

EVERY tuesday

One Week in One Day

A Weekly dedicated to Art, Culture & Entertainment

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Writing Right

Aditya Vyas

The authorship of a book leads a human to immortality in the literary sense, so to say. Once a book, poem or article is written, it automatically acquires a destiny, an existence of its own, which is quite distinct from that of the writer himself. That separation of the creator and the creation in any vocation makes it extremely important that the calibre of the creation be the best. The creation in case of writing has a much longer temporal existence than its progenitors. If we take the example of religious scriptures, for that matter, then we may or may not know the author of those scriptures but we know the thoughts. So also any intuitive mind of any artiste knows that he did not create anything but there was something so overpowering and spontaneous that the creation manifested itself through the person. Apart from that, writing in itself cannot be defined as the classification of any literature is decided on the motive of the literature. It is a two-way traffic where literature enriches culture and culture is the fountain where literature quenches its thirst.



Graphic: Premod Mahajan

In an age of multiple revolutions, writers must play a crucial role in combating cultural amnesia, says **Menka Shivdasani**

Writing the future

We live in an age of multiple revolutions, an era where cultural amnesia becomes a means of survival. The poets who suffered the terrible Partition of our country do not recall years later that they had once written of the traumatic experience; the indentured labourers who went

from India to Fiji wrote little about their experience or the rich history they had left behind; in Vietnam, few people are willing to speak of the unspeakable war that maimed a whole generation. Stephen Bertman points out in *Cultural Amnesia: America's Future and the Crisis of Memory* that this national state of mind

is like the debilitating Alzheimer's disease, eating away at America's soul in a society where a materialistic creed celebrates transience and disposability and the electronic age worships only the present, ignoring all other dimensions of time. Closer home, the poet

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Nitco Add

K.G. Sankarappillai has spoken of how cultural amnesia has crippled the people of our country after the colonial period; the vacuum related to history is visible in all public experiences of Indians in the post-colonial era, he has said.

Yet, as the author Shashi Deshpande pointed out in New Delhi recently to writers and thinkers from across the Asia-Pacific region, "Time does not come in tidy little packets of 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'. There is always a spillover" - the past must inform and impact the future, and it is often more complicated than we would like to believe.

In such a scenario, it is literature that becomes the vital link - the synapse that connects the varied circuits of the globe, the means through which we communicate both with ourselves, and with the outside world. Trying to link the past, present and future through writing may not be a conscious activity for literary minds; "many of us do not consciously decide to write the future, or even the present - we just write", says Ashok Vajpeyi, poet and chairman, Lalit Kala Academy. Vajpeyi also speaks, however, of how, in this state of global amnesia, one function of literature is to become the cultural "memory of a race".

Shashi Deshpande and Ashok Vajpeyi were among several writers and academics who debated these and other issues as they participated in the first ever Asia-Pacific Festival of Writing, held between October 13 and 25, in New Delhi and Shimla.

The event, organised by the newly formed

Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership (APWP) and the Indian Institute of Technology (I.I.T.), New Delhi, with support from several other organisations, paved the way for dialogue between writers from India, Australia, Bangladesh, Fiji, the Philippines, Singapore, United States and United Kingdom, among others. It was an idea sown in the paddy fields of Bali, when members of the APWP met to discuss future plans, and it came to fruition with this festival - a series of workshops focused on fiction, poetry and translation, followed by an academic conference at the I.I.T.

The importance of this conference was underscored by the fact that we know very

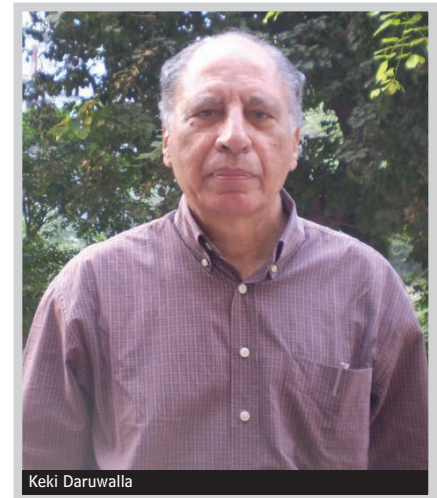


Nayantara Sahgal

which insisted that poetry must "come with mother's milk, in its mother tongue!")

There were attempts at defining literature and its multi-faceted roles. "Literature is the business of bringing back the defeated argument," said poet, novelist and academician Rukmini Bhaya Nair, a key organiser of the event, referring to the debate between Krishna and Arjun in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Arjun lost the argument but won the battle. And as Amartya Sen says in his *The Argumentative Indian*, "A defeated argument that refuses to be obliterated can remain very alive."

Writers from different regions had their own interpretations of the place of literature



Keki Daruwalla

little about the literature of the Asia-Pacific region; how much does an Indian know, for instance, about Chinese or Indonesian writers? And yet, there are so many legacies that these countries share - the experience of colonisation and its long-term impact and the religious and cultural symbols, to name a few. The *Ramayana*, to take just one example, came to Indonesia around the 8th or 9th century, and is as potent a legacy there as it is in India.

"Language, literature and the legacies they bear are important matters to discuss," said Pavan Varma, director-general of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi, at the inaugural session. "You cannot write the future without interrogating the past".

A major factor that influenced cultural amnesia in countries such as India, he added, was the fact of colonisation. "One of the most dislocating experiences culturally is colonialism," he observed. "One of the first things that those who colonise you take away is your language." It was a controversial point of view - the debate between regional writers and those who write in English is an old one, and as writers across the region have proved time and again, the colonising language can be made your own, with its own unique indigenous inflections. (Ask Keki Daruwalla, a major writer with three volumes of short stories and nine collections of poetry. When he addressed a session later, he spoke of how poets writing in English had always been lambasted by what he caustically referred to as the "lactatory school of literary criticism",

in modern times. "One must write to report, to give witness to the unbearable," said 1940-born Satendra Nandan, a writer and politician who traces his ancestry back to Indian indentured labourers in Fiji and is recognised as one of the first novelists there. "Writing the future is filling the blank spaces of the heart."

"The writer is a political being," added Nayantara Sahgal, author of *Rich Like Us*, and *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, among others. "Writing is a private activity but a great writer becomes a public voice." One function of the best literature, she said, is that it is prophetic - literally, writing the future.

Sahgal's view was one that found many echoes. When Jon Cook, dean of the faculty of arts and humanities at the University of East Anglia in the UK spoke of 'absolute art' - art for art's sake that is not confined to the region from which it comes - Shashi Deshpande responded by pointing out that art must have a social role. "The craftsmanship has to be intact but social skills also need to exist," she explained. In another session, Frank Stewart, editor of *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, said: "These are perilous and urgent times we live in and I hope writers can come to grips with their role."

Of course, through all this, good writing must come first; as Keki Daruwalla pointed out, "Poetry should not become only a political instrument even if you are fighting for a cause. There must be fire in the language and

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music in the words."

Great attention was paid at the conference, not just to literature itself, but to the means by which it travels - through publishing, of course, and also through translation.

It is unfortunate, but true, that the commercial aspects of literature cannot be ignored. As Ritu Menon, publisher of Women Unlimited, a feminist press, pointed out, "You can't have a writer without a publisher or a publisher without a writer". In a hard-hitting talk, Ritu analysed the commercial considerations that influenced our literature, and how, in the last 15 years, foreign direct investment and the multinationals had changed the paradigms in their quest to make "as much money as they can, as quickly as they can".

"Huge amounts of money are paid to a few writers who are mined, and mined again, irrespective of what they write and whether they write for literature or for prizes," she said, adding that this means high visibility for some authors and low, or no, visibility for the remaining 95 per cent. "I will never read a writer in India who has been published in Singapore," she explained. "That traffic does not take place between cultures, but between multinationals."

Mercifully, there is a vibrant community of smaller, independent publishers like Ritu, who keep the faith going, against all odds. "These are mostly women," she said. "Very few young men think of publishing as a career option, because the prospects are zero."

Yet, the hard fact that writers must face is that publishing must be a viable option. "If people do not make money out of publishing, there will be no publishing," said Mark Tully, journalist and writer.

The issue of translation as a means of transcending cultures and regions through a common language also took centre stage at the discussions. Translation may have its limitations - one delegate even suggested that instead, people should learn a particular language if they wanted to read its literature! - but if it is done responsibly, it can play a major role in linking communities.

Certainly, translation has its perils. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, poet, novelist, critic and translator, who is widely recognised for her writing in Bengali,

mentioned some of these, in a speech that was as sobering as it was amusing. Do you keep the translation literal, or make it a free rendering? Should the line breaks in a poem remain the same as in the original? "A work of translation can be a much harsher challenge than the original," she said,



Jane Camens and Rukmini Bhaya Nair, organisers of the conference

adding, "There are many ways to commit suicide, and bad translations is one of them." To illustrate her talk, she provided examples from Rabindranath Tagore's own translations of his works, where the magic, and the meaning were completely lost in the English rendering.

Yet, there is no doubt that translations have their place and as Kunwar Narain, Hindi poet, critic and translator, whose own work has been translated into Polish and Italian, said: "You can enjoy a poem in its original, but not all poems are so untranslatable."


An interesting insight into translations, however, came from Harry Aveling, extraordinary professor of translation studies, University of Indonesia. While most of us think of translation as opening up new worlds, he pointed out, the truth was that the most translated texts were in fact religious ones like the *Bhagavad Gita*, and that translations often reinforced stereotypes.

In writing the future, the role of women cannot be denied. Prof. Malashree Lal of Delhi University traced the evolution of writing by women in India from Sarojini Naidu, the 'foremother figure' of Indian women's writing, down to its present-day where Shashi Deshpande has just released her latest novel, *In The Country of Deceit*, a novel about adultery, written "with sensitivity and

without blame". Meanwhile, Prof. Jyoti Nandan of the University of Fiji spoke of how a course in women's writing was opening the eyes of her students to the feminist perspective. "Battles won by women in the West are still to be fought by women in Fiji," she said.

Relations, said in his valedictory address, "There is a tremendous opportunity for cultural efflorescence and creative writing in contemporary times. With a vanishing past and indeterminate future, there is a churning of consciousness around the world."

Dr Singh spoke of five simultaneous revolutions in the Asia-Pacific region. He defined these as political - a striving for democracy, though this would by no means solve all the problems; an economic revolution, where the bastions of capitalism are fragmenting before our very eyes; a social revolution that encompassed class and caste tensions and a movement within families to nuclear and even post-nuclear, single-parent homes; a cultural revolution that was leading to creative fusion; and a spiritual revolution where religion, "a double-edged sword", had an important role to play. "How we deal with these revolutions will determine how we write the future," he said.

The dialogue that began in Shimla and New Delhi could also, perhaps, make a difference. 

This battle for a better future is being fought at several levels, and writers have a major role to play.

As Dr Karan Singh, president of Indian Council for Cultural

Indian Oil quarter ad