



Medieval and Modern Indian Literature

For Prelim: Classical Sanskrit Literature, Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Ancient Buddhist Literature, Ancient Jainism Literature, Early Dravidian Literature, Medieval Literature, Trends in Medieval Literature, Modern Indian Literature

For Mains: Characteristics and Features of Medieval and Modern Indian Literature, Impact of Religion and Society in Medieval Indian Literature, Role of Modern Indian Literature in Shaping National Identity during Indian National Movement.

Indian literature from the medieval to modern period reflects the country's rich cultural and linguistic diversity. **Medieval Indian literature (600-1700 A.D.)** thrived with the rise of **regional languages**, **Bhakti poetry**, and **Sufi mysticism**, fostering social and religious harmony. Poets like [Kabir](#), [Meera Bai](#), and [Amir Khusro](#) played key roles in democratizing literature by using local languages.

Modern Indian literature (late 19th to early 21st century), shaped by **colonialism**, **nationalism**, and **regional influences**, captures the complexities of the modern world through diverse genres and styles saw the emergence of **Hindi**, **Bengali**, **Odia**, and other languages, reflecting the dynamic socio-political changes and contributing to India's diverse literary landscape.

What are the Key Characteristics of Medieval Indian Literature?

▪ Phases of Medieval Indian Literature

- **Early Medieval Indian Literature (7th to 14th Century):** This period saw the emergence of devotional poets like the [Alvars and Nayanmars](#) in South India, who produced literature distinct from **classical Sanskrit and Tamil works**.
- **Late Medieval Indian Literature (14th to 18th Century):** This era featured literary giants such as [Kabir](#), [Guru Nanak](#), [Tulsidas](#), and others, who contributed significantly to the literary landscape.

▪ Linguistic Scenario in Medieval Indian Literature

- **Linguistic Tensions:**
 - Writers faced the challenge of choosing between Sanskrit, supported by royal patronage from the [Pallava and Chola](#) dynasties, and the vernacular languages that were gaining prominence through the [Bhakti movement](#).
 - The Bhakti movement, initiated by Shivas and Vaishnavas, led to a division among Vaishnavas into the **Thenkalai** (favoring Tamil) and **Vadakalai** (favoring Sanskrit) schools.
- **The Apabhramsa Period (700 CE - 1000 CE):**
 - This period marked the final stage of [Middle Indo-Aryan languages](#), where [Apabhramsa](#) emerged as a significant literary language, derived from **Prakrit**. While initially deemed inferior, it was eventually recognized as a valid literary language.
- **Decline of Pali:**
 - The status of Pali, once the dominant language of [Buddhist literature](#), declined after the 12th century, with notable works like **Padya Chudamani** and [Jinacharita](#) being

among the last significant compositions in Pali. Following this decline, Sanskrit emerged as the primary literary language for [Buddhism](#).

◦ **Status of Sanskrit:**

- [Sanskrit](#) was revered as the language of the educated elite, primarily spoken by Brahmins, and served as a literary language across India. Despite its prestige, it was not widely spoken by the masses, and its literary output included the [Vedas](#), [Puranas](#), and [Upanishads](#).

• **Sanskrit Literature:**

- The Pala Empire was renowned for its contributions to Sanskrit literature. During the reign of Madan Pal, prominent works such as Bengali poet **Sandhyakar Nandi's Ramcharit** and **Sridhar Nandi's Nyayakandali, Tattvaprabodh, Tattvasangbadini, and Tattva Sangraha Tika** were well-known.
- Other significant contributions included **Chakrapani Dutta's Chikitsa Sangraha, Ayurveda Deepika, Bhanumati, and Jimutabahana's Dayabhaga**.
- In the Sena dynasty, **Ballal Sen's Dan-Sagara, Advut-Sagara, and Pratistha-Sagara** enriched Hindu Shastra.
 - **Jayadeva's Gita Govinda** and **Dhoyi's Meghduta** were also prominent works from this period.

◦ **Status of Tamil:**

- Tamil, recognized as one of the oldest languages in India, had a rich literary tradition, particularly in [Bhakti literature](#). It maintained a significant readership and evolved significantly from its ancient form, reflecting both ancient and modern characteristics.

• **Tamil Literature:**

- Tamil literature reached its peak in the **Chola period**. One of the best known Tamil works of this period is the '[Ramavatharam](#)' by **Kamban**.
- **Avvaiyaar** wrote '[Aathichudi](#)' and **Bhimkavi** wrote '[Raghav-Padaviya](#)' taking inspiration from [Ramayan](#) and [Mahabharat](#).

▪ **Cultural Scenario of Medieval Indian Literature**

- **Loss of Folk Literature:** Much medieval literature was either **religious or aimed at the elite**, with fewer works created for the entertainment of common people. These popular pieces often did not survive due to inadequate preservation.
- **Modes of Transmission:** Literary production faced challenges like **limited resources and high illiteracy rates**, leading to most literature being transmitted orally by professional storytellers and performers. Silent reading was uncommon, and only religious, academic institutions, and the wealthy could maintain libraries.
- **Places of Performance:** Literature was produced either for **royal courts or for the masses**. Court poetry was exclusive, catering to kings and the elite, while temple performances aimed at larger, diverse audiences, regardless of social status.
- **Status of Authors:** Court poets were predominantly educated Brahmins from prestigious backgrounds, while poets for the masses included revered saint poets from diverse social strata, including lower castes. Notable female writers were rare, with prominent figures like [Akka Mahadevi](#) and [Karaikkal Ammaiyar](#).
- **Audience Dynamics:** The audience played a crucial role in shaping literature, with Sanskrit poetry primarily targeting elite groups known as **gosthis**, which facilitated **academic discussions (Sastragosthi)** and **creative writing (Vidagdha gosthi)**. Poets often focused on immediate appeal and entertainment, resulting in a decorative and erotic style designed for aristocratic audiences.

What was the Impact of Religion on Medieval Indian Literature?

- **Emergence of Religious Sects:** The medieval period witnessed the rise of various religious sects, particularly **Brahmanical religion**, alongside a **decline in [Buddhism](#) and [Jainism](#)**.
 - This era saw **increased temple construction, idol worship, and elaborate rituals**. Brahmanism developed the concept of the [Trimurti](#) (the triad of [Brahma](#), [Vishnu](#), and [Shiva](#)), reflecting the **multifaceted nature of divine worship**.
- **Sectarian Influence:** The period was marked by **tensions and interactions among sects**,

particularly between [Saivism \(worship of Shiva\)](#) and [Vaishnavism \(worship of Vishnu\)](#), as well as [Shaktism \(worship of the Goddess\)](#).

- The [Puranas](#) played a crucial role in promoting these sects, with texts like the [Bhagavata Purana](#) serving as foundational literature for Vaishnavism, while the [Markandeya Purana](#) was significant for **Shaktism**.
- **Role of Puranas:** The Puranas contained genealogies of gods, myths, and narratives that were vital in **shaping popular religious consciousness**.
 - 18 major Puranas, categorized by sectarian interests, **preserved and promoted religious ideologies** and were accompanied by a secondary literature known as [Upapuranas](#).
 - These texts offered insights into creation, cosmic cycles, and royal lineages, thereby influencing social and cultural practices.
- **Sacred Geography:** The epics [Mahabharata](#) and [Ramayana](#), along with the Puranas, contributed to a sacred geography of India. They evoked a sense of a unified sacred space, characterized by holy mountains, rivers, and forests, despite the political fragmentation of the time. This literary portrayal fostered a collective religious identity among the populace.
- **Realism and Mythical Elements:** Medieval Indian literature featured **supernatural elements** but began to incorporate a strong sense of realism, especially in the 9th and 10th centuries.
 - Literary works started to vividly depict everyday life, highlighting the tension between viewing the world as illusory and recognizing human experiences.
 - This realism was particularly evident in anthologies and Buddhist Sahajiya poetry, which authentically reflected real-life situations.
- **Notable Poets and Philosophers:**
 - **Sankara (8th Century):** A key figure in [Advaita Vedanta](#), he emphasized non-duality and the illusion of separateness (maya).
 - **Ramanuja (11th-12th Century):** He introduced [Vishishtadvaita](#), advocating for a qualified non-dualism that recognized the material world as a manifestation of Brahman.

What was the Impact of Bhakti Movement in Medieval India Literature?

- **Devotional Focus:** The Bhakti Movement emphasized personal devotion to a chosen deity, often expressed through love poetry. Central figures like [Krishna](#) and [Rama](#) represented divine love, reflecting a personal relationship akin to that of a lover or child, which made spirituality accessible to the common person.
- **Syncretism and Religious Harmony:** The movement fostered unity among diverse religious traditions, blending elements of **Hinduism and Islam**.
 - Notable poets such as [Kabir](#), [Guru Nanak](#), and others articulated a message of universal brotherhood, transcending sectarian divides and promoting the idea that God resides in every individual.
- **Regional Language and Literature:** Bhakti poetry was composed in vernacular languages, making spiritual literature more relatable and comprehensible to the masses. This led to the development of regional languages, allowing for a rich literary tradition that included notable figures like [Tulsidas](#) in Hindi, [Meera Bai](#) in Rajasthani, and **Basavanna** in Kannada.
- **Social Reform and Anti-Caste Sentiment:** The [Bhakti Movement](#) challenged the rigid caste system, advocating for the worship of humanity and promoting the idea that devotion to God is accessible to all, regardless of caste or social status. Many poets of the movement hailed from lower caste backgrounds, positioning the movement as a subaltern response to societal hierarchies.
- **Personal and Mystical Experience:** The movement emphasized direct, personal experiences of the divine rather than relying on ritualistic practices or theological erudition. This experiential approach led to a form of mysticism that sought to connect the mundane with the divine, producing poetry rich in emotional depth and spiritual insight.
- **Diverse Poetic Forms:** The Bhakti Movement contributed to the evolution of various poetic forms, incorporating elements from ancient epics and local traditions. The emphasis on lyrical expression allowed for the exploration of complex themes of **love, devotion, and social commentary**, creating a vast and varied body of work.
- **Role of Women Poets:** Women played a significant role in the Bhakti Movement, with poets such as **Meera Bai** and [Lal Ded](#) using their voices to express profound spiritual insights and challenge societal norms. Their contributions highlighted the gender dynamics of the time and emphasized

the importance of women's perspectives in the spiritual discourse.

What are the Key Characteristics of Modern Indian Literature?

▪ Development of Modern Indian Literature:

- Modern Indian literature, or **Adhunik Kaal Sahitya**, represents a vast and diverse literary landscape that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries.
- It encompasses languages like Hindi, Bengali, Odia, Assamese, Rajasthani, and Gujarati, reflecting the socio-political and cultural transformations driven by **colonialism, nationalism, and regional influences**.
- It emerged under the influence of **Western culture** brought by the [East India Company](#). The introduction of English in education and administration integrated it into elite society, inspiring writers to adopt the language.
- The [Derozian movement](#) at Hindu College in Kolkata catalyzed this shift, with early authors like **Madhusudhan Bhattacharya** and [Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay](#) leading the way.
- Over time, literature evolved toward a revolutionary mindset, exemplified by **Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Munshi Prem Chand**.
- In recent years, globalization has influenced themes in the works of contemporary authors like **Chetan Bhagat** and **Arundhati Roy**, reflecting the societal changes stemming from India's colonial past.

▪ Hindi Literature:

- The emergence of British colonial rule marked a transformative phase in Hindi literature. This period saw a resurgence of classical and Sanskrit influences, coupled with a growing sense of [nationalism](#).
- Key figures such as Bharatendu Harishchandra emerged in the 1850s, with works like **Andher Nagari** (City of Darkness), inspiring subsequent generations.
- **Phases of Modern Hindi Literature:**
 - Bhartendu Yug (1868-1893)
 - Dwivedi Yug (1893-1918)
 - Chhayavaad Yug (1918-1937)
 - Contemporary Period (1937- Present)
- Prominent writers such as **Munshi Prem Chand, Surya Kant Tripathi 'Nirala,' and Mahadevi Verma** have enriched Hindi literature with their diverse narratives, addressing themes of social justice and women's struggles.

▪ Bengali Literature:

- It developed alongside Hindi and Urdu, influenced by the works of Englishman William Carey, who established the Baptist Mission Press in Bengal in 1800.
- The literary movement was led by visionaries like [Raja Ram Mohan Roy](#) and **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee** with [Anand Math](#) playing a crucial role in nationalist literature.
- **Rabindranath Tagore**, the first Indian Nobel laureate, remains a beacon of Bengali literature with his masterpiece **Geetanjali**.

▪ Assamese and Oriya Literature:

- Assamese literature transitioned from court chronicles ("Buranjis") to a focus on the common man's suffering and nationalist sentiments, influenced by writers like Padmanaba Gohain Barua.
- Odia literature saw a resurgence through modern writers like **Radha Nath Ray** and **Fakir Mohan Senapati**, whose works conveyed strong nationalistic themes.

▪ Gujarati Literature:

- The Bhakti movement significantly influenced Gujarati literature, with poets like **Narsinh Mehta** composing devotional songs.
- Classic novels such as **Saraswati Chandra** by Govardhan Ram and the historical works of Dr. K.M. Munshi epitomizes the rich narrative tradition in Gujarati literature.

▪ Rajasthani Literature:

- It features diverse dialects, with significant contributions from medieval texts such as **Dhola Maru** and devotional poetry from saints like **Mirabai**. This literature encapsulates the region's cultural ethos and spiritual beliefs.

▪ Sindhi and Kashmiri Literature:

- Sindhi literature reflects a blend of influences from **Rajasthan** and Gujarat, shaped by **Sufism** and **Islamic** settlers.

- Notable writers include **Dewan Kauramal** and **Mirza Kalich Beg**.
- Kashmiri literature draws from a rich history, featuring ancient texts like **Kalhan's Rajatarangini** and the mystical poetry of **Lal Ded**, alongside later Sufi influences.
- **Punjabi Literature:**
 - Recent efforts to revive Punjabi literature highlight its influences from **Persian** and **Gurmukhi scripts**.
 - The religious text [Adi Granth](#) stands out as a masterpiece, while narratives like **Heer-Ranjha** reflect regional storytelling traditions.
 - The Sufi poetry of **Baba Farid** and **Bulley Shah** has also played a significant role in shaping modern Punjabi literature.
- **Marathi Literature:**
 - **Dnyaneshwar** (also known as **Jnaneshwar, Jnanadeva, Dnyaneshwar Vitthal Kulkarni** or **Mauli**) was the **first Marathi writer** who had wide readership and profound influence, some of his works were '**Amrutanubhav**' and '**Bhavarth Deepika**'.
 - **Namdev**, the Bhakti saint, is the other significant literary figure from this era. He composed religious songs in Marathi as well as Hindi. Some of his Hindi compositions were included in the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib.
 - Another Marathi writer was **Mukundaraja** who wrote '**Vivek Sindhu**' and '**Paramamrita**'.
 - The nationalist movement galvanized writers such as [Bal Gangadhar Tilak](#) and [M.G. Ranade](#), leading to a rich literary tradition that reflects Maharashtra's cultural heritage.

How did Modern Indian Literature Shape Indian National Identity During the Colonial Period?

- **Role of Indian Writers in Nationalism:**
 - **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894):** He was one of the first to blend nationalism with Indian traditions. His historical novels like **Durgesh Nandini** (1865) and **Anand Math** (1882) became popular for instilling nationalist and patriotic values, making nationalism a part of Indian dharma.
 - His works emphasized the need for Indians to [fight colonialism](#) while drawing inspiration from India's cultural and historical heritage.
 - **Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1942):** He was another significant figure, redefining nationalism through his emphasis on federalism and unity in diversity.
 - Tagore's nationalism was intertwined with India's spiritual traditions, focusing on tolerance and pluralism.
 - His work **Gora** (1910) is a reflection of his challenge to colonialism and his articulation of Indian nationalism as inclusive and diverse.
- **Patriotic Literature and Reformism:**
 - During the 19th and early 20th centuries, a wave of patriotic literature arose in multiple Indian languages.
 - Writers like **Rangalal** (Bengali), **Bharatendu Harishchandra** (Hindi), and **Mirza Ghalib** (Urdu) used literature to resist colonial rule and glorify India's heritage. Their works, while opposing foreign domination, also addressed the need for internal social reforms.
 - **Subramania Bharati** (1882-1921), a Tamil poet, combined patriotism with themes of social reform. He revolutionized Tamil poetry by focusing on themes of national unity and the abolition of social evils like untouchability.
 - Historical novels were a popular medium for promoting nationalism. Writers like **Hari Narayan Apte** (Marathi) and [Bankim Chandra Chatterjee](#) (Bengali) wrote to remind Indians of their glorious past and encourage resistance to British rule. These novels fostered a sense of obligation towards the nation and a call to fight for freedom.
- **Revivalism and Social Reforms:**
 - The early novels in Indian languages, such as **Phulmani O Karunar Bibaran** (1852, Bengali) by **H. Catherine Mullens**, **Pratap Mudaliar Charithram** (1879, Tamil), and **Sri RangaRaja Charitra** (1872, Telugu), addressed social evils like [untouchability](#), [caste distinctions](#), and the denial of [widow remarriage](#).
 - These writers advocated for a revival of India's cultural values while simultaneously pushing for reform and challenging orthodox practices.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. With reference to the cultural history of India, consider the following pairs: (2020)

1. Parivrajaka – Renunciant and Wanderer
2. Shramana – Priest with a high status
3. Upasaka – Lay follower of Buddhism

Which of the pairs given above are correctly matched?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

Q. With reference to the cultural history of India, which one of the following is the correct description of the term 'paramitas'? (2020)

- (a) The earliest Dharmashastra texts written in aphoristic (sutra) style
- (b) Philosophical schools that did not accept the authority of Vedas
- (c) Perfections whose attainment led to the Bodhisattva path
- (d) Powerful merchant guilds of early medieval South India

Ans: (c)

Q. With reference to the religious history of India, consider the following statements: (2020)

1. Sthaviravadins belong to Mahayana Buddhism.
2. Lokottaravadin sect was an offshoot of Mahasanghika sect of Buddhism.
3. The deification of Buddha by Mahasanghikas fostered the Mahayana Buddhism.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

Mains

Q. Pala period is the most significant phase in the history of Buddhism in India. Enumerate. (2020)

