

Editorial

ORIGINAL ENGLISH WRITING in the South-Asian Subcontinent was already on a firm footing in the early decades of this century, with its rather urbane battery of writers and press, official encouragement, and an attentive audience in the colonial world. It was backed up by a tradition of local English writing, then older than a century. Following the partition of India, and independence from Britain of both India and Pakistan in 1947, the language and the literary writing in it have flourished, often in ways unforeseen and striking. Alongside substantial development in other languages and literatures of the region, the phenomenal rise in both quantity and quality of writing in English in all forms is evidently the most significant cultural aspect of the postindependence era—all the more interesting as it has happened in certain instances contrary to expectation, and even declared government policy, and not just in Pakistan or India, but also in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Nineteen ninety-seven was the Golden Jubilee of independence (from Britain) in India and Pakistan (the celebrations in the latter country will continue until 23 March 1998). Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) retraced her steps to freedom and has just celebrated the Silver Jubilee of independence (from Pakistan), which coincides with the Golden Jubilee of her independence from Britain, thereby adding a nuance to “postindependence.” The event in Dhaka could hardly escape the grimacing impress of postcolonial memory as the Bangladeshi and Pakistani national cricket teams played an exciting series of matches and the South Asian heads of governments negotiated for a new *entente cordiale* in the same city this past January, their

meeting helped along by the friendly agency of the common South Asian language, English. And as Sri Lanka celebrates the Fiftieth Anniversary of her independence this year, what better moment than this to notice the Postindependence Voices in South Asian Writings?

All of these states are bilingual or multilingual societies, which make up the four largest nations of the South Asian region. They share a rich past and everyday engagements of the present over and above their obvious geographical contiguity—the offshoots the world over would confirm this. Together, they are also the third largest English-speaking region of the world, besides being the largest producer of English publications after the UK and the US. To say that the tradition of English writing in the region as a whole is strong is to state the obvious. However, frequently overlooked is the fact that subsumed by the national structures since 1947 and 1948, the literatures of these countries are also expressive of distinctive features and ethos as revived, revised, and evolved in the postindependence milieu; these must be kept in view while following the horizontal lines across the region. Hence the “Voices” of our title—instead of any other constructs built over them; it is the individual voices we must listen to carefully in order to recoup for the effects of homogenizing discourses and to improve our listening.

There is some satisfaction to be derived, of course, from the realization that today the postindependence voices of South Asia have a large South Asian and a steadily expanding intercontinental audience. National awards for English writing have been instituted and have had worthy winners. Many top international literary prizes have also been won by South Asian writers. The creative and critical interaction is better than before and often enough is a voluminous affair. Our task has been to sift and squeeze between the journal covers from an abundance of fine material submitted. There has been much to deliberate about but the results are handsome. Some of the best representative work is to be found in these pages—in poetry, fiction, drama, interviews, and criticism. Theoretical debates and critical appreciation are ever more vigorous, and originate in diverse schools of thought. Yet the effort to bring together writers and scholars

from all over and create an appropriate context of dialogue among them has proven to be quite successful for the nonce, and we can only hope that it will continue to be so between the writers and the critics—and no less so among the various languages of the entire region which experience functional proximity.

We cannot but recognize, for the benefit of hindsight, that there have been important shifts in ways of seeing, showing, saying, and even not saying. Critical vocabulary and concepts themselves are part of the argument, and, as may be expected, “postcolonial” and “postindependence” are adjectives which have been used in the critical writings either interchangeably or to denote a distinction. It may be difficult to argue with a critical phase and urge it out of its natural time, but it may be made explicit that chronology (in a historical sense) ill-fits the interchangeability procedure. And we would like to believe that there is a life still beyond the last post of the voice in liberty; not to exclude the postliminary liberty of *own* voice. *ARIEL* invited us to locate it. Professor Victor J. Ramraj (and his team at the University of Calgary) offered all possible support to this end. By this date, South Asian English writing has been canonized enough countrywise, but it is a special pleasure to find here the shape of this larger community, voices regional and diasporic communing with one another, and communicating with the world at large. It appears to us on the strength of this selection that it would be impossible to read or teach World Literature in English without reference to South Asian writings of the past fifty years. *ARIEL*'s special issue celebrates this achievement.

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