



A study predicts that of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken today, nearly half will disappear in this century

# Second language First choice

Not every urban, convent-educated wannabe writer is sitting down to write the next big Indian novel in English. A handful of adventurous literary aspirants are electing to express themselves in their mother tongue — for reasons creative, personal and political, reports Malvika Tegtā

A lot of us are good at two languages, or I'd say, bad in both," observes noted Hindi novelist Geetanjali Shree, 53. For many urban Indians, the first language (the medium of instruction in schools) is English. At home, though, they speak an Indian language. They also consume abundant English entertainment. And they formulate thoughts in translation. Overall, their linguistic identity is a *khichdi*. But then, that's the bilingual condition.

If you are a writer who can write in English, the most convenient (at least from the money and glory point of view) choice is to write in English. That's why we have a thriving, expanding bunch of Indian English writers not one of whose mother tongue (barring a few exceptions such as Ruskin Bond and I Allan Sealy) is English. On the other hand, the most well known writers in the Indian languages are not, typically, the convent-educated English-speaking types. Generally, they would have done their schooling in their mother tongue and grown strong literary roots in an Indian language before developing intimate relations with English.

But now, there is a growing breed of young writers who, despite having been to English medium schools, despite having grown up on all the usual English classics, are choosing to pen their stories and poems in their mother tongue. Is it a political choice? Is it a matter of sticking to a comfort zone? Or is it about finding a readership that English doesn't care about?

## It's an 'identity thing'

Noted Hindi writer Sara Rai, 53, cannot, even today, readily decide between Hindi and English. For her, it's a choice to be made on a novel to novel basis. She penned four chapters of her latest novel *Cheelwali Kothi* (2010) in English, and some chapters in Hindi to see which worked better. But she finds it puzzling that those who are fluent in English should prefer to write in Hindi. "So far as I know, the readers who buy Hindi novels are not urban and not middle class," she says. "Perhaps for some, writing in Hindi is an identity thing."

Both Delhi-based Shree and Lucknow-based Rai come from Hindi-speaking, English-educated backgrounds. Hindi poetry evenings and *mushairas* were Shree's cultural link to Hindi. Rai, who happens to be the great Munshi Premchand's granddaughter, was obviously raised in a literary household. For them, choosing Hindi over English was not such an eye-brow-raising decision.

But it definitely was, for 26-year-old Aruni Kashyap, who writes in Assamese. Kashyap graduated in English from the mother of all elitist English institutions — Delhi's St Stephen's college. But in his case, his comfort with Assamese was established early on, both his parents being Assamese writers. "I am at this unique position where I can't decide which language is closer to me," says Kashyap, who writes regularly for Assamese journals.



Kashyap (top) graduated from St Stephen's college and writes in Assamese; Shree writes in Hindi

## The failure of IWE

It was Assamese literature, especially the works of Indira Goswami, Virendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Anuradha Sharma Pujari, that taught Kashyap to make sense of his world, a world that Indian writing in English knew little about. "I could relate to Toni Morrison and Faulkner who were writing about rural America. But none of the Indian writers in English could capture what was important to me — the world of my grandmother, and the farmers I knew," he says.

Inability to identify with a West-facing Indian Writing in English (IWE) and contemporary Marathi also pushed Marathi literary critic and experimental poet Manoj Joshi, 38, to write in a language that was 'his' — a hybrid of Marathi, English, Hindi, and Gujarati. It was a language that, in his words, reflective of "the way I speak, the way I experience, and the way I express." You see it in his poetry collection, *Jyam Maja* (2006).

Rahul Sarwate, 30, a Pune-based researcher who holds an M Phil in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics, would agree with Joshi's approach, though he may not be able to follow it himself. In a city like Mumbai, where a person traverses different cultural landscapes and registers, "you face an existential question about expression," he says.

Sarwate, who used to write for the Marathi magazine *Sausthav*, grew up reading Kafka, Camus and Sartre, first in

Marathi and then in English. "The world makes sense to me through concepts I learnt from Western philosophy. So when I try to write an academic text in Marathi that borrows heavily from Western philosophers of the mid-'60s, like Foucault and Derrida, I am not sure the reader will understand."

## Ideological linguism

Things are less ambiguous in the case of young writers in Tamil Nadu, which has a strong history of identity politics centred on language. For Chennai-based Kavitha Muralidharan, 32, a journalist with *The Week* magazine, and a regular contributor to the Tamil magazine *Kalachuvadu*, Tamil is her "emotional language." Thanks to the poetry of Bharatiar she encountered at age 10, despite a BA in English literature and an MA in political science, she finds it impossible to write poetry in a language other than Tamil. As Shree puts it, "When you sit down to write, the intuitive mother tongue, various tonalities of which have gone into your being over years, always comes back. And literature, at the end of the day, is all about reading into your intuition."

Of course, since the language determines the audience, the choice to write in one's mother tongue — whether the writer intends it that way or not — always has a political dimension. "The stories I write in Assamese are read by people without concrete houses. They know exactly what I am talking about. I share a greater affinity with Assamese because I get a lot of responses for what I write in this language," says Kashyap. So even though a lot of his writing is still in English, — "it's an unconscious literary choice," he admits — he still makes it a point to write at least two stories a week in Assamese.

For Chennai-based Bharatnatyam dancer and sexual minority rights activist Aniruddhan Vasudevan, 28, the choice was totally political. It was a homophobic Kamal Haasan-starrer that drove him to write in Tamil — he was determined to push a discourse on LGBT rights into a language that talked very little of it. "Many people who read my stories come from small-town Tamil Nadu. It's great to get a whole new readership, and explore a new vocabulary. It's a challenge to fully inhabit a language" he says. Though Vasudevan is aware that few of his generation and background would read what he writes in Tamil, except perhaps his friends, he is unfazed.

Bilingualism has been with us for a long time. That in itself is not new. What is new in the Indian literary landscape, as Shree sums up, is "a new ideological linguism." And if it enriches the various Indian languages that have for long been treated as second cousins to English, all the better.

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## INDIAN INK

KALPISH RATNA

# The candied tongue

I'm at Breach Candy, eating brinjal grilled in gingelly oil. Across the road from me is a British club where, till very recently, Indians were not admitted. All around me are shop signs hastily painted over in Marathi. Connecting these dissidents is Indian ink, and the tale is told.

Their common ground *Breach Candy* is neither British nor Marathi. The Candy honoured in the Breach is no nautch-girl. Nor is Breach that gap in Bombay's rocky shoreline I long thought it was.

Breach Candy is *Burj-al-khari*, Arabic for 'tower of the sea'. The Arabs, master mariners, noticed a geological formation we've forgotten. The name was a clue. It sent me on a map quest a year ago, and yes, there was a Burj here, right in the khari! A massif to begin with, but when the Arabs named it a millennium ago, it had been weathered down to a *minar*, easily spotted on the horizon from far out at sea.

It doesn't stop there. *Burj* isn't Arabic. It came over from Europe during the Crusades when invaders dotted the Eastern landscape with castles.

Sweets we knew as 'peppermints' fifty years ago, we now call 'candy', and fancy we're speaking American. Oh no, we were saying 'candy' long before 4 July 1776.

Sweets we knew as 'peppermints' fifty years ago, we now call 'candy', and fancy we're speaking American

The juicy little word is Tamil, or as it should more correctly be written, Tamizh. The Tamil word for crystallised sugar, *kal-kand*, was adopted by Arab merchants who shopped for it. The subcontinent's coastline has been a bazaar for millennia. All you needed was a boat to zip you over to the mall. The Arab with a sweet-tooth sold his *kal-kand* as *qandi* at Cueta where, in the days before Vasco da Gama, all Europe queued up to score.

From there on to Venice, perhaps, or Genoa, whence a roving Englishman took it home as 'candy'. The first mention of candy in English is in the early 16th century, nearly a hundred years into Portugal's monopoly of trade with India.

The Elizabethans took madly to the stuff and by the turn of the century Shakespeare had absorbed the word into his idiom. When Hamlet said "let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp" presumably the pit knew what he was talking about.

Did the Tamilian return short-changed from the bazaar? Not a whit. When today's purist demands *gingelly* oil he ignores the northern *til* and the Latin *sesamum* as upstarts. The sine qua non of Tamil cuisine can only be *gingelly* — which, in fact, is not Tamil at all. It is 100 per cent Arabic. They called it *al-jululan* (onomatopoeia for the rattle of ripe seeds in its capsule), and loaded jars of the aromatic oil onto their ships along the Coromandel. The adventurous but zealous Portuguese, who loathed the Arabs but loved their discernment, craftily cornered the market and sold the oil back to the people who made it — as *gergelim*. That other Tamil staple, coffee, is grudgingly acknowledged as Arabic. It isn't. Kaffa, in what is now Ethiopia, naturally, is where 'coffee' comes from.

Around the time coffee arrived here from Yemen, as seven beans concealed in Baba Budan's cummerbund, the *other* Kaffa, the one we now call Feodosia, exported quite a different kind of merchandise to Europe. Although it took five hundred years to get here, Bombay boasts memorials to that export at every street corner. Can you guess what it was? Two years ago, while writing a book about it, we discovered Indian ink flows really far out to sea...

Kalpina Suaminathan and Ishrat Syed write as 'Kalpish Ratna'

# Konkanis unite online to save their language

Konkani doesn't have a script, but it will soon get a dictionary, thanks to an entirely volunteer-driven website, [savemylanguage.org](http://savemylanguage.org)

## Malvika Tegtā

A script gives a language some kind of permanence in a predominantly oral culture. Spoken languages are freer, more fluid. They thrive in the air, but also depend on the living to stay alive. Konkani is one such language. Essentially colloquial, it is spoken across dinner tables, in fish markets and community courtyards in and around Mangalore, Karnataka.

It is therefore volatile, or in other words, susceptible to disappearing in thin air. One way to save it from such an eventuality is to document the language in a scientific manner, as it exists in its present form, and also to map its evolution. Roshan Pai Ramesh, a UK-based IT consultant, is doing exactly that through an online Konkani Dictionary Project at [savemylanguage.org](http://savemylanguage.org), a website he started

in 2005. Ramesh's inspiration was the revival of the dying Welsh language that was brought back into the mainstream through the adoption of scientific methodologies and addressing social aspects of the language.

"The Konkani dialect is not in official use anywhere in India. It evolves in the microcosm of each and every household that speaks it," says Ramesh, who is also the chief editor of [savemylanguage.org](http://savemylanguage.org), a website that is dedicated to the Konkani language. Till date, it has documented more than 6,000 words.

The project is entirely volunteer-driven, where people contribute a word and its English meaning. There is strong gate-keeping; the submissions can make it to the final dictionary only after it has been reviewed, catalogued and semantically categorised by language experts. About

Roshan Pai Ramesh  
chief editor of [www.savemylanguage.org](http://www.savemylanguage.org)

The Konkani dialect has evolved in the microcosm of each and every household that speaks it



60-80 per cent of the words received do not make the cut. To avoid duplication, 60 volunteers from India, Dubai, USA and UK, among others, collaborate on email and spreadsheets "targeting specific topics." A topic is basically a semantic category,

say, 'vegetables' or 'kitchen'. The volunteers go category by category, submitting Konkani names for vegetables or kitchen utensils.

The diverse profile of volunteers — bankers, homemakers, IT consultants, entrepreneurs, people in their 20s to those in their 50s — ensures that the evolution of the language is also reflected in the dictionary.

"Each household adds its own flavour based on local circumstances and linguistic influences," says Ramesh. So to broaden the base, the dictionary has Facebook, Twitter and Google applications that give users a 'Konkani word of the day' and its English equivalent. The website also a resource of articles written by volunteers and academics, and contains a comprehensive list of Konkani idioms, proverbs, metaphors and euphemisms.

"The average Konkani speaker's vo-

cabulary is limited, as most prefer to communicate in Hindi or English these days. Add to this the fact that the Konkani we speak does not have a script — that means there are no books or texts one can refer to," says Veena Shanbhogue, a volunteer and a homemaker from Dubai. "Unless something is done, our beautiful words, phrases and funny idioms will all be lost."

Currently the project, which estimates the number of Konkani words at 10,000 to 12,000, is in the collection phase. The numbers, says Ramesh, are purely estimates, as it is a spoken language. Next will come hardbound dictionary, and then the project will venture into advanced areas like a grammar guide. Given the current volunteer rate, says Ramesh, the final phase is eight to 10 years away.

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