Originality in National Literatures

It is a singular and as yet unexplained phenomenon in the psychology of mankind that out of so many magnificent civilisations, so many powerful, cultured & vigorous nations & empires whose names and deeds crowd the pages of history, only a select few have been able to develop a thoroughly original and self-revealing literature. Still fewer have succeeded in maintaining these characteristics from beginning to end of their literary development. There have been instances in which a nation at some period of especial energy and stress of life has for a moment arrived at a perfect self-expression, but with the effort the literary originality of the race seems to exhaust itself. We have the picture of an age, not the spiritual and mental history of a nation. Such a period of partial self-revelation we find in the flowering of Italian literature; in the Divine Comedy, the Decameron, the works of Petrarch, Machiavelli, Cellini, Castiglione, mediaeval Italy lives before our eyes for all time; but the rest of Italian prose and poetry is mere literature and nothing more. Again when we have seen the romantic spirit of Spain, its pride, punctilious sense of honour, courage, cruelty, intrigue, passion and the humour & pathos of its decline mirrored in the work of Calderon & Cervantes we seem to have exhausted all that need interest the student of humanity in Spanish literature. Similar instances offer themselves in the Sagas of the Scandinavian peoples and Germany’s Nibelungenlied, in the extraordinary picture of Mahomedan civilisation of which the Thousand & One Nights are the setting. On the other hand there are literatures of high quality and world-wide interest which are yet almost purely derivative in their character and hardly succeed in rendering the national spirit to us at all, so overloaded are they with foreign material, with things learned rather than experienced; such are the American literature, the modern German literature. Instances there
are again of the nation freeing itself from foreign domination in one or two kinds of writing which partially reflect its inner mind and life, while the rest of its literature remains derivative and secondhand in its every fibre. We get to the heart of Roman life and character in Roman Satires, the annalistic histories of Livy & Tacitus, the Letters of Cicero or Pliny, but in the more splendid & ambitious portions of Latin literature we get only the half Greek dress in which the Roman mind learned to disguise itself. Let us suppose that all historical documents, archives, records were destroyed or disappeared in the process of Time and the catastrophes of civilisation, and only the pure literature survived. Of how many nations should we have the very life, heart & mind, the whole picture of its life & civilisation and the story of its development adequately revealed in its best writing? Three European nations would survive immortally before the eyes of posterity, the ancient Greeks, the modern English and French, and two Asiatic nations, the Chinese & the Hindus, — no others.

Of all these the Hindus have revealed themselves the most perfectly, continuously and on the most colossal scale, precisely because they have been the most indomitably original in the form & matter of their literature. The Vedas, Upanishads & Puranas are unique in their kind; the great Epics in their form and type of art stand apart in the epic literature of the world, the old Sanscrit drama has its affinities with a dramatic species which developed itself in Europe more than a thousand years later, and the literary epic follows laws of form and canons of art which are purely indigenous. And this immense body of firstrate work has left us so intimate & complete a revelation of national life & history, that the absence of pure historical writings becomes a subject of merely conventional regret. The same intense originality and depth of self-expression are continued after the decline of the classical language in the national literatures of Maharashtra, Bengal & the Hindi-speaking North.