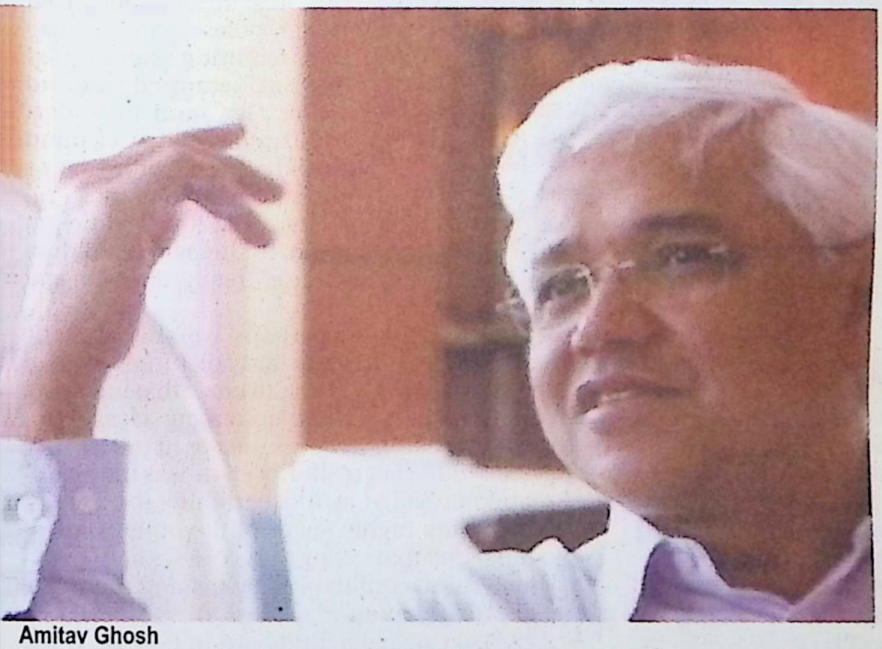
longer does) of the continued viability of Indian English poetry. Not all of these choices are risky ones; many of these writers (myself included) now spend a fair amount of time in the ghostly, mnemonic world of international book fairs, in their guise as crowded transit lounges for the nation; here we wait, eat, talk to each other, ignore acquaintances, as the difference between airport, venue and hotel gradually diminishes. But does this journey lead somewhere? Will it change the way Indian writing is configured within British publishing?

How does travel shape and qualify writing and nationality (a common enough conundrum), especially when they take on this form - the transcontinental literary event; the book reading in a foreign location? And how do these writers cohere and relate to each other in our minds: what is it, besides the book fair and perhaps the place of birth on their passports or some long-standing enthusiasm, that makes K Satchidanandan and Tarun J Tejpal and Dalrymple all, in some sense, "Indian" writers? One thing we do know is that travel is not only about bringing your particular skills, wares, identity and lineage to a place, but being changed by, and learning from, the act of travelling and facing up to foreignness. In roughly the past 20 years India has changed from being a Nehruvian nation-state - an experiment and ideal in democracy - to a portable mode of existence, as well as a form of self-justification for a curious mixture of free-market opportunism and a slyly conservative provincialism. This means that Indians, as they travel, migrate and resettle, have increasingly begun to deflect the problem - and the rewards - of encountering foreignness, and strangeness, and the notion of "India" has helped them in (has, in fact, been crucial to) this deflection. The so-called Indian diaspora ceased, really, to want either to integrate with, or radically revise, the landscape they moved to in the 1980s and 90s (usually, the United States, succeeding the earlier wave of immigration to Britain); instead, they wished to conform silently and, simultaneously, to continue as themselves. This has led to a unique combination of acceptance and denial.



Amitav Ghosh

So much of what the Indian middle class sees as its ideal present and its possible future, including its thoughts on the role of literature, emanates from, or emerges in relation to, these American suburbs. In a survey undertaken last year, it turned out that India lagged behind America alone in its love for that country and for George Bush. ("India" here is a metonym for the middle class, and vice versa.) In the Clinton era, and even more pronouncedly in the Bush era, the US came to be seen as a facilitator of India's own teeming, importunate ambitions, for its true place in the world, and, therefore, as a familial figure, in keeping with the Indian middle class's interpretation of family, as an institution that is primarily a guarantor of self-interest. When India looks at America, it sees a comforting or discomfiting (according to the phase of history it then inhabits) extension of its own welfare - much in the way that a child invents its mother.

This version of the familial also seems to direct the way a large number of Anglophone Indians view what they think of as literature. Their incongruously intimate, emotion-prone and proprietorial relationship with the Booker prize is a case in point. Here, feelings of self-approbation and self-doubt characterise the response to the outcome; and rarely was this inability to escape anxieties to do with prestige clearer than in 2008, when there were two Indians on the shortlist. An uneasy family drama ensued in India, with scorn being poured on one Indian, Aravind Adiga, and felicitations being made prematurely to the other, Amitav Ghosh. When Adiga won, there was patrician outrage; national - or family - pride had been violated. Word had soon got out in the British press that the other serious contender for the prize besides Adiga, as far as the judges were concerned, was Sebastian Barry. This Irish writer, however, hardly penetrated the Indian consciousness, and nor had the others on the list besides the two mentioned; the heterogeneity of Anglophone writing is not something that Indians are any longer prepared to do business with. Similarly, there's a sense, in the context of the new, middle-class Indian, of an end to the notion of travel as disjunction and discovery.

Travel, anyway, shapes the literary festival, the book fair, in paradoxically enclosing ways, and with a degree of unreality. You cover great distances, sometimes, to arrive at the literary festival, but the festival itself is a province, an enclosure. This special provincialism and curious lack of movement becomes more intense when the theme is nationality, or a national literature, as has been the case with the "international" festivals concerning India this century.