

Nov 04, 2016 by *Madhurjya Kotoky*

India's Regional Literature in Popular Culture ^[1]

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India recognizes 18 official regional languages in India with a developed script and literary tradition. In addition, there are nearly '1576 rationalized mother tongues' or dialects as per the 1991 census of the Government of India. Linguistic diversity adds to the richness of Indian culture and every region of India has a highly developed literary tradition with excellent writers of national, and a few of international fame. The government of India has committed itself to the preservation and promotion of every regional language and literature in India through institutions such as the Sahitya Akademi.

Regional literature in India – novels, poetry, short stories, folk tales, regional adaptations of the great epics – Mahabharata and Ramayana etc represent one of humanity's richest creation. However, when it comes to 'popular consciousness,' these stories, characters, poetry have limited recall. There is a huge soft power potential waiting to be tapped in these creations that can appeal to people's imagination overseas and also communicate the 'idea of India' – its values, its people and its richness. Growing up during the Cold War years with India's Soviet 'tilt,' I remember the Russian book fairs that were held in almost every region of India. I was encouraged to go to these fairs, pick up books – and I did – with a message resonating that Russian literature is among the greatest, there are great story books for kids – children's literature - and that 'Russia is a great friend'. I treasure some of those books I picked up as a kid, now neatly stacked and on display in my bookshelf. Through Russian children's literature, I grew up with an idea of Russia, about the life there, the people and, by the time I was in college naturally graduated to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Gorky. Looking back, now I realize the systemic state intervention that facilitated the telling of Soviet Russia's story through such book fairs to cultivate a cold war ally.

India's regional literature offers plenty of potential to appeal to a world audience in a big way through appealing stories, poetries, novels, folk tales and also by its children's literature. Indian folk tales for children, like for example the *Burhi Aair Xadhu* in Assamese have a universal appeal no lesser than Aesop's Fables or Grimm's Fairy Tales that the world grows up with. For India to harness its complete soft power potential, it has to get entrenched in popular consciousness of the world. India's rich regional literature can facilitate that. While Bollywood does offer the opportunity to expand India's soft power, it would do well to draw inspiration from Indian literature for great stories and not fall into the trap of 'exoticizing' India and reinforcing a perception that the world already has of India.

Recently, there have been a few initiatives by Indian corporate houses to promote the study of Indian literature and classics in reputed institutions worldwide apart from regular committed efforts by the Indian government. For example, in 2010, N R Narayana Murthy, Chief Mentor of Infosys Technologies donated \$5.2 million to Harvard University and Harvard University Press to establish a new publication series called The Murthy Classical Library of India. The

endowment is supposed to facilitate English translations of works originally composed in classical languages such as Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu, as well as literature from Tamil, Bengali, Kannada, Punjabi and other Indian languages.

When it comes to literature, spreading awareness is just not enough. It is important for stories from India to become a part of popular culture to generate influence. For example, while Ramayana and Mahabharata are known worldwide as the great Indian epics, if one does a quick survey which tragic hero is more popular or familiar worldwide – Achilles of Illiad or Karna of Mahabharata – Achilles would have more recall than Karna. Achieving this recall should be the eventual aim for any projection of Indian soft power.
