

Editorial

It is difficult to present Indian literature as a unitary and unified category as India is a microcosm of many languages and literary cultures that have resisted the centralizing imperatives of a nation-state. Our creativity has been dialogic, and our literary discourse marked by the negotiation of a necessary heterogeneity, advancing a conception of identity that lives through difference and hybridity. The spirit of multilingual and multi-religious India embodies the civilizational unity of India, not, of course, in the sense in which it was posited by the orientalist scholarship and which subsequently became synonymous with a regressive cultural nationalism. The Sahitya Akademi of India underlines this concern with the essential unity of India with its credo that Indian literature is one though written in many languages. At the same time it rejects the claim that a nation-state should act as the authority to legitimise 'literature' or legislate on it.

During the colonial period the British had sought to standardize India's diverse literary culture under the Western eyes. The orientalist literary historiography made selective appropriations of our past to frame them in their own conceptions of national literature equating Indian literature with the high textuality of Sanskrit marginalising the various Indian vernaculars (or more appropriately, the *bhashas*) many of which have millennia-long traditions. When Raymond Schwab spoke about a second 'Oriental' Renaissance in the West, it was also done with a view to privilege the classical languages of the Orient.

The colonial period was also marked by the claims of western modernity to represent itself through English (part of the baggage of the *mission civilatrice*). Many of the Indian nationalist leaders who led the freedom movement were bilingual and communicated to the masses in their own languages. In the north, in particular, Hindi and Urdu became vehicles of anti-colonial resistance. One cannot, however, completely dismiss the western influences. We can, for instance, clearly find the

effects of western trends in the historical romances in Malayalam, Tamil and Marathi. Chandu Menon, author of an early Malayalam novel *Indulekha*, had as his model Benjamin Disraeli's now forgotten novel *Henrietta Temple*. However, it will not be quite wide of the mark to maintain that it is in their own languages that the Indian writers found their *métier*. One may recall how Michael Madhusudan Dutt, after publishing his verse initially in English and emulating Scott or Byron, wrote his magnum opus the *Meghanadbadh Kavya* in Bangla. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, after writing his first novel *Rajmohan's Wife* in English, soon switched to his mother tongue for his creative writing. Even the English writings of Indian writers like Raja Rao carry the unmistakable flavour of a regional language. Mark how *Kanthapura* carries the distinctive cadence of Kannada.

English, the language of the 'Cosmopolis', (a term popularised by Sheldon Pollock) is everywhere (and therefore homeless) and has emerged as the privileged site for a pan-Indian outlook problematizing the role of the *bhashas*. Salman Rushdie sounds like a latter-day Macaulay when he insists that it is only the Indian Writing in English that represents the Indian creative urge and not the literatures in Indian languages. The sweeping generalization betrays an ignorance of the vast corpus of our literature in the *bhashas*.

The conceptual tools of the majority of our Anglophile critics are hardly adequate to grasp the cultural nuances of works in various Indian languages. Unfortunately, the pan-Indian writing in English asserts its hegemonic role as it assumes the mantle of cosmopolitan exchange. Since English in India relates to fewer registers, there is a greater pull for homogenization and essentializing of reality through erasure of differences, or reducing the pluralities to a conflated idea of Indianness as a theme or worldview. Whereas a writer like Raja Rao can successfully integrate myth and history, realism with fabulation, through the medium of English, in most other writers, there is always an obsessive desire for, what Meenakshi Mukherjee has

called, 'The Anxiety of Indianness.' The *bhasha* writers, on the other hand, do not have to wear the badge of authenticity to declare their Indianness, which they take for granted, nor do their readers ever question it. The postcolonial discourse may have been expedient politically or as a critical methodology but it has also been presented as an exclusionary category in relation to the 'third world literature' as it tends to subsume the several distinctive voices emerging from various locations.

In this issue of *Summerhill: IAS Review* we shift our focus to the writings from Indian languages, in particular, the fictional works in Hindi, Urdu, Oriya, Kannada,

Bangla, Malayalam, Punjabi, Assamese, Gujarati and Marathi. We believe that our postcolonial condition finds its most authentic expression in the works of Indian languages, which through a complex of cultural negotiation have evolved their 'alternative modernities,' which question or redeploy the values of the modern West from the perspectives of so-called pre-modern societies. Literary and cultural texts play a major role in this revisionary exercise. It is hoped that the readers will be led to more texts from the rich repertoire of Indian languages.

SATISH C. AIKANT