



A Vernacular Manifesto: Decolonising the Syllabus, the Shelf, and the Soul

Dr. Promila

Assistant Professor, Department of English, C.D.L.U, Sirsa, Haryana, India

Abstract

Literature in Indian languages is increasingly reshaping the global literary field by challenging the long-standing hegemony of Anglophone canons. This linguistic asymmetry has deep historical roots; colonial education policies systematically elevated English and select standardised vernaculars while marginalising Adivasi, Dalit, and oral traditions. Drawing on theories of linguistic imperialism, language ecology, and epistemic justice, this study elucidates how these hierarchies entrenched the perception of regional languages as culturally inferior. However, recent developments indicate a significant paradigm shift. The unprecedented international acclaim for writers such as Geetanjali Shree, Perumal Murugan, K. R. Meera, and Banu Mushtaq has amplified global attention to Bhasha literature. This momentum is further bolstered by feminist translation networks, archival initiatives such as the People's Linguistic Survey of India, and policy reforms advocating mother-tongue pedagogy. Additionally, digital innovations and a resurgent regional publishing ecosystem are dismantling traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. Collectively, these forces presage an emerging multilingual order in which Indian languages reclaim their visibility, epistemic authority, and creative autonomy.

Keywords: Bhasha literature, linguistic imperialism, translation studies, dalit writing, epistemic justice, multilingualism

Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also a powerful way of organising knowledge and authority. Across the world, English and other major Western languages continue to dominate education, media, and publishing. UNESCO reports that only 351 of nearly 7000 world languages are used as media of instruction, and that one language disappears every two weeks (UNESCO 2023) ^[30]. Almost 40% of the world's population does not have access to schooling in their home language (UNESCO 2023) ^[30], which reinforces Western-centred curricula and limits the presence of local knowledge in the classroom. In India, these patterns have deep historical roots. Colonial rule privileged English and a few "standardised" regional languages, leaving hundreds of indigenous and community languages with little institutional support. This imbalance continues: despite 19,500 reported dialects and 22 constitutionally recognised languages, Western literary markets still shape what is considered culturally valuable or "global." With more than half of the world's languages now considered endangered (UNESCO 2023) ^[30], entire knowledge systems and cultural histories risk disappearing. These inequalities produce what scholars describe as literary hegemony, a system in which Western languages and ways of knowing dominate. Undoing this requires recognising that Indian languages have their own intellectual, cultural, and literary depth.

Postcolonial scholars have long shown that language is central to maintaining colonial power structures. Linguistic imperialism explains how colonial languages are treated as inherently superior (Phillipson 1992) ^[23], while language ecology reminds us that linguistic diversity survives only when communities and institutions actively sustain their languages (Haugen 1972) ^[11]. In India, colonial education established a hierarchy in which English was the dominant language. In some elite settings, Sanskrit or classical Tamil became the primary language of knowledge, pushing oral, vernacular, and tribal traditions to the margins. As G. N.

Devy notes, "colonialism and print technology have contributed to the marginalisation of India's oral-literary traditions" (Devy 2017) ^[8]. As a result, Adivasi and rural epistemologies were made invisible within formal literary and academic spaces. Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital helps explain this: English proficiency confers social status and economic mobility, while regional languages, especially those without state recognition, are assigned far less value (Bourdieu 1991) ^[6]. This produces an uneven literary landscape in which Western languages continue to define legitimacy. To counter this, thinkers like Santos and Spivak argue for epistemic justice, valuing suppressed knowledge traditions and widening our understanding of what counts as literature.

India's current language hierarchy is rooted in the colonial education system, which placed English at the centre of administration and schooling while pushing most local languages into informal or "low" domains. As G. N. Devy notes, this system gave little value to oral learning or folklore, leaving many indigenous traditions outside formal recognition (Devy 2017) ^[8]. After independence, linguistic states were created, but only languages with established scripts and literary histories, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali and others, received constitutional visibility. Hundreds of smaller tongues, especially Adivasi languages, remained unrecognised. The contrast is stark: the 1961 Census recorded 1,652 mother tongues, but by 1971 this number was reduced to 108 after officials removed any language spoken by fewer than 10,000 people, effectively erasing many tribal languages from the public record (Caravan 2018). Devy later showed that most of these "missing" languages belonged to central India's tribal belt, revealing how policy decisions deepened marginalisation.

Alongside this structural erasure, colonial schooling also shaped cultural attitudes. English, and in some elite spaces, Sanskrit, became associated with science, rationality and mobility, while vernacular knowledge was framed as backward or "folkloric." Many Dalit and tribal communities

internalised these hierarchies, often encouraging children to adopt English or standardised Hindi to gain status. Postcolonial theorists describe this as epistemic violence, where local knowledge systems are devalued and gradually displaced. These attitudes continue today, sustaining the sense that regional literatures are “provincial” compared to English-language writing.

In response, scholars and activists have developed a strong counter-narrative centred on bhasha reclamation. Central to this movement is G. N. Devy’s People’s Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), launched in 2010 to document every living Indian language, including those spoken by tiny communities. PLSI identified around 780 distinct languages, far exceeding the 22 scheduled languages (PLSI 2013). Its volumes preserve vocabularies, songs, stories and oral histories, restoring visibility to traditions once dismissed as insignificant. Devy argues that when a community loses its language, it loses an entire way of knowing: “a language disappears when the livelihood options of the speech community disappear.” By treating every language as a repository of knowledge, the bhasha movement offers a form of epistemic reclamation. It challenges the long-standing belief that only English or other dominant languages can express complex, “universal” ideas. Instead, it insists that India’s diverse linguistic traditions hold their own philosophical, literary, and cultural depth.

Language recognition in India is deeply political. Inclusion in the Constitution’s Eighth Schedule or receiving “Classical Language” status brings visibility, funding, and cultural prestige, and activists have long argued that these official categories often hide the realities of marginalised communities. Devy points out that the 1961 Census recorded 1,652 mother tongues, but by 1971 this number was reduced to just 108 after officials removed any language spoken by fewer than 10,000 people (Caravan). This bureaucratic narrowing erased many Adivasi and minority languages from public awareness. The People’s Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) sought to correct this by counting every self-identified language, even those spoken by very small groups; one example is the Chaimal language of Tripura, spoken by only five people (Wikipedia).

These debates extend to the “Classical Language” category, where languages like Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu are recognised for their literary antiquity. In contrast, many tribal languages with rich oral traditions remain excluded. Even the state’s naming practices reinforce hierarchies; grouping diverse speech forms under “Hindi,” for instance, can erase smaller linguistic identities. For this reason, activists such as Devy have argued for reclassifying particular “dialects” as full languages and for including underrepresented tongues in national policy. The broader bhasha movement challenges this architecture of selective recognition and insists that every language, regardless of its size or script, carries its own knowledge.

Dalit literature offers another form of resistance within this landscape. Emerging strongly from the 1960s onwards, Dalit writers consistently rejected upper-caste ideas of literary “beauty” and instead wrote directly about caste violence and everyday oppression. Sharankumar Limbale’s arguments for a distinct Dalit aesthetic became influential, and the Bengali translation of his work won the 2023 Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize (PIB). In Tamil, writers like Bama and I. Sivakami use autobiographical narratives to expose caste and gender injustices, while Malayalam

writers have documented lower-caste histories with similar force. As Sivakami notes, Dalit writing seeks to unsettle complacency and demand justice (New Indian Express). These works also tend to gain wider visibility when translated; many Dalit authors have reached national and international audiences primarily through English translations. Translation, then, becomes a way of amplifying voices long excluded from mainstream literary culture.

Recent global recognition of Indian-language literature has further strengthened these counter-movements. In 2022, Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand* became the first Hindi novel to win the International Booker Prize (Booker Prizes), sparking unprecedented interest in bhasha writing. The momentum continued in 2023 when Perumal Murugan’s Tamil novel *Aalanda Patchi* (translated as *Fire Bird*) won the JCB Prize for Literature (Times of India). In 2025, Kannada writer Banu Mushtaq won the International Booker Prize for *Heart Lamp*, marking a landmark moment for Kannada literature (Booker Prizes). K. R. Meera’s *Hangwoman* likewise drew attention to Malayalam storytelling when its translation was shortlisted for the DSC Prize. These successes have encouraged more publishers and festivals to showcase writing from Indian languages, and prize structures increasingly credit translators as equal contributors. As a result, a new ecosystem is emerging in which regional literatures gain national and international readership, and translation becomes a central tool for challenging long-standing linguistic and cultural hierarchies. Beyond the major prize-winners, many other writers working in Indian languages have been rediscovered through translation. Translators like Arunava Sinha have introduced Hindustani, Bengali, and Tamil texts to broader audiences, while anthologies such as *Maps of the Undefeated* gather Dalit and tribal poetry for English readers. Together, these efforts show how the recent “translation renaissance” has made bhasha literatures visible in world literature and has broadened the idea of what counts as serious literary work. Women translators and writers have also built strong networks to amplify female voices across languages. A central example is Ashoka University’s Women Translating Women (WTW) project (2023–24), created in collaboration with Zubaan Publishers. WTW commissions translations of books written by women in Bengali, Tamil, Sindhi, Urdu, Hindi and other languages, with all translators being women. As co-director Rita Kothari notes, translation is not just a technical exercise but a gendered process; writers and translators shape each other through the act of retelling. Other feminist networks, such as Women Unlimited, CALYX, and small translation collectives like Anuvāda Bhavana, have been translating South Asian feminist texts for years. Internationally, the #WomenInTranslation movement has helped bring Indian women authors into global reading lists. These networks highlight how caste, gender, and coloniality overlap, and their work directly challenges both patriarchal traditions within Indian literature and the broader Anglo-centric publishing world.

Institutional and policy changes have strengthened these cultural shifts. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 endorses mother-tongue learning, stating that children grasp concepts more easily in their home language. It requires schools to teach in the home language at least through Grade 5 and calls for high-quality translations of textbooks into regional languages. NEP also proposes an Indian

Institute of Translation and Interpretation to train translators and produce multilingual teaching materials. Cultural education guidelines recommend digitising folklore and oral traditions. This focus on language is beginning to influence governance as well: the 2024–25 Union Budget established a new Bharatiya Bhasha Anubhag with funding to support AI-based translation systems for official communication. The aim is to “decolonise” administration by enabling government work to be conducted in Indian languages rather than relying on English.

Civil society and private initiatives are reinforcing this momentum. The Sahitya Akademi awards translations across 24 languages, and private prizes like the JCB Prize and DSC Prize treat translations on equal footing with English originals, often splitting prize money between author and translator. Independent publishers such as Zubaan, Tulika, Navayana, and Katha have built catalogues centred on regional and marginalised voices. Digital journals like Kavita Kosh and Bhashaposhak publish poetry and fiction in dozens of languages, while platforms like Amazon Kindle and Scribd now carry e-books in Indian scripts. These developments complement technological projects like Bhashini, a national AI translation platform that offers free multilingual tools and is slowly making India’s digital environment more accessible to speakers of all languages.

Technology is becoming a critical space for linguistic empowerment. Bhashini, launched in 2022 ^[5] with support from UNICEF and the Ministry of Electronics, enables text and voice translation across 22 Indian languages. This helps users, whether farmers, students, or administrators, access information in their own mother tongues. The broader digital landscape is also shifting: over half of India’s 886 million internet users prefer content in Indian languages, and regional-language apps, social media platforms, and storytelling sites are flourishing. Tools for digitising older scripts, open-source fonts, and community archives are preserving endangered languages. Crowdsourced apps now allow speakers of small tribal languages to record oral histories and vocabulary, turning ordinary citizens into custodians of cultural memory. The multilingual web envisioned by NEP is becoming a reality as users increasingly create and consume content in their own languages.

The result of these cultural, institutional, and technological changes is a quiet transformation in India’s literary landscape. Through activism, translation, and policy reform, regional languages are reclaiming space long occupied by English and other dominant tongues. This is not simply a cultural shift but a form of epistemic decolonisation: a recognition that Indian languages carry their own intellectual traditions and aesthetic values. International awards, expanding translation networks, and public investment in multilingual education all suggest that Indian languages can now stand alongside English in global literary circuits.

Looking ahead, a genuinely multilingual literary order feels not only possible but imminent. Sustaining this progress will require strong mother-tongue education, more translation funding, and continued support for small publishers. It will also require readers, both in India and abroad, to embrace non-Western literary traditions as equally rich and complex. If current trends continue, India may soon reverse the colonial pattern by exporting more translated literature than

it imports. With the recent Booker wins of Geetanjali Shree (2022) and Banu Mushtaq (2025), it is clear that when linguistic barriers fall, creative possibilities expand. India is gradually dismantling Western literary hegemony by rebuilding its linguistic architecture from the ground up, one language, one story, and one translation at a time.

References

1. Ambai CS Lakshmi. *A Purple Sea*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Affiliated East-West Press, 1992.
2. Azam M, Chin A, Prakash N. “The Returns to English-Language Skills in India.” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 2013;61(2):335–67.
3. Bama. *Karukku*, 1992. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Macmillan India, 2000.
4. Benyamin. *Jasmine Days*. Translated by Shahnaz Habib, Juggernaut Books, 2018.
5. Bhashini. “National Language Translation Mission.” Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India, 2022.
6. Bourdieu P. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press, 1991.
7. Devy GN. *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*. Orient Longman, 1992.
8. Devy GN. “Colonialism and the Marginalisation of India’s Oral-Literary Traditions.” *Scroll.in*, 2017.
9. Devy GN, editor. *People’s Linguistic Survey of India*. Orient Blackswan, 2013–2020.
10. Government of India. *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education, 2020.
11. Haugen E. “The Ecology of Language.” *The Ecology of Language: Essays*, Stanford University Press, 1972.
12. IAMAI, Kantar. *Internet in India 2024*. Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2025.
13. Kandasamy M. *The Gypsy Goddess*. HarperCollins India, 2014.
14. Khan S, Jayaraj T. “From Colonial Legacy to Contemporary Reality: Attitudes Towards English and Hindi Hegemony in India.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 2024;11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03878-6>.
15. Kothari R. *Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English*. Foundation Books, 2003.
16. Limbale S. *Toward an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Blackswan, 2004.
17. Macaulay TB. “Minute on Indian Education.” 1835. Columbia University.
18. Meera KR. *Hangwoman*. Translated by J Devika, Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2014.
19. Ministry of Finance. “Union Budget 2024–25.” Government of India, 2024.
20. Murugan P. *Fire Bird*. Translated by Janani Kannan, Penguin Random House India, 2023.
21. Murugan P. *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin India, 2013.
22. Mushtaq B. *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*. Translated by Deepa Bhashthi, *And Other Stories*, 2024.
23. Phillipson R. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
24. PIB Delhi. “Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize 2023 Announced.” Press Information Bureau, 2024.
25. Sahitya Akademi. “Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize.” Sahitya Akademi, 2024.

26. Santos BS. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. Routledge, 2014.
27. Shree G. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Tilted Axis Press, 2021.
28. Spivak GC. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1988, 271–313.
29. "The Languages We Lost." *The Caravan*, 2018.
30. UNESCO. *World Languages Report*. UNESCO, 2023.
31. UNICEF India. "Bhashini: Digital Public Infrastructure for Languages." UNICEF, 2023.
32. Valmiki O. *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia University Press, 2003.
33. Wa Thiong'o N. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, 1986.