

Literary Histories and Literary Futures: The Indian Novel in English

Ulka Anjaria

Associate Professor of English
Brandeis University, Boston

Abstract: *The debate between authors who write in English and those who write in the South Asian vernaculars – or bhashas – is well known in South Asian literary studies. The debate is not only about language, but about a writer’s desired audience and her commitment (or lack thereof) to cosmopolitanism on one hand and nationalism on the other. This paper traces some of the key moments in this debate in order to suggest that in contemporary Indian literature we are witnessing the beginnings of a new relationship between English and the bhashas that requires a complication of the cosmopolitanism/nationalism framework. For one, English is no longer the language of the West but has become an Indian language – such that for the first time in India’s history, literature written in English does not rely on an international readership. But the kinds of English writings we see in Indian literature today reflect a thematic shift as well; for instance, new commercial English writings by authors such as Chetan Bhagat and Anuja Chauhan paradoxically reflect a turn inwards – inventing what I call new literary provincialisms: a move away from the diasporic cosmopolitanism of the 1980s and 1990s, and towards India’s regional cultures – but paradoxically, through rather than despite the use of English. These writings are often set in Tier II cities such as Varanasi and Ahmedabad rather than Mumbai or Kolkata, and represent a world not of cosmopolitan elites but lower middle-class protagonists struggling to learn English. These works represent aspiration as the new sensibility of English literature in India.*

The conventional story of the history of the English-language novel in India might begin with the nineteenth-century indigenous elite’s first dabblings in the writing of English, influenced by colonial education and the allure of modernity, and driven by reformist impulses. It might then take us to the movement known as progressive writing in the early twentieth century, when the novel was put to the service of a range of nationalist visions – and then to the early postcolonial decades, a period when English novels and their *bhasha* counterparts went in a number of directions. It would then linger a bit at 1981 when, it is said, the Indian English novel finally found form with the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Such a history would trace Rushdie’s impact on the genre and contrast the pulp forms of contemporary Indian English writing to the literary heavyweights of the preceding generation. This straightforward historical trajectory, based in three formative periods that cover around a century, mark the Indian English novel at three defining moments: its emergence, its “realist” phase and its “modernist” one.

However, this narrative has significant limitations. What happens to the novel *between* and *within* these supposedly distinct eras? How are texts not only expressions of their historical period but also complex entities, whose meaning emerges in form, aesthetics, and genre? How does such an account accommodate the contemporary novel, which is not necessarily a continuation of or development on the Rushdie generation? And, lastly, can we really isolate and tell the story of the Anglophone novel as if it were a self-contained history apart from the *bhasha* novels and Indian literature more generally?

Across the board, the Indian novel had its more spectacular start in the *bhashas* – Malayalam, Odia, Marathi, Bangla – than in English. English was of course a colonial language, brought to India by colonial education, and instituted by means of a deliberate policy, as articulated most famously by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835, “to form a class who may be interpreters between [the British] and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (237). With literacy rates in any language at 3.5% in 1881 (P. Joshi 42 and 268-9 n. 13), and even lower in English, one can see how tracing the rise of the English novel might simply offer a highly selective genealogy of India’s native elite.

Yet in fact, although the Governor-General Lord Bentinck did largely adopt Macaulay’s policy as outlined in his Minute on Indian Education, the actual process of “forming” this class was not as seamless as he might have imagined it. For one, the question of whether or not to structure education in English or the *bhashas* was not one that all colonial officials agreed on. Although English was seen as a means to wrench the native elite out of what were seen as their inherent cultural limitations, some officials saw *vernacular education* as better equipped to transmit the moral learning that was part of the civilizing mission. Indeed, India’s modern written *bhashas* emerged in the very crucible of colonial modernity, and thus any false opposition between India’s “authentic” or untouched *bhashas* and the colonial language of English is in fact inaccurate. In this way, both English and the vernaculars were the site of the consolidation of colonial power – and the site of potential resistance as well. What we see across nineteenth-century *bhasha* writings is a profound sense of literary experiment: evident in the writings of Bengali author Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, whom Sudipta Kaviraj reads as reflective of the “unhappy consciousness” characteristic of colonial modernity; and in the epistemic experiments of Fakirmohan Senapati in his Odia novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, to name only two. Bilingual writers characterize these ambivalences more literally in their movements between languages, as seen with bilingual poets Michael Madhusadan Dutt (R. Chaudhuri, *Gentleman* 86-126) and Henry Derozio (R. Chaudhuri, “Politics”; and “Cutlets”), and in the embattled writings of Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianadan, and Rabindranath Tagore. As the range of these early writers shows, neither writing in English nor in the *bhashas* expressed straightforward political or ideological alliance with colonialism but rather evinced a complex interrogation of the contradictions of colonial modernity itself (A. Chaudhuri, “Modernity” xix).

Thus early English fiction did not emerge in a distinct sphere of its own but rather in relation to and in dialogue with innovations in the *bhashas* that were taking place at the same time (M. Mukherjee, *Perishable* 9). Often, individual authors wrote in *both* English and one of the *bhashas*. Thus less than a decade after publishing his one and only novel in English, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay founded a Bengali magazine, *Bangadarshan*, in which he hoped to invigorate the Bengali language in public life, where English had largely found sway.¹ Likewise, Toru Dutt and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote both in Bengali and English – and, in the case of Dutt, in French as well. These examples demonstrate that the modernity that emerged in India was always already polyglossic. Thus we not only dispel associations of foreignness attached to the nineteenth-century Anglophone novel in India, but also see how an analysis of the English novel cannot be separated from accounts of colonial modernity across languages.

Interchange among the various linguistic traditions continued beyond the nineteenth century. While early twentieth-century Anglophone authors Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali and Raja Rao are often lumped together as nationalist/socialist writers who wrote in English, this grouping provides only a partial understanding of the richness of literary cultures in this period. Anand and Ali were both affiliated with the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association, which brought together authors writing in a range of languages, including Sajjad Zaheer in Urdu and Premchand in Hindi. Ahmed Ali wrote in both Urdu and English, and was involved equally in literary

¹See “Bangadarshaneer Patra-Suchana,” Bankim’s Foreword to *Bangadarshan*.

debates with his fellow Urdu writers as he was with other English writers. Raja Rao, too, wrote in Kannada and French along with English (Amir; Jamkhandi 133). Seeing these authors as essentially linked just because they wrote in English overlooks the richness of engagement of both figures in their respective languages. In the postcolonial decades as well, the “existentialist” (Gupta 53) Hindi writer Nirmal Varma spent most of his life abroad and often set his works in Europe. Kiran Nagarkar’s first novel, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (*Seven Sixes are Forty-Three*, 1974), was written in Marathi, and only later did he switch to English (Lukmani xii). Partition literature also crossed linguistic boundaries; a novelist such as Qurratulain Hyder crafted her own English translation of her Urdu novel *Aag ka Darya*, demonstrating engagement in both languages’ literary and public spheres.

These myriad, interlingual histories tend to get obscured in contemporary literary criticism, which often privileges English as a distinct and more cosmopolitan language than any of the *bhashas*. This is partly because of the slippage between English and cosmopolitanism advanced by many English-language texts themselves: for instance in the “altered vision” (5) with which Adam Aziz returns to Kashmir in the first pages of *Midnight’s Children*, a perspective that makes him “[resolve] never again to kiss earth for any god or man” (4). From this moment onwards in the Indian novel, travel (and English) is cast as broadening and perspective-changing, constructing, in turn, staying home (and, consequently, writing in the *bhashas*) as myopic and provincial. Rushdie stated this view more directly in his Foreword to *Mirrorwork*, an anthology he edited of writing from India from 1947-1997, in which he included only one piece – out of 32 – in translation; the others were all originally written in English:

The prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period by Indian writers *working in English*, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 “official languages” of India, the so-called “vernacular languages,” during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, “Indo-Anglian” literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books (Introduction viii, emphasis in original).

While celebrating English over the *bhashas*, Rushdie simultaneously asserts its marginality, as by putting the phrase “official languages” in quotes, he suggests at least to the book’s non-Indian readership that English is only recognized “unofficially” by the Indian state, and thus that writing in English carries an *inherently* non-nationalist or cosmopolitan imaginary.² From this perspective, English is not only global, but it is inherently progressive; this is not the progressivism of social realism, but a righteous refusal of the narrowness of nationalist belonging.

The backlash to this brand of cosmopolitanism from academics in India “defending” the *bhashas* led to a further entrenchment of the English-*bhashas* divide in the 1990s and early 2000s. Literary critic Meenakshi Mukherjee suggested that “in the English texts of India there may be a greater pull towards a homogenisation of reality, an essentialising of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community” (“Anxiety” 2608). Yet those are precisely the authors that are more widely read, “interviewed . . . [and] invited for readings” (Mukherjee, “Local” 51). In response, several Anglophone authors took increasingly entrenched positions in defense of English. Vikram Chandra, for instance, argued that Indian critics such as Mukherjee, whom he dubbed “commissars” and “self-proclaimed guardians of purity and Indianness” have constructed a “cult of authenticity” around a nationalist fantasy of Indianness (“Cult”). Through this type of polarizing debate, the stakes of the question rose dramatically, crescendoing into rigid – and ultimately useless – binaries: authentic vs. traitorous; *desi* vs. *pardesi*. Despite the material realities of market inequality and differential access to international celebrity-status, the English writers framed their position in such a way that increasingly, any call for attention to vernacular writing was cast as backwards, provincial and an expression of a knee-jerk nativism.

² In fact, English has a higher position than the “16” other languages, being, along with Hindi, one of India’s two national languages. The point is not to demonize Rushdie, however, which has been done by many, but rather to underline that leaving aside his particularly strong language in this Introduction, his views on the superiority of Indian English writing over *bhasha* writing is not unique. Bharati Mukherjee, another Indian English diasporic writer, said that living in the diaspora, “I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous driven underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachment to a distant homeland, but no real desire for permanent return . . . Instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration . . . I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated” (qtd. in Mukherjee, “Anxiety” 2610). In her introduction to the reference book *South Asian Novelists in India: An A-to-Z Guide*, Sanga similarly writes: “Also unmistakable is the enduring quality of writing in English” (xiii); other, similarly subtle valorizations of English writing appear widely

This valuation of Indian English writers over *bhasha* writing was only strengthened by an increasing interest in the west – the place where, until very recently, literary fortunes were made – in a certain type of writing coming from India, marked by an easily digestible blend of exotic difference and legibility (in short, different but not too different): “otherness [that] is validated only if it fits into certain pre-established paradigms of expectation: a magic realist ambience, mystical spice women, small town eccentrics, the saga of women’s suffering, folk tale elements blended into contemporary narrative, so on and so forth” (Mukherjee, “Local” 52). This contradictory desire is encapsulated in a June 1997 issue of *The New Yorker* which featured eleven of “India’s leading novelists” (Buford 6) – all writing in English – who, the article’s author reported, represented, “in a hopeful, even exhilarating way: the shape of a future Indian literature” (8). In the photograph of the eleven writers, they are all dressed in shades of black, suggesting a kind of staged hipness; yet despite this well-meaning attempt to convey the modernity and futurity of the Indian novel, the cover of the issue still relied on tired, Orientalist imagery for representing India, showing the surprise on the intrepid, white explorers’ face when they find a statue of Ganesh not meditating, but reading – and reading fiction, to boot. English – in particular the “Indian English” celebrated so enthusiastically by the article – provides precisely that mix of difference and legibility that makes Indian writing marketable to an audience unfamiliar with India. This is not the “small-town tedium, frustrated youth, couples incapable of communicating with each other, the impossible gulfs between aspiration and reality” of the Hindi novel *Raag Darbari* – the “India that the West does not like to think about for too long” – but “the florid, sensuous, inclusive, multicultural world of the post-Rushdie, postcolonial novel,” through which “the West can settle down to contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself” (Orsini 88).³ One might say that Chinua Achebe’s determination that the African writer “should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (63) was commodified and neatly assimilated in this period into a particularly American multiculturalism that values the exotic only when it appears in faintly familiar garb.

And yet, although the ripple-effect of these debates continues to affect what gets published and what authors write in the first place, it appears that the relationship of English to the vernaculars in contemporary writing has begun to shift in the last decade or so. For one, many of today’s authors seem to be more aware of the richness of the *bhasha* literary spheres, now that the euphoria surrounding cosmopolitanism’s children has somewhat died down. Thus, for instance, although Booker-winning author Aravind Adiga writes in English, he has published articles celebrating regional writing, and has confessed that when he is in Bangalore, he only reads the Kannada-language press (contrast that with Rushdie’s dismissal of all *bhasha* writing in his 1997 introduction to *Mirrorwork*). Chetan Bhagat, who writes deliberately in opposition to the “highbrow” literary culture of the Indian novel, contributes a weekly column to both *The Times of India* and the Hindi newspaper *Dainik Bhaskar*. Bhagat’s books are translated into Hindi and other *bhashas*; and the settings of some of the recent ones in Tier II towns like Ahmedabad, Varanasi and Patna (rather than Kolkata and Mumbai, more typical of Indian English fiction) speaks to his desire to reach a wider audience *within* India rather than outside of it. This is something we see in the works of bestselling contemporary author Anuja Chauhan as well, who brings a notable Hindi-Punjabi inflection to her light, “rom-com” novels resonant of popular Hindi romance films. Although at times they appear similar, I suggest that these examples constitute a phenomenon different from Rushdie’s “chutnification” – because the intended audience is not the cosmopolitan or diasporic elite but precisely those Indian readers who might potentially read in English *and* one of the *bhashas*. Today’s texts no longer ask their readers to be versed in the hybrid history of Moorish Spain or the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but in Facebook, Premier League cricket, and Bollywood gossip. Many are decidedly low-brow; but nonetheless, they carve out a new space where English and the *bhashas* can meet again.

In Bhagat and Chauhan we also see a closer tie between literature and India’s most significant mass cultural product: Hindi popular film, also known as Bollywood. Although connections between literature and popular film have existed in the past, with notable Hindi and Urdu writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai,

³ Rajan and Shailja similarly recount how some US readers of *The God of Small Things* found its use of Indian English alienating, as it “distracted them from getting the meaning.” In its audiobook version, however, the novel was found less alienating: when “read in a well-modulated but slightly accented voice, many... nodes of cultural differences were delicately mediated” (153).

⁴ William Mazzarella describes the “euphoria” that undergirded India’s economic liberalization as “ar[sic] out of a sense of temporal overcoming, a rejection of the historical stalemate that the developmentalist/modernizing paradigm had bequeathed” (89).

Krishan Chandar (R. Bose 62), K.A. Abbas (Khair, “Indian” 73n.14), Javed Akhtar and Gulzar working in both domains, in English the divide has been historically greater. Likewise, although Rushdie includes many filmic references in his novels (described in detail by Stadtler), his true interest lies in auteur filmmaking (Mishra), and he uses Bollywood as a cultural source mostly generative of parody. Sangita Gopal shows how the connections between popular film and literature have only heightened in recent years, with novels like Bhagat’s seemingly written for film, and their adaptations becoming huge box office successes (Gopal). Again, what looks like a crass commercialization might simultaneously be seen as another instance of a renewed relationship between English and the vernaculars.

Moreover, today’s English fiction actively rejects the westward orientation that was clear – if not necessary (for publishing purposes) – among the earlier generation. Bestselling novelists such as Anuja Chauhan, Chetan Bhagat, Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi and others do not market their books to the west; many of them have not even been published outside of India – something unthinkable for an earlier generation. Likewise, notably absent in these books are glossaries or other attempts at translating food or other cultural items to a western reader. The assumption, then, that writing in English means a western orientation or foreign intended audience is no longer valid; and in consequence, the terms of the earlier debate – the sense of English as a “foreign” language on one hand, and a cosmopolitan one on the other – have largely dissolved.

This shift corresponds with a larger change in urban Indians’ self-perception vis-à-vis their own national history as well as the west⁴ that has largely grown out of the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. This has also resulted in a de-fetishization of the diaspora, as the lifestyle for the wealthy in India’s big cities is no longer radically different from how emigrants might live abroad. The changes in urban India’s consumer economy, in addition to new multinational companies hiring both Indians and foreigners, means that there is more back-and-forth movement between India and its diaspora. The wide availability of imported products and a new “global” urban aesthetics (such as malls, multiplex cinemas, coffee shops and so on) have further reduced this gap. The image at the beginning of *The Satanic Verses* of diaspora as a moment of utter freedom – a space where “anything becomes possible” (*Satanic 5*) – repeated in various ways in more recent novels such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013) – has now been reevaluated. It is not that the allure of diaspora no longer exists, but its experience is no longer represented as a sea-change. In *The White Tiger*, Ashok, Balram’s boss, has lived in “America” – therefore, unlike the rest of his family, he wears different clothes, knows the correct pronunciation of “pizza,” and is slightly more liberal than his brothers in his treatment of his driver. But the novel simultaneously suggests that (western/ized) liberal condescension is just as bad as (homegrown) feudal hegemony; thus it is Ashok who becomes Balram’s eventual victim. Aesthetically as well, in a graphic novel such as Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* (2004), New Delhi’s streetscapes elicit the same feeling of alienation that might arise in any modern city, and thus “challenge the negative images of the postcolonial metropolis as a ‘third world’ megalopolis with problems ranging from the ill-health of its urban poor, and increasing numbers of inhabitants, to slumification” (Standten 512). It is thus not that contemporary novels efface the cultural differences between “east” and “west,” but they de-fetishize them; they render them banal.

Today’s authors, too, not only move – but *move back*: Chetan Bhagat and Aravind Adiga both lived for many years abroad, but now live in India. This kind of movement complicates the one-way trajectory that was true for most of the *New Yorker*-featured writers. But at the same time, contemporary writing cannot be reduced to these sociological trends. I suggest that these new itineraries are accompanied by new literary concerns – and, perhaps more importantly, *new literary forms*, which have emerged in relation to these changes. In turn, these forms require new methodologies that might entail breaks from more classically postcolonial theoretical concerns.

One example of this is Chetan Bhagat, one of India’s bestselling English-language authors, but virtually unheard of abroad. Together, his six novels have sold seventy lakh copies. His fifth novel *Revolution 2020* (2011) sold ten lakh copies in a mere three months and several of his other books took only a little longer to do the same. He writes in a simple English that is available to a range of education levels and fluencies. His stories are straightforward – they are plot driven, contain mostly flat characters, and eschew the allegorical, magical and meta-textual features that had defined Indian English literature in the 1980s and 1990s. For this reason they are disliked by most critics in India, who decry the commercialization and standardization of the Indian novel his works represent. But Bhagat’s novels do offer a vision for Indian literature, even as it is one opposed to the cosmopolitan ethos of the Rushdie

generation. I call this vision a new provincialism. If Rushdiean cosmopolitanism was a modernist celebration of exile and critique of the nation, the new provincialism is skeptical of the west and grounds its ethos in a certain understanding of the *aam aadmi* or common man. The new provincialism is based in India's small towns rather than its global megalopolises; it offers an imagination of national futurity that is based in India rather than abroad; and it offers Indian English as thoroughly indigenized into the pragmatic political imaginary of India's middle class, rather than as the language of the modernist elite.

One Night@ the Call Center is Bhagat's only novel set wholly in Delhi; the others are set in smaller or less cosmopolitan towns: Chennai, Patna, Ahmedabad, Varanasi – and that is not by accident. The earlier generation of cosmopolitan writers used Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata as launching pads to locate their otherwise globe-spanning tales: think of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, or Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. If characters lived outside the big cities, as in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* or *Midnight's Children*, they quickly left their homes behind. Bhagat, by contrast, redefines India's provincial towns as places of growth, both economic and personal – in short, as sites of futurity. In *Half Girlfriend*, Madhav leaves a lucrative job with a multinational bank in Delhi to run a rural school in Bihar. In *Revolution 2020*, Gopal abandons his plans of becoming an engineer to start a successful coaching business in Varanasi instead. In these plots, entrepreneurial achievement requires not migration, but a change of perspective. In Delhi Madhav felt inferior because of his Bhojपुरi-accented English; in Bihar he feels empowered rather than submissive to the forces of cosmopolitan elitism. Once he stops worshipping Delhi and loving Bihar, he is able to mature as a young man and prosper at the same time.

Bhagat's works thus imagine India – all of India – as a place of possibility, and for a nation where the English-language novel has been tied up with a sense of loss and disappointment, this is no small feat. Many in India have criticized Bhagat's aspirational vision for its investment in individual empowerment and entrepreneurialism, its neoliberal critique of the state, and its embrace of free market capitalism. In his speeches, newspaper columns and other non-fiction writings, Bhagat has been critical of welfare initiatives such as farm subsidies; for him, individual innovation is the only path to development. He is a proponent of teaching simple English to all Indians, which he believes opens up avenues of social mobility. These are, for Bhagat, admittedly practical rather than ideological solutions to the nation's problems. To put it simply: capitalism, a culture of individualism, and a celebration of youth are changes to the environment in India which will encourage the most talented to stay, rather than emigrate abroad. Provincialism thus becomes a pragmatic means of imagining India's future. The *content* of that future might not be one that all Indians share – capitalist and anti-cosmopolitan – but it is a future nonetheless, and it is the new Indian English that paves the way there.

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