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Uneasy Alliances: Visvasahitya, Comparative Literature and National Literature in India

My paper concentrates on uncovering the collusions and collisions that characterize the relationship between the concepts of Rabindranath Tagore's Visvasahitya ('World Literature' in Bangla), National Literature and Comparative Literature as it has been practiced in India.

While the relationship between WL and NL has often been one of opposition and animosity in the European context, it has taken on new and different dimensions in the multilingual Indian context. The study of Indian Literature, as equated with National Literature, is rendered more complex because of the diversity of languages in India, leading scholars like Nabaneeta Dev Sen to suggest that the study of Indian Literature is essentially Comparative Literature in practice.

As Comparative Literature has evolved in India, it has often paradoxically embraced the study of Indian Literature as a core object of study. How have institutions sought to negotiate the claims of NL and WL/VS as they have evolved their curriculum to bring it in tune with their quest for relevance? My paper will try to throw light on this question in its various manifestation through a study of curricula and extra – curricular practices in institutionalized spaces doing Comparative Literature in India. In trying to do so, I shall focus not only on developments within named Comparative Literature departments but also on spaces related to English Studies and Comparative Indian Literature. I shall also try to understand how recent developments related to the study of National Literature within Comparative Literature may be tied up with the development of a 'culture of translation', which is, as I shall argue, a recent trend in India.