

GREETINGS FROM BANGALORE, SASKATCHEWAN

Ven Begamudré

WE HAVE A SAYING in the city of my birth: "Those born in Bangalore can never live anywhere else." Much can be read into this, much that is mystical and romantic and rife with metaphor, but its origin is straightforward. The saying refers to climate. Bangalore lies on a plateau of the Deccan Peninsula, an imperfect catenary dangling between the Arabian Sea on the west and the Bay of Bengal on the east. (Completing this picture is Sri Lanka, a teardrop-shaped pearl fixed off-centre.) At 1000 metres above sea level, Bangalore boasts a pleasant year-round climate. People move there from across India. As a result, Bangalore has become one of India's fastest growing cities, with all the problems such growth brings. These things happen.

Around the turn of the century this American tourist was taking the train across Canada to go see the Rockies and it stopped in this prairie city. So she gets down to have a stretch and asks a porter, "Excuse me, y'all, but where are we?" The porter says, "Regina, Saskatchewan." So the tourist says to her girlfriend, "Ain't that cute? He don't speak English." I heard this long before I settled here. I came for a month in 1978 and stayed. That first winter was especially cold; temperatures often hit minus 38 degrees Celsius. It was the first time I saw ice coating the inside of windows. Robert Service might as well have written of me in "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Was it only coincidence that he was called "the Canadian Kipling"?

On a map, Bangalore can be found between 75 and 80 degrees east longitude. Regina can be found near 105 degrees west longitude. One is roughly halfway around the world from the other. Much can be read into this, much that is mystical and romantic and rife with metaphor. Here are random notes — greetings — from my true home: Bangalore, Saskatchewan.

On Homelands and Blood

Like a satellite unable to escape the gravitational pull of the earth, my life continues revolving about my father's district of Nanjangud. This is not meant to be a complaint; it is merely an observation. Indeed, an American tour operator told me, while reminiscing about his quaint midwest town, "You cannot go home again."

Why anyone would wish to do so, I cannot guess. And yet I know it is foolish to attempt to leave the past behind, for however long ago or far away that past may feel, it remains with us always.

My own life, like that of the unnamed narrator of this story,¹ also continues revolving about India. Not all of India; only the South, and that's why I claim to be from South India. India is a subcontinent, after all. To say I'm from India would be like an Austrian saying he's from Europe; it would be true but not specific. From the South, then. Which part? All of me, of course.

Another joke, yes, but not really. My father's family is from a state now called Karnataka (once Mysore); my mother's family is from a state called Andhra Pradesh. I'm Kanarese on one side, Andhra on the other. Caste? Brahmin on both sides, my mother's a higher sort of brahmin than the other; my father's side more orthodox and so more proud. There's more. On my father's side we're not simply brahmin but Madhva brahmin, nominal followers of Madhva Acharaya (Madhva the Teacher), who lived in the thirteenth century. Like him we're Vaishnavites, followers of Vishnu, the Protector among the three great gods who compose the Hindu Triad. And still more. Though we're from the South, we're lighter-skinned than some Southerners because we're actually of mixed blood. Dating back farther than the thirteenth century, it's true, but still mixed: Aryan on the one hand, Dravidian on the other; light on the one, dark on the other.

Can any of us truly say what we are? It depends on the time, on the place, on the context. It depends on who asks the question and why.

On Exile and Entrapment

It's uncomfortable becoming an exile after one's parents adopt a new home — in my case, Canada. I won't romanticize the lot of exiles because there's nothing romantic about it. I used to bemoan my lot; now I revel in it for it allows me to view my homeland with detachment. For example I've learned that India, like Canada, is less a country than a construct; that even the name *India* was given to it by non-Indians, who couldn't pronounce names like *Bharat*. Alberto Manguel best describes the exiled artist's task in a book of photographs by Rafael Goldchain, a Latin American photographer who now lives in Canada. Manguel writes,

The exile's task is twofold: to procure for himself an image of the absent country that will allow him a constant point of reference, and to procure for others an image of that same country that will not lend itself to easy clichés and mere local color.²

How to procure those images? Here we come to the task of a writer. It's a common task whether one hails from India or Canada.

The last time I attended a function in Regina's Indian community, someone said, "Your father tells me you write stories. What do you write about?" "Some-

times about India.” “How old were you when you came over?” “I was six.” The man looked at me then and said, “Oh, well, but you’re not a real Indian then?” My first thought was, “Good for you; you’re as bigoted as the rest,” meaning other Canadians. Not a generous thought, that. Now I realize he was genuinely bewildered. How *do* I write about India? I do it the same way one writes about anything. Not all writers; those who make traditional fictions.

I write about what I know. What I don’t know I research. What I can’t research I make up. Even when I’m doing this, I try to make sure I’m writing about things I understand. There’s much I don’t know about my heritage, but I’d like to think there’s much I understand; that even if I don’t understand something, I shall always be willing to acknowledge this. My belief in genetic imprinting helps. Even this belief is inherited. Once a Hindu, always a Hindu.

Here’s a story of a different kind of exile, one as uncomfortable as it is permanent. It’s a retelling of a legend in which we can read much that is mystical and rife with metaphor:

TRAPPED BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Trishanku, King of Ayodhya, wanted to enter heaven in his mortal form. He wanted to live there like a god or a sage and so he asked his guru, Sage Vasishtha, to help him.

Vasishtha claimed Trishanku’s dream was hopeless for he was a mere king — neither god nor sage. Vasishtha was a brahmarishi, a brahmin sage who had pleased the gods with austerities and worship. He knew much.

Trishanku travelled south to the hermitage of Sage Vasishtha’s sons. Since their father had refused to help the king, so did the sons. He declared he would seek the help of some other sage.

Furious with the king for turning his back on their father, Vasishtha’s sons changed Trishanku into a chandala, an outcaste. Black and ugly, he wandered along confusing paths through desolate lands until he came upon Sage Vasishtha’s rival, Visvamitra.

Now Visvamitra had his own dream. He wanted to become a brahmarishi like Vasishtha. But Visvamitra had been born a warrior and become a king and so he had become a rajarishi, a noble sage, inferior to one born brahmin. Visvamitra decided that if he could gain Trishanku a place in heaven he, Visvamitra, would be hailed as greater than Sage Vasishtha.

And so Visvamitra’s disciples invited all the pious and learned men to a great sacrifice. Only the sons of Sage Vasishtha refused to attend. They said being near a chandala would defile them. Visvamitra cared nothing for this. He officiated at the rites and poured ghee into the fire until it began to smoke from the butter and oil.

“Oh, devas,” Visvamitra called to the gods, “come down from the skies and lead the great King Trishanku into heaven!” No gods appeared even after Visvamitra repeated his prayer; even after he poured so much ghee on the fire it sent up pillars of smoke. He decided to lift Trishanku into heaven with his own powers.

Such power Visvamitra had! While everyone watched open-mouthed, Trishanku rose into the sky, up through the clouds, and past the clouds to heaven’s very steps.

Indra and all the gods stood firmly in the way. Indra said, "Heaven holds no place for a king cursed by his guru's sons. Fall — to the depths of the earth!"

Trishanku fell off heaven's steps. He fell back toward the clouds. Even as he fell, head downward, he cried for help.

Visvamitra could not admit defeat; not even by the gods. "Stop where you are!" he called.

Trishanku stopped halfway between heaven and earth, just above the clouds. He hung there upside-down.

"I shall create a heaven around you!" Visvamitra declared. He created around the king the Saptarishis, seven stars. They circle the earth to this day.

You know them as the seven stars of Ursa Minor, the Great Bear.

On Reading Others

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is, to my mind, the greatest Indian writer of the 20th century. She's not a "real Indian," though what makes a real Indian is clearly debatable. She was born in Germany of Polish parents and moved to England when she was twelve. She's likely best known for two things: her novel *Heat and Dust*, which received the Booker Prize in 1975; and her numerous screenplays for such films as *Shakespeare Wallah* and *The Bostonians*. What makes her Indian? She married an Indian, calls her children Indian, and has lived in India for most of her adult life.

Other writers have affected me more strongly than she has. In the novels of R. K. Narayan I rediscovered an India I thought I had lost; I began accepting that maxim "Once a Hindu, always a Hindu." Among my contemporaries, Rohinton Mistry holds a special place. His short-story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* marked a turning point in Canadian literature precisely because most of it is not set in Canada. Without meaning to, he gave other writers of our generation permission: not to write about Canada yet be Canadian writers. Perhaps there were books before *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which unwittingly gave us this permission. None I'd read were by a fellow Indian.

And yet it's in the novels and short stories of Ruth Praver Jhabvala that I find most pleasure, emotional and intellectual — especially novels like *The Nature of Passion* and *The Householder* and short stories like "A Course in English Studies." In the introduction to her book *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, she writes this:

Sometimes it seems to me how pleasant it would be to . . . give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in a cow. Other times it seems worth while to be defiant and European and — all right, be crushed by one's environment, but all the same have made some attempt to remain standing. Of course, this can't go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose — if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India?³

On Language

Here is an excerpt from a work-in-progress, a nebulous (as in vague or confused) rendering of my visits to India. It's written in English since that's the language in which I think, read and write; yet it contains an occasional passage like this, a "found poem":

MARKETTINALLI

"Badanekayige bele enu?"
 "Badanekayi kiloge aivaththu paise."
 "Badanekayi chennagideya?"
 "Chennagideri!"
 "Ardha kilo kodu."
 "Thegedukolli."
 "Gorikayi bele enu?"
 "Gorikayi . . . eppaththu paise."

What happens if a writer doesn't speak his native tongue or tongues? Since my father had decided I would be raised North American, he arranged for me to speak English first. And so, although I didn't come here until I was six, I quickly forgot my father tongue, which is called Kannada, and my mother tongue, which is called Telegu.

When I started writing seriously about India, though, I discovered I didn't speak the languages my main characters spoke. I wanted to use Kannada and Telegu in my Indian fiction — not to add local colour, which Manguel warns us against, but to preserve my heritage. And not to preserve it like some dusty artifact but to preserve it because my ashes, too, will one day be immersed in a river. Using Kannada and Telegu hasn't been a problem in the work I've done these past ten years. I used my memories and phrasebooks. Here's a translation of what appears above:

IN THE MARKET

"What is the price of eggplant?"
 "Eggplant is fifty paise per kilo."
 "Is the eggplant good?"
 "It is good, sir!"
 "Give me half a kilo."
 "Take it."
 "What is the price of bean?"
 "Bean is . . . seventy paise."

As a writer of traditional fiction my job is, among other things, to invent or re-invent characters and situations so they *seem* real. A difficult task in itself which needs no complications. Then recently one of my cousins by marriage asked, "How can you truly understand village and townspeople unless you speak their language?" He meant I needed to understand such people because, although our families had

lived in cities for much of this century, our roots are in villages and towns. It's not a matter of inventing some bucolic past; it's a matter of history. He and his wife started teaching me Kannada. We laughed a lot but, by the end of the afternoon, I wandered about practising phrases like "Snana madtiya?" It means, "Do you want to make a bath?" Not *take* a bath; *make* a bath.

No matter how conscientious I am about learning Kannada, though, I'll keep losing it in the same way as I've lost so much of my French. What to do? A French-speaking writer unwittingly offered a solution, or at least a compromise. The Québécois poet Madeleine Gagnon once told a largely American audience, "Listen to the music of the language." She went on to say that if we did this we might begin understanding the person who spoke it.⁴ This made me wonder: do I really need to learn the native tongues which were never truly mine in the first place? What if it's enough to remain open to Kannada and Telegu rhythms; to listen to the music of the language?

Of course it's debatable how authentically we can write about the people we left behind without speaking their language. If I were a poet, I would invent a new language. Even that's not necessary. Whether one is in rural or urban India, Indians don't speak some rarified, pure form of their native tongue; they speak a language full of phrases from other tongues, especially English. Witness the term "kilo" in that marketplace dialogue.

The South Indian novelist Raju Rao faced a somewhat different problem. Let me quote at length from his 1937 foreword to the classic novel *Kanthapura*:⁵

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.

He is asking how a person can write about his own culture in a language which lacks enough words to describe that culture. He continues:

I use the word "alien," yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up — like Sanskrit or Persian was before — but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not.

This is a bold statement but hardly a surprising one, coming as it did from an Indian nationalist. Yet he immediately surprises us by saying:

We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

Time has justified it. At the 1989 PEN Congress in Toronto, Anita Desai spoke of her attempts to convey everyday shoptalk in her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

She called her attempts an experiment, with all the hope and trepidation the word implies.⁶ Even as she spoke it amazed me: how much groundwork our predecessors have laid, so we who are writing now can take such experiments for granted; so we can mix English and other languages freely and think little of it. Let me end these random thoughts — these greetings from Bangalore, Saskatchewan — with another piece from that still nebulous work-in-progress:

TECHNICOLOUR

I am discovering speech under equatorial skies. My father lives in America and plans to raise me there, so he asks my grandmother to teach me English instead of their mother tongue. That's why when I later live with my mother, while we wait to rejoin him, she takes me to only American movies. Dumbo learns to fly. The Swiss Family Robinson races ostriches, battles pirates. The Sleeping Beauty sleeps under blue American skies. But I want to see an Indian movie, a film. What happens in films? Swearing me to secrecy, my grandmother takes me. The film is in her mother tongue. It's in black and white. In one scene, Lord Krishna reclines on a window ledge and plays his flute. Villainous guards vainly swing their swords at him, perhaps even through him. In the final scene warriors on horseback assemble in a courtyard while the evil king, mortally wounded, crawls to his death. The warriors cheer their new king, and fireworks burst over the palace. White fireworks in a black and white sky.

NOTES

- ¹ "A Planet of Eccentrics" in *A Planet of Eccentrics* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1990) : 22.
- ² Alberto Manguel, "Rafael Goldchain: The Memory of Exile" in *Blackflash*, Saskatoon: The Photographers Gallery, 6: 3 (Fall 1988) : 6.
- ³ Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1984) : 16.
- ⁴ Madeleine Gagnon, Reading at "The Literatures of Canada," University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, March 21, 1991.
- ⁵ Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1967) : vii.
- ⁶ Anita Desai, Reading at "The 54th World Congress," PEN, Toronto, September 24, 1989.

