



Literature and Society in India: Texts, Contexts, and Ideologies—Tagore, Indian Knowledge Systems an Interdisciplinary Dialogues

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Abstract- Indian literature has historically functioned as a powerful medium through which social realities, ethical dilemmas, and ideological conflicts are articulated and contested. This paper examines Indian literature as a form of social knowledge by adopting an interdisciplinary framework that brings literary studies into dialogue with history, cultural studies, education, and philosophy. Placing Rabindranath Tagore at the center of analysis, the paper explores how literary texts engage with society through questions of nationalism, civilization, education, and humanism. Tagore’s literary works, political essays, and educational experiments at Santiniketan are read alongside the conceptual framework of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), understood as an integrated epistemology combining knowledge, systematic inquiry, and life philosophy. The paper argues that Indian literature does not merely reflect society but actively participates in shaping social consciousness and ethical imagination. By foregrounding Tagore’s critique of narrow nationalism and his vision of holistic education, the study demonstrates how Indian literary traditions contribute meaningfully to global interdisciplinary dialogues in the humanities and social sciences.

Keywords: Indian Literature, Rabindranath Tagore, Literature and Society, Indian Knowledge System, Interdisciplinarity, Ideology.

I. Introduction

In global academic discourse, the call for interdisciplinary research arises from the recognition that complex social realities cannot be adequately understood through isolated disciplinary approaches. Literature, long regarded primarily as an aesthetic or linguistic object, is increasingly recognized as a critical site of social knowledge. Literary texts encode historical experience, ideological struggle, and ethical reflection, making them indispensable to interdisciplinary inquiry across the humanities and social sciences.

In the Indian context, the relationship between literature and society is especially intricate. Indian literature emerges from a multilingual, multi religious, and socially stratified society shaped by colonialism, nationalist movements, and postcolonial transformations. To study Indian literature without attention to its social contexts is to strip it of its historical urgency; to study society without its literary expressions is to ignore how social meanings are imagined, questioned, and transformed.

This paper adopts the framework of texts, contexts, and ideologies to examine Indian literature as a socially embedded practice. “Texts” refer to literary works as structured narratives and symbolic forms. “Contexts” include historical, political, and institutional conditions shaping literary production and reception. “Ideologies” refer to the systems of values and beliefs that organize social life and appear within literary discourse.



Rabindranath Tagore is chosen as the central figure because his work uniquely integrates literature, social critique, and education. His writings offer a sustained engagement with nationalism, modernity, and civilization, while his educational experiment at Santiniketan embodies an alternative model of knowledge closely aligned with what is now conceptualized as the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). By reading Tagore alongside other Indian literary traditions, this paper situates Indian literature within global interdisciplinary conversations.

II. Interdisciplinary Framework and the Indian Knowledge System

Interdisciplinarity in literary studies involves moving beyond close textual analysis to examine how literature intersects with history, sociology, politics, and philosophy. Cultural studies has been particularly influential in this regard, emphasizing that cultural texts must be analyzed in relation to power, institutions, and social difference. Literature, from this perspective, is not isolated art but a social practice embedded in material and ideological conditions.

However, interdisciplinary work in the Indian context also raises questions about epistemology: whose knowledge counts, and on what terms? The Indian Knowledge System provides a useful conceptual framework here. IKS is often described as an integrated epistemology comprising *jñāna* (knowledge), *vijñāna* (systematic or scientific inquiry), and *jīvan darśan* (a philosophy of life). Rather than separating knowledge into rigid disciplinary compartments, IKS emphasizes holistic understanding, ethical responsibility, and lived experience.

When applied to literary studies, IKS encourages scholars to see literature not merely as representation but as a way of knowing the world. Literary texts become sites where ethical reasoning, social critique, and imaginative vision converge. Tagore's work exemplifies this integration: his poetry, fiction, essays, and educational philosophy all emerge from a holistic view of knowledge grounded in human values.

III. Rabindranath Tagore as Writer and Public Intellectual

Rabindranath Tagore occupies a distinctive position in Indian intellectual history. He was not only a Nobel Prize winning poet but also a novelist, essayist, dramatist, composer, and educational thinker. Unlike many writers whose social influence is confined to their texts, Tagore actively intervened in public debates on nationalism, education, and civilization.

Tagore consistently resisted the compartmentalization of knowledge. For him, literature was inseparable from ethics and social responsibility. His writings reveal a deep concern with how modern political ideologies affect human relationships, cultural life, and moral imagination.

This holistic vision is most visibly realized in his educational project at Santiniketan, later institutionalized as Visva Bharati University. Tagore conceived education not as mechanical instruction but as the cultivation of the whole person. Learning took place in close contact with nature, through dialogue, artistic practice, and community life.



This educational philosophy resonates strongly with the principles later articulated in the Indian Knowledge System.

IV. Tagore's Critique of Nationalism: Society Before Politics

Tagore's most explicit engagement with political ideology appears in his lectures collected as *Nationalism* (1917). In "Nationalism in India," Tagore makes the provocative claim that India's real problem is not political but social. By this, he means that political freedom alone cannot resolve deep seated social divisions such as caste hierarchy, communalism, and economic inequality.

Tagore distinguishes between the nation as a cultural community and nationalism as a political machine. He argues that modern nationalism, especially in its Western form, organizes people for economic and political efficiency at the cost of moral and human values. When imported uncritically into the Indian context, such nationalism risks intensifying social fragmentation rather than healing it.

This critique is crucial for understanding Indian literature's engagement with society. Tagore does not reject the desire for freedom but questions the ideological forms through which freedom is pursued. His emphasis on social harmony, ethical responsibility, and human dignity provides a counter narrative to aggressive nationalist discourse.

V. The Home and the World: Ideology in the Intimate Sphere

Tagore's novel *The Home and the World* (Ghare Baire, 1916) offers a literary exploration of the ideas articulated in his nationalism lectures. Set against the backdrop of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, the novel examines how nationalist ideology enters the private sphere of family and personal relationships.

The novel's structure—alternating narrative voices of Nikhil, Bimala, and Sandip—creates a polyphonic text in which competing ideologies confront one another. Nikhil represents ethical restraint and rational humanism, while Sandip embodies a charismatic but manipulative nationalism. Bimala, caught between these figures, becomes a symbol of the nation itself, torn between moral responsibility and emotional fervor.

What makes the novel especially valuable for interdisciplinary analysis is its focus on affect and desire. Nationalism is not presented merely as political doctrine but as an emotional force that reshapes identity and ethical judgment. The novel thus reveals how ideology operates not only in public rhetoric but also in the most intimate spaces of social life.

VI. Civilization, Progress, and the Ethics of Modernity

Tagore's reflections on civilization further deepen his critique of modern ideology. In essays such as "Crisis in Civilization," written toward the end of his life, Tagore reflects on the moral failures of modern civilization despite its technological progress. He



questions the assumption that material advancement necessarily leads to human betterment.

For Tagore, civilization must be grounded in ethical principles that sustain human relationships. He frequently invokes the concept of dharma as a moral force that holds society together, contrasting it with a purely mechanical notion of progress. This understanding aligns closely with the philosophical foundations of the Indian Knowledge System, which emphasizes ethical life and social responsibility alongside intellectual achievement.

Literature, in Tagore's view, plays a vital role in preserving this ethical dimension. Through narrative, metaphor, and aesthetic experience, literature cultivates moral imagination and empathy—qualities essential for a humane civilization.

VII. Education, Santiniketan, and the Indian Knowledge System

Tagore's educational experiment at Santiniketan provides a practical demonstration of his epistemological beliefs. Education there was designed to integrate intellectual inquiry with artistic creativity, ecological awareness, and social engagement. Classes were held in open spaces, encouraging direct contact with nature. Students participated in music, dance, crafts, and self governance, fostering a sense of community and responsibility.

This model exemplifies the principles later articulated in discussions of the Indian Knowledge System. Knowledge is not treated as abstract information but as lived practice. Learning is experiential, dialogic, and ethically grounded. By integrating literature, art, environment, and social service, Tagore's pedagogy anticipated contemporary calls for interdisciplinary and holistic education.

VIII. Beyond Tagore: Indian Literature and Social Critique

While Tagore provides a central case study, Indian literature as a whole demonstrates sustained engagement with social realities. Writers such as Premchand foreground economic exploitation and rural poverty through realist narratives. Mahasweta Devi documents the lives of marginalized tribal communities, exposing the violence of development and state power. Dalit and feminist writers challenge dominant literary canons by asserting lived experience as a source of knowledge and resistance.

These diverse traditions illustrate that Indian literature is a contested field where multiple ideologies intersect. Literature becomes a space for questioning authority, articulating dissent, and imagining alternative social futures. Interdisciplinary analysis allows these texts to be read alongside social history, anthropology, and political theory, enriching our understanding of Indian society.

IX. Indian Literature in Global Interdisciplinary Dialogue

Indian literature's engagement with society positions it as a valuable contributor to global interdisciplinary scholarship. By integrating ethical reflection, social critique,



and cultural imagination, Indian literary traditions challenge narrow disciplinary boundaries. Tagore's vision of a world "where the world makes a home in a single nest" captures the spirit of such dialogue: openness to global exchange without loss of cultural rootedness.

When read through the lens of the Indian Knowledge System, Indian literature offers alternative models of knowledge that emphasize relationality, ethics, and holistic understanding. These models are particularly relevant in contemporary debates on education, sustainability, and social justice.

X. Conclusion

Indian literature, viewed through an interdisciplinary lens, emerges as a dynamic form of social knowledge. Rabindranath Tagore's writings and educational philosophy exemplify how literature can engage deeply with society, ideology, and ethics. His critique of nationalism, reflections on civilization, and holistic approach to education align closely with the principles of the Indian Knowledge System.

By situating Indian literature within the framework of texts, contexts, and ideologies, this paper demonstrates that literature does not merely mirror society but actively participates in shaping social consciousness. In global dialogues on interdisciplinary research, Indian literary traditions offer rich insights into how knowledge, culture, and ethics can be integrated to address the challenges of the modern world. This is exactly what such conferences and rhetorics help us to achieve and need for reevaluating our modern society through the lens of literature.

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