In Search of India

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The theme of the London book fair this year is Indian writing. Vikram Seth, Amartya Sen, William Dalrymple and other writers in frequent circulation in this country are going to be joined by writers - K Satchidanandan, Javed Akhtar - distinguished or popular on their own terrain but less known here, for five days of discussions and celebrations. Something like this happened in 2006 to the Frankfurt book fair, when planeloads of Indian novelists and poets descended on the Intercontinental Hotel, waved to each other over breakfast, and then read from their work to courteous audiences in the afternoons and evenings.

The theme then, too, was India; and the "idea of India" acted as a catalyst to a process that might have already begun, but received, at that moment, a recognisable impetus - the confluence, in one place, of literary and intellectual dialogue with what is basically business activity, each bringing magic and movement to the other. The India-themed Paris book fair followed swiftly.

Both these events proved a few things. Firstly, you were reminded of the variety of genres that Indian writers - especially those who write in languages other than English - had practised for much of the 20th century. In the hotel lobbies, the cafés and restaurants in adjoining streets, not to speak of the venues, you kept running into poets, critics, short-story writers, historians, playwrights from the many Indian literatures; and, of course, novelists. The English language had, it would seem, only thrown up novelists in India in the last 30 years; the truth is that there were and are excellent English-language poets, but few, or none, had been invited.



Aravinda Adiga with his novel *The White Tiger.*

The other thing that hit you was the amount of money the Indian government had to spare for culture; it was one of the main sponsors of these events, and had made these migratory, crowded, but characteristically desultory congregations possible. Why now? And just how much thought had gone into the meetings and readings? Perhaps a great deal more could have been done over the decades following independence to give us a greater and more acute sense of our literary history as moderns, especially as more funding seemed to have been available than had been assumed. We in India have no equivalent of the Modern Library, for instance, nor anything like the Penguin Modern European Poets series, let alone properly influential critical and scholarly work on 20th-century literature. Are the book fairs, with their new kind of commingling, sending out a hint - perhaps an unintended one - about the timeliness of such initiatives to their organisers?

Another revealing aspect of Frankfurt and Paris was the evidently unconstricted and even unpredictable way foreign rights were sold by Indian publishers (without, necessarily, British mediation) to European countries: this explained the random mix of celebrities and little-known practitioners, of the "latest thing" in Indian writing in English as well as the older and occasionally infirm writers (members of a deceased avant-garde) in the Indian languages. Some of these people have hardly been translated into English, but are often available in French or German, and there are students writing doctorates on their work. The putative common pool of the Indo-European languages (established at first in the late 18th century by a Welshman, William Jones, and put into circulation in Europe by the Germans Schlegel, Schiller, Goethe and later Max Mueller) probably - who knows? - still stirs faintly in the memory of European academia as it hardly does in the Anglo-Saxon world. Or, possibly, the fact that these countries have less of a direct relationship with India than Britain allows for the frequently hit-or-miss but sometimes surprising nature of the Indian list on the European publishers' catalogues.

What will London bring that Frankfurt and Paris haven't? Certainly, it seems to have taken the cue from the two European cities in at least one regard: it hasn't invited only those writers who are published in this country - that is, Anglophone writers of prose. So, for instance, we will have, besides Vikram Seth, Ramachandra Guha and Patrick French, the Urdu-language theorist Gopi Chand Narang, the Bengali poet and novelist Sunil Ganguly, and the English-language poet and novelist Mamang Dai from the idyllic, remote Arunachal Pradesh. In other words, the book fair should bring some intimation to audiences in London of an explosion in writing that is not 30 but perhaps 200 years old, the consequence of a venerable, many-tongued, and still astonishing lineage in modernism.

There will also be two writers who have aired their disagreements with each other in these pages - the Englishman William Radice, poet, translator of Tagore, and, until recently, poet laureate-aspirant, and the younger Jeet Thayil, poet, critic, editor of an anthology of Indian poetry in English, and defender (odd but instructive that it should need defending even now, in a way that Indian fiction no