

For me, as for anyone who has grown up within an Indian literary milieu, the Jnanpith is an award unto itself, possibly because it recognizes something that goes beyond literary achievement: it acknowledges also the trust and affection that sometimes arises between writers and communities of readers. This bond – which one might almost describe as a kind of love – is perhaps the greatest reward that any writer can hope for.

When I started writing, many, many years ago, I could not have imagined that the Jnanpith would ever come my way. In those days Indians who wrote in English were accustomed to thinking of themselves as marginal, both to Indian and to English literature. This despite the fact that even back then writers from the Indian subcontinent had produced a corpus of work in English that was truly impressive for its breadth and quality. Many of the writers I read in my formative years are still well known, but I think it would not be out of place here to mention a few who are now at risk of being forgotten, for example Aubrey Menen, G.V.Desani, Kamala Markandeya, Attia Husain and Manohar Malgaonkar. Although these writers were better known back then it wasn't always easy to find their books. They were often to be found, not in bookshops, but in the libraries of the British Council.

How different things are today! It is now possible to walk into bookstores almost anywhere in the world and find many books written by talented young writers from India. Much of this of course, has to do with the increasing dominance of the English language, which is rightly a matter of deep concern to writers who write in other literary languages. Although I write in English myself, I fully share this concern for English is not, by any means my only language; nor would my work be what it is if I had grown up in a circumstance where one language predominated over all others. I am all too well aware that my work has been shaped, formed and enabled by the linguistic diversity and pluralism of the circumstances in which I grew up.

When we use the words 'pluralism' and 'diversity' we tend to think of a multi-colored mosaic, with many solid blocs of color adjoining but not spilling over into each other. But this is a false picture. There is nothing solid about the way that languages interact with each other in the Indian subcontinent: they mingle, flow and infiltrate, not just between groups but, most significantly, within individuals. The distinctive thing about our reality is that diversity and pluralism are intrinsic to our innermost selves – simply because it is impossible for an Indian to be monolingual in the manner of some Europeans and most Americans. All Indians grow up multilingual to a greater or lesser degree: we speak one language or dialect at home, another on the streets, yet another with our friends, and still another in the workplace or when we deal with government offices. It is almost impossible to function in an Indian city or town with a single language.

My father for example, grew up speaking Bhojpuri with his brothers and sisters, standard Bangla with his parents, standard Hindi with his friends, and English at his workplace. Which was his 'real' language? This question might make sense on a census form but it has absolutely no relevance to the inner worlds that

writers draw upon when they write. The whirling flow of languages, and the creative tensions, they generate are precisely the wellsprings I draw upon when I write.

It should be noted that this predicament is not particular to me as a writer who writes in English; it is shared by every writer in the subcontinent, no matter what language they write in. We all contend with multiple currents of language, many of which flow across the borders and boundaries that divide us from our neighbours: for example, Bangla, Punjabi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Nepali, Tamil, Sindhi, Gujarati, Tibetan, Chin, Tai and Nagami.

This reality existed long before the arrival of the English and their language. For thousands of years, literate Indians have been expected to be conversant not only with 'Languages of Place', or *desabhasas*, but also with at least one language that transcended place and region. Sanskrit was for millenia the exemplification of such a language, and Tamil was another. In medieval times Persian too came to be viewed in a similar light. In India, uniquely, linguistic pluralism was never seen as a source of confusion, as in the story of Babel. It was instead embraced, celebrated and incorporated into literary practices. The writer and critic Rajashekhara, formalized these practices over a thousand years ago when he wrote: '[One] given topic will be best treated in Sanskrit, another in Prakrit, or Apabhramsa or the language of spirits...'

The creative potential that arises from the intersection of languages can perhaps best be seen in the work of three great multilingual writers from Karnataka, two of whom stood here before me and one who, sadly, did not: U.R. Ananthamurthy, Girish Karnad and A.K. Ramanujan. The latter was to my mind, one of the greatest writers and thinkers of the late 20th century, and his works spanned Kannada, English, Tamil, Sanskrit and much else.

Even though I write in English, I draw constantly on Bangla and its vast imaginative resources. Here is an example. My last non-fiction book was called *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. In writing this book I came to the conclusion that modern literature offers few answers to what I take to be the most important literary challenge of our era: that of giving voice to the non-human. So I turned to pre-modern literature instead, and began to read the work of medieval Bangla poets like Bipradas Pippilai, Sukobi Narayan Deb and Kobi Krishnaramdas. It was through the work of these great poets that I re-discovered a legend that I had loved as a child: the story of Chand Sadagar. This legend is at the heart of my new novel *Gun Island*.

Apart from giving me access to the resources of an immensely rich literary tradition, Bangla also opened the door to the vibrant literary milieu of Bengal. I consider myself hugely fortunate in having been befriended by inspiring writers like Sunil Gangopadhyaya and Mahasweta Devi. Sunil-da once described my book *The Hungry Tide* as a Bengali novel written in English: I prize those words to this day.

Communication between languages, and across different habits of mind, always requires humility, patience, and a willingness to listen. These attributes do not come about by accident; they require a certain kind of habituation, and certain protocols, which in turn need the support of institutions that make it their mission to provide platforms where writers from many languages can meet and interact as equals.

The Jnanpith Foundation is precisely such an institution which is why the writers I looked up to held it in unparalleled esteem, as a body that was independent of the government and fair in its evaluations. Although there are undoubtedly some major lacunae in the awards, most notably in relation to gender and caste, it remains true, I think, that the Foundation has generally aspired to cleave to the principles of pluralism in relation to language, region and community.

These principles are likely to be sorely tested in years to come. We are living in a time when writers are increasingly beleaguered, embattled and marginalized. Around the world, everywhere we look, there is a closing of minds, a narrowing of horizons, and a palpable fear of the future. Nor is this fear unjustified: it is increasingly clear that the world's dominant economic model is profoundly dangerous: not only is it corroding our political processes it is also altering the planet's atmosphere in catastrophic ways. Technologies of communication, which once seemed to brim with emancipatory promise, are now seen to be capable of disseminating rage, prejudice and disinformation with unprecedented speed and efficiency. Under the circumstances we have to accept that the fundamental premise of modernity - that everything will always get better and better - is no longer credible. What lies ahead is a time when it will become ever more necessary for institutions like the Jnanpith to defend the ideals of plurality, diversity and fairness, ideals that were embodied by writers such as Firaq Gorakhpuri, Ashapura Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Qurratulain Hyder, Indira Goswami, U.R. Ananthamurthy, Srilal Shukla and Mahasweta Devi. To be chosen to follow in the wake of these great writers is, for me, an honor beyond all measure.

The journey that has brought me here was a long one, and on the way I have incurred more debts than I could possibly hope to acknowledge. But I would like to recall the memory of a man, who, would have been very glad for me today: my long-time editor and publisher, Ravi Dayal, who taught me more about reading and writing than anyone else.

Moments of celebration such as this are rare in a writer's life. For the most part we lead lonely, quiet lives, struggling with that most elusive of instruments – language. My constant companions in these struggles have been my children, Lila and Nayan, and most of all my wife of thirty years, Debbie. Without her love, support and encouragement I would not be here today.

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