



How Good is the Indian Muse?

By BS Murthy

Where to look for the soul of India in print, or now in digital mode? Is it in the writings of those for whom the muse is their mother tongue or those who happen to muse in the alien English? Where to savour the flavour of Indian life in fictional form? Is it in that 'stronger and more important body of work of Indian writers working in English' as trumpeted by Salman Rushdie or in the supposedly 'true to life' depictions (not the same thing as the examination of the human condition) on the variegate canvas of regional languages penned by the vernacular writers? And certainly, it is an overkill on the part of the *bhasha* writers to suggest, as was done, that 'any Tamil writer would have put more life into his novels than Narayan did'. An Achilles-like abuse of Hector's body and literally it's like saying; "I would have written your novel better had you given me the plot and all, soul included."

Well, what it takes to be a writer and what's the utility of writing itself? Naturally, this should be the starting point of such a debate. If writing skills alone are sufficient to make a writer out of a man, wouldn't be many in a given language master them? But writing is all about giving expression to one's original ideas and a happy blend of the writing ability and the ability to think, never mind which is predominant, is what makes a writer. After all, if Flaubert embellished his thoughts with fluid French, the polish of the language did not back Voltaire's profound intellect, but yet they both enriched the French, nay, world literature. And surely some of the *bhasha* literature couldn't have been brought to the international attention because the flavour of the originals cannot be captured in English translations? But if not the beauty of the language, certainly the intellectual underpinnings of the writing shouldn't be beyond the capacity of a translator to transcend the regional work into the English tome.

However, the ultimate test of any writing would be its ability to influence social thinking to any degree. Wasn't Rousseau's *Social Contract* the harbinger of the French Revolution? What about Das Kapital that ushered in communism? Were not Tolstoy's writings that brought the serfdom to end in Russia? If not for Dostoyevsky's ingenuous

arguments against the capital punishment, would have much of the world got rid of it? That none of them wrote in English and the translation of their works into it followed their regional fame should remove the misconception that writing in the regional languages is a handicap. Conceding that the lesser geniuses too are entitled to have a place under the universal English sun, what are the grounds then of the *bhasha* writers' claim to fame?

That the human condition of the Indian society in their domain is still governed by archaic thinking, insulated from the nuances of human psychology, would expose their collective failure to modernize the mind-set of their readership and contribute to social change. It can be said with a measure of assurance that modernity of thought in our society wherever it is prevalent is owing to the exposure to the writings in English, not necessarily the Indian writing in English. That being the case, what benefit the English translation of the *bhasha* writings is going to have is anybody's guess. It's nobody's case either that the Indians writing in English have made any profound difference, themselves being victims of a split personality what with their heart in here and the mind on the western market, and the soul missing altogether.

The whole thing boils down to moolah and the media. What is galling to the *bhasha* writers is the sizeable advance that an upstart of an Indian writer in English occasionally garners from the publisher. While they remained poor, writing about 'the poor and the powerless' for long, it seems unjust to them that someone making a debut without having even a nodding acquaintance with the wretched of the land should be so rewarded by the unfair system! What pains them too is the novice of an Indian writer in English becomes a nationally recognizable face overnight by the media coverage, while they go unnoticed even in their own *galli* for all their long and arduous toil. Maybe, the 'reality of life' could be frustrating for any but intellectuals should be made of a different stuff, that too the writing kind. Isn't it?

After all, there are things that we owe in life to positional advantage, and writing in English could be one such, that is, if one gets published by the right kind of publisher. On the flip side, there are no literary magazines that give a break to those writing fiction in English as is the case with the *bhasha* literary outpour. Thus, while many who write in English would get stuck with their manuscripts for pillows, for the rest of their lives, every 'me too' writer in the regional languages gets published, often enough, to become a doyen in due course. Can't the intellectualism of the regionalists come to grips with this irony of Indian literary phenomenon? Why should someone choose to be a writer after all? If it is for self-expression then why crave for public recognition? When a book infects at least one reviewer to write an informed review, wouldn't it be worth more than all the hype in the world? Couldn't a private conversation the writer has with someone when something is quoted from his book be far more rewarding than the publicized interviews where the book figures only in the passing? Above all, isn't it said that if only four come to read a book, all the midnight oil the author was required to burn writing it is worth its glow.

The problem is writing has come to be regarded as a means to acquire name and fame, if not money, and it does not matter as long as the writer is in the news, never mind whether someone really comes to read to enjoy or tends to be provoked by the book. Unfortunately for literature, the greater rewards of writing lost their relevance and the lesser benefits came to mean everything. Till this is understood, unkind cuts would continue to be inflicted in the arena of Indian writing. That's for sure.

This Dec-2011 piece is picked from my archives

