**IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS...**

India currently has a special place in the English language

record books—as the country with the largest Englishspeaking

population in the world. Ten years ago that record

was held by the United States. Not anymore.

—David Crystal, from his Talk for *Lingua Franca* (ABC

Australia), January 2005.

How would one describe the English language? To begin with,

as the language of Albion, which developed from the dialect

of its East Midlands through the pen of Chaucer who consolidated

it as the dialect of London (which historicans later called ‘Middle

English’), and then reaching in the hands of the Elizabethans

a century and a half later, began to travel the world as the empire

spread, and became an effective weapon in the hands of the tradercoloniser-

proselytiser? It then became the symbol of pride and

achievement for the upwardly mobile natives in the British

colonies, because the masters who were at the apex needed a

broader local base for themselves to exist and so, co-opted their

services gradually and shared with them the magical secrets of

their mother-tongue; this was how English began its journey

at least in India. In the American colonies, the language was

English in the founding thirteen colonies however much the

pioneering community wanted to be farthest away from their

homeland England—nevertheless, the insistence of most of

them on being totally independent from the mother country

was so thorough as to have a shaping influence on their language,

which became ‘American’ for all practical purposes in due course,

over a couple of centuries. Though the same cannot be said about

Canada or Australia (despite both having their own peculiarities

of expression), both Dominions of the British Crown where the

predominant language has been English, as one hardly hears about

a distinctly ‘Canadian’ or ‘Australian’ language like we say in the

case of ‘American,’ except in connection with their literatures,

which, per force, have to be known after their national labels.

When it comes to India, the case becomes much more

complicated. English here just cannot be called ‘Indian’ a la

‘American’ for a variety of obvious reasons—nor can the literature

written in the English language developed here be called ‘Indian’

Literature, a la ‘Canadian Literature’ or ‘Australian Literature,’

meaning a literature newly developed by the colonisers in the

English language, in a seeming vacuum, like it happened in the

cases of the aforesaid colonies in Australia or Canada. Because,

by the time the British had somewhat gained a firm foothold

on our subcontinent in the latter half of the eighteenth century,

and consolidated themselves towards the beginning of the

nineteenth, all our important regional languages were at least

a thousand years old or thereabouts, some like Tamil having been

several millennia old, blossoming forth rich literatures of their

own. The colonisers simply didn’t know what to do in such a

situation—as reflected by the ignorance of the majority of the

‘culture vultures’ of the colonial period. They weren’t either

sufficiently aware of, or wouldn’t pay heed to, the great, pioneering

Indologists or Orientalists among themselves like Sir William

Jones (1748-1794), or lately, Arthur Avalon (Sir John George

Woodroffe 1865–1936), a Chief Justice of the Calcutta High

Court, who upheld the greatness of the millennia-old Indian

civilization and its literary and cultural heritage. They seemed

not to try to understand the magnificence and heights of the

host culture, but were blinded by their arrogance and boastful

conviction about the superiority of their own language and

culture brushing aside whatever literature they discovered here,

as is evident to anyone who reads the accounts by many of the

administrators, planners or general commentators of the English

East India Company of those times and later, post the First War

of Independence of 1857 and even in the early 20th century.

Remember, Tagore’s Nobel Prize (1913) was for his ‘English

*Gitanjali*,’ or *Song Offerings* which is a collection of 103

English poems of Tagore’s own English translations of his Bengali

poems first published in November 1912 by the India Society

of London. It was the ‘English identity’ of the book that was

obviously considered. It contained translations of 53 poems from

the original Bengali *Gitanjali*, as well as 50 other poems which

were from his drama *Achalayatan* and eight other books of

poetry—mainly *Gitimalya* (17 poems), *Naivedya* (15 poems) and

*Kheya* (11 poems)’ (courtesy Wikipedia.) His original *Gitanjali* in

Bengali was a collection of 157 poems published in 1910.

Moreover, they seem to have deliberately tried their best

to belittle whatever literary heritage they countenanced in their

colony. Certain voices rather on the strident side are heard

accusing certain official circles of the colonial power, years before

the 1857 debacle, of conspiring to undermine the great cultural

and literary heritage of India through devious means. About the

same time, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) had devised

a plan to lure the ambitious among the natives to make them

“cultural intermediaries between the British and the Indians”

giving them enough of the experience of the grand language

and culture of the paramount power so as to enable them to

appreciate the crumbs offered to them from the eternal banquet;

this, in turn, was to subtly undermine their pride and confidence

in their own languages and cultures. He, however, seems to have

sincerely believed that English education will serve as “a vehicle

for the European scientific, historical and literary expression”

because he had a very low opinion of what was available as written

material in the country; he had felt that “all the historical

information which has been collected from all the books written

in Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found

in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in

England.”(*Minute on Indian Education,* 1835)

More or less a contemporary of Macaulay, John Borthwick

Gilchrist (1759-1841) had apparently conceived a plan to divide

the vast Hindustani-speaking populace of the Indo-Gangetic

plains, through his project of commissioning translations of

various subjects to be distributed among

the public, according to Sohail Hashmi.

“The college (Fort William College,

Calcutta), initiated the policy of making

two sets of translations, one in Urdu in

the Persian script for ‘Mohammedans’

and the other in Hindi in the Devanagari

script for ‘Hindoos.’ It was Gilchrist who

gave the name ‘Hindoostaani’ to the

spoken language of the region and it was

Gilchrist who hired separate translators

for the two scripts. Laskhari or Urdu,

Hindavi, Zaban-e-Dehli, Deccani or

Rekhta, call it what you will, had now

split to become Hindi and Urdu: one for the ‘Hindoos’

and the other for the ‘Mohammedans.’ This act of

Gilchrist eventually created the idea of two separate

cultures, for language and culture are joined by an

umbilical cord and thus were ‘created’ a ‘Hindoo

culture’ and a ‘Mohammedan culture.’ The two

languages, two cultures, two peoples construct was

to eventually contribute to the two nation theory, the

Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. (“The

Language of Delhi,” by Sohail Hashmi, *Celebrating*

*Delhi*, edited by Mala Dayal, pp.124-142). One has to

remember here that Gilchrist had done this after

extensively travelling through the north-Indian

heartland from Gujarat to Bengal, and learning that the vast

majority of the people were speaking what he called ‘Hindoostani’

and set to work on that vital nerve, in a premeditated move.

In another version (Wikipedia), we see that Khariboli, the

language of Delhi and environs which began to develop towards

the end of the first millennium CE and had reached dominance

by early 1800s, and which also went by the names Hindawi,

Dehlawi and Hindustani, was formalized by Wali Muhammad

Wali adding Persian vocabulary making it more suitable for

poetry; this language came to be known as Rekhta, (in which

Mirza Ghalib wrote) which became acceptable as the literary

language in the Mughal court replacing Persian. As it became

co-official language of the empire along with English in 1837,

there rose a demand that it should be written in Devanagari,

and in 1881, the language so written, became ‘Hindi’ as the official

language of Bihar for the first time, replacing the traditional

Persian script of the same language. So, the onus is shifted here

to Indians themselves! Unless Wikipedia is conspiring to exonerate

Gilchrist, Sohail Hashmi has a real challenge here.

In spite of all these carrot-and-stick and then divide-and rule

policies, the languages of the sub-continent continued to

flourish, ironically though, through exposure to world literature

through English. English, or any other language for that matter,

is like a clear stream, nourishing those who partake from its

mineral-rich waters; in the case of Indians, the drinkers flourished,

and the stream too got widened over time, to form into a river,

local runnels and rivulets of cultural and linguistic inputs adding

to it, despite the cynical designs of some of its early introducers.

Here I have to mention the efforts of missionaries, both British

and other Europeans (like French, German, Swiss, Portuguese

etc.) who, though driven by their zeal to spread the Gospel among

the natives, took the trouble of studying many of the regional

languages, pioneering dictionaries in many of them, and were

instrumental in setting up institutions of learning like schools,

colleges and universities in different parts of the subcontinent.

Their efforts most certainly laid the foundations for the

revolutionary development of the regional languages and also

that of English. Thus, as English became the language of power

and prestige in British India, regional languages also thrived along

with it, as they were the sustenance for the common masses.

As the spirit of nationalism caught on and the struggle

for Independence began, all these languages got a natural infusion

of blood and developed into full-bloomed modern literatures

towards the end of the nineteenth century, or by the early

twentieth century, ironically again mainly through the agency

of English-educated literary, political, social and cultural leaders

who employed modern western ideas in developing strategies

against the colonial oppressor, by writing and speaking in the

regional languages and Hindi, the nationalist language. For

Macaulay, this could have been a dream turning into a nightmare,

had he been alive then, because, the Indian elite had indeed

embraced English and imbued the progressive ideas from Europe

through its medium, as he had visualised, but put that to a use

quite contrary to his expectations. All genres of literature in

all the languages of India flourished, with great writers emerging

from among the commoners, fired by patriotism and a sense of

destiny that called for ultimate attainment of an independent

nationhood.

Modernity was ushered into India simultaneously; our arts

and other cultural expressions too began to bear the stamp of

national identity. Strong and mature regional literatures developed,

yet none of them could be called ‘the’ Indian literature—as we

see it now, all are ‘Indian literatures.’ So, the English that

developed here too, is just another language here, an Indian

language at that, and not ‘the’ language, unlike in the case of

Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or a sizeable population of

South Africa, where, except for the token presence of some

aboriginal languages (in Australia), Maori (in New Zealand), some

Red Indian languages and French (in Canada), Afrikaans and a

range of other African languages beginning with Zulu (in South

Africa), the over-riding literary discourses are in English. When

one talks about ‘Canadian’ literature, one naturally means

Canadian literature in English; the same is the case with ‘Australian’

literature.

It is another story that English in India, in due course,

has attained full maturity as an Indian language, and is the mother

tongue of vast numbers of the younger generations—poets,

fiction-writers and other prose-writers from among them enjoying

world-wide readership and recognition. About the authenticity

of the language they write in, as against British English, many

of the editors of our MNC publishing houses seem to have

misgivings. But I do not subscribe to their view. Let’s see once

again what David Crystal has got to say on the subject: “Three

generations on after Independence, Indian English is still having

trouble distancing itself from the weight of its British English

past. Many people still think of Indian English as inferior, and

see British English as the only ‘proper’ English. It is an impression

still fostered by the language examining boards which dominate

teachers’ mindsets. At the same time, a fresh confidence is plainly

emerging among young people, and it is only a matter of time

before attitudes change….”

Learning English is so empowering to the marginalised

millions in the context of our society’s deep class-caste divide.

Zareer Masani, in his article “English or Hinglish—which will

India Choose?” in the Magazine section of *BBC News* Website,

makes a stunning discovery.

“The most vocal demands for English teaching now come

from India’s most disadvantaged communities.

Perched high up in an ugly Delhi tower block is a shrine

to the newest deity in India’s teeming pantheon - the Goddess

of English. Her high priest is a Dalit (former Untouchable,

according to India’s historic caste system) activist called Chandra

Bhan Prasad.

In his tiny apartment, the goddess blazes forth from one

wall in the lurid colours of a bazaar poster. Modelled on the

American Statue of Liberty, she is pictured against a map of India,

wearing a sari and an English straw hat, standing on a computer

and holding aloft a giant pink pen. Beside the goddess hangs a

portrait of her unlikely messiah, Thomas Babington Macaulay,

the British Whig historian and statesman who brought English

education to India way back in the 1830s.

Every year on 25 October, Chandra Bhan and his loyal band

of devotees gather here to celebrate Lord Macaulay’s birthday

as English Day with a hymn of praise to the new deity: ‘Oh

Devi Ma, please let us learn English! Even the dogs understand

English.’

Macaulay may finally have had the last laugh, thanks to

our indigenous systems to keep the majority of our people

bogged down in unjustifiable deprivation in the social and

economic spheres over the millennia.

Why am I elaborating on something so obvious, as the

place of English in our lives, you may ask. There is a reason.

Even as the use merely of the adjective ‘Indian’ a la ‘Canadian’

or ‘Australian’ with respect to literature does not correctly

describe the one that gets written in the English language in

this land because there are at least 23 more such languages in

India making up ‘Indian Literatures,’ those who write well in

the English language, though of Indian nationality or of Indian

origin living within these shores or away in far off lands,

can be called ‘English’ writers, and they need not be described as

‘Indian English’ writers. It merely means that English is an

international, or better, transnational language, and anyone who

has expertise in this language so as to write, say, good poetry

in it, can claim it as one’s own, without attaching an adjective

signifying one’s nationality.

This is what poet and editor Sudeep Sen too seems to imply

by giving the title, *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, to

the latest anthology of English poetry by Indians he has edited.

He evidently feels that there is no need for an apologetic

prefix like ‘Indian’ to be added before ‘English’ to earmark it

as something written by the erstwhile colonial subjects and their

descendants and not the ‘asli,’ and to remain in an eternal

genuflection like that of tennis players’ before the Queen in

the Wimbledon Courts. One would notice that the 85 poets

included in it are Indians living in India or elsewhere in the

world, or at least persons of Indian origin, only when one

reads through the biographical notes, as some of the names

also do not sound Indian. Yet, these are poems throbbing with

Indian ethos, worldview, and also experiences of the wider

world. As the quote that is carried on the front cover, from *World*

*Literature Today,* announces, it is ‘Among the 60 essential English

language works of Modern Indian Literature. An important

literary marker.’

✩ ✩ ✩

We are paying belated birth centenary tributes to two great

Romantic Indian poets, both of whom were born in October

1911—Changampuzha Krishna Pillai (11 October 1911—17 June,

1948) and Asrarul Haq Majaz (October 1911—5 December, 1955).

Changampuzha was a volcanic eruption that

happened in the world of Malayalam poetry which

was being ‘driven’ on the beaten track perpetuated

by the ‘kavitrayam’ (poets’-trio) of Asan, Ulloor and

Vallathol. I do not wish to add anything more here

to Professor K.Satchidanandan’s balanced estimate of

the poet placing him correctly in Malayalam literary

history, which we carry in this section.

Asrarul Haq Majaz (Majaz Lakhnavi), was an

Urdu poet who wrote romantic and revolutionary

poems that caught the imagination of a generation.

His birth centenary was celebrated with great fanfare

in Lucknow in October last year, marking a reassertion of the

grand Urdu literary tradition of the Awadh (Oudh) region. Friend

and brother-in-law of Jan Nisar Akhtar (who had married Safiya,

Majaz’s sister; Javed Akhtar is their son) and Ali Sardar Jafri, Majaz

was a bright star in the Urdu literary firmament. A graduate of

Aligarh Muslim University, he was very proud of his alma mater

and was held in great esteem by literature-lovers of that seat

of learning. His “For Aligarh”(which we carry in the selection

published in this Section) is still being used by the University

as its official anthem. He was active in the Progressive Writers’

Movement at its heyday and spoke up for the poor, the labourers,

the neglected. Unrequited love had held him a lifelong prisoner,

yet it blessed him with a poetic power that transmuted all else

in his consciousness. A number of his ghazals and poems are

on the theme of different facets of this all-consuming love.

Unapologetic about his lifestyle which he seemed to celebrate,

he turned everything he experienced into poetry, even disparaging

himself and his impossible ideal of a perfect woman; he also

wrote on a wide range of other themes. Sami Rafiq in her

“Introduction,” likens him to Keats, whereas I find another

comparison closer home. All these traits, his worship of beauty

and the ardent desire for the coming of revolution, remind me

of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, one of the great pioneers of

the Romantic Revival in Malayalam poetry, and the one who

lit the fire of revolution in the veins of ordinary readers through

his long narrative poems like *Vaazhakkula.* Like in Sami Rafiq’s

quote from Asloob Ahmad Ansari about Majaz, Changampuzha

too wrote poetry that ultimately celebrated ‘his self ’’ and in that

sense his poems were not politically ‘revolutionary,’ or in other

words, propagandist. Changampuzha too died young, of

tuberculosis, Keats-like, following an intense lifestyle much like

Majaz’s, complete with a tragic involvement with a married

woman and lost in the delusive refuge of intoxication.

Celebration of love, despondence in not attaining it,

idealisation of abstract beauty, a burning empathy for the

underprivileged, intense patriotism—these are some of the

themes on which his poetry blazes forth. A long poem “Revolution”

is not carried in these pages for want of space. Some of the

other poems that celebrate the nationalist sentiments just before

the attainment of Independence, a poem celebrating the First

Independence Day and another one remonstrating with celebrated

Urdu poet Josh Malihabadi who opted for Pakistan after Partition

bring out Majaz in his nationalist sentiments. His poem on the

death of Gandhiji stands out for its note of profound grief, the

poet’s feeling of being orphaned and his abiding faith in the

healing touch of the Mahatma. His lifelong suffering and untimely

death (he was 44 at the time) had left the permanent stamp of

a tragic hero on his memory. Talat Mahmood had sung one of

his well-known poems for a Hindi film, marking the beginnings

of the practice of bringing literary poems into films. The famous

singer, late Shri Jagjit Singh, has immortalised many of his ghazals.

Indian Postal Service has brought out a stamp in his memory

on 28th March 2008. *Shab-e-taab*, *Aahang* and *Saaz-e-Nau* are his

most important collections. The present selection, translated by

Sami Rafiq, is from *Aahang* (Voice). She had translated all the

95 poems of the collection a couple of years ago and is still

awaiting a publisher!

In our Masters section we have Sethu

(A. Sethumadhavan), one of the

accomplished Malayalam fiction-writers

who led modernism from the forefront.

After the modernist phase, he grew into

its later stages, cutting a unique path for

himself. Most of his fiction is concerned

with the plight of human beings in the

role of victims—of individuals, systems,

and of even one’s own psychological makeup.

His novel *Adayalangal* (Signs) which

won Sahitya Akademi Award (2007) and

a couple of important literary awards in

Kerala, explores the world of a woman HR manager, a loner-divorcee,

who is successful in resolving many a problem for her

company but is confounded when it comes to dealing with her

only daughter turned her ‘enemy.’ The compulsions and pulses

of a cyber age come to the fore in this novel. His latest novel,

*Marupiravi* (Reincarnation), is set in his village Chendamangalam,

near the site of ‘Pattanam’ (believed by many historians and

researchers from around the world, to be Muchiripatanam or

Muziris, frequented millennia ago by the ships of Greeks, Romans

and others from the Middle East, Arabia and North Africa), and

as he says, is intended to pass on a hallowed sense of history

to the present generation who seemingly glide glibly along the

corridor of ultra-modernity, without even a thought about the

remains of the bygone ages right under their feet.

The novel *Pandavapuram* with which he rose to prominence,

is an intricately woven symphony of nightmares and visions. In

many of his novels and stories, he looks at intriguing human

relationships and into the deepest recesses of the human mind,

often bordering on the esoteric. His story “*Doothu*” (The Mission)

which I translated in 1996 in the international translation

competition organized by the Association of Kerala Medical

Graduates in the Americas and won the First Prize (which enabled

me to go to the USA to take part in the Annual Convention

of The Associated Writing Programs in Washington, D.C. and

to attend an International Workshop in Creative Writing at the

Writers’ Center, Bethesda, Maryland, and tour the country for

two months, followed by another two months in UK and Europe),

is a fine example of the esoterica he is capable of conjuring up

like a magician. The story we present in this section is another

example of one such.

*Mastakabhisheka: A Rehearsal*, H.S. Shiva Prakash’s play,

comes through as an eye-opener towards our ‘hybrid’ consciousness

that is ready to grab anything that brings money and power, in

the context of an era of globalisation of the word and image.

The ironies and paradoxes that the playwright builds up to

supreme dramatic effect in the main narrative — Vrushabhadeva

(described in Bhagavatha as one of the manifestations of Lord

Vishnu) renounces his empire at the zenith of his glory and hands

over power to his ambitious son Bharata; he, in turn embarks

on a conquest of the world; but when he thinks that he has

all the world at his feet, he discovers to his chagrin that countless

conquerors before him had done exactly the same thing; he finally

commands his younger brother Bahubali to submit to him to

complete his digvijaya; however, the latter, in response to this

senseless demand, defeats him in single combat, and then

renounces the fruit of his victory (the empire, as a result of

his conquest over his ambitious elder brother) recognising, like

his father, that the power and the glory of this world are but

transient, and only dharma has permanence—are juxtaposed

alongside the sub-texts.

The sub-texts consist mainly of scenes during the festival

of Mahamastakabhisheka of Bahubali at Sravanabelegola—the

lumpen attitude of some ultra-right elements among the organisers

of the celebration committee, the unrealistic idealism of the

atheists, the petty ambitions and ‘aggression’ of the reporters,

the queuing up of the middle-aged people discarding their clothes

to get initiated as ‘digambara’ Jain ascetics, life of the ordinary

folks far removed from it all and in blissful ignorance of the ‘upper

class’ narrative exemplified by the newly married rural couple

visiting the festival grounds, the commodification and

commercialisation of religion and rituals through marketing

channels (even the 90 year-old-nun’s death is sought to be ‘sold’),

the victory of the unscrupulous Ratnakar through a Supreme

Court verdict against his upright brother Subhakar (the producer

of the play who supports it financially) in an inheritance dispute,

and the coming in and taking over of the ‘business’ of culture

by extraneous forces who do not know what it all means,

prompting the lead actor playing Bahubali to discard his clothe

with the intention of becoming a Jain ascetic (in an obvious

choice to follow in his own real life the pattern of renunciation

of the character he portrays), saying ‘...none of you deserve it...’

(meaning the cultural legacy of India). The play leaves the

audience (or here, the reader) with an aching conscience. The

uniqueness of our spiritual heritage and the west never being

able to experience it, yet trying to marketise it, as in the case

of appropriating many of our so-called New Age ‘gurus’ and their

followings, and developing a ravenous taste for this kind of ‘stuff,’

is implied here, it would seem. Spirituality is an individual’s

personal experience; trying to market it is the greatest anti-thesis.

One has to reach there all by oneself... in that sense, even writing

about it, let alone other ways of expression, is futile to some

extent. Then what of the people who see only its exteriors and

get thrilled? The playwright seems to suggest all these and

more....

Vivek Muthuramalingam’s photographs are incisive

statements by themselves, with their tone and texture, revealing

the extraordinary spirit of some really marginalised people of

Kylasanahalli, on the fringes of Bangalore City—a group of about

40, belonging to eight families, who, after being compelled to

sell their ragi-farming fields, had to work as rag-pickers in the

same fields when they were converted into landfills where the

solid waste from Bangalore was dumped by contractors who were

seeking to cut costs by reducing the distance of the lorry-trips

by avoiding the designated far off landfill-sites. Landfills, desolate

phantoms of a city’s activities, serve as a reminder of our wasteful

lives. And those who are fated to make a living wading through

tons of filth are considered ‘untouchables’ by us, the fashionable

city-dwellers! The essay, “City Makers and City Breakers,” by

Dunnu Roy in *Celebrating Delhi* deals with the rag-pickers and

landfills of Delhi, which makes the reader feel somehow

responsible for the inequities the hapless grassroots ‘wastemanagers’

suffer. What Vivek’s photos evoked in me is much more

poignant in comparison!

A.J. Thomas

Guest Editor

NOTE

Sri Sunil Gangopadhyay, our beloved President, has

unexpectedly passed away on October 23rd, plunging

us all in deep grief. We would have carried a Memorial

Section with samples of his writings, and writings

on him by his numerous peers, friends and admirers

across the country in this issue, had it not been for

the fact that it would take considerable time to bring

it all together. In the next issue, November-December

2012, we are carrying such a special section.

Guest Editor.