Some Contexts of Modern Indian Poetry

Like poetry produced at other times and in other places, twentieth-century poetry from India is connected in numerous, often complicated ways to the world in which it is written, read, and circulated. Unlike poetry in other national traditions, however, it appears in about twenty important languages, thirteen of which are represented in these pages. The variety of languages relates modern Indian poems to an unusually large number of contexts, many of which make individual texts significant simultaneously at the local, regional, national, and international levels. In order to understand how these contexts mediate particular poems, it is especially useful to look synoptically at three of them: the history of poetic movements in India during the first half of the twentieth century; the network of national and international allusions, references, and influences which give modern Indian poetry its intertextual resonance; and the social circumstances in which recent Indian writers have produced their poetry.

One of the principal contexts of modern Indian poetry is its history, which can be explored initially as a succession of interacting poetic movements. Throughout the twentieth century, movements, counter-movements, schools, factions, and styles of poetry have appeared all over India in significant numbers and with great regularity. Some of them have been national in scope, bringing together most of the languages, while others have been local or regional in character, being confined to one or two languages and communities. Some movements
have lasted for a quarter of a century or more, and have involved more than one generation of writers. Others, in contrast, have survived for less than a decade, and have been centered around small (but influential) coteries of friends.

In general, the series of successive, overlapping, and interacting nation-wide movements in poetry which appeared in the first half of the twentieth century prepared the ground for the mixture of schools and styles we find in contemporary India. The earliest of the "national" poetic movements emerged between about 1910 and 1930, when the various languages collectively went through a phase of intensely nationalist writing. This movement, which had its origins in the nineteenth century, included hundreds of popular poets who wrote (or tried to write) rousing poems about Mother India, her glorious, heroic, and ancient past, her present courage in the face of British imperialism, and her idealistic determination to win her political and cultural freedom in the near future. It also included dozens of more serious poets, most of whom played prominent roles in the freedom movement, both locally and nationally. Among them were figures like Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali) and Aurobindo Ghose (English), whose work is still read widely, as well as poets like Shridhar Pathak, Maithilisharan Gupta, and Makhanlal Chaturvedi (Hindi), whose work is now read by smaller regional audiences and mainly—one hopes—for its historical interest. During the nationalist movement, Indian poetry as a whole seemed to be at one with it social and political circumstances, and the poets seemed to be equally at one with their audiences. In subsequent decades, with the "death" of nationalism and idealism, these identifications gave way to an alienation between poets and their publics, and a disjunction between poems and their immediate situations.

Between the two World Wars, and especially between about 1920 and 1935, the Indian languages passed through a new nation-wide phase of Romantic writing (an earlier, longer one had appeared in the nineteenth century), which overlapped with the nationalist movement. In this phase a large number of poets attempted to redo, at least in part, what the Romantics in England had done more than a century earlier. The models for these Indian poets included the better-known works of William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the minor lyrics of Lord Byron, and the poems of lesser figures like Thomas Hood (as well as the writings of Sir Walter Scott, Lord Alfred Tennyson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow). This type of displaced and modified Romanticism appeared, for example, in Assamese, in the work of Lakshminath Bezbarua, Raghunath Raichoudhary, and
Jatindranath Duara; in Telugu, in the Bhavakavitvam school of poetry led by Rayprolu Subbarao and Devulapalli Krishnashastry; and in Marathi, in the poetry of Balkavi and that of Madhav Julian and the poets of the Ravi Kiran Mandal (these writers are practically untranslatable now). By and large, the twentieth-century Indian Romantic movement emphasized the primacy of the unique human individual and his or her unified sensibility, concentrating on "intense" personal experience, emotional spontaneity, lyricism, and sincerity to produce a body of writing that dealt mainly with nature, love, desire, melancholy, childhood, simplicity, nostalgia, and fine feelings. These private, often idiosyncratic explorations generally contrasted sharply with the public rhetoric of nationalist poetry, and created a distance between the poet and his or her audience and the text and its contexts. But they contributed nonetheless to the definition of a distinctive modern Indian self and even an alternative national identity, in which a poet introspectively became the site where one or more older Indian traditions manifested themselves. Of the writers included in this issue, Mahadevi Varma (Hindi) is the only one who began as a Romantic, publishing her famous and influential early poems in the 1920s and 1930s, and acquiring a major national reputation well before the second World War.

Two new, frequently intersecting and simultaneous national movements appeared in the 1930s to complicate the dialectic of nationalism and romanticism (most Romantics were nationalists, but many nationalists were not Romantics). One was the Progressive movement, launched effectively by the national conference of the Progressive Writers' Association at Lucknow in 1936, with a presidential address by Munshi Premchand, the foremost fiction writer in modern Hindi. The Progressive movement, some of whose early proponents continued to write until the 1980s, emphasized the significance of Marxist thought and socialist and communist ideals for the various Indian literatures, especially Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, English, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. Many of the Progressive writers criticized and rejected the matriotism and romanticism of their predecessors, and attempted to paint a bleak, often starkly violent, even "anti-nationalistic" portrait of Indian society, choosing invective, satire, and irony over epic seriousness and lyricism. Among the poets in these pages, Raghuvir Sahay, Kedarnath Singh (both Hindi), Vinda Karandikar (Marathi), and Sunil Gangopadhyay (Bengali) are prominent examples of writers influenced by the Progressive movement.
The other nation-wide movement that started in the 1930s—and continued to affect writers and readers until the end of the 1970s—was the Indian counterpart of Anglo-American modernism, in which poets in practically every language broke away from traditional (often highly Sanskritized) metres, stanza patterns, styles, materials, and themes to invent "free verse" poetry. In exploring new forms of writing, these poets often took up distinctively high modernist positions (for example, in Marathi, B.S. Mardhekar in the 1940s), or combined them with Progressive existentialist perspectives in the Indian context (Vinda Karandikar in the 1950s), or with avant garde, especially surrealist, viewpoints (Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar in the 1960s). Using a range of this sort, they concentrated on such themes as the disintegration of traditional communities and familiar cultural institutions, the alienation of the individual in urban society, the dissociation of thought and feeling, the disasters of modernization, the ironies of daily existence, and the anguish of unresolved doubts and anxieties. In this issue, Kunwar Narayan (Hindi), Nabaneeta Dev Sen (Bengali), and Gulam Mohammed Sheikh (Gujarati) are among the more distinguished writers influenced by the modernist movement in Indian letters.

In the decade immediately after Independence (1947), the literatures in most of the Indian languages underwent a different kind of upheaval at approximately the same time, launching more or less "regional" poetic movements that were often simply called new poetry (for instance, nai kavita in Hindi and nava kavya in Marathi). Although the various new poetry movements of the late 1940s and the 1950s were sufficiently similar to constitute a loosely integrated nation-wide phenomenon, they retained a local or regional character in keeping with the renewed regional chauvinisms that surfaced in the 1950s when independent India was divided into states along linguistic and cultural lines (Orissa became the Oriya-speaking state, Andhra Pradesh the Telugu-speaking state, and so on). By and large, the new poetry in different regions emerged as a combination or mixture of styles and concerns developed earlier by the major "national" movements of the first half of the twentieth century. In some instances, it revived the old nationalist and Romantic attitudes to celebrate the end of the British Raj. In many other cases, however, it articulated hesitation, doubt, unease, skepticism, and even outright anger or despair over the disappointments of postcolonialism, bringing together modernist style and Progressive critique to attack the new Indian order under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress Party (for example, Vinda Karandikar fuses Progressivism and experimental modernism in...
his "high" nava kavya style in Marathi). In the end of the 1950s, the new poetry in languages like Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali had begun to give way to an unprecedented social and political reconfiguration of the Indian literary world, which I shall discuss in the final sections of this essay.

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A second major context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian poetry is the variety of Indian and foreign literatures surrounding it. In the web of intertextual relationships spreading outwards from this poetry, "foreign influences" have played a crucial role in the emergence of Indian modernity. The same is true of the older literatures of the subcontinent, which constitute the "domestic sources" that Indian poets have constantly plundered in their quest for novelty, modernity, and meaning. Reading modern Indian poems in the context of various literatures and literary relationships helps us to explain phenomena that we cannot explain easily by analyzing the history of poetic movements.

Indian sources and foreign influences play different kinds of roles, with each also serving several distinct purposes. Some foreign influences work at the level where an entire Western literature deeply affects one or more modern Indian literatures. English literature is an obvious case in point, since it has pervasively influenced all the Indian language traditions since the nineteenth century. Other Western literatures also enter the picture, but they work differently and differentially. For instance, poets from Bengal, whether they write in Bengali or English or both, have had a more or less unique, obsessive relationship with the French language and its literature for almost one hundred and fifty years now. "The French Connection" first appeared in Bengal around the third quarter of the nineteenth century, in the work and careers of poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutt (Bengali and English) and Toru Dutt (English). It then resurfaced strongly just before and soon after the middle of the twentieth century in the generations represented by, say, Buddhadev Bose and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (both bilingual in Bengali and English), who have extensively worked out rather agonistic connections with Baudelaire, Mallarme, Rimbaud, and Valery. Some of the distinctive qualities of modern Bengali poetry—for instance, its immersion in metropolitan culture, its love-hate relationship with modernity, its simultaneous provincialism and cosmopolitanism, its zeal for revolutions—carry strong traces of French influence. The Bengali situation is intriguing because exact parallels in the other Indian
languages appear only piecemeal in the work of individual poets, as when we find a strong interest in the French symbolists and twentieth-century avant garde poets in Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre (both bilingual in Marathi and English).

The anomaly of the situation of French literature in India is heightened by its contrast with two other prominent foreign literatures. Spanish poetry from Latin America, particularly the work of Pablo Neruda (probably the single most influential poet in the world in recent times), has generated a much more evenly spread interest among poets in different Indian languages, whether Bengali and Hindi, or Gujarati, Oriya, and Malayalam. Similarly, American Beat poetry of the 1950s and 1960s has also had a widespread effect, chiefly through the influence of Allen Ginsberg, drawing strong (favorable) responses from all over the subcontinent. Neither of these bodies of writing, however, has yet affected Indian poetry as deeply as English Romantic, Victorian, and high modernist writing has, or for a comparable length of time.

In the modern Indian situation, foreign influences work not only at the level of whole literatures and movements, but also at the level of specific genres, and at that of isolated connections between individual authors. In the case of genres, between the first quarter of the nineteenth century and the third quarter of the twentieth, for example, the English and European sonnet has predictably seduced many strong and weak poets in languages like Bengali, Marathi, English, and Urdu; while in recent decades the Japanese haiku has sparked off experiments in, say, Kannada and Gujarati. It is worth observing that this mechanics of imitation, derivation, and transfer also appears in the case of modern Indian prose, where, for instance, the nineteenth-century Russian short story—Chekhov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi—remained an obvious primary model for Indian writers for more than half a century.

In contrast, in the case of particular influences on individual writers, we find a much wider range of obsessions and affiliations, some of them quite startling. To mention only a few instances and selected literary relationships, among the writers represented here we find strong, self-consciously established affiliations between B.C. Ramachandra Sharma (Kannada) and W.B. Yeats; Jayanta Mahapatra (English) and John Ashbery; Dilip Chitre (Marathi) and Hart Crane; Vinda Karandikar (Marathi) and G.M. Hopkins and W.H. Auden; and Kedarnath Singh (Hindi) and hans magnus enzensberger and Vasko Popa.

If the context of foreign literatures helps us to unravel lines of influence in the network of modernity, the context of Indian literatures
allows us to separate the varieties of revival, retrieval, reworking, and renovation that revitalize the Indian poetic imagination on its home ground. Although all modern poets "reject" the past in order to become "modern," they often end up using the past imaginatively and constructively in a multitude of ways: many modern writers are, quite paradoxically, traditionalists and classicists. We find modern Indian poets replicating this paradox from a variety of poetic, political, and philosophical positions. Thus, since the turn of the century, numerous poets have drawn extensively on the forms, devices, voices, and motifs of the bhakti (devotional) poetry produced in the Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages during the past one thousand years or more. Mahadevi Varma (Hindi) and Indira Sant (Marathi), for example, have revitalized Mirabai’s sixteen-century Rajasthani poetry of love, separation, and union with a divine lover (viraha bhakti), combining it with nineteenth-century English Romanticism; B.S. Mardhekar and Vinda Karandikar have turned to the examples of Jnaneshwar (thirteenth century) and Tukaram (seventeenth century) in Marathi; and Arun Kolatkar has fused Jnaneshwar and Tukaram, among others, with Rimbaud, the dadaists, the surrealists, and the Beat poets. In the past two or three decades the Indian-English poets have continued to work in a similar vein: Nissim Ezekiel has used classical Sanskrit models to produce delightful experimental poster poems; Arvind Krishna Mehrotra has exploited second-century Prakrit originals to write witty, epigrammatic poems; and R. Parthasarathy has drawn on the Tamil classics, while Agha Shahid Ali has reworked the ghazal tradition of the last three centuries to reflect on contemporary Indian experience in exile.

The range of affiliations generated by the convergence of national and international literary contexts described above is probably best represented in contemporary Indian verse by A.K. Ramanujan’s equally distinguished poetry in English and Kannada. Ramanujan’s bilingual work crosses numerous historical, cultural, and poetic boundaries as it resonantly brings together Cassandra and the Mundaka Upanishad, the Tamil cankam poets and the Kannada bhakti poets, Pascal and Yeats, Cesar Vallejo and Rene Char, reflections on pointillism, and meditations on Zen, the imagistic lyric and the satiric prose poem, the modernist monologue and the postmodernist collage. Significantly enough, Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali) and Subramania Bharati (Tamil) perfected many of these strategies on a large scale around the beginning of this century. They drew boldly on Vedic hymns, Upanishadic dialogues, Vedantic concepts, and bhakti poems, on Baul songs in Bengali, religious-erotic poetry in Maithili, or proverbs and
riddles in Tamil, and on grandmothers’ tales, nursery rhymes, lullabies, and abecedaria—even as they learned from Tennyson and Browning, Whitman and Mallarme, Eliot and Pound.

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A third crucial context of modern Indian poetry is its varied social world, which shapes the lives of the poets, their education and literary training, their relationships with their medium and their audiences, their understanding of the conventions and functions of authorship, as well as their identities in a rapidly changing literary culture. The heterogeneity of the Indian social world permeates many different literary institutions, takes the form of synchronic variations as well as historical transformations, and surfaces at several distinct levels of analysis.

For example, heterogeneity is evident in the fact that all modern Indian writers do not come from the same social class. It is true that the majority of modern Indian writers consist of middle-class men and women, but the so-called middle class in India is itself a spectrum of different positions, varying by language, region, religion, caste, occupation, income, education, degree of urbanization, and so on (with its lower segments living below the line that defines "poverty" in Europe and America). But even though this makes it possible to claim that the Indian literatures by and large are a middle-class phenomenon, it is important to remember that some Indian writers come from upper-class backgrounds (for example, Rabindranath Tagore and Sudhindranath Dutta earlier, and Arun Joshi, Salman Rushdie, and Bharati Mukherjee now), while others, in increasing numbers in recent decades, come from low-income families in large cities and small towns (for instance, G.M. Muktibodh), impoverished village communities in the countryside (Bahinabai Chaudhari, Anuradha Mahapatra), and even the bottomless bottom of the caste hierarchy (Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Hira Bansode, Jyoti Lanjевar, Narayan Surve).

In fact, when we survey the modern Indian literatures systematically, they turn out to constitute an essentially mixed institution that draws writers as well as readers and audiences from many different parts of the Indian social world. Thus, among the best-known recent poets in the major languages—such as those represented here—we find businessmen (Kunwar Narayan), commercial artists (Dilip Chitre), economists (P.S. Rege), physicists (Jayanta Mahapatra), professors of language and literature (Nabanecta Dev Sen, Meena Alexander, Vinda Karandikar, Kedarnath Singh), local administrators and national-level bureaucrats
(B.C. Ramachandra Sharma, Ramakant Rath, Sitakanta Mahapatra), social workers (Mahadevi Varma), journalists (Sunil Gangopadhyay, Raghuvir Sahay), publishers’ editors (R. Parthasarathy), advertising executives (Arun Kolatkar), painters and art-teachers (Gulam Mohammed Sheikh), and full-time writers (Amrita Pritam). This makes the twentieth-century Indian poetic world heterogeneous, unpredictable, and exciting when compared to the sedate or colorless academic-literary worlds we sometimes find elsewhere.

Nor do all modern Indian poets study literature formally beyond the high-school level: their education in college ranges from Sanskrit and the fine arts, to law, the natural sciences, and engineering. Most of them acquire or develop their literary tastes outside the institutional classroom, most often in local networks of writers, translators, critics, intellectuals, and "activities" of various shades and colors who meet in coffee-houses and tea-stalls, private homes and campus-rooms, or even at cinema theaters, movie clubs, libraries, and art-galleries. The liveliest and most influential modern Indian writing still comes out of these "autonomous associations" characteristic of a "civil society" in which writers write chiefly in order to exercise their common citizenship, both politically and apolitically, as fully as possible.

The principal medium in which modern Indian poets exercise their citizenship is, of course, the medium of print. Their work appears constantly in mass-media weeklies and monthlies, small literary magazines, institutional journals, edited anthologies, individual books, and posthumous editions of collected works. In some languages there are more than a dozen periodicals that publish poetry regularly; in others, there may be less than a handful. The languages with the ten or twelve largest populations of native speakers have large (sometimes very large) regional publishing industries, and in each of them there are several publishers who concentrate on contemporary literature. In a language like Bengali, Hindi, or Marathi, at least a couple of hundred poets publish their work in any given year; most of them appear in magazines, but a substantial number of them also publish books, some privately, some with small presses, and others with well-known publishing houses. An established poet may sell between 2,000 and 5,000 copies of a book of poems over five years or so; a good anthology of contemporary poetry may sell out two or three such editions in a single decade. The modern classics and literary bestsellers in each language—Tagore in Bengali, Ghalib in Urdu, Deokinandan Khatri and Premchand in Hindi prose—run into forty or fifty large printings in the course of a century.
Contemporary Indian poets and their audiences, however, do not communicate only through the abstract medium of print. They come face to face at poetry readings organized by colleges, literary societies, libraries, and private cultural centres and state academies, as well as by political groups and political parties. They congregate at local, state, and national writers’ conferences and at international cultural festivals. Besides, the poets now travel abroad on exchange programs, reading circuits set up by Indian embassies and Indian immigrants’ associations, at the invitation of book-fair committees and foreign governments. The readers and listeners they reach are equally varied and scattered: politically partisan "mass audiences" in Belgaum and Aurangabad, small groups of writers and academics at the local Max Mueller Bhavan or the Alliance Francaise, fashionable women at the India International Centre, and coteries of expatriate Indians and South Asia specialists in London and Chicago.

The picture of the modern Indian poets’ varied world is complicated by the fact that many of them have been and are writers and intellectuals or artists in the larger sense. Besides poems, they publish short stories, novellas, and novels, plays and literary criticism, essays on social issues and travel accounts. Amrita Pritam, for example, is not only the best-known contemporary woman poet in Panjabi, but also the most important modern writer in the language in general, with more than seventy collections of poems and short stories, novels, autobiographical accounts, and other kinds of works to her credit. At a more general cultural level, painter-poets like Gulam mohammed Sheik and Gieve Patel are as central to the history of modern Gujarati poetry and Indian English poetry, respectively, as they are to the history of twentieth-century Indian art, art criticism, and aesthetics. At an equally complex level of integration, A.K. Ramanujan has combined his career as a bilingual writer of poetry and fiction in English and Kannada with his simultaneous careers as a prolific theorist and interpreter of several Indian literatures and cultures, and as a unique twentieth-century literary translator—translating contemporary English materials into Kannada, and translating into English from ancient and modern Tamil and Kannada, as well as (with collaborators) from Sanskrit, Telugu, and Malayalam.

This variety of artistic achievement is not just a contemporary phenomenon. Historically, the modern Indian ideal of versatility goes back at least one hundred and fifty years. Between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth, Rabindranath Tagore created the most wide-ranging mixture of this
kind, effectively defining the paradigm for future generations: he was a poet, short story writer, novelist, and dramatist, as well as an essayist, critic, autobiographer, travel writer, correspondent, and translator, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913; at the same time, he was also a major lyricist and composer of music, a marvelous painter in his old age, a religious thinker, a nationalist, an antinationalist, a national hero, an orator, a public father-figure, a teacher, a theorist of education, and the founder of a major university in Bengal. Given this sort of range, a systematic account of the social contexts of modern Indian poetry is likely to turn rapidly into a full-scale social and cultural history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India.

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The heterogeneity of the social world of modern Indian poetry, however, does not end there. As I suggested earlier, in the postcolonial decades, that world has undergone a new series of far-reaching transformations. For one, during the past thirty years, it has been altered increasingly and with great effect by the emergence of women poets in the various languages. Until the end of the British Raj, and even in the first decade after Independence, there were few prominent women poets in the country: in the second half of the nineteenth century, for instance, there was Toru Dutt (English); between the two World Wars, there were a handful of figures like Sarojini Naidu (English), and Mahadevi Varma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (Hindi); and in the final years of colonial rule, there were a few younger women like Indira Sant (Marathi) and Balamani Amma (Malayalam). Since the late 1950s, however, the number of women poets in print has risen sharply. This shift is part of the larger, more dramatic trajectory of change Indian women have been creating for themselves in the domestic and public spheres, especially in the domains of literacy, education, journalism, scholarship, and arts, the entertainment industry, politics, and the various modern professions. Between the 1950s and 1970s, we therefore find women poets like Amrita Pritam (Panjabi), Kamala Das (English), and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (Bengali) working concurrently with fiction writers like Qurratulain Hyder (Urdu), Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya (both English), and Mahashweta Devi (Bengali), scholars like Irawati Karve (Marathi) and Romila Thapar and Meenakshi Mukherjee (both English), translators like Lila Ray (Bengali and English), and editors like Madhu Kishwar (English and Hindi) to bring into existence a large, well-
defined emergent community of women intellectuals, and a formidable body of women's postcolonial writing in the various languages. In the 1980s there has been virtually an explosion of women's poetry in India, with dozens of new names and voices in English, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada—a phenomenon generously represented in these pages, where about half the contributors are younger and older women writers of the post-Independence decades.

The situation of women poets in Indian English, in fact, may be a good measure of the change as a whole. In the 1960s the foreground was occupied by relatively isolated figures like Monika Verma and Kamala Das. In the 1970s Gauri Deshpande, Malathi Rao, Anna Sujatha Modayik, Lakshmi Kannan, Mamta Kalia, and Sunita Jain, as well as Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgardo, Priya Karunaka, Dejibani Chatterjee, Nasima Aziz, and Meeena Alexander entered the picture, giving it the look of a community of women poets. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Intiaz Dharker, Tilottama Rajan, Charmayne D'Souza, Shanta Acharya, Menka Shivdasani, Chitra Divakaruni, and Sujata Bhatt, among others, filled the frame, joining (whether they wanted to or not) the poets who had survived from the previous decades, and giving that community an impressive new profile. Together with their counterparts in the other languages, these women writers have effectively displaced Indian writing from its "traditional male-dominated centers."

During the postcolonial decades, the Indian literary world has also been altered by powerful new writers (both men and women) from formerly suppressed or marginal social groups and communities. In the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s, poets from lower-class and lower-caste backgrounds began aggressively and systematically challenging the canons of middle-class and upper-caste literary establishments in languages like Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam, as well as Bengali, Marathi, and Hindi. Many of these "subaltern" writers came from small towns and communities quite far from the metropolitan centers of Bombay and Calcutta, Delhi and Madras, Lucknow and Hyderabad, writing protest poetry and participating in broader cultural movements in places like Ajmer, Aurangabad, Belgaum, Bhubaneswar, Ernakulam, Mecerut, Nagpur, Patna, and Amravati (where, for example, the Marathi writer Vasant Abaji Dahake lives and works). Among the poetic movements that emerged from this wider phenomenon were the Digambara ("naked poetry") movement in Andhra Pradesh, the controversial and short-lived Hungry Generation movement in Bengal,
and the Marxist-Leninist (Naxalite) movement of revolutionary writing in different parts of the country. The best-known movement of this kind, of course, turned out to be the Dalit movement, which began in Maharashtra in the 1950s under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and spread subsequently to neighboring states like Karnataka as well as to such distant ones as Punjab. The Maharashtrian Dalits are former untouchables from castes like the Mahars, the Mangs, and the Chamars, who have converted to Buddhism in a collective revolt against the institutions and power structures of Hinduism, and have frequently used poetry, fiction, autobiography, and essays as one of their primary means of political action.

As a heterogeneous group of writers from formerly marginal communities, these poets force us to question our most common and far-reaching assumptions about the modern Indian literatures, their social constitution and functions, their canons, aesthetics, and establishments, and their implication in the institutions of power. Converging unexpectedly in the 1970s and 1980s, the women poets and the subaltern poets have broadened and changed the social world of contemporary poetry to an extent we still cannot assess or foresee.

The social, literary, and historical contexts discussed in this essay are only selective examples from a broader, more complex range of phenomena that have shaped and reshaped the Indian literatures at the local, regional, and national levels in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical process has now entered yet one more distinctive phase. In the 1980s, a new generation of writers appeared in print, consisting of men and women who were born after Partition and Independence, and whose earliest childhood memories and experiences therefore go back at most to the 1950s. These "children of Midnight's Children" have grown up in a country which is separated by a massive rupture from the India of the Raj, the larger "India" that writers born before 1947 knew, discovered, portrayed, recovered, freed, changed, and even took for granted. The figures of the new generation who are best known at present—Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Shashi Tharoor in prose and fiction, and Seth, Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt in verse—write in English, publish their work in England and America, and receive generous praise from cosmopolitan international audiences. In the course of the next twenty or thirty years, they and their counterparts
in the Indian languages, functioning as both the sites and the instruments of a larger process of change, will once more alter our conceptions of what "India" is and has been, "of what is past, or passing, or to come."

**Editor's Note**

A longer version of this essay will appear as the Afterword to *Modern Indian Poetry: An Anthology*, edited by Vinay Dharwadker and A.K. Ramanujan, forthcoming from Oxford University Press in India and the University of California Press in the United States.

The essay above refers to several writers included in this issue, whose names are set in boldface for ease of reference.