

Engaging with the Oral: Translating Lepcha and Tamang Traditions

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1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to share some of our experiences with the rich and varied oral traditions of the Darjeeling hills and Dooars of West Bengal. It is formulated in the specific context of the involvement of the Centre for Translation of Indian Literatures (CENTIL), a small centre at Jadavpur University, in trying to disseminate the cultures of the region to a larger audience/readership through translation.

For decades, literary studies in India have been confined to the study of printed, and indeed, canonical literature, that too along the axis of a single language. The study of literature has traditionally seemed to mean the study of the masterpieces of either English, or Bangla, or Hindi, or Tamil literature in isolation. In India at least, we have been indulging in a pedagogy that treats the study of English Literature, Bangla sahitya, Hindi sahitya as watertight categories, each divorced from the other, and each focusing almost exclusively on the culture of print. Our premise is that no one literature develops in isolation, that every literature is what it is because of its interaction with other literatures, that print is only one medium in which the cultural creativity of our species finds expression—the last, being particularly true of a country like India which has such a rich and ubiquitous oral tradition. The need to look beyond this model is

Route to Oral Literature : Compilation of proceedings of the Seminar on Route to Oral Literature, organised by Sahitya Akademi in 2016 at Gangtok, edited by Anvita Abbi, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (2018)
Rs. 225

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Anvita Abbi, (b. 1949) : Editor

Genre : Seminar papers

Published by Sahitya Akademi

Unwritten Languages Series : 07

First Published : 2018

ISBN : 978-93-88468-02-2

₹ 225

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Cover painting : Rajeev Kumar

Pagesetting by Quick Offset, Delhi-110032

Printed by Vikas Computer and Printers, Delhi-110032

Website: <http://www.sahitya-akademi.gov.in>
