

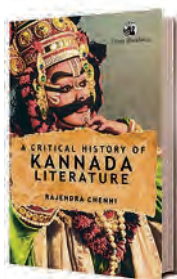
A kaleidoscope of Kannadas

As he interrogates Kannada literary history over the last century, Rajendra Chenni sees it as neither a celebration of masterpieces nor a catalogue of movements but an enquiry into power, memory, and language. **KAMALAKAR BHAT**

Writing a literary history is not merely a matter of arranging authors and texts in chronological order. It requires deciding on what counts as literature, whose voices become representative, and what kind of past a language is imagined to possess. Rajendra Chenni's *A Critical History of Kannada Literature*, published by Orient BlackSwan as part of a series edited by E.V. Ramakrishnan and M. Asaduddin, begins precisely there. Rather than lamenting the scarcity of literary histories or repeating familiar explanations about lost manuscripts and historical amnesia, it asks why literary histories have been written the way they have. The question proves more consequential than it first appears, leading Chenni to interrogate the assumptions that have shaped Kannada literary historiography over the past century.

The book's force derives partly from the methodological principles Chenni states explicitly: reject linear progress, attend to exclusion, contextualise rather than extol, write for non-specialists, and record both conformity and resistance. These are not merely worthy intentions; they guide concrete interpretive choices, such as refusing to read the Vachanakaras as straightforward precursors of modern secularism or arguing that the Navodaya "composite" tradition was a class-specific construction rather than a civilisational given. The chapter on language is among the book's most significant contributions. By centring Prakrit's neglected role, exposing standardisation as an expression of caste ideology, and validating marginalised dialects against the Marga-Desi hierarchy, Chenni turns Kannada into a compelling case study of how linguistic identity is politically

A Critical History of Kannada Literature



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constructed rather than naturally given.

The opening chapter forms the intellectual core of the book. Its critique of the familiar image of Kannadanadu as an inherently plural and harmonious cultural space establishes the terms for everything that follows. The reassuring narrative of peaceful coexistence among Jaina, Saiva, and Vaishnava traditions is tested against evidence of sectarian conflict, caste hierarchy, and the political imperatives of the Ekikarana movement. Particularly persuasive is the argument that the celebration of pluralism itself became an ideological necessity during the movement for linguistic unification.

Pampa, Ranna, and other canonical figures are never allowed to become timeless monuments detached from their historical circumstances. Pampa's epics, for example, are read as negotiating between worldly obligations and religious commitments, between the demands of feudal patronage and an unease about the violence it sustained. Chenni resists reducing these works either to political documents or to aesthetic achievements insulated from history. Instead, he shows literary form, ethical vision, and social location to be inseparable.

The chapter on the Vachana movement is equally nuanced. Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, and their contemporaries emerge as figures who inaugurated a profound break with established literary and social conventions. The assertion of the vernacular against Sanskrit's authority, the entry of artisan communities into literary culture, and the challenge to caste hierarchy are recognised as genuinely transformative developments. Yet Chenni is equally attentive to the movement's limits. Its egalitarian aspirations remained incomplete, its dependence on Kalachuri patronage constrained its possibilities, and its challenge to patriarchy, though remarkable



for its time, never entirely escaped patriarchal assumptions.

The same resistance to easy narratives shapes the discussion of colonial modernity. Karnataka did not experience colonial rule as a single political or cultural unit, and the book repeatedly reminds the reader of this fragmented history. The trajectories of Mysore, Dharwad, Hyderabad Karnataka, and the coastal regions differed significantly, producing distinct literary cultures rather than a uniform Kannada modernity. Particularly illuminating is the reassessment of Mysore. Long remembered as an exemplary princely state, it is examined alongside its taxation policies, its suppression of resistance, and its accommodation with colonial power. This broader political context gives a different texture to literary developments often discussed in isolation.

The treatment of Navodaya is equally illuminating. Rather than presenting it as a coherent renaissance, Chennai identifies divergent tendencies within it. On one side stood an academically oriented, Sanskrit-centred literary culture associated largely with Mysore; on the other, a tradition more deeply engaged with oral forms and regional culture, exemplified by D.R. Bendre in North Karnataka. The distinction is persuasive because it restores regional and social differences that later literary histories flattened.

The chapters on Navya modernism and its aftermath continue this interrogation of literary consensus. While Navya undoubtedly transformed Kannada writing, Chennai asks whose experience its celebrated universality actually represented. The movement's engagement with T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, and European modernism is situated within the social world of urban, privileged-



The Kannada letter

"Sa" from Bahutva Karnataka's Inclusive Alphabet campaign, which celebrates the State's pluralistic heritage.

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caste intellectuals who dominated its institutions. Whether or not one accepts this reading in its entirety, it compels a reconsideration of assumptions that have long shaped discussions of Kannada modernism.

The importance of the 1973 Boosa controversy emerges clearly in this context. Basavalingappa's provocative dismissal of Kannada literature as "Boosa" ("cattle feed") generated a reaction that exposed tensions extending far beyond literary taste. The controversy becomes the moment when questions of caste and representation could no longer be kept outside literary criticism. The subsequent emergence of Dalit and Bandaya writing appears not as a peripheral development but as a fundamental reorientation of Kannada literature. Chennai's discussions of Poornachandra Tejaswi and Chandrashekhara Kambar further demonstrate that responses to Navya ranged from experiments with popular forms to renewed engagement with folk traditions. Taken together, these chapters do more than revise individual periods: they recast Kannada literary history itself. Familiar movements and canonical figures become part of a larger history of exclusions, recoveries, and competing claims to literary authority.

THE LATER CHAPTERS broaden the scope of the history without feeling like appendices. The discussion of theatre is particularly valuable. Company Nataka, long dismissed by educated elites, is restored to its historical significance. Equally important are the chapters on women's writing, folk literature, popular writing, and criticism.

Women writers are not confined to a separate enclosure of "women's literature" but are read as intervening in questions of domesticity, violence, and social power. Folk epics such as the *Manteswamy Kavya* become sites where suppressed histories survive outside the canonical tradition, while detective fiction, humour, and other popular genres are treated as integral to Kannada's literary public sphere rather than dismissed as minor streams. The chapter on criticism offers a lucid account of how different critical practices reflected different social worlds, from the mutual affirmations of Navodaya criticism to the formalist



orientation of Navya. Whether literary history can accommodate forms rooted in performance and oral transmission without dissolving the specificity of literature as a modern institution of print, publication, and criticism remains an open question.

What distinguishes this work is not only the range of material it covers, impressive though that is, but also the way it changes the terms of the conversation. Literary history here is neither a celebration of masterpieces nor a catalogue of movements. It becomes an enquiry into power: who is remembered, who disappears, and how languages construct images of themselves. That perspective reveals a tradi-

tion far more contested, internally diverse, and historically dynamic than conventional narratives have allowed.

Anyone interested in Kannada literature or, more broadly, in the writing of literary history in India's bhasha traditions will find this an important and provocative book. It does not offer the last word on Kannada literary history. Instead, it demonstrates why the questions we ask of literary history matter every bit as much as the answers we receive. ■

Kamalakar Bhat has edited and translated from Kannada
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