

ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA  
SANT KABIR, RUDYARD KIPLING, AND VERNACULAR ENGLISH

I

In a well known *doha* or distich, Kabir (1398-1448) takes the hierarchical Indian language system and stands it on its head. The *doha* compares Sanskrit, the language of the gods, to *kupa jal*, the stagnant water of a well, and *bhasa* (vernacular) to the running water of a stream. There is nothing new in the anti-Sanskrit sentiment he expresses. Other *bhakti* poets, like Nammalvar (9<sup>th</sup> century) and Basavanna (12<sup>th</sup> century), had expressed it before him.

The vernacular—or ‘running water’—Kabir wrote in is difficult to pin down. ‘The difficulty of the problem’, Charlotte Vaudeville has said, ‘is largely due to the uncertainties of the textual tradition . . . [T]he same *pad* may be found with characteristic Avadhi forms in the *Bijak*, with more Khari Boli in the *Guru Granth* and with a few Braj forms in the *Kabir-granthavali*.’<sup>1</sup> Kabir’s first editor, Shyam Sunder Das, looking at the fine mess that is Kabir’s language, called it *panchmel khichri*, or kedgeriee cooked with five kinds of grain. A less aromatic description of it is Ramchandra Shukla’s, who in a history of Hindi literature first published in the 1920s and still the standard reference work on the subject, called Kabir’s language *sadhukkari bhasa*, which literally means the jargon of sadhus. Holy argot.

A century after Kabir we get another instance of a mixed language, *rekhta*. The word comes from the Persian, and, according to John Platts’s *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, it means

‘Poured out; scattered; mixed;’

‘The mixed dialect, the Hindustani or Urdu language (as used by men);’

‘A Hindustani ode;’

‘Mortar, plaster.’<sup>2</sup>

Apart from being the name of a language, *rekhta* could refer to any poetry that mixes lines, phrases and vocabulary from Hindi and Persian. It could also be written in both the Persian and Nagari scripts, the choice of script depending on who you were. Wandering Sufis chose the Persian script and Nirguna *sants* the Nagari. The popularity of *rekhta*, of this mixed language, extended to the Mughal court, where, taking the form of macheronic poetry, it sometimes degenerated into a parlour game, an occasion for poets to show off their skills.

In one extreme case, a quatrain by Rahim mixes Sanskrit, Braj, Gujarati, Marathi, Rajasthani, Khari Boli, Punjabi, Persian/Arabic, and Telugu.

So far I have only spoken about language mixing without giving an actual example. Here is one, a mixture of Hindustani and subaltern English, taken from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It describes the encounter between three privates in a line regiment and a newly-arrived visitor, Lord Trig, to the cantonment. Trig has expressed a desire to inspect the troops but has the reputation of afterwards insulting the commanding officer on the appearance of his men. The troops have come to know this and are indignant. The day before the inspection, Trig goes to the bazaar for shopping, and while he’s waiting for the colonel’s barouche to come and fetch him he sees the three privates:

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<sup>1</sup> *A Weaver Named Kabir* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (1884; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 611.

Pristinely, he sthrols up, his arrums full av thruck, an' he sez in a consiquinshal way, shticking out his little belly, "Me good men," sez he, 'have ye seen the Kernel's b'roosh!"—"B'roosh?" says Learoyd. "There's no b'roosh here—nobbut a *ekka*." – "Fwhat's that?" sez Thrigg. Learoyd shows him wan down the street, an' he sez, "How thruly Orientil! I will ride on *ekka*." I saw thin that our Rigimental Saint was for givin' Thrigg over to us neck an' brisket. I purshued a *ekka*, an' I sez to the dhriver-divil, I sez, "Ye black limb, there's a *Sahib* comin' for this *ekka*. He wants to go *jildī* to the Padshahi Jhil" –'twas about tu moiles away—"to shoot snipe—*chirria*. You dhrive *Jehannum ke marfik, mallum*—like Hell? 'Tis no manner av use *bukkin'* to the Sahib, bekaze he doesn't *samjao* your talk. Av he *bolos* anything, you just *choop* and *chel*. *Dekker?* Go *arsty* for the first *arder* mile from contonmints. Thin *chel*, *Shaitan ke marfik*, an' the *chooper* you *choops* an' the *jildier* you *chels* the better *kooshy* will that *Sahib* be; an' here's a rupee for ye!"

The *ekka*-man knew there was somethin' out av the common in the air. He grinned an' sez, "*Bote ahee!* I goin' damn fast."<sup>3</sup>

The cantonments of the Raj—my example is from Kipling—may seem a far cry from the medieval world inhabited by Nirguna sants and Rahim, but the linguistic roots of British India lie firmly in that earlier period. As Ivor Lewis points out, 'Kipling's Anglo-Indian expressions were not newly-minted for special occasions but inherited from the verbal treasuries of generations of Anglo-Indians stretching as far back as to the seventeenth century and occasionally earlier.'<sup>4</sup>

## II

In the work of the Indian writer in English, the linguistic traditions of the subcontinent are not always as visible on the page as they are in Kabir, or, ironically, even in

Kipling. But non-visibility does not mean absence. Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri-American poet who died in 2001, spoke for many of his contemporaries when he said,

I think we in the subcontinent have been granted a rather unique opportunity: to contribute to the English language in ways that the British, the Americans, and the Australians, also the Canadians, cannot. We can do things with the syntax that will bring the language alive in rich and strange ways, and though poetry should have led the way, it is a novelist, Salman Rushdie, who has shown the poets a way: he has, to quote an essay I read somewhere, chutnified English. And the confidence to do this could only have come in the post-Independence generation. The earlier generations followed the rules inflicted by the rulers so strictly that it is almost embarrassing. They also followed models, especially the models of realism, in ways that imprisoned them. I think we can do a lot more. What I am looking forward to—to borrow another metaphor from food—is the biryanization (I'm chutnifying) of English. Behind my work, I hope, readers can sometimes hear the music of Urdu.<sup>5</sup>

Kabir and kedgerie; Rushdie and chutnification; Ali and biryani: when it comes to describing the language of Indian literature, it would seem that gastronomy is the metaphor of choice. Interestingly, despite Ali's enthusiasm for chutnified English, there is a world of difference between Rushdie's English sentences larded with Hindustani words (and Hindustani phrases in literal English translation) and what Ali himself is attempting to do. Whereas in Rushdie the presence of the other language, delightful though it is for those on the inside, becomes an instance of the empire writing back, in the poet it is, as Ali says, 'behind' the work: 'Behind

<sup>3</sup> *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> *Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs: A Dictionary of the Words of Anglo-India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed., *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 4.

my work, I hope, readers can sometimes hear the music of Urdu.’ They may both be chutneys, but one is more subtly flavoured.

There are in Ali’s poems several musics to be heard. There is strict music of the ghazal, of which he wrote several. ‘The reason this form is so tantalizing’, he says in his preface to Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s poems, ‘is that it gives the poet the freedom to engage with all kinds of themes, issues, attitudes, while keeping him gratefully shackled.’<sup>6</sup> The freedom comes from the ghazal’s couplets, which are thematically independent of each other; the shackling from the rhyme scheme, which imposes on the couplets an unvarying pattern. It’s like flying twenty differently coloured kites, but having one string controlling them. ‘Ghazal’, from Ali’s last book, *Rooms are Never Finished*, concludes:

How the air raged, desperate, streaming the earth with flames—  
To help burn down my house, Fire sought even the rain.

He would raze the mountains, he would level the waves;  
He would, to smooth his epic plot, even the rain.

New York belongs at daybreak to only me, just me—  
To make this claim Memory’s brought even the rain.

They’ve found the knife that killed you, but whose prints are these?  
No one has such small hands, Shahid, not even the rain.<sup>7</sup>

The last line of ‘Ghazal’ more or less repeats the last line of e.e. cummings’s poem ‘somewhere I have never travelled’: ‘nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands’. Ali, who belongs to the same Midnight generation as myself, would have first encountered cummings’s poem around the same time I did, in the mid Sixties, and perhaps in the same anthology, Oscar Williams’s *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*. The poem may even have appealed to him for some of the same reasons that it appealed to me. It spoke of romantic love (‘your slightest look easily will unclothe me / though I have closed myself as fingers’) but did so in lower case, which made it look avant garde. I remember reading the poem in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, and thinking I was breathing New York air.

A third linguistic presence in Ali’s poems, after the Urdu ghazal and modernist American poetry, is the Hindu bhajan, or devotional song. Here are the trance-inducing opening stanzas of ‘Film Bhajan Found on a 78 RPM’:

Dark god shine on me you’re all I have left  
nothing else blue god you are all I have  
I won’t let go I’ll cling on to your robe

I am yours your Radha my bangles break  
I break my bangles my heart is glass come back  
blue god there’s nothing you are all I have

let there be no legend of a lost one  
who breaks her bangles who lets herself die  
who says you hid yourself to break my heart

your eyes are my refuge hide me from the world  
dark god Dark Krishna you are all I have  
do not hide yourself merely to break my heart<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, trans., *The Rebel’s Silhouette* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> *The Final Collections* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), pp. 57-58.

### III

In an essay on the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati, 'On Bharati and His Prose Poems', A. K. Ramanujan writes,

After the nineteenth century, no significant Indian writer lacks any of the three traditions: the regional mother-tongue, the pan-Indian (Sanskritic, and in the case of Urdu and Kashmiri, the Perso-Arabic as well), and the western (mostly English). Thus Indian modernity is a response not only to contemporary events but to at least three pasts. Poetic, not necessarily scholarly, assimilation of all these three resources in various individual ways seems indispensable. . . . The malaise and feebleness of some modern Indian poetry (in English as well as in our mother-tongues) is traceable, I believe, to the weak presence or total disconnection with one or another of these three resources. The strong presence of the three is certainly not sufficient, but it is necessary.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that some of the most important Indian writers of the past two centuries have had access to at least three linguistic traditions should help us read afresh poets like Agha Shahid Ali, Arun Kolatkar, and Ramanujan himself. One such attempt has been made with Ramanujan's English poems, with, I think, unfortunate results.

In 1979, in the inaugural issue of Jayanta Mahapatra's magazine *Chandrabhāgā*, published from Cuttack, Orissa, Rabi S. Mishra published 'A. K. Ramanujan: A Point of View', in which he said:

A study of A. K. Ramanujan's poetry leads one to the uncomfortable conclusion that he is incapable of broad patterns of experience. . . . He reflects an inherently narrow range, and with the intellectual thinness of his poems he cannot achieve the depth that should qualify him for a significant poet.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to what Mishra says, Ramanujan, who was William A. Colvin Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, and in the Committee on Social Thought, at the University of Chicago, was perhaps the most intellectually formidable of all modern Indian poets, and his poems, dense with allusion, reflect it. However, what concerns us here is not Rabi S. Mishra's opinion of Ramanujan's poetry but the sharp response it drew from R. Parthasarathy, who was at the time employed as editor with Oxford University Press, Delhi, and currently teaches at Skidmore College. The response, which came in the form of a long letter to the editor, was published in *Chandrabhāgā* #2. I will need to quote from it at length:

Mishra's is an irresponsible and unfortunate exercise in debunking a poet who is generally considered significant. In 1976 . . . I had remarked: 'Ramanujan's repossession, through his poetry, of the past of his family and of his sense of himself as a distillation of that past is to me a signal achievement. . . .' Unaware of this fundamental aspect of Ramanujan's contribution, Mishra, the English teacher, chastises him for not writing like Pope, Yeats, Eliot or Neruda. Irrelevant as this comparison is, Mishra's attitude is not: it is potentially dangerous . . . . Might I suggest that Mishra stay clear of the treacherous waters of Indian English literature when he is so patently unfamiliar with the topography?<sup>11</sup>

And the letter continues:

. . . Ramanujan's work offers the first indisputable evidence of the validity of Indian English verse. Both *The Striders* (1966) and *Relations* (1971) are the heir of an anterior tradition, a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Vinay Dharwadker, ed. *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 333-34.

<sup>10</sup> *Chandrabhāgā* # 1 (1979), pp. 60-66.

<sup>11</sup> *Chandrabhāgā* # 2 (1979), pp. 66.

tradition very much of this subcontinent, the deposits of which are in Kannada and Tamil, and which have been assimilated into English. Ramanujan's deepest roots are in the Tamil and Kannada past, and he has repossessed that past, in fact made it available, in the English language. I consider this a significant achievement . . . Ramanujan has successfully conveyed in English what, at its subtlest and most incantational, is locked up in another linguistic tradition. He has . . . indicated the direction Indian English verse is likely to take in the future. 'Prayers to Lord Murugan,' overlooked by Mishra, is . . . embedded in, and arises from, a specific tradition. It is . . . the first step towards establishing an indigenous tradition of Indian English verse.

'Prayers to Lord Murugan,' I should explain, is a sequence of 11 short poems in Relations. In a note, Ramanujan describes Murugan as the 'Ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war, and love. He is represented as a six-faced god with twelve hands.' Here is the concluding poem of the sequence:

Lord of lost travellers,  
Find us. Hunt us  
down.

Lord of answers,  
cure us at once  
of prayers.<sup>12</sup>

The languages inherited by the multilingual Ramanujan may not conform to Parthasarathy's geological model. For it to hold, we have to agree that Ramanujan arranges Tamil and Kannada in the lower strata, English in the upper, and each time he chooses to write he descends, caged canary bird in hand, into the thickly-seamed coal pit of the mother tongue. Unless we know more about how languages are positioned in multilingual sensibilities—do they always keep this inflexible, stratified order?—and how writers relate to them, it is premature to dogmatize about the 'anterior tradition'.

As I see it, 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' is a risky example to choose if you want to show how Ramanujan's work relates to his native idiom; a reader like Parthasarathy will not think twice about making the figure of Dravidian god its symbol. When Parthasarathy says the poem is embedded in another tradition which Ramanujan makes available to us, he is already reducing languages which are tissue in the multilingual sensibility to pictorial shreds, to the framed surfaces of oleographs.

The other tradition does not enter Indian English literature in the guise of a god, a river, a place, a cow named Gopi, or a Tipu Sultan; nor as a poetic shell: a *rubai*, a *doha*, a *vacana*, or an *abhangā*. Their presence alone does not reflect the inlay of, for instance, Tamil and Kannada in Ramanujan, and their absence will not mean that no inlaying has taken place. Ramanujan writes in the manner of Tamil heroic poetry, Adrienne Rich writes 17 poems based on the *ghazal*, and American poets in Cedar Rapids write haikus by the score. Have they not taken their forms from a common pool? Is there any difference in the way non-English traditions operate in Ramanujan and Rich? There is none of we restrict Tamil and Kannada to being suppliers of poetic forms and twelve-headed gods. Ramanujan's multilingualism, therefore, is so inlaid in his work that in order to trace it we will have to look outside the obvious signs. Once this is accepted, we can further say that had Ramanujan written bucolics instead of *vacanas* and ended *Relations* with 'The Goatherd versus the Shepherd' instead of 'Prayers to Lord Murugan,' his 'deepest' roots would not have ceased

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<sup>12</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 117.

to participate in the writing, but certainly their mode of participation would be more difficult to plot.

By going to a library the reader can identify most references to myth and religion, folklore and history, in the work of Indian poets; what the library cannot gloss is the prismatic interlingual space in which the work is rooted. This space Parthasarathy has filled with Murugan's torso. Multilingualism could well be the crux of Indian literature in English, particularly its poetry, but unless the perimeter around the space is cleared and we know more about the deployment of Tamil-Kannada, Marathi, Urdu, and Russian in the English work of Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Ali, and Nabokov respectively, we need to tread like angels.

I have added Nabokov's name to an otherwise Indian list because his position is analogous to ours. In *Extraterritorial*, George Steiner, through his example, raises issues that are common to multilingual writers:

It would by no means eccentric to read the major part of Nabokov's opus as a meditation—lyric, ironic, technical, parodistic—on the nature of human language, on the enigmatic coexistence of different, linguistically generated world visions and of a deep current underlying, and at moments obscurely conjoining, the multitude of diverse tongues.<sup>13</sup>

When Steiner moves away from subterraneity and looks specifically for the 'sources and fabric' of 'Nabokese'—the Anglo-American interlingua in which Nabokov wrote after his move to the United States in 1940—he marks out an area and asks questions which we should be putting Ramanujan, Kolatkar, and Ali if we are to stay in the business as readers:

We need really detailed study of the quality and degree of pressure which Russian puts on Nabokov's Anglo-American. How often are his English sentences 'meta-translations' of Russian? To what extent do Russian semantic associations initiate the images and contour of the English phrase . . . We also require careful analysis of the local and literary background of Nabokov's English. . . All these would be preliminary lines of inquiry toward getting right the 'strangeness', the polysemic nature of Nabokov's use of languages. They would clarify not only his prodigious talent, but such larger questions as the condition of multilingual imagining, of internalized translation, of the possible existence of a private mixed idiom 'beneath', 'coming before' the localization of different languages in the articulate brain.<sup>14</sup>

Borges and Samuel Beckett are the other 'new "esperantists"' in *Extraterritorial*. Though Borges writes only in Spanish,

His intimacy with French, German, and, particularly, with English is profound. Very often an English text—Blake, Stevenson, Coleridge, De Quincey—underlies the Spanish statement. The other language 'shines through', giving to Borges's verse and to his *Fictions* a quality of lightness, of universality. He uses the vulgate and mythology of Argentina to ballast what otherwise be almost too abstract, too peregrine an imagination.<sup>15</sup>

Borges, Steiner says in *After Babel*, moves among languages 'with a cat's sinewy confidence.'<sup>16</sup> Though he has a keen sense of the irreducible quality of each particular tongue, 'his linguistic experience is essentially simultaneous and, to use a Coleridgean notion, reticulative. Half a dozen languages and literatures interweave.'<sup>17</sup>

The questions we should be asking are: What is a multilingual sensibility? How do languages tenant it? How does this tenancy register on the poem? Steiner tries to answer these questions, but even he does not answer as much as ask in *After Babel*:

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<sup>13</sup> *Extraterritorial* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Does a polyglot mentality operate differently from one that uses a single language or whose other languages have been acquired by subsequent learning? When a natively multilingual person speaks, do the languages not in momentary employ press upon the body of speech which he is actually articulating? Is there a discernable, perhaps measurable sense in which the options I exercise when uttering words and sentences in English are both enlarged and complicated by the ‘surrounding presence or pressure’ of French and German? If it truly exists, such tangential action might subvert my uses of English, making them in some degree unsteady, provisional, off-centre . . . Or might such ‘interference’ from other languages on the contrary render my use of any one language richer, more conscious of specificity and resource? . . . In short: does that ‘intertraffique of the minde,’ for which Samuel Daniel praised John Florio, the great translator, inhibit or augment the faculty of expressive utterance? That it must have marked influence is certain.<sup>18</sup>

Parthasarathy has implied one way in which languages tenant a polyglot’s mind: they are kept in layers and the relationship between them is that between source-language (Tamil-Kannada) and receptor-language (English). “‘Layers’ is,” says Steiner, ‘of course, a piece of crass shorthand. It may mean nothing. The spatial organization, contiguities, insulations, synaptic branchings between, which account for the arrangement of different languages in the brain of the polyglot, and especially of the native bilingual, must be of an order of topological intricacy beyond any we can picture’.<sup>19</sup> There are several other ways in which languages can be arranged and each arrangement will affect the interlingual relationship.

Following the anthropologists’ division of establishment Hinduism into ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions and Ramanujan’s description of the terms in his introduction to *Speaking of Siva*, we can devise a heuristic model to show the interplay of languages in the central nervous system. In Hinduism the ‘great’ tradition is Vedic, whereas the ‘little’ is woven from ‘saints’ legends, minor mythologies, systems of magic and superstition . . . local animal sacrifices . . . wakes, vigils, fairs . . . worship of stone, trees, crossroads and rivers’.<sup>20</sup> In the context of Indian poetry in English, the ‘great’ tradition would be English and the ‘little’ revolve around the native idiom. Ramanujan has described how the two traditions coexist within the structure of Hinduism.

. . . traditions are not divided by impermeable membranes; they interflow into one another, responsive to differences of density as in an osmosis. It is difficult to isolate elements as belonging exclusively to the one or the other.<sup>21</sup>

Though Ramanujan and Steiner are discussing subjects as dissimilar as Hinduism and multilingual imagining, both use osmosis as a metaphor to describe their inner workings. If what Steiner says about the reticular nature of Nabokov’s and Borges’s linguistic experience is correct, then languages have porosity just as religious traditions do, the ‘great’ and the ‘little’ are ‘not divided by impermeable membranes’ in either. The native idiom (the ‘little’) has to seep through the English poem (the ‘great’); how could it not? And if this is so, then each poet writes in an idiolect as distinctive as ‘Nabokese’: Ramanujan’s consists of English-Kannada-Tamil, Kolatkar’s of English-Marathi, Ali’s of English-Urdu, and so on. Each poet belongs to a tribe of one or two, seldom more than of six or eight, and Indian literature in English becomes a dream dreamt outside the several bodies of these phenomena. It is the dream of Gondwanaland.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>20</sup> *Speaking of Siva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

The osmotic process of the multilingual common factor explain this literature's mottled look and its incohesiveness: for this reason we can hardly speak of Indian literature in English as we do of Bengali or French. What I call mottled look has a parallel in India's tribal art. The latter, according to Stella Kramrisch, lacks 'stylistic certitude', and her insight is based on the recognition of osmosis in Hinduism and its percolations into adjoining forms. Though there can be few outward resemblances between Hinduism and Indian literature in English, there is at least one between India literature in English and India's tribal art. The model I have proposed for the 'dynamics of interlingual osmosis' is supplemented by what Kramrisch writes in *Unknown India*:

Tribal art throughout India for the last two thousand years at least must be assumed to have coexisted with traditions commanding greater means and more complex organization. The Buddhist stone railings of the stupa of Bharut and the Stupa of the Saints, in Sanchi, both collective monuments of sculpture of the second to first century BC, show the work of many different hands. These stone railings with their carvings are each a symposium of styles, some of which bear affinity to tribal carvings such as those of the Gond who to this day live not far from the sites of these ancient monuments. Buddhism was open to members of any group. The sculptors, however, were not necessarily Buddhists, they were from the lower Hindu strata of ancient Indian or tribal stock. Progressing Hinduization, while dissolving much of the self-supporting and self-sufficient tribal communities, absorbed as much as it destroyed of tribal traditions while these tribes, where they survived as solid groups, assimilated much from their suppressors who were also their neighbours. But Hinduism from the start is an alloy of the Brahmanic tradition and the many other and older Indian traditions. Due to this long process of osmosis, tribal art in India, on the whole, lacks stylistic certitudes and perfectedness of the tribal art of Africa, Oceania, and of the American Indian.<sup>22</sup>

Between Nabokov's English and Russian, between Borges's Spanish and English, between Ramanujan's English and Tamil-Kannada, between the pan-Indian Sanskritic tradition and folk material, and between the Bharut Stupa and Gond carvings 'many cycles of give-and-take are set in motion'.<sup>23</sup> The Buddhist stone railings are imprinted with tribal motifs; the tribe, in its turn, assimilates the culture of its suppressor: it is the 'great' tradition getting 'translated' into the regional language. Nabokov's 'Russian version of *Alice in Wonderland* (Berlin, 1923),' writes Steiner, 'has long been recognized as one of the keys to the whole Nabokovian oeuvre'.<sup>24</sup>

The answer to the third question, how do the 'language-spaces' register on the poem? is dependent on how we answer the first two. If a multilingual sensibility is a coal pit, and 'spaces' are stratified, they will register on the poem but marginally. On the other hand, if the sensibility is a crucible in which languages change their properties, then the effect is molecular. To Nabokov's sentences they give an intricacy not elsewhere found in English prose; to Borges's what Alastair Reid calls 'a mysterious balance'; to Ali's lines a grieving tone, 'a wound-cry', such as not been heard before in American poetry.

To recapitulate: for various frenetical reasons, Parthasarathy wrecks the axiom that links exist between Ramanujan's English poems and his native languages. Moreover, the axiom, as he understands it, has nothing to do with Ramanujan's significance.

#### IV

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<sup>22</sup> *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Speaking of Siva*, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Extrareterritorial*, p. 17.

Ramanujan spoke about the presence of three traditions—regional mother-tongue, pan-Indian, and western—in the work of Indian poets, and Steiner remarked that we ‘require careful analysis of the local and literary background of Nabokov’s English’. In this last section, I’ll analyse the work of Arun Kolatkar, asking this very question: What are the sources, ‘the local and literary background’, of Kolatkar’s English? Where did he get his English from? Here are two poems by him. The language of the first is not English; neither is it Marathi, which is the other language he wrote in. However, it uses English words—‘manager’, ‘company’, ‘rule’, ‘table’, ‘police’, ‘complaint’—that readers will recognize. If one keeps only the English words and erases the rest, the poem will resemble a Sapphic fragment.

main manager ko bola mujhe pagaar mangta hai  
 manager bola company ke rule se pagaar ek tarikh ko milega  
 uski ghadi table pay padi thi  
 maine ghadi uthake liya  
 aur manager ko police chowki ka rasta dikhaya  
 bola agar complaint karna hai to karlo  
 mere rule se pagaar ajhee hoga<sup>25</sup>

The second poem is a translation of the first:

i want my pay i said  
 to the manager  
 you’ll get paid said  
 the manager  
 but not before the first  
 don’t you know the rules?  
 coolly I picked up his  
 wrist watch  
 that lay on his table  
 wanna bring in the cops  
 i said  
 ’cordin to my rules  
 listen baby  
 i get paid when i say so<sup>26</sup>

The language (it is more a patois) of the first poem is Bombay-Hindi; of the translation American English. ‘Main manager ko bola’, which was written in 1960, is part of a sequence of three poems, all written in the same patois. The sequence, which does not have a title, first appeared in a Marathi little magazine and subsequently, in 1977, in Kolatkar’s first collection of Marathi poems. In English, Kolatkar titled the sequence ‘Three Cups of Tea’.

Kolatkar created two very different bodies of work, both of equal distinction and importance, in two languages. The achievement, I think, has few parallels in world literature. What has a parallel, at least in India, is that he drew, in his work, on a multiplicity of literary traditions. He drew on the Marathi of course, and Sanskrit, which he knew; he drew on the English and American traditions, specially Black American music and speech (’cordin to my

<sup>25</sup> Arun Kolatkar, *Arun Kolatkar's kavita* (Bombay: Pras Prakashan, 1977), p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Arun Kolatkar, *The Boatride and Other Poems*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Bombay: Pras Prakashan, 2009), p. 69.

rules / listen baby / I get paid when is say so'); and he drew on the European tradition. He drew on a few others besides. As he said in an interview once, talking about poets, 'Anything might swim into their ken.'<sup>27</sup>

Fortunately, in Kolatkar's case, we know something about that 'Anything'. Kolatkar died in September 2004. Recently, while going through his papers in Bombay, I came across a typed sheet in which Kolatkar had put down a chronology of his life. In it, against each year, he gave the name of the advertising agency he worked for at the time (Ajanta, National, Press Syndicate); the area of Bombay he lived in (Malad, Sion, A Road); illnesses, if any; and the poems he wrote, both English and Marathi. That is how we know when he wrote 'main manager ko bola'. He also gave the names of the authors he read that year. Against 1965, he mentions the following: 'Snyder, Williams, Villon, Lautreamont, Catullus, Belli, Apollinaire, Morgenstern, Berryman, Wang Wei, Tu Fu, Li Po, Cold Mountain'. Cold Mountain is not the name of an author but the title of a book of translations of the Chinese poet Han Shan, whom, incidentally, Gary Snyder also translated.

'Art', Ezra Pound said, 'does not exist in a vacuum.' And Claude Levi-Strauss, 'Whether one knows it or not, one never walks alone along the path of creativity.' Kolatkar's list of authors, which appears to be random, is in fact a capsule biography, a life of the life of the mind. Show me your books and I'll tell you who you are. It's a mind that could move with ease from first century B.C. Italy to eighth century China to fifteenth century France to twentieth century America, while at the same time picking up the language spoken in the backstreets of Bombay, a slice of which he offers, without comment, in 'main manager ko bola'. But that said, the names of poets that appear in the list are not in themselves surprising. We were all reading the same or similar things in Bombay (or in Allahabad) in 1965. There is, however, one exception to this, and that is Belli. Though his name belongs among the greatest in nineteenth-century European literature, he was, until recently, known to very few, even in Italy. In the mid Sixties, there was only one translation of Belli around, and it's the one Kolatkar must have read. The translation is by Harold Norse and is called The Roman Sonnets of G. G. Belli. It has a preface by William Carlos Williams (a name that also figures in Kolatkar's list) and an introduction by Alberto Moravia. What is striking about Harold Norse's translation is the idiom in which he translates romanesco, the Roman dialect, perhaps not unlike Bombay-Hindi, in which Belli wrote his sonnets. Here is the opening sentence of William's preface:

Gogol wanted to do the job, and D. H. Lawrence, each into his own language but they were written not into the classic language Italian that scholars were familiar with, but the Roman dialect that gave them an intimate tang which was their major charm and which the illustrious names spoken of above could not equal.<sup>28</sup>

Coming to Norse's translation, Williams says

These translations are not made into English but into the American idiom in which they appear in the same relationship facing English as the original Roman dialect does to classic Italian.

'Three Cups of Tea' first appeared in Saleem Peeradina's anthology *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* in 1972. The anthology was the first to represent the new Indian poetry in English and 'Three Cups of Tea' has been a part of the canon since. I don't have a

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<sup>27</sup> Eunice de Souza, *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> *The Roman Sonnets of G. G. Belli*, tr. Harold Norse (Highlands, NC: Jargon Press, 1960), n.p.

date for when Kolatkar made the translation, but I suspect it was made after 1965, which is after his discovery of Norse's Belli and the American demotic Norse employs to translate romanesco: 'If ya wanna be funny, it's enough to be/A gentleman.'

So there it is, your Indian poem. It was written in a Bombay patois by a poet who otherwise wrote in Marathi and English. It then became part of two literatures, Marathi and Indian English, but entered the latter in a translation made in the American idiom, one of whose sources, or, if you will, inspirations, was an American translation of a nineteenth-century Roman poet.

I would like to end with a short 14-word poem from Kolatkar's Jejuri:  
That's no doorstep.  
It's a pillar on its side.

Yes.  
That's what it is.  
(‘The Doorstep’)<sup>29</sup>

Indian literature in English is a bit like that doorstep. We cross it everyday, and perhaps for that reason do not notice that it is really a pillar lying on its side, inscribed with the left to right and right to left scripts of the subcontinent.

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A version of this essay was given as a talk at Smith College, Northampton, MA on October 23, 2008 as part of a lecture series. Most of section III appeared first in *Chandrabhaga* # 7 (Summer 1982) as part of a longer essay called 'The Emperor Has No Clothes'; it was later reprinted in *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature*, ed Amit Chaudhuri (NY: Vintage Books, 2004). Section IV has appeared in *Fulcrum* # 4 (2004).

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<sup>29</sup> *Jejuri* (1976; rpt. New York: New York Review of Books, 2005).