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Another India: Voices from the Periphery

The title I have chosen for my paper does not allow me to entertain any doubt about whether we are justified in talking of the dichotomy of 'center' versus 'periphery'. I suppose one could still open a talk with an argument that in a plural space, such as South Asia, each political entity will, at any given point of time, have many centers - depending on the way in which one decides to assign values to one or the other cultural parameter. Moreover, differences of opinion arise between those who take an outside look at such plurality, and those who live in such spaces.

Which India shall I talk about? The space that is presented in the words woven by our writers who write or re-write in English may appear to be a conundrum - a universe plotted as a pastiche on a canvas which looks remote and diverse at the same time - to the reading public in other parts of the world.

But for those of us who think and write in - let me use the much-maligned word, 'vernacular languages' - those that stand on the other side of the lamp that is sustained on an English wicker, it is evident that rather than illuminate the concept or the space we would like to call India, Indian English writing allows a large part of India to perpetually remain outside the focus. What is in focus suddenly becomes the center, even if it is a dormant Kanthapura, or a sleepy town in Kerala.¹ But what is outside this written world remains in the periphery for the Anglophone Indian, no matter how interesting Labtolia or Purnea may be in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's or Renu's unforgettable stories.²

There is yet another India, often not understood by the readership of mainstream Indian literatures. I am talking about the folk stories of Vijaydan Detha Chandayana in Rajasthan or Raja Salhes in Mithila, or the Manteswami episode of the Tulus in Karnataka, which typically lie outside the known worlds of the mainstream Indians. What is happening in Kurmali, Bodo, Adi-Galong or Bhojpuri is none of 'their' (this readership's) concern. These cultures become newsworthy only when a caste war occurs, or when they throw up a tainted political figure.

¹ This refers to Raja Rao's fictional village of Kanthapura in *Kanthapura* (1938) and Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997).

² Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* (1929) or Phanishwar Nath Renu's (1921-1977) story "Mare Gaye Gulfam" ("The Third Vow") on which the film *Teesrii Qasam* (1966) was based.

There are other Indias, too, where speakers of the same language are scattered so disjointedly over a vast space that they can hardly communicate or read each other's works. The speakers of Urdu in Punjab or Lucknow are not necessarily aware of what a Hyderabadi Dakkhani Urdu writer has written, or what an Urdu speaker from Hubli would surmise with regard to a particular topic. Urdu occupies an official position in the states of Jammu and Kashmir, where different mother tongues, such as Kashmiri, Ladakhi or Dogri, abound; conversely Urdu is not even recognized as an associate official language in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where it forms the mother tongue of a large percentage of the people.

Then, there is the linguistic situation of diagraphia to which the *International Journal of Sociology of Language* devoted an entire issue in 2002, and which is of peculiar pertinence to India. We have in Konkani, which is written in Roman, Devanagari, Kannada and Malayalam scripts, the case of a language with different literate zones. Punjabi is written in Gurmukhi, Devanagari and Perso-Arabic script, and Sindhi in the latter two writing systems. Alternatively, there may be the case of the same culture having many mutually almost unintelligible expression systems, as in Nagaland with fourteen different varieties of Naga languages, such as Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Khemungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Serna, Yimchunger and Zeliang, many of which are rich in music and expressions. Can we forget the Shompens and the Jarwas in the Andaman Islands, speakers whose numbers do not exceed a few hundred, but who are now gaining the limelight as different NGOs take up their cause in litigations and interventions? The NGOs and individuals include the Survival International³ or Pune-based NGO Kalpavriksh,⁴ or the Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology (SANE), and personalities, such as Shyamali Ganguly, a local lawyer.

So, let me return to my original question: which India should I talk about in the context of this conference? A country which speaks in 1576 'rationalized'⁶

³ See statements to UNESCO at <<http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/-05fa1136a00217e7c1256b76004ef81c?Opendocument>>.

⁴ See Pankaj Sekhsaria's book *Troubled Islands - Book on the Andamans* (pune: KalpavrukshalLead India, 2003).

⁵ See Pankaj Sekhsaria, "Delivering the Jarawas." *Frontline* 18.7 (18-31 Aug. 2001) <<http://www.flonnet.com/fl1817/18170650.htm>>.

⁶ After the Census enumerators bring back filled in questionnaires and collect and collate all labels of languages as returned by the people (over 7,000 in 1981 and a little over 10,000 in 1991 Census), based on Grierson's survey as well as linguistic descriptions and surveys of well-known linguists and organizations, and also drawing from the experiences of earlier Census, these labels are reduced to names of 'probable' languages and speech varieties - a process which is known as 'rationalization' of language labels.

mother tongues and in 1796 'other mother-tongues'?⁷ These are not terms that were invented for this presentation. They are taken straight from the Census documents.⁸ Even if I restrict the number of languages in India by the number of speakers, that is, over 10,000, we still have 114 languages with speech communities as large as 338 million (as in the case of Hindi), or merely 10,144 speakers as in the case of languages like Maram in Manipur. India is a linguistic space where 146 speech varieties are beamed through radio networks, 69 are used in schools, and newspapers are brought out in 35.

India has always been a space which could be characterized as multi-centric. It was one nation and many at the same time. It is therefore no wonder that its boundaries are not rigidly fixable. India has one culture and many; while this is seemingly contradictory, it is nevertheless true. Hence the talk in India of multiple identities which are moreover structured at different layers. Thus we have: Indian versus Gujarati or Bengali; Aryan versus Dravidian; Brahmin versus Baniya; the 'twice-born' versus the scheduled castes; the 'forward' versus the 'backward' communities; the hill people versus the plains people; as well as many other formations. Each term demands a footnote for the uninitiated reader, but each term must be understood in relation to the other terms.

In spite of these diversities, the pressure of living together for thousands of years has served to create 'India as a linguistic area'. This concept, first suggested by Emeneau in 1958, has found support in further evidence offered by many others, including Colin Masica, Peter Hook, K.Y. Subbarao and Anvita Abbi, and had been latent in the research findings of Suniti Kumar Chatterji from his *ODBL* days. The plural linguistic scene that obtains in India has been recorded in Census documents and linguistic surveys, such as the one conducted by Grierson during 1888-1902. Therefore, linguistically, too, India is one and many at the same time.

What happens in a seemingly contradictory configuration, such as India with its many centers, each one with its own peripheries, when English is introduced as a medium of modern expression and learning? My answer to this question will have to begin with a further question: Is it not wonderful to live in a plural world? Yes, it is. But let us ask ourselves: What kind of world is this? Is it a world of hope, or a world full of despair? Is it a world in which only rivers flow or is it a place where the mountain wind blows its conch shell loud and clear? Can there be a place for both, the stationary and the hyper-mobile, the young and the old, or the aged and the agile? But why do you ask, you might reply. Did not a famous poet say: "The river runs swift with a song, breaking

⁷ The speech varieties other than mother tongues, which are possible to group as dialects and varieties under one or the other languages and must be grouped separately, are known as 'other mother-tongues'.

⁸ See *Census of India*, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991.

through all barriers. But the mountain stays and remembers, and follows her with his love" (Tagore, "The Gift" 153).

Even when we talk of streams, and claim to be in the mainstream, or at least, swear by it, where are the other streams - those numerous torrents and tributaries? Do the edges, the periphery, have a story to tell? Those who have by now got into the habit of staying only in their cocoons, can they narrate a tale of places far and wide? Let me further ask: Do we live in a world where the alphabet begins with 'I' and also ends with the first person? Or, say, begins with an 'a' (for *ahaM* or 'I') and ends with another 'a' (*asmaakaM* or 'To us') - thus leaving no scope for othering? Or, is there scope for the second person, or 'you'? Are we forgetting the fact that the creative moment comes only when the 'I' and the 'you' - the *ahaM* and the *tvam* - begin to mould each other? The poet Tagore admits:

When I thought I would mould you, an image from my life for men
to worship, I brought my dust and desires and all my coloured
delusions and dreams.

When I asked you to mould with my life an image from your heart
for you to love, you brought your fire and force, and truth,
loveliness and peace. ("Fruit Gathering" 168)

Let 'I' and 'you' merge into a 'we'. In India, we have had a rich and long experience of living together. Those who ruled at the regional as well as supra-regional levels were challenged by interesting experiences in our multilingualism. No doubt there are both tame and wicked problems to be faced when attempting to manage this plural space. While tamable problems have found their resolutions, there are many wicked problems that still dodge any attempts to solve them, however well-meaning these attempts may be. Coupled with that, there has been an interesting interplay of different formations. The politics of the planning and execution of policies has been as interesting as the socio-political forces that any effort of this gigantic size has to take into account.

Many other developing nations are now trying to learn from the Indian experience of managing our pluricultural and multilingual scenario. The time has come to document many of these problems in the area of language management as well as to consider situations across our space which pose problems for social engineers. However, anyone attempting to prepare an archaeology of the living traditions of these large numbers of languages in the developing and under-developed world has to remember the enormity of this task and the interesting theoretical challenges they throw up for our disciplines.

The last five decades in the life of India has seen numerous language problems in different parts of the country, and different solutions offered for them. Some problems have arisen from the denial of basic language rights to minor and minority speech communities while others have sprung up from control over scarce resources in a situation where different linguistic groups live together. While some communities have been linguistically tolerant to others,

some have demonstrated what seems to be puzzling prejudice towards others. Studies have revealed interesting linguistic attitudes that a given sub-group has towards others within a speech community; for example, the attitudinal problems of Sikh and Hindu speakers of Punjabi as reported by Rangila (1986) or the social distance among different dialectal groups of Bangla as measured by Aditi Mukherji in her dissertation. To summarize, linguistic fanaticism has been on the rise.

Compare this scenario with a recent prediction by a bio-mathematician called Mark Pagel from the Division of Zoology, School of Animal and Microbial Sciences, University of Reading, that out of 6,000 odd distinct human languages spoken all over the world, only 10 percent will survive the first half of this new century.⁹

Given that the developing and under-developed countries house close to 90 percent of this stupendous figure, it paints a bleak picture for many of our languages and their speakers. With these languages, their rich cultural heritage as much as they are preserved in speech behaviour - will also disappear. Whether it is multiple norms of standard formation spread over a large space, as in the case of Marathi or Konkani, or the question of multiple socially determined stylistic standards (such as *saadhu* and *calit* or the *graanthika-vyaavahaarika* distinction in Bangla), or the question of graphemic plurality (as mentioned earlier in respect of Sindhi, Punjabi and Kashmiri), India seems to be full of these fluctuating centers. Even in the fields of mass media - say, in the case of newspaper penetration and distribution, or in television channels and their popularity ratings - the domination of any particular language appears impossible.

Although there are other control parameters, such as the flow of translation traffic, viewership of films as well as their distribution network, the market value of anchors, actors and tele-personalities, as well as the relative price of books, and their print-run, these often tell conflicting stories as to the kind of space a given language occupies. Further, since most of our major languages have both static and dynamic speech areas (e.g., Gujarati is spoken largely in Gujarat but has also spread out into Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu), and as each one is used as a link language to build bridges, it is difficult to imagine that either English or Hindi in India will come to occupy the central place that would have been theirs by right in less pluralistic nation-states. It is not just the plurality of languages which is responsible for this state of affairs as can be seen in the case of Indonesia, where over 300 speech

⁹ See Mark Pagel, "Should Linguistic Diversity be Preserved?" 853-858, and Mark Pagel and Ruth Mace, "The Cultural Wealth of Nations" 275-278. Similar claims have been made by Michael Krauss, "The World's Languages in Crisis" 1-42 and David Crystal in *Language Death*.

varieties are spoken, and where language planners were able to implement the planned domination of Bahasa Indonesia, but the dynamics of languages in India that are primarily responsible for mutually contradictory forces at work. In fact, there are both centripetal and centrifugal forces in operation in India in the context of the politics of language. It is often the case that the displaced speakers of one language community live as a diasporic group in another part of India, and then become a part of the local scene. The Saurashtri weavers in Tamil Nadu or the Bengali diamond cutters in Surat are enmeshed in the local fabric of Tamil and Gujarati speech communities, because of the interplay of interesting forces. These are the integrative forces of the surrounding majority language community - and the forces of their own speech group to retain their own language as in-group communication and identity marker.

The picture, of late, gets further complicated because of the emergence of numerous literary languages from what was once considered to be the 'periphery'. Their variety and vitality - despite the attempted dominance of a neighboring language locally, and the two national official languages - are both refreshingly new developments. There is no doubt about the literary potential of languages from 'another' India. The cultural activities in Bhojpuri, Bodo, Garo, Khasi, Kurmali, Lushai, Magahi, Maithili, Nepali, Santali, etc., and the references and connections they make to the mainstream of literary expression can be easily pointed out. It is not surprising, then, to see them write in Bhojpuri in the following manner:

I don't mind being drenched in sweat!
At least I don't have to please others!
True, I get to eat only half as much as I can,
Get to wear half of what I need, or eat half as much!
But I don't have to be under the pressure of a king!
May have to repair shoes or polish them
But at least I don't have to put the shoes on Sahib's legs!
Let me not even touch apples, or eat grapes
But at least I don't have to call tamarinds 'mangoes'!
Let me speak with eyes and breathe through the skin,
But let me not be forced to speak up
Only to tell you -
in a foreign language, 'I love you!'
(Shukla 83)

When we talk of the dynamics of centripetal and centrifugal forces in operation in India, we find that the problem of what occupies the center-stage becomes a real problem on more than one count. We know of only the written mode of expression as all the other media that draw our attention today (films, television and newspaper included) mainly discuss those who can and do write. But India has vast resources of the 'spoken world' which have only one focus: the centrality of the spoken word. They know that all the poetry that is formed, all the songs that are sung are the products of the teeming millions of illiterate

people (who in our definition will be called 'uneducated'). Consider what another unknown poet in Bhojpuri says:

I am looking for poetry!
My belly is full,
And I have dressed up well
With a shirt of the latest design,
As I sit in a new house!

But there's this man
In dire hunger
Whose back n' belly look alike;
On whose head will burst
The sky above - crashing down, And from under whose legs
Will flee the ground,
Realities -
That's where sits the poem,
That's where!
(Mishra 84)

When we talk of the 'spoken world', which lies far away from the center of 'literary stage', we need to appreciate a few concerns that the inhabitants of such worlds have. The written words are defined by 'text', but how do we look at the authors of spoken texts? Are they similar or definable in the same way? Perhaps not. When we talk about the ethics of speech, and the violence that is often to be withstood by those on the margin, are we concerned with the relationships that obtain among majority and minority speech communities? Or, do we define these authors differently? What distinction do we make between their words and the real world?

Where does today's author stand: on a one-way street where none is allowed to get 'lost' as everyone has a pre-ordained trajectory to follow? Do we have pre-defined 'imperatives', or can we 'impe' our interlocutors in as many ways as we possibly can? If we are free, how free are we? What awaits the author of written texts at the next cross-road - a surprise? Or, a direction board? Or, a set of icons the meanings of which have to be discovered if one is to move further? How different are the authors of spoken texts?

All these factors of speech pose a strange paradox before us:

The *author*, as we all know, complains of the tyranny of words. But the authors of the spoken world love and respect words which are more important than anything scribbled on a piece of paper. They also demarcate the boundary that authors are expected to confine themselves to. Any form of grammatical violation, purposeful or otherwise, is considered to be a deviation from the norm. This is a challenge authors like to meet in order to redefine these very norms.

- I suppose, the *words*, too, must have their own set of complaints. But whom would they turn to - to let them be known?
- The *critics* are unable to reopen the body of a word to know about the shame it has had to bear with, the sins it has committed or the virtues it has itself been unaware of. In short, a word is often unwilling to reveal itself to the critical eye of someone who lacks empathy.
- The *readers* of written texts are often unwilling to meet the authors halfway, and hence are unable to grasp the import of numerous words and their usage. In comparison, the listeners to spoken texts empathize with those who sing the words out: an interchange of roles often occurs, and the result is true communication.
- The *commentators*, *interpreters*, and *translators* of written words face the dilemma of being twice removed from the text - first, in terms of medium or language, and secondly, in terms of creativity. It is altogether a different matter that for all that the community of translators has done in the few thousand years of the history of civilization, they are more misunderstood and underrated than anyone else.

As linguists, we are often tied by the paradox that we have to deal with, the urge to commit ourselves to the primacy of speech over writing, and yet, like true philologists, we are concerned with written texts. A further paradox inheres in attempts to track down the internalized rules of the mental grammar of an ever elusive 'native speaker', and yet be aware that language keeps on changing from one moment to the next. Saussurean 'synchrony' is, therefore, a mirage. What is needed is a different kind of linguistics capable of appreciating the world of spoken languages and their particular mechanics.

Even though a sociolinguist would say that a community gets the grammar it deserves, the statement is useful only in the context of writing communities who are center-stage. First, grammars define the texts and their con-texts. Grammars also authorise patterns that weave newer and newer expressions constructs that are possible but are not normally available. They also demarcate the boundary that authors are expected to confine themselves to. Any form of grammatical violation, purposeful or otherwise, is considered to be a deviation from the norm. This is a challenge authors like to meet in order to redefine these very norms. Unfortunately, such challenges are often projected as defiance against the tyranny of linguistics, because literature (which is often equated with 'written' literature) is generally viewed as a liberating force.

Does this mean that literary studies will only look towards the center for guidance and leave the periphery to the explorations of linguistics and anthropology? Here comes the other kind of diversity we need to tackle. Knowledge in the twentieth century has been specialized into an enormous set of semi-autonomous sub-disciplines, each trying to outsmart the other and occupy the center-stage of our intellectual tradition, even at the cost of severing its relationship with others. We love to imagine that physics and psychology have

nothing in common, just as many believe (eIToneously) that linguistics and logic are miles apart.

Further, there has somehow emerged a naive belief that it is the sciences that occupy the center and all the other 'softer' disciplines belong to the periphery. The sciences are expected to provide the conceptual tools for grasping this world of differences, changes, and emergent processes. In the process, a coherent picture is expected to emerge, in which crucial differences between physical, biological, psychological and sociological processes all can be seen within one ontology (see Emmeche, Keppe and Stjernfelt). But recall that in the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics (1892), when the sciences were less fragmented than today, one could see an attempt being made to bridge the gap between specialized disciplines, and to investigate what might be called the evolutionary semiotics of energy. Peirce, in his essay "Man's Glassy Essence" (1892), describes matter as comprised of the objective and objective perception of it:

Hence, it would be a mistake to conceive of the psychical and the physical aspects of matter as two aspects absolutely distinct. Viewing a thing from the outside, considering its relation of action and reaction with other things, it appears as matter. Viewing it from the inside, looking at its immediate character as feeling, it appears as consciousness. These two views are combined when we remember that mechanical laws are nothing but acquired habits, like all the regularities of mind, including the tendency to take habits, itself; and that this action of habit is nothing but generalization, and generalization is nothing but spreading of feelings. (300)

It is hard for us even today to understand all aspects of Peirce's position, which may sound like a peculiar form of objective idealism. Without digressing too much on yet another kind of debate on center and periphery, let me say that we need to dismantle the disciplinary boundaries that have arisen of late, mostly due to our ignorance, between language and literature, between literature and the fine arts, or between 'static' and the performing arts, if we are to appreciate the creativity that emerges from the margin.

I am reminded of the interesting allegory that Tagore, the artist, performer, literary person and linguist - all rolled into one, narrates in the following lines:

The lofty building lies in the dust and all is scattered and broken.
Mind looked about. But what was there to see?
Only the morning star and the lily washed in dew.
And what else? A child running laughing from its mother's arms into the open
light.
"Was it only for this day that they said it was the day of the coming?"
"Yes, this was why they said there was music in the air and light in the sky."
"And did they claim all the earth only for this?"

"Yes", came the answer, "Mind, you build walls to imprison yourself.

Your servants toil to enslave themselves; but the whole earth and infinite space are for the child and for the new life."

"What does the child bring you?"

"Hope for all the world and its joy."

Mind asked me, "Poet, do you understand?"

"I lay my work aside," I said, "for I must have time to understand."

(Tagore, "The Fugitive" 259-260)

I presume the time has come for all of us to try and understand each other; to understand what living in the plural world is like.

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