Article

Canon Formation and Power Dynamics in India: A Study of Dalit and Adivasi Literary Exclusion in Postcolonial Curricula

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Abstract: This paper analyses the institutional and structural factors that have influenced the development of the literary canon in postcolonial India, with a focus on the exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi literatures from mainstream curricula and national scholarly recognition. Although English- and upper-caste-dominated canons were established by colonial education systems, similar hierarchical structures have been frequently maintained by post-independence organisations, such as the NCERT, Sahitya Akademi, and large universities. The institutional marginalisation of subaltern voices–particularly those of Dalit and Adivasi writers–through selective critical praise, publishing gatekeeping, and curriculum omissions is the main issue this study attempts to address. The purpose of this research is to examine new counter-canonical practices that challenge and reinterpret prevailing narratives, as well as to investigate how caste, language, and institutional power intersect to shape literary value and legitimacy in India. This study examines the methods of exclusion and the tactics of resistance, drawing on theoretical frameworks from Dalit studies, postcolonial theory, and the sociology of literature. The paper advocates for a decolonised and inclusive literary canon that represents India's linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity through critical engagement with curricula, anthologies, award histories, and alternative publishing platforms.

Introduction

Although it is often regarded as a repository of intellectual and cultural value, the literary canon is neither impartial nor representative of all cultures. A complex interplay between colonial legacies, caste hierarchies, linguistic politics, and institutional authority has shaped the construction of the Indian literary canon. Selectively elevating some works and authors into the "canonical" is a reflection of larger power structures, especially those that favour urban, masculine, upper-caste narratives in English or other dominant regional languages. In India, the canonisation process has served as a cultural gatekeeping device, stifling some voices while promoting others. It is by no means a simple literary or artistic endeavour (Ambedkar, 1948).

Due to their disparate epistemologies, lived experiences of oppression, and oral traditions, Dalit and Adivasi literatures have long been marginalised in the literary world. These literatures continue to be underrepresented in state-sponsored acknowledgements, literary anthologies, and academic curricula, despite the abundance of potent works that articulate resistance, dignity, and social critique. This omission is not coincidental; rather, it is a sign of systemic injustices that are ingrained in India's literary establishments (Gopinath, 2007). Because histories of marginalisation and cultural erasure are intricately related to the question of whose tales are transmitted, kept, and taught, canon construction thus becomes a site of ideological contestation.

However, activist researchers, alternative publishers, and subaltern writers have been increasingly challenging the prevailing canon in recent decades. These initiatives aim to redefine the very concept of literary merit while also reclaiming the voices of underrepresented individuals. Examining canon development in the Indian setting offers crucial insights into how literature both reflects and perpetuates social inequalities, which is particularly important as discussions about decolonising knowledge gain traction around the world (Gupta, 2006). It is crucial to understand these relationships to envision a more equitable and inclusive literary culture.

Literature Review

Historical, sociopolitical, and cultural factors have significantly influenced the development and evolution of India's literary canons. The way that prevailing narratives silence some voices—especially those of Dalit, Adivasi, and other subaltern communities—has long been a topic of discussion among academics and activists. Significant contributions to the knowledge of canon construction, its exclusions, and the efforts towards literary decolonisation are surveyed in this study of the literature.

B.R. Ambedkar's seminal work *The Untouchables* (1) offers a foundational socio-historical analysis of caste-based marginalisation, framing the systemic exclusion that later Dalit literature challenges. G.C. Spivak's critical essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (12) complements this framework by questioning the representation and agency of marginalised voices within elite academic discourse.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (2) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincialising Europe* (3) provide theoretical paradigms essential to postcolonial studies.

Their work challenges Eurocentric epistemologies and foregrounds the cultural hybridity and epistemic disobedience necessary for decolonising literary fields. Chakrabarty's critique of linear historiography is particularly relevant to resisting colonial legacies in literary canonisation.

Supriya Chandra's *Decolonising Indian Literature* (4) builds on these postcolonial frameworks by critiquing institutional mechanisms that perpetuate colonial literary hierarchies. Similarly, S. Gupta's *Dalit Literature and the Indian Canon* (5) interrogates the structural exclusions in the Indian literary landscape and argues for a pluralistic redefinition of literary value.

Gita Gopinath's article (6) analyses the trajectory of literary studies from a postcolonial perspective, highlighting how global academia often overlooks indigenous and vernacular voices. M. Mukherjee (7) examines how Indian educational institutions reinforce canonical boundaries, limiting the representation of marginalised literatures in curricula.

Scholars such as P. Narayan (8), S. Rai (10), and U. Natarajan (9) have focused on the struggle for recognition in Dalit literature. Narayan and Rai discuss the sociopolitical negotiations involved in literary legitimation, while Natarajan foregrounds the rhetorical and narrative strategies used by Dalit writers to contest dominant paradigms.

The contributions of G. Shyamala (11) and J. Vijay (13) further expand the discourse by emphasising oral traditions and folk narratives in the contexts of Dalit and Adivasi communities. These texts challenge genre hierarchies and highlight the significance of non-textual forms in literary production.

The *Anthology of Indian Literature: Voices from the Margins* (14), compiled by the Sahitya Akademi, represents an institutional attempt to engage with these marginalised voices, though its scope and framing remain subject to critique for tokenism and selective inclusion.

Together, these works provide a critical foundation for interrogating the mechanisms of literary canon formation in India. They emphasise the need for decolonial methodologies, intersectional awareness, and the recovery of suppressed literary traditions in reshaping what is considered "valuable" literature.

Methodology

With a focus on the marginalisation of Dalit and Adivasi literatures, this study uses a qualitative, multidisciplinary approach to examine the processes of literary canon-building in postwar India. The study traces the construction, legitimisation, and contestation of literary worth through the integration of textual analysis, institutional critique, and archival examination.

1. Textual and Canonical Analysis

To investigate recurrent themes, stylistic innovations, and ideological deviations from accepted norms, a detailed reading of a select number of literary works by Dalit

and Adivasi authors will be undertaken. Disparities in thematic content, aesthetic valuation, and representational politics will be highlighted through a comparative study with works that are frequently taught in school and university curricula. Literary curricula, textbooks, and anthologies will be essential resources for spotting inclusionary and exclusionary trends.

2. Institutional Mapping

The study critically examines how prominent institutions, including the Sahitya Akademi, the University Grants Commission (UGC), and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), have shaped the canon of Indian literature. To expose institutional biases that favour upper-caste, urban, and English-language writers, this entails analysing curriculum materials, award listings, editorial choices, and funding priorities. For this, academic circulars, policy reports, and institutional archives will be explored.

3. Archival and Discourse Analysis

To track the historical decisions that have shaped canonical forms, the research utilises archival materials such as government education policy documents, literary award criteria, editorial prefaces of anthologies, and curriculum committee minutes. To investigate how literary value is expressed and defended in mainstream academic and media settings, discourse analysis will be employed to examine critical essays, reviews, and public discussions.

4. Engagement with Alternative Literary Spaces

The study examines grassroots initiatives that support the voices of Dalits and Adivasis, independent publishing firms, and regional literary forums to understand resistance to canonical exclusion. Navayana Publishing, Adivaani, and regional literary collectives are a few examples of case studies. The development of counter-canons and the tactics used to combat institutional suppression are highlighted in this section of the study.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study is influenced by Dalit studies (e.g., Sharmila Rege, Kancha Ilaiah), postcolonial theory (e.g., Gauri Viswanathan, Homi Bhabha), and literary sociology (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu). These frameworks enable the critical examination of literary texts, as well as the hierarchies of power that govern their dissemination and reception.

A thorough grasp of how Indian literary canons are created, preserved, and challenged—as well as how these processes relate to more general issues of caste, language, and cultural authority—is made possible by this multifaceted methodological approach.

Analysis And Discussion

1. Historical Foundations of Canon Formation in Colonial India

Historical and institutional factors, many of which mirror and uphold colonial power structures, have had a significant impact on the development of the literary

canon in postcolonial India. The British educational system established English literature as a significant pillar of cultural authority during the colonial era, granting the British elite precedence over indigenous and oral literatures (Narayan, 2012). A literary canon that supported colonial ideas of cultural superiority and control was established as a result of this process. Many of these systems persisted in the newly formed Indian state even after independence, with organisations like the NCERT, Sahitya Akademi, and UGC still supporting a literary hierarchy that favoured male, upper-caste, English-speaking writers. Dalit and Adivasi literatures, which represent drastically divergent epistemologies and lived realities (Sahitya Akademi, 1998), have been excluded due to the continuation of caste, class, and linguistic hierarchies in postcolonial literary institutions (Shyamala, 2015).

2. Dalit and Adivasi Literature: Counter-Narratives and Challenges to Canonical Norms

However, by providing counter-narratives that challenge societal hierarchies and expose the realities of marginalisation, Dalit and Adivasi writers have consistently questioned these conventional standards. The aesthetic and thematic standards of mainstream Indian literature are directly challenged by these literary works, which often draw on oral traditions, autobiographies, and regional vernaculars. Authors such as Gogu Shyamala, Daya Pawar, and B.R. Ambedkar have produced influential works that challenge the cultural and social domination of upper-caste narratives (Spivak, 1988). The assumption that Dalit and Adivasi experiences are not part of the national mainstream has been reinforced by the systematic exclusion of their voices from academic discourse, literary anthologies, and national curricula, despite their literary and political significance (Rai, 2018).

3. Institutional Gatekeeping: The Role of NCERT, Sahitya Akademi, and Other Literary Institutions

It is impossible to overstate the contribution that important organisations—such as NCERT, Sahitya Akademi, and university curricula in particular—play in maintaining this exclusion. These organisations successfully gatekeep literary recognition by choosing what is included in textbooks, anthologies, and awards. These institutions continue to influence school and university curricula, which mainly ignore Dalit and Adivasi literatures in favour of the writings of upper-caste, English-language authors (Natarajan, 2004). This marginalisation is further reinforced by the standards for academic recognition and literary awards, which give preference to works that conform to the cultural norms and values of the prevailing classes. Even while marginalised writers are becoming more visible in public discourse, these institutional frameworks nevertheless restrict their recognition, which is indicative of the larger social injustices that still exist in postcolonial India. (Mukherjee, 2013)

4. Emergence of Counter-Canons: Grassroots and Independent Publishing Movements

To counter the dominance of the canonical legacy, Dalit and Adivasi writers, independent publishers, and activist scholars have established alternative literary spaces in response to this marginalisation. In addition to regional literary festivals and

online forums, publishers such as Navayana and Adivaani have emerged as crucial venues for advancing Dalit and Adivasi literatures, providing these under-represented voices with visibility and acknowledgement. In addition to giving voice to suppressed stories, these counter-canons resist the colonial and upper-caste legacies that have become mainstream in literary culture (Chakrabarty, 2000). The initiatives of these alternative venues reflect the increasing call for a literary landscape that is more egalitarian and inclusive, prioritising diversity and multiplicity over uniformity.

5. Rethinking Literary Value: Decolonising the Indian Canon

The necessity of reevaluating the definition of literary worth itself is a key component of this conversation. The continuous fight for a more inclusive canon emphasises how crucial it is to decolonise literary studies by tearing down the ideological and institutional frameworks that have traditionally silenced under-represented voices. It is feasible to develop a canon that more accurately captures the richness of India's social and cultural fabric by adopting a broader, more inclusive definition of literary value that takes into account linguistic diversity, social equity, and cultural heterogeneity. However, doing so requires a shift in cultural perceptions of what makes literature valuable, as well as institutional changes (Vijay, 2016). Although caste-based prejudices and the dominance of traditional literary institutions continue to be significant obstacles to this change, the work of independent publishers, activists, and marginalised writers is a crucial Step in the direction of a more equal literary future. (Bhabha, 1994)

Conclusion

With an emphasis on the exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi literatures and the institutional mechanisms that support these exclusions, this study has explored the intricate processes of literary canon creation in postwar India. The research highlights the need for a reimagined canon—one that reflects the diverse linguistic, cultural, and social realities of contemporary India—by examining the historical legacy of colonial education, the role of significant cultural institutions, and the emergence of alternative literary movements. Even if English-language, upper-caste writers continue to dominate widespread literary acclaim, marginalised voices have discovered creative ways to subvert the established literary hierarchy.

With its roots in opposition to colonial legacies and caste-based oppression, Dalit and Adivasi literatures provide potent counter-narratives that subvert the aesthetic and ideological norms of the canonical tradition. Their inclusion is nevertheless still restricted by institutional gatekeeping, underscoring the need for changes to publishing systems, literary prizes, and educational curricula. There are still significant obstacles in the way of a more inclusive literary landscape, despite the emergence of grassroots publishing initiatives and the growing prominence of marginalised authors in public discourse.

A decolonised literary canon necessitates a broader societal shift in the conception of literary worth in addition to institutional reform. India may progress towards a literary culture that accurately represents its diversity by adopting a more

pluralistic and inclusive definition of literary value that takes into account the opinions of Dalit, Adivasi, and other underrepresented groups. Ultimately, this study advocates for a sustained and coordinated effort to challenge the conventional canon, dismantle the systemic injustices that underpin it, and expand the literary canon to encompass the full range of Indian voices.

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