

Towards the Concept of a New Nationhood: Languages and Literatures in India

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Some years ago I was in Syria meeting Arab writers from several parts of that country, and most of them asked me this question: ‘You have twenty-two languages, but you are one nation, whereas we have one language, one religion, but we are twenty-two nations! How do you explain that?’ What follows may provide a tentative explanation of this mystery called the Indian nation. I invoke two names, those of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore for this purpose. They provide an idea of the nation which is very different from the European idea of one language, one race, and one religion. Hence, although there was an attempt to evolve a European kind of nation, the idea of the nation, evident in all the Indian literatures, was very different. India contains many Indias; one encounters this when looking at literatures in the twenty-two languages of India. Whatever one can truly say about India, its exact opposite can also be maintained with equal truthfulness.

According to the 1961 census, there were 1,652 mother tongues, classified under 105 languages. These languages belong to four language families: the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibetan and Astro-Asiatic. But 90 of these 105 languages are spoken by less than 5 per cent of the population and by 65 small tribes. There are fifteen languages that are written, read and spoken by 95 per cent of the people in India. From this, the country might seem like a Tower of Babel. However, by knowing two or three languages one can get by nearly anywhere in India.

In our everyday speech activity, we find that many of us use at least three languages: one at home, another on the streets, still another at our office. We constantly translate from one language to the other. When you narrate to your old mother what happened in your office, you are translating spontaneously. And vice versa. Plurality in language and translation are inseparable.

One of my pet theories is that, in India, the more literate a person is, the fewer languages he or she knows. Those who are literate only in English are tempted to use only English. But in small town where I come from, even one

who may not be so literate – a bus stand coolie for instance – speaks Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, some Hindi, and some English. It is these people who have kept India together, not merely those who know only one language of hegemony.

People in India have always lived, even in the past, in an ambience of languages. Shankaracharya, the great philosopher who wrote in Sanskrit, must have also spoken Malayalam; he was from Kerala. Ananda Tirtha must have spoken Tulu at home and Kannada in the streets, but he too wrote in Sanskrit. Ramanuja, who must have been profoundly moved by Tamil saints – they were non-Brahmin saints, and they wrote in Tamil – took a lot from them, but also wrote in Sanskrit.

These philosophers who propagated the nations of monism, dualism and qualified monism, travelled throughout the country and acquired disciples. They also influenced mystical poets who wrote in regional languages, and whose utterances became myths and poetry in languages of the common people which I call *bhashas*. With such happenings a profound egalitarian impulse shot through the hegemonic structure of Indian society. The caste system was questioned not after the Europeans came to India; it had been questioned much earlier. In the 12th century, the great Kannada Vachanakara poet, Basava, got into great trouble for arranging a marriage between Brahmingirl and a Pariah.

The Buddha, on the other hand, chose not to write in Sanskrit, the ‘father tongue’. (My friend, the scholar A. K. Ramanujam always called Sanskrit the father tongue, somewhat like English is today.) The saint-poets of the medieval period in India did not use Sanskrit at all, they used rather the *ibhashas*, the languages of India. They were mystic whose experience of God was immediate and not speculative. But they were deeply concerned with the society. Hence, although they were mystic, they were not apart from the society. Belonging to different parts of India, these mystics, by opting to use the language of everyday speech to convey their religious experience, actually began to communicate with their gods in the languages of the streets and of the kitchen. There was indeed a special language to address the God, but by their use of a familiar language, the mystic brought God to the common people. As a direct consequence, their poetry empowered women and the lower castes for the first time. For instance, in Karnataka, menstruating women are considered impure. But the mystics said: ‘No, they are as pure as ever,’ defying a commonly held belief of the time. In this sense, the

empowerment of women in India goes back to 800 years.

The spiritual insights and philosophical subtleties which marked Sanskrit, the language of the elite classes, thus became the possession of the Indian *bhashas*. Since the medieval period, these *bhashas* have been the conduits of egalitarian passion working through the history of India. It has been a continuous process of inclusion, rather than a negation of any language; of Sanskrit in the past, or of the *bhashas*, or of English later on.

The most recent of these great saints, who may be described as one of the great critical insiders of Indian civilization (I use the term ‘critical insider’ for many of these people; they are insiders to our tradition, but they are critical of this tradition even if they are within it), was Mahatma Gandhi, who wrote in Gujrati, Hindustani, and also in English.

In our times, English serves the communicative function that Sanskrit did in the past. It was Sanskrit that our writers had to cope with then. A 14th century Kannada writer once remarked that there was nothing left in Sanskrit, as every thing is taken away from it. The Indian *bhashas*, which had earlier digested the essence of Sanskrit, today cope with the challenges of the West. Thus Kafka, Tolstoy and other European writers have influenced writers in the Indian *bhashas*.

I do not use the term ‘mother tongue’ as it is understood by Europeans. For instance, some of the best Kannada writers such as Conrad, who wrote in their language of adoption, these cases are very few. In India, however, many writers do not speak the same language in which they may be writing. I once asked one of the greatest Kannada poets, who used the Kannada language magically, just as Blake used English, whether he had always spoken that language. He replied ‘No, I spoke Marathi at home, but until I was 12 or 13, I did not know that I was speaking two languages!’ He was then a very colourful old man. At that point, his daughter-in-law came into the room where we were talking in Kannada and whispered something in his ear. He turned and spoke to her in Marathi, without realising that he was speaking in Marathi. This kind of shift takes place constantly and quite unselfconsciously.

Multiple tongues and texts

Shifts in tongue and texts are true of a large number of writers in Hindi who speak Rajastani, Bhojpuri and many other languages related to Hindi. The characters in their fiction may be actually speaking these languages, but

they are rendered for us in Hindi.

More significant than this in our understanding of what constitutes a text is a unique Indian phenomenon often bypassed. Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* isn't a text in a single language. An early poet of our times in Kannada, Shishunil Sharief has poems where the first line is in Kannada, the second line is in Telugu and the third in what may be called Urdu. He came from an area where these languages are spoken. As he was a mystical poet of the people, I am sure his immediate audience would understand all these languages and their copresence in the same poem must have made a unique sense to them. They were listening to the silence beyond the spoken word – especially to the silence celebrated in a variety of words.

Along with this free play of languages, which existed in an ambience allowing for shifts and mixtures, and also because of such a free play aside from hegemonic indications that languages carry with them, the poets of the past in Indian languages could acquire the territory of Sanskrit for their vernaculars. The use of vernaculars never seemed to threaten free communication with others, isolating each language group in its own territory. Such a process of cultural inclusion and quiet synthesis has gone on in India for more than a thousand years. First, if it was the language of the Gods making way for the language of the common people, now it is the official domain of English making way, however reluctantly, to the vernaculars in the process of the empowerment of the people. Translation, oral as well as textual, was the principal mode in the past as well as the present for such negotiations.

In support of my ideas, here are some concrete examples. The coastal Karnataka has small town called Udupi, a name made familiar by its inhabitants who have opened restaurants all over India. There are at least three languages spoken in and around Udupi. Tulu is the language of a large number of its inhabitants, the peasants and workers and it is also a language rich in folklore. Not only the lower castes speak it, but a Sanskritised version of it, considered impure by native shudra speakers is spoken as mother tongue by the Brahmins as well. Next to Tulu is Konkani, mainly the language of the trading castes.

Kannada exists in Udupi along with other languages. One could say it is perceived as the language of high culture, whatever that means. Kannada is also the mother-tongue of a large section of people. However, the point I want to make is this. A large body of Kannada literature in the past as well as the present has come from this coastal region. If one encounters a stranger

on the streets, the language used for communication is Kannasa. But a Tulu or Konkani speaker encountering other speakers of those languages would invariably use the language native to the speaker. Otherwise it would be considered arrogant behaviour. And almost everyone of the native Tulu and Konkani speakers would understand Kannada and if he or she happens to be a writer, most probably the language of choice for writing would be Kannada.

Thus *Chomana dudi*, a celebrated novel in Kannada by K. Shivaram Karanth, is written in Kannada. Choma the hero of the novel is an untouchable, and in real life, he would be mostly speaking in Tulu. In fact, one could say much of the novel takes place in the language of Tulu, and the author Karanth while writing the novel is truly translating from Tulu to Kannada.

But is this not true also of the good fiction in English written in India? Isn't Salman Rushdie translating from Bombay Hindi in many of his creatively rich passages? The best effects of Arundhati Roy, I feel, lie in her great ability to mimic the Syrian Christian Malayalam. RajaRao's path-breaking *Kanthapura*, although it is written in English, is truly Kannada novel in its texture as well as narrative mode – deriving both from the oral traditions of Karnataka. With most of the truly creative novelists in English, who seem to have made a contribution to the way the language English is handled I would venture to make this remark. For them to create a unique work in English is to transcreate from an Indian language milieu.

Epics as Language: A thousand years ago, Pampa, another great Kannada poet (the fact that I cite examples from my language should not be mistaken as chauvinism, it merely gives me a sense of authenticity) wrote of Arjuna, his hero. Being a Jain, he could not make Krishna his hero, Krishna being a spiritual figure. He instead made Arjuna the hero of his work, and identified him with his own ruler, the Hindu king Arikesari, who was also his friend. Idealizing Arikesari, he created the Hindu king after Arjuna. He also did something very interesting: he mixed his own narrative with that of the *Mahabharata*. He used a new figure of speech, *Samasa Alankara*, which draws very unrealistic equations between a great epic of the past and a contemporary event. Personally, I think this a great device, one which Pampa used to voice his worldly concerns. It was a daring initiative, to make one's own river flow into the rivers of the past.

Not only have experiences been transferred from one language into another in a continuous and spontaneous act of translation in the course of daily life, but Indians have also lived simultaneously through many ages. The *Ma-*

habharata has been used freely for this purpose. Therefore, it is possible to say that apart from the innumerable languages of India, there are, metamorphically speaking, two more languages: the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Many Indians, I dare say, have never read for the first time this epics. Yet they have encountered them right from childhood, through several modes.

A translator of Indian literature once narrated the following experience. He was collecting oral stories in Kannada language. There are a thousand such stories in Kannada, which are sung or narrated from memory by non-literate rural people. In the original episode in the *Ramayana*, Rama advises Sita that she should stay back in the palace and not accompany him to the forest where he has been exiled. He says: ‘You do not have to come with me. You are princes. Your feet are tender and you have been brought up with such care, so do not come to the forest with me.’ But Sita says: ‘No, I am your wife, and I should go!’ However, in one of the folk stories, when Rama similarly advises Sita, she says: ‘In every other *Ramayana* I know of, Rama lets Sita go with him. How can you deny it to me?’ Thus India knit, according to this translator, through an inter-textuality, which occurs not only across the texts which we read, but across oral texts as well. That is why I state that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* could be two languages which knit India together. This rural Sita is aware that there are other *Ramayanas* without even knowing the names of the authors.

Plurality and hybridity, unity and diversity

For the modern Indian writer, therefore, there is a confluence of languages: Sanskrit, English, perhaps translations from French and Portuguese, and certainly Russian, because Tolstoy was read even during British rule. English was used not only to read British writers. I do not think Jane Austin ever influenced an Indian writer, but Tolstoy certainly did. English, being a hospitable language offering many translations, was used to read much of the work from Europe.

I wish to emphasize this element of plurality within India. For instance, there was an attempt in Tamil, the oldest of the modern languages, to develop an alternative to Sanskrit poetics and grammar, and also a theory of poetry that was very different. Great writers like Tagore and Gandhi became much more than literary figures for the people who spoke the languages in

which they wrote.

An interesting point may be made here. While there are certain metrical compositions which can only be read, there are also compositions, in a certain kind of rhythm, which can be easily memorized. Some of the great poets used rhythmical expressions that enabled a composition to directly enter the memory of the people. There are wonderful memory devices within those metres, and they are present in the common speech of the people.

Literary figures were however generally in the high mode, which is classical. There are thus two streams entering into India's languages: the classical and the *desi*, or the indigenous stream. After Kalidasa (this is a daring statement that I make, as I have always done), there had been no great literary figure in India until Kabir came on the scene. Interesting here is the fact that at one time a literary figure could emerge only in Indian *bhashas*, Bengali, which is neither as widespread as Hindi nor is ancient as Tamil. One of the Indian *bhashas* like any other, Bengali produced a literary figure equal in stature to Kalidasa, a figure who will be emulated all over India. This must have been due to the spirit of nationalism in those days. Since independence, however, we have again become so Euro-centric that we can not think of any Indian language producing a literary figure for the whole country. Instead, we borrow our literary figures from Europe.

I would like at this juncture to say something about unity and diversity. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the great philosopher, once said at Sahitya Academi, the Academy of Indian *Letters*, that since all the twenty-two languages are represented there, Indian literature is one, although written in many languages. The use of the phrase 'unity and diversity' in politics and in culture has now become cliched. In fact, I would shy away from using the phrase myself, until I suddenly realized it could still be applied, if one thought of it as a process.

If you overstress unity in India, and maintain that there is only one India, then diversities begin to appear. This becomes a political phenomena too. Thus, after Indira Gandhi, who wanted a strong Centre, there have been problems in Assam, in Punjab and in Kashmir. It has been argued that as Tamil is older than Hindi, Hindi should not be imposed on Tamil. This could be stretched to mean that Hindi should not be imposed on Bengali, or on Marathi. So, if one overly stresses unity, diversities begin to assert themselves. On the otherhand, trying to emphasize diversity, arguing that Indians are all different, and that they have nothing in common, makes me

uneasy and I start to feel that there is something common after all between a Bengali and myself and everyone else. We are all Indians. So unity-diversity appears true only in actuality and in these last fifty years we have seen an on-going drama of unity in diversity.

As far as diversity is concerned, over the last fifty years there have been many attempts at grasping the post-colonial situation. Paradigms have been tried and given up, communities imagined and been dissolved, traditions constructed and de-constructed, the principles of unity and of difference alternately appealed to. Further, the western presence has been acknowledged and negated, the radical European concepts and models have alternated with a return to indigenous roots, to the classical and folk elements of India's heritage. Decolonization has become a major preoccupation.

Creativity in India has just been released afresh. Literary discourse is marked by the negotiation of the necessary heterogeneity, using a concept of identity that lives through difference and hybridity. Over time, this hybridity enters the languages. There are a number of words of Portuguese and Arab origin in Kannada, and quite often people speaking that language are not even aware that they are using words from other languages; such is the way with the Indian *bhashas*. The philosophers say that there is a little fire somewhere in the *atma* (soul) which can digest anything, known in Sanskrit as the *jeernagni*, the digestive fire. I consider the Indian *bhashas* the great *jeernagnis* of India, because they digested Sanskrit at one time, as they digest Europe now. They have been transacting with different languages in this manner right through their history.

A great and new phenomenon in the Indian languages were the *dalits*, the untouchables, who wrote, first in Marathi, then in Gujrati and are writing now in Kannada, Telugu and Tamil. Thirty centuries of silent suffering, a whole culture of silence, lay behind their articulations of indignation. There is a kind of subaltern protest in their writings. They have succeeded in re-drawing the literary map of their languages by exploring a whole new continent of experience, and also in revitalizing language with styles, timbers, words and phrases so far kept out of literary use. The tendency of Indian languages has been that whatever is closest to Sanskrit has been used by the elite groups. When new groups begin to talk, words which have never been used in a literary context enter in the literary texts. I shall have something more to say about this phenomenon a little later on.

In addition to this *dalit* literature, India also has a committed feminist

literature. Some of the great women writers are Lalitambika Antarjanam, Mahadevi Varma, Mahashweta Devi and Vaidehi (Karnataka). These are not self-consciously feminist writers, but I shall not dwell further on this.

Last of all, let me make a personal statement, since I am myself a creative writer. I feel uneasy when I write just academically, because I may not be handling the issues objectively and rationally. But when I write in a creative idiom, I am more comfortable. So I will end my observations about Indian literature, and how it makes for a new kind of a nation, on a personal note. I use traditional Indian home, my own childhood home, as a metaphor for Indian literature.

My father and his friends frequented the frontyard of the house, which had a raised urban platform under a country-tiled roof, known in Karnataka as Mangalore-tiled roofs. The upper classes usually have Mangalore-tiled roofs over their homes, while less well-off have round-tiled roofs. In the frontyard of my home, caste was not a problem. My father's non-Brahmin friends in the village came to consult him about auspicious days for weddings and other ceremonies and, more frequently, to settle land-related disputes. They sat around him on coloured mats. The very poor who belonged to the same caste sat on one of the steps leading to the platform. This was like a porch, a matless, quite cold, but well-swept space.

My father offered everyone palm and betel nut, and even tobacco to chew. This frontyard space, framed impressively by massive, well-carved pillars, was a place of authority, yet cheerful and full of tidings of the temporal world outside and the spiritual world beyond. On auspicious occasions, for example, traditional story-tellers would be invited to recite in the frontyard.

As a child, I came to know of the affairs of the world, I heard even of Edmund Burke and Gandhi, in this man-dominated frontyard of the house. My father was a self-taught man, literate in English, Sanskrit and Kannada, and therefore an unusual and sought-after scholar in the hilly villages around. He spoke enthusiastically to villagers of the freedom struggle, then being led by Mahatma Gandhi. And the villagers would gossip, narrating again and again the same stories about the British government and its officers, whom they admired for their efficiency, and generosity. On auspicious occasions, some elder of the other who came as a guest to our house would describe the glories of the *Dasara* in Mysore. Or he would choose an appealing episode from the *Mahabharata* and sonorously read it out.

There were only men in the frontyard, and if women came at all they

were taken inside to a cool dark hall which was the centre of the house, called *nadumane*. If the women were Brahmins, they went deeper into the house., to the place for family dining. The spaces of the house had their own meaning, depending on where you were and where you sat. The *nadumane* had coloured bamboo mats spread on a smooth, cold and swept floor. The family dining space, more private, had wooden planks to sit on.

Adjoining this was the most private place of all, the kitchen, which had a niche for the household god, where an oil lamp burnt night and day. Only my mother had free entry to this space; even my father could go there only after he had bathed and removed his everyday shirt. Next to the dining hall was a big bathroom, and near that was a work-shed for the servants. Beyond that was the backyard; the most magical space for me. Had I not frequented it and eavesdropped on the gossip there, I would never have become a writes, because I got my material from the backyard.

Into the backyard came women of the village, either to draw water from the well, or just to talk to my mother, or receive a gift of leftover special food which my mother would give them unsolicited. These used to be gracious moments of kindness and friendship and courtesy among the women. A woman might refuse politely, but my mother would keep talking and say ‘not for you, but for your child’! After the exchange of such civilized courtesies, much more would take place in the backyard as the women relaxed and the conversation became more intimate.

My mother was ritually more orthodox than my father, who drank coffee and who knows what else in the town. Yet, in the backyard, caste barriers among women were forgotten and they would confide the secrets of their sexual lives. I heard a lot as a child about the sexual life of women, and about affairs in the village. So I knew that no matter what was presented in the front, the spiritual India, there was something else at the back, even in the village. This is how writers are made, in the backyard, not in the frontyard of civilization. The frontyard produces professors!

Women would talk the everyday sorrows of the complicated relationships between men and women, and speak of bodily aches and pains that would never get cured and could never be shared with their menfolk. The world of the frontyard and the world of the backyard were such different worlds! The backyard world was not only the secret world of women. Here mother cooked delicious smelling dishes from herbs and leaves that grew beneath the untended bushes. Only my mother knew them by their names, and

every small thing that grew had a name which never entered the learned dictionaries of my language.

My grandfather would also venture into the backyard to collect roots and leaves of plants as medicine for the sick in the village. It taboo to reveal names, which were mostly in Sanskrit, or even identify the plants. Such medicines were effective only if secrecy was observed. Today, I wish secrecy had been observed, because, under globalization, most of those medicines are going to be American medicines and will cost large amount of money to obtain.

Grandfather used to assure me as a child that he would pass on to me the secret knowledge when I grew up. But I grew up to be a different kind of person because of the influence of my father's frontyard, where the use of Sanskrit led to Anglicization and worked on me to make me modern. So the education that began in the frontyard of my traditional home finished in England and America, the great frontyards of modern civilisation.

The indian literatures in the *bhashas* have a frontyard and a backyard as well. I use the word *bhashas* since I do not like the word 'vernacular'. It is very condescending word and should never be used. Nor I am happy with the word 'regional language'. One does not call Portuguese a regional language, so I do not want to call any of my languages a regional language. All the languages of the world are also regional languages. Even the word 'dialect' I do not like, for it is of dubious usefulness. For if a dialect has an army and a national poet, then it becomes a language.

Which is the frontyard of India's *bhasas*? I will take the example of Kannada, my own language. The frontyard had Sanskrit literature of pan-Indian fame. But it had a secret backyard, fragrant, fertile and neglected. Here one could find the innumerable indigenous folk and oral traditions in Kannada, the *desi* traditions. The classics in Sanskrit constitute the *marga*, the great road. *Desi* and *marga* are actually the words used by Pampa a thousand years ago. His genius lay in the telling combinations he made of the two, and what he did had implications for the treatment of his themes; it was not just as aesthetic exercise.

The universal truths celebrated in Sanskrit literature were not only given a local habitation and a name but, cohabiting in Kannada with the folk imagination, they became pulsatingly alive. The two worlds of the frontyard and the backyard have been meeting ever since in Kannada literary works. The backyard is inexhaustible. From it, as literacy spreads, more and more

people emerge into the frontyard of all civilizations, like the *dalits* and women today, bringing memories and desires to integrate with the mainstream of the frontyard literature, the world literature. The backyard, which is still the world of women, of secret therapeutic herbs, and roots and tendrils for the creation of new dishes, keeps literature in the *bhashas* continuously supplied with fresh themes and stylistic patterns.

Sanskrit as a language had no backyard of its own. It had to admit the *bhashas* of the backyard to ensure the survival and continuity of its spiritual substance. In the *bhashas* of India, the frontyard contains the classical literature, Sanskrit literature. However, what dominate the goings-on in the frontyard of our lives are not just the Sanskrit classics. There is also the powerful presence of English, the language of modernity. But neither Sanskrit nor English have any power if isolated from *bhashas*, in fact they are impotent if they fail to interact with the world of the backyard.

Literatures in the *bhashas* have also constituted themselves as literary traditions, in search of their own particular royal highways. Tamil and Kanada have searched actively, and discovered their royal highways. A royal highway is meant for those who can compete with the classical Sanskrit tradition. What happens then to the backyard? The linguistics of cultures such as those small, powerless castes and their areas are undermined in the process. Yet while these sub-groups can be undermined, they cannot be destroyed. When the royal highway becomes pompous and loud and artificially rhetorical, and therefore solely a voice of public emotion, it loses the flexibility and truthfulness of common speech. It is at such moments of cultural crisis that the traditions in the backyard make a comeback and revitalize our languages. This was what Blake and Hopkins did to the English language in their own country, and what has been done with much greater consequence for our culture by poets such as Tukaram, Basava, Mirabai and Kabir. When such people speak the language, they bring new life into the languages.

Women have without doubt been empowered by the great saint-poets of India. So it is misleading to speak about literature in the Indian *bhashas* without recognizing its intimate relationship with larger political and cultural questions. The tradition of lively dialectical contention between the royal highway and the indigenous in India will be marginalized if globalization encroches upon everything; if everything loses out to the corporate world. That is the danger in India today. Even Yadavs, who are supposedly born into the lowly but noble caste of Krishna in India, have begun to rule

in the manner of barbarians. Even the so-called sons of the soil, such as the Shiv Sena in Mumbai, seem only too eager to sign a memorandum of understanding with polluting and exploitative industries which threaten to deplete the fertile backyard. There is still a fertile backyard. But if this continues, there will be no place for either a leisurely frontyard, or for a dark and fertile backyard, in the industrial and corporate no man's land which we increasingly inhabit in India today.