

THE LANGUAGE CONFLICTS: THE POLITICS AND HOSTILITIES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND THE REGIONAL LANGUAGES IN INDIA

A brief aside. I belong to that dubious and endangered species called the bilingual writer. We are regarded as the half breeds and the hybrids, the ones who are caught between two civilizations and cultures and fall in the abyss between. Neither this nor that, neither here nor there, the minority who don't belong anywhere.

I am considered a turncoat by Maharashtrians since they think that I betrayed my mother tongue when I switched to writing in English. And by the *bhadralok* or the sophisticates of Oxbridge and their cousins in Stanford and Harvard as something akin to the nouveau riche, the nouveau English, the ones who can't get their v's and w's straight.

As you are about to discover, I take my role as outsider and traitor to both the languages seriously. Very seriously.

I will start by raking up some hoary history. The year is 1997, the year when *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* was published and for which Salman Rushdie wrote an introduction. Here's a quote from it: "The prose writing — both fiction and non-fiction — created in this period (that's in the last fifty years since Independence) by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen recognised languages of India, the so-called "vernacular languages" during the same time, and indeed this new, and still burgeoning Indo-Anglian literature represents perhaps the most comprehensive contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (Rushdie, West, 1997, 50). Not satisfied with this lofty pronouncement from high, Rushdie immediately reinforced it with an uncharacteristically lazy statement "The true Indian literature of the post-colonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind" (Rushdie, West, 1997, 50). The "true" Indian literature... indeed. That sounds almost evangelical in its certitude. Something like the true faith of the believer, you have to take it on faith. The Empire is dead. Long live the Empire.

Barring Urdu, it is doubtful if Rushdie knows any other Indian languages. As he himself admits, he has had to base his “unexpected and profoundly ironic conclusion” on a reading of translations from the regional languages. Again as he acknowledges, the quality of translations is often inadequate. The sad fact is there is no tradition of translations worth the name either from one vernacular language to another or into English. Eleven years after Rushdie wrote his introduction, translation is still a very, very occasional activity on the subcontinent, which means even exceptional and memorable writing in regional languages doesn’t get translated.

The Times of India every now and then banner headlines that it is not merely India’s leading newspaper but the largest-selling broadsheet in the world. The *Times* is far too full of its own dubious success and mired in its belief that journalism is nothing but the goo which fills the interstices between corporate plugging and product endorsements and so no longer has a books page. But even when for short periods it did have a books page during the nineties and in the new millennium, its policy was to review books by foreign authors alone and nobody else. The only time an Indian writer found a place in its book section was when he was published abroad, and by abroad the *Times* meant the U.S. of A. and the U.K. *The Asian Age* and other newspapers in India took their cue from the *Times* and eschewed reviewing English fiction written by Indian writers except when some foreign publisher brought it out. Salman Rushdie too practised this kind of apartheid even within the community of Indian authors writing in English. Look at his selections in the Vintage anthology, and never mind how mediocre or worse some of them are, it’s clear that if you were not published in the U.K. and U.S.A., you weren’t eligible.

Many Indian critics believe that Rushdie’s “profoundly ironic conclusion” stems from his profound ignorance. But his risible grandstanding deserved only one response. We should have ignored him. He was far too intelligent an author to be indulging in this kind of mischievous nonsense except to get a rise out of us and to draw attention to himself. Unfortunately most “regional” writers rose to the bait.

Oddly enough his use of the words “the true Indian literature” reminds one of the language used by “bhasha” or regional language authors when they talk of authentic Indian writing. When *Outlook* magazine did a cover story on “How Indian is Indian Writing in English” in its February 2002 issue, a week before the one and only government-sponsored International Festival of Indian Literature held so far and entitled

“At Home in the World”, regional authors too levelled questionable charges indiscriminately against the whole tribe of Indo-Anglian writers, if I may use Rushdie’s shorthand, and that too sometimes in rather unfortunate language.

Rajendra Yadav, the Hindi author, found “that Indian writing in English is so second-rate” because it panders to the western reader who can appreciate only “exotica or erotica”. Indian writing in English, or IWE for short, “takes a touristy look at India, like Pankaj Mishra’s *The Romantics* or Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* which is nothing more than “a creatively-written traveller’s guide... their total approach is to Westerners, a third rate serpent-and-rope trick”. Gurdial Singh thought that IWE and its readers were “intellectual pygmies”. The late Nirmal Verma claimed that the Indian writers in English “find themselves in a strange place: the emotional content is missing, as is the real core of the Indian experience”. Bengali novelist and poet Sunil Gangopadhyay told us that he “knows why they write in English. It’s because they’re insecure in their own mother tongue”. Bhalchandra Nemade, the Marathi novelist and poet was a shade more virulent. Indian writers in English, he claimed “are such necromancers, creating something out of nothing”.

That’s a mouthful especially because it is so simplistic and bereft of nuance. If the regional language writers did not take such a prejudiced and partisan stance, they would have to admit that Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, Arun Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* and some other books written by Indians in English are remarkable literary works.

The oddest claim many of the regional Indian writers make in the *Outlook* article, however, is that they do not give a damn about money. It is the writing and the writing alone that matters, they say. That is indeed laudable but not altogether honest. The IWE market in the country, as far as a few lucky authors are concerned, may indeed have become a gold mine in the last year or two and is in some ways competing with the madness of the current art scene in India. However it is worth remembering that while integrity and money may not always go together, they are not mutually exclusive. Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Pynchon, Joseph Heller have not exactly had to struggle after they made it.

As someone who has broken every record in the Guinness Book when it comes to the big bucks, my first novel *Saat Sakkam Trechalis*, a book which I am told is still a milestone in Marathi, has sold a staggering thousand copies in barely... ahem, twenty-seven years.

My earnings for the first year were a hundred and seventy-four rupees and in the last year an astounding eleven. So if you will forgive my mercenary leanings, why can't we do some plain speaking? If you take the trouble to do good writing, you bloody well ought to be paid well for it.

The other issue that seems to exercise the "bhasha" writers in India as obsessively as it did the committee who chalked out the subjects to be discussed at the International Festival of Indian Literature is the question of identity, Indian identity, in our writing. The question is who is to say what is authentically Indian? Is it the sari or the mindset? Is it Chitra Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* or is it the late Gulshan Nanda's pot-boilers which never failed to entertain millions of his readers? Is it arranged marriages or is it wife-swapping? The Hindu fundamentalist who sets fire to Muslim homes or the Muslim terrorist from Kashmir who believes he's fighting for his country's freedom? The fact is there is no such thing as Indian or un-Indian, right or wrong, in literature and the arts. Any subject an author wishes to deal with is valid so long as he brings a depth of understanding, richness and complexity to it; so long as his characters are not two-dimensional but intrude on you as if they were as real as your closest friends or family. In short, so long as he can pull it off.

The fact is when an Indian writer is playing to the so-called Western gallery, that shrewdly calculated move is just as Indian as the novels of Premchand which bear the scent of the Indian earth itself, the depiction of hypocrisy in a *doha* by Kabir, the mystic poet-saint of the fourteenth century, or the terrible tragedy at the end of *The God of Small Things*. Yet what many "bhasha" writers wish to do is to privilege their own creations while not allowing the same freedom to those who write in English.

At one of the panel discussions at the Festival, the Anglo-Indian writer I. Allan Sealy took serious offence when someone suggested that English was alien to India. The question he posed deserves serious consideration especially from regional language writers: What does that make of me? he asked. Where do I belong then? Do you want to wipe out not just the memory of a colonial occupation but an entire community off the subcontinent?

The case against bilingual authors like the late Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mahapatra and myself is even trickier than Allan Sealy's. Are we to understand that when we write in

Marathi or Oriya, we write the real thing? That Arun's Marathi voice was authentic? But when he switched to English, he was a phony, a fraud out of touch with his roots?

The hostility between English and "bhasha" writers did not start with Rushdie, it had been festering for a long time. From the periphery, English had made rapid progress, oddly enough, especially after the country won independence. Thanks to the linguistic basis on which the different states were demarcated in the 1950s and 60s and also because Hindi, an unpalatable sanskritised Hindi, was rashly promoted as the national language and instantly disowned by the southern states, English assumed the status of the unacknowledged lingua franca for the whole nation.

The standard practice is to blame the rapid ascendancy of English on Thomas Babington Macaulay, the Law member of the Governor General's Council of the East India Company who insisted that government funds should be spent on furthering higher education in English, rather than native languages. Macaulay's minute on education of 1835 declared with the wonderful and unabashed arrogance of the coloniser that "a single shelf of a good European Library was worth the whole of native literature of India and Arabia". Undoubtedly Macaulay was more concerned about creating a cadre of English speaking bureaucrats, lawyers, and teachers than exposing Indians to the joys of Hume and Milton. But surely there's more to the ubiquitous presence of English in India than just Macaulay's minute on education.

Edward Said's pioneering study of Orientalism has shown us how we bought hook, line and sinker into the white man's view of the natives, of the superiority of the English tongue and how everything we still do and our very perception of ourselves is coloured by that experience. The world owes a tremendous debt to Said for this seminal contribution. But as an irrelevant aside it would do no harm to remind ourselves that while Western colonisation ruthlessly exploited conquered lands, destroyed the local economies and perhaps worse, that intangible quality called self-esteem, we cannot keep passing the buck to the coloniser as we seem to do endlessly. At sixty-one years of age, it's about time Indians took responsibility for their own actions and their own fate.

But there is one perspective that Said failed to suggest even glancingly. If the whites were responsible for imposing their culture, their administrative, taxation, and judicial systems and their language upon us, so were the Muslim invaders who settled in India as well as other countries as were the Indian traders who sailed to Indonesia, Thailand and

Bali and left their language and their gods and their culture and their mores behind. Quite simply that is the nature of the beast called colonisation.

If English displaced our regional languages as the language of privilege, so did Persian in the twelfth century when Muslim kingdoms were established in Delhi. Though the founder of the Moghul dynasty in India in the 16th century, Babur wrote his memoirs in Chagatay Turkish, the Persian language and its distinctive culture continued to rule supreme in Delhi and most of India except in the southern peninsula until the Mughals went into decline and Urdu displaced Persian. And then English in turn displaced Urdu. And let's not forget that Sanskrit similarly edged out the local languages when Indianised kingdoms were set up in South-east Asia.

The pre-eminence of English on the planet in recent times, however, is due to one major factor. In earlier times the coloniser's tongue was confined to the mother-country and to the conquered territory. It was the same with English except that the British Empire stretched all the way from USA, Canada and Australia to many parts of Africa and Asia. Though the Empire may now be only a memory in most of these countries, English still rules vast swathes of land. And yet it would not have become as all-encompassing as it is today but for the United States. In the second half of the twentieth century, American economic and political hegemony and creativity sent its emissaries in different garbs not only to the erstwhile English colonies but to the non-English speaking world. The Marshall Plan, Hollywood, capitalism, the domino theory, multinationals, music, the auto industry, Starbucks, the IT revolution, Boeing, Coca-Cola, McDonalds, The Voice of America, the arms industry, best-sellers, out-sourcing and just as importantly, science and technology... these have all been carriers of that ubiquitous virus called the English language. Most scientific writing today is perforce done in English if it is to reach the world at large. Many countries have passed laws in their legislatures making the teaching of English mandatory along with the mother tongue from the first grade itself. France is still holding out but Spain has capitulated and Germany does it in all but name.

The mortality rate amongst the languages of the world is catastrophic. One language disappears every fortnight. In early 2005 there were 6000 around. Which means that today only about 5800 languages survive on the planet. The so-called spread of civilization to primeval jungles and tribes has been the death knell for many languages. But for the last

six or seven decades English too has posed a threat to not just the dialects of the world but to the major languages. The animosity against English amongst the “bhasha” writers in India is partly due then to the fact that regional languages in the country feel beleaguered. However, there’s no gainsaying the sad truth that the far greater threat comes from the enemy within and not from an external factor like English.

There is an element of prestidigitation or perhaps it would be wiser to term it self-deception at work amongst regional writers from the various languages, twenty-two to be precise according to the government’s revised calculations. Since the “bhasha” writers all stand together and gang up against English, it would be natural to assume that there is a camaraderie and closeness amongst the different regional languages, a healthy give and take, and a high level of interest in each other’s literatures leading to a constant stream of translations from one language into the others. That unfortunately is just not true. Barring the very occasional flicker of curiosity in our neighbours, we remain totally absorbed in ourselves.

There was a time in the 1930s and 40s when the entire oeuvre of Sharatchandrababu was translated from Bengali into Marathi. But those times are long gone. Today, at the most, a Bengali novel like *Lajja* by Taslima Nasrin, the Bangladeshi writer who was forced to flee her country, will occasionally make its way into Marathi but generally speaking, I suspect Maharashtrians can’t be bothered with almost anything to do with the south Indian languages. The whole of the south is clubbed together in the north Indian mind and all the languages of the region are referred to disparagingly as “andu-gundu” tongues. I have no idea how the southern states and people look at Marathi, Bihari and any other north Indian language and whether they find them objects of derision.

((Perhaps this is the right place for a few stray thoughts on translations in the Indian context.

Let me begin on a light note. When my Marathi novel *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* was published in 1974 it got mixed reviews partly because there was no beginning, middle or end to the book, partly because the narrative style was fragmented and full of flashbacks and flash-forwards and partly because the grammar, syntax and the idiom were so unorthodox that some critics were of the view that I had reinvented the language. A famous novelist-cum-playwright, Jaywant Dalwi had a column called *Than Than Pal* in the monthly magazine, *Lalit*. He had a wonderful, mischievous style and he could make fun

of any but any writer but without ever giving offence. When he wrote about my book, he said, “We hear that Kiran Nagarkar’s novel *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* is being translated into English. But shouldn’t it be translated into Marathi first?”

Which brings me to the strange case of Bhalchandra Nemade. Nemade wrote a ground-breaking work called *Kosla* on a dare in 1963. It is a *bildungsroman* full of humour and wit. Every now and then Nemade uses the device of an alien who has just landed on earth and observes humans and their oddities to hilarious effect while simultaneously presenting a critique of our society and its mores. It is something of a puzzle why his later novels and his critical work are so devoid of humour and the lively sense of values and perspective that fine satire invariably brings to any subject. Instead Nemade went on to enunciate his theory of Nativism which posited that the only authentic and valid voice of literature is the one that is expressed in the mother-tongue.

The logical consequence of this theory was to trash all translations in one fell stroke. Nemade proved his point in a truly unique fashion at a session at the International Festival of Indian Literature in 2002. He took one of his poems and proceeded to translate it word for word in the order in which the words occurred. I do not recollect the poem which he used to demolish translations but frankly any poem will do. I will take a Marathi children’s rhyme to illustrate his method.

Yere yere pawsa,
Tula deto paisa
Paisa zala khota
Paus ala mota.

Here’s how Nemade would translate it:
Come come rain
To you give paisa
Paisa becomes fake
Rain comes big

No, translations don’t make sense if you go the Nemade route. Fortunately there are other sensible methods of translating literary works.

Translation is a limited activity in most parts of the world. In India it is less than minimal. Yet even on this marginal scale, the majority of translations are predominantly from the regional languages to English and not from one regional language to another. West Bengal and Kerala do better than most of the other languages especially when it comes to translating English novels, plays and poetry. A scholar from Kerala who I ran into recently told me that someone had translated James Joyce's *Ulysses* into Malayalam. How lucky the Keralites are. Why won't someone translate Joyce, Greene, Cervantes, Neruda, Murakami, Pessoa and hundreds of others, let me not be greedy, I will settle for a thousand right now, into Marathi and the other Indian regional languages? How can I be grateful enough for all the accidents of fate which ultimately sent me to an English medium school? How poor and barren our lives would be if someone or the other had not translated Tolstoy, Kafka, Camus, Dostoevsky, Halldor Laxness, Celine, Saramago, Juan Rulfo (who wrote one of the earliest magical realism novels, *Pedro Paramo*), Curzio Malaparte into English?

The art of translation, to repeat a truism, can at best be a fine approximation of the original, but nevertheless an approximation. The debate about whether to aim at textual fidelity or the spirit of the work can never be settled. Yet, there is only one way we can do without translations. All we need is to know all 5800 existent languages not only fluently but with the multiple resonances that have accumulated over centuries. There is no dearth of shabby or appallingly bad translations. And yet barring Bhalchandra Nemade, how many of us could stomach the thought of life without translations?

But to get back to the subject of regional languages)). Our regional writers and politicians may profess their love of their mother tongue time and again and swear to defend its honour against threats from English or any other language. But more and more there is a disconnect between our public stances and our private lives. However ragged a cliché it may be, the fact is most of those who can afford to, and many who can't, send their children to English medium schools. And why not, you may well ask? After all we want the best for our children. Very true. The only problem is that the best no longer includes one's mother tongue. Most children today who have been to English medium schools, can barely speak and write in their own languages. It's as if it's *infra dig* to speak one's mother tongue.

We seem to have forgotten that we live in India which has always been home to several languages. Of the twenty-two major languages in the country today, each with a long-standing tradition of hundreds of years, the oldest, Tamil, is over three thousand years old. What after all could be simpler and more natural than parents conversing with their children in their mother tongue? As for our national language, Hindi, children learn it from age two or three because their parents, even the most affluent of them, are given to watching Hindi movies and serials, humming Hindi songs and playing that unique and ubiquitous Indian game called *Antakshari* where someone sings the first line of a song and the next person takes off from the last syllable of the previous song. If those of us who live in cities like Bombay, don't really give a damn about our mother tongues, it's quite simply because we have bought into the myth of the superiority of English.

Even when they migrate to the States, the majority of Chinese and Japanese ensure that their children know to speak their mother tongue along with the language of the new country. They talk to their children in Chinese or Japanese. Parents in urban India don't seem to find it necessary to speak to their children in their mother tongues, let alone in a foreign country, but even in their own homes in their own country. If this double-speak and these double standards continue to hold sway over us, what hope can there be for our regional languages? Who is going to read Kannada, Marathi, Assamese and other "bhasha" books?

For a moment let's forget the affluent Indian and consider what the common man, just your average Amar, Akbar and Anthony, feels about the English language. The ward-boy in Bombay Hospital, the SSC-failed dispatch clerk at an advertising agency, the rickshaw-driver, the clerk in the government office and the Marathi and maths teacher in Bombay will beg, borrow and blackmail his father-in-law to give him the money to get his son admitted to even the most third-rate school so long as the medium of instruction there is something that passes for English.

Of the many asides in my novel *Ravan and Eddie* published in 1995, there is one called "A Meditation on Neighbours" in which there is a short disquisition on language. The eponymous children of the title, one a Hindu and the other a Roman Catholic, live in Bombay in a *chawl* or tenement building with common toilet facilities for dozens of families and public water taps. The Roman Catholic Eddie whose family hails from Goa

speaks Konkani at home but English outside while his arch enemy Ravan speaks Marathi both at home and outside.

Here is the excerpt:

“Along with religion, the other great divider in the CWD chawls was language. Often, the one got confused with the other. Hindus spoke Marathi, Catholics, English. Konkani was still very much the lingua franca in the Goan home but outside the house, the younger people communicated almost entirely in English.

English was the thorn in the side of the Hindus. Its absence was their cross, their humiliation and the source of their life-long inferiority and inadequacy. It was a severely debilitating, if not fatal, lack that was not acknowledged, spoken of or articulated. It was the great leveller. It gave caste-Hindus a taste of their own medicine. It made them feel like untouchables. It also turned the tables. The former outcastes could now look down upon their Hindu neighbours.

Perhaps Dr. Ambedkar was wrong to convert millions of his untouchable brethren to Buddhism. He should have converted them to English. That would really have stood the caste-Hindu world on its head. Roman Catholic missionaries were seized of the power of the English long before the rest of the population caught on. Outside Goa, they abandoned Portuguese and took the English tongue almost as seriously as their faith. They went on a spree and opened English-medium schools and colleges across the country.

Chhya men, he’s a dutty bugger. Tree times I told him don’t climb the tree to look at my sas. Leave my sas alone, men. I asked him ‘gain and again but he din listen, so I gave him a hit, straight on the face like. De bugger began to cry like a baby, men. He begged me like but I din listen. I told him, you look at my sas, and I’ll break your bones and balls”. Goan English is easy to mimic and an easy target for well-educated and affluent Bombayites. It is burlesqued in plays, reviews and films. Such niceties and caricature are lost on the Hindus from the CWD chawls. Ask any one of them in an unguarded moment and he’ll tell you that he would give his right hand, make it his left, to be able to speak like the people from the top floor. Because there are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who have English and those who don’t. Those who have English are the haves, and those who don’t, are the have nots.

How could you possibly grasp the meaning and value of English if you spoke it before you were toilet-trained or had a place reserved for you in an English-medium school? English is a mantra, a maha-mantra. It is an “open sesame” that doesn’t open mere doors, it opens up new worlds and allows you to cross over from one universe to another.

English makes you tall. If you know English, you can wear a “suit-boot”, do an electrician’s course or take a diploma in radio and refrigeration technology. You can become a chef at the Taj Mahal Hotel or a steno at Hindustan Lever, even a purser with Air India or Pan Am. If you know English and someone steps on your foot, you can say to him, “Bastard, can’t you see?” You can talk like a foreigner. Sit down in a local train and hold a best-seller like *Peyton Place* in front of your eyes and even read it. If you know English, you can ask a girl for a dance. You can lean Eileen Alva against the locked door of the terrace and press against her, squeeze her boobs and kiss her on the mouth, put your tongue inside it while slipping your hand under her dress.

Language is leverage. Not a very original or revolutionary perception really. Our ancestors had grasped the principle two or three thousand years ago. The word for culture and tradition was sanskriti. Those who spoke Sanskrit had sanskriti. What about the rest of the folks? Well, what about them, they spoke Pali or some such dialect and ate crow. Did they have any choice in the matter?

There is only one difference between then and now. Sanskrit was the language of the gods, thirty-three million gods and of Parmeshwar or Everlasting God (our great great grandfathers were certainly aware of the difference between small-time, easy-come, easy-go gods and the Big One) and of Brahmins. As go-betweens, middle-men, spiritual hustlers and keepers of our deities, Brahmins had exclusive and total rights to God. Since they coined the words and phrases, they called themselves Brahmin or the people who know Brahman or God. (Dyaneshwar, the boy saint who finished his life’s work by age twenty-one and bid goodbye to the world, may have caused a few hiccups when he translated the Bhagavad Gita and wrote a commentary on it in the 13th century in a local and young language called Marathi, but that didn’t lessen our grudging respect and admiration for the learning, erudition and culture of the Brahmins). But Goan Catholics were not even Brahmins. They had not learnt the Puranas by heart nor discoursed on the Upanishads, nor had they preserved and perpetuated our culture. And yet without in any

way earning it but doing what they so aptly call “bugger all” they had English on their tongue. Just like that.

The fact is there is no justice on earth” {Nagarkar, 1995, 178 — 181).

Fast forward to end 2006. That was the year when the Frankfurt Book Fair chose India as the guest of honour. This was indeed a signal honour by any standard since the Frankfurt Book Fair is the biggest book-fair in the world. It offers a country a window to publishers and agents from the entire world and allows it to showcase the very best of its literature. But 2006 was even more special because India was perhaps the only nation to be invited twice in the span of a mere twenty years.

The four authors from Bombay (including myself) who attended the Frankfurt Book Fair that year were invited by the Goethe Institute to recount their experiences when they got back home. As lady luck would have it, and for once she was on my side, I had lost my voice. I was, however, forced to sit on the podium along with the others and play the dumb observer. The first of the three speakers was a first-time author, the second was an extremely successful woman-novelist at whose work the literary establishment turns up its nose but which is taught in the School of Oriental and African Studies in England and the third was one of the country’s most respected poet-cum-art critics.

I had some trepidation about the evening but it turned out to be rather pleasant and light-hearted. The woman-novelist entertained the audience with her caustic recollections of the Fair, the first-time novelist was charmingly tentative and the poet-critic was for once free of the kind of deconstructionist vocabulary so popular in academia during the eighties and nineties. In the last five minutes of the session the subject veered to the “bhasha” writers whose trip to Germany and stay at some five-star hotel had been sponsored by the government bureaucrats in Delhi whereas the poet, woman novelist and I had not been guests of the Indian government.

The poet-critic’s language suddenly took a self-righteous turn and he spoke of the regional writers with contempt bordering on the uncivil. The general drift of his diatribe was that the Indo-Anglian writers had made it to the Book Fair and on the international scene through literary merit unlike the “bhasha” writers who curried favour with those in power, indulged in politicking and “lived off government hand-outs”. Soon the lady-novelist had joined him and was taking down the “bhasha” writers a further notch or two. With my voice-box temporarily out of order, I wasn’t able to ask them whether private

hand-outs were okay. After all we too were there at the Frankfurt Book Fair courtesy of our German publishers.

There. We were back to blanket statements, willing to tar the whole community of regional writers because of a few who were adept at intriguing and promoting themselves, as if that was something beyond the Indo-Anglian writers. And yes, once again the lines were drawn and the discourse was framed as “us and them” and the world was divided between the good guys and the bad and no prizes for guessing who the baddies were on this occasion. I thought at least three quarters of the hundred or hundred and fifty strong audience would corner the poet-critic and ask him whence the superior tone and weren’t there as many mediocre writers in English as there were amongst the regional writers? I was sure they would also gleefully pillory the lady novelist for her popular variety of glitterati fiction while seriously criticizing her stance on “bhasha” writers.

I guess I can’t ever get it right, can I? Not a soul spoke up for the regional writers. The audience laughed and lauded the sentiments expressed. Luckily, it seems the “bhasha” writers and the Indo-Anglian ones are both convinced that they are the chosen. The notion of the chosen can only function through exclusion. The more exclusive you feel, the more your need to exclude. The more the “bhasha” folks feel left out, the more they perceive themselves to be the underdogs and the side-lined, the more they see themselves as the chosen. And in exactly the reverse circumstances, Rushdie can claim to restrict admission to his chosen club. The hubris of the Indo-Anglians is as offensive as the arrogance and intolerance of the “bhasha” writers. Perhaps both the parties are of the belief that by demonising the “other”, they come out looking virtuous, incorruptible and righteous. There’s really nothing to choose between the two.

If it is ironic that language, which is the primary means of communication amongst humans, should be used as an instrument of exclusion, it is even more bizarre that it should be exercised as an agent of persecution. The year after India was the Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, it was Catalonia’s turn. Since Catalans were writing more in Spanish than in Catalan because it was the state language at least at one time and because it gave them access to a larger readership, the Germans and others who attended the Book Fair were expecting authors who write in both Catalan and Spanish. But that was not to be. The community of authors who write in Catalan is going through an intense and intolerant phase of chauvinism: the argument put forward was that since

Catalonia was invited and not Spain, there was no room for the Catalan traitors who wrote in Spanish. So to the dismay of the Germans and everybody else only those authors who wrote in Catalan got to the Fair.

One final example. The plight of the Fijians of Indian origin is truly tragic. The original inhabitants have suddenly taken it into their heads that Fiji is only for them and not for the fourth or fifth generation of Indians who have long since been assimilated into the cultural fabric of the country and are the backbone of the Fijian economy. Which is why there has recently been an exodus of the latter to Australia and other parts of the world. But not satisfied with foolhardily ruining their own economy, the ethnic Fijians have declared a ban on people of Indian origin writing fiction in Fijian.

That brings me to two of my deepest convictions about literature. What difference does it make whether a writer is from Timbuktu, India, France or America; whether she writes in Japanese, Swahili, Inuit, English or Malayalam? The only thing that matters is, is he a good writer or a mediocre one? Does she grip your imagination, is his language like the light that slants through your window after a summer storm that washes the air, the heavens and your soul clean? Does her work give the kind of insights that stay with you through the rest of your life?

It must take a self-destructive blind spot on the part of Indian writers in the regional languages and English not to grasp that the moving image on TV and the big screen, socialite journalism, the internet, cell phone messaging and video games have turned literature into one of the most endangered species on the planet. If we care for literature as we claim to, then we have to put an end, an immediate end, to this ludicrous and utterly counterproductive but nevertheless internecine squabbling and devote our energies to writing compelling fiction, drama, poetry, non-fiction, and enchant, and thus drag our absconding readers by their metaphorical hair, back to the word and to the book.

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

Let me wind up this paper by recounting a bizarre meeting I had with a remarkable Mexican author. The year was 1978. I had taken a red-eye flight from Los Angeles to Mexico City. I must have got in around six in the morning but my German friend, Greta, was there to welcome me and take me to her home in Coyoacan. I was under the impression that since I had travelled the whole night, Greta and her husband would allow

me to rest till the afternoon but the moment I had had breakfast and bathed, I was whisked off on a tour of the city. By four thirty someone should have tucked me into bed and told me not to get up for the next seven days but my hostess had got a second wind and we were having cake and tea in a huge glass-vaulted cafe. Come six o'clock we were in a large book-shop with a mezzanine floor. I have a clear memory of the place. There was music playing. As I was to learn later on it was an LP called *Odes*. It was composed by Vangelis and sung hauntingly by Irene Papas, haunting enough for me to keep looking for it for a decade.

We went up to the mezzanine floor and my German friend greeted the owner in Spanish and then another man sitting in the shadows. He was an elderly man dressed spiffily in grey trousers, a white shirt with blue stripes, a burgundy tie and a midnight blue blazer. My hostess introduced us. I was not sure I had heard the name of the rather distinguished-looking man correctly since I was about to pass out from fatigue and asked her to repeat his name. "Jaun Rulfo, the author," she said. My ears pricked up and I was suddenly awake. It was as if someone had plunged a needle in my heart and injected adrenaline directly.

A year or two previously, I had gone to Strand Book Stall off P. M. Road in Bombay and amongst the various remaindered books in the shop, I had picked up a copy of a slim novel called *Pedro Paramo*, read a couple of blurbs and made an impulse purchase. And wonder of wonders had actually got around to reading it. It was so different from anything I had read, it was unsettling. The ground kept shifting under my feet and it was difficult to tell where reality ended and fantasy took over and vice versa. I am not sure I grasped all that was going on but I understood that this was indeed a new kind of fiction and a whole different way of perceiving the world. Now I was being introduced to the man who had written the book.

I am not given to gushing when I meet authors or artists but I did convey my excitement about *Pedro Paramo* in no uncertain terms. He looked at me but directed his answer in Spanish to my hostess. "I thank your friend for his warm words but I will not talk to him since he speaks the coloniser's tongue". I was a little puzzled and asked my German friend whether he knew English or not. "Yes, fluently. Most of his royalties come from the sales of his book in English". she said. "But he'll not talk to you because his neighbours to the north stole large swathes of his mother land". "But that was a long

time ago. Besides it just so happens that I am not an American but an Indian. Surely he must know that my country too suffered a similar fate at the hands of the British but that is no reason for me to hate Shakespeare or Coleridge or Chaucer”. “Tell your friend that that is his problem, not mine”.

Indeed, it has been and continues to be one of the happiest problems of my life. How can I be grateful enough for all the accidents of fate which ultimately sent me to an English-medium school and thus gave me access to so many of the finest writers in the world of literature from other countries? Juan Rulfo spent another hour and a half talking to my friend, Greta and ignoring me. Looking back I am no longer mad with him. He wrote a fine book; I can afford to disregard his pettiness. But do the “bhasha” writers or the Indians who write in English really want to emulate Juan Rulfo? If this is all that the pursuit of literature can do for us, if it cannot open our hearts and minds and make us more tolerant and inclusive, we would be better off without it.

CONCLUSION

I wrote this paper almost against my own wishes. Every single cell in my mind is revolted by the thought of the utterly unnecessary language conflicts in India. If my people had any sense they would address the appallingly real and urgent problems facing us and not cook up fake issues. But in the last nine or ten months the language problems in my state, Maharashtra, have taken a dangerously violent turn and Marathi is now being used as the instrument to drive out all non-Marathi speakers. It is indeed a sad time for Bombay, that most cosmopolitan of cities in India.

In the nineteen sixties, a new political party called the Shiv Sena became a force to reckon with because it promoted the concept of Maharashtra for Marathi speakers only, the implication being that jobs in the state and especially in Bombay, should go to Marathi speakers and nobody else. Over the years the Shiv Sena has embraced different platforms including a fundamentalist Hindu stance. But two years ago the Sena split and the breakaway group, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena has gone back to the original agenda of the Shiv Sena with a new and maleficent wrinkle, an “outsider/insider” dichotomy, the outsiders in this instance being the Biharis from the state of Bihar. The rationale is that the “outsider” Biharis are depriving the insider Marathi-speakers of jobs. In truth, without the Biharis, many industries in Maharashtra would close down. Bombay is like

America, more than ninety-five percent of its population is originally from some other part of the country. Without outsiders, there would be no Bombay and no industry and no employment.

In colonial times, the British played havoc with us with their “divide and rule” politics. But it’s sixty-one years since we won independence. Do we really want to divide and tear the subcontinent apart? The rhetoric of hate has only become more and more vicious and violent amongst both the Maharashtrians and the Biharis. Soon every state in India will demand that all outsiders should get the hell out. What we need more than ever now is the obdurate voice of reason to fight this deadly parochialism.

We are the lesser if there is even one language less. Most other countries have a single language. How fortunate we in India are to have this treasure-trove of twenty-two major languages, not to mention hundreds of dialects. It is writers above all others who have the most intimate relationship with language and are its high priests. It is they who give new turns and twists to words, use them in unusual contexts and ways and renew language. It is they who must form the first phalanx against those who would lay siege to our languages and preserve them for future generations.

Works Cited:

Nagarkar, Kiran; 1995, Ravan and Eddie, New Delhi: Viking

Reddy, Sheela; 2002, Midnight’s Orphans. How Indian is Indian Writing in English?, Outlook India, February 25th 2002, www.outlookindia.com

Rushdie, Salman, West, Elizabeth, eds.; 1997, The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997, London: Vintage