...ilde and the Queer

...trod. V. Holland.

THE CULT OF AUTHENTICITY: INDIA'S CULTURAL COMMISSARS WORSHIP "INDIANNESS" INSTEAD OF ART

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Two years ago, Sunil Khilnani, Ardeshir Vakil, and I did a reading at the British Council in New Delhi. As we trooped up onto the stage, I scanned the hall, trying to get a sense of the chemistry of the room, a feeling for what sort of beast this audience was going to be. I recognized a couple of faces —university professors, literary editors, and suchlike— and a few others seemed familiar from newspapers and magazines. The Delhi literati and chatterati had come out for us. "This is going to be easy", I thought. "Good room".

Sunil Khilnani read first, from *The Idea of India*, and Ardeshir and I followed. The moderator then opened the floor for questions from the audience. One of the first queries came at Sunil: "How can you live abroad and write about India?" Sunil answered, and as he did, I thought about what an odd question this was, coming from a room full of Indians who had probably studied Wordsworth under neem trees and written authoritatively about the idea of Byron from Allahbad. A few minutes later, a passage from Ardeshir's novel, *Beach Boy*, became the subject of enquiry. In this passage, Ardeshir's young protagonist, Cyrus Readymoney, watches a street-vendor make his beloved bhelpuri. Cyrus is a dedicated gourmet, and the process is a wonder to him, and he watches in an ecstatic trance: "I swallowed hard on the saliva that had gathered in my mouth. Flies buzzed around the food, my eye was caught by the large bosom of a girl in a blue frock. The bhaiya cuts a lime in half, he chops a green mango into tiny squares, he shreds some coriander leaves, he lifts up a box and slides out a sheaf of pages torn out

from a magazine. The paper is thick and durable but not glossy —perfect for the food it will hold. He folds one sheet over and makes a wide cone-shaped vessel. Now comes the delicate throwing together of ingredients, dry and wet, that delights the heart". I had delighted in this evocative passage when I had read it, in the whole of this lovely novel, which moves along streets I'd grown up on. But now a member of this audience was suspicious of Ardeshir's motives: "Why was there that long passage about the preparation of bhelpuri? We Indians all know how bhelpuri is made. Was that an emigrant's nostalgia, or was it written for the Westerners who don't know what bhelpuri is?" Ardeshir answered ably, but the question seemed so amazingly preposterous to me that I felt impelled to jump in. To delight in the mundane is what an artist does, I said. And so on. I should have saved my breath. I got it next.

A woman in the audience, somebody I didn't recognize, raised her hand and asked, "Why do the stories in your collection *Love and Longing in Bombay* have names like "Dharma" and "Artha" and "Kama"?" I answered. I talked about wanting to see how these principles —Duty, Gain, Desire— worked their way through ordinary lives. But my interlocutor was not satisfied. "But your stories are so specific, and these titles are so abstract". That's precisely what I like about the titles, I said, the burnished glow of the Sanskrit, their seeming distance from the gritty landscapes of the stories themselves. "No", she said. That wasn't it, according to her. "These titles are necessary to signal Indianness in the West", she said. By this time, I was annoyed. I'm afraid I was a little short with her. Absurd, I sputtered, I used these titles because of the energy inherent in them, in the electric charge between the abstraction and the concrete.

After the discussion was formally closed, the audience and the writers milled around in the courtyard of the British Council building. I was deep in the middle of a much-needed whisky when the person who I was by now thinking of as Title-Lady walked up. "You misunderstood what I said", she said. "I meant that since ordinary people don't think about such things as dharma, or use that kind of language, the titles couldn't have arisen from the stories but were tagged on to signal Indianness in a Western context". I was again bewildered. What I wanted to say was, "then perhaps you and I live in different Indias, or even on different planets". We were standing, after all, in the capital of a nation that had watched the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* on television in numbers that had set all-time world records, a nation that had experienced the rise of the BJP and the destruction of the Babri Masjid and widespread riots. I myself was from a city that had been ripped apart by

bombs, where a single saffron-wearing man ran the government by remote control and lectured us often about dharma.

But I didn't say any of this to Title-Lady. I'd just started working on a new novel about the underworld, about Bombay cops and Bad Guys. So, I told her about an evening I'd spent the week before with a police inspector, a man who at the time was working in the criminal investigation department in one of the western suburbs. In a bar, over a beer, he told me about a murder case he had been investigating. He had caught one of the shooters, and then, when he felt he was getting close to the man who had paid for the killing, a man of some influence and power and wealth, he had been told in no uncertain terms by his superiors to back off. "What did you think of that?" I'd asked. He said, "Sometimes I feel that I'm suffocating. But you tell me, Vikram, what is my dharma?" So I told Title-Lady about this, and she nodded, and said, "That's what I wanted to hear", and was off like a shot into the crowd. I drank the rest of my whisky feeling somewhat dazed.

Later that evening, as we were leaving the British Council, I told my friend Tarun Tejpal about this strange encounter. He laughed, hard, and said, "Do you know who that was?" I shook my head. "That was Meenakshi Mukherjee", he said. "You know, professor at JNU she used to be".

"Ah", I said. "Professor. JNU. Of course".

As I thought about this evening, as the months passed, I noticed the constant hum of this rhetoric, this anxiety about the anxiety of Indianness, this notion of a real reality that was being distorted by "Third World cosmopolitans", this fear of an all-devouring and all-distorting West. I heard it in conversations, in critical texts, in reviews. And Indians who wrote in English were one of the prime locations for this rhetoric to test itself, to make its declarations of power and belonging, to announce its possession of certain territories and its right to delineate lines of control. A friend told me about a meeting of the Delhi University syllabus revision committee, where they were trying to decide on the one Indo-Anglian novel that should be prescribed in the one course on modern Indian literature. My friend suggested *Midnight's Children*, and she was shouted down. Salman Rushdie isn't Indian, the majority of the professors asserted. Amitav Ghosh, however, was found to be sufficiently Indian, and so his *Shadow Lines* was accepted into the canon. The issue was decided not on the basis of the relative merits of the books, but on the perceived Indianness of the authors, and by implication, the degree of their assimilation by the West.

Meanwhile, I continued my wanderings through Bombay. I met one afternoon with Arun Gawli, one of the great Bombay mafia Dons. I went to meet him at Dagdichawl, his fortress-home in the heart of the old mill area of Parel. I waited, sitting on a plastic chair alongside other supplicants, under a grey hulk of a building. Above us, from a balcony, Gawli's boys, his young soldiers, watched. Finally, I was led up a narrow staircase, and a left turn took us into a large gold-Formica-paneled room, where I waited again, sitting on a shiny maroon sofa under a very large silvery chandelier. The walls were covered with large gold-framed pictures of gods and goddesses. Gawli was a fervent Shiva-bhakt, I knew this already. It was part of his legend. It was said that on some days his Shiva-puja lasted for three hours. Outside, on a large balcony, young men spoke urgently into cell phones. Gawli's children watched cricket on a color television. Another fifteen minutes, and then Gawli himself came in and led me to another large room, this one with mirrors rising to the ceiling, and again a chandelier. It felt like a durbar hall, but Gawli himself was a very small man dressed in a white shirt, white pajamas, and a Nehru cap. He was very polite, and it was only when he spoke of his mortal enemy, the mafia boss Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar, that his eyes grew still and hard, and I felt a chill. We spoke, and he told me about his life, and then I asked him how a man as religious as himself could do the things he has been accused of doing. "When a man is fighting for justice", he said, "what is adharma becomes dharma. We do what is necessary". We spoke for a while about right action, and then I took my leave.

Almost a year later, my friend the crime journalist H. Zaidi and I waited on a street corner in Jambli Mohalla, in Dongri, the mafia-ridden locality that Bombay newspapers refer to as the "Palermo of India". My cell phone rang, and a voice told us to move to a certain street corner. Zaidi led the way through the narrow, crowded lanes. Go right, go left, we were told. And then a boy, a young man, walked over to us, nodded at Zaidi and led us rapidly through some more turns, and then through a door, up a narrow staircase. A brown door opened for us, and as I went in I touched it with my hand and realized that it was metal. Inside, the man we had come to meet, Hussain Ustra, Hussain the Razor, was patting cologne onto his cheeks. Behind him, a bank of closed circuit television screens switched through multiple cameras. They had been watching us come up the street. Ustra himself was a dapper, slightly paunchy man, dressed in a tailored white shirt and pants. He would have been completely at home at a Nariman Point lunch for stockbrokers. He had an elegant haircut and sophisticated Urdu and a very direct stare. He told me about his life, about his early use of straight-razors to settle arguments, and his rise to commanding his own company, or gang. He told me about *his* war with Dawood Ibrahim. In passing, he mentioned that his company followed strict Islamic rules, that none of his boys smoked or drank. "What about women?" Zaidi asked. Ustra grinned. "Who doesn't like women?" he said. We talked on. As Zaidi and I were leaving, Ustra passed close to me, and I asked, "What's the cologne?" He smiled a shaukeen's satisfied smile, and said with the pride of a connoisseur, "Paco Rabanne".

Six months later, Ustra went to a rendezvous with his mashooq, his beloved. The Bombay underworld says "mashooq", not "mashooqa", which would be feminine and grammatically correct; "mashooq" is in keeping with the traditions of Urdu poetry, in which the beloved, is always male. Ustra's mashooq was reportedly related to Dawood Ibrahim by marriage; to be with her was a risk. But Ustra went alone, with no bodyguards, only a driver. He went up, spent his time with his mashooq, and then came down. He opened the door to the car, bent to get in, and somebody stepped up close behind him, and fired two bullets into his temple, one into his neck as he fell, and one more into his back. And that was the end of Hussain Ustra. That winter, when I came back to Bombay, I spoke to a senior police officer who had known Ustra. We talked about Ustra, the religiosity of gangsters, Gawli, Shiva, and then again about Ustra. "Why did he go there?" I said. "And after all his closed-circuit televisions and metal doors, why alone?" "Who knows?" the policeman said. "How many times I told him not to go there. Bastard had become a fucking Majnoon". I shook my head, and the policeman shrugged, and said, "But who can escape from Love? Not even Bholenath". The policeman's allusion was to Majnoon, the exemplary lover of Persian and Urdu poetry, who leaves behind sanity and life itself. But he also was speaking of Bholenath, Shiva, who was stung by Kama's darts, and felt himself giving in to desire.

And now, recently, a couple of months ago, my friend Anuradha Tandon e-mailed me. She wrote, "Hey, that Mukherjee person's been talking about your titles again, and this time at some lecture in Bern". Anuradha had found, on an Internet mailing list, an account of Dr. Mukherjee's lecture by a cross-culturally named "Chandra Holm", and she forwarded this description to me. Ms. Holm's summary of the talk —which I've since checked for accuracy with Dr. Mukherjee herself and rephrased accordingly— goes in part like this: "Today (on April 12, 1999), Meenakshi Mukherjee gave a talk on "Indian Fiction in English: the Local and the Global" .... She spoke about a book called *Love and Longing in Bombay* by Vikram Chandra. It has as titles of chapters the Sanskrit words, dharma, kama, artha, etc.... Such language (and choice of words) would embarrass any regional writer writing in an Indian language. The worst first sentence ever written for a novel is the first

sentence of *The Madwoman of Jogare*, written by Sohaila Abdulali, "The koel sat in the tamarind tree and called urgently, despairingly, coo-ooo! Into the sun and onto the earth". Koel and tamarind are commonplace Indian realities. These writers have to accentuate these realities, to exoticize the Indian landscape to signal their Indianness to the West, in the context of the Western market". Dr. Mukherjee then quoted Borges quoting Edward Gibbon, who asserted that in the Koran the word "camel" is not mentioned even once "because the Koran was written originally in Arabic, and the camel is so Arabic that there was no need to mention it. If the Koran would have been written originally in English, the word camel would certainly have appeared in it to show the Arabian connection".[1]

This Borges reference was mystifying. It might be too much to ask of a historian looking for lessons, or an academic in full polemical flight, to remember that another Arabic book par excellence, *The Thousand and One Nights*, is full of camels, of caravans of camels and dogs and cats and birds, and even a writing ape. But Jorge Luis Borges? Our Borges? The writer who loved *The Thousand and One Nights* so much that he wrote an essay about its various translations?

A quick look at the Borges essay from which these lines were taken was sufficient to dispel my puzzlement. The essay is called "The Argentine Writer and Tradition", and was written in 1951 in response to a polemic by a faction of Argentine writers and academics who might be roughly described as the Local-Color Epic Gaucho School. These worthies demanded that Argentine writers confine themselves to writing of local color and nothing but local color, in language and metaphors inflected and infected by local vernaculars. They proclaimed that Argentine writers who were cosmopolitans, who engaged themselves in a literary and cultural conversation with Europe, were un-Argentinian, deracinated, and literary traitors. The exhaustively cosmopolitan and erudite Borges is arguing in this essay for the freedom of artists to choose their tropes from wherever they see fit. He writes, "What is Argentine tradition? I believe that this question poses no problem and can easily be answered. I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have". Which is to say that Argentine writers have the right, and the ability, to call on Dante in *addition* to gauchos.

It seems to me that Borges has absolutely nothing against local color. He was after all the writer who began a story like this: "I remember him (I have no right to use that sacred verb; only one man on earth had the right, and that man is dead), I remember him with a dark passionflower in his hand, seeing it as no man has ever seen it, though he might look from dawn until twilight for a lifetime. I remember him, his face still and Indian-like, and singularly remote, behind his cigarette. I remember (I believe) his sharp leatherbraider's hands. I remember, near those hands, a mate gourd engraved with the arms of the Banda Oriental". These are the opening sentences of "Funes, the Memorious", which is, mind you, not a local-color story at all but one of Borges' metaphysical paradoxes, about a man with a perfect memory. And yet, here we have a passionflower, as common in Uruguay as, say, tamarind trees in Maharasthra; we have a stereotypically impassive American-Indian face; we have angular leatherbraider's hands (leatherbraiding being one of the crafts of Uruguayan Indians); we have a mate gourd (mate is a bitter tea that is as folklorically a beverage of the Southern Cone as bhelpuri is a snack of Bombay), a gourd engraved with the arms of the Banda Oriental, meaning that colonial territory which —under the rule of the Spanish crown from the early sixteenth century until independence at the beginning of the nineteenth— comprised present-day Uruguay and southern Brazil. Even the cigarette could be accused of participating in local color, since the practice of smoking tobacco originated with the indigenous peoples of America. And if we stare a little longer at that dark passionflower, as Funes does, we may begin to remember that this creeping plant, "passionara" in Spanish, is, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "often used to symbolize events in the last hours of the life of Christ, the Passion of Christ, which accounts for the name. Thus, the corona represents the crown of thorns; the styles represent the nails used in the Crucifixion; the stamens represent the five wounds; and the five sepals and five petals represent ten of the apostles, excluding Judas, who betrayed Jesus, and Peter, who denied him three times on the night of his trial". The passionflower is doubly local, then: not simply an allusion to the local flora but to the Catholicism that permeates the local culture.

So, Borges has no problems with local color. For him, the local and the global —and, indeed, the eternal— exist in the same place, in the same passionflower. But he is against ideological restrictions being imposed on writers, and he is very much against bad writing. To trot out too many camels, and only camels, a surfeit of camels or a surfeit of gauchos is an aesthetic sin, but the ruthless excision of camels or gauchos —or bhelpuri— would constitute a bizarre self-censorship. Good artists tend to caress the landscapes they live in, to notice and delight in what is *there*, what is *present*. In the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, for instance, we are treated to a vast variety of local color, including cranes and herons, lizards, turtles, monkeys, fishes, worms, scorpions, frogs, hedgehogs, iguanas, boars, deer,

eagles, vultures, mongooses, cats, mice, elephants, tigers, lions, dogs, rhinosceri, leopards, apes, cobras, and boas. And this is just the very short list. And I mustn't forget cows. There are plenty of cows in these epics, and I think we may safely assume that our epic ancestors were as close to their cows as any Arab to his or her camel. My favorite epic cow is of course Kamadhenu, the Cow of Plenty, or the Cow Who Grants all Wishes, who is born during the churning of the oceans by the gods and asuras. The epic poets linger lovingly over Kamadhenu, and tell us about the sweetness of her breath, and the gentleness of her gaze. Lovely Kamadhenu is always getting kidnapped, and during one of these episodes she decides to take decisive action. She asks her owner Vashishta's permission to retaliate, and routs the kidnapping king's armies by creating dreadful Pahlavas and Shakas (varieties of Iranians), and Yavanas (Ionians or Greeks), from her "roar" or "bellow"; more Pahlavas then come from her udders, more Yavanas from her vulva, her yoni, and more Shakas from her anus, and do dreadful damage to the enemy, until finally Vashishta burns the remaining warriors to ashes with the syllable "Hum!"[2]. This is a rather cosmopolitan cow, and I think Borges would have liked her.

But not Dr. Mukherjee: to put a cow, any cow, even one cow, into an Indian story is, I suppose, to "signal one's Indianness in the context of the Western market". Without doubt, one koel in an Indian narrative causes all sorts of conniptions. This despite the fact that every day in Maharashtra substantial koels sit on substantial tamarind trees in their thousands, as they have been doing for thousands of years. And certainly, to title a story with a resonating abstraction like "Dharma" or "Shakti" is to use language that a "regional writer" would be "embarrassed by". Putting to the side this puzzling insistence that there is shame in doing something that "regional writers" don't, I had thought that in my choice of titles I was walking along a well-trodden path. The Hindi writer Narendra Kohli had written novels titled *Karma* and *Dharma*. The title of Kulwant Kochar's Hindi novel *Man Kurukshetra* conflates the mind and the fabled battlefield of the Mahabharata. The Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay had written the novel *Maya Moh*, whose title alludes to our attachment to the shifting illusion that is the world. I was certain that the iconic Hindi writer Prem Chand had written a renowned novel called *Karmabhoomi*, or the *Field of Karma*. And certain, too, that the famous Bengali writer Maitreyi Devi had written the Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel *Na-Hanyate*, which is Sanskrit for *It Does Not Die* and is a fragment from the famous passage of the Gita that asserts that the soul cannot be killed. I imagined the scrupulous and ascetic Munshi Prem Chand blushing with shame under Dr. Mukherjee's strict gaze, and I shuddered.

I come from a family of film directors and writers and producers, and I was certain that I'd grown up watching movies with titles like the ones I'd used. So I phoned Ashish Rajadhakshya, editor of *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, and asked him to put some queries to his database. He came back with some interesting numbers. It seems that to date, 31 feature films called "Dharma" have been made in India; if you allow for variations on the word (like "Dharma Yudh"), that number goes up to 84. Similarly, thirty movies called "Shakti" have been produced; it's 54 if you allow variations. For "Shanti", the numbers are ten and eighteen. For "Kama", three and three. For "Artha", one and six.[3] I suppose some overworked clerk at the Ministry of Permissible Language forgot to send out the right memo to the film industry.

I could go on, and tell you about the soldiers I met one very early morning at Dadar station, on their way to a northern front, who were reading the Gita and eating a breakfast of vada-pao and chai and Coca-Cola; about a very famous and very good actor named Kiran Kumar speaking in a recent interview in *Zee Premiere* magazine about his karma as an actor, about his longing for shanti, peace. But I mustn't. I hope you'll forgive me for lingering on this rather anecdotal, personal history. My purpose in lingering is not merely to grind an attack on my beloved stories under my iron heel, although, as you can probably tell, grinding gives me glorious pleasure. My purpose is also to give you some sense of the texture of the world in which I live and write, and therefore also a sense of the sheer effort it takes to sustain and drive this censorious rhetoric about correct Indianness, and a sense of the galloping vastness of its elisions. This rhetoric lays claim not only to a very high moral ground but also a deep, essential connection to a "real" Indianness. Despite all their demurrals about not essentializing Indianness, and their ritual genuflections in the direction of Bhabha and Spivak, the practitioners of this rhetoric inevitably claim that they are able to identify a "Real India", and so are able to identify which art, and which artists, are properly Indian. The maneuvers typically used in this rhetoric might be summarized as follows:

To write about India in English is at best a brave failure, and at worst a betrayal of Indian "realities". In a 1993 essay titled "The Anxiety of Indianness", Dr. Mukherjee tells us, "the normal ground conditions of literary production, where a culture and its variations, a language and its dialects, centuries of oral tradition and written literature, all interact to create a new text —do not exist in the case of English in India. Take for example, the case

of Malayalam, which is not only the spoken and written language of the geographic space called Kerala, but of its films —both commercial and serious— its folk tales, riddles, nonsense verse, nursery rhymes ... a fictional text that is produced in this language today draws upon, and echoes, the reverberations of this layered plurality that surround and nurture it. English in India on the other hand functions on relatively fewer registers and it would not have been surprising if this remained a permanent liability, allowing the novelist to operate only within a limited parameter". And further, "Those who write in English do so because —no matter what language they speak at home— they have literary competence only in English.... It may be more useful to us to understand the circumstances that lead to the loss of the mother tongue than to charge these writers with for capitalizing on their loss".

Indo-Anglian writers write for a Western audience. Again, Dr. Mukherjee writes, "I am neither trying to privilege ethnographic documentation in fiction over other aspects nor insisting that mimetic representation should always be the desired narrative mode, but merely suggesting that in the English texts of India there may be a greater pull towards a homogenization of reality, an essentializing of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community. This attenuation may be artistically valid when the narrative aspires to the condition of allegory but for the Indian writer in English there may be other unarticulated compulsions —the uncertainty about his target audience, for example. An O. V. Vijayan or a Bhalachandra Nemade knows his exact constituency and is secure in the knowledge of the shades of response his associative word-play or ironic under-statement will evoke in Malayalam or Marathi readers who are equipped with the keys for decoding these oblique messages. But R. K. Narayan's audience is spread wide and far, within India and outside, hence the need for an even-toned minimalistic representation that will not depend too much on the intricacies and contradictions in the culture and the inflections of voice which only an insider can decipher".

Indo-Anglian writers make too much money. Here is Dr. Mukherjee again, writing a review of a recently translated Bengali novel in *Outlook* magazine: "The author of *Aparajito* can't appear on television chat shows because he died nearly a half a century ago. A book launch in the capital is out of the question because no advance in hard currency has been offered for the book. The review circuit in London or New York has not told us what to think of this novel. Consequently one of the major fictional texts of our

century is likely to remain unnoticed by the media even though it's available in English now".

A lot of Indo-Anglian writers live abroad, so they are disconnected from Indian realities, and are prey to nostalgia; and besides, the bastards are too comfortable over there and don't have to face Delhi traffic jams and power cuts and queues for phones and train tickets and busses, and so they don't suffer like us and so they can't possibly be virtuous enough to be good artists. And here is Namita Gokhale, writing in *Sunday* magazine about Kiran Desai: "The daughter of a famous Indo-Anglian novelist, she makes a cushioned landing into the world of people-like-us literati, with a fat advance from Faber and fleeting visits to the fatherland.... Kiran Desai typifies a tendency of contemporary Indo-Anglian writing, of the author as a glib tourist guide of an alien sensibility rather than an introspective insider chronicling the life and times he or she lives in".

You'll have noticed that references to "regional writers" are an essential rhetorical device in these maneuvers. "Regional writers" presumably live in regions, which is to say in properly dusty parts of India, not in faraway air-conditioned regions of *vilayat*, abroad; "regional writers" write in regional languages, which is to say any language other than English; "regional writers" therefore presumably don't write for a Western audience, or an international one; and "regional writers" presumably don't make money, at least not in large hard currency amounts. "Regional writers" are therefore the opposite of Indo-Anglian writers in all ways, and are therefore virtuous and pure. Indo-Anglian writers are the opposite of "regional writers", and are therefore corrupt and impure. This moral positioning became especially noticeable and fervent in reaction to Salman Rushdie's infamous assertion that "the prose writing ... by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced ... in the so-called "vernacular languages"". Critics and academics and mandarins, especially the English-speaking and English-writing variety, vociferously and properly defended the aesthetic achievements of the "regional writers". But the aesthetic argument was speedily subsumed by furious barrages of tidy moralizing. It wasn't nearly enough to argue that such-and-such Marathi writer was as "strong" as or more "important" than his or her Indo-Anglian peers. Indeed, as the critics rushed forward to do combat with Rushdie, many of them seemed to forget aesthetics altogether. Instead, many of them assigned to "regional writing" a pristine purity of content and purpose, an austere and lofty nobleness of intent, and following from this virtuous abnegation, an ability to connect to a "Real India" that could not possibly exist in Indo-Anglian writing.

It's a curious term, this "regional writing". It clumsily clubs together dozens of literatures, and thousands and thousands of writers. The attempt to locate Indianness in "regional writing" is inevitably problematic, since —in a nation battling numerous secessionist movements— regional specificity is inevitably in conflict with generalized national traits. But "regional writing" is always connected to the soil, to "Real India". And when it's opposed to "Indo-Anglian writing", the term "regional writing" implies that writing in English is not regional, that it's pan-Indian or, worse, cosmopolitan, belonging to nowhere and everywhere. "Regional writing" is sometimes referred to, in a fashion more *au courant* on Indian campuses, as *bhasa* writing. *Bhasa* is literally "language", and therefore Indo-Anglian writing is non-language writing. Indo-Anglian writers, then, are writers from nowhere who write in a non-language. This is all rather neat, and one has to admire the elegance of the construction.

And yet, and yet. Life, or at least the life I live, is very messy indeed. My entire region is entirely messy. Yes, I must respectfully submit that I too am a "regional writer". I will not presume to claim Maharashtra or even the entire city of Bombay as my region. I will only claim part of the western suburbs, let us say north from the highway junction at Mahim causeway, roughly an area containing Dharavi, Bandra West, Khar, Santa Cruz, Juhu, Andheri West, and Goregaon West. This is my region. I live in it, in the locality of Andheri, in the colony called Lokhandwalla.

My region is a hugely cosmopolitan place. Every single person who lives in my region is a cosmopolitan. I am of course a cosmopolitan; I travel away from my region every few months to make a living. My neighbors do also. There are the Gujarati diamond merchants who spend three weeks out of every four travelling from Africa to Belgium to Holland; flight attendants who fly to Beijing; businessmen who sell textiles in Australia; mechanics and welders and engineers who keep Saudi Arabia running; merchant navy sailors who carry cargo to Brazil; nurses who give care and nurture in Sharjah; and gangsters who shuttle between Bombay and Indonesia and Dubai as part of their everyday trade. But there are many other cosmopolitans in my regions. I mean the men who have left their homes in Muzzafarnagar and Patna to drive cabs in Bombay; the chauffeurs who send money home to Trivandrum; the road-laborers from Madhya Pradesh; the maids from the Konkan coast; the cooks from Sylhet in Bangladesh; the Tamil bakers; the struggling actresses from Ludhiana; the security guards from Bihar; the painters from Nashik who stand on roped lengths of bamboo three hundred feet in the air to color Bombay's lofty skylines. They are all cosmopolitan. A woman born and bred in Dharavi, in the heart of the city, is a cosmopolitan because she lives and works in this city of many nationalities and languages, this city that has become a *vatan* or homeland for people who have travelled very far from their *vatans*.

Now, in this, my region, it is very very common for a person to speak one language at home, use another on the street, do business in a third, and make love in a fourth. We do it so often and so universally that to do so excites no comment. It is a part of the way we live. Indians have lived in many languages simultaneously for thousands of years. Did the great Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa speak Sanskrit at home? Maybe he did, and maybe he spoke a Prakrit. We'll never know for sure. But we do know for certain that the Bombay poet Kalidas Gupta, whose *takhallus* or nom-de-plume is "Raza", was born in Jullunder, Punjab, in a Punjabi-speaking household. Raza first wrote in Farsi, then in Urdu and English. Raza told me that there are many, many other Urdu poets like him in Bombay, poets like Khawar Bankoti, who speaks Konkani at home, and Abdul Ahad "Saz", who is a native Kutchi speaker. If we look a little further into the subcontinent, we encounter writers like Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, who was a Maharashtrian, but who wrote his travelogues, memoirs, and short stories in Gujarati, and was so ardent about the language he wrote in that the Gujaratis themselves called him "Savai Gujarati", or "One-and-a-quarter-times Gujarati", more Gujarati than the Gujaratis. Vaidyanath Mishra Nagarjuna was born in Bihar, and spoke to his mother in Maithili; he first wrote poetry in Sanskrit, then in Maithili. He won a Sahitya Akademi prize for a Maithili collection, but then switched to writing in Hindi. Raj Kamal Chaudhari was also a Maithili-speaker at home, but wrote his pathbreaking novel about homosexual love, *Ek Machili Mari Hui (One Dead Fish)* in Hindi. Abbas Wasi "Mareez", the hugely famous poet who is widely regarded as the "Ghalib of the Gujarati ghazal", was an Urdu speaker. Rajinder Singh Bedi was from a Punjabi-speaking Sikh household, but he created literary landmarks in Hindi.

I was born into a household that on a census form would undoubtedly be tagged as "Mother Tongue: Hindi". But I called my mother "Mummy" and my father "Daddy". They spoke to me in Hindi sprinkled with English. Sitting on my mother's lap, I read newspapers in English. English was everywhere in the world I grew up in, and continues to be an inextricable thread in the texture of every day I live in Bombay and in India. English is spoken on the playgrounds, and we tell folk tales in it, we riddle each other and joke with each other in it, and we make up nonsense verse and nursery rhymes and films in it. Along with many other languages, it is spoken in the slums, on the busses and in the post offices and the police stations and the court rooms. English has been spoken and written in on the Indian

subcontinent for a few hundred years now, certainly longer than the official and literary Hindi that is our incompletely national language today. I for one hear registers aplenty ringing away in it, and as it is spoken and written more widely, these registers will expand. A language is a living thing. A patois born in soldiers' camps not so long ago became Urdu, whose beauty ravishes our hearts. To love Urdu for her low origins and her high refinements, for her generous heart and her reckless love, is not to give up Punjabi. What a mean economy of love and belonging it must be, in which one love is always traded in for another, in which a heart is so small that it can only contain one *jannat*, one heaven. How fearsome must be this empty land where each new connection must inevitably mean the loss of all roots, all family, each song you may have ever sung in the past. Any ghazal-maker, any Mareez, I think, would flee from such a hellish wasteland. But my region, where Kalidas Gupta Raza continues to sing his passion for Urdu, is different. If Hindi is my mother-tongue, then English has been my father-tongue. I write in English, and I have forgotten nothing, and I have given up nothing. And I know the tastes and quirks and nuances of my regional audience, of the people who live in the locality of Andheri, in the colony of Lokhandwalla, as well as or better than any Bengali poet knows her regional audience.

Every citizen in my region understands the uses of English, and the costs of not having it. Those who have no English understand that certain avenues to power are closed to them, that there are many jobs for which they are instantly considered unfit, that they are closed out of certain discussions, that they are socially marked. English in India today is very obviously the lingua franca of power, of business, of cultural exchange, of politics. It is possible to become powerful and rich and content without English, but to be poor without English is to know that this is the language of opportunity, of money, of advancement. The advantages of having English are grindingly obvious: a journalist who writes a story in, say, Kannada, will know without doubt that a colleague writing exactly the same story, or a lesser one, in English, will be paid three times as much. To not speak English, or even to speak broken English with a strong Tamil or Gujarati accent, is to identify yourself as not belonging to a certain class, as being an obvious non-member of a very powerful club. That is why walls in very small towns are covered with hand-stencilled messages offering "English Coaching Classes". To those who have never had English, who don't have it, the advantages that flow from it are as palpable as the healing effects of amrit, ambrosia, and the struggle to acquire it is frequently lacerating and painful: you can swallow the poisonous metallic mass of this sharp language, but it will cut your throat and linger in the skin like a blue bruise.

For the sins of their advantages, the gods visit upon some of the comfortable in India a powerful guilt. Those who are comfortable and speak English are burdened by a double guilt. Convinced that they are marooned by their comfort and their language, these good burghers are assailed by a constant, oppressive sense of unreality. If you've spent any time in Delhi, or read much Indian critical writing, you will have met the FabIndia-kurta wearing gentleman and the ethnic-bindi wearing lady who will wave their Scotches in your face and tell you that the "Real India" is anywhere but where you are, that the "Real India" is in the urban slums, in the faraway villages of Bihar, in the jungles of the tribals. So if you write in English, and are improperly contaminated by the West, if you've travelled across the Black Waters and lost your caste, then the "Real India" is by definition beyond your grasp. "Real India" is never *here*, it is always *there*. "Real India" is completely unique, incomprehensible to most, approachable only through great and prolonged suffering, and unveils herself only to the very virtuous.

Our friend Jorge Luis never wrestled with this ancient mystery, but he struggled in a comparable fashion with the belief that the "Real Argentina" was so new that it was completely unique. He writes, "According to this singular point of view, we Argentines are as if in the first days of creation; our search for European subject matters and procedures is an illusion, an error; we must understand that we are essentially alone, and cannot play at being European. This opinion strikes me as unfounded. I understand why many people accept it: such a declaration of our solitude, our perdition, and our primitive character has, like existentialism, the charms of poignancy. Many people may accept this opinion because, having done so, they will feel themselves to be alone, disconsolate and, in some way, interesting". I must confess that as I quote him here, I feel a strong onrush of affection for my Argentinian friend; I shall from now on refer to him as "Borges-bhai". "Bhai" is, of course, "brother," but in Bombay it also means a Man of Respect, a Wiseguy, a Made Guy. Borges-bhai, then, in his ever-inimitable fashion, offers a hint that might help us unlock that opposition so beloved of certain literati: the Indo-Anglian writers versus the Regional Writers. If we are *here*, comfortable and Anglicized, then "regional writers" are *there*. If we, as cosmopolitans, wear the colognes of globalization, then "regional writers" give off whiffs of the poignantly original and primitively undiluted perfumes of *there*.

This is why Indo-Anglian writers are told, by critics of various political hues, to be more like their elder "regional" brothers and sisters, and this is why Indo-Anglian writers are forbidden to engage in activities that their "regional" siblings would be "embarrassed" by. Virtue lies in being more like

the virtuous "regional writers". Therefore, Dr. Mukherjee praises *A Suitable Boy*, which, she asserts, "might just as well have been written in Bengali where a tradition exists of long three-decker realistic stories about families". Therefore, the critic Namvar Singh asserts that *Shadow Lines* is a good novel because "it is a Bengali novel in English". Now, it is true that *Suitable Boy* and *Shadow Lines* share elements and tropes and structures with earlier Bengali novels, but I think they're good Indo-Anglian novels because they are good Indian novels in English, books of their time and place and language, not because they're faux Bengali novels, imitating Bankim Chandra and Tagore. To see these books as Bengali novels in English drag requires a muscle-straining skipping around the shape and textures of these narratives, and a mind-bending faith in the untouched and original Indianness of "regional writing". The Indian novel itself is a form that grows out of interactions between Indian and western forms of narrative. Good Indian writers have never been self-isolating, inward-looking mandarins afraid of the pollutions of foreign contact. Bankim Chandra was an avid reader and follower of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, and Tagore —whose very name is an Anglicization— was widely despised by his orthodox Bengali contemporaries for his loose Westernized ways and his new-fangled, imported ideas. Indeed, these writers were cosmopolitan in their very Indianness, and this has been true of novelists and artists all over India. Hindi literature, for instance, has had a long and extended conversation with ideas from other parts of the world, and has necessarily struggled with and absorbed everyone and everything from Marx to Freud to modernism to post-modernism. In fact, the critic Jaidev has issued stern diatribes against various Hindi stalwarts, accusing them of indulging in mere "bandarpana", a monkey-see-monkey-do aping of the latest Western intellectual and artistic fads. I cannot help savoring the fact that in order to be able to recognize this bandarpana, Jaidev must himself be a walking, talking perfect model of the postmodern. A similarly delicious irony flows from the damning Bengali-centric praise of Meenakshi Mukherjee and Namvar Singh: if one has written an Indo-Anglian novel that is *exactly* like Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Math*, then one has written a novel that is at least *something* like *Ivanhoe*. Alack! Pollution is everywhere!

The greatest pollution, in this view, flows from the market, from the awesome sums that distort gravity and cause tidal flows of media. In some of the recent agonizing over the Western interest in Indian writing, Indo-Anglian writers have been reconstructed as the hapless tools of a global market. Thus, Dr. Mukherjee asserts that "R. K. Narayan's audience is spread wide and far, within India and outside, hence the need for an even-toned minimalistic representation". What is bizarre about this contention —about this "hence"— is its absolute confidence, its tone of intimate and inside knowledge, its unwillingness to concede the slightest ethical or aesthetic volition to the artist himself. It apparently never occurs to Dr. Mukherjee that style is something that one feels in the pit of the stomach, that Narayan may be interested in a minimalistic representation because it grows from the marrow of his Malgudi bones, that perhaps when Narayan sits down at his desk with his pen and his paper, he is not thinking of his pan-Indian or international audience, not any more than Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver were thinking of their audiences in Ghaziabad and Vishakapatnam when they chiselled their laconic turns of phrase. But no, in this understanding of the universe, to write in English is to be transparently vulnerable to the demands of the market, any market. And conversely, to write in anything but English is to be preternaturally chaste and upright.

And yet, and yet. In 1998, the ever-watchful Namvar Singh, along with the Marathi writer G. P. Deshpande, publicly accused the Jnyanpeeth Award-winning and popular Marathi writer V. S. Khandekar of being "commercial and Mammon-hungry". Ranks of other Marathi luminaries lined up to defend Khandekar, and as this developed into a lovely dust-up, the Marathi poet Grace remarked that the Marathi literati had now formed gangs along the lines of Dawood Ibrahim's D-company. The next year, even as the official *sammelan* or convention of Marathi writers spoke out against the rightist, fascist tendencies of our state government, two rival *sammelans* were organized against the official *sammelan*, to protest against the allegedly exclusionary and Brahmanical character of the official *sammelan*. Further north, in Gujarat, almost two decades after the death of Mareez, the Ghalib of Gujarat is still not part of the university curriculum, despite the extraordinary quality of his *ghazals*. Mareez, a Muslim from Surat with a fourth-grade education, was very much from the wrong side of a lot of tracks. A friend of mine describes the efforts by academic poets to keep Mareez out of the Gujarati canon, both before and after his death, as "shameful, disgusting".

Dr. Henry Kissinger, that seasoned academic and grandmaster of realpolitik, warned us that sometimes the most egregious corruption and vicious combat happens when there is precisely no money at stake. To imagine that "regional writers" work in an Eden of innocence, free of the temptation to write badly, free of the pressure to write according to some prevailing ideology, is to indulge in fantasy-making of the most profoundly nostalgic sort, and to indulge in nostalgia for something that has never existed, that never will exist. There will always be a prevailing market and a prevailing ideology, and a head of department who fiercely upholds that

prevailing ideology, a head of department whose cousin owns the press that publishes the books, whose cousin's best friend reviews the books for the Sunday paper, whose cousin's best friend's cousin gives out the government grants and the fellowships to Paris. All art is born at this crossroads of ambition and integrity, between the fierce callings of fame and the hungers of the belly and the desires of one's children and the necessities of art and truth. Michelangelo knew this, and Ghalib knew this. There is no writer in India, or in the world, no artist anywhere who is free of this eternal *chakravyuha*, this whirling circle that is life itself. To have less money does not mean you are more virtuous, to have more money does not mean you are less capable of integrity. Those who believe in the salutary effects of poverty on artists have never been truly hungry, and are suspicious of money from the safety of their own middling comforts. Finally, I suspect, whatever language we write in, we are all equally capable of cowardice and heroism. And I don't mean to cast particular aspersions on Marathi or Gujarati writers, so please, no angry brickbats, at least on this score. In case it makes anyone feel any better, let me state for the record my considered opinion that for sheer incestuousness, for self-serving pomposity, for easy black-and-white moralizing, for comfortably sneering armchair wisdom, for lack of generosity, for pious self-interested victim-mongering, for ponderous seriousness and a priggish distrust of pleasure, there is no group on earth that can match the little subcaste that is the Indo-Anglian literary and critical establishment. I say this with full cognizance of my own somewhat contested membership in said establishment. But, to get back to "regional writing" —if you write in Marathi or Gujarati, of course it is hugely angering to be told that you are not as "strong" as a bunch of toffee-nosed English-speaking brats, and of course it is annoying to enjoy less than your fair share of any pie. But when a certain set of people start referring to you collectively and generally as "regional writers", and when they start locating in you a paranormal connection to reality and lost innocence and original virtue, and using you as a stick to beat other writers over the head with, you may be absolutely certain that you are being simplified, exploited, and used. Saintliness may have its temporary and ethereal satisfactions, but for any artist, it is finally a trap.[4] But why this search for saints? And why this inquisition, this desire to fix and vanquish sin? Why, I wonder, this frantic searching for purity of purpose? I recall, now, E. M. Forster's observation about "reformers who are obsessed with purity and cannot see that their obsession is impure". Perhaps, to extend Forster's notion, the ones who see the anxiety of Indianness everywhere are in truth eaten at by this anxiety themselves, and the ones who battle the malign hand of the West in every action of every day are completely determined by the West. To be obsessed with defeating the devil is to be his servant.

And the devil is of course within ourselves: the most vociferously anti-Western crusaders I meet are inevitably the ones who are most hybrid. It is these comfortably situated citizens, these Resident Non-Indians, who, beset by a consciousness of their own isolation from "Real India", feel an overpowering nostalgia for an Indianness that never was, for a mythical, paradisaical lost garden of cultural and spiritual unity. From their fear of the mongrel nature of their own selves, from their fear of the new Indian tongues spoken by their mongrel children, grows the golem-demon of the All-devouring West, in whose dread shadow a koel becomes a secret signal of betrayal, and the word "dharma" a fatal compromise. To alleviate this loss, to vanquish this terror, they perform a rather complicated ritual war-dance against the West, or against an idea of the West. The central mystical paradox in this ritual is the absolute necessity of Western recognition, or even any foreign recognition, as an imprimatur of quality, and a simultaneous belief in the corrupting power of such recognition. Indian, in-house awards are all very well, but only an award from somebody in Singapore or London can mark you as a world-class player; but winning such an award also means, without doubt, that you must have sold out, that you've gone far from "Real India". So, "regional writers" are luckily isolated from the dread forces of globalization, their virtue kept intact, and yet the lack of recognition for "regional writers" by those very forces is the wellspring of much anger. So also, the comedy of Pankaj Mishra's review of *Ground Beneath Her Feet* in the magazine *Outlook*. In this review, which felt to me more like an Oedipal assassination attempt than a critique, Mr. Mishra accused Rushdie of being merely a subcontinental importer of narrative methods from other parts of the world, of producing —over an entire career— only a commodified "anti-literature" that the Western market is eager for. And yet, Mr. Mishra's own tag line, the only introduction thought necessary by the magazine, was this single sentence: "Pankaj Mishra's novel *The Romantics*, due to be published next year, has been sold around the world for over half a million dollars". This double movement, this love-hate, may have its origins in the crushing defeats of colonialism, in the Brahmanical obsession with pollution, in the tumbling disillusionments after Independence, in the self-rending narrative of the Indian state during the American century, in the ontological uncertainties of the bourgeois Indian self. Wherever its origins, this complex ambiguity is widely noticeable in India, not just in literature but in politics, in business, in film. And so, curiously, in a culture famously open-ended and various and hybrid, writers and other artists are subjected to tests of Indianness, to

interrogations of authenticity, and their books are rejected or accepted according to these mysterious and arbitrary calculations.

How should a writer work, in these circumstances? What must an Indian artist do? We could of course turn around and ask these self-proclaimed guardians of purity and Indianness exactly how authentic they are themselves. We would speedily discover that when judged by their own rather bizarre standards, these gatekeepers are about as "authentically Indian" as Pamela Anderson. When we hear a sentence that starts, "I am neither trying to privilege ethnographic documentation in fiction over other aspects nor insisting that mimetic representation should always be the desired narrative mode", should we raise our hands and ask, "Sister, how freely and authentically *Indian* a sentence is that, and exactly who are *you* writing for?" Should we point out that all modern Indian institutions, and especially Indian academies of learning, are products of interaction between India and the West? Should we argue that Indian universities are wholly-owned subsidiaries of the huge engine of Western academia, that Indian campuses are off-shore production plants where Indian academics are farm-grown and encouraged to perform what Ashis Nandy has called "gladiator-like acts of ritual defiance"? And when we hear of Indian academics lecturing in Bern, should we be suspicious of titles like "The Local and the Global", and charge the speaker with peddling false oppositions to a rich Western audience? Should we stand up and wave our fists and thunder, "Madam, you have sold us out for Swiss chocolates?"

No, no, no. That way lies madness, or at least quivering insecurity and profound defeatism. So what must we artists do? I was pondering this recently, in Lokhandwalla, in my region, and my mother noticed my furrowed brow, and said, "Vikram, go for a walk". My mother is a wise woman, and so I picked up a proof-copy of "Selected Non-Fictions", by Borges-bhai, to keep me company, and I went for a walk. I walked to the rear of Lokhandwalla, past the power station, along the road that leads into a swamp. I walked further out towards the sea than I usually do, and now I noticed a pathway I'd never seen that angled off from the road. Down this pathway I went, and I walked for a long time. I was lost in thought, and when I came back to myself I saw that I was walking in a great flat wasteland. And then suddenly the ground fell away beneath my feet, and I rolled down a slope, and when I stood up, a quick thrill went jigging up my spine. I knew instantly that I had found, without really looking, the Lost Valley of the Lefties. I knew this was the Lost Valley of the Lefties because there were absolutely no koels in it. Looming over me was Mount Restoration of the Righties, and on their common border the Lefties and

Righties were blasting away at each other. I could hear their war cries. "This is Indian", they were shouting. "That is not Indian". And then again, "That is not pure of intent. This is". As the shells whizzed over my head, I was afraid. I hid under a rock and read Borges-bhai. "I believe that this problem of the Argentine and tradition is simply a contemporary and fleeting version of the eternal problem of determinism", Borges-bhai wrote. "Everything we Argentine writers do felicitously will belong to Argentine tradition, in the same way that the use of Italian subjects belongs to the tradition of England through the work of Chaucer and Shakespeare. I believe, moreover, that all the foregoing discussions of the aims of literary creation are based on the error of supposing that intentions and plans matter much.... Therefore I repeat that we must not be afraid; we must believe that the universe is our birthright and try out every subject; we cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine because either it is our inevitable destiny to be Argentine, in which case we will be Argentine whatever we do, or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask. I believe that if we lose ourselves in the voluntary dream called artistic creation, we will be Argentine and we will be, as well, good or adequate writers". So I read Borges-bhai and I was comforted. But now it grew dark and the clamor of the fighting ceased. I emerged from my shelter, and saw a glow in the distance. As I walked towards the flickering light, I saw that the Lefties and Righties were now holding hands, and were moving in circles, and now I could hear the words they were singing: "Be pure in location, be pure in tradition, be pure in audience, be pure in intent". And now I saw that the Lefties and the Righties were dancing around a god, a huge idol who sat on the border between the Lost Valley of the Lefties and Mount Restoration of the Righties. Standing next to this god, I realized that the Lost Valley and Mount Restoration were exactly alike, that they were mirror-images of each other. The god towered over me, gigantic and terrible, and he was double-faced, and looked both ways at once, and he had huge bronze arms, which the Leftie and Rightie priests moved by means of intricate mechanisms. The god's mouths opened and closed, opened and closed, and the arms gathered up offerings and dropped them into his maw. Long processions of Lefties and Righties brought these offerings, and I saw that these offerings were books, and paintings, and sculptures, and poems. The offerings were eaten by the god, and in his belly was a furnace, and the books burned in a roaring flame. I was afraid again, and I cried out, "Who is this terrible god you worship with these living sacrifices?" And the Lefties and Righties answered in one voice, "This is our God of Authenticity. Pay homage or you will suffer".

With Borges-bhai hidden under my shirt I fled from them. As I ran around their god, I heard a voice from his belly. As I looked into the fire, I saw pale blue eyes, a toothbrush of a moustache, and I heard a thousand amplified voices speaking as one, "In art, too, there will be only one guideline for action from now on, and that guideline is a philosophy drawn from a passionate national and state consciousness anchored in the realities of blood and history! Art shall serve the growth and strengthening of this folkish community.... [We] expect not only that materialism, Marxism, and Communism will be politically persecuted, outlawed, and eradicated but also that the spiritual battle ... will also be taken up by the people as a whole and that Bolshevist nonart and nonculture will be doomed to destruction....All products of cosmopolitan or Bolshevist nature will be removed from German museums and collections.... In the future we in this country will not have to look at apartment blocks or churches that look like greenhouses with chimneys or glass boxes on stilts and ... ways will be found to claim restitution from the criminals who grew rich perpetrating such insults against our native culture.... Sculptures that are offensive to the national sensibility and yet still desecrate public squares and parks [will] disappear as quickly as possible, regardless of whether these works were created by geniuses like Lehmbruck or Barlach. They must give way to the scores of artists loyal to the German tradition".[5]

Frightened, I ran to the other aspect of the god, and again I heard loudspeakered voices. In the belly of the god, I saw an avuncular man with a bald head and greenish teeth. Again, amplified voices proclaimed in unison, "New-democratic culture is national. It opposes imperialist oppression and upholds the dignity and independence of the Chinese nation. It belongs to our own nation and bears our own national characteristics... To advocate "wholesale Westernization" is wrong. China has suffered a great deal from the mechanical absorption of foreign material... Chinese culture should have its own form, its own national form. National in form and new-democratic in content —such is our new culture today.... New-democratic culture belongs to the broad masses and is therefore democratic. It should serve the toiling masses.... To attain this objective, written Chinese must be reformed, given the requisite conditions, and our spoken language brought closer to that of the people".[6]

And I was afraid. And then I heard a dry chuckle from inside my shirt, next to my chest, and I realized that Borges-bhai was laughing. I stopped running, and I began to laugh. Loudly I laughed. And in my laughter, I was restored. I shouted the syllable, "Hum", and I was delivered from the Lost Valley of the Lefties and from Mount Restoration of the Righties. I was back in Lokhandwalla.

Such was my journey into the wilderness, from which I was delivered by the laughter of Borges-bhai. Having made this journey, I must speak now to my own *biradari*, my brothers and sisters who are artists. To them, I say: ignore the commissars, whether they come from the left or the right, up or down, India or abroad. Be wary of their praise, because their hospitality is a prison. They will kidnap the cow of your plenty. Be ruthlessly practical, like the bhais of Bombay, those CCTV-using, Glock-firing, Bholenath-worshipping gangsters. Do whatever it takes to get the job done. Use whatever you need. Swagger confidently through all the world, because it all belongs to you. And don't worry about tradition. Whatever you do felicitously will be Indian. It cannot be otherwise. If Bholenath speaks to you, put him in your painting, or your story. The inevitable fact that some reader in New Jersey will find Bholenath's tiger skin and matted hair "exotic" is wholly irrelevant. To be self-consciously anti-exotic is also to be trapped, to be censored. Be free. Give up nothing, and swallow everything. In your work, don't be afraid of elephants and snakes and mystical India. If repetition and misuse have emptied out an image, a metaphor, a trope, rendered it void of meaning and substance, your job as an artist then is to be wily; you must slide sideways under the metaphor, take it onto your skin and inhabit it, then twist it, mangle it, pervert it, until it becomes your own and therefore comes alive again. You have to repossess what was once yours, what is still yours. To give up a metaphor because someone else has abused it is reflexive stupidity; you are again letting "them" take the initiative, letting them decide what is still yours and what is not. You are giving up ground. India *is* full of elephants and snakes and mysticism, and also cell phones and nuclear weapons and satellites. Give up nothing, and swallow everything. Be fearless, like that suave cosmopolitan M. K. Gandhi, that most international of khiladis, who told us repeatedly that while his political gurus were Gokhale and Ranade and Tilak, his spiritual gurus were Tolstoy and Thoreau and Ruskin, and that he got his non-violence not from the Gita, but from the Sermon on the Mount. Remember that Gandhi's audience was not just Indian, but also everyone else; that all his actions, the spectacle of his revolution and the revolution of his self, were performed simultaneously before a local audience and a global one. He spoke to us, to those he loved, but in speaking to us he was also speaking to all the world, and in speaking to the world he wanted nothing less than to change all of it. Be fearless, speak fearlessly to your readers, wherever they are, and be aware that as you speak, you will inevitably be attacked by some critics for being not Indian

enough, for being too Indian, too Westernized, too exoticized, too rich, for being a foreigner, an agent of the CIA. This is also wholly irrelevant. Do your job. Be kind to other artists, whether they paint in Gujarati or Marathi or English. Be generous. Take care of each other, and give shelter to each other against the depredations of the commissars. Finally, once our personal quarrels are over, what is good for a Gujarati painter is good for an English writer is good for a Marathi poet.

As you work, don't fear the God of Authenticity, for he is a weak god, a fraud, a fake, and —for all his posturing— completely irrelevant. Do your job, and your goddess will protect you and bless you. She is your mashooq, this One who is always absent. You know who she is, this One you follow always, the One who is untidy, elegant, blowsy, impossibly glamorous. She is the goddess Beauty, who has been frozen in liquid oxygen by the party bosses on Mount Restoration of the Righties, who has been declared dead in the Lost Valley of the Lefties. But you know your mashooq, and you can feel her power and her grace, how alive she is. She will always elude you, but you must risk everything for her. At the end of each day of work, the only question she will ask you is, did you write well today? And if you can honestly say, yes, I wrote well today, she will come a little closer to you, and you will sense her presence, and as you caress your mashooq, as she ravishes you with pleasure, you will know how absolutely real she is, this shape-shifting phantom. Then she will flee again. This absence is the only true grace you will ever know, or need. Believe in your mashooq, lose yourself in the dream of Her, and you will be Indian, a good artist or an adequate one, local and global, soft as a rose petal, and as hard as thunder, not this, not that, and everything you need to be. You will be free.

NOTES

[1] Such is the awful majesty of Gibbon that I accepted his assertion about camels unquestioningly, as Borges apparently did also. But an earlier draft of this essay was recently being discussed online, and two friends told me about a posting by a properly skeptical Fatima Hussain. Ms. Hussain searched on online Koran and found no less than eighteen mentions of the unprepossessing camel. So there is local color even in the holy book, and perhaps a sharp moral lesson —especially for writers of essays— about not trusting great authorities, and about the powers of cyberspace.

[2] I'm grateful to my colleague Alf Hiltebeitel for introducing me to this vengeful aspect of the gentle Kamadhenu. Lest Dr. Mukherjee accuse me of alluding to an epic cow who "ordinary people" have no connection with, I hasten to add that not very far from my home in Lokhandwalla is the Kamadhenu Shopping Centre, where ordinary citizens avail themselves of a veritable plenty of electronic goods, computer lessons, make-up salons, chartered accountants, and so on. For reasons of space, I'll leave aside the interesting problem of why Dr. Mukherjee feels that artists must only use allusions that "ordinary people" would understand; and also the problem of exactly who is "ordinary".

[3] The relative numbers are certainly interesting: 31 movies titled "Dharma", and only three called "Kama", and one called "Artha"? Does this truly reflect our national preoccupations, or perhaps only our willingness to talk about certain preoccupations? But that's another essay.

[4] It is certainly true that regional writers don't get enough attention in the national press. They don't even get enough attention in the various regional presses. And they usually make even less money than the average Indo-Anglian writer. But this is a situation that predates the current "boom" in Indo-Anglian writing, that has existed for long decades due to the complex inter-workings of many national and regional factors. But that, too, is another essay.

[5] From a 1933 manifesto, "What German Artists Expect from the New Government", published in *Deutscher Kunstbericht (German Art Report)* by the Fuehrerrat der Vereinigten Deutschen Kunst (Fuehrer's Council of the United German Art and Cultural Associations). Quoted by Sherree Owens Zalampas in her book *Adolf Hitler: A Psychological Interpretation of His Views on Architecture, Art, and Music* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1990).

[6] From "A National, Scientific And Mass Culture", part XV of *On New Democracy*, by Mao Zedong. Excerpted in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1967. This text worked as a manual for the Red Guards, the shock troops of the Cultural Revolution. In his book, *The Search for Modern China*, Jonathan Spence observes, "Red Guards eager to prove their revolutionary integrity turned on anyone who tried to hold them in check, anyone who had Western education or dealings with Western businessmen or missionaries and all intellectuals who could be charged with "feudal" or "reactionary" modes of thinking. The techniques of public humiliation grew more and more complex and painful as the identified victims were forced to parade through the streets in dunce caps or with self-incriminatory placards around their necks, to declaim their public self-criticism before great jeering crowds and to stand of hours on end with backs agonizingly bent and arms outstretched in what was called "the airplane position". With euphoria, fear, excitement, and tension that gripped the country,

violence grew apace. Thousands of intellectuals and others were beaten to death or died of their injuries. Countless others committed suicide.... Many of the suicides killed themselves only after futile attempts to avoid Red Guard harassment by destroying their own libraries and art collections".