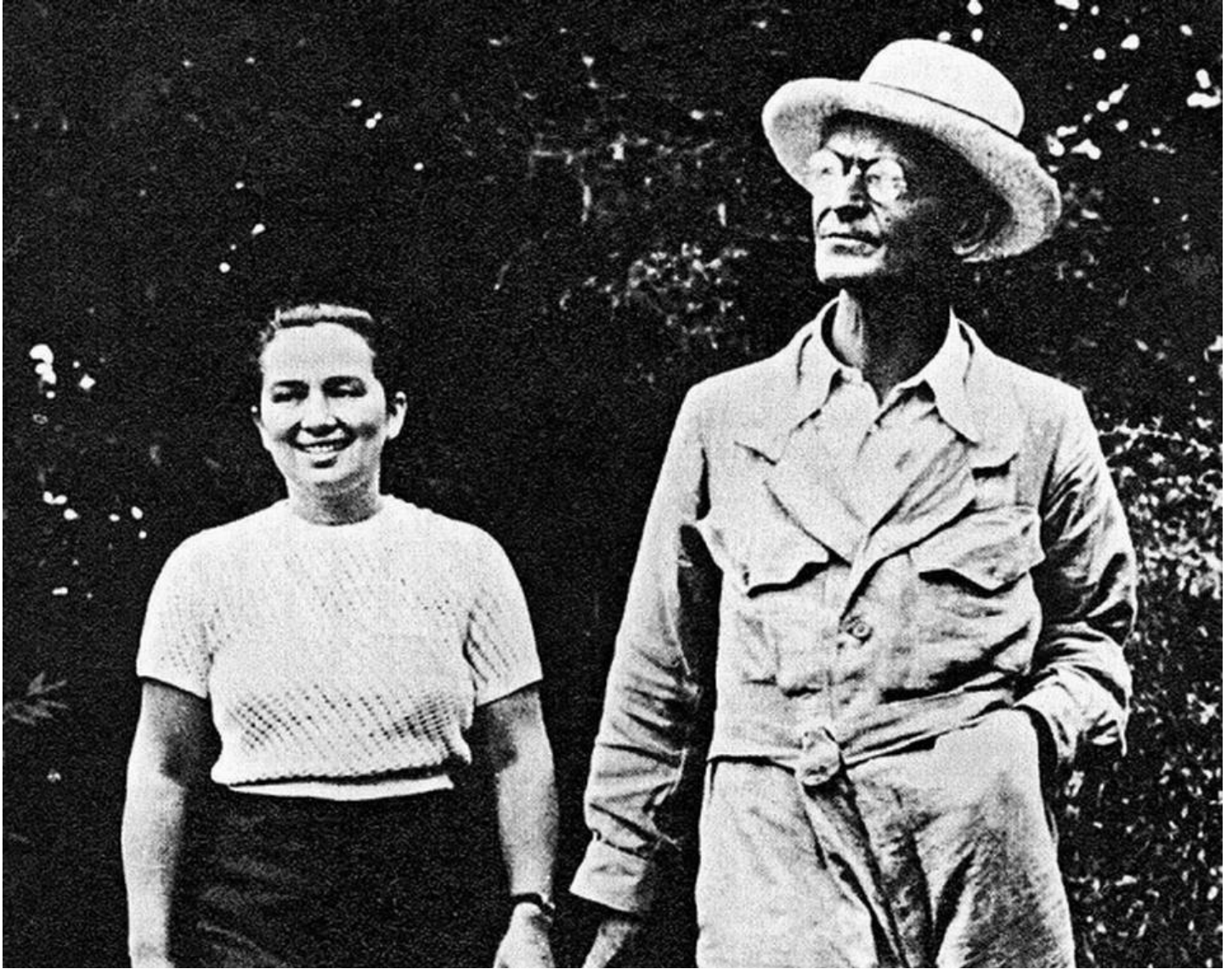


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## An Indian tale



**Reji Varghese**

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**On Hermann Hesse's birth anniversary, Reji Varghese explores the Nobel Laureate's connection with India and how the counter culture, hippie movement of the 60s brought his work to the mainstream.**

*"While words of learned length and thundering sound*

*Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around..."*

These lines from Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village*, applied to the gathering at 146, Mathikarai, Bangalore in 1985, that I was part of, which discussed books, literature and poems. The only reason I was in that dingy house that reeked of rum and stale cigarettes was because I played in the college band and some of my band mates who lived in that house, were part of the literary group that met often to discuss and debate authors.

I must admit, I did try borrowing and reading a few of the books discussed, but the only thing these books helped in was to induce a deep sleep in me. I never got past the first few pages of any of these books.

All that changed one summer holiday in Kottayam, when I had run through all the Louis L'Amour in my cousin's neatly arranged bookshelf. I chanced upon an author who was discussed at that august gathering in Mathikarai. I picked the book up and decided to give it a shot. It was alluringly slim and had a distinctly Indian name – *Siddhartha*.

When I started reading, I found it quite simply written with not much of the bluster and thunder that I expected. This book induced curiosity rather than sleep. I sat through the afternoon and late into the night and finished the book on the same day. The story was of a Brahmin's pursuit of enlightenment and was set in India around the time of the Buddha. There are very few books that can change the way you think, and for me, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* was one of them.

Hesse's books were inspired by India and strongly influenced by the inward-looking philosophy of Buddhism and theosophy. His India connect was deep. Hesse's grandfather Hermann Gundert was a missionary who lived for many years in Tellichery in Kerala. Gundert compiled a Malayalam-English dictionary, a book on Malayalam grammar (*Malayala Bhasha Vyakaranam*), and 11 other books in Malayalam. To this day, he is highly regarded amongst the foremost linguistic scholars in Kerala and there's even a statue of Gundert that stands near the stadium in Tellichery. Hesse himself travelled extensively in India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and much of the terrain depicted in *Siddhartha* comes from a man who has walked the path he has written about.

Two decades after his Nobel Prize, Hermann Hesse's books made it to the mainstream, thanks to the counter culture, hippie movement of the 60s and 70s. Books such as *Siddhartha*, *Journey to the East*, *Narcissus and Goldmund* were about soul searching and enlightenment: popular themes of the Flower Power and Woodstock generation. Two of the most influential figures of the counter culture movement – Colin Wilson and Timothy Leary – wrote passionately about his work and Hesse who was relatively unheard of in the U.S., before the 60s, became a bestseller, ironically after his death.

The literary world celebrates the 138th birth anniversary of Herman Hesse today. There's a certain simplicity and truth in his writings that is plain to even an 'amazed gazing rustic'. His words are not of 'learned length' nor are they 'thunderous', but deeply philosophical,

lyrical, poetic and yet simply written. It's quite difficult to achieve all of these at the same time, but Hesse manages it with eloquent ease.

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