UNIT 1 THE CONCEPT OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Structure

1.0 Objectives
1.1 Introduction
1.2 The Idea of India as a Nation
1.3 Search for Indianness in Literature
1.4 Ancient Indian Literature
1.5 Middle Indian Literature
1.6 Conclusion
1.7 Questions
1.8 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will explore and try to establish the concept of Indian Literature and see how it can be delineated from ancient times through the early modern period of literatures in Indian languages (I am looking at it as the middle period in terms of Indian literary history). By the time you complete this unit, you will, we hope, have a fair idea of the complex nature of the question of the concept and also of what goes into the making of the concept. You will also be able to understand why the methodology of comparative literature studies is most suitable to study Indian literature.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

You may wonder why Indian Literature needs to be defined at all. After all, one understands that it is the literature written in India. But as you read the previous sentence, you realize that India does not have one literature, i.e. literature written in one language. We have many literatures and many linguistic cultures, or sub-cultures, some of which were born in opposition to other linguistic cultures or sub-cultures. Hence, the definition of Indian Literature has to be more complex than the one offered earlier. One needs to explain and explore the term further. In fact both India and Indian Literature need to be thought through more clearly.

Culture and literature are closely bound together and if we can have a way of looking at India as a clearly definable cultural entity, then the task of defining Indian Literature would be much easier.

1.2 THE IDEA OF INDIA AS A NATION

We will first consider the idea of India as a nation, and then see why we still don't have a credible history of Indian Literature and why we need to have one. We will then see how the basis for such a history is in our past, in the epics and in folk and popular literature, especially of the Bhakti movements. We will argue for a way to read Indian Literature as a fabric consisting of
weaves from different hands coming from different regions joining together almost seamlessly to create a wonderful whole.

If we think of India the subcontinent that experienced various historical events including colonisation and then achieved independence and partition, we may be able to escape the trap of looking at India as existent only after the idea of the nation-state came into being, after 1947. This is not to say that we should not see how our nation was “imagined” into being. After all, successive governments in independent India have talked of the need for national integration, a need that would have been superfluous if we had already thought of ourselves, i.e. all Indians, as belonging to the same “national” community. Indeed, as part of the struggle against the British colonialists, our political leaders went around the subcontinent educating people about Bharat Mata, about their belonging to the same motherland. This was quite a task among people divided by language, race, religion, caste, and food habits. [In fact it is a miracle that we came to be a modern nation state, still cohering as a nation however divided we may appear to be!] They took recourse to the undeniable truth of the underlying cultural unity in the country.

In fact, Jawaharlal Nehru points out our essential differences as well as our essential unity in his book, *Discovery of India*, and this unity precedes nation formation. While describing the obvious differences in racial stock, talking of undivided India of the British times, he points out that even the extreme examples of diversity, the Tamils and the Pathans, “there is no mistaking the impress of India on the Pathan, as this is obvious on the Tamil”. (Nehru: 61) He then goes on to say that while the vast majority of Indians fall in between these two extremes, they too “have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundreds of years … and yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities”. (61) This heritage was cultural — which meant that it could be seen as a way of life and in “a philosophical attitude to life” (62). He thinks of India as “a culture and a civilization which gave shape to all things”. (62) This is a culture that absorbed foreign influences and tried to find a synthesis at all times between older and newer ideas. He then says that India is simply home for the Indians, that Indians will feel more at home anywhere in India than outside, reminding one of the statements of the famous Indian English poet, Nissim Ezekiel, when he was commenting on V.S. Naipaul in his essay, “Naipaul’s India and Mine”: “In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian”.

It used to be a critical commonplace to say that our nation could be divided into two parts — the urban India and the rural Bharat. Sometimes these were seen as elitist English speaking India, which was clearly in the minority, and the majority Indian languages speaking Bharat. The second formulation should immediately alert us to the dangers of easy categorizations. The Indian languages speaking Bharat exists in the cities as well, i.e. in urban India. And people who speak and earn their living in Indian languages can also constitute the elite both in terms of political power and cultural production. However, in common perception, India is represented in English to foreign audiences, while Indian languages cater to only to fellow Indians. Thus, Meenakshi Mukherjee and Nissim Ezekiel called their anthology of translations from Indian languages into English *Another India*. Perhaps, the anthology would have been better served by a title like *Other Indias* or simply *Writing India*. 
These titles would have worked better because they do not flatten out or homogenize the various literatures that constitute Indian writing.

The idea of reading Indian literatures in translation is to understand the various linguistic cultures that constitute our nation. But don’t or shouldn’t we already know about these cultures because they belong to one nation, our own nation? One of the slogans of the Nehruvian era used to be “Unity in Diversity” and this is a useful slogan to remember because it alerts us to the fact that though there may be many common factors in our various linguistic (and religious) cultures, our nation is also marked by a wonderful diversity, that we are by definition a pluralistic nation.

1.3 SEARCH FOR INDIANNESS IN LITERATURE

According to K.M. George the basic problem with the term Indian Literature is that it is used both in the singular and the plural, that is to say that we accept that we have many languages and though they do produce one Indian literature, it is possible to read the literature of each individual language in terms of its own history and development. We don’t have a common Indian language but we have what we could call Indian Literature. He gives as analogy to understand this, the case of a traditional brass lamp with many wicks. He says that if we have more wicks, “the brighter the light”. (x) As he goes on to say:

The lamp is the same, the oil is the same, but it is the wicks that determine the brightness of light. The lights from various wicks merge imperceptibly and produce a brightness which is the totality of many lights. Just as many wicks produce one light, India’s many languages produce one literature. (George: x)

In other words, various Indian literatures share the same sources and even if individually they are discrete, they constitute Indian Literature in their totality. As K.M. George says, Indian Literature “is the sum total of the literatures produced in the Indian languages, modern and classical”. (ix)

One of our most well-known comparatist scholars, Sisir Kumar Das, who tried to develop the concept of Indian literature, argued that India is “a space undisturbed by the changes in geographical factors from time to time affected by political expediency”. (Das 1995: xiii) In other words, India was a vision, “less territorial and more spiritual” (xiii), and has “existed in some form or the other throughout the pre-colonial history of India”. (xiv) This concept of Bharatavarsa gained “new significations” during the national movement. However, Das argues that Indian literature isn’t ‘one though written in many languages’, but that it is in fact made up of many unique literatures and “looks at each of them as a distinct expression of the experiences of each community”. (xiv) This is not to say that he doesn’t see commonality among the various literatures — he argues against both homogenization of Indian literatures as well as against a vision of heterogeneity that erases “the commonalities in cultures”. (xiv) Historical and geographical factors have made these literatures interact with each other and their separate histories have “certain points of convergences, thematic, generic, ideological...”. (xiv)

Thus, we should be able to arrive at the idea of Indian Literature by establishing the idea of India — by studying our politics, economics or social
life, which are factors that “are seldom confined to a particular language or region, and an instrument of exploration which transcends the boundaries of a particular language or region”. (Mukherjee: 2) In other words, as Sujit Mukherjee says, the ‘literary history of India should account for our literary past.’ (2) As he complains, “Literature in India is as old as its sculpture or painting or music but has not received historical attention in the way that these other arts have”. (1) Hence, we must look to discover the common literary past Indian languages have in order to be able to establish the contours of contemporary Indian Literature.

1.4 ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

According to Sujit Mukherjee, “… the very term ‘Indian Literature’ is sparingly used in Indian literary circles. Most often, it tends to make people think only of ancient literary works in Sanskrit. No modern and forward-looking concept of Indian Literature has yet been formulated, in spite of the much-used official declaration, ‘India has one literature that is written in many languages’, authored apparently by Radhakrishnan. This declaration has never been fully explored nor has any serious attempt been made to establish its validity”. (Mukherjee: 1) The first important point to note is that Indian Literature has always meant “ancient literary works in Sanskrit”. It is important to pause here and to think of what the term means to you, especially the term Ancient Indian Literature, or the term Classical Indian Literature. Perhaps you should write down names of Indian literary works from the period. If you have written down the word “Sanskrit”, or if you have gone further and written down names of Sanskrit texts, you should learn to look southwards. Tamil is the only language in India with a continuous literary tradition since the start of the Christian era (or even before, depending on which history you read or trust). It has a rich literary history and interestingly, an early Tamil grammatical text, Tolkappiyam, recognizes one other language as its literary equal and perhaps strong competitor, “vadamozi” or northern language, i.e. Sanskrit. Hence, when we talk of ancient Indian Literature, we need to think of both Sanskrit and Tamil, and then of Prakrit, and we must also remember that Telugu and Kannada also claim a hoary past. Interestingly, we are only considering written works here, for there must have been a strong oral literary tradition in various Indian languages in the sub-continent.

We can immediately see the problem of dealing with Indian Literature — some of you didn’t think of Tamil because it belongs to a completely different region, and to a different family of languages. We have so many languages in our country that no one of us can know them all. Hence, we can hardly talk of them with confidence, being dependant on other scholars for information and critical analyses even to establish commonalities in our literatures. Also, the development of modern Indian languages, the division of our country into linguistic states, and the ever reinforced politics of linguistic identity that forces us to distinguish our languages from others as far and as minutely as possible (arguing that what has been seen as a dialect of a language is actually a distinct language in itself) have meant that we tend to think of our languages in isolation, and perhaps in opposition to other Indian languages. This creates a further difficulty in thinking coherently about Indian Literature. Further, as Sujit Mukherjee has pointed out, “… no previous model exists anywhere in the world for the literary history of a country of this size and containing so
many languages that have achieved a widely scattered and highly uneven literary culture”. (Mukherjee: 2)

Nevertheless, it is possible to see in the ancient and, particularly, in the medieval periods, a happy cross-pollination of Indian Literatures that makes it possible to see literary movements across the country. If the Mahabharata and the Ramayana can be seen as the mainstays of our epic tradition, traveling across the sub-continent and manifesting themselves in established literary traditions as well as folk traditions (sometimes oppositionally), we can also see the Bhakti Movement as the first truly popular literary movement in India. The Bhakti Movement began in South India in the seventh century CE (Christian era). It is because of the popularity of the Bhakti Movement in Tamil, especially of the Saivite saints that Tamil is recognized by many as a Saivite language, and Saivism as a hallmark of Tamil culture. However, ancient Sanskrit literature, whatever the tension between Sanskrit and Tamil, was available as a rich resource in both north and south India. One must remember that many Tamil kings patronized Tamil and that during the medieval period, both Sanskrit and Tamil were used as literary languages in the Tamil courts and not only influenced each other but perhaps were written by the same poets.

We all know of India’s Vedic and Upanishadic heritage. Rigvedic poetry is the oldest part of the Vedas. Already well evolved in literary style, they point to a rich and vibrant culture. Even if the Vedas and Upanishads were known only to the Brahmans, their ideas did find expression in popular traditions and were available to the common people. This is where the two epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, played and continue to play a big role. As Nehru said, all Indians shared a common “cultural background” (Nehru: 67), which “was a mixture of popular philosophy, tradition, history, myth, and legend” (67), and that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, “in popular translations and paraphrases, were widely known among the masses, and every incident and story and moral in them was engraved on the popular mind and gave a richness and content to it”. (67) He calls the Mahabharata the foundational text of India in the sense that it is in this epic that “a very definite attempt has been made to emphasize the fundamental unity of India, or Bharatavarsha as it was called” (107). The Mahabharata is the longest epic in the world, and is a rich source of early philosophy, political thought, religious belief, social structure, myths and legends. The Mahabharata is such an inspirational text that it has not only been retold in many languages, and its episodes are part of various folk traditions, it has also inspired many contemporary works. Besides the rewritings of the Mahabharata played a crucial role in the development of a few modern Indian languages towards the end of the first millennium in the Christian Era as well as in the second millennium. For example, consider the following: Kabi Sanjay’s Bengali version of the Mahabharata in the early half of the fifteenth century (some say the sixteenth) or the Malayalam Bharatamala from the fifteenth century or the Kannada Pampabharama from the tenth century. However, what is of interest to us here is the fact that episodes from the Mahabharata provide plots for Sanskrit plays and are also referred to in Tamil Sangam poetry, thus pointing to a common cultural heritage in ancient India.

The noted Sanskrit playwright Bhasa (3rd century CE) wrote at least six plays based on the epic: Madhyamavayyogam (Bhima reunited with Hidimba and son), Dittavakram (Krshna as emissary to Kauravas’ court), Karnabharam (Indra begging the gift of Karna’s armour and earrings), Pancaratram (Raid on
Virata), Dutaghatakacacm (Ghatotkacha’s message to Kauravas celebrating the death of Abhimanyu that Arjuna would avenge), and Urubhangam (Bhima-Duryodhana duel). Who has not heard of Kalidasa’s Abhijitana Sakuntala, or Kumarasambhava? What is of even more interest is the fact that Tamil Sangam poetry refers to episodes that occur in the Mahabharata without showing an awareness of the written epic itself, perhaps indicating that oral traditions must have traveled first as also that the events and characters may have formed part of various literary works and been part of popular imagination before being put into epic form in Sanskrit. Whatever be the case, both the epics find expression in Tamil in their first written avatars outside the Sanskrit tradition. Since the first mention of characters from the Mahabharata occur in Sangam poetry, it can be assumed that Tamilians knew of them at least two to three centuries before the Christian Era. In Puranamurh a Chera King, Peruncherru Utiyan Cheralatan, provides food for both the parties in the Mahabharata war. This is an extremely interesting insertion of a Tamil king into the Mahabharata which signals the significance of the events for all parts of the land. It was because there was a common cultural heritage that the patrons of the arts, the royalty of the times in a different part of India, are portrayed as characters in the episodes, thus giving them a part to play in both the cultural and the political life of the land. Some of the other references are interwoven in similes as in Perumpuranarruppattai where the victory of the Tamil king Tontaiman Ilhastraian is compared to that of the Pandava victory over the Kauravas (414-420). The Kurukshetra war finds mention in Kallttokai, which also speaks of the deaths of Drona and Bhisma. As has been pointed out, Tamil dynasties claimed to have participated in the episodes that constitute the epic, with the Pandya kings claiming direct descent from the Pandavas (through Arjuna’s marriage to Chitrangada, the daughter of a Pandya king, whose son Babruvahana ascended the throne). In terms of literary affinities, one must also point out that one of the Sangam poets is called Bharatampatiya Peruntavanar, i.e. Perumtevanar who sang (composed) the Bharatam. One must also note that the early Tamil epics, both the Jain Cilappadikaram (3rd century CE) and the Buddhist Manimekalai (5th century CE) contain references to episodes and characters from the Mahabharata. There are many retellings of the Mahabharata in later years, culminating in what is considered the greatest of them all, Bharatam by Vilippalpurunathavhar in the 14th century CE.

One must remember that Sanskrit texts were composed in various parts of India and many of the Sanskrit retellings can be attributed to specific locations in the east and the western parts of India. Sanskrit was the language of high culture. Even during the period when Prakritis came into prominence (between the sixth and eleventh centuries), and Pali was also an established language, Sanskrit was studied and used as the language of communication and literature in various parts of India. It played a prominent role even in the Tamil country. This period has also been called the Apabhransa period. While, as Sisir Kumar Das points out, Apabhransa primarily meant “a sub-standard or corrupt speech” (Das 2005: 4), it was soon recognized as a literary language. Apabhransa seems to have been widely known in fifth century India, but Sanskrit was still the link language. As said by Burrow, “with progress of time the differences between the local dialects grew greater, so that Sanskrit became a necessary bond for the cultural unity of India. ... Sanskrit was the only language which could serve as a national language in Ancient India, whose cultural unity, far more influential and important than its political
disunity, rendered such a language essential”. (Burrow 59-60) Thus, there was a civilizational and cultural unity that was expressed in and through Sanskrit texts but also through classical Tamil and in various folk literatures. Thus it would not be an exaggeration to say that our unity, the idea of India, is to be found in the dissemination of the two epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Think of all the versions of the two epics that you have heard of and you realize how they attest to the truth of that statement. As pointed out stories from the Mahabharata traveled into all languages quite early, the Ramayana has had a greater history of translation, and at least two well known versions are considered to be equal in significance and effect (if not superior) to the original Sanskrit version — the Kambaramayana, and Tulsi’s Ramcharitmanas. But the popularity of the Ramayana comes only towards the end of the first millennium of the Christian era. As pointed out by K. Nachimuthu the “Mahabharata seems to have been more popular than the Ramayana in the Sangam period if the frequency of references is an indication of a work’s popularity”. (Nachimuthu 3) This changes only “after 10th century after the appearance of Kambaramayana which made Rama, a cult figure equal to Krishna but in popular versions among folks the Mahabharata continued to have sway”. (Nachimuthu 3) One must remember that the Jain and Buddhist traditions also traveled south and played a part in the weaving together of Indian culture. Bharata’s Natyaashastra was the basis for analysis of drama in both the north and the south and gave rise to Bharatanatyam, the South Indian dance form. We must also consider the possibility that many Sanskrit texts owe their origin to Tamil climes and that the two literary cultures must have influenced each other in ways that still have to be established fully.

1.5 MIDDLE INDIAN LITERATURE

As already said, the two epics played a major role in the development of modern Indian languages. Malayalam for instance as well as Kannada signaled their literary status by versions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The first writing that histories of Malayalam begin with is a mostly Tamil rewriting of the Ramayana, the twelfth century Ramcharitram, which only treats the Yudha Kanda. However Malayalam literature takes definite shape only in the 14th century CE. This was when Madhava Panicker, Sankara Panicker and Rama Panicker composed their versions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. They are called the Niranam poets, and their works mark an important stage in the formation of Malayalam. Madhava Panikkar wrote a condensed Malayalam translation of Bhagavad Gita, while Sankara Panikkar composed the Bharathamala, a condensation of Mahabharatham. Rama Panikkar is considered to be the greatest of them, and is the author of Ramayanan, Bharatham, Bhagavatham, and Sivarathri Mahatmyam. Kammasa Ramayanan and Kammasa Bharatham are the most important of these Niranam works. The two epics were given various Malayalam avatars, and found one of their most famous composers in Thunchattu Ezhuthachan (15th century CE) who composed the Sri Mahabharatam Kilipattu as also the famous Adhyatma Ramayana. This gave Ezhuthachan the stature of the father of the Malayalam language. One finds that in Kannada, Pampa (10th century CE) is the first of their great writers and achieved his greatness with Vikramajurna Vijaya, also known as the Pampabharata, because it is a Kannada rewriting of Vyasa’s Mahabharata. Pampa was a Jain and also wrote a Jain epic, the Adipurana. While other
Sanskrit works also inspired early Kannada works (e.g. Banabhatta’s Kadambari which is in prose finds a fine verse equivalent in the Kannada Karnataka Kadambari written by Nagavarma, who also belonged to the tenth century CE), the Mahabharata continued to inspire Kannada writers, with another tenth century writer, Ranna, composing the Sahasa Bhima-Vijaya. The Ramayana finds its first major Kannada version in the twelfth century, when Nagacandra wrote Ramacentacarita Purana. This history is repeated in language after language in India, be it Bengali and Kritibass’s 15th century Ramayana, or Hindi with Tulsidas’s Ramacaritamanasa (16th-17th century CE), or Marathi where the beginnings of Marathi literature can be seen in the saint Jnaneswara’s commentary on the Bhagwat Gita. Jnaneswari, and its consolidation in Ekanatha’s sixteenth century Bhavartha Ramayana, or Oriya and Sarala Das’s Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Chandipurana are seen as the foundational texts of the language, or Telugu with Nannay’s eleventh century Bharata.

By now it must be clear that Indian literatures point to a commonality of cultural and religious influences, a unity that is expressed in different languages, and in divergent localized expressions. As Sisir Kumar Das points out, “the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the Puranas helped towards the growth of a perception of a unified India despite its political disunity” (Das 2005: 16). In fact our idea of India corresponds to that of the India of the middle period which “inherited the idea of a sacred geography characterized by holy rivers and mountains and cities” (16). Places sacred to the Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains become part of this imagination. The mythical and the real interpenetrate to give rise to this imagined India. In fact religion played a large part in this cultural continuity with most parts of India participating in the divisions and hostilities between the Saiva and the Vaisnava sects. While bhakti was always a part of our cultural unity, Saivism and Vaisnavism found new avatars in the south during the middle period. Shaktiism or the worship of the Mother Goddess in all her aspects was also prevalent across the country. Thus, it should not surprise us that the texts we have been noticing come out of and give sustenance to Bhakti movement(s) and literature(s). One should not underestimate the work of Sankara (late eighth century CE) and Ramanuja (late eleventh century) in reinvigorating philosophical traditions and their concepts of non-dualism and dualism have become part of popular thought. Sankara also imposed a certain unity in India by establishing four mathas at the four corners of India. Both Ramanuja and Sankara were successful in gaining converts to their positions and both wrote exclusively in Sanskrit, the link language of the culture.

The Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement had its beginnings in the Tamil country in the sixth century CE. This movement, which lasted till the tenth century in Tamil Nadu, was powered by the Nayanmars and Alwars, two groups of saint-poets, the first being devotees of Shiva and the latter devotees of Vishnu. Vishnu was also worshipped in his avatars as Krishna and Rama. While Jainism and Buddhism held sway in Tamil Nadu for a few centuries after the turn of the millennium, by the middle of the sixth century, Hinduism (or Brahmanism) reasserted itself. One of the Nayanmars, Tiruvannambakkam, is credited with single-handedly defeating Buddhism and Jainism. He was a great singer-composer and like other Nayanmars and Alwars would sing in front of deities.
Processions where the saints and the followers would sing and dance their ecstatic devotion became common during this period. This ecstasy in worship, which characterized the Bhakti movement had its origins in ancient practices of worship in Tamil Nadu. According to George Hart, "the custom of ecstasy in worship survived in Tamil Nadu to produce the Nayanmars and Alwars, who went about Tamil Nadu singing ecstatic songs about Siva and Vishnu, and were largely responsible in later times for the position of pre-eminence those gods attained as well as for the Bhakti movement" (29) The Tamil Bhakti movement gave rise to three major texts — Tevaram, Nalayira Divya Prabandham, and Srimat Bhagavata. The first is an anthology of songs written by three Nayanmars (Saivite saints), Sambandhar, Appar, and Sundarar, and is in Tamil. The second, an anthology of four thousand devotional songs in Tamil is written by the twelve Alwars. Both were compiled in the tenth century. Srimat Bhagavata is perhaps composed entirely in the tenth century and is in Sanskrit, and is an expression of the kind of bhakti that came out of the movement headed by the Nayanmars and the Alwars. This bhakti, as already pointed out is an outpouring of emotions, an intense expression of the ecstasy of devotion. As Sisir Kumar Das says, "the saints spread a new message of love and hope for the common man. If the Bhakti movement emerged mainly as a reaction against the life-negating rigorous principles of Buddhism and Jainism, it was partly against the dry formalism of the Brahmanical system as well". (Das 2005: 50) Also, as Das points out, "by their social behaviour and personal practices the saints went beyond the taboos of caste and birth". (51) Thus, a form of personal worship, one that went beyond and, sometimes, against organized religion, became a force that swept through the rest of India, challenging orthodoxies even while affirming cultural values that had always characterized the people of the land.

From the Tamil Andal (9th century CE) to Meera (16th century CE) in the north, from Tukaram in Maharashatra to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (15th-16th century CE) in the east, there are a number of names that one associates with the Bhakti movement. Between the 14th to the 17th centuries CE, the Bhakti movement became a major force in north India. Vallabha, Kabir, Tulsidas along with Meera, Chaitanya, and Tuka were all spearheads of this movement. The Bhakti poets can be divided into those who worship the formless God or the One with form. However, this distinction did not have as great an impact as the fact that they sang of personal faith. As we know, the Bhakti saints came from different castes and many of them were women. Among the more famous women are Akkamahadevi (12th century CE), Meera, Jahnabai (13th century CE) and Bahinabai (17th century CE). They composed and spoke in the language of the people, and spread the message of individual devotion, thus democratizing literary culture, and strengthening literatures in various Indian languages. Songs, imagery from every day life, using elements of speech, dance, and drama, all characterize Bhakti poetry as attested to in the works of composers like Jayadeva (11th century CE), Vidyapati (14th century CE), Chandidas (14th-15th century CE), Bhakta Narasimha (15th century CE) and Meerabai, from different parts of India, composing in different languages. Other than Urdu, almost all Indian languages that established themselves during this period owe a great deal to the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement contributed to the shaping of India’s composite culture, influencing practices in various religions. The singing of qawwals in Dargahs by Muslims, and the singing of Gurbani in Gurudwaras by Sikhs owes as much to the Bhakti movement as does the singing of kirtans in Hindu temples. The message of sufi saints is seen to be in dialogue and agreement with that of the Bhakti poets. It would not be wrong to say then that the Bhakti movement
played a major role in the weaving together of the Indian culture and civilization in through the last centuries of the first millennium and through the first half of the second

1.6 CONCLUSION

Thus, we can see that the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two pillars on which the edifice of Indian culture is built. These and the Puranas have traveled across the land and found avatars in almost all Indian languages. We can also see that there is a great deal of cross-pollination in Indian literatures and that they go through similar phases and movements (sometimes with a certain time lag). This is because the political structures, the social institutions, the cultural roots and traditions, the literary influences, are shared across the land by all the people. Thus, one is able to talk of Indian Literature the same way that one is able to talk of European Literature, where languages have established themselves separately, often define themselves in opposition to other languages, and yet show the same characteristics and are a result of the same cultural and historical influences. This is something we will see in the modern period as well, in the years leading to our independence from British rule, and in the years after our independence.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. Why is it difficult to define Indian Literature?
2. Is ancient Tamil Literature completely unaware of Sanskrit Literature?
3. If Bhakti has always been a part of Indian culture, what was unique about the Bhakti movement?
4. What is the role of the two major Sanskrit epics in the construction of Indian culture?

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


Nehru, Jawaharlal, (1946) 1992, *The Discovery of India*, New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund and OUP.