach, the reformers dropped and changed some letters of alphabet, which used to be queer and farfetched from the spoken mode. They simplified the complex orthography making the languages printing-enabled and accessible to the commoners. With the simplification and modernization of the bhasha languages, the prose began to be used for writing to communicate. The influence of the English novel coupled with writer and learner-friendly changes, Indians began to write prose. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, “English education and through English as exposure to Western literature influenced the birth of Indian novel” (Mukherjee 3). The English officers encouraged the lettered brahmins to write novels.

Two forces were in operation in de-privileging the spoken word. One was Sanskritization of Telugu and another versification of prose—prose, imitating the poetry.

The vyavaharika tradition in the written mode enjoyed its organic character till the emergence of the transliterators, who were in favor of the grandhika tradition i.e. Sanskrit inflected classical Telugu. They considered Sanskrit the legitimate, and the non-sanskrit languages mlecha bhasas, the languages of the barbarians. The grandhika tradition commenced with the transliterations of the epics by suffixing the bhasha case endings to the Sanskrit morphemes. The subsequent writers in Telugu, belonging to the prabhandha period, continued the grandhika tradition. The transliterations and the early medieval writings used to be
intelligible only to the Sanskrit pundits, but not to the educated commoners. The reasons for the promotion of the grandhika tradition could be termed more of extrinsic (social, cultural, political) and less of intrinsic (linguistic). The literary language had been stylized, distancing itself from the spoken language during eleventh to fifteenth centuries. The Sanskrit pundits prohibited the use of the spoken words in the poetic works making it more rigid. In spite of the vernaculars being enriched by its contact with Prakrit right from the tenth century, the influence of Sanskrit alone had been validated, and celebrated as the sublime.

Another factor is strict avoidance of prose and using poetry for all kinds of writing like inscriptions, treatises and other documentary records. The pundits meticulously took care that the scholars and poets used poetry even where prose was suitable. Use of prose was discouraged for any kind of writing. Consequently, prose did not emerge as a form of classical literature. The writings of documentary nature like prosody, arithmetic, medicine and grammar were scrupulously written either in vernacular verse or in Sanskrit slokas. For example, Chinnayasuri (1806-62), a Telugu pundit in the Presidency College, who was patronized by the British rule, modeled his prose writings on the classical poetic language. Niti Chandrika (1853) and Bala Vyakaranamu (grammar for children) (1855), are the examples of the versified writing. His practice lent sanctity to upholding the classical language considering the spoken language as the degenerate form. The traditionalists may thus be considered responsible for the stilted growth of prose in the vernaculars.

Validated by the Sanskrit pundits, the classical poetic language won over vyavaharika, spoken language till the early twentieth century. The traditionalists legitimated the use of the classical poetic language in the school textbooks and examinations. As a result, writes
Blackburn: “Telugu pundits’ control of printed prose ossified the language” (Blackburn 12). The vernacular prose therefore ceased to grow for about hundred years beginning 1850s in spite of the best and concerted efforts of the language reformers, who used a neutral variety—neither classical nor modern. For instance, though the first Telugu work was printed by Benjamin Schultze as early as 1746 in Germany, Telugu prose did not change. Velcheru Naarayana Rao, a noted Telugu critic and translator, argues: “Printing, which created opportunities for prose, for silent reading and for development of a modern subjectivity, was held hostage by the pundits” (Naarayana Rao 2004).

One of the primary reasons for the promotion of the classical tradition, opines Narayana Rao, was politically necessitated by the reciprocity between the brahmins and kshatriyas, who vied with each other for the political space. The grandhika poets received patronage from the kings. The brahmins in turn conferred kshatriyahood on the kings, some of who were of low caste origin needing the conferment of kshatriyahood for the political legitimacy. Narayana Rao argues, “the dialectic of the mutual—brahmins conferring the status of kshatriyahood on kings and the kshatriyas making brahmins powerful by their patronage—is predominantly the story of brahmin ideology in pre-modern India” (Narayana Rao 1995: 25-26). The classical tradition flourished unquestioned because of the nexus between the political and the linguistic.

The social intention of the classical tradition had been to subordinate the speakers of the vyavaharika languages. Used as an effective tool of subordination, language became a demarcating line between the social elites and the marginalized sections. The sudras and ati-sudras, who spoke a language uninfluenced by Sanskrit, were treated inferior, uncivilized, barbaric, and so on. Not only that their languages were considered inferior, but were treated as
unfit for literary writings. As a result, the degree of linguistic unintelligibility became a sign of scholarliness: the more difficult a text, the more respectable it used to be considered. The pundits, who produced the prabhandhas with competitive unintelligibility, ended up requiring *tika*, paraphrase for the understanding and enjoyment of a poem. A poem written in classical style was not readily understandable; it needed paraphrase or explanation. The classical tradition thus got alienated from the whole majority of the people, who constituted the sudras and ati-sudras.

The process of re-privileging—restoring dignity to the spoken tradition—had to do with political, social and literary reasons.

In the political domain, there was a transition in the feudal establishment. With the kings themselves asserting their authority in the name of divine king, the kings ceased to depend upon the brahmins for conferring kshatriyahood. The kings of different social hue acquired legitimacy ceasing to depend on brahmins for legitimating their authority. This transition was possible because the kings by then became stronger, no longer in need of the brahmins’ social support. The divine king concept helped in reducing the importance of the brahmins.

On the social front, the mystics, aiming at social and spiritual reformation, used the vernacular as a means of reaching out to the people. Realizing that the high-flown grandhika tradition was a barrier to communication, the mystics chose simple and plain vernacular for disseminating the message of reformation. The mystic writers practiced and advocated the vyavaharika tradition, though with limitations. The foremost of the mystics in this lineage was Basaveswara who originated *vacana sahitya*, readily intelligible prose texts, which propagated the caste and gender equality in the twelfth century. Another important mystic writer was
Palkurki Somanatha of the thirteenth century, who questioned the Sanskrit works which are not accessible to ordinary people. The simplicity and sweetness of the vyavaharika tradition is put succinctly:

Telugu is simple, beautiful to hear

It reaches all, unlike these big words of verse and prose.

I will therefore sing in dvipada couplets.

Somanatha protested against Sanskrit. His protest laid the foundation of the low caste protest movements. The use of the vyavaharika tradition accounts for the popularity of the mystics; the grandhika tradition, with its complexity, accounts for the unpopularity of the Hindu philosophers like Shankaracharya, who remained unknown to the masses because of the unintelligible language they had used. The mystic writers contributed immensely to release the vernaculars from the clutches of the linguistic complexity. In spite of the criticism of the vyavaharika tradition, say for example, comparing dvipada to an old whore, a backyard sewer, and a patron who does not pay (in Narayana Rao 1995: 27), it flourished unfettered.

The literary factor that contributed to the simplification and popularity of the vyavaharika tradition is the origination of the inventive genres like satakam and vacana (prose), besides dvipada (couplets) that contributed to the re-legitimation.

The emergence of the non-brahmin writers and low caste artists, who acquired legitimacy helped challenge the grandhika tradition. The non-brahmin writers and low caste artists elevated and adopted the folk art forms like, street plays), musical plays and other ballets and plays. These folk art forms in turn revolutionized the language of literature. The Sanskrit epics, which were adapted into the folk art forms, could reach the unlettered masses. The reason for the popularity
of the folk art forms has been that the complex texts (*slokas/verses*) are recited tunefully to the accompaniment of musical instruments like drum, harmonium, stringed instruments, and explain/paraphrase them in the language of the masses. The audience would enjoy the verse recited tunefully and understand the meaning of the verse through the paraphrase. Narayana Rao puts it interestingly: “The distance and the aura that Sanskrit had acquired were related to its unintelligibility. The Vedas and all the prescriptive texts of Sanskrit, including its venerated grammar, derived their power precisely from their being distanced from the ordinary person. However their ideological impact would not be felt if they were not made somehow accessible” (Narayana Rao 1995: 26). The processes of the modernization of the vernacular prose thus traversed a long and chequered way. John Leonard sums up the process:

The social reform proved to be the chief determinant of the direction of cultural change in the Telugu language and literature. The modification of Telugu script for printing, the initial effort at prose composition, and the introduction of new literary forms had occurred during the mid-nineteenth century, developed by the Telugu scholars who tried to control the langue…The main motivation for this modernization of Telugu was the hope that it would bridge the gulf which the educated elite felt between themselves and those who did not know [educated language]” (Leonard 167).

And Narayana Rao sums up the process of modernization of Telugu:

After long and vehement persuasion by Gidugu Ramamurthy and Gurajada Appa Rao, and after heated discussions in public gatherings, academic journals and literary associations, the tide of public opinion turned towards modern Telugu. The pressure of daily needs in news papers and popular journals gave rise to fluent modern Telugu prose. Great pundits
such as Kandukuri and Challapalli Venakatasamstry shifted their allegiance to modern Telugu. This was not exactly karanam Telugu but modern prose suitable for intellectual communication as well as artistic creativity (Narayana Rao 2004: 163)

Telugu prose began to grow, in spite of the resistance of the pundits, since the nineteen forties. On the communication front, the mass media, with the emergence of the radio, TV, cinema and language newspapers, reinforced the importance of the spoken word.

Thus the brahmin-led Gidugu’s school of language reform may be credited with effecting a shift from the Sanskrit inflected Telugu to ‘standardisation’ of Telugu, which in practice meant the educated spoken language of the delta region. Hence Gidugu-Kandukuri language movement needs to be viewed as non-sudra and non-dalit reform, needing yet another linguistic revolution namely dalitisation of Telugu.

The Dialect

The Genre of short story played an important role in restoring dignity to the dialect. While the language reform ended up elevating the delta language as the ‘standard’ variety, the Telangana and Rayalasima dialects attained respectability through the genre of the short fiction. The authors from Telangana and Rayalaseema wrote in their respective dialects as different from their counterparts from the delta region. Because of the rise in literacy and awareness, a shift has taken place in the genre. Ranga Rao writes: “with the spread of education and the democratic spirit, writers in impressive numbers have started coming from the other two regions” (Ranga Rao 261). The vernacular short fiction underwent a transition when the writers of the backward regions questioned the formation of the delta writing as the canon, and affirmed the use of the dialects, which are regional in character. The regionalisation of the genre thus legitimised the use
of the dialects effecting a shift from the centre to the margins. However, the dialects, which have been promoted as alternatives to the standardized variety, suffer from the limitation of being elitist and being upper caste in diction and accent. The accent and diction used is characteristic of the Brahmin variety. Similarly, the literary and theatre movements and the struggle for the left ideological legitimacy failed to restore dignity to the spoken language of the sudras and dalits. Ramakrishna, in his interesting article on the topic too did not specify the failure of the left in de-brahminizing Telugu (Ramakrishana).

The shift from the delta dialect to the other dialects, though considered revolutionary, is elitist in nature, needing yet another shift in the form of dalitization of the dialects.

Malayalam dalit writer, S. Joseph, in his essay, “Poetry in Search of a Prose,” writes about the inversion of the hierarchy of the genres—prose ceasing to imitate poetry, instead poetry imitating prose—in dalit writing (in Satyanarayana 63). Inversion of the linguistic binaries such as standard-dialect; written-oral; etc has been practiced in the dalit writing.

Dalit writing after Ambedkar marked a significant shift from the dialect. Written in all the genres—poetry, fiction, biography and autobiography and the socio-political critiques—the dalit writings eschew traditional style of writing. The writers, mostly being activists, proved that literariness does not require using special, sublime, stylized language. They proved that writing can imitate speech re-defining the language of literature. This would mean the twin-shifts—shift from the written mode to the spoken mode; and from the oral mode of the educated elite speakers to that of the illiterate low caste speakers—became complete with the emergence of the contemporary Telugu dalit writing.
The dalit writing radicalized the language of literature thereby reclaiming the dalit language, which the dalit writers attempted at two levels. First, the use of the dialects. Though, it is not a new experiment to write prose entirely in the Telangana dialect, the upper caste writings in the respective dialects, were received with acclaim. But dalit works in the dialects did not evoke same kind of response because the dalit writers go beyond the dialect in employing the dalit register as well as the spoken mode as against the brahmins’ register and accent.

The dialects are enriched by the use of the dalit register, an authentic form of the dalit language that represents the dalit life. If the dialect is region-specific, register is culture-specific. The social aspect of the dalit life is best represented by the dalit register.

The properties of the ancient Telugu—sans Sanskrit influence—are preserved in the little communities because of two factors. First, the illiteracy of the dalits prevented the Sanskrit words from entering into their language. The textbooks, teaching and examinations provided for Sanskrit the inroads into Telugu and other Indian languages. The language of the educated therefore is Sanskrit based, and that of the unlettered sudras’ and dalits’ is free from Sanskrit elements.

Second, the social exclusion and demographic isolation prevented the dalits from the social contact with the mainstream. Consequently, the dalit language remained unaffected by the Sanskrit inflections. The homogenous nature of the dalit groups helped preserve the ancient forms of the vernaculars. The extent of Sanskrit elements used in Telugu is similar to the social structure in the village: while the Telugu of the brahmins is most affected, the Telugu of the dakkalis is least affected. The caste hierarchy corresponds to the extent of the Sanskrit words and inflections. Thus the illiteracy and the social and demographic isolation of the dalits account for
the ‘proseness,’ ‘purity,’ and ‘ancientness’ of the Telugu language. It took above a thousand years to ‘prosify’ the poesy, completing the full circle of language transformation, thanks to the dalit writing.

The first generation dalit writing however did not radicalise the language and technique: concerning language, they did not go beyond the use of the dialect; regarding the technique, they rather imitated the canonical well-made structure of the story. The new generation dalit writers, in stark contrast, radicalised the genre by using the dalit register. Instead of the well-made form, they employed the style of narrativizing the experiences blurring the difference between autobiographical and fictional narrative.

Their target readers not being the complaisant middle classes, the radical dalit writers did not aim at acceptability, but affirmation of their culture, ritual and identity. They used the oral tradition making use of the diction and register, which would otherwise be described as ‘vulgar and obscurantist’ (Dangle 50) by the literary establishment. The radical dalit writers considered it a form of cultural assertion from below. This kind of writing entails “the double task of tackling the dalit literary establishment, on the one hand, and colonizing the state, on the other.” (Guru 192)

The instances of defiance assumed extreme proportions of being unintelligible to the readers from the rest of the regions; and speakers of the non-dalit register. This kind of prose invoked criticism on the grounds that the prose is difficult to read. The credit for beginning a new genre, which is termed ‘mud-house’ writing as against the ‘elite’ writing (Guru) may be attributed to the new generation dalit writers.
The writers of this genre defend their language on the grounds that it is close to the language actually spoken by the dalits. They prefer the mud-house language at the expense of intelligibility. When asked about a writer’s preference between intelligibility and representation, Yellaiah, a dalit writer avers: “Dalit writer has to prefer representation to intelligibility. Cultural representation cannot be sacrificed for readability. The difficulties that readers might face can be overcome by effort. But if representation is sacrificed for intelligibility, it amounts to erasing one’s own culture and identity…culture is best transmitted by one’s own register and dialect. (Yellaiah 343)

By choosing to write in the mud-house language, the dalit short story mirrors the dalit middle classes and the lower classes.

The Identity

Cutting across the languages and genres, the identity writing emerged in the last decade. For over two decades now the little literatures produced experiential writings, which attracted the attention of the literary theoreticians, and became part of the curriculum of the universities in the world. The writings by dalits, tribals, religious minorities, women and other writings of the sub-nationals address the most fundamental issue of identity and protest affirming thier occupation, culture and language. They portray the conflicts and problems in their lives. They also portray the deplorable living conditions.

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