

# Contours of the Contemporary: Indian Literature in the Present Era

**Dr. Yasmeen Mughal**

Associate Professor in English, GGM Science College, Jammu

## **Abstract:**

This paper explores the landscape of modern-day Indian literature, probing the interplay between convention and modernity in a culturally diverse, multilingual society. As India continues to evolve politically, socially and technologically, its literary expressions emulate these shifts across themes, genres, and voices. The rise of regional language writing, the influence of digital platforms, and the increasing presence of marginalized narratives reveal a literary scene that is both fragmented and richly interconnected. Through thematic analysis and critical engagement with notable works and authors, the paper highlights how Indian literature today functions as a vibrant cultural archive—capturing identity, dissent, innovation, and memory in powerful ways.

**Keywords:** Indian Literature, languages, genre, thematic evolution, diversity

Indian literature in the present era occupies a space of remarkable dynamism and diversity. Encompassing over 22 officially recognized languages and countless regional dialects, India's literary corpus is as complex and colorful as the nation itself. While rooted in ancient storytelling traditions and classical literary forms, contemporary Indian writing is boldly experimental, often confronting social taboos and cultural contradictions. The post-globalization era, particularly the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, has catalyzed a shift in the literary imagination of Indian authors. Urbanization, migration, political polarization, digital transformation, and identity movements have become prominent themes in the literature of our time. Writers negotiate not only linguistic identities—choosing between English, Hindi, or regional vernaculars—but also ideological positions within an increasingly fragmented sociopolitical landscape.

This paper investigates the contours of modern Indian literature with particular emphasis on language politics, thematic evolution, genre experimentation, and the emergence of new voices from traditionally marginalized communities. By engaging with critical theory, representative texts, and cultural discourse, the analysis aims to answer a key question: What does it mean to write—and to be read—as an Indian author in today's world?

India's linguistic landscape is unparalleled in its diversity—home to hundreds of languages and dialects that shape not only communication but cultural identity and literary expression. In the postcolonial and post-globalization eras, questions surrounding language choice have become central to Indian literature. The binary between writing in English versus vernacular languages continues to provoke debate, both in academic circles and among readers and writers alike.

English remains a powerful literary language in India, particularly in urban and diasporic settings. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Jhumpa Lahiri have garnered international acclaim,

contributing to a canon of Indian English literature that is both global in scope and introspective in theme. English affords Indian writers access to wider readerships and global publishing markets. However, this accessibility is not without criticism—it raises questions about authenticity, cultural alienation, and linguistic elitism. While some critics argue that English is a remnant of colonial legacy and perpetuates class hierarchies, others contend that Indian English literature has carved out its own idioms, rhythms, and politics. As Meena Alexander once noted, “Indian English is no longer a borrowed tongue—it has become rooted in Indian soil, bearing the flavor of its many homes.”

Concurrently, there has been a vigorous resurgence of writing in Indian languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, and Marathi, among others. Writers like Perumal Murugan, Bama, and Uday Prakash have foregrounded deeply rooted social realities that are often underrepresented in English-language narratives. Translation plays a crucial role here—not merely as a linguistic bridge, but as a cultural negotiation that carries meaning across contexts. Vernacular literature brings to the fore questions of caste, class, gender, and regional identity with immediacy and authenticity. This wave of literature resists homogenization and asserts the multiplicity of Indian experiences, often using indigenous idioms, proverbs, and storytelling techniques.

What sets Indian literature apart in the global landscape is the fluid way in which languages bleed into one another—code-switching, hybridity, and polyglossia are not simply stylistic choices but lived realities. Authors like Anjum Hasan, Jerry Pinto, and Aruni Kashyap play with multilingualism within their narratives, allowing the reader to engage with a more textured, authentic India. The simultaneous presence of multiple registers—formal, colloquial, poetic—mirrors the complexity of Indian social life. In contemporary Indian literature, language becomes more than a medium—it becomes a site of resistance, identity-making, and innovation. Writers consciously select their language not just for expression, but to align with political and ethical commitments, signaling solidarity or subversion.

Dr. Jaya Sinsinwar and Dr. Rashmi Kaushik – through their paper, *A Critical Exploration of Identity Construction Through Language in Indian Literary Works*, offers a deep dive into how linguistic choices shape individual and collective identities in Indian literature. It’s a rich resource for understanding multilingualism and cultural negotiation in literary texts. Nuri R. Marak – through, *Identity and Representation in Postcolonial Indian English Literature*, examines how authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri use English to navigate postcolonial identity, gender, and globalization. This paper is especially useful for discussing the politics of English as a literary medium. Likewise, Pankaj Kumar Singh – through his study, *The Role of Language in Shaping Identity in Indian Literature*, published in *The Creative Launcher*, explores how language functions as a tool for identity formation and resistance in Indian writing. It’s a helpful source for discussing vernacular literature and multilingual narrative strategies.

Contemporary Indian literature is a vibrant reflection of the country’s evolving socio-political and cultural landscape. With diverse authorship and narrative experimentation, several key themes have emerged that define the current literary terrain. These themes are not isolated but intersect in layered and often provocative ways. As India’s cities rapidly expand and rural communities undergo transformation, literature captures the tensions of displacement, nostalgia, aspiration, and alienation. Novels like *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga explore the dark underbelly of urban life and social mobility, while writers like Anjum Hasan articulate the ambivalence of urban identities. Migration—internal and global—forms a literary backdrop for negotiating fractured belonging and hybrid identities. Urbanization and internal migration are central to novels like *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, which

critiques the class divide and moral ambiguity in modern Indian cities. As noted by Dr. L. Komathi and R. Ramya in their paper *Contemporary Indian Literature: Literature and Reality*, urbanization has become a literary lens through which writers explore identity, alienation, and aspiration in a rapidly transforming India.

Contemporary literature increasingly centers voices from the margins. Dalit writers like Yashica Dutt (*Coming Out as Dalit*) and Sujatha Gidla (*Ants Among Elephants*) challenge dominant narratives with lived experiences of systemic oppression. At the same time, feminist authors such as Meena Kandasamy and Urvashi Butalia foreground issues of patriarchy, gender-based violence, and autonomy, often deploying searing critique through experimental narrative forms. Dalit and feminist literature have gained prominence, challenging dominant narratives. Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* are powerful examples. The IndiaNetzone article on Contemporary Indian Literature highlights how regional and marginalized voices are reshaping the literary canon, often using local idioms and hybrid forms to assert identity and resistance. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Palace of Illusions*), Anand Neelakantan, and Devdutt Pattanaik are part of a trend where epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana are reinterpreted through alternative lenses—female protagonists, anti-heroes, or historical subversions. These works offer commentary on contemporary values and societal tensions by reworking familiar mythic frameworks. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anand Neelakantan reinterpret epics to reflect contemporary values. According to the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, Indian literature has long used mythological frameworks to explore philosophical and social truths, a tradition that continues in modern retellings.

Indian diasporic literature—represented by authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Salman Rushdie—continues to grapple with issues of identity, rootlessness, and cultural negotiation. But newer voices also reflect reverse migration, cross-border hybridity, and transnational activism. Globalization has brought Indian stories to a wider audience, while also challenging writers to maintain cultural specificity amidst market pressures. Diasporic authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Salman Rushdie explore themes of cultural dislocation and hybridity. Komathi and Ramya emphasize that post-independence literature often reflects the tension between local realities and global influences, especially in the works of second-generation diasporic writers.

Digital platforms have catalyzed a new literary culture—blogs, Instagram poetry, and web serials are redefining what it means to be a writer. Young authors are more experimental in form and voice, often fusing memes, slang, and internet aesthetics with traditional storytelling. This literary movement, spearheaded by platforms like Terribly Tiny Tales and Kommune, signals the democratization of literature outside institutional gatekeeping. Digital platforms have democratized literary expression. The IndiaNetzone article notes how modern Indian writers are increasingly blending traditional narrative forms with digital aesthetics, creating a new idiom that resonates with younger audiences. In recent years, Indian literature has been invigorated by a chorus of emerging voices that challenge conventional narratives, disrupt literary hierarchies, and represent identities long marginalized in mainstream discourse. From Dalit intellectuals to LGBTQ+ poets, from writers in tribal languages to digital storytellers, this new wave reflects the democratization of literary space in India.

Dalit literature is no longer peripheral; it is a powerful force of dissent and historical reclamation. Writers such as Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*), Bama (*Karukku*), and Ajay Navaria highlight caste-based violence, exclusion, and resistance with raw, autobiographical intensity. This genre insists on lived experience as both subject and source, breaking free from the representational gaze of upper-caste

authors. As scholar M. K. Naik observes, “Dalit literature is not just a literary phenomenon; it is a social movement.” Through testimonies and fictionalized reimaginations, Dalit writers are crafting an alternative canon—one that is unapologetic in tone and revolutionary in spirit. Dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki and Bama have redefined Indian literary discourse by centering caste-based oppression and resistance. Mimi Mondal, a Dalit speculative fiction writer, brings underrepresented narratives into genres like science fiction and fantasy. As she explains in an interview with *She The People*, her work is rooted in “anti-elitist” traditions and challenges the invisibility of Dalit voices in mainstream literature.

The rise of queer literature in India has reshaped conversations about identity, intimacy, and visibility. Writers like R. Raj Rao (*The Boyfriend*), Vikram Seth, and Gazal Dhaliwal explore queer lives with honesty and complexity, while anthologies like *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* curate a range of voices and experiences post-Section 377’s decriminalization. Queer writing often challenges heteronormative frameworks, drawing from indigenous traditions of gender fluidity while also grappling with contemporary stigma and urban belonging. As Rohit K. Dasgupta notes in his study *Digital Queer Cultures in India*, queer expression in literature today also spills over into digital activism and performance, creating hybrid cultural spaces. Queer literature in India has gained momentum, especially after the decriminalization of Section 377. Anthologies like *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* and writers such as R. Raj Rao and Gazal Dhaliwal are reshaping how gender and sexuality are represented. Rohit K. Dasgupta’s *Digital Queer Cultures in India* provides a scholarly lens on how literature and digital activism intersect in queer expression.

Indigenous literature in India—often overlooked in national literary discourse—is gradually gaining recognition. Authors like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar (*The Adivasi Will Not Dance*) and Easterine Kire (from Nagaland) write from within communities historically excluded from the literary mainstream. Their works are steeped in oral traditions, ecological wisdom, and cultural specificity. They narrate stories of resistance to displacement, cultural erasure, and environmental destruction, offering crucial counterpoints to state-centric national narratives. Authors like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Easterine Kire are bringing Adivasi and Northeastern narratives into national focus. Their works, often grounded in oral traditions and ecological consciousness, challenge dominant historical narratives and offer alternative worldviews.

The digital revolution has birthed a new generation of storytellers. Platforms like *Terribly Tiny Tales* and *YourQuote* have democratized literary expression. Writers such as Nikita Gill and Priya Malik blend poetry with digital aesthetics, creating a new literary idiom. According to *The Literature Times*, emerging authors like Mir Hadia Ashiq and Kanwalpreet Kaur are reshaping the literary landscape with fresh perspectives and innovative storytelling. These sources not only validate the emergence of new literary voices but also highlight the shifting power dynamics in Indian literature—where authenticity, diversity, and digital access are redefining who gets to tell the story. The digital age has dismantled literary gatekeeping, allowing younger writers to share stories instantly through blogs, social media, and online journals. Platforms like *Terribly Tiny Tales*, *Juggernaut Books*, and *YourQuote* have given rise to a new genre of microfiction—short, often poetic snippets that pack emotional heft.

Writers like Nikita Gill, Priya Malik, and Durjoy Datta are part of this wave, blending contemporary themes with highly shareable formats. This new form, while sometimes criticized for its brevity, represents a shift in how stories are consumed and produced in a tech-saturated world. These emerging voices are not fringe—they’re now central to the evolving narrative of Indian literature. They

deconstruct monolithic notions of culture, nationhood, and identity through stories that are intimate, insurgent, and deeply human.

Newer fiction blends autofiction, journalism, oral history, and even social media formats. Writers like Jeet Thayil (*Narcopolis*) use stream-of-consciousness and non-linear timelines, while authors such as Shubhangi Swarup (*Latitudes of Longing*) experiment with magical realism fused with ecological and political themes. Kanishk Tharoor, in *Swimmer Among the Stars*, combines myth, parable, and speculative fiction, creating cross-genre mosaics that defy neat categorization. These innovations are not just stylistic—they often serve as critiques of social norms and narrative authority. The Oxford Handbook of Modern Indian Literatures, edited by Ulka Anjaria and Anjali Nerlekar, offers a comprehensive look at how Indian authors are blending genres, languages, and narrative forms. It includes chapters on hybrid storytelling, multilingualism, and postmodern aesthetics in Indian fiction.

Indian poetry, long associated with canonical figures like Tagore and A. K. Ramanujan, is undergoing a renaissance—especially in performative and digital spaces. Poets such as Akhil Katyal, Rochelle Potkar, and Hussain Haidry draw from Urdu, Hindi, English, and regional idioms to blend activism, wit, and personal testimony. Spoken word collectives like Kommune and Airplane Poetry Movement have cultivated a youth-driven poetic culture that thrives online and in public performances. These movements resurrect oral traditions while embracing modern platforms. Gaddala Subbarao's paper titled *Modernist Trends in Indian English Poetry: Influences and Innovations in the Twentieth Century* explores how poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and A.K. Ramanujan broke away from traditional forms to embrace modernist and experimental techniques. This work provides historical context for today's spoken word and digital poetry movements.

The emergence of Indian graphic novels marks a significant departure from text-only storytelling. Works like *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee and *Bhimayana* (illustrated by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam) use art to tackle urban ennui, caste injustice, and political satire. These visual narratives often leverage indigenous art styles—such as Gond or Madhubani—blending traditional aesthetics with modern commentary. As noted in academic circles (e.g., *Contemporary South Asian Literature* by Neelam Srivastava), visual storytelling expands accessibility and deepens emotional impact. The Oxford Handbook also includes analysis of newer genres like graphic novels, highlighting works such as *Bhimayana* and *Corridor* as examples of how visual storytelling is being used to address caste, urban alienation, and political critique in Indian literature.

Science fiction and fantasy were once considered fringe in Indian writing, but authors like Samit Basu, Indra Das (*The Devourers*), and Vandana Singh are changing that. Their works engage with ecological collapse, mythic alternate histories, and futurist dystopias grounded in South Asian ethos. This genre boom includes environmental themes too—eco-fiction from writers like Anuradha Roy and Amitav Ghosh probes climate change, species loss, and the Anthropocene through deeply human stories. Genre innovation isn't just a sign of literary evolution—it reflects a broader cultural shift toward pluralism, hybridity, and aesthetic risk-taking. Linesh Balhara and Anushruti's study in the *Globus Journal of Progressive Education* discusses linguistic creativity and evolution in Indian English literature, with a focus on how authors like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have expanded the boundaries of genre through stylistic innovation and thematic hybridity.

The Indian literary scene is not only defined by the writing itself but by the systems that promote, disseminate, and consume it. In recent years, both traditional and non-traditional publishing platforms have undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader changes in technology, economics, and



reader preferences. Events like the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), the Tata Literature Live! Festival, and Kerala Literature Festival have created robust public spaces for authors and readers to interact. These festivals celebrate both Indian and global voices, but they are not without critique. Scholars like Anjali Nerlekar argue that such platforms often favor English-language or urban-centric authors, creating implicit gatekeeping around “literary legitimacy.” That said, regional literature has increasingly gained space at these gatherings, aided by translation initiatives and institutional sponsorships. The Sahitya Akademi and the Indian Language Literature Festival (ILLF) are working to amplify voices from across India's linguistic spectrum. Literary festivals like the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) and Tata Literature Live! have become cultural landmarks. However, as noted in the India Literature and Publishing Sector Study by the British Council, these festivals often reflect urban, English-language biases, though recent efforts have aimed to include more regional voices and translated works.

The digital shift has empowered writers to bypass traditional gatekeepers. Platforms like Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), Notion Press, and Juggernaut Books offer self-publishing models that have disrupted the industry. Authors like Savi Sharma and Preeti Shenoy found massive success through self-publishing, eventually gaining mainstream readership. This shift, while democratizing, also raises concerns about quality control and editorial rigor. However, it has opened literary space to those historically excluded, especially writers in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, and those writing in non-English languages. The British Council's report highlights how self-publishing platforms such as Notion Press and Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) have democratized access to publishing, especially for authors outside major metros and those writing in regional languages. This shift has allowed for greater diversity in voices, though it also raises questions about editorial standards and discoverability.

Translation has become one of the most powerful tools in expanding readership and literary exchange in India. Organizations like the Sahitya Akademi and the recently launched India Translation Mission are working to bridge linguistic divides by promoting translations of literary works across Indian languages. Rather than strict linguistic fidelity, many translators adopt “transcreation”—a method that adapts cultural idioms and narrative tone for target audiences. This has allowed stories like Perumal Murugan's Poonachi and Vivek Shanbhag's Ghachar Ghochar to gain national and international acclaim. Translation is a cornerstone of India's multilingual literary culture. The British Council study emphasizes that while translation between Indian languages has a long tradition, professional support and funding remain limited. Transcreation—adapting cultural nuances rather than literal translation—is increasingly used to make regional stories resonate with broader audiences.

India's book market, estimated to be among the top ten globally by revenue, is fast evolving. Audiobooks, e-books, and mobile reading apps have changed consumption habits, particularly among younger readers. According to Nielsen India's India Book Market Report, English and Hindi dominate in sales, but regional languages are seeing renewed growth. Social media platforms—especially Bookstagram, BookTok, and Twitter—have become powerful engines for book marketing, with readers shaping literary trends in real time. In sum, the publishing landscape in India is undergoing a tectonic shift: more inclusive, more digital, and more reader-driven than ever before. It's an ecosystem simultaneously balancing tradition and disruption. According to the India Book Market Report by Nielsen (cited in the British Council study), India is one of the fastest-growing book markets globally, with a surge in digital reading habits. Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube have become powerful tools for book promotion, especially among younger readers. These sources provide a solid

foundation for understanding how India's publishing ecosystem is evolving—balancing tradition with innovation, and exclusivity with accessibility.

To understand the dynamism of contemporary Indian literature, it's essential to analyze the works of key writers and regional traditions that exemplify linguistic diversity, thematic depth, and narrative innovation.

Arundhati Roy through her work, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) extends her political activism into experimental fiction, engaging with themes of Kashmir, caste, gender, and religious extremism. Her use of fragmented narrative, poetic prose, and multilingual registers exemplifies how fiction can become a vehicle of resistance. Meena Kandasamy, works like *When I Hit You* and *The Gypsy Goddess* focus on caste violence, marital rape, and gender inequality. Her stylistic boldness—switching between satire, polemic, and memoir—marks her as one of the most provocative voices in Indian literature today. Similarly, writing in Tamil, Perumal Murugan's novels (*One Part Woman*, *Poonachi*) blend folklore with sharp social commentary. His temporary withdrawal from writing after political backlash revealed the fraught relationship between literature and free expression in India. His return reaffirmed literature's role in defiance and renewal. Likewise, Jeet Thayil known for *Narcopolis* and *Low*, navigates urban decay, addiction, and existential searching in Indian metros. A poet at heart, his prose is lyrical and often disorienting, reflecting fractured modern identities. Easterine Kire, hailing from Nagaland, through his novel *When the River Sleeps* weave oral traditions, tribal history, and myth to challenge mainstream narratives. Her work opens a rare window into Northeast India's cultural complexity.

Writers like Benyamin (*Goat Days*) and K. R. Meera (*Hangwoman*) have reinvigorated Malayalam literature with powerful explorations of migration, morality, and female agency. Literary journals and translation initiatives have brought these works to national audiences. Bengali authors such as Mahasweta Devi, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, and younger voices like Tilottama Majumdar continue to tackle questions of tribal rights, feminism, and urban-rural transitions. Mahasweta Devi's use of reportage-fiction remains influential in activist literature. The Marathi Dalit literary movement, spearheaded by figures like Namdeo Dhasal and Baby Kamble, has deeply influenced Indian literature at large. Their autobiographical works blend fiery political critique with poetic intensity, setting the template for modern Dalit expression. Whereas, Northeastern writers like Dhruba Hazarika and Tamsula Ao are giving voice to postcolonial and insurgency-related themes in a region long underrepresented. Their works are finally finding pan-Indian readership through translation and academic study.

## Conclusion:

Contemporary Indian literature stands at a compelling crossroads—where centuries of tradition meet the restless urgencies of a changing world. It is a space where languages collide and converse, where voices once silenced speak boldly, and where genres dissolve to make room for new modes of storytelling. As we've seen through themes, innovations, and case studies, today's Indian literary landscape is not a monolith but a mosaic—fragmented, multilingual, and richly contradictory.

The literature of the present era refuses easy definitions. It dares to explore taboo subjects, interrogates the state and society, and amplifies experiences across caste, gender, class, and region. Writers navigate the tension between rootedness and mobility, between heritage and invention, crafting stories that are as intimate as they are expansive. From spoken word poets to tribal novelists, from diasporic authors to digital storytellers, Indian literature today pulses with a fierce energy of reinvention. Its future, while

uncertain, promises to be more inclusive, more experimental, and deeply intertwined with the evolving fabric of Indian identity. In sum, Indian literature in the present era is not just reflecting change—it is helping to shape it.

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