

*Writing India, Writing English: Literature, Language, Location*

G. J. V. Prasad

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The nuances of difference between Indian writing in English and Indian English have still to be resolved. The dialogue between Indian writers of English and Indian writers using the other languages of India has still to be facilitated in ways that will be productive, rather than reductive. The issue seems to be that those writing in English represent only a very thin slice of India, both literally and figuratively. Nevertheless, translations from various Indian languages into English have increased exponentially in recent years and it appears that English is, paradoxically, the chosen language in which a great deal of Indian literature comes to be represented. J. G. V Prasad's collection of essays engages with these issues in a relatively dispassionate manner and with a critical perception honed over decades of thinking and writing on the subject. Prasad argues that if Indianness is the essence or core of the experience of reading Indian literature, it is more fruitful to examine when the consciousness of the nation state (Indianness according to Prasad) enters Indian literature, and how the languages/literatures imagine their specific identities in that space. He maintains that post-Independence writers in various Indian languages have been more concerned with their own linguistic culture and politics rather than with that of the nation. Regional literatures represent cultural dots on the map of India that have to be connected in order to appreciate the fuller picture.

Perhaps that is why Prasad chooses to circumscribe Indian English to the nation state of India, excluding writers of English from Pakistan, Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia. Obviously, under his logic, the consciousness of being a nation would be different for those who elected or were compelled to move to Pakistan and later Bangladesh. Yet this logic does not satisfactorily explain how their world views change so drastically as to set them apart. While Salman Rushdie transcends the boundaries of India and Pakistan, many budding South Asian writers of English are left out in Prasad's discussion because they do not fit into his paradigm.

In the Preface, Prasad states his focus: "...this book look[s] at how the nation is negotiated and constructed in English (and English translation), a language that calls for constant transformation even as it transforms Indian realities" (xi). His goals, stated as they are in a series of questions, are invariably thought-provoking. Here are two of the more

challenging ones: “How enabling is English, and how disabling? How can we use English to truly understand and represent our various Indias” (xi)? Since the volume is comprised of separate papers delivered at conferences and/ or previously published as chapters in books, the author has cast it in two parts. Ostensibly, this is an attempt to focus the reader’s attention on the stated goals mentioned above: Part I: India, English, Translation; Part II: Indian English Literature and the Nation. This said, however, some of the selections do not appear to address the volume’s intellectual desideratum. Five of the book’s eleven chapters deal specifically with Indians writing in English: Girish Karnad, Toru Dutt, R. K. Narayan, Nissim Ezekiel and Mahesh Dattani. While their works and reception as writers are inherently interesting, Prasad’s studied treatment of their contribution to writing in English hardly addresses the pressing questions outlined in the Preface. The remaining six chapters, on the other hand, are much more effective, addressing the history (“A Minute Stretching into Centuries: Macaulay, English and India”), the challenges of translating Dalit literature (“Translating Dalit Tamil Literature into English”), the interaction of India’s regional languages with English (“Tamil, Hindi, English: The New M  nage    Trois”), the role of English in the imagining of the nation-state (Trans-creating India(s): The Nation in English Translation”), whether the ‘Indian reality’ to be found only in Indian English texts (“Writing India, Writing English”), and, finally, the paradoxical role of Indian English poetry in constructing the nation (“India in Verse: The Indian English Nation”).

I find it difficult to endorse the way Prasad has inserted Macaulay in the conversation about English in India. While one cannot deny the impact of his “Minute” and his other initiatives on language policy, education, colonial administration and the penal code, one gets the inference from Prasad that there is an implied apology for a colonial (aggressor) who premised his ideas on the notion that he was racially and culturally superior, therefore his language, English (culture implied), deserved paradigmatic status. Here is an example: “While it is true that the debate about the medium of education had been well under way when Macaulay arrived in India, it is also a fact that his ‘Minute on Education’ routed the field and planted the flag of English language well and truly in this country. It is a flag that has withstood various storms and outlasted the flag of imperialism and is still flying high and proud in the country of its imposition and immediate adoption” (3-4). The fact of the matter is that by 1834, the year Macaulay arrived in India, there had been over a century of heated debate in Great Britain on the subject of the English language’s origin, its development as the foundation of British culture and identity, its place in the academic curriculum, and, most meaningfully, its role as the language of a people destined to rule the world. Scholarship in this area is well developed, yet it is hardly referenced by those who discuss the introduction of English into Indian education and administration. Macaulay is often portrayed as the progenitor of a radical idea. Some even argue that he was the father of modernity for Indians and responsible for

the concept of India as a cultural unity. Yet his record is unambiguous. Macaulay left an England deeply engaged in debates concerning the importance of teaching the English language in English schools, where it had been accorded second-class status behind Latin and Greek. Britain had been slowly awakening to the value of the study of the English language ever since Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, R. B. Sheridan, Thomas De Quincey and Archbishop R. C. Trench, to name just a few, had promoted the idea that the role of language should be understood not only from a scientific, linguistic perspective, but as the key mechanism in social and political progress, as the native soil of morality and the racial superiority of its speakers. By the mid-1830s, the expansion of Britain's imperialist reach had grown to the point where the supply of suitably educated middle-level bureaucrats and administrators, schooled in the use of a grammatically standardized English, was insufficient. As a member of the Board of Control of the British East India Company before leaving for his commission in India, Macaulay was well aware of the shortage of bureaucrats. He also understood that one of his goals would be to promote English education among the Company's 'subjects', if British imperialism was to expand in India, as elsewhere. We need to fully consider and appreciate the circumstances in which the transformation of Indian systems of knowledge-making were accomplished in order to look for residues of such circumstances diachronically. They are still with us in the present day. Prasad makes an able attempt in this regard, yet one gets the impression he has embraced certain presuppositions about the moral, economic and political implications of Macaulay's contributions. It is one thing to point out the use of English language and education by Dalits, and their paradoxical proclaimed reverence for Macaulay, and quite another to accept the inevitability of the hegemony of English, not only in India, but world-wide. After all, how can a unilingual world fulfill the humanity within us?

The Macaulay piece aside, Prasad has managed in "Trans-creating India(s): The Nation in English Translation," to raise several questions and issues that consistently problematize discussions about the role of English in India. The social, political, economic and cultural challenges facing India are often compared to those of Europe, which Prasad notes is going through a period of resistance to the idea of a European Union. The question is: does resistance in India take the same forms? Is the construct 'India' made possible through the agency of English? More to the point, Prasad asks, "How do you anthologize an India you recognize as a hegemonic construct, a disabling fiction? And in English (translation)?" (51) First of all, while Europe is multi-cultural and multi-linguistic, as is India, it has not experienced colonialism, nor has a single language or educational system been imposed upon it. It is not yet a construct, but a construction. Prasad raises the anthology question to the level of theory, pointing out that anthologists have positioned themselves on a slippery slope, "...in a constant struggle to maintain their balance, mediating between the centre they inhabit and the peripheries they would like to co-

opt” (52). One comes away with the disconcerting feeling that English anthologies of Indian regional languages simply defend the role of English, thus failing in their espoused purpose.