21st Century Perspectives on Indian Writing in English

21st Century Perspectives on Indian Writing in English:

A Time to Turn

Edited by

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To 75 years of English writing in independent India

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

Writing as an act should always be instituted from the safe house of the future. All projections—the present and the past—are then verifiable truisms. They offer a cosy coverture against the sanguinary assaults of a fickle time. Literature then becomes a trade in certainties, as well as verities. However, what may be diagnosed as a lack of boldness in literary culture trying to parley with the pell-mell of millennial disorder, hiding behind the "truth" of objective reality, can as easily be marked as a decisive move on the part of cultural critique to measure how the passage of time, states of time (reflected in states of mind) affect acts of writing and creation in general. Literary artefacts have to seed themselves in apocalyptic soil. There is not a hospitable climate for the work of a writer. It has to be prepared for abrasive contact with political, social, and cultural contingencies. In short, a rough-and-tumble ride through history, a nation's history.

In the context of Indian writing in English, works produced, especially during the last century of the last millennium, have needed to, and should according to all the contributors to this volume of essays, be subjected to a rough ride of reassessment, of reappraisal, in the light of all the water that has flowed under the bridge of time, down history's riverine passage. *A Time to Turn: Twenty-First Century Perspectives on Indian Writing in English* is a set of essays that are both interesting and intrepid as they engage with an array of texts, drawn from genres like poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and drama, from post-millennial perspectives. The post-millennial perspective is not the import of a fashionably new terminology: postmodern and posthuman instead of poststructuralist, a Deleuze or Agamben instead of a Derrida. The post-millennial perspective is not the restitution of up-to-the-minute theoretical fads, but the simple realisation that with a change in perspective, and the vantage "ground" from which a literary work is observed,[1] its very fabric, the strands that come together there, appear altered. In layman's terms, depending on where one is standing in the Louvre, a mark on the wall could be a flea or the *Mona Lisa*.

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[1] By "ground" I imply the philosophical import of the word in Nietzschean interpretation. Nietzsche was unquestionably one of the most penetrating critics of the quest for "ultimate grounds" in philosophy. By *ground* Nietzsche meant value. The ground of values, or the value of values, is at best a shifting one

A summary glance at the history of Indian writing in English in the twentieth century is enough to make us realise that writers, across genres, have been in the field, wide open to sallies and ambushes by socio-historical accidents, they have been down lethal lanes and up uncomfortable avenues, far from that safe house of the future. Independence, Partition, the birth of India as a republic, the transnational and modernist boom in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Emergency, the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the hate crimes against the Sikhs in Delhi, globalisation, towing the tenuous fiscal line thrown by the IMF to some promised harbour or haven of security: the list of realities—genre-bending, perspective-bending realities—that has been taken in its stride by Indian writing in English is truly amazing. As a body of critical essays, *A Time to Turn* does not consider the past as home; it does not "melt with truth" but remains firm in its mensuration of the long historical shadows cast by literary works forward, into the future. Literary works are as much recollections as they are repetitions in the Kierkegaardian sense. The essays in this volume are instinctively filled with this wisdom.

In India, the twentieth century lies heavily on the shoulders of the twenty-first. The past winces, the past shrieks in the voice of the present. As poet and novelist Keki Daruwalla reminds us, with a melancholy archness, in his *Partition Ghazal*,

> Tenses curve and coil through the murk of time
> The past erupts except that it is not the past.
> Beyond the linear and hence beyond the line
> The magic lantern images of memory flash past.
> . . .
> This should pass muster, and yet may not pass.
> All tenses are tricky, especially the past.
> . . .
> The past you talk of may not have been the past.
> (1–2)

The past is as insistent in the new millennium and as doggedly engaged with by the contributing essayists in this volume as that dry, traumatised, crackling cry of "Hayo Rabba!" (Dear God) that went on and on with the relentless eternity of a nightmare in Banraj Bhatia's epic musical score for Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (based on the Partition story by Bhisham Sahani) made for the national television channel Doordarshan in India. There is no escape from such a past.

The volume opens with a section on Indian poetry in English that contains four essays. Angshuman Kar's essay is an attempt at a bird's-eye

and a mole's-eye survey of post-Independence Indian poetry in English. Medha Bhadra Chowdhury looks at the cultural restitution of cosmopolitan memory in the geographical imaginary of the poetry of Arun Kolatkar. Debasish Lahiri looks at the provenance of the work done by the Bombay School of Poetry and the comparative resonances generated by pitting it against the achievements of another anglophile city, Calcutta. In his second essay in the section, Lahiri sifts through the terrain of Bashabi Fraser's poetry to trace a distinct cultural mooring that is often lost sight of while cataloguing its diasporic driftage.

The second section of the book is focused on Indian fiction and non-fiction in English. In the first essay in the section, Pradipta Mukherjee discusses the evanescence of history as memory, revealing as much as it conceals, in Kunal Basu's *The Opium Clerk*. In the following essay, Julie Mehta elaborates on the survival of myths as cultural memory in the tidal country of the Sunderbans in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Nishi Pulugurtha carries on the examination of Ghosh's novel by visiting the idea of the geographical sublime and the contested category of "territory." Didier Coste brings in the concept of "heteroglossia" while examining the metamorphosis of Jhumpa Lahiri as an Italian writer. In his essay on the non-fictional writings of Arundhati Roy, Alex Taek-Gwang Lee uses the prism of Theodor Adorno's ideas to reprise the question of "realism." Pradeep Trikha picks up on one of the volume's central concerns, a reappraisal of the past in the present context, in looking at the apnoea of memory and desire, a veritable Bombay-on-wheels in the United States, as Sam Duschamp and his literary alter-ego Ismail Smile make a modern-day tilt at the windmills in Salman Rushdie's picaresque novel *Quichotte*. The section ends with Anirban Guha Thakurta's essay on Indian graphic narratives, like Amar Chitra Katha and *Bhimayana*, which interprets visual language as being both a reinforcement and an interrogation of attitudes towards social stigma.

The third section of this volume is devoted to Indian drama in English. The diversity of the three essays in this section signals towards the fecundity of the field, but also towards the relative paucity of critical intervention in it. Hem Raj Bansal writes on the thrust of gendered social critique in Vijay Tendulkar's English play *His Fifth Woman*. Subhendu Sarkar takes a detailed look at the use of Brechtian dynamics in the dramaturgy of Badal Sircar, drawing upon his translated plays. In the final essay in the section, Vinay Sharma traces the tale of the coming of age of English theatre in Kolkata, from pre-Independence times, through the heady days of cultural collaborations in the 1960s to the socially aware new millennium English theatre of the last decade.

The final section of the book constitutes three interviews conducted by the editors with three notable literary figures in India. In the first interview, Pradipta Mukherjee engages Bashabi Fraser, CBE, in a conversation regarding the ways in which post-millennial realities have shaped her poetry. Debasish Lahiri then addresses questions of nostalgia, origins, and the role of memory in a candid talk with novelist Kunal Basu as they navigate the author's journey to the present day. In the third interview, Lahiri and leading Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani discuss issues surrounding the limits of drama, the new roles of art in society, and the socio-political content of drama written in English in India.

The sheer range and variety of styles, trajectories, and content assembled in *A Time to Turn* should both whet and satisfy the appetite of all critically oriented, sensitive and culturally aware readers, especially those that have India and matters Indian at heart, even in the West. This critical turn, this catching in perspective on the turn, this critical pirouette, will hopefully be an immense resource inside and outside the academy.

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Debasish Lahiri
Kolkata,
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POETRY

MODERNISM VIA BYCULLA:
HOW THE BOMBAY SCHOOL OF POETRY
DEFINED INDIAN MODERNISM

DEBASISH LAHIRI

The tale of the coming of age of English poetry in India is a tale of two cities: Bombay and Calcutta. My deliberate use of the erstwhile names of these two cities in the course of my essay is indicative of my belief that they were signposts of a mutable, open, cultural tableaux, which their new avatars (Mumbai and Kolkata) are certainly not.

For Karl Marx, the nineteenth-century European city demonstrated the metamorphosis of feudalism into capitalism. The postcolonial city's emergence, however, sees a blend of rural and urban, a chaos of origins and modes reflected in the shanty towns and their inhabitants who eke out a living residing as it were on the periphery of both the spatial and the social worlds of the elite urban population.

A city such as Bombay reveals itself, at the level of social movement and literary production, to be an entirely different phenomenon from the European city, while Calcutta remained true to that model. Cities always grew from a large-scale movement of people from rural to urban areas; but this mobility in a postcolonial city like Bombay was the sign of a larger global movement set in motion by colonialism. The apparent divisions of economic disparity could not conceal the furious interweaving of classes, castes, and origins, the pell-mell.

Postcolonial cities, like Bombay and Calcutta, were invariably established as centres from which commerce and profiteering were appropriated by the coloniser. Bombay, however, carved a unique position for itself by showing a propensity for the absorption of an internal diaspora. A deep magic ruffles the teeming, undulating human tapestry in Bombay and Calcutta. There is also a deep logic behind it. Bombay, or Bombaim ("the good bay" in Portuguese), had always been a sea-spore, wafted and rocked on the shoulder of irrepressible, but insistently returning, tides and ideas. As a Portuguese holding, it blundered into English hands in 1661 as part of Catherine of Braganza's dowry when she married Charles II. Only twenty-five years separate the advent of Anglophone influence in the two

cities. By 1686, Job Charnock had procured the three villages of Sutanuti, Gobindapur, and Kalikata, thus beginning the conception of Calcutta. The difference in their respective cosmopolitan ethos, however, could not have been more pronounced.

While Calcutta developed as an insular, surly, self-reflexive bastion of orthodoxy and exclusiveness in the image of the British pioneers, Bombay emerged as a space that embraced change, the flotsam of diverse influences, the Babel of cultural voices and aspirations. Its indigenous settler community identity, with the influx of the Pathare Prabhus from Saurashtra (in Gujrat) in the thirteenth century, was exacerbated by its absorption of lusophone influences in the early seventeenth. English came like a tidal surge, as unique as it was familiar, in the life of Bombay. Bombay was thus never in awe of the English, or their language. The relationship between the English language and its attendant culture, on the one hand, and local, native culture, on the other, in Calcutta was always one between a strict, hard-to-please parent and a guilty, effete offspring. Bombay's engagement with the establishment of English culture was more confident, mature, and fraternal, often boisterous and combative as well. The aura surrounding the English language in Calcutta, its oracular status as the voice of civilisation and enlightenment, was, I believe, the singular cause for the stunted and marred development of English poetry, post-Independence, there.

The extraordinarily individualistic character that Bombay developed as social phenomena, the ways in which it came to determine the direction of its development and its extraordinarily energetic creativity, may be traced in literary works, in poetry, in the work of the imagination, rather than in social analysis. Poetry written in English best captured the exorbitant, enthusiastic, and multi-layered reality of a city such as Bombay.

In Bombay all "Indias" met and merged. Bombay was also the site where India met that which was not India, something that travelled across the black water to flow into its veins. A city such as Bombay broke the national/global binary by establishing itself as the liminal space between them. From its inception Bombay was a diasporic city, a city of immigrants who had never left the country, thus providing a case study of several larger issues: the increasing mobility of postcolonial populations; the transformation of modernity; and the creative proliferation of postcolonial art and literature. Postcolonial commentators like Bill Ashcroft might see these as utopian formations that stand alongside the deepening of class divisions, the exclusion of women, and the increasing marginalisation of large groups of people.

If the postcolonial city of Bombay was an obstreperous and gargantuan dystopia of class and ethnic inequality, why then, we might ask, was it also the site of a fantastic flowering of art and literature and why was that literature so deeply hopeful? One reason is, of course, that all utopias are critical, imagining a future based on a lack of equality and amenity in the present. However, there is something about the cultural profusion and intermixing of the postcolonial city that lends itself to hope. The tolerance and equanimity attending the profusion of cultures, castes, languages, and classes in a postcolonial city such as Bombay professes an insatiable optimism that triumphs over the corrupting and confining influences of the state.

The trajectory of poetry written in English in Bombay in post-Independence India stems, as I have already stated, from the "works and days" of the English language in the city. In this, it forms a close and instructive parallel with the fate of the English language and poetry written in English in Calcutta, the quintessentially colonial city. The characteristic responses to Anglophone culture in the two cities are a result of the fallout of that very nucleus of self-conception: the imaginary, powerful, visionary, and prophetic delineation of their personalities. In José Gerson da Cunha's fascinating book *The Origin of Bombay* (1900), which is a detailed, if rambling, history of the islands in the Arabian Sea, we encounter an intriguing detour (da Cunha apologizes for this "digression") during the narration of the Portuguese influence on the rise of the island city. In the middle of his recounting of the visits and sojourns of Portuguese sea-captains, generals, and consuls, da Cunha launches into a survey and critique of the formative influences and lasting legacy of *Os Lusiadas* (The Lusiads) by Luis Vaz de Camões, the Portuguese Virgil. Of particular interest to da Cunha is the idea of the *ilha dos Amores* (the island of love), which was supposedly created by Venus to act as the place of rest and recuperation of the glorious conquerors of India. This was truly a place of ease, accommodation for all, and a somewhat chaotic cataloguing of pleasurable influences. In fact, da Cunha quotes profusely from classical scholars, translators, and antiquarians to insist upon the openness and free spirit of absorption of varied cultural influences that was prevalent as a norm on that island. Further, da Cunha points out that the most likely resources for Camões in his rendition of the "isle of love" in his epic were the accounts of soldiers and sailors who served under Heitor da Silveira, the Portuguese general who became the Protector of Bombay in 1529.

Da Cunha sums up his thesis thus:

> In this poetic creation, moreover, Camoens not only adheres to classical models, but blends the Greek with Hindu mythology. His aim was to prove

that the great and the good are permitted to drink the amrita of the Mount Meru in the company of the immortals who people the Grecian Olympus. And his nymph-espousals and immortal brides have been derived from the Indian Gandharvas and celestial musicians. (84)

A sense of hybridity that has become synonymous with postcolonial subjectivity is firmly located in the city as a space of movement, collection, aggregation, and interaction. Metaphors of racial intermixing constitute a supremely Bombay image distinguishing itself from the linguistic partitioning that makes up the nation of India. The Bombay brand of English poetry inaugurates the pathway to a radical revisioning of the notion of subjectivity itself whereby a dislocation of the city dweller allows for the natural development of multiplicity and tolerance.

The cultural life of Bombay is a beat that sounds and lodges at the heart of Immanuel Kant's view of the ethics of cosmopolitanism. For Kant, cosmopolitanism is a "universally philanthropic" gesture that would ensure peace among nations and grant individuals the right to international hospitality or "the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory" ("Perpetual Peace"). Emmanuel Levinas, in his *Totality and Infinity*, reflects that "to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I" is "to have the idea of infinity" (27). Furthermore, "The welcoming of the Other is the beginning of moral consciousness" (84). A more genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. In poetry, Bombay is such a city. By loosening the ties of the subject, the city provides the freedom to accept the Other.

Such a Bombay was indeed primarily forged through the printed medium after the Second World War. A windfall of books from all over the world literally started pouring onto the pavements, through English, which acted as a window to global literatures and international modernism, but also through migration and interaction with people from all origins, languages, and cultures.

Still Bombay for English speakers, the city liberated its poets. This is particularly true of figures like the poet Dilip Chitre and the Marathi-English poet Arun Kolatkar, who declared that their works were rooted in the maddening cosmopolitan mix of Mumbai. Bombay is certainly the most composite, multilingual, and multi-confessional of Indian cities, where Portuguese, British, Jews, Parsis, Iraqis, Russians, Chinese, and Persians but also Indians and refugees from the whole sub-continent congregated and left their mark.

Most "Bombay" poets were not originally from the city and have precisely migrated there, uprooted from other states, small cities, or rural backgrounds (Dilip Chitre came from Gujarat, Arun Kolatkar from Kolhapur, a small town in South Maharashtra). When they were born or brought up in Bombay, they often came from religious minorities who, at one point in time, also found refuge in the city, like Adil Jussawalla and Gieve Patel, who were Parsi, or Nissim Ezekiel, who was Jewish. During the 1940s and 1950s, the city also represented a kind of haven for European war émigrés who often played a seminal role, especially in the visual arts, in mediating the international avant-garde and fostering modernism. The Progressive Artists' Group, which is the most influential school of modern art in India and was formed in 1947 in Bombay, was precisely a product of such migrations and cosmopolitanism.

Not only were Jewish European émigrés largely involved in the development of the Progressive Artists' Group (like the German cartoonist Rudolf von Leyden or the Austrian painter Walter Langhammer who became the first arts director of the *Times of India*), but the founding fathers of this group all came from different regional, religious, and linguistic backgrounds: F. N. Souza from Goa, K. H. Ara from Hyderabad, M. F. Husain from Pandharpur in Maharashtra, S. H. Raza from Madhya Pradesh, and Sadanand Bakre from Baroda.

When many modern Indian poets started writing in the 1950s and 1960s, it was the time of beat poetry, sound poetry, visual poetry, concrete poetry, jazz poetry, and continuing surrealism; a time of openness to everything else that was happening in the world and of feverish experimentation with all kinds of forms and mediums. Bombay poets engaged with these new paradigms and with the internationalism of the avant-garde. They had all been exposed to the "modernist" galaxy and often consciously placed themselves in this lineage. An unpublished fragment by Arun Kolatkar reads as follows: "I was born the year Hart Crane killed himself / Nine years after Ulysses was burnt / three years after Auden published his first collection / one year after Maïkovsky killed himself / I had my first tooth when / Dylan Thomas published his first collection" (*Arun Kolatkar: Collected Poems in English*, 87).

This period, which is sometimes described as a kind of "Indian Renaissance," as opposed to the earlier emanation of the word in the nineteenth-century "Bengali Renaissance," drew on silent years of collective endeavours between writers, painters, sculptors, and theatre persons. The cultural fugue inspiring the modernist moment, whether in Europe and America or in Bombay was singularly lacking in Calcutta. Writing, poetry to be more precise, was a loner, ruing its individuality and

constantly derivative from a sense of lost siblinghood. Neither did this English poetry belong, nor did it want to belong, to a free new India. Instead, what emerged in Bombay with the arts pooling their respective visionary strengths was commitment to a continuum, to a diversity that challenges foreclosure.

English in Calcutta never reached out to the suburbs or districts, while in Bombay it was the life-blood of the language. English actually changed class-orientation in Bombay. Provincialism was now, uncannily, the new face of openness and absorption of cosmopolitan influences from across the world.

Any analysis of how Bombay stole a march over the Anglophilia of Calcutta must go back to the period of the 1940s and 50s, well before the advent of the *Sathottaris* (the post-60s writers), as claimed by Anjali Nerlekar. In the Calcutta of the 1940s and 50s, English had remained in colonial drapes. The curse of Caliban was in a vernacular tongue. The negative influence of English in Calcutta was noteworthy in this period. The use of the English language for literary production only furthered the hardening of Late-Victorian and Edwardian orthodoxies. Calcutta's literary output in English became testament to the import and provenance of the dated European *fin de siècle*. Yet English never became the language of the new cosmopolitans, who were the erstwhile provincials in search of a common fuse and foothold.

In Calcutta, the English language became marked by the trappings of governance. The most conceivably Anglophone city in India, Calcutta, ironically stood witness to the demise of English as a cultural medium with the potential for organic growth at the turn of the nineteenth century. The unhappy spectral presence of this English has haunted literary production in the city for over half a century.

The symptoms of this condition in Calcutta was underlined by the absolute lack of bilingual literary figures. English never became the vehicle of openness. Instead regression, ossification, and a stifling orthodoxy became its chief characteristics.

English became synonymous with the language of hegemony in Calcutta and was thus ripe for a take-down. In Bombay, it was the language of choice for effecting social mobility and new enthusiasm.

The moment of modernism in Calcutta was this urban tiltyard where a mongrel Bangla vied for supremacy against a "pure" English. In the English literary circles of Calcutta, the Victorian twilight persisted long enough for it to become a midnight sun that fuelled discontent with the radical leaps and bonds forged by modernism.

        This linguistic antagonism in Calcutta was in stark contrast with
the linguistic fugue struck up between English and Marathi in Bombay. In
Calcutta, Bangla, the vernacular, was seen as the purported alternative, not
a fraternal or friendly ally, of the English tongue as the means of true
communication across the broad spectrum of modern society. As an object
illustration of this fact we find Anjali Nerlekar bring up the trans-vernacular
solidarity in the national absorption of the travelling after-shocks of Euro-
American modernism in an interview with Ashok Shahane, one of the most
important figures in the Marathi publishing world and the founder of Pras
Prakashan. Nerlekar refers to the fact that it is not widely known that
Marathi modernism is closely connected in influence and inspiration to
Bengali literature.

        Ashok Shahane took pains to study Bangla, having books sent over
from Calcutta in the 1950s, including the journal *Kobita*, published by the
poet and critic Buddhadeb Bose. Jibanananda Das, Bishnu De, and Samar
Sen remained enduring influences as they were the nascent new wave in
Bangla writing. Shahane makes it a point to mention in the interview how
the Bangla weekly *Desh* was regularly available at bookstalls in railway
stations in Bombay signalling an arterial vernacular cultural inter-flow that
was strengthening the new post-Independence forays of modern writing in
India. Bombay English in Bombay poetry was rampant with this healthy
wave of unified cultural excitement that flowed into it from Marathi (and in
turn Bangla), whereas by comparison English in Calcutta and its poetry
remained a valetudinarian, perennially recovering from the vernacular
wound, or berating vernacular pestilence.

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Indian English Poetry: In Search of a Continuity

Angshuman Kar

Great critics, though revered as seers, are not always prophets. Buddhadeb Basu, perhaps, would have withdrawn his hasty remark that "Indo-Anglian poetry is a blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading nowhere," had he been alive today. Gone are those days when Indian English poetry was laughed at as a queer breed, either as "Mathew Arnold in saree" or "Shakuntala in skirt." It is true that in terms of popularity and sales, even today, there is no comparison between Indian English fiction and Indian English poetry. But no one now would dare to say that Indian English poetry is a blind alley. The presence of Indian English poets at most of the prestigious literary festivals of the world cannot be ignored; their visibility on most Indian English, postcolonial, or South-Asian courses offered by Indian and Western universities is also too glaring to overlook. Some of these poets have also bagged important national and international prizes; some have made it into the long and short lists of some of the most prestigious international awards. Indian English poetry today definitely stands at a crossroads from where highways are not far. In fact, in the last thirty years, not only regional and national but also international publishing houses have taken significant interest in publishing Indian English poets. Several anthologies of Indian English poetry have been published by well-known publishing houses like Sahitya Akademi, Oxford University Press, Penguin, Macmillan, and Harper Collins. Even a cursory glance at any of these volumes will surprise readers because of their diversity in terms of both content and form. Sudeep Sen, who has edited the *Harper Collins Book of English Poetry* (2012), has also admitted that the "range of style, preoccupation, technique" of the Indian English poets included in the anthology "is vast, various and impressive—each poet stamping their own signature and subtly displaying their own vision" (22). Such diversity often baffles readers and makes them wonder whether there is continuity of any sort in Indian English poetry. This essay is a modest attempt at tracing a thread that has perhaps woven the separate pieces of Indian English poetry

to form a garland of many colours and scents. In so doing, it will historicize the development of Indian English poetry putting special emphasis on recent shifts and turns.

In fact, in academia, there have been different attempts to periodise the development of Indian English poetry. M. K. Naik and K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in their iconic books on the history of Indian English literature adopted two different approaches in mapping the development of Indian English poetry. M. K. Naik's approach is visibly politico-historical. In fact, chapters in his book are titled "The Pagoda Tree: From the Beginnings to 1857," "The Winds of Change: 1857 to 1920," "The Gandhian Whirlwind: 1920–1947," and "The Ashoka Pillar: Independence and After." He also traces the development of Indian English poetry in the same chapter alongside prose, drama, and fiction. In comparison to this, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's approach is not governed by politico-historical determinants only. In his book, whereas there are complete chapters on Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, and Sarojini Naidu, there are also chapters like "Poets Again" and "The New Poets" in which he has clubbed several poets together, considering the historical factors and the development of Indian English poetry as a literary genre. In the chapter "The New Poets," for instance, Iyengar includes the poets of the thirties like Shahid Surhrawardy and Manjeri S. Isvaran alongside poets of the post-Independence era like Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, and P. Lal under the rubric of new poetry highlighting these poets' engagement with European modernism. Makarand Paranjape seems to fuse the politico-historical and the literary issues in mapping the development of Indian English poetry as he sees Indian English poetry developing through four distinct phases: "1825–1900: Colonialism," "1900–1950: Nationalism," "1950–1980: Modernism" and "Post-modernism: 1980." Paranjape, like his predecessors, considers the phase of modernism very significant in that during this phase, he argues, "the dominant tone in Indian poetry in English shifted" (19). The disillusionment about a bright future of the state that Independence produced made the tone of nationalism and romanticism disappear from Indian English poetry, making it "clear, hard unsentimental" and often ironic (Paranjape 20). Paranjape seems to use the term "post-modernism" (interestingly with the hyphen) not to mark a temporal break that distinguishes the poets of the earlier era from the poets of the "post-modernist" phase but to suggest a literary continuity that connects the poets of these two times. In fact, he even argues that by the early 1990s (Paranjape's anthology was published in 1993) "Kolatkar, Mahapatra and Alexander have already moved into the post-modernist mode with relative ease, calling into question the observing self in their poetry" (26).

That in the 1950s Indian English poetry radically broke away from the tradition that it had already established is also prominently underlined by Bruce King in his well-known critical study of post-Independence Indian English poetry, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. First published in 1987, King's book was trying to examine the processes of the formation of a canon and a poetics in Indian English poetry. The politico-historical or aesthetic divisions found in the earlier works were not present in the same way in King. His approach, as he himself declares in the preface to the first edition of the book, was "historical, cultural, sociological and literary" (vii). In fact, Ezekiel is identified by King as a major pillar who exerted tremendous influence on the processes of the formation of a poetics of Indian English poetry. King observes: "I suggest that the moral seriousness, rational, modern, intellectual consciousness, technical competence, concern for high standards and precision of language" that contributed significantly to the formation of a poetics of Indian English poetry "were introduced into Indian critical thought by Ezekiel and through him spread to . . . others" (75). One of the chapters of King's book is also titled "Ezekiel and His Influence." The revised edition of this book (though written in 1999) came out in 2001. In it, King tried to identify some new themes explored by a set of young poets in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Aga Shahid Ali, for reasons obvious, is given a prominent place in the new chapters added to the old edition. "Trilingual, tricultural," observes King, "he [Ali] is a product of many events—Indian Independence and the subcontinent's Partition and the subsequent migration of peoples—and influences— education in literary modernism, participation in contemporary literary styles—which make him 'post-colonial'" (258). In fact, the emergence of Ali is also indicative of the emergence of a significant number of Indian English poets who are Muslim by religion and in whose poems there are continuous negotiations with Muslim identity. The list includes poets like Tabish Khair, Saleem Peeradina, and Imtiaz Dharker as well as Ali. It is also interesting to observe that all these poets are strong voices of Indian diasporic literature. In fact, King has also identified how after Kamala Das, a new set of female poets (such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Sujata Bhatt) became significant through their bold assertion of women's plights and representation of typically feminine sensibilities. Poets like Hoshang Merchant and R. Raj Rao have also been mentioned by King for their explicit treatment of homosexuality. He has further noticed how a poet such as Jeet Thayil has written on drugs, drink, and sex, while G. J. V. Prasad has treated "communal violence, religious and caste intolerance, regional nationalism" and even "the Emergency" (351). Though in the first edition of his book, King tried to map the development of Indian English poetry by

primarily focusing on the creation of a poetics of Indian English poetry, in the second edition, he did not try to discover any thread for weaving the divergent areas that emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Interestingly, G. J. V. Prasad (who as a poet has been praised a lot by King in his book), in his *Continuities in Indian English Poetry: Nation, Language, Form* (1999), has identified an engagement with India as the primary continuity operating in Indian English Poetry over the two centuries. Prasad's book was published in the year in which King completed writing the new chapters of his book. Though less wide than King's book in its coverage of the poets of the last two decades of the twentieth century, Prasad's analysis of Indian English poetry as a whole is important in that it tries to specifically identify certain thematic and formal continuities in Indian English poetry. He observes:

> From Derozio to Bhatt, a Eurosian in India to an Indian in Europe, the Indian English poet has always had to ensure that his/her identity as an Indian poet is reiterated and imprinted in the consciousness of the reader. The historical/political situation has changed over the two centuries, quite like the attitude to the language and to poetic form. But the Indian English poet is still a displaced soul constructing or reconstructing India(s) that would accommodate his/her self. (106)

This, indeed, seems to be a tall claim.

I, however, primarily agree with Prasad. In this essay, I would also like to extend his argument to examine the Indian English poets' engagement with India in the first two decades of the twenty-first century pointing out some significant changes that were not possible for Prasad to observe simply for temporal reasons. In so doing, I need to reiterate and highlight certain issues already underlined by Paranjape, King, and Prasad. There is little doubt that in Indian English poetry a significant change came both in content and style with the poets of the post-Independence era. An India, which was noninclusive and dirty, both literally and metaphorically started slowly emerging in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, Keki Daruwala, A. K. Ramanujan, and the like. Readers of Indian English poetry started feeling for the first time the presence of a *garib Bharata* alongside the "new" India of Nehruvian five-year plans. Some of the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, rooted deeply in the soil of Odisha, could be seen as ironic criticism of what later on would be called the "shining India," as these poems present a *garib Bharata* in which hunger for food compels one to become easy prey for sexual hunger. In this respect, Keki Daruwalla does not lag far behind; he, in fact, even sees himself as a "poet of rural India" (qtd. in Prasad 44). R. Parthasarathy observes that Ezekiel, Daruwalla, and

Gieve Patel were unable to "to accept present-day India" as it was and "to relate themselves comprehensively to traditional India." They exploited "irony to disclose the contradictions inherent in the Indian situation" (42). It should however be remembered that because of the influence of European modernism, their critique of the Indian situations was never direct and explicit but mostly subtle and suggestive. For instance, their preoccupation with the issue of class was almost always implicit. What motivated them to critique Indian conditions was definitely a desire to see the emergence of a new inclusive India. But this vision too was not prominently foregrounded and was metaphorically and symbolically showcased. In fact, the emergence of the divergent issues in the poetry of the poets of the 1980s and 1990s that King has underlined should also be considered as the result of these poets' wish to see India being built on the spirit of inclusion. Prasad in his book also suggested this when he argues that the post-Independence Indian English poets were engaged in a project of constructing a pluralistic India:

> Thus the post-Independence poets continue the earlier project of constructing the nation. Even as they locate themselves in their specific regions and other axes of identity (religion, caste, gender . . .), they hold on tight to the larger construct that contains them—India. This India is pluralistic India of various traditions and culture woven together by historical continuities—an India which seems to be genetically transmitted and inherited. (108)

In this context, I would like to highlight something that was not directly underlined by Prasad. Indian English poets' engagement with the issues of religion, caste, and gender actually suggests their engagement with (what in present-day jargon is known as) identity politics. Taking the cue from Prasad, I would, therefore, like to argue that the emergence of the new issues that have emerged in Indian English poetry in the last thirty years or so corresponds with the emergence of identity politics as a very important factor mediating the socio-political dynamics of India's national fabric during this period. All the new and significant developments in Indian English poetry in the last three decades are the direct result of Indian English poets' negotiations with identity politics. In so doing, Indian English poetry has become more political than it has ever been. I, of course, use the word "political" not in its narrow sense.

Indian English poets' engagement with identity politics, I would argue, had its roots in the poetry of Kamala Das. For instance, in her famous poem "An Introduction," she asserted her identity not only as a postcolonial bilingual poet but also as a woman. When she attacked politicians and

patriarchy, her irony was also less subtle and more direct than her male counterparts. Just consider the first few lines of the poem:

> I don't know politics but I know the names
> Of those in power, and can repeat them like
> Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.
> I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
> I speak three languages, write in
> Two, dream in one. (1–6)

When Kamala Das says that she is an Indian, very brown, and born in Malabar she is actually asserting her identity not only as an Indian but also as a Malayali. By saying so, she is not placing her Indian identity over and above her regional identity. There is rather a hint that she wants to examine her relationship with a newly born nation-state both as an Indian and as a Malayali. As the poem proceeds, she also prominently underlines her identity as a woman. The strong presence of her body in this poem and in several others also indicates that she was not ashamed of her sexual identity at all; she rather boasted of it. Kamala Das was followed by a number of women poets such as Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgardo, and Mamta Kalia. Their poems clearly show that they were trying to come to terms with their gender identity in an India that was highly gendered and completely under the control of patriarchy despite having a female prime minister for a significant period. What distinguished these poets from their male predecessors who were also unhappy with an exclusivist India in the making is the fact that these poets began to underline the politics of exclusion directly. The language of their poems, in comparison with their male counterparts, was also straight and less suggestive. In fact, in claiming recognition as female poets, these poets were trying to suggest that India should not be seen as a homogenous space—it is inhabited by different minority groups whose ideological, economic, and societal existences and interests often contradict one another. They made it clear that despite similarities, women's India is bound to be different from men's India. If we read much younger women poets who are active now and are usually known as feminists, it is clear that they are also continuing the tradition set by their predecessors. They are not only exposing an oppressive patriarchal Indian society but also very strongly asserting their identity. Mention, in this context, should be made of Aditi Rao, Usha Akella, Tishani Doshi, Rochelle Potkar, Rupi Kaur, and Meena Kandasamy. Exclusion has also been a major theme in some of the poems of gay and lesbian Indian poets. Hoshang Merchant, R. Raj Rao, Jerry Pinto, and Suniti Namjoshi have not only boldly celebrated same-sex love in their poetry but also exposed the

exclusivist homophobic nature of Indian society where queer people need to camouflage their identity just for survival. In an interview with Probal Dasgupta, Hoshang Merchant laments:

> A cat is a cat. A cat walks into the room and everyone knows it's a cat. A dog is a dog. A tiger is a tiger. A Black is a Black. A woman is a woman. Why can't a gay be a gay? Why do I have to pretend that I am straight and why do I have to make people comfortable who know I'm gay and who pretend I'm straight. So I'm just being myself and I want to be myself and if that's radical, well that's radical. I'm sorry. (128)

Merchant's very famous "Sind" is as bold as some of the poems of Kamala Das:

> It was with a Sindhi boy I first found love
> He felt love but being a boy he took me from behind
> Like the Holy Spirit took St. John one night on the steep stairway to God.
> (1–3)

In fact, in some of the poems of R. Raj Rao, the confessional tone of Merchant is missing as he brings to the fore the plight of third-gender people in general. Take for instance, R. Raj Rao's "Female Eunuch." In three small parts, Rao, sarcastically, exposes the homophobia of Indian society, on the one hand, and, on the other, highlights the boldness with which the eunuchs celebrate their queer identity:

> FEMALE EUNUCH 1
> The female eunuch
> Claps so hard the neighbours think
> It's firecrackers.
>
> FEMALE EUNUCH 2
> The female eunuch
> Exports her castrated part
> To America.
>
> FEMALE EUNUCH 3
> The female eunuch
> Gets the barber to dye her
> Pubic hair golden. (333)

A voice like this, it has to be admitted, had never been heard in Indian English poetry before.