

## Responsibilities of a writer

The recent attack on writer-teacher Humayun Azad has focussed our attention on the right of freedom of expression, especially that of a writer, a right that is unquestioned in developed, mature societies. Less attention, and far less space, has been given on what a writer, in underdeveloped societies buffeted by uncontrollable forces from the outside and the inside, where ideological and political issues tend to be redefined violently, actually does. Or should do. In the piece reproduced below, a speech delivered at the Annual Writers' Conference in Colombo in September 2002. Kannada writer **U. R. Ananta Murty** argues, in terms that are no doubt Indian but whose broad features are also pointedly relevant to our condition, that writers preserve and expand the frontiers of language, and by extension, the communities in which they live, that simply by writing in their own language/s they fight the juggernaut of a globalized English, of 'mindless' Westernization, that threatens to reduce human differences. Which, not surprisingly, is also the essential characteristic of extreme fundamentalism: to reduce to a sameness, to eliminate the 'other', to level all to uncritical uniformity and conformity. That in the last instance, the genuine writer is automatically the doubter, the sceptic, a creature suspicious of slogans, cliches and formulas, a creature of the particular rather than the general, a creature drawn to flesh-and-blood characters, to the fingernail and the flower, rather than to state, party or church. By those criteria, it seems that Humayun Azad was attacked for simply doing his job.

I am not happy with the word "responsibility". It sounds a little pompous, and burdensome, like filling income-tax forms. If reading/ writing of creative literature is not a joyful act in itself, it is nothing of much consequence. Bad literature can't be good politics. This is a truism that state promoters of literature, like the former rulers of Soviet Union, often forget, or deliberately ignore.

Yet, there is a need for a notion like responsibility. For, no writer lives and creates in a vacuum. The moment one uses language, one gets related to the community that keeps the language alive. It is the vibrancy of the English language of the renaissance that made Shakespeare possible. The language was alive and vibrant because the people were alive and vibrant and responsive to the times. Therefore, all good writers are aware that they owe something to their people and the language that sustains them. Language always helps its people to have a sense of continuity with their own past, the dreams and achievements of a people through history that have been preserved as memory. All our memories of the past in our countries are preserved in our folk-tales, songs, performances, and myths.

As writers we owe an obligation to our past as well as to the present to continue what is best in our literary traditions, not by imitating the past but creatively interacting with it. We make poetry out of our quarrels with ourselves, said Yeats. And, politics, out of our quarrel with others. Both these quarrels, so necessary in our times of instability and change, could be with our own traditions as well. We should take care that these quarrels should be dialogues, too, among the literary fraternity.

Why else do we meet like this, and you should invite a fellow writer like me from India, so near to you and yet so far! This mutual unfamiliarity is unfortunate as many of us are brought up by our education to feel we are nearer to Europe than to each other. The truth is we have so much more to share with each other than with the modernised Europe. For instance, our common heritage, and the anxieties resulting from our need to modernise and yet preserve what is best in tradition could result in significant dialogues. The same kind of artificial distance is there, paradoxically, more after our "Independence" than before, among us, Indian Language writers, as well. If only we learn from one another in Asia, then it may result in our becoming better partners in the literary endeavour with our great contemporary writers in Europe. I hope this question will engage some of you in this conference.

AS writers, particularly as Asian writers, we need to be "critical insiders" to our own traditions. Being mere insiders, uncritically, may often result in the production of mindless celebratory writing, rhetorical flourishes, and populist clichés -- so easy to imbibe and so banal. Because of our *sthotra* tradition, and the inherited

courtly behaviour of our classical past, reinforced by colonial rule, many of us mindlessly slip into this mode in our writing. Some of us, "modernists" have been critical of that kind of pompously celebratory writing.

Being blindly critical of our traditions, on the other hand, may result in blindly imitative westernisation, leading to amnesia of whatever is good in our past. In India, the great 12th-century poet-mystic Basava, who rebelled against ritualistic and superstitious temple worship and caste system, was a critical insider. And so was the Marathi poet Tukaram and the Hindi poet Kabir. The great medieval saint poets were all critical insiders. Mahatma Gandhi comes in that tradition. You will surely have plenty of such examples in Tamil and Singhalese of "critical insiders".

There is something else in the nature of our languages too, which makes the situation of our Asian writers significantly unique. There have been two great movements in languages of the world. Some five hundred years ago, Latin was the language of Cosmopolis in Europe. This gave way to European vernaculars. This cultural decentralisation resulted in great creativity in European languages. Shakespeare in English and Dante in Italian were made possible because the vernaculars replaced the language of Cosmopolis in literary creation. (I am indebted to Dr. Sheldon Pollock's writings on this issue.)

I shall speak only of the instance of Kannada in which I write. Sanskrit, which was the language of Cosmopolis, a thousand years ago, made way for the geographically bound and limited language, Kannada of the Kannada-speaking country. This has been profoundly theorised in our classic of a thousand years ago, *Kaviraja Marga*. The author, Srivijaya, sees the language as geographically limited and yet, this is important, the creation of its authors unlimited in its universal significance. We must not forget here that this decentralisation of creativity didn't result in a total break with the past, or fragmentary visions. For the Italian poet Dante, the Latin Virgil is the guide and for the Kannada Pampa, a thousand years ago, the Sanskrit Kalidasa is a model.

This happened much earlier in Tamil. In ancient India the great Buddha spoke in the language of people. Creativity of our times in the whole world owes to this empowerment of people's languages, the vernaculars (I hate to use this word, unless technically).

UNDER the impact of globalisation, we see, after a thousand years, another cycle. People's languages are threatened; their power is diminishing. Perhaps the whole world is moving in the direction of English as a language of Cosmopolis because the most powerful nation in the world, the United States, uses it. Of course, not because Shakespeare wrote in it.

Therefore I feel it is the "responsibility" of writers in our languages to see that people's languages, which have a history of their own, and a sense of continuity of valuable memory of what it is to be human in history, are empowered. This is as much a political task as it is a cultural one.

The task means many things: firstly, it means decentralisation of economy and empowerment of village level democratic institutions; secondly, consequent to the first, it means truly federal governments. Such determined political action is needed, not for mere cultural reasons of identity, but for meaningful governance, and even efficient governance in a large country like India.

Languages in India are an aspect of our pluralities and pluralities are a guarantee of our democracy. We use the phrase "unity in diversity" to describe the nature of our civilisation in India. This means that if a dictatorial ruler insists on unity only in the interest of highly centralised governance, we then become acutely aware of our diversities. For instance, this happened in Assam, in Punjab, in Tamil Nadu and eventually led to Emergency in India. At the same time, if separateness is insisted in the name of diversities, and a Yugoslav situation is created, we profoundly become aware of the oneness of our civilisation. That is why I feel in countries like India if we over-centralise we may balkanise. A happy situation for us is when a Tagore could be a Bengali and

simultaneously a great Indian poet. A Gandhi could be a Gujarati and at the same time a great Indian soul.

The so-called globalisation, which in reality is Americanisation, is a threat to many of our cherished and tested values. Writers in our languages have to respond to this threat. There is no future for our languages, otherwise. They may survive as kitchen languages only.

LET me move to another question that preoccupies some of the best writers of our times in the world. This is an important question that demands an imaginative appreciation of other cultures than our own. The lack of it, which often drives the misguided to passionate self-righteousness and even martyrdom, has been resulting in inhuman cruelty and brutality and destruction of all civilised values. There is no literature, no theatre, no poetry without culture and civilisation. There is no civilisation without love and compassion for all forms of life, and for this earth and this sky, which sustains and nourishes life.

A character in Ignatio Silone's novel, **Fontamara**, speaks of two evils, Money and State, which are as old as fleas, hateful in themselves but bearable as long as they are kept within limits. But both Money and State are able to access the single-minded devotion of some passionate people. These people in politics and big business could be righteous in their self-centred pursuit of power and justify any immoral act in the name of the welfare of the people. For instance, the slow ecological disaster is justified in the name of prosperity and strong state. Those who are knowledgeable of such matters say that more people have been displaced and reduced to misery in the guise of "modernisation" and "development" after Indian Independence, than in the earlier communal holocaust when India was partitioned.

Mahatma Gandhi as well as Tagore had therefore rejected the European idea of Nation-state and opted for a different notion of Nationalism, appropriate for a pluralistic civilisation like India. There may be a lesson for this disturbed world in the message of these two visionaries of my country. But we do not seem to heed to them in our pursuit of money and strong state. Today, the communal frenzy let loose by the state itself in Gujarat, and the support that terrorism receives in Pakistan, and the attempt to justify the one with the other frighten us.

World literature has to respond to these challenges of our times. This needs compassion, and vision and profound self-reflection. We, as writers, will have to be conscientious witnesses to the terrible events of our times, as well as act as citizens to restore sanity and compassion.

AND finally, a few words about the senseless, and absurd passions of our times to which any of us, and the near and dear ones to us may become victims. The writer Karahasan brings out the cruel absurdity of a mindset through a Bosnian joke:

There's a joke I was told was Bosnian, though it sounds Jewish, in which Ivek is in a local tavern and the moment he hears that the name of the man standing next to him is Moshe he kills him without thinking twice. He does not deny the deed to the police, he simply justifies it by saying: "And what about what they did to our Jesus?" "But that was two thousand years ago!" the police inspector exclaims. "Yes, but I only heard about it yesterday," says Ivek.

The man who is killed is no longer seen as an individual with his own history, his own inviolable physical body. Everyone else who doesn't look like me, or worship like me, or speak like me is the hateful "other". The "other" need not be a grown-up man or woman. A mere child could be the abstract "other". Such a mindset is terrible.

If literature has a great contribution to make it is this: it makes us suspect abstractions. It makes a Hamlet hesitate to kill his own father's murderer.

We don't just represent something; we have living bodies and living histories -- as individuals and, at the same time, as members of a community. That is the great lesson of all great literatures.

### A TO Z, AZAD

(for Humayun Azad)

KAISER HAQ

Something is dying in us  
and we watch in bewilderment;

it was perhaps the best thing  
in us, and with all our niggling flaws  
marked us still as human:

we thought the world  
or at least our corner of it  
could be made  
if not better  
at least less bad,

but it's only getting worse--  
looks like we've been had.  
True, we won a war--  
or at least a Victory Day  
but more than what we won's  
at stake in battles that rage  
around us every day.

When  
To live and let live  
is a philosophy  
minced with butcher's knives  
the thinking mind must reiterate  
before the powers that be  
and the powers that are desperate  
to be the powers that be  
some simple lessons of civilization:

Ballot-box democracy is meaningless  
without democracy (please  
look it up  
in a dictionary--  
you need a big one for this,  
I'm afraid)

To say there is no world  
but what we make with words  
and what we call truth  
is only a construct  
may be detectable  
postmodern fashion  
for academic consumption  
but to make untruth with words  
is nothing but to lie

And to drag God's name down  
into the gutter of politics  
is utterly flagitious  
or monstrously insane

To be *azad*, to be free  
to walk, talk, write, sing,  
love, draw, dance  
is the A to Z of life,  
the rest is death  
death  
death  
death

I could go on and on  
but why be schoolmasterly?  
I could take a cue from Magritte  
and write:  
despite the hint of metre  
and the desultory rhyme  
*Ceci n'est pas un poeme*--  
instead

I'll adapt some words  
from sombre Wilfrid Owen,  
killed on the Sambre Canal,  
whose spirit still haunts the literate:

I am not concerned here with Poetry.  
My subject is Life, and the protest  
against the enemies of Life.  
The Poetry is in the Protest.

Kaiser Huq teaches English at Dhaka University.

## TRAVEL WRITING

In the first part of a two-part series 'Around Kumbun', **Tenzig Sonam**, a Tibetan poet and film-maker currently living in New York, goes inside a country he calls his home but does not recognize.

## A Stranger in My Native Land

THE two Chinese ladies sharing our compartment have been chatting ceaselessly for hours now, their conversation fuelled by an unending supply of roasted melon seeds. Earlier, in an unexpected gesture of friendliness -- unexpected because we had been travelling together for almost eighteen hours and they had not once acknowledged our presence -- they had brusquely offered us a handful of melon seeds and then, just as rapidly, retreated behind the curtain of their conversation. My wife, Rituu, and I have been in China for only three days but already we are accustomed to the indifference with which the Chinese seem to treat foreigners.

But Chinese attitudes to outsiders is the last thing on my mind as the train nears our destination, Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province. Ever since we entered China I have been in a state of permanent tension, strung equally between apprehension and excitement. I am a Tibetan in exile, born and brought up in India. All my life I have thought of Tibet as my homeland and China as the country that deprived me of it. I can scarcely believe that I am finally here, deep inside enemy territory, approaching my father's native land. Not far from Xining is Kumbum Monastery, one of

Tibet's great religious institutions and the defining landmark of the region where my father was born. Kumbum is at the edge of Amdo, one of Tibet's three traditional provinces. Since the Communist Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1949, most of this region has been incorporated into Qinghai Province.

Low, dun-coloured hills, eroded and fragile, stretch out on either side of the train. We have been travelling due west ever since we passed the old Silk Road outpost of Lanzhou a few hours ago. The Gobi Desert lies to the north and in the south the Tibetan plateau begins its gradual rise; we can just about glimpse the faint adumbration of its mountains, ethereal above the undulating horizon. We pass villages -- clusters of flat-roofed adobe dwellings -- and farmland scratched out of the side of barren declivities. Factories appear, their chimneys seeping black smoke, then blocks of white-tiled apartment buildings and colonies of mud huts next to the tracks, slum-like yet surprisingly clean. There is none of the chaotic jumble of humanity and poverty that litters the approaches to large railway stations in India. I was brought up to think of Xining as a part of Tibet, but there is nothing remotely Tibetan about this modern Chinese city that we are entering.

...My parents had left Tibet prior to the failed Lhasa uprising of March 1959 and the consequent escape of the Dalai Lama to India. In the early 1960s Darjeeling was full of Tibetan refugees and our house was a transit camp for numerous relatives and friends who had recently fled their homes. To my child's eye their torn clothing, their haggard and tense faces, and above all their ripe, unwashed body odours were all evidence of the horrors they had just left behind. Our unexpected guests were mostly my mother's acquaintances from Central Tibet, but every now and again we had visitors who were from the Kumbum region. These men were special; they spoke a strangely accented Tibetan but, even more mysteriously, amongst themselves and with my father, they spoke in the Xining dialect of Chinese which none of us could understand. They also shared with my father a love of noodles which they prepared in a variety of different ways, a culinary distinction that set apart our household from all other Tibetans.

Sometimes they would joke with me. 'And where are you from?'

I would reply, 'From Amdo!'

I would then triumphantly declaim, childishly proud of my improbable provenance: 'I am from Amdo Kumbum!'

...The curved roofs of the monastery appear like a mirage, the first manifestation of Tibetan culture. I think of the black-and-white photograph of my childhood, but my memory bears no resemblance to this freshly renovated complex that we are entering. I notice immediately that the hills behind the monastery that were so prominently barren in that picture have become farmland. We drive past the famous row of eight stupas that guard its entrance. They seem marooned in the middle of a large, newly-paved plaza. The monastery looks freshly scrubbed, the main road is paved and clean. We pass a brand new public toilet. Coloured light bulbs are strung along the outlines of the temples like decorations in an amusement arcade. Everywhere, there are signs of construction or renovation; but some vital component seems to be missing, and then it hits me -- there are hardly any monks visible. Every now and again I glimpse them, in twos and threes, wraithlike in their robes, disappearing around corners, melting away into shadows and alleyways. I immediately think of the Tibetan refugee monasteries in India, not half as big or imposing as Kumbum yet alive with activity, filled with the din and clatter of religious endeavour, their atmosphere charged with a spiritual resonance.

...We are staying within the monastery complex at the residence of Zorgye Rinpoche, one of Kumbum Monastery's high lamas who is closely connected to my family; the previous incarnation and the founder of the lineage was my great uncle. The present Zorgye Rinpoche is now in his seventies and has lived in exile for the past four decades, the last thirty years in America. Following a family tradition, Nima is the Rinpoche's steward and represents his interests at the monastery.

All tourists pay an entrance fee to visit the monastery but pilgrims are exempt. Thanks to our guide, an old monk who works with Nima, we fall into the latter category. We go from shrine to shrine, making our offerings, joining the pilgrims who are mostly nomads, traditionally dressed and speaking the Amdo dialect. Photographs of the Dalai Lama and the late Panchen Lama are prominently displayed in all the chapels, a reminder of the extent of the Dalai Lama's influence inside Tibet. Three of my first cousins sit with us, steadily downing alcohol. Nima interprets; Dhundup is the only one who remembers my father: 'Your father used to come home from school and he would play the flute. We were only children then but we loved him so much. Oh, I have so much to talk to you about, if only I

could speak Tibetan!'

'Is she Tibetan?' asks one of my cousins, pointing at Rituu.

'No, I say, she is Indian.'

'Is she a Tibetan born in India?'

'No, she's a real Indian.' I ask Nima: 'Have they seen Indians before?'

'Only on television,' he replies. 'He is Tibetan but he looks like an Indian,' says another of my cousins, pointing at me.

'I guess I've lived so long in India that I've become an Indian myself! I reply to their merriment. But, in fact, the irony is that in exile I have had the freedom to develop and express my identity as a Tibetan more completely than my relatives have and, unlike them, I was brought up with strong nationalistic aspirations. Here, Tibetans have been a minority for so long that for them to even consider the notion of a separate and independent Tibet is unimaginable.

The morning advances. My father becomes the focus of our conversation. To my cousins, he is the last surviving member of their parents' generation and, as such, the patriarch *in absentia*. They ask me to convince him to return; they want him to live out his final years in his family home among his many relatives. I promise to convey their message, but deep down I know that my father will never come back. He has spent most of his life

actively working for the cause of Tibet's independence. For him to return would be an admission of failure, a negation of his entire life's work.

The talk, the alcohol and the rush of memories make Dhondup melancholic and he unexpectedly breaks down and sobs like a child, hugging me, speaking to me in Xining Chinese, shaking his head and groaning as if racked by some deep, searing pain. I cradle him and try to comfort him, confused, the alcohol gone to my head as well -- these unfamiliar surroundings, this stranger in my arms with whom I have nothing in common and yet who is bound to me by ties that are more deep-rooted than shared memories or experience.

After a while, we visit the very spot where my father was born; the original house was broken up and shared among three of my cousins.

These are the beams from the old house', Dhondup says. 'And that tree was there when your father was a child -- take a picture of that, he'll remember it -- and that's the spot where he used to sit and read his books or play the flute.' My cousin has recovered from his momentary breakdown and he is now even more drunk, staggering, grinning broadly, doing an impromptu jig and saying to me, 'This is one of the happiest days of my life because you have come

back to your native land and we have finally met.'

The sun is setting. The surrounding hillsides have taken on a warm, golden, almost liquid sheen, and their rows of haystacks stand out, stark and surreal, like a de Chirico painting.

My relatives, like most Tibetans in the Kumbum region, are literally clinging on to the last shreds of their cultural identity. They still have Tibetan names and are officially registered as ethnic Tibetans, a minority status that allow them certain privileges and, most importantly, they still maintain their faith in the Tibetan Buddhism -- the proximity of Kumbum Monastery continues to exert a strong influence on their lives. But in every other respect, they have become indistinguishable from their Chinese neighbours. Until the onset of the Cultural Revolution, their women folk could always be recognised by their Tibetan dress without which they never ventured outside, but the madness of the intervening years wiped out that one surviving display of ethnic separateness.

The loss of language and traditions is the first step in the dissolution of cultural identity. Here among my relatives, in this far corner of Tibet, that process seems almost complete.