Hunting A Snark: On The Trail Of Regional Indian Science Fiction

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It is easy enough to find non-existent things: one simply has to look in all the wrong places. It is also easy to find ubiquitous things: like junk mail, they find you. But it is having to find snarks, stuff that should exist but don't seem to, the stuff that's in-between, that vexes, as Douglas Adams put it, the "tea time of the soul." Car keys, true love, and the self-confident soufflé all fall into that vexatious category. Apparently, so does regional Indian science fiction (ISF): there's enough to make one look for more, but not enough to make it easy to find.

I define regional ISF as fiction written by Indians in a regional Indian language, like Hindi or Tamil.

Some background may help. Though there are more than 1,000 odd different language-dialects in India, the Government of India only recognizes about fifteen regional Indian languages. The regional languages differ greatly in their number of speakers and history. For example, my native language, Malayalam, spoken in Kerala, a southern state, is a few hundred years old and has some 30 million speakers, whereas a language like Hindi, mostly spoken in the north, is far older and has more than 600 million speakers. It's hard enough to keep up in one language, let alone fifteen, so getting a sense of what's going on in Indian literature is a bit like the (Indian) story about the six blind men and the proverbial elephant. Imagine cramming all of Europe's linguistic variety into an area one-third its size, and one begins to get an idea of what's involved. Incidentally, am not including English as a regional language, though it's widely spoken on the subcontinent.

I got involved in regional Indian SF by accident. In 2007, Michael Iwoleit, chief editor of the now defunct *Internova*, had been planning to put together a special issue on Indian SF, with an emphasis on regional languages. When he learnt I'd be in India during June and July of that year, he generously volunteered my assistance. I spent part of my trip meeting people who wrote in regional languages, reading the few translations I could find, and trying to get a sense of the SF scene in India. Lewis Carroll's Snark had been pursued with thimbles, forks and hope, as well as railway-shares, smiles and soap. My

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methodology was not dissimilar. Mischievous circumstance and my wallet often determined the next leg of my trajectory. If I came to a fork in the road, I frequently turned back. My interviews were informal, to say the least. This report– travel notes really– can be accused of a great many things, but thoroughness is not one of them.

Still, a travelogue belongs to the literature of first impressions, and first impressions do have their uses. So without any further apology, here are my conclusions on the state of regional Indian SF:

1. There is not much SF in most regional Indian languages.
2. Much of what exists is naïve, often poorly translated and/or derivative.
3. There are interesting exceptions to both (1) and (2);
4. Indian SF's prospects are quite promising.

One caveat:

For me, the most surprising discovery was the paucity of regional Indian SF. At the start of my trip, I had been optimistic. For example, if Debjani Sengupta is right, Indian SF began as early as 1880 with Hemlal Dutta's Bengali short-story "Rahasya" (Mystery), published in the Bigyan Darpon. In 1896, J. C. Bose had written *Polatok Toofan,* a story which had anticipated Chaos theory's butterfly effect. I knew there had been writers like Premendra Mitra steadily producing SF stories throughout the mid-half of the 20th century, and that popular scientist/writers like Jayant Narlikar (Marathi), "Sujatha" Rangarajan (Tamil), Dinesh Chandra Goswami (Assamese) and Nellai Mutthu (Tamil) had created a growing awareness of the genre's possibilities. I assumed the number of regional writers working in SF could only have increased since 1880.

When I went to meet Jaya Bhattacharji, senior editor at Zubaan Books, I didn't have regional SF on my mind. But Jaya's easy going manner encouraged conversation, as did Zubaan's cosy office in the Hauz Khas enclave[1], with its coir shades, worn furniture, book-stuffed walls and almost cavernous central room. I found myself confiding, unasked, that like Jake and Elwood in the Blues Brothers, I too was on a quest. I had intended to add that an armchair was to be my faithful horse and the only expected hazard was having to wade through hyperlink thickets.

But I never got around to the qualifiers, because Jaya began to fire off names and numbers of people who could help. It soon became hideously clear that she expected me to work at this questing business.

"The National Book Trust is just down the road from here," Jaya told me. "Rubin's their acquisitions editor for Malayalam."

There was nothing for it but to buckle down and get to work.

I went over to the National Book Trust (NBT), but Rubin Cruz wasn't in. NBT's display room was also under renovation. I was all set to return to my hotel room, when I noticed that NBT had parked a book-mobile in front of

[1]Zubaan Books has since shifted to Shahpur Jat, another cool locale in Delhi.

the building. It was pleasantly surprising to see it thronged with book-hungry children, or as I call them, clients. The mobile's driver/guard/bookseller was a friendly sort, in the over-relieved manner of someone thirsting to see adults. He handed me a catalogue.

The catalogue listed perennials like Narlikar's *Journey Through The Universe* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Mora*. Then there was the stuff teacher's pets like to read: books about ants, hard-working bees, India's folk art, colonial history, lives of great people, and of course, *The Story Of Rice*. A couple of titles sounded deliciously inappropriate: Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Gay-Neck: The Story Of A Pigeon* and Qudsia Zaidi's *Begum Gulabo Mousie And Her Balloons*.

The catalogue also listed two pieces of science fiction. The first was *My Robot Robbie*, a children's book by the late Dilip Salwi, and the other was *It Happened Tomorrow*, an anthology of nineteen stories edited by Dr. Bal Phondke.

Of its nineteen stories, seven were from Marathi, three from Bengali, three from English, three from Hindi, two from Kannada, and one from Tamil. With the exception of Jayant Narlikar (Marathi), Laxman Londhe (Marathi) and Sujatha Rangarajan (Tamil), I hadn't heard about the other authors. It was little odd that there was just one Tamil author. Rangarajan ("Sujatha," his pen name, happens to be his wife's name) is enormously popular in Tamil Nadu, and his success has inspired other writers such as T. S. Balasubramanian ("Subra Balan") and Maalan Narayanan. Also, Tamil is sort of the mirror-image to Sanskrit. Spoken by around 70 million people, almost as old as Sanskrit, a parent to almost all the south-Indian languages, rooted in a state with a strong colonial presence, it was the sort of regional language that could generate a lot of SF writers.

It was also odd that there were no contributions from Malayalam. And where was the Urdu science fiction story? Or Telugu, for that matter.

Dr. Phondke is a careful, thorough and knowledgeable scholar (indeed, one of the stalwarts of Marathi SF). Several Indian SF anthologies have appeared in the last few years, but they're all by writers working in English. Dr. Phondke's anthology remains the only one with stories translated from other regional languages as well. I think the real reason for the uneven distribution of names is simply that there simply aren't that many Indian writers working in regional SF.

It is not a new conclusion. For example, at the 2005 Interaction Conference in Glasgow, Jim Walker had presented a paper with the title, "Urdu Science Fiction: Where is It?" In his interviews, Sujatha Rangarajan frequently bemoans the lack of modern SF. When K. K. R. Mohan died in May 2007, perhaps 80-90% of Telugu SF ended with him. Dr. Uppinder Mehan, now a professor at University of Houston-Victoria, wrote a thoughtful paper in 1998 on the possible reasons for paucity of Indian SF; the paucity itself was not in question.

I heard this theme echoed time and again. When I met Dr. Nirmal Bhattacharjee, editor of Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi (India's premier literary organization), I asked if he had come across anything that could even remotely

qualify as science fiction.

"SF? Asimov? Rockets? That sort of thing?" He looked bemused.

"Yes. But by Indians."

Dr. Bhattacharjee fell silent. It was clear that he wanted to help. His eyes scanned the stacks of Indian books piled here and there: old friends, good friends, interesting friends, radical friends... but alas, no science fiction. At that moment, a tall, bearded, serious-faced man– obviously a fellow Malayalee[2]– entered the room. Dr. Bhattacharjee asked him if he had heard of Malayalee SF. The worthy eyed me briefly and replied: "Nothing worth remembering."

Later, Rubin D'Cruz more or less confirmed what Dr. Bhattacharjee's colleague had said. He too was doubtful that there was any such thing as Malayalam SF. When I visited Ernakulam, Kerala a few weeks later, I went down to its famed Press Club Road and asked in several bookstores for Malayalam SF. Writers other than the renowned Malayalee authors Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke? No, not Harry Potter. But it was hopeless. I might as well have asked for a saddle and an unicorn.

Shobhit Mahajan, perhaps the most well-informed of all the people I had met, was pessimistic about Indian SF. It wasn't that there was a lack of it. The trouble, he commented, was that so much of Indian SF was of such poor quality. In fact, the problem was a larger one. The audiences for regional language literature were fragmented, and unlike the case for South American fiction, there were few good English translations of regional Indian literature as a whole.

This paucity of regional SF poses an interesting problem, one that is not confined to the Indian context. Under what conditions does a language begin to generate science fiction? Necessary conditions don't seem to be sufficient. For example, just as there can't be a sea literature for a land-locked people, it's probably true there can't be science-fiction without a cultural awareness of science. Similarly, mere secular and naturalistic thinking does not seem to suffice. The ancient Greek, Chinese, Roman, Indian and Arab civilizations had may such works, but no significant tradition of science-fiction. The word "tradition" is important; it is probable every language has that dubious ancestor of an SF text that exists solely to irritate genealogists.

On the other hand, sufficient conditions are not necessary. The disruptive effects of technology in the Industrial revolution may have been sufficient to trigger western SF, but in that case, why didn't the marvels of Roman engineering have a similar effect?

In India, SF seems to have had its origin in "alien" contact, namely, the arrival of the colonial powers. Tapan Raychaudhuri's scholarly assessment[3] of

[2]Residents of my home state, Kerala, are called "Malayalees," since they speak "Malayalam.." Arundhati Roy, the author of *The God of Small Things*, is perhaps the most famous Malayalee writer.

[3]Tapan Raychaudhuri "Europe in India's Xenology: The Nineteenth-Century Record." *Past and Present.* No. 137, pp. 156-182. 1992.

that arrival speaks to the point:

"The nineteenth-century Bengali novelist Bankim Chatterji remarked that what he and his contemporaries wrote would have been incomprehensible to earlier generations, however one might try and translate it.... The new Indian way of looking at things was more than a simple synthesis of western and Indian traditions. It is something new, a product of a specific historical experience of cultural encounter which had a catalytic impact on the perceptions and preferences of the Indian literati."

The colonial powers (Britain, France and Portugal) were mainly situated in the regions of Bengal, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, so perhaps it is not surprising that those are the regions and their associated languages– Bengali, Marathi and Tamil—that exhibit the earliest signs of Indian SF. In contrast, Kerala was relatively unexposed to the colonial presence. Though considered something of a twin for Bengal because the two states are so similar, and even though the prosperous state has the country's highest literacy rate (well over 90%) as well the highest human development index, Kerala, unlike Bengal, doesn't have a tradition of regional SF. Thus, the skewed distribution of sudden, disorienting encounters with modernity in India might explain the skewed distribution in its regional SF.

Skewed or not, I have claimed that a lot of the current writing in regional SF is simply not very good. This is of course just a personal opinion, as all rankings of literature must be. Many of the stories are sincere, well-motivated and courageous, but to my mind, they are lacking in depth, ambition and originality. Some are overly didactic, others are exercises in ancestor-worship, and far too many are in thrall of golden-age SF's plots and themes.

I don't believe there's any need to bring out the violins though. For three reasons. First, a good novel– howsoever 'goodness' may be defined– has a better chance of being published and widely read in urban India than ever before. Economic problems in developing countries don't have to do with demand-side issues but distribution and supply-side issues. New word-of-mouth technologies (blogs, social bookmarks, collaborative filtering, viral and syndicated feeds) are changing the way readers encounter books. It is difficult to find Sujatha Rangarajan's SF novels in a bookstore outside of Tamil Nadu, but his works are easily available online. This is especially good news for Indian fiction, given the weak distribution networks.

Second, there are some great existence proofs of great Indian SF. Some examples come to mind. Pritish Nandy's *Tapan*, a story about when an excess of freedom becomes a stifling constraint. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Sharing Air* which rethinks what is meant by "the air we breathe." Premendra Mitra's *Telanopota*[4], a Borgesian nugget, describing love's loss as a name, a fever; a place. Some stories are linked in time and between languages: the mosquito that Premendra Mitra's protagonist Ghana-da kills in *Mosquito*, a Bengali story, survives to haunt humankind in Amitav Ghosh's English novel, *The Calcutta*

[4]See Pritish Nandy's translation at: www.thedailystar.net/2004/03/13/d403132101102.htm

Chromosome. There's Sujatha Rangarajan's disturbing tale *Manikavum*, a story about forbidden desires, written on a Moebius strip. There's some amazing stuff.

Third, English is liberating the regional languages from their narrow audiences. Imagine if English literature had to depend solely on the denizens of Kansas! That's the situation with many regional languages in India. Rita Kothari in her book, *Translating India* (Zubaan Books, 2006), has carefully explained how English is liberating that regional creativity inherent now being held in solitary confinement. In a multi-language setting, a lingua franca like English actually maintains variety rather than suffocating it. Great stories survive their translations. Perhaps even thrive. Michael Kandel's translation of Lem's *Cyberiad* comes to mind. As the alien Gorkon says in Star Trek VI: "you have never experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon." My friend Shobhit's point about the lack of good translations is on the mark, but I think presses that encourage English-language translations, like Blaft, Katha, Pratham, Penguin Books and Zubaan Books, will eventually make a difference, even if they do not deal with SF at the moment.

Finally, it may simply be that we need to look in the right places. Regional SF may find its natural habitat not in the pages of magazines or books, but in Indian cinema. Recent movies like "E", "Matrubhoomi," "Adbhut Deepam," "Koi Mil Gaya," "Jaane Hoga Kya," "Drona," and "Robot" all point to a revolution to come. These movies have all the chutzpah of golden age SF: they're pulpish, noisy, impassioned and thought-provoking. They are rooted in the subcontinent's heat and dust. They are as ambitious as Icarus, and almost all, fail like the world's first teenager. Yet the industry rises to try again. If these efforts are an indication of things to come, then all is well.

– The End–