South Asian Literatures

edited and introduced by
Gerhard Stilz and Ellen Dengel-Janic

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SOURCES AND RESOURCES

Edited by

Tobias Döring, Frank Schulze-Engler and Gerhard Stilz

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General Preface

Postcolonial Literatures in English have become a central field of research and study. If studying 'English' was once synonymous with studying literature from Britain, and later with looking into a bipolar literary world comprising Britain and the USA, it is today a critical engagement with a global network of English-language literatures and cultures. This engagement encompasses a broad spectrum of linguistic varieties, including speakers or writers who may use English (or a variety of English) as only one of the options available to them in their specific sociocultural context.

The six volumes of *Postcolonial Literatures in English: Sources and Resources* aim to help students and teachers of literature in exploring the diversity of this global network. Postcolonial Literatures in English are linked through a common history of colonisation and decolonisation, but also through current transnational connections in an increasingly globalized world and by transcultural lifeworlds established by large-scale migration and diasporic populations. At the same time, these literatures are very specific engagements with widely diverging experiences of colonisation and decolonisation, local histories and entangled modernities. The volumes in this series on (1) *South Asian Literatures,* (2) *Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Literatures,* (3) *African Literatures,* (4) *Canadian Literatures,* (5) *Caribbean Literatures,* and (6) *Black and Asian British Literatures* address both the local, regional or national contexts in which these literatures have emerged and the transnational and transcultural connections that link them to each other and the wider 'English-speaking world.'

The volumes bring together fully annotated original historical and critical texts documenting the material, political and cultural conditions from which anglophone writing has emerged and continues to operate in the specific regions. Each volume contains an introduction setting out major trends and developments in the region, provides recommendations for further reading and explores the specificities of the region within a general framework focussing on histories, identities, language, education, movements and genres as well as transcultural perspectives. The book series allows easy access to helpful background knowledge on the broad range of postcolonial literatures, aims at facilitating critical dialogues with literary and intellectual voices from relevant regions, and hopes to generate further insights into the interconnectedness of anglophone literatures around the world.

Tobias Döring, Frank Schulze-Engler and Gerhard Stilz

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Introduction

'South Asia,' the area outlined in the first volume of the new series *Postcolonial Literatures in English: Sources and Resources*, is a territorial concept owed to panoptic expediency rather than cultural unity. It is not just that wide and politically grave differences exist between some of the national units of this region that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. But the largest and most populous of these 'units,' the Republic of India, is in itself as proverbially diverse as any state in this world could possibly be. Beyond these political issues, a diversity of climate, landscape, fauna and flora characterizes this area. Moreover, we encounter such a variety of racial, social and religious divisions practised by its people that a South Asian 'identity' is at best a vague external construct. Comparisons between Europe and South Asia might be appropriate on this account, but one should keep in mind that South Asia (4 million square km, 1.5 billion inhabitants) is less but half the size of Europe while being home to more than twice its population.

This book has been designed to provide European readers with a useful background of contexts and basic information on South Asian English literatures. It is not the first attempt of its kind. Almost thirty years ago, a pioneering forerunner was published, which has now been out of print for a long time.[1] Meanwhile, the task of making a large and increasingly important field of English literature not only accessible and attractive but also meaningful to Western readers has not diminished. In spite of the world-wide success of a growing number of authors of Indian origin during the last thirty years, in spite of the increasing flow of tourists in both directions and in spite of the global economic investments and communication systems that have made distances shrink into a confusing omnipresence, a vague exoticism concerning India still prevails in much of Europe. This is rather reinforced than reduced by the triumphant arrival of Bollywood movies in Western media entertainment. It seemed advisable therefore to renew the effort at a solid introduction to the material and historical contexts which gave and give rise to literatures in English in countries like India where this language has been (and still is) considered alien to the vast majority of inhabitants. Yet English literature in and from India and her neighbouring countries seems to have come to stay. This stubborn and indeed amazingly vital phenomenon is profoundly linked up with two centuries of British Indian colonial history. Surely, other factors have meanwhile confirmed English as a world language. Whether they relativize – or extend into the present – the colonial past may be debatable. But it is undoubtedly still

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[1] Gerhard Stilz, *Grundlagen zur Literatur in englischer Sprache*, vol. 4: *Indien* (München: Fink, 1982). The introduction and the commentaries to this primer were written in German so that its distribution was largely limited to a German-speaking clientele.

the complex dialectic relationship of strategic cultural forces that may be termed 'colonial' – or 'neo-colonial,' in a wider sense – and the myriad of tactical individual decisions that can be seen at work in the centre of the creative process of writing. For the resourceful reader, this creative process – exacting the mystery of how new ideas come into the world – becomes accessible from the aesthetic surface of texts. Yet without the necessary sources and resources, without texts, critical concepts and contextual knowledge, even a sensitive reading remains historically blind.

This is where this book and the series of which it is part, wishes to assist: by way of a general introduction to the field, by historical and critical texts that help to understand the formative conditions and impulses of South Asian literature in English, by brief introductions and annotations to these texts and, finally, by a list of recommended handbooks and further reading.

A few geographical dispositions have shaped South Asia's human history over the ages. On the one hand, the massive barrier of the Himalaya Mountains has prevented major threats from the North and North-East. The Western and Eastern coastlines (the 'Malabar' and 'Coromandel' Coast) offered attractive anchoring places to foreign traders and fugitives but did not raise fears of invasion as long as ships were small and poorly armed. The major entry gate, however, that repeatedly brought demographic change to the Indian subcontinent was the North-Western (Afghan) border region with its passes from Persia and Central Asia. On the other hand, Indian harbours supported a certain amount of Hindu colonization during medieval times in South East Asia and the Indonesian Archipelago.

It is not yet fully known whether the ancient city cultures named 'Indus Valley civilization' (famous for the excavation sites of Harappa and Mohendro Daro) were autochthonous developments that had spread over all of the Indian subcontinent before the Aryans arrived from somewhere in the Eastern Caucasus region (c. 1500 B.C). But it is clear that all later Asian invasions used this gateway: above all the armies of Alexander, the Persians, the Kushans, the Turcic Ghaznavids, and the Mughals. No single dynasty or ruler, however, was ever able to gain full command over all of the Indian subcontinent from North to South. This had three lasting consequences: (1) The Vedic Aryans, though they established the caste system which has come to pervade Indian life even beyond the confines of Hinduism, did not succeed in fully subjecting all native tribes. Their limited genetic impact initially suggested a categorization of castes by colour ('varna'), until its later complexity, based on codes of dietary purity, relegated racial criteria into the background. However, taking refuge in the more remote central and southern areas, large parts of India's population remained 'outcastes' or were despised as 'adivasis' (tribal original inhabitants). (2) Conquerors of Caucasian, Mediterranean, Iranian and Central Asian origin following the Aryans over many centuries left their genetic mark and social influence on the northern parts of India, but in the central and southern parts the invaders' fair-skinned racial characteristics faded out. (3) The invasions from Central Asia since the ninth century, altogether conquests led by Muslim rulers, produced a religious hierarchy with Muslim colonizers and converts concentrated in the Northwest, in East Bengal and in some of the central Indian states like Hyderabad or Bijapur. Yet, powerful Hindu states prospered at all times, increasingly undisturbed towards the South. At the same time, the Hindu-based reform movement of the Jains in Western and Southern India (dating back

to the sixth century B.C.) survived, and the Sikh community in the Punjab (founded in the fifteenth century A.D.) thrived, while Buddhism, which had been dominant in India from the fifth century B.C. to the fourth century A. D., all but disappeared on the mainland under the antagonistic efforts of the medieval Hindu renaissance and the Muslim conversion movements. All these major divisions, however, were dilated by mobility, intermarriage, and wise acts of political and religious tolerance, so that none of the dividing lines can be said to have been permanently rigorous or clear-cut.

The minor immigrant groups of early Oriental Christian, Jewish, Arab and Parsi traders and fugitives, who arrived, mainly along the Western coastline, during the first millennium A.D., formed communities largely tolerated by their Indian environment, but were not encouraged or willing to integrate. Thus, the deeply rifted communal setup in India has been equally characterized by rare but violent outbreaks of discrimination or assertion and by long phases of largely peaceful coexistence. The impact of European colonialism since the Portuguese 'discovery' of the sea route round Africa in the fifteenth century did and could not fundamentally change this state of affairs. Though the strengthening of Christianity under Portuguese, French, Danish, German and, perhaps least emphatically, British missionary societies did produce converts (above all among the Hindu untouchables), the number of Christians in India never came anywhere close to the number of Muslims, the heirs and converts of the previous colonial system.

Having barely mentioned these major factors and results of the complex interplay of earlier invasions and colonizations in the South Asian subcontinent, this introduction will now have to restrict itself to *British India* and its legacy in the South Asian region. The origins of this history can be dated back to the last day of the year 1600, when the British East India Company, founded in 1599, received a Royal Charter from Queen Elizabeth in order to compete with the Dutch East India Company in the lucrative spice trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. During the seventeenth century, the British, like their European competitors (above all the Portuguese, Danish and French) succeeded in establishing trade posts along the Malabar and Coromandel coastlines (notably the 'factories' of Surat 1612, Madras 1640, Bombay 1674 and Calcutta 1690). They negotiated trade privileges with the local rulers and even sent ambassadors to the court of the Mughal overlords in Agra. Such activities account for the growing awareness of an exotic India in British writing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But, as a whole, the British impact on India remained negligible until Robert Clive, who, having gathered some military experience in skirmishes with the French around Madras, established the Company's control over Calcutta, and eventually Bengal, by the cannonade of Plassey (1757). The British traders in Bengal thus officially slipped into the role of 'nabobs' (from 'nawab,' a provincial governor of the Mughal Empire), who adapted their speech and manners to their social environment and became notorious for their 'oriental habits.' Clive's successor, Warren Hastings, the first 'Governor General of India,' was faced with problems of stabilizing the Company's authority on the one hand and disciplining its servants on the other. The Company's activities were legally subordinated to the British government through a 'Board of Control' largely appointed by the monarch.

It took another generation until, in the early nineteenth century, a colonial society settled down in Bengal and the other British 'presidencies' of Bombay and Madras. From 1830 on, this British immigrant community (many of them temporary residents intending to return to Britain after a number of years), was large enough to voice and support the cultural needs requisite for an explicit colonial project. Several notable innovations brought about this change: There was a growing public interest from Britain fed by the accelerated and intensified mail and traffic services between the mother country and the colony. This produced an increasing number of British women and children willing and able to undertake the cumbersome passage to India round the Cape of Good Hope. Thus, a self-supporting, self-defining Anglo-Indian colonial society gradually settled down in the new promising presidencies – on the other side of revolutionary America and half way to pioneering Australia. The nouveau-riche, seigneural families of clerks, traders and administrators displayed their comfortable ways of life in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras with aristocratic ambitions and bourgeois norms of behaviour. They started establishing newspapers, literary magazines and reviews printed in India, and stocked libraries with books from British and American publishers. In absolute numbers, this society of colonizers always remained surprisingly small, especially when compared to the Indian subjects whom they were supposed to govern. Their total figure (including the British troops within the British Indian army) grew from hardly fifty thousand in the year 1830 to almost a quarter of a million in 1911 before decreasing again. At the same time, however, their initiatives and responses in terms of language and educational policy served a cultural reform movement among parts of the Indian elite in the various presidencies, whose leaders valued and desired the Western scientific and literary knowledge available in English. When the Charter Act of 1813 demanded that, out of the Company's profit, a sum of 100,000 rupees should be spent annually on educating "the learned natives of India," a dispute arose as to whether this fund should be better spent on Oriental (i.e., Persian or Sanskrit) or English educational establishments. This famous dispute between the "Orientalists" and the "Anglicists" was settled in 1835 in favour of the Anglicists (headed by T.B. Macaulay) and the Bengal reform movement (led by Raja Rammohun Roy). At the same time, not surprisingly, Indian authors, mainly from Bengal, started writing in English, imitating and adapting European models for their own needs of expression.

During 1784-1857, through a policy of expansion and annexation, the East India Company widened their area of domination and governance over vast areas, extending their control in North-Western direction from Bengal up to the Punjab and Sindh, as well as East into Assam and Burma, similarly from Madras along the Eastern coast and into the central areas of South India and, finally, from Bombay into parts of Maharashtra and the central Deccan areas. British paramountcy reduced the Mughal Empire to a puppet regime, and made the remaining Indian princes fear for their political survival. At the same time, the British colonizers, with missionary zeal and under the discourse of enlightenment, enforced social reforms. They suppressed widespread 'evils' such as *thuggee* (ritual highway robbery) or *sati* (the burning of widows on their husband's funeral stakes), forbade child marriage and encouraged widow remarriage. The minor issue of how to grease rifles and cartridges of the British Indian military (a sensitive case for both Hindus and