

The Genesis of Comparative Literature in the University of Delhi: Some Lesser Known Facts

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It was the birth Centenary year of Rabindranath Tagore. Delhi University at that time was headed by Prof C.D. Deshmukh(who was earlier the Governor of Reserve Bank of India, and also was for some time the Finance Minister of India) as the Vice-Chancellor, who decided to create a Chair in the name of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Prof. R.K. Dasgupta, the renowned Milton scholar from Oxford was appointed as the Tagore Professor in Bengali and also as the Head of the newly established Modern Indian Languages Department in 1962. Prior to that, barring Hindi, Urdu, and of course English, a few other Indian Languages, like Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada, had some kind of presence in the University of Delhi. These three Languages were initially part of the Hindi Department, and later shifted to the Department of Linguistics. As we have mentioned earlier, it was the vision of Prof. C.D. Deshmukh to create a Department in the University of Delhi, where a number of Indian Languages would be taught. The said Department initially comprised of five languages : Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. The other six languages, viz. Assamese, Manipuri, Gujarati, Sindhi, Telegu and Oriya, were added later. This was the composition of Modern Indian Languages (MIL) Department.

In MIL Department, the M.A. Programme in Bengali was started in 1962. Dr. Sisir Kumar Das who was teaching Bengali in the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, joined the new MIL Department in 1963. Those were the early days of the Department. Only M.A. Programme and certificate courses in various languages had started. Apart from the teaching programmes, Professor Dasgupta thought of organizing more activities: holding weekly seminars were mooted. Thursday of every week was designated as the seminar-day. It must be mentioned here that the detailed history about these seminars are not preserved anywhere. Some papers of these seminars are available in private collections, some references have been retrieved from the memories of the old and surviving faculty members. Prof. Dasgupta had an aptitude of collecting the materials for the histories of the Literary Scholarships of various Indian Languages and Literatures. So the weekly seminars were designed with papers like, “Grammars in Tamil”, “Grammars in Punjabi” etc. or Dictionaries in various Languages (those that were taught in the

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MIL Department).The schedule of the seminars were prepared in the beginning of each Academic session and on eachThursday, at 3 P.M, one faculty member used to read a typed paper, the copy of which used to be circulated amongst the audience. In the process, a sizable body of materials about Literary Scholarships in various Indian Languages were collected.

Likewise, seminar series such as, ‘The First Novel in the Languages’, ‘The First Play...’,‘The Western Component...’, ‘The Bhakti Movement...’, used to be conducted. Individual faculty members also, from time to time, prepared papers like ‘The Style of Maniprabala in Malayalam’, ‘ The Japji in Punjabi’, ‘ The Tirukural in Tamil’etc.So, over the years, a lot of information was gathered in a language (i.e., English) which was intelligible to the rest of the faculty members in the Department of MIL. It should be noted with emphasis that the composition of the MIL Department of the University of Delhi, where so many Languages and Literatures of India are studied, is till date unique in the whole of India.And, it should also be noted with equal emphasis, that the contribution of the Department of MIL through its innumerable seminars on various topics of Indian Language paved the path for the studies of Comparative Indian Literature. It is obvious that almost all of these faculty members had no training in the discipline of Comparative Literature, but unknowingly they were contributing to the growth of a discipline of Comparative Indian Literature which will be immensely appreciated in the future. It goes without saying that there are possibilities of having many gaps and lapses in such studies, but that should not debar us from recognizing their importance. That Professor Sisir Kumar Das was able to write his magnum opus, *The History Of Indian Literature*, in three volumes was facilitated by all these seminar papers. Obviously there is no question of undermining the unprecedented vision and perseverance of Professor Das in writing these volumes.

How the materials collected in these seminars contributed to the growth of Comparative Indian Literature will be clear from one or two examples. In the late eighties, the Department of MIL decided to take up “War Narratives” in various Indian Languages as the topic of the seminar of that year. Dr. T. Shishila, who was teaching Telegu in the Department at that time, wrote about Bobbali Yuddham (“The Ballad of Bobbali Yuddham”) which was a very popular historical ballad in Telegu. The ballad celebrates the war in Bobbli which happened in 24th January, 1757. Bobbli and Vijaynagar were the two adjacent kingdoms of Andhra Pradesh. The ballad “Bobbli Yuddham” has many versions. In one version, a French commander-

in-chief called Bussy is the principal character. Bussy, who attacked the famous fort of Babbly, was a corrupt person, but is praised by the local poets because of his kindness towards his captives, women in particular. Professor Das later wrote about this narrative:

He [Bussy] is, of course, projected against the native hero, RangaRao of Babbli who sacrificed his life to protect the honour of his 'country'. It is one of the earliest literary documents in an Indian Language which glorifies an Indian defending the honour of his kingdom against the onslaught of Western power. The ambivalence of the Indian bards towards the character and personality of the European soldier is a clear indication of the complexity of their attitudes reflecting as it did, their allegiance to the local rulers and awareness of the political disunity among them and also their implicit acceptance of the superiority of the European military power. RangaRao's (the lord of the Bobbali Fort) resistance to the forces of Bussy was glorified during the national movement as a patriotic act of defending the motherland, a favourite theme in Telegu literature, and Bussy, a Frenchman was obliquely identified with British rule.

Another example from a seminar paper on Tamil literature was written by Dr. A. Mariappan, a faculty member in the same Department about "Villu-Pattu" (Bow-Song), a kind of long narrative sung during the festival days in Tamilnadu. Professor Mariappan referred to "Vellaikkarankadai" ("The Story of a White Man"), an apotheosizing of a white man who defied the custom. The story goes like this:

...in the coastal area of Tamilnadu relates the story of an unidentified English man, referred as Vellaikaran Swamy, who was deified in the late eighteenth century and is worshipped even today by the villagers. This particular English man ordered the woodcutters to cut a tree for the requirement of the mast of a ship. They hesitated to carry out the order as the tree was believed to be the abode of a spirit called Chenkitaikaran. When they were

forced to fell the tree, the spirit decided to avenge the humiliation and waited for the opportune moment. Once the ship was built and started her voyage, the spirit sitting on the top of the mast, invisible to every one, took the form of a huge bird and raised a terrible storm in which the ship and the English man both perished. The spirit of the Englishman, however, was pardoned by Chenkitakkaran; he became a deity in a temple built later at the site of his death near sea-shore. There is no idol in the temple, instead there is a wooden chair, on which rests a long coat and a trousers, a cup and a pair of boots as well as a rifle, all supposed to be used by the Englishman. The offerings in the temple are mutton and chicken, cigar and brandy.

Apart from the weekly seminars, there used to be another set of activities, undertaken by the Department of MIL. When G. Sankar Kurup, the first recipient of Bharatiya Jnanpith award, visited Delhi in 1966, he was given a felicitation in the University of Delhi. The function was held in the Tagore Hall of Delhi University. A booklet entitled G. Sankara Kurup edited by Dr. O.M. Anujan, a faculty member in Malayalam in the Department, was published in this occasion. In that booklet, Dr. Anujan wrote an article on G. Sankara Kurup together with a detailed bibliography of his works, and Professor Dasgupta wrote a beautiful 'forward' to it about which we shall discuss later. Similarly, on the occasion of unveiling a portrait of Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar in the Faculty of Arts, Delhi University, a booklet containing essays on Vidyasagar, written by Dr. Margaret Chatterji, Dr. Sisir Kumar Das and the chronology of his life together with the bibliography of Vidyasagar's works were prepared by Dr. Nabendu Sen, a Faculty in Bengali in Delhi College (now renamed as Zakir Hussain Post-Graduate College).

From 1962 to 1970, when Professor Dasgupta was the Head of the Department (because from 1970 the Headships in the University became rotational), there used to be a whole lot of scholarly activities of various kinds in the University & in the Department. In all these activities, the Department of MIL participated vigorously. For instance, in the mid-sixties of that period, the Government of India installed a big statue of Bal Gangadhar Tilak in a central place (to

be precise, near ITO) in New Delhi, henceforth called Tilak Marg. During the unveiling of the Statue, the MIL Department participated in that ceremony and Professor R. K. Dasgupta was requested by Professor C.D. Deshmukh to speak on the patriotic component of Indian Literature.

A good number of booklets were published mainly during the installations of the portraits. Those booklets were “Raja Rammohun Roy” (1966), “Michael Madhusudan Datta” (1967), “Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar” (1971). I must mention here that all these booklets—which are of priceless value if we consider the time and place of their origin and the purpose they served—have not been preserved properly. Barring a few private collections, I doubt very much whether the entire collection of these booklets are to be found anywhere. Let me mention one or two such booklets to give a rough idea. Dr. Nilratan Sen wrote a paper on Michael’s blank verse, and Dr. S.K. Das wrote on the structure of Michael’s sonnets. Two articles by Professor Dasgupta were on the French influence on Michael and *Nostra Divina Lingua*. Besides those articles, a number of facsimiles of Michael’s writings and some of his letters were there in that booklet. We may recall that it was Professor R.K. Dasgupta who retrieved the facsimile of the original letter of Michael and of the manuscript of the sonnet on the poet Dante sent to the Governor of Italy on the occasion of the poet’s tri-centenary birthday celebration. Obviously all these activities led to the Genesis of the Comparative Indian Literature as an academic discipline.

I should also mention about another such booklet: “Our National Anthem.” On 7th August the annual Tagore Day was celebrated in the Tagore Hall of Delhi University. This particular booklet is noteworthy for many reasons, but the uppermost reason is Professor R.K. Dasgupta’s article, “Our National Anthem: Its Composition and Significance.” Professor Dasgupta has presented all the relevant facts about ‘Janaganamana’, the confusion created by a particular paper. The canard about this song which surfaces at regular intervals will vanish for ever if the people of India pay a little attention to the glaring facts presented in the said booklet.

In the early days of the MIL Department, may be because of the particular trait of Professor Dasgupta’s personality, or because of the general ambience of Delhi University in those days, which was very much different from the later days, Professor Dasgupta conducted himself as an Ambassador of Indian Literature. Because of his Oxford background, it was relatively easy for him to do so. The Department of MIL used to publish not only booklets on Indian Literature, but with equal felicity booklets were also published on Goethe, Roman Rolland, Croce and others

on different occasions. The Spanish-speaking Guatemalan writer, Miguel Angel Asturias, who received the Nobel Prize in 1967, was felicitated in the Tagore Hall of Delhi University, and an informative booklet about the writer was edited by Professor Dasgupta. Though I have not come across any such booklet on the Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, but I have heard from Professor Das that the poet Paz was also felicitated similarly when he was the Mexican Ambassador in India since 1962.

In the beginning of my paper, I referred to the Felicitation Ceremony of the Malayalam writer, G. Sankar Kurup, which was organized on 21st November, 1966, in the Tagore Hall. G. Sankar Kurup was the first recipient of Bharatiya Jnanpith. While writing the forward of that booklet, Professor Dasgupta pointed out many significant areas of Indian Literature. I think the opening lines of that 'Foreward' is very relevant here:

The emergence of G. Sankar Kurup as a poet throughout India is particularly welcome to our Department of Modern Indian Languages which has set itself the task of arriving at a conception of Indian Literature as a whole.

In the next fifty years of its existence, the Department of MIL sometimes vigorously, sometimes feebly treaded that path to chart out the multi-faceted conception of Indian Literature. The detailed history of that journey awaits professional documentation.

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