

## **ON COMMUNICATION: ROUGH NOTES FROM A LINGUIST'S DIARY**

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The following paragraphs are lifted from my rough notes that contained a dozen or more points on 'Language and Communication'. If one finds them provocative or if they trigger some more thoughts or reactions, a dialogue could begin to extend or reject or modify the ideas. Without making it an academic endeavor, let me shoot off with these points:

1. As any one who handles communication – and there are so many of us in each domain, classroom, radio channels, print media, new media, television or on bigger screen, and social network sites, not to talk of the good old face-to-face communication, one would know its myriad challenges. One challenge lies in its constant variability – almost like air or water in a stream or the clouds on the pallet of sky, it fluctuates. It fluctuates in content, media, style, strategies, pitch level, intelligibility, and in so many other ways.
2. The other challenge lies in its variation across domains. As we now know, each domain demands as well as creates or throws up its own discourse strategies, with each speaker/communicator/author coming up with innovative styles with which the intended readers and audience will have to cope up with. More difficult the

- experiment and the strategy used, it becomes doubly difficult for the readers or interlocutors to deal with the intent of each text.
3. Consequently, if the end of the line person is a translator, she will also have to develop her own technical strategies and skills to match with such novelties. Further, a reader or a critic or a translator must also demystify a text, deal with numerous jargons as well as neologisms specifically – weighing each one and dealing with it on its merit and parallels in the Target Language, and thus ultimately remove the language barrier and so many other obstructions (unpredictable at the opening of each segment of conversation) preventing clear (read, ‘intelligible’) communication. She is also expected to be a good communicator herself, so much so that she is expected to disambiguate as well as transfer an intended pun and ambiguity across languages. In general, what we see is that a translator is a person who tries to remove the language barrier and other obstructions preventing clear communication.
  4. All critics, *‘tiikaa-kaara’s* (‘commentators’) and translators are ‘clarifiers’ or clearing agents of sorts, whose task it is help demystify unnecessary jargon and pointless abbreviations, and uncover the *purdahs* or veils on novel coinages. It becomes more difficult when it comes to literary communication, more so – in case of poetic interpretations and transfers, but let us not assume that the language of international diplomacy or verbal exchanges intended to foment trouble or war or even the texts in agreements has a simplistic structure.
  5. In 1926, in a lecture of ‘Art’ – yet another form of communication tried out by Rabindranath Tagore, the master communicator of the medium of language, he had asked as well as answered this obvious question “What is Art?” His thoughtful observation was that all artistic communication was “the response of man’s creative soul to the call of the real.” By saying this, he brought it to our attention that in many ancient civilizations, there emerged a gigantic creative

endeavour that marked a triumph of great artistic moments. In stupendous carvings and in significant movements in the field of visual arts, these naturally endowed artists defied all obstacles, and contributed to what he called a 'heroic activity'. In that sense, Tagore would surely be remembered as a hero and a harbinger of new artistic movements at a time when the community of artists and painters in India was trying to find its own identity.

6. There is yet another area of concern for the linguistic and literary scholars of communication, and that has to do with occupancy of space of a given text or topic or even medium in which one is speaking or writing. In a paper of mine titled 'Another India: Voices from the Periphery' (given in Saarbrucken in August 2002), I had argued that in a plural space such as South Asia, each political entity will have, at any given point of time, many centers – depending on which way one decided to assign values to one or the other cultural parameter. I had then suggested we are often unable to decide as to whom do we write for or about? Which India are we talking about? Is India the space that gets to be seen in the words woven by our writers who happen to write or rewrite in English? Or, the space that peeps through the texts in 'Vernacular languages' that stand on the other side of the lamp that is sustained on an English wicker?
7. There are other Indias, too – where speakers of the same language are scattered over a vast space so disjointedly that they can hardly communicate with or read each other. The speakers of Urdu in Punjab or Lucknow would not know what a Hyderabad Dakhani Urdu speaker says, or what an Urdu speaker from Hubli would surmise. The language occupies an official position in a state (Jammu & Kashmir) where almost all speak a different mother-tongue – Kashmiri, Ladakhi or Dogri, and yet is not even recognized as an associate official language in the state (Uttar Pradesh) where a large percentage of people speak it as mother tongue.

8. To return to the theme of literary communication, let me say this that in a possible Sociology of Writing (and Translating), if the author is viewed as a pawn with a keen sense of the game - the game her language plays on people and on reading, she must be collecting, collating and buying things – the raw materials to create products in order to sell 'her own words'. But what are these raw materials? And who sells them? Supposing we say that the author builds on top of the materials supplied by the 'system' which always has a set of official stories to sell – those that are blared out on radio and tele-networks or smeared in ink in dailies of all hues – as well as those that are rumours and tales common man tells or offers as possible alternative narratives. Of course, there are also agencies at work in that society – I mean, group-internal, or external business interests – that would like to create their own little deviations or versions. Those who resist changes have their own myths constructed, and the advocates of change spread their own beliefs. Does the author depend on any one of these? Or, must she do so? It often appears that the politics or economics of literature within which the authors have to function, thwart their reason and the power of critiquing, and they find themselves trapped in this quagmire.
  
9. But if we believe that it is the readers who actually write, then they are free to dispel a belief, discard an approach, and dislodge a theory so as to write new versions not only of texts but of the social relations. At this point, for the interested scholars, let me refer to the interesting text by Matthew Maslin (1996) posted on a web-space under '*Cyber Space and Critical Theory*' (cf. <http://65.107.211.206/cpace/cspaceov.html>), where he created a parody of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In place of Vladimir and Estragon, we find Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida appearing as old friends in this text - engaged in an imaginary conversation, as they *wait* endlessly *for Foucault* quoted in detail in Singh, Udaya Narayana (2010). Thoroughly bored, they continue in the following manner to 'keep the conversation going. That way we can pass the time'. The topics seem limited as they can't 'talk about a novel yet', 'because it isn't done yet', and nor about the concerns such as 'Do you think we're writers?', because if

they were not, and were ‘authors’ instead, they were dead ‘because of what Barthes said’. In the segment on ‘Writing’, Derrida falls asleep as Bakhtin kicks him to warn that he ‘must stay awake’, for which ‘we have to talk about something’ such as anything. The play continues in the same multiply nested mode which made a virtue out of boredom of continued communication.

10. At the end of these notes, let me ask this question on ‘oral communication’ from the history of Bangla language and literature: In all stages of contemporary Bangla literary communication – especially of the prose variety, modernity seems to be driving the subsequent generations more and more towards consumerist and materialistic western model of social organization, ensuring a permanent intellectual and economic slavery. This had been the observation of Bankim as well as Tagore. While this was happening - not surprisingly - an insipid romanticism in both tone and tenor - had been smuggled in stylistically in the writings of many in those days getting rid of which was a problem even for an erudite ‘*Bhaashaa*’ writer such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Bankim complained that neither the best of communicators among the English neo-romantics nor their 19th century Bengali replica in Hemchandra and Navin Chandra Sen could satisfy him until he could rediscover the everlasting charm of *oralcy* of the poets like Ramprasad Sen who were writing for the indigene – the common speakers of Bangla, and hence were absolutely great communicators.
11. Once again, talking about communication and revelation, Rabindranath Tagore had made a very significant observation about Man’s revelations and Man’s attempt to liberate himself in 1921 when he said: “The essential thing is that truth should be *realized within* and *expressed without*, with the sole object of liberating and revealing man’s soul. The doctrine of man’s revelation must be propagated through our education, and practiced through our action. Only then shall we be honoured by honouring all mankind, and shall overcome the infirmity of age by invoking a new age. He who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in

all beings, he does not remain unrevealed.” (*Towards Universal Man*. Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1961: 251; ed by Bhabani Bhattacharya. Introduced by Humayun Kabir). This dilemma of remaining within ‘language’ and moving ‘beyond language’ expressed succinctly by Tagore in his Bengali statements such as ‘*Bhashar madhye bhashatita*’ or the realisation within and expression without are typical characteristics of post-modern texts and authors.

12. Which India could we talk about to our fellow *Indianists* or India-specialists? Are we to talk about a country which communicates in 1576 “rationalized” mother tongues and in 1796 “other mother-tongues”? (Believe me – these are not the terms that are invented for this presentation. They are taken straight from the Census documents.) Even if I restrict the number of languages in India somehow as the Census does, we still have – 122 languages by the 2001 count, each one with a speech community, a part of which may be bi- or mutli-lingual. What happens to a seemingly contradictory configuration such as India with many centers – each one with its own peripheries, where English is introduced as a medium of modern expressions and learning, Hindi and a few other languages as modes of tele-communication (on our 837 TV channels)? If one looks at the contemporary history of our major media of communication, one would see that those who ruled at the regional as well as supra-regional levels have also had interesting experiences in managing our multilingualism. No doubt there have been both tamed and wicked problems of managing this plural space. While tamed and tamable problems have had their resolutions, there are many wicked problems that are still dodging any attempt to solve, however well-meaning the attempts may be. Coupled with that, there have been interesting interplay of different formations. The politics of planning and execution of policies with respect to language and communication have been a challenge that the socio-political forces that manage the multiplied effect of the gigantic size and complexity have to learn to deal with.

## References

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