

Mediating Literature: Little Magazines and the Shift from Print to Digital Platforms

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ABSTRACT

The literary journals, or as they are popularly known, ‘little magazines’, are special-interest publications that address the literary practices in the literary world. Especially in the modern history of world literature, they have played a pivotal role by bringing writers together to prompt their literary experiments. In the early 19th century, European languages had some of the greatest little magazines that promoted the worldviews of young writers. This was also reflected in several Indian languages, providing an opportunity to express new sensibilities. These non-commercial, special-interest publications, including in English and other Indian languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Marathi, and Telugu, have expressed afresh literary and cultural ideas. However, in recent times, these publications are gradually losing their readership, and younger writers in different Indian languages are finding other alternative avenues like digital literary magazines, e-books, portals, online groups, and web journals that accept their writings. In this preliminary paper, an effort is made to explore the legacy of little magazines and the reasons for their decline.

Keywords: Little Magazines, Modernism, Digital Literary Sphere

INTRODUCTION

The little magazines and literary journals have created a niche for themselves in the long tradition of world literature. These publications are basically “non-commercial enterprises funded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing the experimental works or radical opinion of untried, unpopular or under-represented writers” (Churchill and McKible, 2007).

In the modern history of Western literature, little magazines have played a pivotal role by bringing writers together to express their unconventional and new sensibilities in art and literature. Beginning in the United States, England, and France in the 19th century, the little magazines continued to flourish in the 20th century. Apart from nurturing the worldviews of young writers and critics such as Symbolists, the journals began with the purpose of publishing early literary works that had some artistic merit and did not fit into the frame of commercial magazines. For instance, *The Dial* (1840), *The Masses* (1911), *Poetry* (1912), *Little Review* (1914), *The New Freewoman* (1913), and *The Liberator* (1918) provided a small space for many writers, artists, and activists to meet and test out a seemingly limitless number of new ideas. Early writings of modernist writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein appeared in the magazines mentioned above. These magazines acted as socio-political and literary forums for writers of different genders, races,

and nationalities. Also, they provided a much-needed platform for talented, budding writers and poets, many of whom later became acclaimed literary personalities. American little magazines like the *Double Dealer* (1921–26) and the *Fugitive* (1922–25) printed some of the early work of famous writers such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, poets like Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom, apart from producing brilliant editors and literary figures.

Legacy of Little Magazines

In India, in several Indian languages, little magazines grew vigorously during the 1950s–1970s. And scholars have rightly pointed out that these decades as the golden age of magazine culture. In India, little magazines gave expression to the Dalit struggle in Maharashtra, while in West Bengal, they were associated with a series of noteworthy literary and radical political movements. Several little magazines in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu expressed Marxist political and cultural ideas. As Abu Mounir observes that in West Bengal, little magazines contributed to significant literary movements from the time of *Sabujpatra*, considered the first Bengali little magazine, mentored by Rabindranath Tagore. “*Sabujpatra* (1914–27) was followed by *Kallol* (1923–35), a magazine that threw a challenge to conventional literary forms and social convictions. *Porichoy*, perhaps the longest-surviving Bengali little magazine, was established in 1932 by poet Sudhindranath Dutta, a close associate of Tagore. Dutta’s intention was to introduce modernist trends in poetry and literature to the literary circle in Bengal. Both *Kallol* and *Porichoy* made an indispensable contribution to Bengali literature by introducing several unknown writers and poets who went on to become stalwarts of Bengali literature and culture” (The Voices of Creative Independence, 2022). In Hindi literary tradition, as Francesca Orsini in her recent work *The Post-Colonial Magazine Archive, South Asia* observes that “magazines loom large as the main platform for literature, where poets and fiction writers found readers and recognition and critics debated aesthetics and ideology”.



Image.1. Cover-page images of literary magazines.

With the influence of modernist ideas in literature, even Hindi writers started editing little magazines in the early 1950s. Devoted themselves exclusively to stories, Hindi

magazines initially began to publish with titles like ‘Juicy Stories’ and ‘Entertaining Stories’ (RasīlīKahāniyān, Manohar Kahāniyān), which included mostly thrilling, melodramatic, or funny stories and were geared towards ‘timepass’ reading, as on train journeys. But publications such as Hans (founded in 1930 by Munshi Premchand), Dharmyug (started by Times of India Group in 1949) others were more serious and literary, like Kahānī (edited by Premchand’s son Shripat Rai with Bhairavprasad Gupta and Shyamu Sanyasi, 1954), NāīKahāniyān (New Stories) (1959, ed. Bhairavprasad Gupta) and Sārikā (1960, ed. Chandragupta Vidyalankar and later Kamleshwar). Such diversification did not exclude overlaps, and it was not unusual to find stories by writers like Manto or Rajendra Yadav, or even Dostoevsky, packaged as thrilling ‘timepass’ reading (Francesca Orsini, 2022). The Telugu language too had some magazines that boosted literary and political activism. For instance, Jwala (started by Muddukrishna in 1935) turned out to be a forum for young Telugu writers who later emerged as known poets in the language. Srirangam Srinivasa Rao, popularly known as Sri Sri, published his early writings in Jwala. In the early 1980s, Nalupu (Black), Edureeta, and EkaLavya were mostly publishing writings of revolutionary young poets who were immensely influenced by Marxism and Ambedkarism.

In Tamil, though there are some publications such as AnandhaVikatan (a satirical magazine by PudhoorV aidyanadhaiyar in 1926 later purchased by SS Vasana), Kalaimagal (started in 1932 and edited by Swaminathalyer), another Tamil literary magazine which have completed more than nine decades, have been providing space for many great Tamil writers such as Kalki Krishnamurthy P.Srinivasan (P.SRI), Akilan, Anut-thama, Kamala Sadagopan, and Laxmi Rajaratnam, Devan, Sujatha Rangarajan, Gnani, Madhan, Kalaimani Kothamangalam Subbu and Nadodi, to name a few. Kalki - the magazine (established by Kalki Krishnamurthy in 1941) is also known for its publication of historic novels and literary criticism. Some of the Dalit magazines, including ‘Puthiya Kodangi’, and ‘Dalit Murasu too gave importance to arts, literature, and culture, besides politics.

The Kannada language had a rich history of little magazines. Beginning in the early 20th century, they continued to shape the different phases of Kannada literature, art, and culture. ShivramaKaranta, a known writer, started a magazine titled Vasantha in 1924. It published short stories, poems, and articles on literature and art. In 1928, Kathavali (by A N Krishnarao, popularly known as ANAKRU) published writings of Navodaya (renaissance) writers. To give shape to the modernist literary movement in Kannada, the major poet of the Navya literary movement, Gopala Krishna Adiga, started a publication called Sakshi in 1962. It defined the Navya poetics and published modernist writings. The early writings of Chandrashekhar Patil, Poornachandra Tejaswi, P. Lankesh (later edited by LankeshPatrike in 1980), and other important writers appeared in this magazine. In 1964, Sankramana was started by a group of writers from Northern Karnataka, namely Chandrashekhar Patil, GiraddiGovindaraju, and Siddalinga Pattanashetty. Later, Patil owned and edited this magazine till 2019. The magazine began with a declaration that it would not be a mouthpiece of any faction or ideological group.

It has space for different ideological presentations. Ironically, in the later decades, Sankramana has turned to be a forum for Bandaya Sahitya –protest literature in Kannada. In 1982, Rujuvathu, another important little magazine, was started by U.R Anantamurthy, and it claimed that it was launched for ‘afresh creative experiments, in search of a new path and for finding a socio-cultural context’. No doubt, it kept literary discussions active for some time. Shudra (1974, by Shudra Srinivas), Gandhi Bazaar (1978), Anveshane (1985), Sanchaya (1987), and Abhinava (1994), Deshakaala (2005) equally played a pivotal role and gave a space for young writers.

In Marathi, due to the ideological influence of Ambedkar and Marks, many young writers launched their own publications. In 1954, Dilip Chitre, Ramesh Samarth, and Arun Kolatkar started a little magazine, Shabda and thereby contributed to the origin of the little magazine movement in Maharashtra. Little magazines like Shabda and Quest (in English, edited by Nissim Ezekiel, 1954–57) attempted to ignite new poetics in Bombay. Along with poets and writers like Bhalchandra Nemade and Ashok Shahane, Chitre played a major role in laying a solid foundation for literary creation within Maharashtra. In 1968, Gangadhar Pantawane started publishing Asmitadarsh, aiming to give a voice and expression to the sensibilities of the Dalit community. It gave ample space to articulate the cultural aspirations and conflicts of the Dalits.

Preetlari - a progressive Punjabi literary magazine has completed more than eight decades of its publication. It was started in the year 1933 by Gurbax Singh, a US-returned civil engineer year1933. The best talents of the time - film actor Balraj Sahni, fiction writers Upendra Nath Ashq and Kartar Singh Duggal, playwright Balwant Gargi and poets Mohan Singh and SahirLudhianvi - were associated with it. Preetlari has been a front-runner in the `little magazine movement of alternative publishing in Punjab. Today, over 100 different `little magazines` are printed across the state, publishing poetry, fiction, and stories on social issues in Punjabi. Amrita Pritam and Imroz started a monthly magazine called Nagmani in 1966. The journal was considered an important document of the socio-cultural history of Punjab that recorded societal change at every step. Akhar (1977) is one of the most prominent Punjabi literary journals that was started by the noted Punjabi poet, late Parminderjit. This bi-monthly magazine featured poetry, short stories, and social commentary by prominent writers and literary figures. Kahani Punjab (2006) is another notable magazine that has earned a name and recognition among the readers of Punjabi literature for its quality matter in the field of Punjabi literature, culture, and criticism.

Keeping the development of communities, a few magazines started publishing in the Malayalam language in the early years of the 20th century. Vivekodayam (1904) was started with Kumaran Asan as its editor. Soon, the journal gained vast popularity, and it served as a forum for Asan’s literary pursuits. SadhujanaParipalini- (1914), a journal of Sadhu Jana ParipalanaSangham, a pro-Dalit organisation, was launched by Ayyankali. ChempamtharaKalichothi Karuppan was the first editor of this periodical, and it was brought out by the Dalit community. In Malayalam, however, little magazines as

important forums of literary discussions emerged in the early 1950s. As TikiRajwi (A peep into the history of little magazines in Malayalam, Indian Express, 28th June 2018) points out that in Malayalam, “Navasahithi edited by M V Devan and published from Chennai - then Madras - was the first. It was followed by Gopuram (1957), published in Thiruvananthapuram in 1957. Many big names like Satchidanandan, A Ayyappan, AyyappaPanicker, and C J Thomas were associated with them”. They published content including short stories, thought-provoking articles, poetry, and bold discussions on the parallel cinema of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, and others. In the later decades, these magazines hosted heated ideological debates against the institutionalised Left outfits. For instance, a few other publications such as Kerala Kavitha (1968, edited by AyyappaPanicker), Jwala, Aksharam, and Samkramanam, Prasakthi, Samasya, Prerana, Rasana (started during 1970s) had played a major role in promoting alternative thoughts and ideas in the Malayalam literary world.

To evaluate the legacy of these publications, put in Amit Chaudhuri’s phrase, “these little magazines were sites of intense ‘literary activism’: an activism by editors on behalf of literature to champion new writers and encourage readers’ tastes, but also a constant critical interrogation on the value and function of literature” (Francesca Orsini, 2022). Despite their ephemeral nature—particularly in Hindi and in a few other Indian languages, a context where old books and periodicals tend to be sold in bulk as scrap paper—magazines embody, and capture for us eager after readers, a lively community of readers and writers. Most of these magazines seemed not only to accelerate unorthodox ideas but also, in large part, became the centre of regional modernism that the young generation was busy shaping the cultural and political landscapes in the mid-twentieth century.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As part of current study, some related scholarly works have been referred to understand the legacy of print literary magazines and their shift from the traditional form to digital. Biswajit Adhikary's 2016 study looks at how little magazines are really worthy for learning about the people, culture, and old stories of rural Bengal. Essay titled “Little Magazine: The Prime Space for Study of Sociology, Anthropology and Folklore of Rural Bengal” illuminates that these regional magazines record local traditions, social habits, and country life. This makes them great resources for researchers to dig into the daily culture, beliefs, and art from Bengal's villages.

In her important work titled ‘Bombay Modern’, Anjali Nerlekar takes a fresh look at Arun Kolatkar's (renowned Marathi poet who edited very important literary magazines) poems. It puts poetry, which usually isn't a main focus in studies about Indian modernism or post-colonialism, right in the middle of argument. Nerlekar carefully reads Kolatkar's work, looking at both languages he wrote in and the physical aspects of his writing. She shows how his poetry creates a strong, local feeling that pushes back against the idea of one dominant language in India after the 1960s, as he wrote in both English and Marathi. By focusing on Bombay and that specific time (sathottari period), the book avoids

making modernism seem like a one-size-fits-all idea. Instead, it uncovers a different kind of modernism, one that's very local but also fleeting. Bombay Modern is important for studies on modernism and post-colonialism. It also proves how powerful poetry can be in expressing local ideas in a world where literature is becoming more global.

Simone Murrays work investigates the ways that the internet transforms literature. She merges the examination of publishing, marketing, and the culture of online readers into the notion of the digital literary sphere. Through this concept, Murray delves into authors online work performances, the digital marketing of books, and the engagement of communities in reading and literary events. Her cross, disciplinary method brings together the history of the book, media studies, and digital culture. She illustrates that technology at one point empowers, pressures, and also commodifies literary practices. At the same time, the artist in the online literary world, commerce, and community are highlighted as being interwoven in a complex manner. Apart from the above-mentioned works, books such as 'Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches' by Churchill and McKible (2016) and 'Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism' by White (2013), and 'Cultural imperialism or vernacular modernity? Hindi newspapers in a globalizing India' by TabrezeAhamd were also referenced.

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative, interdisciplinary, and broadly exploratory, featuring theoretical frameworks and methodologies from literary studies, cultural studies, and media studies in order to explore the historical role, ideological aspects, and current changes of little magazines and literary journals in India. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature and combines a historical study with a critical evaluation. The research is extensively based on secondary literature such as academic books, journal articles, various edited collections, newspaper reports, archival materials, and critical essays on little magazines, regional literatures, and digital literary culture. The works of Churchill and McKible, Francesca Orsini, Amit Chaudhuri, Simone Murray, and Tabrez Ahmad provide the major theoretical content of the analysis. Besides this, the analysis is also grounded on the histories of particular magazines from the languages of India like Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, and English.

Giving equal attention to differences as well as commonalities, a comparative schema is taken up to illustrate how little magazines in various linguistic areas changed over time and the kind of cultural, political, and ideological impacts that each region generated. Furthermore, the research also implements thematic analysis as one of its methods to investigate major issues such as the role of literature in activism, vernacular modernity, caste and political movements, economics of readership, and the contradiction between cultural and economic value systems.

In covering the shift from print to digital media, this article critically reviews a few recent digitally published literary magazines and web journals. On the whole, this approach allows for a sophisticated appreciation of little magazines as lively cultural

institutions that are constantly in dialogue with tradition, modernity, and the introduction of technological changes in the Indian literary milieu.

Theoretical Framework: Simone Murray's Digital Literary Sphere

Simone Murray's "digital literary sphere" is a set of ideas which helps one comprehend how literary culture today is impacted by the internet. Among other things, she combines a production-oriented approach and a reader, centered perspective. That is, she looks not only at the structures of book publishing and marketing but also at the experiences of readers on the internet. The framework depicts literature as part of a network of the production, distribution, and consumption of literary works and shows how digital platforms influence each of these stages. Starting with literary works that are either accepted as literature or aspiring to be one, Murray limits her study to the online construction and negotiation of literary value while at the same time incorporating the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the problem into her one and only model, accordingly.

Cultural values v/s Economic values

However, literary scholars and media experts express that the success of the little magazines completely depends on the three important formulas, such as the writer is unknown and therefore not a good risk; the work itself is unconventional or experimental in form; or it violates one of several popular notions of moral, social, or aesthetic behaviour. In the Indian context, even if the little magazines invite the writings from renowned authors and take the risk of publishing the works of acclaimed writers or do not always try to break the popular notions of societal norms and morals but they still struggle to find the required subscribers.

Factors for the fading away of little magazines from the regional literary worlds cannot be found merely in the circulation techniques of the publications. As it takes place in the case of commercial or general interest magazines, readership surveys determine the fate of their existence; for literary and little magazines, the formula cannot be applied, as they do not follow the revenue model of conventional print publications. For this, we need to look at the region-specific cultural practices and literary trends that are fundamental to the survival of little magazines. Indeed, the political and ideological leanings of the editorial team do matter in the success of a little magazine. Because these journals, if one can use the idea of 'vernacular modernity' of Tabrez Ahmad (2010), critically appropriate the Western modernity that is reproduced in indigenous form. Though they try to be sensitive towards local cultural values and provide hybrid content, they fail to adopt technological innovation, which is very crucial for any 'cultural product'.

Literary journals do not lose their shine just because they are not listed in the audit reports of circulation agencies. Moreover, these regional magazines rarely publish advertisements as they do not completely depend on the ad revenue and their 'consumers' do not belong to the 'general readers'. They fall into the category of 'special

interest magazines', which are mainly run based on the readers' subscription money. The buying capacity of these 'special interest readers' is a decisive factor for the survival of little publications. For instance, the Kannada little magazine Sakshi (edited by Gopala Krishna Adiga) was successfully published for more than a decade, not just because the magazine was promoting modernist sensibilities in Kannada literature, but also the fact that its readers/subscribers were mostly coming from an English literature background and teaching at universities and colleges.

Apart from encouraging young writers, it is equally important to look at the fact that the source of pastime and entertainment is also changing with the entry of new technology. Thus, there is always a dwindling number of readers willing to subscribe to the little magazines. Though the number of poetry collections, short story writers, and novelists is flourishing in different regional languages still publishers often complain that they do not find readers. Indeed, it is ironic that on the one hand, the number of writers is increasing, and readers is decreasing.

For T.S. Goravar, the editor of Sangaata, a monthly magazine published in the Kannada language, it is the quality of content that makes all the difference. "There may be commercial publishers who often create hype and try to double the readership just to claim the readership, but ultimately the readers will decide the fate of a publication", he adds. He agrees that there are fewer readers for poetry and thus it does not sell as fast as short stories and novels do. Therefore, publishers do not wish to take the risk of publishing poetry. Goravar also started a publishing house under Sangaata and published the works of new-generation writers.

The scene of the English literary magazine world is completely different, as it has larger consumers than the vernacular print market. Magazines such as 'Indian Literature' (SahityaAkademi, 1957), Biblio (1995), The Indian Quarterly (2000), and Contemporary Literary Review (2010) are considered reputed literary magazines in the English language which have familiar with having a familiar reader base.

Does 'digital literary sphere' end 'print reading public'?

Despite a gradual decrease in the number of print magazines and literary forums, clubs, and circles, young writers in different Indian languages had found other alternative avenues. In India, with the coming of internet services in the late 1990s, there emerged a new kind of digital communication technologies, about which scholars had expressed their concerns over its impact on the traditional print culture. "Digital literary sphere' as Simone Murray (2018) defines it, is 'an evolving landscape of literary culture wherein readers engage with their favourite works and authors through digital platforms" (p.8). Further, Murray observes that "for the Internet offers an abundance of what in earlier print- and broadcast-dominated eras was collectively termed "book talk": book review websites, self-cataloguing library networks, author home pages, publishers' portals, online book retailers, archived writers' festival panel sessions, and recorded celebrity

author readings” (p.1). Hence, one can argue that in the larger Habermasian idea of ‘public sphere’ (in the context of physical meeting spaces and political discussions), ‘print’ and ‘digital’ as two distinct public organs can mutually blend with each other and reshape the literary public.

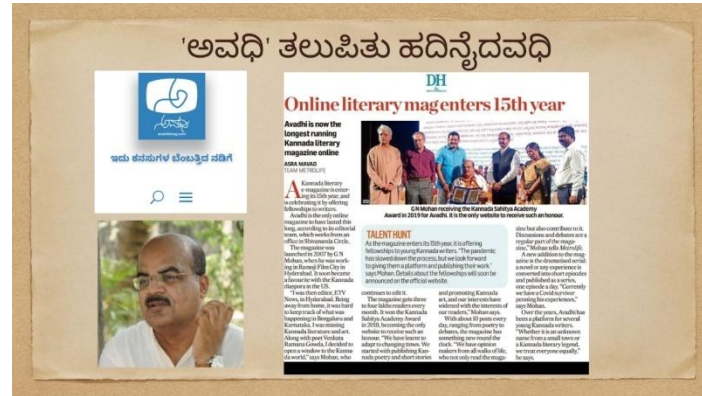


Image.2 Avadhi, Kannada longest running online literary magazine launched in 2007 by G.N Mohan

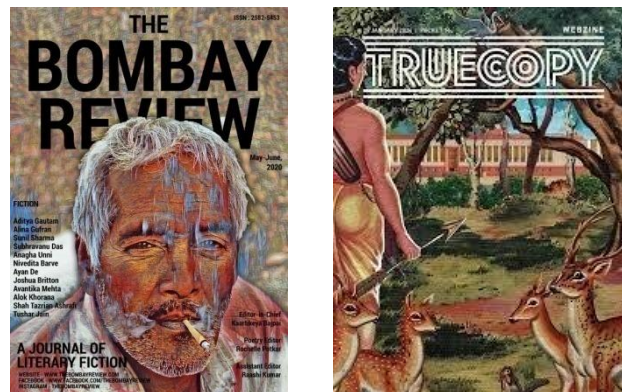


Image.3 Cover designs of The Bombay Review and Truecopy

For instance, there are considerable digital literary magazines, e-books, portals, online groups, and web journals that accept the writings of the young generation. In an article titled A world without poetry? According to Swati Daftuar, (published in The Hindu dated May 16, 2016), it is observed that the internet has opened up new platforms for younger generations. And they have their strategies — online groups, e-books, and web journals which are wonderfully creating listeners for poetry. For example, one of the young writers responded to Swati that “Open-mic gatherings like Delhi and Mumbai’s Caferati has poets reciting their work to attentive, appreciative audiences, which suggests that perhaps the idea of a lack of consumers might be slightly premature”. In recent times, there are several online independent literary journals that publish poetry, criticism, short stories, and reviews in different Indian languages. In Malayalam True Copy (started in 2019), a Webzine, is the first weekly that publish in-depth discourses in art, literature, and culture. It claims that it is committed to “...the environment demands a futuristic

reading of politics, science, art, literature, culture, and life itself” and its endeavour is to customise these themes as the content of a new reading. Similarly, The Cue is another Malayalam e-magazine that works towards foregrounding the stories that are left out or marginalised from the larger mainstream media. Similar efforts were also made in other Indian languages such as Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, and Marathi. Avadhi, a Kannada literary e-magazine launched in 2007, has successfully completed its fifteen years, and they have learned to adapt to changing times and started publishing Kannada poetry and short stories and promoting Kannada art and literature. It also started a publishing house, Bahuroopi and has published some notable literary works. The success of these digital media platforms, as Murray points out that the ‘author is far from dead in the digital age; rather, authors are held to a performance of identity and intimacy with reading publics online’. (p.26)

CONCLUSION

Despite new sensibilities and strong voices entering the literature, the reputed English publishing houses have turned so exclusivist about publishing the works of budding writers and literary genres. Hence, promising younger generation writers have found their way to get their works published. With print publications losing their readers and the rise of digital platforms and e-magazines, young writers writing in the English language are trying to grab the opportunities that these new media spaces have created.

In a report A host of new digital literary magazines are giving a boost to India’s literary magazine culture by Manoj Sharma and published in the Hindustan Times on 15th January 2017, it has been observed that in different metropolitan cities of India, there are likeminded young writers who have started editing literary journals such The Bombay Review, The Bangalore Review, The Madras Mag and Mithila Review are exceptionally doing well by hosting new digital ventures. They publish high-quality work – art, essays, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry – merging genres, forms, and realities. In the report, Suhail Rasheed-the co-founder of The Bangalore Review, adds that it is “giving a space to new voices that may or may not have found literary validation elsewhere — those often marginalised in literary conversations”. Muse India, The Indian Quarterly, Out of Print, Helter Skelter, The Literary Mirror, and the Spark are notable e-magazines that are absolutely dedicated to publishing different forms of literature. It is possible mainly because of communicative modes such as instant interactivity, diverse content, hyperlinking, which digital technology is facilitating in the digital literary sphere, which is not available to traditional print culture.

Interestingly, writers from different Indian languages believe that the digital literary magazines are levelling the playing field, wherein anybody can produce serious and insightful work. Even though digital literary magazines are providing an autonomous space for many writers and artists who are playing a big role in the contemporary literary domain and becoming part of regional literary traditions in Indian languages, unfortunately, they remain a relatively neglected area of academic studies.

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