

PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH IN INDIA: THE EMERGENCE OF DALIT AND NORTHEASTERN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that transactions between the English text and local conditions are an important aspect of developments in English in India determining interpretations in teaching and research. Texts emerging from contemporary conditions feature in courses, with one of the most significant of these transactions resulting in the incorporation of Dalit and minority literatures into English Studies. Perceived as an instrument of empowerment by Indians almost from the time it was introduced, English has never quite lost this aspect of its role – and even as the discipline has taken note of global expansions in the field through theory and the incorporation of new areas, it has gradually acquired a strong national/regional flavour through the incorporation of texts that have emerged out of struggles for visibility and voice by marginal groups. The rise of Dalit and Northeast Indian English literature and their incorporation into English syllabi are two examples of this trend.

INTRODUCTION:

While trying to capture a sense of the current status of the discipline of English as it is taught at college and university level in India, and brought up short by the impossible task of pulling together the many ways in which the discipline exists here, I realized that perhaps the only common thread that runs through its multiple practices is the growing interest in

Dalit writing from all over the country and writings (mostly in English) from the north eastern states of India (or NE as it is commonly known). The bird's eye view would reveal literatures from these two sites – the Dalit and the NE – making the most significant impact on the discipline by their hospitality to current developments in theory, their strong ideological moorings in otherness of caste and tribe respectively, and, perhaps most importantly, their accessibility as areas of study.

English in India' as a meta-issue has been the subject of study ever since Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* demonstrated how English Literature was used by the British as a tool of subject construction and governance.

While the goals and influence of English (language and literary study) changed with Independence in 1947, interest in what can be achieved through it has continued to grow and change. A Google search would show many essays and books that describe and analyse 'English in India' with varying degrees of success and most often with an emphasis on the language. English is taught in schools across the country, functions as the language of communication among the educated, is the language of higher education, and is often used as an official language in administration and in the courts. Simultaneously, Indian Writing in English (IWE) has become an exciting new addition to the global English Literature corpus. And English continues to be part

of subject construction and empowerment exercises. But what is the nature of the discipline in contemporary India? An overview would show the presence of English in the above-mentioned ways as a significant context for developments in the discipline, while transactions between the English text and local conditions appear to affect interpretations in teaching and research. Texts emerging from contemporary conditions feature in courses, with one of the most significant of these transactions resulting in the incorporation of Dalit and minority literatures into English Studies. Perceived as an instrument of empowerment by Indians almost from the time it was introduced, English has never quite lost this aspect of its role – and even as the discipline has taken note of global expansions in the field through theory and the incorporation of new areas, it has gradually acquired a strong national/regional flavour that has helped turn the very real disadvantages of practising the discipline outside of its primary Anglo-American sites of production into a source of strength. And since higher education is administered from the University Grants Commission (UGC) through a combination of suggestion and direction, model curricula periodically issued by it are often a barometer of change with Dalit, regional, minority, Indian English, and classical literature being highlighted in such advisories at different times.

Over the last seven or eight decades the primarily British-English syllabus inherited from colonial education has expanded to include literatures in English from other parts of the world and India, and has come to terms with offering a percentage of translated texts from European and Latin American literatures and from some of the major Indian literary

traditions. Today it is a combination of a historically inherited core British literature component supplemented in different universities with American, African, Australian, Canadian, South Asian, and Caribbean texts and elective courses (these national literatures do not always feature as full courses but individual texts often appear in courses on Women's Writing, literature and environment, post-humanism and literature, graphic novels, etc.). Besides, newer texts and areas emerging in the wake of India's national and regional politics, social concerns, and discourses about public events have gradually begun to appear.

Such new texts from socio-economic and political conditions and events stemming from churning amongst the many racial, class, and caste components in India's tradition-bound social fabric have helped to evolve reading strategies that are directed at critiquing the domains from which they have emerged even as they have contributed to the formation of new critical terminologies and themes. The UGC's curricular suggestions have facilitated incorporation of region and language specific content. So the English syllabus at a university in the north east of India would have English and translated texts from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Tripura (available from reputed publishers at local booksellers). A university in West Bengal might have courses on Bengali Dalit writing (both Jadavpur University and West Bengal State University have individual faculty offering such courses). A central university (like Hyderabad, Delhi, or Jawaharlal Nehru University [JNU]) with a different kind of ethnic composition and cultural politics might have courses on both Dalit and writing from the NE states on offer or encourage research in these areas. This

scene, with obvious regional modifications, is repeated in universities all over the country.

Many dimensions of English are apparent in various parts of the country (regional variations emerging from racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural conditions), and English is made to bear the weight of different expectations. Debates over whether students should study Indian writing in English or continue to read the British and American writers were common at one time and, we continue to argue whether Shakespeare (and other early writers) should be taught in general courses in English and whether science students in their compulsory English paper should read literary classics or science writings, or should be prescribed Indian short stories and poems in original English or in English translation from Indian languages. Many of these concerns come out of an interpretation/understanding of contemporary India, especially about disparities in education and wealth, about social class, caste and gender discriminations, and the need to provide education that will help ameliorate such problems.

The 'politics of English literature as a colonial phenomenon' has long been displaced as a way of thinking about the discipline and the language even as newer strategic uses have been regularly reinvented. That earlier view is usually taken for granted as part of the history of English in India but to think of current practice is to acknowledge how deeply immersed English has become in the Indian everyday, which includes the socio-political changes going on in post-Independence India, the tone and rhetoric of public discourse, and everyday events that catch news headlines – acts of corruption, violence, multi-ethnic Indian

classrooms, gender and ethnic discrimination – all of which quickens English language usage and sharpens interpretation of literary representation. In fact, one eminent English teacher narrates his own experience of teaching Hemingway's 'Hills like White Elephants' through processes of translation in a multi-ethnic classroom and discovers what students might learn: 'readers of "Hills" in languages other than English open up other worlds where their selves are relocated and discovered. No one is perfectly at home or elsewhere in reading such stories as "Hills," a discovery only a translation, however imperfect, can teach them'.¹ Chandran's essay, one of many others that he has written on the experience of teaching English in India, suggests that young readers bring to the classroom and to the specific texts cultural experiences drawn from the reality of their lives in contemporary India that determine how they are likely to respond to the English text.

The complex reception and strategic hospitality accorded to the English text are the result of the urgency in students and researchers to make their discipline more responsive and relevant. This urgency has gradually begun to appear as the profile of the English classroom, determined by a combination of merit and social welfare schemes of reservation (the reservation of seats for constitutionally defined disadvantaged groups at all levels and going up to recruitment of faculty), has become more and more complex, and has begun to influence text selection and modes of classroom practice. The ideal of social upliftment through English is not new.² It has been a part of the expectations attendant upon knowledge of the English language and has been one of the tacit goals of English literary study at the university during its long history in India.

But the growing self-consciousness, protests, and demands for visibility and justice on the part of India's variously disadvantaged communities have ensured a path-breaking shift in Indian society and English has frequently been the engine driving this movement even as it has itself felt the impact of the upheaval.

For the discipline the shift was initially visible in MPhil and PhD research and in projects funded by the UGC³ and has been the result of a number of negative and positive factors. The negatives include the impossibly large numbers coming into higher education institutions to study for BA and MA degrees and often going onto research degrees (with that nth PhD dissertation based on a superficial reading of a chosen author); uncertain competence in core English literature; and problems of access to primary materials on British and other English language authors. Among the positives are the alternative and local language histories of the canonical English text (as it came to be translated and circulated in one or other of the many literary cultures); theoretical engagement in the global culture of the discipline with issues of trauma, violence, otherness, and the body facilitating the incorporation of texts from Dalit and tribal experience and from Indian experiences of Partition, the Emergency, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, etc.; and contemporary events that have made it impossible to insulate the English text from its moment of reception (for example, frequent events of rape and honour killings occurring in the still heavily feudal societies in many parts of India have often served as prisms to refract the representation of interpersonal violence in the English text). Literatures representing and making visible these experiences are also invested with the goal of empowerment and social development that runs through Indian higher education

policy, even as they speak to ideological associations (and identity issues) of communities. It is possible to identify two kinds of responses in this situation – one in the inclusion of actual new texts and fields of study drawn from India's current socio-political and economic conditions/crises; and a second in readings of the canonical English text alongside radical new texts (the English text now seems closer even as it allows the event to be seen more sharply and critically).

So, from being a tool in British colonial hands it has now metamorphosed into a strategic tool in the hands of Indian students and researchers of the discipline. It has been progressively Indianized – through the admission of new texts from hitherto ignored and invisible areas of culture, through comparative work, and in a turn to Indian aesthetics and classic Indian texts. The most recent (2015) UGC model curriculum for the BA course starts off with a paper on Indian Classical Literature that includes Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, Sudraka's *Mrcchakatika*, 'The Book of Banci' from Adigal's *Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet* and several sections from the *Mahabharata* while among suggested readings is Bharata's *Natyashastra* – all of which would earlier only have been referred to in passing in the classroom, if at all.⁴

The interest in politically charged work has accompanied the protest movement of the Dalit Panthers and has created serious readership for Dalit autobiographies and poetry and fiction on Dalit experience. Autobiographical novels like *Karukku* by Bama and *Ittibritte Chandal Jibon* by Manoranjan Byapari, autobiographies by Baby Kamble (Jina Amucha) and Daya Pawar (Baluta), and the powerful poetry of Namdeo Dhasal (to name a random handful of representative Dalit texts in

Tamil, Marathi, and Bangla, all available in English translation) now feature in syllabi across the country. The emergence of Dalit consciousness is a pan-Indian phenomenon and its powerful discourse of otherness has led to discovery of similar literatures in regions earlier thought to be devoid of Dalit groups.

Dalit literature finding a place in English curricula has been the result of much of this literature being either written in English or being quickly translated into English. The role of Katha and Sahitya Akademi in supporting translations from the literary traditions of other languages, the rise of new publishers and local presses, as well as the changed policy on translations of big publishing houses like OUP and Penguin, has been largely responsible for the availability of this literature. Publishing houses that have begun to specialize in Dalit writing are identified by Jaya Bhattacharji Rose as Macmillan India (Karukku was brought out by them), Orient Longman/OBS, OUP India, Zubaan, Navayana, Adivaani, Speaking Tiger, and Penguin Random House.⁶ Besides these there are smaller presses throughout India publishing minority and Dalit literature. The case of literature in English from the 'North East' is similar, with visibility and circulation being achieved because of the interest shown by the same publishers.

Recently, I was at a workshop on Translation organized by the English Department of West Bengal State University (WBSC). The focus was on translations of Bangla Dalit writings. The overall ambience of the workshop was distinctly Bengali with workshop participants (comprising of translators who were expected to use the three days of the workshop to fine tune their translations through interactions with the writers

present and with one another) and invited Resource Persons (mainly senior academics who were expected to use their own experience of translation to comment on the problems brought up by the participant-translators and set them against current positions in the field of translation studies) being asked to use English, Bangla, and Hindi in their presentations and interventions. Several of the writers whose works had been or were being translated were present along with their translators, even as the workshop identified new writings under this category. Since there was no Dalit literature in my region (comprised of the eight states of India's northeast), the example I gave was of a similar translation context. This was a project that the English Department of my university had carried out in 2000–2001 which involved the collection of folk tales from several tribal languages of Assam and their translation into English. The project was titled 'Representation of Women in the Folk Narratives of Assam' and the process of collection from oral sources and already existing.

published versions in Assamese translation revealed two interesting features: one was a desire for visibility on the part of communities/groups marginalized by a dominant literary culture – and hence the willingness to be translated into English; the second was the mediatory role played by departments of English in this politics of visibility, a role that has elements of social responsibility, genuine desire to make a rich vernacular literature available to a larger readership, and perhaps most crucially the need to reinvent or at least reenergize the discipline and redefine the place of the Indian academic within this discipline.

The other significant surge of interest has been in literature produced in the eight states of the region known collectively as 'the North East' (much of it in English, though literature in the Assamese language has a long history and powerful presence). This literature has successfully articulated the region's historical marginalization, its cultural and ethnic distinctiveness, its contemporary politics of identity, and accompanying insurgencies and violence, even as the conditions that produced this literature have provided insight into issues of power and powerlessness, and of processes of othering in social and political sites. The experience of alienation, misrepresentation, and political neglect of the NE has been long drawn out and persistent and its perceived and real marginalization has been frequently represented in its literature; and since much of it has been in English or is available in English translation this literature has entered syllabuses without too much resistance.

These two areas of experience have led to hitherto unimaginable representations of cruelties; of bodily oppression and mental agonies; of disgust, shame and revulsion, strong resistance, and critiques of historical persecution. The struggle to find voice and expression has helped refurbish the critical apparatus of writers and critics. Questions of space, body, and otherness have become the stuff of critical language, and students and teachers of English literature have been quick to make the connection between English texts and Dalit and NE literature and allow the insights gained to influence approaches to otherness, and social oppression in the English text.

An example of the kind of thing that happens in the contemporary classroom in India should give a sense of these shifts.

The classroom at my university has students coming from different ethnic groups, from rural and urban backgrounds, often with little or no previous exposure to English literature before they enter the BA programme. The challenge is to find a point where we can converse and use the familiar to introduce the strange. The entry point for them is often life in the region, and their access to the discourse about the region made up of identity, neglect, invisibility, and marginalization has both colonial and contemporary resonances. When faced with a text like *The Merchant of Venice* (one of the most popular and featuring frequently in syllabi), the student's sympathy for Shylock is immediate.

While they enjoy the twists and turns of the plot and readily mouth critical platitudes derived usually these days from online notes, their response to Shylock is experiential and therefore more engaged. With a little steering into the social dynamics of the play they quickly see the way the majority Christian community treats the minority Jewish community – drawing on their own sensitivity to the treatment NE students receive when they go to study or work in metropolises like Delhi and face discrimination and violence from landlords and neighbours or randomly on streets because of different food habits, dress, and supposedly bohemian lifestyles.

Contextual elements as part of literary-critical concerns decide themes of research, setting up evaluative schema that address and critique existing frames for reading that have their origin in other contexts (for example, Partition violence or Indian representations of violence and trauma might help to critique migration writing as well as the literature of the Holocaust or 9/11). The need to speak to

the specific classroom – and this varies across India – the importance of taking note of current events and social concerns and registering these as relevant to the English classroom, are also part of keeping the discipline relevant.

While it is impossible to generalize, the blend of canonical and local elements found in the university English classroom today points to a dual urge at work in the way English is developing – one that looks both outward and inward. This is the empowerment that the discipline’s practitioners have perhaps been seeking ever since it was introduced and it looks forward to what might very well be an enabling indigenous strand in English Studies in India alongside developments in keeping with its global status.