



Special issue with the Sunday Magazine
From the publishers of THE HINDU

REACHING OUT: April 08, 2001

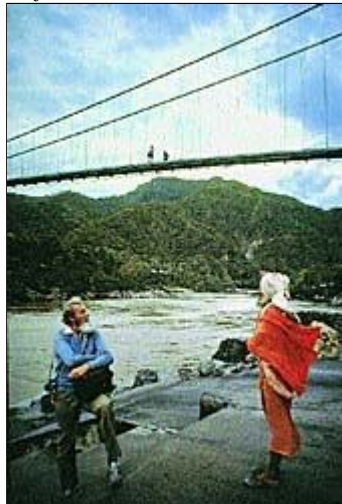
Across divisions

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Language is what unites us with the world, for it enables a particularly human mode of access to what is outside us. Language is also what divides us from the world, for it is always there between us and whatever may be outside us. Literature, always written in some language or the other, displays a similar ambiguity. Drawing upon the world outside the text (directly or indirectly), it seeks to unite the reader with that world in sympathy, understanding or criticism. But the world it unites the reader with is the world of the text, and hence it also divides the reader from the world that is outside the text.

Sanjeev Saith/Fotomedia



If this is the general condition of literature, imagine a literature about a country or community in a language that is not spoken by most members of that country or community. Imagine, for example, Indian English fiction. Less than four per cent of the population of India is supposed to speak English, but such is the position of English and English speakers in India that any literature written in it tends to be thinly smeared across all of India. If we keep the fact that this linguistic divide very often also coincides with significant socio-economic gaps, we might be able to understand the most crucial division that - in its presence or absence - characterises Indian English fiction.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not dismissing Indian English fiction because it is written in a language brought from abroad or spoken by a tiny elite. All I am pointing at is the huge linguistic and socio-economic chasm that lies between those who read and write in English and many of those who do not or cannot. And the various ways in which Indian English fiction faces up to, obscures or seeks to bridge this chasm.

The most obvious division is the one of social spaces, and various Indian English writers have attempted to resolve it in different ways. Villages, for example, have not only been absent in Indian English fiction: they have sometimes been present in largely idealised versions. But while it is superfluous to expect urban Indian English writers to write about villages in all complexity (though it has been done in English by urban sociologists like Arvind N. Das), what is even more surprising is the relative lack of "heavy industrial geography" in Indian English fiction. While

cottage industry is sometimes present in Indian English fiction, the geographical space of smoking, broiling, grunting factories is largely missing. This division between the urban spaces of middle class neighbourhoods and heavy industry is sometimes sought to be bridged by Indian English writers who, tellingly, resort to the description of mercantile spaces, cottage industry or executive circles. This, as in the case of the narration of villages, is a bridge of the textual space: a resolution that fails in actual space.

One can add similar points about, say, the narration of servants or of low caste characters in Indian English fiction. But let us move on to the division that language signifies. How is it that Indian English writers set about narrating a country in which the vast majority does not speak English or does not speak English from choice?

The case of the odd Indian English novel based in a village is particularly complicated. Here we have to assume a complete translation of the local language into English. Indian authors have tried to do this in three ways: recreating the language patterns by creating a special rhythm and syntax (Rao in *Kanthapura*, 1938), taking recourse to a "correct" but slightly dated style and language and intermingling Indian words and literally translated phrases with English. The ease of moving between English and Indianised elements in the knowledge of greater Euro-Indian lingual hybridity in the cities and the convenience of creating a stylised chutney English (as in Rushdie) is denied to the author who writes about rural India.

But is the case of a writer like Rushdie all that clear-cut either? Was he the one who, as Anita Desai claimed, "finally brought the spoken language off the streets (of India) and onto the printed page"?

But, madam-sir, the "spoken language (of) the streets" in India is seldom English and never the stylised Englishes of either Salman Rushdie or Raja Rao. No doubt, Rushdie incorporates elements of spoken Indian English and creates the impression of a colloquial language. But this language is a combination of consciously manufactured English used (if at all) by a small circle of cosmopolitan *Babus* and a sprinkling of staged English extracted from the speech of people lacking an "English-medium education". In actual fact, however, neither will the former talk extensively in Rushdie's lingo, nor would the latter talk in English on ordinary occasions. As for the rest, those who speak English from choice follow the "correct" grapholect quite closely in spite of phonetic variance. Even a vast majority of these, switch from a more or less correct use of a textualised English grapholect to a more or less correct version of some Indian *Bhasha*. An attempt to capture the English spoken by these English-speaking Indians would have to shift erratically between English and the *Bhasha*, and thus be largely illegible to some in India and most abroad.

Following Desani, Rushdie often uses compound words in which a native calque is combined with an English word. Words like "*dia-lamp*", for example, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. At first blush, such words appear to be the same as Indian English neologisms in actual use; neologisms like the "*lathi-charge*" that appears in most English language papers. But they are not. Actual Indian English compounds combine a native calque with an English word to signify a third referent (with specifically Indian characteristics). Rushdie's (and Desani's) compound words merely stage this effect. Very often, as in "*dia-lamp*" or "*khansamah-cook*", the native calque is rendered superfluous. A *dia* is an earthen lamp; a *khansamah* is a cook.

Consider also the acronym of Mynah's (the Moor's sister) feminist group in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. This is given as "WWSTP" which is then glossed as "We Shall Smash This Prison (*Is Jailko Todkar Rahenge*)". This gloss reverses what appears to be the logical order of explanations - Hindustani followed by English. The Hindustani version appears particularly superfluous when one realises that it does not tally with the acronym. It is not needed to explain the acronym. The only reason it is there is to confer a degree of vernacular "authenticity" on Rushdie's description - not because it is needed (as the full version of a Hindustani acronym) or because it is meant to convey a mite extra to Hindustani speakers.

Once again, we have a division and an attempt to overcome that division. Once again, the attempt turns out to be something of a facade: not a bridge but a stage. But what, one may argue, is wrong with such a facade? After all, isn't literature art and isn't all art, by definition, artificial? To answer this, one will need to examine why Indian English writers like Amitav Ghosh avoid such staging of subaltern speech and write in the unadorned grapholect.

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