

# studies in language & capitalism

## A Resolutely Uncivilized Colonial Bumps into Postcolonialism

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On a recent British Airways flight neither originating nor terminating in India, I was surprised to find *devanagari* text on the title page of the fold-out glossy card containing safety instructions for passengers. While the body of the card has pictorial rather than verbal content, the title, *Safety on Board*, is printed in eight different languages: English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, and Japanese, in that order. The title was translated as *Sécurité à Bord* in French, *Segurança a Bordo* in Portuguese, and *Seguridad a Bordo* in Spanish. Each of the remaining four languages employs a script other than roman. British Airways presumably intended Hindi-reading passengers on board to read the phrase *Safety on Board* as *viman meN suraksha*. However, the text that actually appears on the card doesn't make ready sense to me, and I doubt whether it would make sense more readily to another *devanagari* reader than it did to me. The first word of the Hindi phrase, which I take to be *viman*, employs an unknown orthography: an orphan diacritical mark is suspended in a soundless limbo preceded by the syllables *va* and *mi*, and followed by the

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syllable *na*. The last word of the phrase, *suraksha*, while spelt correctly in the strict sense, also employs a somewhat unusual orthography: while most native writers would spell the last syllable with the *devanagari* conjunct for *ksh*, British Airways chose to have it written with a *halant* below the *devanagari* symbol for *k* followed by the *devanagari* symbol for the *moordhanya sh*. Thus, the only word in the three-word phrase that would have been readily intelligible to a native reader is the adposition *meN*, which by itself cannot be said to shed a great deal of light on what the card might be about. The fact that safety in the context of an emergency in the air, which is what I take the card to be about, is perhaps more correctly translated as *bachav* than as *suraksha* is less relevant to what I want to write about here. For the moment, I am more interested in what might be called the political economy of the production of the *devanagari* text on the safety card at issue and its intended audience.

The card is printed in color on glossy photographic paper and bears hallmarks of high production values in its graphic design and in the quality of printing. At \$10.7 billion, market capitalization of British Airways is second only to that of Air France KLM among the airlines that trade publicly in the US.<sup>2</sup> For the fiscal year ended March 31, 2006, British Airways recorded a net income in excess of \$257 million. I think it is safe to conclude that it is within financial reach of British Airways to hire competent professional staff for typesetting and proofreading a simple Hindi phrase. I doubt that professional services for typesetting and proofreading Hindi would cost more than, say, an exorbitant \$500 an hour. A one-time expenditure of \$1000 on a generous two hours of professional typesetting and proofreading is unlikely to make a serious dent in the earnings that British Airways reports. Now, I have no personal knowledge of the market for *devanagari* typesetting in London, but in these globalized times, British Airways surely has ready electronic access to a vast pool of international manpower, including that in India, where *devanagari* typesetting is neither expensive nor in short supply. Furthermore, British Airways employs a fair number of ethnic Indians in India and abroad, some of whom might be enticed to admit to being capable of reading and writing Hindi. In addition, British Airways had the choice of consulting such British Universities as offer courses in Hindi. What is more, British Airways is based in a country that gave birth to Sir Charles Wilkins, who, while working for the East India Company in the 18<sup>th</sup> century India, standardized the *devanagari* typeface that is in use today. Evidently, when economic interest of the empire, as opposed to safety of a voiceless minority, is at issue, the British can see their way clear to dealing with alien scripts.

The card indicates that its contents were copyrighted in 2005. It has therefore been in use on British Airways flights for a year or so, perhaps longer. During this time nobody noticed the orthographic oddities of its *devanagari* contents, or, perhaps, nobody cared enough to bring

them to the attention of the British Airways staff. It is also possible, though I should like to believe it unlikely, that the misspelling was brought to the attention of British Airways staff, who then chose to do nothing about it. Finally, one must allow for the possibility that there aren't really *any* passengers on *any* British Airways flight *anywhere* who can read *devanagari* but not English. Or none, at any rate, whose safety matters a whit. What I mistook as characters of non-roman scripts on the face of the card are really aesthetic features of its graphic design: four lines of exotic dingbats following four lines of roman text as a neat counterpoint. The well-thought-out layout was meant to make Eurograph British Airways passengers feel good that they form part of a multicultural whole, citizens of a *ville mondiale* in which diversity, a benign euphemism for weirdness, is tolerated so long as it remains confined to an unintelligible scrawl on a glossy card.

It is remarkable that British Airways managed to get all three diacritical marks in the French translation right. Apart from the *devanagari* text, there is nothing on the card<sup>3</sup> with even a remote hint of shoddiness. I want to argue here that the fact that this kind of error occurred and went unnoticed or uncorrected for a year is symptomatic of the contempt in which an Indian vernacular in general, and, as Mark Tully observed, Hindi in particular, is held. Anglicized Indians evince this contempt more than anybody else, and it would not surprise me to learn that the card was typeset and proofread by an anglicized Indian on British Airways payroll, one who like most of his ilk considers self-hatred a hallmark of sanity. The rest of the world sees the contempt in which the ruling elite in India hold the Indian culture, and rightly concludes that no more than shoddiest attention is necessary for any facet of Indian culture. Instances of this contempt abound, and I mention below a few.

In 1996, Mira Nair, a filmmaker educated at Harvard, who is said<sup>4</sup> to have lived in India until she was 19, made a film called *Kama Sutra*. Gratuitously appended at the very end of the credit roll of the film was a bit of *devanagari* text that Ms. Nair must have thought represented the title of the film. Ms. Nair, or one of her hirelings, chose to spell the last syllable, *ma*, in the first word, *Kama*, with a *deergha* rather than a *laghu* vowel. Now, given that the dialogues and the credit roll in the film were in English, I am not sure what purpose, if any, the insertion of the *devanagari* text was intended to serve. Perhaps, Ms. Nair, like British Airways, needed *devanagari* for a largely cosmetic purpose. All she wanted was a little something in a vaguely Indic script to lend her film an air of authenticity. It cannot have been very difficult for Ms. Nair to find out how the title of her film is written in *devanagari*, a script I imagine she bumped into once or twice during her 19 years in India. The fact that so little care was devoted to such an easy task in a film otherwise characterized by high

production values can only mean that it mattered little to Ms. Nair whether or not she got it right.

Shoddy research and fact-checking characterize citations having to do not just with Indian vernaculars but with Indian culture itself. A great deal of energy at English departments in various American universities is expended on such things as PoMo [postmodernism], PoCo [postcolonialism], and Critical Theory. In 1989, Ketu Katrak and R. Radhakrishnan, two English professors at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, guest-edited a special issue of a literary periodical called *Massachusetts Review*. Entitled “Desh-Videsh,”<sup>5</sup> the issue dealt with postcolonialism as manifested in the writings of what has come to be called the Indian Diaspora. The lead article in the issue was written by Professor Feroza Jussawalla, then at University of Texas, El Paso. The article ended with a reference to Draupadi, who the erudite Professor Jussawalla informed her readers was a character in *Ramayana*. Professor Jussawalla grew up in Hyderabad and got her undergraduate degree at Osmania University in that town. One would think that, as guest editors, Professors Katrak and Radhakrishnan, both of whom also grew up and got an undergraduate degree in India, would have read Professor Jussawalla’s article before settling upon it as the lead article of the special issue. Whether or not that unnecessary allusion gave Professor Jussawalla’s readers an impression that she knew whereof she wrote, its publication certainly revealed that familiarity with neither *Mahabharata* nor *Ramayana* formed a part of whatever education any of the three professors had received, in India or in the US. It is only the backward, the uncouth, the uncivilized, and the uneducated in India who mistakenly ascribe cultural significance to the two texts. Professor Jussawalla’s doctoral dissertation<sup>6</sup> “seeks to establish critical criteria based on a [sic] analysis of the context of situation, the authority of an interpretive community, and a return to traditional Indian critical criteria.” For Professor Jussawalla and for her dissertation committee at the University of Utah, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were not relevant to the Indian tradition the “critical criteria” of which her dissertation advocated a return to. The license to pontificate on matters postcolonial that Professors Katrak and Radhakrishnan have also took the form of a Ph.D. from an American University. Familiarity with such pre-colonial texts as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* seems not to be necessary to speak with authority of postcolonialism in the academic circles in the US.

In 1979-80, Philip Glass composed an opera called *Satyagraha* for the Netherlands Opera. A German production of the work was staged and filmed in 1983. It was shown on cable in the US a few years later, and released on DVD in 2001. The credit roll at the end of the filmed version gives one to understand that the opera is about the life of a character called Gandhi. Again, it cannot have been very difficult for the people responsible for the filmed

version to get the spelling of the name of the main character right. Surely, they might have heard of a writer called Romain Rolland in neighboring France, who, some nine years after he got the Nobel prize in literature, had written a book called *Mahatma Gandhi*. One would think that the production team for the filmed version of *Satyagraha* also had access to Richard Attenborough's 1982 biopic. Mr. Attenborough also managed to get the spelling of the name of the subject of his biopic right, though not much else, perhaps. The title role in *Gandhi* was played by Ben Kingsley, whose until then none too noteworthy Hollywood career had started in 1972 with *Fear is the Key*, a film in which the future Mahatma Kingsley played a homicidal hoodlum. In 188 minutes of *Gandhi*, Mr. Kingsley was expected to utter a total of perhaps three non-English words: he calls himself "Moan Duss," and pronounces *Sardar* to rhyme with the English word "harder." Basking in the glory of the career that his 1983 Oscar for *Gandhi* revived in large part, Sir Ben regaled his admirers on *Inside the Actor's Studio* in 2002 with his mockery of the "sing song" accent with which Indians speak English. It is significant that Attenborough chose a man who holds Indians in such contempt to play Gandhi, and it was perhaps in recognition of the fact that this contempt shines through his performance in the film that members of the Motion Pictures Academy of America thought that Mr. Kingsley deserved an Oscar.

At a time when he was the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi granted an interview to an American stringer of dubious renown. This interview with the leader of the most populous democracy was considered worthy of interest to readers in the most powerful democracy in the world at no publication other than *Penthouse*. On odd occasions now and then back in the late 1980s, Mr. Gandhi did manage to earn a passing mention in a part of American media a little more mainstream than *Penthouse*. Not even once did I hear Mr. Gandhi's first name pronounced correctly on radio or TV in the US. There seemed to be a consensus among newscasters in the US, who seemed to have no trouble rolling their mostly Anglo-Saxon tongues round the Romance sounds of a name like Nicolae Ceausescu, that "ji" in "Rajiv" has the same sound as the "Gi" in "Gide."

When Zeenat Aman, a Hindi film actress, was on a visit to London in the 1970s, she was interviewed on radio by the Hindi service of the BBC. Inconveniently for Ms. Aman, the BBC interviewer posed questions to her in Hindi. Unlike Ms. Aman, the interviewer was mindful of the strange coincidence that it was only Hindi speakers who made up the audience of the Hindi service of the BBC. Ms. Aman, who was more interested in showing off her wonderfully clipped English accent, responded in English to every Hindi question. Now, most norms of good manners, Indian or Western, would suggest that a question in Hindi posed to a Hindi film actress being paid for an interview on Hindi radio should elicit a response in Hindi.

However, anglicized Indians do not waste good manners on the menial class to which they think all Hindi speakers belong. Eventually, the BBC interviewer asked Ms. Aman to respond in Hindi. “I will try,” was Ms. Aman’s clipped-accented response. This incident was reported in a passing manner by a Hindi film magazine in India. The report contained no hint of anger, and if any consumer of Hindi cinema felt slighted by the contempt Ms. Aman showed she held Hindi in, it did not lead to the slightest reduction in the numbers in which Hindi speakers continued to flock to her films. It would seem that Hindi speakers who knew of the incident and yet continued to spend their money on films featuring Ms. Aman condoned her behavior, implicitly concurring with her that their language deserves contempt even from those to whom it provides a means of livelihood.

Two very well-known singers from the Hindi cinema, Manna Dey and Talat Mehmood appeared in a concert in the San Francisco Bay area in 1987. While *every single* number performed in the concert was in Hindi, comments by the singers on the numbers they were about to sing were *invariably* in English. The two singers, not too proud to accept money from an audience of Hindi speakers they looked down on, were eager to show that outside their professional life, they had no truck with the servants’ language. Or perhaps both Mr. Dey and Mr. Mehmood somehow concluded it would be rash to assume that Hindi would be readily understood by members of an audience some of whom had paid as much as \$100 to hear them sing Hindi songs.

Shabana Azmi and Farooque Sheikh appeared in a performance of the Urdu play *Tumhari Amrita* at Cambridge, MA in the early 1990s. Because demolition of Babri Masjid had occurred relatively recently, Ms. Azmi took it upon herself to say a few words after the performance on virtues of secularism. Ms. Azmi chose to express herself in English perhaps because she didn’t want to risk exposing her audience to a mind-numbing vernacular like Urdu beyond the medically calibrated dose of 90 minutes at a time that her audience had just endured. Ms. Azmi probably went to a school where students caught uttering even a single word of an Indian vernacular on the school campus would receive corporal punishment. And she lives in a country where it is experimentally proven on a daily basis that sustained exposure to Indian vernaculars has a deleterious effect on thinking ability. No wonder civilized Indians use Indian vernaculars only to issue short commands to their menials, whose mental and social inferiority can be causally attributed to the fact that what they have for a mind is caught in the prison-house of their language.

Evidence of the harm that Indian vernaculars inflict on ratiocinative faculties is showcased in films such as Aparna Sen’s *Mr. And Mrs. Iyer*, which practically suggests that there would be

no communal violence in India if every Indian spoke English. English speaking protagonists of Ms. Sen's film are engaged in nice respectable professions such as medicine and photography, while uncouth Bengali-speaking louts in the film go on a killing rampage. Similarly, the rational "voice of God" narration in Anand Patwardhan's *Father Son and Holy War* is uttered in English, God's own language. In contrast, all the hooligans in the film who go about rioting and barking angry shouts of violent rage speak Hindi or Marathi. The sequence of shots of *Venus of Willendorf* with which Mr. Patwardhan opens his film establishes the fact that Mr. Patwardhan addresses himself in the film to the cosmopolitan audience wise to the cultural connotations of the figurine.

Utter inutility of Indian vernaculars is also reflected in the extent of their usage on the internet. I understand that Google, which has most of the market for online searches, generates its revenues by advertisements. Something called "advanced search" can be conducted on Google to return pages written exclusively in one of 35 languages.<sup>7</sup> Of these, only seven are non-European: Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew<sup>8</sup>, "Indonesian,"<sup>9</sup> Japanese, Korean, and Persian. Oddly, even when you go to the "advanced search" (*vistrit khoj*) from Google in Hindi, the option to conduct *vistrit khoj* in Hindi is not open to you. Significantly, not a single African or Indian language makes the list of 35 languages that Google considers rich in information. Google avers "Don't be Evil" as its "informal corporate motto." Google foundation is engaged in philanthropic activities both in India and in Africa, and I am sure that blind Eurocentric prejudice is not what led its socially conscious management to deny joys of conducting advanced search in their own language to that one third of humanity which dwells in India and Africa.<sup>11</sup> One therefore has to turn to the [presumably non-evil] logic of the market for an explanation why Icelandic and Estonian make the list, while Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, and Tamil do not. Evidently, advertisers are more willing to pay for ads and "sponsored links" on search results for pages written exclusively in Icelandic than for advertising on search results for pages written exclusively in Hindi.

Now, according to the CIA world factbook,<sup>12</sup> as of July 2006 the total population of Iceland and Estonia was 300,000 and 1.3 million<sup>13</sup> respectively. In contrast, the website <http://www.krysstal.com/spoken.html> lists 510 million speakers for Hindi, 215 million speakers for Bengali, 103 million speakers for Punjabi, and 78 million speakers for Tamil.<sup>14</sup> An older source of data, the 1999 Ethnologue Survey of the Summer Institute for Linguistics, lists 189 million and 182 million respectively as the number of Bengali and Hindi speakers. Thus, for every Icelandic speaker, there would appear to be somewhere between 606 to 1700 Hindi speakers in the world. Nonetheless, it appears that those among Iceland's population of 300,000 who read Icelandic but not English are of greater interest to Google

and its customers than those among 182 million Hindi speakers who can read Hindi but not English. Thus, the non-Anglograph fraction of the Icelandic population would seem to play a larger and more powerful role in the global economy than the non-Anglograph (read uncivilized) Hindi speakers. The English language press and media in India, the Indian government, and anglicized Indians take considerable pride in Indian achievements in “IT and IT-Enabled Services [ITES] industries.” The wonders that these IT and ITES industries have wrought for the Indian economy seem not to have empowered too many of the non-Anglograph Indians, not enough at any rate to matter to advertisers.

Information is perhaps an apt word for what turns up when you conduct a search on Google. Thus, the roster of languages for advanced search on Google may have to do with the extent to which Google thinks information<sup>15</sup> is exclusively produced in a given language. Not only are there not many web pages that are conceived and written in Indian vernaculars, there isn't perhaps a great deal of research that is conceived and conducted in Indian vernaculars, either. Therefore, Indian vernaculars are deficient not just in production of information, but also in production of knowledge. Only a miniscule proportion, if any, of the research in humanities, social sciences and cultural studies, even on those issues that deal with Indian polity, society, history, culture and civilization, is conceived and carried out in Indian vernaculars. Most if not all modern Indian painters sign their work in roman rather than an Indic script. Scholarly tomes on Hindi films and Indian pop music and culture, are conceived and written almost exclusively in English. Drugs and pharmaceuticals worth billions of dollars are made and sold in India. I have occasionally come across instances in which information on the contents, dosage, and directions for use on a drug package is in a language other than English in the US. I have never found a single instance in India in which this information is in any language other than English. The textual contents of cigarette packets including the statutory warning are exclusively in English. The statute that mandated the warning was written in English, and enacted by a government that obviously didn't care whether or not the non-Anglograph among the Indian smokers were made aware of the hazards of smoking. It is the roman script that is seen more often than the script for all Indian vernaculars put together on the packaging of DVDs VCDs, audio CDs, and audio and videocassettes, even when the contents are entirely in an Indian vernacular. What is even more strange about this state of affairs is that nobody finds it strange.

In a recent article in the *Sunday Indian*, which I think was conceived and written originally in English, though it also appeared in the Hindi version of the magazine, Mr. Rahul Dev predicts that “[w]ithin the next 25 years [what Mr. Dev calls his beloved] Hindi will become



the language of the poor, the backward-the drivers, servants, the *subziwallas*.” Is it now, or has it ever been, anything else?

In 1947, in a speech conceived, written and delivered in English, Jawaharlal Nehru referred to a “tryst with destiny” and heralded the arrival of a time “when we shall redeem our pledge not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially.” He went on to suggest that independence from the British was a time “when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.” Some 60 years after that day, it appears that this utterance found by the somnolent soul of the Indian nation happened to be in clipped accented English, the accent having been doubtless acquired when the aforesaid national soul was “long suppressed”. This soulful national utterance, I am sure, is music to the ears of Nehru’s biological and intellectual descendents, the Anglophone Indians that Nehru’s “we” in “we shall redeem our pledge” referred to. I think it remains unintelligible, perhaps even inaudible, to the non-Anglophone Indians who not only remain excluded from whatever chimera of nationhood Nehru had dreamt up, but also disenfranchised not merely politically, but also economically, academically, culturally, and intellectually.

## Notes

1. It wasn’t until he was 18 that Kanchhedia Chamaar realized that God spoke and understood English and nothing else. Because unfamiliarity with the *lingua divina* was a matter of intense shame at Delhi School of Economics in the 1970s, he started learning English on the sly, and continues to be consumed by the process to this day. Over a period of three years after he had received his master’s degree, no fewer than one hundred and eight Indian firms found him unfit for gainful employment. While doing his PhD in the 1980s, he found that at Universities in the US, even those not fluent in English were treated as human beings, a dignity that not everybody seemed willing to accord to him in Delhi. He has been hiding in the US ever since. Contact: [kanchhedia@gmail.com](mailto:kanchhedia@gmail.com)
2. Figures from [www.finance.yahoo.com](http://www.finance.yahoo.com) on November 25, 2006.
3. This doesn’t apply to the languages on the card I don’t read. However, I should indeed be vastly surprised to discover that the Chinese and the Japanese texts contain any inaccuracies or oddities, either of orthography or of diction.
4. See wikipedia entry on her.
5. Written, thank God, in roman script.
6. See her CV at <http://www.unm.edu/~fjussawa/fjcv.html>.
7. The drop-down menu for advanced search lists two versions of Chinese: simplified and traditional. The languages add up to 36 if the two versions are counted as two different languages.
8. Though I count Hebrew as non-European, I understand that most Hebrew speakers live in Israel, and most Israelis are of European ancestry.
9. Presumably Bahasa Indonesia.
10. *Vistrit* comes from *vistar*, and, in my opinion, corresponds more to “detailed” or “expanded” rather than to “advanced”.
11. I am sure that, unlike some Americans that I have met, most people who work for Google know that India is not a part of Africa.

12. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>. I use this source because it is free, and because the information is recent. I assume that CIA gets its facts on most countries right, except of course those that the US wants to bring democracy and liberty to. None of the countries information pertaining to which I rely on the factbook for has any oil to speak of, and therefore faces no imminent prospect of democratization.
13. The CIA factbook says that only 67.3% of the total population of Estonia is made up of Estonian speakers, which would suggest that there are about 875,000 speakers of Estonian in Estonia.
14. The table on the web site mentions no source. The only legend that appears at the bottom of the table is "© 1997, 2006."
15. Or such information as may be of interest to the customers that Google advertisers want to reach.