IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSONS...

The season of literary festivals or ‘litfests’ (to be trendy!), has

virtually come to an end with the Festival of Letters of the

Sahitya Akademi. It is not blowing our own trumpets, but stating

the obvious, when I say that our Festival retains its original charm

of over nearly half a century, because it really is all about

genuinely promoting writers and writing without any market

or profit considerations. Granting that we are able to maintain

it this way solely because of the non-profit nature of our

operations, made possible through government funding, one has

to still look at the motives behind many of the other festivals,

and the sources of their funding. One would then be surprised

to find that these festivals also run on sponsorships—public and

private sector enterprises are supporting their operations a hundred

percent! Then where is the cause for dilution, mixing excellence

with pedantry, and eminence with fawning sycophancy? Once

again, one will have to look closely at the motives of the

promoters. This is not to generally condemn all literary festivals

in the country—there are of course at least a few brilliant ones

like the newly instituted *The Hindu* Literary Festival in which

an annual award is given over the last two years, after astute

evaluations. However, the general complaint that the Indian

language writer is just a showpiece in the works, where English

rules the roost, and the various Indian literatures find little

recognition in such venues, remain. Some attribute this to the

colonial hang-over (remember our old coinage, ‘the brown saheb’?),

while others say that the English language overpowers Indian

languages with its newfound muscle-flexing ability. We have to

now examine the truth or otherwise of these charges. And along

with it, the inter-relationship of English and the Indian languages

too.

Language brings knowledge, and with it, power. We have

more than two hundred years of colonial past. During the height

of the colonial power, their language, English, got embedded

in the consciousness of the upper crust of our society, and it

gradually percolated down to the lower levels, getting established

in the process. The so-called Bengal Renaissance and the

renaissance movements in other regional-language literatures are

partly a direct result of this phenomenon. To a great extent our

nationalist movements, and the final freedom struggle, drew

strength from its leading elite who used the English language

to the advantage of the cause. During these epoch-making times,

Indian English came into being. The literature in this language

began to develop from the early 1820s, and has by now become

a full-fledged literature, with world-level recognition given to

many IE writers, especially after the early 1980s, with Salman

Rushdie winning the Booker Prize. The question whether we

are writing in English because of a colonial hangover, is too

complex to answer in a sentence or two. Suffice it to say that

whatever is it that changes our lives as never before will certainly

leave their strong traces, which cannot be erased. We cannot

put the clock back. So it is with English in India.

English is a global language that holds the key to greater

knowledge and power. Language, as is well-established by now,

is a living entity. English, in its Indianised version, is not a colonial

relic, much less a sign of colonial hangover! When the idealistic

age (read Gandhian-Nehruvian or post-Independence) lost out

to the pragmatic age (both at the individual and national levels),

people began to go for what really brings in the goods! Look

at how our politics and the spheres of commerce, industry,

science, education etc., underwent radical changes over the last

four decades induced largely by English, and you’ll understand

what I am talking about.

Now, the question whether English compromises the

survival of regional literatures has to be looked into, and the

forces at work examined.

First of all, it is not possible to engage purely with English

or with a regional language in our situation. The vast majority

of writers know English and one or more regional languages.

Those who write successfully in English apparently have an edge

over the others, because of the reach of the language, and the

kind of readership it has. There is a general perception that

regional language writers are doomed to fail in the race, and

lose relevance ultimately, like the regional languages themselves!

This is a really pessimistic view, and not the reality. We go on

living as we are, although our lifestyle is gradually getting

westernised. Likewise, regional languages still live their own

lives, though apparently influenced by all the changes taking

place. Regional languages, however, retain their own space and

identity. Take the case of eminent writers in regional languages.

ONV Kurup, the renowned Malayalam poet whose works I have

translated into English, won the Jnanpith award and the Padma

Vibhushan within the space of a couple of months! Another

great writer who got the Jnanpith and subsequently the Padma

Bhushan, is UR Anantha Murthy from Kannada. I’m just

mentioning two writers who came randomly to my mind. There

are scores of others. They are all nationally acclaimed, with

literary and civic honours, and stand at the pinnacle of their glory.

Anyone who is writing in a regional language can look forward

to that kind of fame and acceptance, and many more at the

national and regional levels, if their output is outstanding.

Now, those who write successfully in English have a wider

reach, within the country and abroad, owing to the peculiarly

privileged position of the language. And the ‘successful’ ones

are really making it! The money is good too, running into

millions in some cases. This makes anyone with a flair for writing

nurse ambitions to write in English and make it rich and successful.

This is not to say that all those who write in English are not

genuinely creative. There are a lot many IE writers who think

of nothing else but truthful self-expression. Many of these

writers would have had English practically as their mother

tongue. There are others like me who perchance got into writing

in English solely for self-expression, having come to think and

dream in that language from the dawn of their adulthood, under

the pressure of the circumstances they found themselves in

during that part of their lives. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, the

great Malayalam fiction writer, is reputed to have written the

first draft of his masterpiece *Baalyakaala Sakhi* (Childhood

Girlfriend) in English, while on his extended wanderings in North

India, away from home.

One way to get regional language literatures into the

mainstream and global attention is to have competent translations

of them into English. This has been an activity going on for

the last half century, gaining considerable momentum over the

last couple of decades. However, for some unknown reason,

translations from Indian literatures, even those coming out from

MNC publishing houses, do not seem to interest the global

reader, unlike the translations from Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish,

Czechoslovakian etc. Publishing circles often complain that the

quality of the English of the translations is comparatively low.

But of late, the leading publishers of the country who bring

out translations have seemingly solved that problem by engaging

the best editors. Still translations do not work; they don’t sell

in hundreds of thousands, unlike a few of the IE novels. And

the remuneration for translators remains woefully low.

Our awards and prizes at the regional level like the state

Sahitya Akademi awards, or the national level ones like the Sahitya

Akademi awards, the Jnanpith Award, Saraswati Samman or Kabir

Samman, while still holding their importance, are not apparently

so ‘glitzy’ as a Booker, because of the difference in the scale

of global publicity. Arundhati Roy instantly inspired a slew of

fervent ‘academic’ papers on her *God of Small Things* from venerable

old professors—who wouldn’t have written a single word on any

of the masterpieces in their mother-tongues—which they kept

sending to *Indian Literature* seeking publication! I personally think

that *God of Small Things* is a grossly over-rated work compared

to her brilliant non-fiction writings which display total honesty

and integrity.

The problem with such a situation is that true, genuine,

creative writers in IE, who produce works with the scent of life,

do not get past the marketing squad. Writers like Kiran Nagarkar

who has produced wonderful novels like *Cuckold*, in the line of

greats like Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, Raja Rao, Nayantara

Sahgal, Anita Desai et al, cannot catch up with the likes of Chetan

Bhagat. One has to remember here that writers who have proven

their talent, like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh,

Upamanyu Chatterjee and others, were fortunate enough to

begin their careers when the market was not so soulless, and

also to find insighful editors and publishers.

As to the question whether enough is being done for the

regional literatures, we have to observe that Sahitya Akademi

and the Akademis of regional literatures are very active in most

of the major literatures in India, and give a lot of incentives

for writers. But can creative writing be encouraged this way?

While it is true that ample recognition at the right time can

encourage writers and spur on their creativity, it is debatable

whether they will inspire them to engage in writing in their

own mother tongues and not hanker after English, especially

in the case of younger generations.

Language solely defining one’s identity is becoming old

hat now because of the ‘globalising’ effects we all are experiencing.

Another factor is that, language nationalism doesn’t work very

well in India, because we have become a very strong Central

entity, and federalism is being gradually eroded in our country

in myriad ways. Indian regional sub-nationalities have been

steadily getting weakened. So, regional languages too weaken,

as language and nationality hold a complementary/supplementary

relationship. Another factor is that, along with English, Hindi

also has risen as a language of knowledge and power, and is

effecting a gradual eclipse of regional languages. So, a natural

process is at work, so to say, the result of which is quite

unpredictable.

The decline of common schools due to the rise of ‘English

Medium’ schools right across the country began to steal away

youngsters from their mother tongues since the last three-four

decades. Today, the majority of the population living in

metropolises, cities, towns and townships all over the country

invariably belongs to these couple of generations; this development

has been directly at the cost of their mother-tongues, including

the most famously proud ones like Bengali and Tamil as I had

the occasion to learn from personal experience during my long

years at *Indian Literature*.

Being embedded in the strong culture of the mothertongue

and the opportunity of exposure to English in an equal

measure had brought about the rise of great bilingual writers

like Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre of Marathi/English, Kamala

Das/Madhavikkutty/Kamala Surayya of Malayalam/English and

many others. Now this pattern is slowly disappearing, though

there are exceptions like Ankur Betageri, a fine young poet and

fiction-writer of Kannada/English; I’m sure there are many more

like him, though the trend is gradually downward.

Many writers like Jayanta Mahapatra established themselves

in English and then turned to their mother tongues, feeling some

compunction apparently, while many others are lured by the

prospects of becoming successful in English after establishing

themselves in their mother-tongues. So, the balance is somehow

maintained, one hopes!

There are many eminent writers like UR Anantha Murthy

of Kannada, K.Satchidanandan of Malayalam, the late Nirmal

Verma of Hindi and hundreds of others, who, though they knew

English very well, wouldn’t engage in creative writing in that

language, but did their intellectual work in it. Satchidanandan

translates poetry extensively into English, though. Such writers

strengthen the case for regional languages.

Indian English Novelists like Usha K.R., Aravind Adiga and

several others are noted for their originality. Indeed, the apex

of the pyramid is always formed by a few, though towards the

base, it broadens into what I described in one of the previous

editorials, as ‘market products.’

There are fine poets writing in English like Jeet Thayil,

Priya Sarukkai Chabria and others followed by a promising

younger generation including Lekshmy Rajeev, Sridala Swami,

Meena Kandasamy, Radha Gomaty, Shimanta Bhattacharyya and

a few others. A whole crop of North-Eastern poets like Temsula

Ao, Mona Zote, Robin S Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang,

Kynpham Singh, Mamang Dai and others are writing excellent

poetry in English. For many of the NE poets, English is as good

as mother tongue because of missionaries who spread English

education early on. I have published all of them and can bear

witness first hand to the fact that English as a creative medium

is really relevant in India, and is not a big brother or colonial

relic.

The Indian languages and English having a symbiotic

relationship, each strengthening the other, is the ideal situation.

It is possible too, if language and humanities are given emphasis

in our country like in the industrialised West, and if we are not

too anxious to fashion the futures of our children hammering

them into the shapes of doctors, engineers, IT professionals,

MNC managers and a whole army of ‘nut-and-bolt’ savvy

technicians, bankers and marketers, in chasing our national dream

of the growth index in two digits soaring endlessly.

So, the literary festivals continue to be as they are, largely

because of the limitations of the promoters involved, and not

solely because of the hegemonic ‘take over’ of English or any

other language.

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Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize

in 1996, passed away recently aged 94. She is remembered as

‘the Mozart of Poetry’ and a musicologist friend of mine, posted

in a group mail, a celebrated musician’s performance on Youtube

on the day she died, by way of tribute! She too, like many other

leftist intellectuals in Poland, had gradually parted company from

the ideology as practical politics on the ground under Soviet

hegemony gradually turned anti-human. She was one of the

earliest writers who, as early as 1964, came out in the open

demanding freedom of speech in the ironclad Polish establishment.

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In our pages, we begin with ‘Masters.’ We have the pre-eminent

Tamil woman writer R. Chudamani remembered suitably by a

moving story, translated by C.T. Indra.

Our ‘In Memoriam’ section begins with P. Lal (Professor

Purushottam Lal), the inveterate promoter of Indian English

writing, especially poetry. Through his Writers Workshop, he

published more than 3000 titles. Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan,

Adil Jussawalla, Kamala Das, Keki Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra,

Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi, Vikram

Seth, Pritish Nandy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni etc., are a few

well-known names among them. His landmark mammoth volume

in 1969, *Modern Indian Poetry in English: the Writers Workshop*

*Selection: An Anthology & A Credo* marked the official census-taking

of Indian English poets and poetry, so to say, with each of the

poets explaining why they write in English, and with samples

of their creations. He single-handedly promoted literary

translation at a time when the practice was viewed generally

with hardened pessimism. Himself a poet and translator, he is

acclaimed for his translation of the entire Mahabharata into

current English. Many a young man or woman, including myself,

a couple of decades ago, who was at a loss as to how to get

their heart-beats out in the open officially in black and white

on hard paper (‘hand-made’ as P. Lal proudly proclaimed), had

P. Lal as a safe haven. Many would then and even now dismiss

some of his productions as ‘fancy publishing,’ but the dream of

a poet to clasp one’s own collection proudly to heart became

literary hubris aside, anyone who looks at P. Lal for what he

has really achieved during his long life can only marvel at the

daring initiative he took and his own magnificent output. Though

he passed away more than a year ago in November 2010, we were

not able to get a good enough obituary on this veteran literary

activist, till now. We are grateful to Chinmoy Guha for his

perceptive piece.

The towering Malayalam literary personality, fiction-writer

George Varghese Kaakkanaadan, just “Kaakkanaadan” for Malayalee

lovers of letters the world over, passed away on October 19, 2011.

We are carrying obituaries and his stories which speak for

themselves.

We are reviving one of our valued sections, “Kinspeople

Near and Far,” with poetry by poets from the Asia-Pacific, as I

had announced in the previous issue. The poets are, Agnes Lam,

Alvin Pang, An-Jin Yoo, Carlotta Abrams, Christopher ‘Kit’ Kelen,

Dennis Haskell, Isabela Banzon, Jhoanna Cruz, John Mateer, Jose

‘Butch’ Dalisay, Lucy Dougan, Nor Farida Abdul Manaf, Paul

Heatherington and Vivienne Glance. Happy reading for poetry

lovers!

Our special feature carries the extraordinary case of a young

lady combating cerebral palsy with poetry!

We have besides, our regular features of poetry, short story,

photo-essay, literary criticism, and writers in their attics revealing

themselves in their solitary creative moments.

A.J.Thomas.