**Indian Literature in English: An Historical Perspective**

Anyone concerned with the history of Indian writing in English, and with its reception in India and abroad, must be sobered by the consideration that this is the first international seminar that has been held on the subject outside India. If neither the organizers nor the distinguished participants who are here seem to have been aware of the this fact, that simply emphasis how necessary and how useful it is to have an historical perspective on the subject.

Any historical perspective on a literature must help us to see its age, its volume, and its variety; and that is the scope of this paper. Dr. Chaudhuri’s paper provides a useful starting point for mine. If it is easy to take umbrage sometimes at his manner, or to disagree with the precise way in which he formulates a particular matter, it is generally difficult to take issue with the substance of what he says. I make bold, however, to challenge two points he made, to the effect that we could write quite well in English by 1850 and that the world of English in India is a limited one and will always remain so.

I make bold to challenge them because in this particular matter of Indian writing in English, of which Mr. Chaudhuri so blithely declared himself ignorant, I have the inestimable advantage of having actually read the stuff! My special interest is the history of Indian writing in English – and, as I research it, I become more and more aware of how much is simply not known.

There are, for example, five major bibliographies which include Indian English literature within their ambit – including the most useful short bibliography by Ronald Warwick, published by the Commonwealth Institute. But the most substantial of these bibliographies, edited by Professor Amritjit Singh et al., (Indian Literature in English – A Guide to Information Sources) published in America last year by Gale Research Company, and running to some 630 pages, commences only in 1827, the date of the publication of the first volume of poems by that remarkable Indian, Henry Derozio. The year (1827) is the generally accepted date or the commencement of the literature, but it is at least a few decades late. The pamphlets of no less a person than Raja Rammohan Roy began being published some twenty years earlier, in 1816, while the very first pamphlet written in English by an Indian appears to have been published in 1806. The first book to be published in English by an Indian, appeared before the end of the eighteen century, in 1794. We don’t have time to discuss the fascinating man who wrote that volume, Sake Deen Mahomed, but he was only one of many Indians who were writing in English before the end of the eighteenth century. Though they do not seem to have published any volumes of work, they contributed to Calcutta periodicals at a time when Calcutta was second only to London in its importance in the Empire. Nineteenth century Calcutta was cosmopolitan, and swayed to breezes not only from Britain and the Continent, as Mr. Chaudhuri reminded us, but also to breezes from as far away as Canada and the United States – which are geographically just about as far from India as it is possible to be. And yet Calcutta started benefiting from English education only in 1817, while the first school which taught English was actually started hundred years earlier, at Cuddalore, near Madras.

The revolution in Indian intellectual life was so complete by the 1830s that the first autobiography had already been published in English – Raja Rammohan Roy’s. Why it is the genre of autobiography that so demonstrates this mental revolution will be instantly clear to anyone acquainted with Vedantic philosophy, which believes that our consciousness of being individuals, separate from each other and from nature around us, is not only an illusion, but constitutes precisely that illusion which prevents us from ‘relising’ the absolute Brahman. To be so absorbed in this ignorant and illusionary self as to actually want to recall, and then pass on to others, the wretchedly transitory detail of life in this illusory world ought to come as close as possible to the unforgivable in Advaitic belief. Anyway, that sin had been committed by an eminent Indian in the 1830s, and is committed by an increasing number of Indians, eminent and not-so-eminent, every year. The first play in English, Krishna Mohan Banerjea’s The Persecuted was published in 1831, and the first novel in English, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Rajmohan’s Wife was published in 1864. Briefly, then, Indian writing in English goes back some two hundred years, and all the major literary forms had begun being practiced some one hundred and twenty years ago.

By contrast, Australian literature is generally agreed to begin with the stories of Charles Rowcroft in the 1800s, Canadian literature with T. C. Haliburton’s The Clockmaker in 1836, and New Zealand literature with two volumes published separately by Samuel Butler and F.E. Maning in 1863. White South Afrian literature, again, begins in the 1800s, but black African literature begins very late – unless one includes the work of black British writers such as Equiano and Sancho in the eighteenth century. Caribbean literature, if one excludes the seemingly solitary exception of Mary Seacole (who should also properly be considered black British), really begins in the inter-war period in the twentieth century. India was therefore one of the first countries outside Britain and America to adopt English for literary purposes.

One other fact is often forgotten in nationalist zeal by good Indians: that the British did not generally want to see natives educated in English, partly for the racist reasons of keeping us in our place, and partly for more sophisticated cultural and political reasons. They were afraid that English education would cause too much trouble. And of course it did. Eventually it was English education that was responsible for Britain losing its Indian, and in consequence its world, empire. So Macaulay, the whipping-boy of those Indian who blindly favour the exclusive use of Indian regional languages, was actually quite enlightened. In allying himself with the progressive Anglicist lobby on the Committee of Public Instruction which he chaired he was, more importantly, allying himself with a large and growing body of Indian opinion that wanted English education and had already started getting it. His Minute (which introduced state-supported English-language education into India) was the same Minute which conceded the Indian could already (in 1835) use English with an use, fluency, and precision that would do credit to any Member of Macaulay’s own (British) Committee of Public instruction. We fought to get State-subsidised English education because we could see its advantages; the English hesitated to give it to us because they too could see the advantages that would accrue to us as well as the corresponding disadvantages to themselves. This Indian demand for State-supported English-language education created the precedent and the successful model for English-language education which was followed in British colonies in other parts of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, and thus laid the foundations for the development of English as a world language.

We come, next, to the question of the volume of the literature. Prose was the first of the literary forms in Indian English literature, and it continues to be the largest and most vigorous form. Born properly with the reforming zeal of Raja Rammonhan Roy, and aimed at educated people all over the country, the astonishing and irritating flexibility of the language was hammered into an effective weapon of exposition, argument, and exhortation against the British by a long line of eminent patriots such as Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi. More recent practitioners, such as Mr. Chaudhuri and Ved Mehta, have used it at least as effectively and creatively, if to quite different purposes.

As might be expected, poetry was the most important literary form of the nineteenth century, and through it is not of such central importance now, an ever-increasing number of Indian poets are writing and publishing in English.

Fiction in English presents an opposite sort of line on the graph, which compared to poetry, for it shows a steadily increasing popularity at first, and now an algebraic growth rate, both in the number of works published, and in the print runs of individual titles.

Drama in English is of course the last of the literary forms to flower and there have been only some two hundred plays published in English over a period of 150 years. But then if drama is to thrive, it is self-evident that it needs greater institutional and public support than any other form of literature.

It is also possible to examine the quantity of Indian literature in English by the historical periods into which it naturally falls. The first of these is roughly up to 1816, what might be called the ‘Pre-Roy’ period (i.e. before Raja Rammohun Roy). It is during this period that the use of English by Indians was an individual aberration or indulgence.

The second period begins with Roy and is typified by him: it is marked by a steadily increasing use of the language on the part of the growing nationalist class which was, during this period, entirely English-educated.

The third period begins in the 1930s with the arrival of the three major Indo-Anglian novelists, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. This coincides with the final phase of the nationalist movement which for the first time in Indian history awoke the masses of our peoples to their political rights and responsibilities. During this time, India’s conception of caste, which had strangled social behaviour for some thousands of years, was revolutionized, and Mahatma Gandhi’s Christianised and individual version of Karma and Bhakti was gradually replaced by the philosophical and practical materialism and individualism typified by the urbanizing and industrializing instincts of Jawaharlal Nehru, our first Prime Minister.

Having got rid of the English, the paradoxical Indians turned with a remarkable passion to the language of the people we had just expelled,: our Constitution, adopted in 1951, was written in English, and recognized two official languages, English and Hindi, which the government has made determined efforts to promote. With this patronage, Hindi has made significant strides, and the number of publications has been growing steadily. But what is not often realized is that the number of publications in English is also growing, both absolutely and as a proportion of all books published. Eight thousand of the seventeen thousand titles published in 1981 were in English, and comprised the bulk of our book exports worth £4.5 million. It is not surprising that India is among the ten largest publishers in the world; what is a little surprising, and very little known, is that India is now the largest publisher of English-language books in the world, after the United States and Britain.

So powerful has Indian English literature become that novelists who have won prizes for their work in Indian regional languages, such as Narendarpal Singh, have started writing in English: an exact reversal of the situation a hundred years ago when M.M. Dutt and Bankim Chander Chatterjee flirted with English before returning faithfully to Bengali.

Indian writers in English have now won every major literary prize: the Nobel Prize was won by Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, the Booker McConnell Prize for 1981 was won by Salman Rushdie. The Hawthornden Prize, the Commonwealth Poetry Prie, the Duff Cooper Memorial Award, the Winifred Holtby Award of the Royal Society for Literature, the English-Speaking Union’s Prize for the Best Novel of the Year – all of these have been won by Indian.

If Indian literature in English is of such quantity, variety, antiquity and quality, why is it so little known and recognised in the West? One reason is the self-interest of Western individuals and publishing companies. After independence, the number of opportunities for Western individuals and corporations multiplied in Africa and the Caribbean. By contrast, opportunities for Westerners in India disappeared almost overnight. It is therefore understandable that few Western literary scholars are interested in Indian English literature: there are fewer career opportunities. Indian legislation, combined with India’s own vigorous publishing industry means that the market available in India to Western publishers is negligible. India publishers themselves have only recently made any substantial attempts to promote their books in Britain.

Whereas the cause of Afro-Caribbean studies was given a powerful fillip by the political and social activism of black Americans which has had repercussions all over the world, there has been no similar factor promoting Indian or South Asian studies abroad. Unlike the African, the Indian diaspora is rarely perceived as a unity; indeed, it is rarely perceived at all. One has to remind intelligent and well-read people of the fact that the Indian diaspora is both more massive and more widespread than the African, extending to Fiji, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, the Seychelles, the Middle East, Britain and various Continental countries, Canada, the united States, Trinidad and Guyana, in addition to Nigeria and a number of countries in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa.

The Chinese diaspora is perhaps comparable, in both spread and size, but the Indian is more riven by divisions of language, religion, caste and family ties.

There are two other factors within our community that have historically militated against our own interest, and still do so. I refer to what I call the ‘cut-above syndrome’. Every Brahmin thinks himself superior to members of every other caste, the Muslim considers himself superior to the idolatrous Hindu, the Bengali thinks that the Punjabi is a philistine, the Punjabi in his turn reviles the cowardly Bengali for eating fish rather than meat, and so on. There is also what I call the ‘orphan-wish’ of Indian English writers: none of us wishes to acknowledge our literary ancestors, regional, Indian English, British, or whatever; all of us apparently sprang full-grown Minerva-like from Jupiter’s head! Our attitude is summed up by one of us who, on being asked about other Indian English writers, looked the questioner in the eye and quietly replied, “There are a few … but I am the only one worth reading.”

This sort of attitude is possible only for the extreme egoist (which that writer is not), or for one who is ignorant of the history and the body of the tradition in which he or she is writing.

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