

lecture

Khushwant in Karachi

Khushwant Singh went from Delhi to Karachi in late March to address a seminar on "Peace, Goodwill and Fellowship", organised by Rotary International.

ASSALAMALAIKUM! This is a ritual greeting between the people of India and Pakistan. You will agree that at no time in the 52 years that the two nations have been independent, have we been closer to war as today. We have fought three wars and are preparing for a fourth, which I have not the slightest doubt will be the final one because there will be nothing left of either you or us.

On that low note, (let me start by saying that) I represent no one. I am a half-writer of some books, but my roots are in this soil and I have great ambition to somehow prevent the spread of hatred between our two countries. I am also a manufacturer of jokes; in fact, the main factory of jokes against my own community, the Sardarji jokes.

Speaking about the impressions my countrymen have about Pakistan, there is one point that is always harped upon—our common past and heritage, that we speak the same language, we are the same race, our style

of living is the same, we wear the same dresses, our mindsets are the same, we eat the same kind of food. You are almost entirely Muslim, we are predominantly Hindu. But our Muslim minority of 14 percent, perhaps in numbers, equals the entire population of Pakistan itself. We have a lot in common.

Despite all this, something does not allow us to become close to each other. Today we have in common many negative aspects, which are more important to talk about than the heritage we share. Our two countries are the most corrupt, poorest, the most violent, and the most ignorant.

Some international organisations report that both of us share the distinction of being amongst the top 10 in corruption and violence, civic violence. I am mighty pleased to see that in corruption you were ahead of us by two cases. But somehow I do not believe this because for every case of corruption in Pakistan, I can match that with eight cases in India.

I read about your ministers and other people being put in jail, and having large estates in England and

large accounts in Swiss banks. But that is chicken-feed compared to what our politicians have done to our country. We have had one prime minister, described as Mr. Clean, and he made a neat 65 crore rupees on one deal. We had another prime minister who had to bribe only four members of Parliament out of the 540 to rule the country for five years. I can name at least two dozen chief ministers who have really done well for themselves.

We have had a lady chief minister who blew up exactly 100 crore rupees at the wedding of her foster son, and she wore a belt on her sari, studded with diamonds and jewels, worth more than a crore. She still is holding her head high, she's still described as the amma of her state, and is a formidable force not only in her own state but also in the rest of the country.

We have the case of the Bihar chief minister who has been charged with an enormous sum of bribery. But not only did he win his way back into power, he also put his illiterate wife

in the chair as chief minister. I do not think you can match this kind of thing.

We have in our Parliament and state assemblies, many who have been elected while they were still in jail, and who have come back to be sworn in as ministers. All this is a marvel. We have had one of the ablest and honest of men, Dr. Manmohan Singh, losing in the last election. While a lady called Phoolan Devi, once convicted of the murder of 22 men at one go, won.

The question is to really ask ourselves amidst this abysmal state of affairs is, what has happened to us? In both our countries, we have a leadership pool of high intelligence (the worthy minister who spoke before me gave a very lucid and, if I may say, brilliant defence of the indefensible), and yet how has it happened that we are the poorest and the most illiterate people in this world?

I think the answer is very simple—we brought it on our own heads. Our successive governments, instead of going in for building more roads, railways, schools, hospitals and

whatever the countries needed, have been buying arms, manufacturing guns, fighter aircraft and submarines, all that we cannot afford. If you spend all the money in weapons of destruction, how can you expect to provide the people sustenance of any kind?

Kashmir as real estate

We are being told that the problem is Kashmir. I agree. But I think it has become an excuse for both of us. I have my own solution which would not be acceptable to either India or Pakistan, but I have put it across with as much candour as I can. We have treated Kashmir as real estate, a property to be divided between India and Pakistan. Kashmir is not a problem of real estate. It is a problem of people, and they are neither Indian nor Pakistani. They are Kashmiri. And in our discussions, neither of us have talked to the Kashmiris about what they want.

You accuse us of not holding the plebiscite that we undertook to do before the UN. You are right, we did not follow the undertaking, what is more, we are not going to have a

plebiscite for a simple reason. It is really clear that if the people of Kashmir are given the option of choosing either India or Pakistan, they will opt for Pakistan, for the Muslims are in majority there. If given a third choice without India or Pakistan, but as a state of their own, I have not the slightest doubt that they will opt for the third.

Now, the complication is that the Kashmiris are not one people. They are four different ethnic and linguistic groups of which one lot is with you, and they have no choice but to stay with you. Another lot is Buddhist, predominantly in Ladakh, and they will not come to you. Jammu again is slightly doubtful because apart from the one district of Dodha, it is Hindu. There is no question of them ever wanting to come to Pakistan. The crux of the problem is the Valley of Kashmir, which is over 90 percent Muslim. And without doubt, on these people's decision about their future depend the future of India-Pakistan relations.

To be continued
Courtesy: Himal

essay

India and World Literature

By Salman Rushdie

ONCE gave a reading to a gathering of university students in Delhi and when I'd finished a young woman put up her hand. "Mr. Rushdie, I read through your novel, *Midnight's Children*," she said. "It is a very long book, but never mind, I read it through. And the question I want to ask you is this: fundamentally, what's your point?"

Before I could attempt an answer, she spoke again. "Oh, I know what you're going to say. You're going to say that the whole effort - from cover to cover - that is the point of the exercise. Isn't that what you were going to say?"

"Something like that, perhaps..." I got out.

She snorted. "It won't do."

"Please," I begged, "do I have to have just one point?"

"Fundamentally," she said, with impressive firmness, "yes."

SO here, once again, is a very long book; and though it is not a novel, but an anthology selected from the best Indian writing of the half-century since the country's Independence, still one could easily say of the work contained in the next 600-odd pages that the whole collective effort, from cover to cover, is the point of the exercise. Fifty years of work, by four genera-

book extract

The Nobel Prize

by Krishna Dutta & Andrew Robinson

Continued from last week

TAGORE read the prince's account in English translation and mentioned it to Thompson with dry humour:

But the beauty of it is that I never met him and the flashes of fire in my eyes which he considered dangerous for the British Government were under observation of the detectives of the Criminal Investigation Department somewhere behind my back. We are not allowed firearms and if any little fire is left playing in our eyes it should not be brought before the notice of our authorities.

A remarkably imperfect encounter this!

The deliberations of the Swedish Academy had a far sounder basis than the rumour, but still there were elements of misunderstanding bordering on comedy. What precisely had prompted 'that mysterious committee of international judges' to 'crown' a Bengali poet 'with bank notes'? — as Robert Bridges mused ironically in a letter to Tagore in June 1914. After all, they had already considered and passed over Tolstoy, Ibsen, Zola, Strindberge, Shaw and Yeats. In 1913 they would ignore Thomas Hardy in favour of Tagore — to the chagrin of the Royal Society of Literature in London, whose candidate Hardy was. (He never received the prize)

The initial proposal came from Thomas Sturge Moore, a Fellow of the Royal Society. It was of course based on *Gitanjali*. Later in 1913 the Nobel committee would have access to the just-published *Gardener, Sadhana* and to a defective translation of Tagore's short stories not approved by Tagore. That was all. One member of the Academy, Esaias Tegner, grandson of the poet Tegner, knew some Bengali. Whether he had read any Tagore in the original was not clear. (He seems not to have taken Rabindranath very seriously, for he told a Swedish academic, later a member of the Nobel committee, that with Bengali grammar and two or three weeks' study he would be able to read Tagore in the original.)

the so-called "vernacular languages", during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, "Indo-Anglian" literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.

It is a large claim, and while it may be easy for Western readers to accept it (after all, few non-English-language Indian writers, other than the Nobel laureate Tagore, have ever made much of an 'impact' on world literature), it runs counter to much of the received critical wisdom within India itself. It is also not a claim which, when we set out on the enormous and rewarding task of doing the reading for this book, we ever expected to make. The task we set ourselves was simply to make the best possible selection from what is presently available in the English language, including, obviously, work in translation. To our considerable astonishment, only one translated text - S. H. Manto's masterpiece, the short story "Toba Tek Singh" - made the final cut.

Two qualifications should be made at once. First, there has long been a genuine problem of translation in India - not only into English but between the vernacular languages - and

it is possible that good writers have been excluded by reason of their translators' inadequacies rather than their own. Nowadays, however, such bodies as the Indian Sahitya Akademi and UNESCO have been putting their resources into the creation of better translations, and the problem, while not eradicated, is certainly much diminished. And second: while it was impossible, for reasons of space, to include a representative selection of modern Indian poetry, it was evident to us that the rich poetic traditions of India continued to flourish in many of the sub-continent's languages, whereas the English-language poets, with a few distinguished exceptions (Arun Kolatkar, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, to name just three), did not match the quality of their counterparts in prose.

Those who wish to argue with the conclusion we have drawn may suspect that we did not read enough. But we have read as widely and deeply as we could. Others may feel that, as one of the editors is English and the other a practising English-language writer of Indian origin, we are simply betraying our own cultural and linguistic prejudices, or defending our turf or - even worse - gracelessly blowing our

own trumpet. It is of course true that any anthology worth its salt will reflect the judgments and tastes of its editors. I can only say that our tastes are pretty catholic and our minds, I hope, have been open. We have made our choices, and stand by them.

(As to the inclusion here of work by one S. Rushdie, the decision was taken with some unease: but *Midnight's Children* is undeniably a part of the story of these 50 years, and we decided, in the end, that leaving it out would be a weirder decision than putting it in. After its publication, I learned that the idea of a long saga-novel about a child born at the exact moment of Independence - midnight, August 14-15, 1947, had occurred to other writers, too. A Goan poet showed me the first chapter of an abandoned novel in which the "midnight child" was born not in Bombay, but in Goa. And as I travelled round India, I heard of at least two other aborted projects, one in Bengali, the other in Kannada, with pretty similar themes. I just had the good fortune to finish my book first.)

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The lack of first-rate writing in translation can only be a matter for regret. However, to speak more positively, it is a delight to be able to showcase the quality of a growing

collective oeuvre whose status has long been argued over, but which has, in the last 20 years or so, begun to merit a place alongside the most flourishing literatures in the world.

For some, English-language Indian writing will never be more than a post-colonial anomaly, the bastard child of Empire, sired on India by the departing British: its continuing use of the old colonial tongue is seen as a fatal flaw that renders it forever inauthentic. "Indo-Anglian" literature evokes, in these critics, the kind of prejudiced reaction shown by some Indians towards the country's community of "Anglo-Indians" - that is, Eurasians.

In the half-century since Jawaharlal Nehru spoke, in English, the great "freedom at midnight" speech that marked the moment of Independence, the role of English itself has often been disputed in India. Attempts in India's continental shelf of languages to coin medical, scientific, technological and everyday neologisms to replace the commonly-used English words sometimes succeeded, but more often comically failed.

To be continued
Courtesy: The Frontline

Babindranath Tagore, if not exactly one of us, is, an Aryan, a distant relation of all white folk." In Vienna, a well-known liberal newspaper asked: "Has the award of the prize been due to the exotic Buddhist fashion or the England's policy in India been, perhaps, in favour of the crowning of the Bengali poet? This will remain the secret of the judges in Stockholm." In Paris, a journalist approached Sylvain Levi, since he was a Jew, asking for an interview about Le Rabbin Tagore. (Possibly the first example of a persistent misapprehension about Tagore, who would become sometimes an Aryan and at other times a Jew.)

In England the press coverage was copious and laudatory, but perhaps less enthusiastic than might have been expected on the basis of the rave reviews of *Gitanjali*. In the literary world a reaction had already started, fuelled by disappointment that Thomas Hardy had been passed over: Punch printed some (quite good) parodies of *Gitanjali*; the New Statesman remarked wistfully, 'the unjustified boom we have always had with us.'

I am often angered when references to you catch my eye in the papers now for there is an itch about them to treat you unjustly as before they were fulsome in praise." Sturge Moore told Tagore in January 1914. Recalling his first months in England, Tagore replied from the heart: 'I would have gladly sacrificed my Nobel prize if I could be left to the enjoyment of [that] strong friendliness and true-hearted admiration. But the Indian summer of western liberalism was almost over.'