

LANGUAGE DEBATE AND CANONIZING INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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One of the debates that has kept literary scholars of the present generation engaged in recent times and has ample implication for teaching pedagogy is the problem of canon-formation in Indian English poetry. One of the ways in which such canon-making operates, especially in the field of Indian English poetry, is through the compilation, use and importance of anthologies. Anthology making is a conscious political act that sanctions a poet or poem its literary status. It has given rise to the publication of numerous anthologies and in the recent decades we have witnessed the emergence of a handful of alternative anthologies.

A list of some canonical anthologies of Indian English poetry would include Gauri Deshpande's *An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry* (1974), R. Parthasarathy's *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (1976), Makarand Paranjape's *Indian Poetry in English* (1993) and *An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry* (1993), Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1994). Some popular and inclusive anthologies in libraries include V.K. Gokak's *Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1970) and P. Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (1971). Some anthologies of historical importance would likely to include A.V. Rajeswara Rau's *Modern Indian Poetry: An Anthology* (1958) and P. Lal and K. R. Rao's *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1959); both the anthologies were published by Kavita, New Delhi. Anthologies in general remain compact; they are convenient and often less expensive than purchasing separate texts. Those are some of the reasons for their popularity. However, as the case has been, inclusion of a poet or poem is hardly an innocent phenomenon. We have witnessed that canonical anthologies in India are exclusive about their selection of poets and poems, and in most cases the editor's profession remains central to anthology making. Hence, there is a need to address the issue of anthology making in Indian scenario. In what follows I shall explore the historiography of anthology making in India in the light of the great Indian language debate put forward by Buddhadeva Bose. The politics of inclusion and exclusion—of anthologizing and publishing Indian English poetry—will be central to the discussion of anthologizing Indian English poetry.

It was in the year 1963 that Buddhadeva Bose, a known poet and critic, argued in *The Concise Encyclopedia of English and American Poetry and Poets* (1963) that 'English is at best a

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functional language in India, for Indians'; and it is unsuitable for poetic expression in any case. Bose's entry in the encyclopedia becomes the genesis of the great Indian language debate in terms of literary expression. The allegation of Buddhadeva Bose against any kind of literary expression in English challenged both writers and publishers who were to establish themselves in market. The challenge was taken seriously by poets, critics and anthologists of the generation however. Every anthology or criticism of the contemporary times, in India, had some reference to the on-going debate put forward by Buddhadeva Bose. C.D. Narasimhaiah, for instance, in *The Swan and the Eagle* (1969) rejected the allegation completely. For Narasimhaiah the allegation was not only completely baseless, it was also a question of 'hampering' the progress of writers and critics alike. P. Lal of Writers Workshop, in order to respond to such an allegation, initiated a great discussion about the choice of language for Indian poets. He sent a set of Questionnaire to several Indian poets to examine their propositions and attitude towards the choice of English language as a means of creative expression. The replies from poets, along with a set of sample poems, were later published in 1969 under the title *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (1969). Lal wrote a 15-page introduction to prove that "A subculture has arisen whose problems, values, and aspirations can be expressed only in English" (Lal, 1969: xv). On the one hand, by publishing such an anthology Lal gained much favour in the academia; his status as a poet, professor and critic changed to that of an anthologist and publisher of poetry. On the other hand, however, by initiating such a discussion among poets and critics, Lal did much consequential disservice because poets and critics of the decades had to concentrate on such an inane issue that had proved itself to be creative for more than hundred years.

Responding to P. Lal, Nissim Ezekiel for instance stated that English was the only language he was comfortable with. So did several other poets who were writing in English. Adil Jussawalla's case was an apt example. As a Parsi man in India, Jussawalla claimed, embracing any language would be a foreign language for him. Similar were the explanations of Kamala Das, Roshen Alkazi and many others. Answering such a question, Dom Moraes once said that the only language that was used at his home was English; then he had to go abroad; Moraes returned to India only when he was 25; after that he felt that it was too late to learn an Indian language. He claims that the question here is 'how constructive the language is' for the writer. Reasonably, the language debate rendered a serious disservice not only to poets and critics but also to anthologists and publishers, and to Indian English poetry in general because the poetrycriticism circle was busy discussing an issue that had not only proved itself to be creative and resourceful, but had also been acknowledged by several Indian and foreign publications. Though aware of such issues, M.K. Naik goes on to examine: "These questions must be posed and their implications examined, though it is possible that we might ask and ask and Sphinx smile and remain silent" (1973, 157).

In order to answer Buddhadeva Bose, a generation of poets, critics and anthologists frequently debated whether English was a means of creative expression in India, and whether or not Indian thought or experience can be expressed in the English language. Meenakshi Mukherjee's "The Anxiety of Indianness" (1993, 2000) is one among such influential essays though the subject matter extends to Indian English fiction. In other words, 'nativising' English for the purpose of

creative expression and ‘nativising’ Indian poets without the influence of their Western counterparts were the major issues the poetry-criticism circle was engaged in. Due to the growing number of poets and their publications in standard anthologies and journals, it was almost irrelevant to debate on the issue in the decades. Moreover, according to Bruce King, the language debate contributed positively to the history of Indian English, and Indian poetry was slowly shaping itself to be free from the early ‘imitation’ or ‘influence’ in the coming decades (2001).

It is noteworthy to mention here that by the time of Bose’s allegation, Indian English poetry had marched a long way. Historically, Henry Derozio had composed his songs and verses in praise of the motherland in 1820s. His collections *Poems* and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems* were published in 1827 and 1828 respectively and were pioneering collections of Indian English poetry. There had been other poets centered in and around Calcutta who wrote poems and were given some recognition. The earliest anthology of Indian English poems was a celebrated work; it was *Selections from the British Poets from the Time of Chaucer to the Present Day with Biographical and Critical Notes* by David Lester Richardson and published by the Committee of Public Instruction, Calcutta, in 1840. It had included Indian poets such as Henry Derozio and Kasiprasad Ghose. In Bose’s contemporary decades, Adil Jussawalla published his first collection of poems, *Land’s End* in 1962, which has been a significant collection of poetry. There remained some considerable events and publications of historical importance in the Indian scenario before Bose’s claim as well. Gokak claimed that the direct imitation of Byron and Scott was no longer found in the collections of poetry that Indian poets produced (1970). P. Lal claimed Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu (1971). In 1952, *The Literary Criterion* was started in Mysore. Nissim Ezekiel had published his first promising work *A Time to Change* in 1952. Sahitya Academy was founded in New Delhi in 1953. In 1957, it started publishing *Indian Literature*, its journal, to promote Indian writing in English. P. Lal founded *Writers Workshop* in Calcutta in 1958 and started publishing poetry the following year. *Kavita* had published A.V. Rajeswara Rau’s *Modern Indian Poetry: An Anthology* in 1958, and P. Lal and K.R. Rao edited *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* for *Kavita* the following year. In short, by 1962, in the poetry scenario, the two related preconditions for the production of Indian English poetry, “the Indianization of the English language” and “the Anglicization of Indians,” in Paranjape’s words, had been adequately met by Indian English poets (Paranjape 1993, 1-2).

During this period, Buddhadeva Bose however was not the only person to accuse Indian English poets for being imitative of their British counterparts. A year before Bose’s comments on Indian English, Allen Ginsberg accused Indian poets for being imitative of English poets (1962). About Allen Ginsberg’s remark at Ezekiel’s residence, Chirantan Kulshrestha writes:

Indo-Anglian poetry, he [Ginsberg] felt, was often imitative, derivative, and literary, born of an idiom “too polite and genteel,” impossible as a vehicle of creative expression because there could never be an Indian English “like there is an American Negro English.” (Kulshrestha 1980, 9)

The direct impact of Ginsberg’s statement on Indian poets and poetry is difficult to be traced. Literary critics and anthologists of the subsequent decades took this as a serious offense,

defended Indian (English) poets, and tried hard to project what “Indianness” and “modernism” were there in Indian English poetry. They did not forget to divide Indian poets by British ‘periods’ and ‘-isms’ as well. They traced the influence of Eliot and Pound, and other British poets on Indian English poets and tried hard to show the Western ‘-isms’ in Indian English poetry. Makarand Paranjape in *Indian Poetry in English* (1993), for example, classifies Indian poets in this light to a great extent. Though he is inclusive about anthologizing poets in both his anthologies, he is highly sceptical about their individual potential. The Western yardstick he applies to judge and categorise Indian poets becomes a serious concern of his anthologies. Moreover, most anthologists of Indian English poetry of the decades tried to hard show what ‘modern’ Indian poetry in English was like. The spirit of the time demanded critics and anthologists to form canons of Indian English poetry not only for its individuality but also to be acknowledged in world literature.

Furthermore, as most anthologists and critics were also poets themselves, the purpose of such an exercise favoured both poets and critics alike. Ezekiel’s “Very Indian Poem in English,” “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.,” “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” and “Night of the Scorpion”; Kamala Das’s “A Hot Noon in Malabar”; and Ramanujan’s “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House” received positive reviews and were frequently anthologised. Further, most anthologists and critics celebrated the representation of Indian idiom or rather what they constructed as Indian idiom and engaged themselves critiquing and defending the same for the sake of the ongoing language debate. Apparently, Nissim Ezekiel’s poem “A Very Indian Poem in English” remained constantly popular and was even prescribed in university syllabi in vain. Ezekiel writes:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding,
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,
I should say even 200% correct,
But modern generation is neglecting—
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing. (Paniker, 1991, 68)

One major issue that is obviously portrayed in the poem is the Native’s use of the English language. Numerous critics who celebrated the poem were highly obsessed with the theme of “Indianness” in Indian expression which remains a serious concern of this decade of poets and critics. In fact, the positive review and comment did not come in isolation. By the time Ezekiel humoured the Indian idiom, he had established himself as a poet, English teacher and mentor of several new poets and dictated their taste for poetry accordingly. And, consequently, a generation of creative artists and critics suffered the Ezekiel syndrome of overusing ‘Indianness’ with a suffused desire to present the fascination of the mentor. Ezekiel continued to guide and portray his whim— likewise in “A Very Indian Poem in English” where the humour become pugnacious, “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” and many others explore a similar theme. In fact, the poem “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” became so popular that without teaching the subject matter of Ezekiel’s preaching of Indianness, it seems almost impossible to make meanings of Indian English poetry:

You are all knowing, friends,
what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling. (Parthasarathy, 1976, 37)

The idiom and the tone remain similar. His volumes of poetry turn out to be a continuous portrayal of the same whim of 'Indianness'. Ezekiel's role as a mentor in publishing circle remains thus a debatable issue which needs further elaboration.

Apparently, Indian poets who wrote during the subsequent decades strived to portray 'Indianness' to a larger extent to be housed in the spirit of the time. Poetry had to be "Indian" in terms of its linguistic expression along with its rhyme, rhythm and the choice of subject and form. Agha Shahid Ali for instance was a diasporic poet, but was included in anthologies as a major poet because he composed ghazals in English. Adil Jussawalla published only two collections of poems but received the status of a major poet because he was located in Bombay and was frequently discussing the issue of 'language debate' in India for creative expression. His status as editor of *Debonair* also contributed positively. Indianizing the English language became so central to anthologizing poets and poetry that it almost remained impossible to anthologize a writer or poem without defending the 'Indian' status. The impact remains clearly visible even if an anthology was inclusive and the anthologist liberal in the choice of poets or poems. K. Satchidanandan's "Introduction" to *Signatures: One Hundred Indian Poets* remains a clear indicator of the issue. He shows how poetry was to a maximum order 'nativised' and how this phenomenon extends even to writers of various regional languages, yet he has to highlight the issue for the marketability of the anthology:

The outside influences were chiefly transformative in nature, as they were nativised by the individual genius of the writers, the geniuses of the languages they wrote in, and the contingencies of the specific cultural and literary conjunctures obtaining in different language-zones. Little magazines, translations and anthologies and anthologies played a crucial role in sensibility and idiom. (2006, xxxiv)

With the growing number of journals and publishers of poetry, in and around the '50s, '60s and '70s, several Indian English poets got published. P. Lal of *Writers of Workshop*, for instance, gave a chance to both new and established poets without any discrimination. The other major publishers of Indian English poetry in the market were Oxford University Press and Arnold-Heinemann. If we examine the anthology-scenario, in the early years, the poetry-study circle was dominated by R. Parthasarathy's *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (1976) and afterwards, it was dominated by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992); both the anthologies remained popular in colleges and universities and attained the status of canonical anthologies. The common poets included in both the volumes were Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar and Keki N. Daruwalla.

Canonical anthologies like *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (1976) and *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) are indicators of the process of institutionalization of Indian poetry. They are not excluded from their editors' intentional representation of the 'constituents' of modern Indian poetry. Parthasarathy's anthology represents only 10 poets: Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Shiv K. Kumar, Mahapatra, Meherotra, Parthasarathy, G. Patel and A.K. Ramanujan to examine 'the tradition' of Indian English poetry which he thinks is important in the post-independence era. Broadly speaking, it includes an "Introduction" of 11 pages, in 8 parts, examining different objectives, characteristics and problems of Indian English poetry. Like other traditional anthologies and critics, Parthasarathy problematizes the position of English language in India and the use of Indian idioms in poetry. Meherotra's *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* houses Ezekiel, Mahapatra, Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Daruwalla, Dom Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Eunice De Souza, Adil Jussawalla, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth and Manohar Shetty. He writes a complete introduction to each poet assessing his/her poems. However, like Parthasarathy's anthology, this one also represents a particular group of poets to represent Indian varieties, and indicates the editor's prejudices to form an exclusive canon of Indian poetry in English. Upon the success of both the anthologies, the subsequent anthologists too remained obsessed with such an issue which neither deserved any attention nor was there any need to remain prejudiced to represent defiance poetic expressions. Furthermore, Ranjit Hoskote, a known poet and critic edited *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* for Penguin in 2002. This volume is seriously obsessed with the metropolis, although it supposedly houses fourteen different voices of the 'second generation' of Indian poets. Hoskote, a Bombay-based poet, included seven poets from Bombay to represent poetry of the second generation and left the rural voices untouched.

Parthasarathy's *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, within a span of two decades, saw its eleventh impression; and Meherotra's *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* saw several impressions before the first student edition was published in 2004 (second student impression 2005). Poets, critics, anthologists and publishers of Indian English poetry kept themselves busy discussing what was termed as the great 'Indian language' debate.

Further, in Bombay poetry circle, Nissim Ezekiel by and large became the central figure as a poet, teacher, critic and mentor. If we examine major anthologies of the contemporary times, Indian poetry without Ezekiel's presence seems to be incomplete. In spite of his high-personal writing, sometimes very 'unpoetic' either, he achieved the status of a major Indian poet with the publications of two of his books abroad. Ezekiel's *A Time to Change* (1952) was assuredly a promising collection of poems. His two collections of poetry published abroad enriched his popularity. They included, however, several of his autobiographical pieces about which in later stage Meherotra commented:

Often the writing seems to be purposeless ('At twenty-seven or so / I met the girl who's now / my wife. As bride and groom / we went for what is usually called— / I don't know why—a honeymoon. '); the language under no pressure ('You arrived / with sari clinging / to your breast / and hips. '); and if one may shift the poetic reference from context to author, the man himself hopelessly priapic (' "Is this part of you?" she asks, [sic] / as she holds it, stares at it. / Then she laughs. '). (1992, 9)

The 'nativisation' of Indian English poetry and the obsessive discussion on the issue of language have negative effect on Indian English poetry as a whole. The problem of such obsession has been twofold. On the one hand, Indian poets who did not participate in the language debate were hardly anthologized and often ignored. The presence of their poetry neither interested critics nor anthologists. The publication of Sultan Padamsee's *Poems* (1975), for instance, vanished without any review or criticism. Modelled after Elizabethan lyrics and love poems, sometimes in themes and sometimes in forms, Padamsee's writings had hardly anything to do with 'India', its contemporary 'freedom struggle' or 'Indianness' though he was interested in the reconstruction of India through theatre and painting. English was for him the only language available for effective communication because of his education like that of Ezekiel's or Jussawalla's. Padamsee, who wrote during the War and had an early death, had a little output though. He had only one collection of poems to his credit, and the poems were posthumously published by his sister Roshen Alkazi. On the other hand, poets who dealt with different themes and issues in their poetry came to the poetry circle only when they had something to do with issues like the 'language debate' or/and "Indianness". Any poet who wrote something apart from these two issues hardly went to a press; or if at all his/her poetry was published, it was ignored to the maximum degree.

The effect of such an exercise has been negatively influential as well. There have been multiple attempts to portray the same work by the same poet. For instance, Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpio" originally published in *Exact Name* is reprinted in six anthologies; Kamala Das' "My Son's Teacher" originally published in *Hers: A Book for Children* is reprinted in four anthologies; Jussawalla's "Sea Breeze, Bombay" originally published in *Missing Person* finds spaces in four anthologies; Mehrotra's "Continuities" in three anthologies; Parthasarathy's "Trial 7" in four anthologies; Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree" is published in four anthologies, and the list continues. In such a condition of the anthology market, inclusive anthologies like that of Gokak's have been sidelined to a significant degree. V.K. Gokak's *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry* is still readable, not because it is inclusive about its selection, but because it is a critique of and an introduction to the history of Indian English poetry. Besides, P. Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* is remarkable not because of its popularity in early periods, but because it has housed a set of questionnaires with several Indian poets. With such market at hand, regional poets, poets from the North-East India, queer poets, poets writing on religious themes and issues and other such poets who are not located at metro cities and are not part of the main-stream poetry circle are sidelined to a significant degree. An inclusive anthology would do much service to justify that Indian English poetry is as diverse as the country itself in terms of geographical, linguistic and cultural differences.

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