



Original Article

The Role of Literature in the Development of India: Special Reference to Bengali Literature

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Abstract

Literature in India has always been more than a form of aesthetic expression; it has been a catalyst for social change, cultural awakening, and national development. The trajectory of Indian development cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the profound role of literature in shaping public opinion, inspiring reform, and mobilizing resistance against colonial domination. Bengali literature, in particular, has played a pioneering role in this process. From the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century to contemporary feminist and subaltern narratives, Bengali writers have consistently used literature as a medium of reform, resistance, and cultural self-assertion. This paper explores the multifaceted role of literature in India's development, with a special focus on Bengali contributions, including the works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Ashapurna Devi, Mahasweta Devi, and others. It argues that Bengali literature has not only reflected societal realities but has also actively shaped them, thereby advancing India's progress toward inclusivity, justice, and cultural resilience.

Keywords: Role, Literature, Nation, Building, Rabindranath, Bankimchandra, Mahasweta.

Introduction

The idea of “development” in India extends far beyond economics; it encompasses intellectual, social, cultural, and moral growth. Literature has historically been a central driver of such holistic development. By mirroring social realities, challenging traditions, and offering visions of change, literature has functioned both as a critique of the present and a guide for the future. In colonial India, literature played a vital role in awakening national consciousness. Writers used the novel, poetry, and drama to critique oppression, inspire unity, and articulate dreams of freedom. In the post-independence era, literature continued to address pressing issues such as inequality, gender justice, caste discrimination, and cultural identity. Among India's many literary traditions, Bengali literature has been especially influential. The Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century generated a vibrant synergy between reform and creativity. Writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt reshaped both literary form and social imagination. Later, Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam gave literary expression to universal humanism and revolutionary nationalism. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay exposed social hypocrisies, while Ashapurna Devi and Mahasweta Devi foregrounded women's and tribal struggles. Together, these contributions demonstrate how Bengali literature has shaped not only regional identity but also the wider trajectory of Indian development. This paper examines four broad dimensions of literature's role in India's development: (1) national awakening, (2) social reform, (3) cultural enrichment, and (4) contemporary relevance and expected role. Through this framework, it highlights how Bengali literature has functioned as a mirror, critic, and transformative force in Indian society.

Literature and National Awakening in India

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the emergence of Indian nationalism, and literature was central to this awakening. Bengali writers pioneered the use of novels and poems as tools of resistance, articulating visions of freedom that transcended political boundaries. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), often considered the father of the modern Indian novel, gave nationalist imagination its first iconic symbol. His novel *Anandamath* (1882) introduced the hymn “Vande Mataram,” which became a rallying cry for freedom fighters

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(Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005). By depicting an imagined brotherhood of monks fighting for the motherland, Bankim fused literary creativity with patriotic fervor, demonstrating literature's ability to mobilize collective identity.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Nobel laureate and global humanist, redefined nationalism in broader cultural terms. His essays in *Nationalism* (1917) critiqued the aggressive nationalism of the West, instead envisioning an India rooted in spiritual inclusivity (Tagore, 1917/2009). His fiction, poetry, and plays consistently explored the tension between tradition and modernity, patriotism and fanaticism. For example, *Ghare Baire* (1916) interrogated blind nationalism and emphasized the need for balance between freedom and responsibility. Tagore's founding of Visva-Bharati University symbolized his belief that education and literature could together serve as pillars of development.

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976), known as the “Rebel Poet,” infused literature with revolutionary passion. His celebrated poem *Bidrohi* (1922) called for rebellion against oppression and championed equality across caste, class, and religion (Islam, 1922/2000). Nazrul's advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity was especially vital in the years leading to partition. Through his poetry and songs, literature became a medium of resistance, brotherhood, and cultural synthesis.

These contributions demonstrate that literature was not peripheral but central to the nationalist struggle. It articulated dreams of independence, warned against its pitfalls, and linked the idea of development to both freedom and ethical responsibility.

Bengali Literature and Social Reform

Bengali literature has been deeply engaged with social reform. Writers often critiqued oppressive practices, advocated for women's rights, and reimagined moral values.

Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) combined scholarship with reformist zeal. His clear prose shaped modern Bengali, while his writings on widow remarriage, especially *Bidhoba Bibaha Prostab* (1855), challenged orthodox customs (Vidyasagar, 1855/1998). Literature here became a persuasive tool for social justice.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873) introduced modern literary techniques, notably in his epic *Meghnad Badh Kavya* (1861), which reinterpreted the Ramayana from Ravana's side (Dutt, 1861/2004). By valorizing the “other,” he questioned traditional moral frameworks and encouraged intellectual reform.

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) addressed everyday social realities with unmatched popularity. His novels like *Charitraheen* (1917) and *Srikanta* (1917–1933) exposed the hypocrisies of patriarchy and depicted marginalized lives with empathy. *Pather Dabi* (1926), banned by colonial authorities, merged nationalist and social revolutionary themes (Chattopadhyay, 1926/1993). Sarat Chandra's works underscored that independence had to be accompanied by social justice.

Ashapura Devi (1909–1995) gave voice to women's struggles through her trilogy beginning with *Pratham Pratiruti* (1964), which traced women's journey from subjugation to self-assertion (Devi, 1964/2005). Her narratives highlighted education as the cornerstone of women's empowerment and societal progress.

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) extended the reformist agenda to tribal and subaltern communities. Works like *Hajar Churashir Maa* (1974) and *Draupadi* (1978) exposed systemic injustices and demanded recognition for marginalized voices (Devi, 1974/2005). Through her activism and writing, she demonstrated literature's role as advocacy for inclusive development.

Thus, Bengali literature has persistently engaged with reform, blending storytelling with critique to create a vision of a more egalitarian India.

Literature and Cultural Development

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (1894–1950) enriched Bengali cultural identity with his sensitive depictions of rural life in *Pather Panchali* (1929). His ecological sensibility reflected a holistic view of development where culture, community, and environment coexisted. Post-independence, writers like Sunil Gangopadhyay and Shakti Chattopadhyay explored urban anxieties and modern alienation, while Mahasweta Devi emphasized subaltern cultural identity. Together, these works reinforced India's pluralist and secular ethos. Thus, Bengali literature has not merely preserved culture but actively reinvented it, ensuring continuity amidst modern challenges and projecting India's identity on the global stage.

Contemporary Relevance of Literature

Even today, literature remains crucial to India's sustainable development. Contemporary Bengali literature continues to highlight themes of environmental justice, gender equality, and human rights. Mahasweta Devi's advocacy for tribal rights resonates with global discourses on indigenous justice. Modern Dalit and subaltern writings echo similar concerns, emphasizing inclusivity as a measure of true development.

Moreover, the translation of Bengali works into global languages has expanded their influence, ensuring that India's developmental discourse reaches an international audience. The Nobel recognition of Tagore, the global circulation of Nazrul's songs, and the worldwide popularity of Bibhutibhushan's narratives highlight how Bengali literature has shaped not just India but also global cultural consciousness.

Expected Role from contemporary and emerging Bengali Writer for Viksit Bharat by 2047

As India moves toward the centenary of her independence in 2047, the dream of Viksit Bharat (a developed India) goes beyond material prosperity. It envisions a nation that is economically strong, socially just, environmentally sustainable, and spiritually enriched. In this transformative journey, the modern Indian Bengali writer holds a unique responsibility. Writers are not mere chroniclers of events; they are shapers of consciousness, interpreters of culture, and torchbearers of moral vision.

First, **the modern Bengali writer must act as a custodian of cultural identity.** In an era of globalization and technological upheaval, there is a risk of alienation from our civilizational roots. Writers need to reinterpret India's epics, folklore, and philosophical traditions in contemporary forms so that the youth remain connected with their heritage while aspiring for modernity. By weaving together tradition and innovation, literature can preserve India's plural ethos.

Second, **writers must serve as advocates of social harmony**. India's strength lies in its diversity, yet this very diversity can also become a source of division. Through novels, poetry, and essays, writers can highlight stories of unity and compassion, reminding readers of the spirit of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat. In this sense, literature becomes a bridge, reducing social distances and fostering empathy across caste, gender, religion, and region.

Third, **the modern Indian writer has a duty to raise awareness about sustainability and responsibility**. Viksit Bharat cannot be defined only in terms of GDP or infrastructure; it must also mean clean air, water security, ecological balance, and dignity for farmers and workers. Writers, by portraying the struggles of rural India, the threats of climate change, or the ethical dilemmas of development, can awaken collective consciousness towards sustainable growth.

Equally important is the **writer's role in nurturing democratic values**. Literature has always been a mirror of truth, a fearless critique of injustice, and a voice for the voiceless. By promoting reason, tolerance, and courage, writers strengthen the democratic fabric of the nation. In times when freedom of expression is challenged, their words can serve as a shield for truth and justice.

The empowerment of women and marginalized communities is another sphere where writers must actively engage. By amplifying silenced voices and challenging social stereotypes, they can help India progress toward genuine equality. A truly developed India cannot leave behind half of its population or its historically disadvantaged sections. Tagore rightly pointed out this thing in his poetry (Gitanjali, 45) as.

He, whom you cast down, drags you down with him

He whom you push away blinds you closer still

He whom you blind fills your path with darkness.

He whom you shut out waits at your door like death.

Last but not least, the modern Indian writer's role for Viksit Bharat 2047 is not limited to artistic expression; it is a form of nation-building. By being cultural custodians, social critics, ethical guides, and global voices, writers can ensure that India's development is not only economic but also moral, intellectual, and spiritual. A developed India in 2047 will be one where literature continues to inspire its people to imagine, to question, and to create a more humane and inclusive future.

Conclusion

The development of India cannot be understood merely in terms of economics or politics; it must also be seen as the unfolding of social justice, cultural identity, and ethical responsibility. Literature has been central to this broader vision of development. Bengali literature, in particular, has pioneered the integration of creativity with reform. Bankim Chandra articulated nationalist imagination; Tagore offered humanist universalism; Nazrul Islam gave voice to rebellion and unity; Sarat Chandra exposed social inequities; Ashapurna Devi and Mahasweta Devi highlighted gender and subaltern struggles. Collectively, they ensured that literature remained a dynamic force in shaping India's path toward progress.

By inspiring reform, preserving culture, and articulating visions of justice, Bengali literature has significantly contributed to India's development. Its relevance endures today, reminding us that true development lies not only in material prosperity but in the moral, cultural, and intellectual growth of a society, which may help the country to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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