

Reviews

The Linguistic Wheel Coming Full Circle: A Review of *Dauka Puraan* by Subramani (Star Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi; 521pp)

When a Professor of English who is well known for his academic and creative writing in that language writes what is arguably the largest Pacific novel in Fiji-Hindi, at least some curious readers might want to know why. Perhaps it is a case of the return of the proverbial prodigal son with a linguistic twist, if not the linguistic wheel coming full circle. The language used in this extraordinary new novel, *Dauka Puraan* by Subramani, is indeed intriguing. It is in fact the Hindi of the author's childhood as spoken in rural Labasa, an area belonging to the second largest island in Fiji. However, it is a language that is still familiar to those of us who have come from other parts of rural Fiji.

To have written in English would have been to have captured, at least potentially, a much larger readership. Even standard Hindi would have had a sizable following. Why then the choice of a version of Bhojpuri brought in from the sub-continent during the indenture period? The author has told me that at first he wanted to write the novel in English but changed his mind when his characters didn't look authentic enough speaking in that foreign tongue. Rural or folk Hindi seemed more appropriate for the kind of characters the author was visualising. And I'm sure, most readers of Hindi will be glad with Subramani's final choice, for the real fun of this novel resides in the language itself. The principal strength of this unusual book lies in its humour, which in turn lies in the language, in the way of seeing and saying things. After all, every language has implicit in it its own distinct world view.

One can virtually pick any page of this tome and be assured of deriving pleasure. Overall, the plot itself is of no serious consequence compared to the attention paid to the language and its inherent humour. To put it another way, if the greatest strength of *Dauka Puraan* lies in its humour, that humour springs from the way the author makes his various characters use the language. The right turn of phrase at the right time is like good timing in the telling of jokes. What's more, one recognises on every page that's exactly how people used to speak—and that some people still do. For me personally, it is the authenticity of the language use that really makes the novel work. I am constantly surprised by the author's exceptional memory in terms of language. There is constant and thrilling reminder of phrases and idioms one once knew quite well.

The novel depicts a period of about four decades since the early 1950s. For the writer as well as the reader, a sense of nostalgia cannot be avoided, for the language of one's childhood perhaps holds a special place in our lives. On a more political level, Subramani has gone on record saying that he wanted 'to make the non-literate, the poor, the rural people the main characters because they are left out of books, and even

if they are mentioned they are never given a name or identity'. Speaking at the novel's Suva launch, Mr Jai Ram Reddy, a highly respected Fijian statesman, made an interesting statement in this respect: 'I can now see how literature can work for democracy—by including those who are excluded'. There is no doubt that one of the many satisfactions one gets from reading the novel is the realisation that ordinary, often non-literate farmers and other rural people have lives, aspirations, hopes and fears that are very real. Their lives have a legitimacy that town-folk often forget about or are unaware of.

It's amusing to see the reaction of a mixed audience when excerpts are read out loud. People who understand Fiji Hindi break into frequent bursts of laughter while the others watch on silently, unable to fully appreciate what all the fuss is about. It is reminiscent of Salman Rushdie's account of his experience at the Commonwealth literature conference held in Sweden when Ngugi wa Thiongo from Kenya, a committed Marxist and an overtly political writer, 'expressed his rejection of the English Language by reading his own work in Swahili, with a Swedish version read by his translator', leaving the rest of the 'erudite and sophisticated' audience completely bemused ('Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist'). While Subramani's temporary rejection of the English language may not be as political or drastic, it is certainly 'a blow for our vernaculars', to use his own words.

But not everyone would agree with him necessarily. It is interesting to note that in some elitist quarters the spoken vernacular, particularly of the rural areas, is looked down on by comparison to standard Hindi. Quite snootily, some people reject Fiji Hindi as second-rate, a shadow ('chhaya') of formal Hindi. Of course, in their supercilious logic such people would also have to deny the primacy of oral language over the written language, unable to see that very few real people use standard or formal language exclusively. Which is the shadow and which the real thing is indeed an interesting question, if not an instructive one. The whole debate is not very different from the old question of what dialect was best suited for BBC broadcasts!

The author himself says that the characters in the novel speak in rural folk Hindi. Therefore it is only appropriate to write in their 'own language rather than in standard Hindi or English'. The vernacular is also 'the site of resistance to aspects of globalisation that is working towards homogenisation, or levelling of cultures'. Perhaps for Professor Subramani to conquer English and then revert back to the language of his childhood may be to complete the process of making oneself free.

Of course, folk language frequently includes crude words and phrases systematically avoided by more formal or standard dialects. One of my more religious academic friends finds himself in a real dilemma: while he enjoys the novel, he can't be seen in public promoting unseemly language or swear words that we hear every day! It's a bit like some people wishing to return their knighthood once the Beatles were bestowed that honour!

Essentially, *Dauka Puraan* is a novel. Its form is based on a conceit. The novel starts off with an overseas academic arriving in the curiously named protagonist Fijilal's village wishing to meet the 'daukans' and write their history. With a name like Vidyadhar Shrivastow, the academic is obviously a diasporic Indian—and not so obviously an allusion to V.S. Nai-

paul, who won the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature just after the publication of *Dauka Puraan*.

The glee with which Fijilal takes on the offer for telling the history of the *daukans* is quite palpable. Of course, Fijilal fully concurs with the academic that everyone deserves his or her history to be recorded, no matter how insignificant. He will decide what to include and what to leave out; after all, history, biography or autobiography is a matter of selection. If orthodox historians have concentrated their efforts exclusively on important people and events, Fijilal will dwell on the left-overs, on what the educated historians have discarded. And this decision gives Fijilal a special sense of power, which he can gloat over: '*wahi sab saan ke banaib dauka puran*'. The story is not only bullshit, which is a large part of it presumably—the word is 'gobar', cow dung, and every Hindu knows the value of that.

The narrator tells us that the novel is particularly about rivers and mountains, moonlit nights, births, deaths and marriages (normal rites of passage), pilgrimages, and a woman named Pingala, no doubt a reference to the underlying theme of romance and music present in the novel. Through his descriptions we get more than a glimpse of rural Indian life in Vanualevu, the second largest island of Fiji. We also get an idea of the life in the CSR 'lines' next to the sugar-mill. When Fijilal decides to go on a pilgrimage-of-sorts, looking for his soul as well as his saviour, we are treated to life in selected parts of the main island, Vitilevu, as seen from the perspective of the rural Labasan that Fijilal in fact is.

Fijilal firmly believes the history of a country cannot merely be an exclusive, elitist exercise. A real history must include the common people as well, the uneducated rural folk who are all-too-often neglected by conventional historians forever looking for documentary evidence. The value of oral literature or evidence is all too often ignored. So *Dauka Puraan* is virtually a written version of a history which is not normally written.

On the blurb, using a theoretical buzz-word or two, Harish Trivedi, Professor of English at the University of Delhi, makes the following interesting statement:

Some of the most eminent theorists of postcolonial discourse have for some years been lamenting that an authentic self-representation of the lower classes is not available in literature because "the subaltern cannot speak". They have never realised that even if the poor subaltern were to speak, he could hardly speak in English. The subaltern could have found his own voice only in a language such as Fiji-Hindi used in *Dauka Puraan*, as indeed he has.

Thus a key theme of the novel surrounds the issue of language itself. And as the blurb says, it takes the debate on language in postcolonial literature to its logical conclusion. As Professor Trivedi says, it is quite something to narrate in common speech 'a whole novel on the epic scale, and this is just the wonder that Subramani has wrought'.

Fijilal, thrilled by the possibility of his people's history being recorded for posterity, insists on certain house rules—no tape recorders to be used, oral informal storytelling to take at least three days, etc.—for the history will comprise a thousand and one stories. At one stage, he presumably jocularly introduces himself as Fijilal Girmmit Ram Dauka, 'girmmit'

being a term closely linked with the indenture experience. It is, therefore, important to emphasise that Fijilal is in fact a likeable rogue, and as such readers and listeners can afford to be indulgent enough to suspend their disbelief. A special feature of the novel is that it celebrates joy and goodness and leaves alone evil and intrigue. The main character might be a *dauka*, but his heart is in the right place. He is a person who befriends people easily because he can be relied upon, thanks to his basically generous spirit.

The novel is full of narration. At the slightest of excuses, the protagonist is ready to detour. Narratives are fitted into other narratives and the stories go on and on. The book neatly depicts the oral nature of narratives. As we know, deviations and additions are very much part and parcel of oral story-telling. But more importantly, the story seems to be told in a manner designed to echo the rural Fiji Indian talent—or is it need?—for non-stop self-regeneration. The pain is in the background, unseen. Laughter is one way of managing that pain. If the need for talk, for narratives, for laughter is compulsive, it is a necessary counterweight to Fijilal and his people's personal tragedy, given the country's recent history of coups and displacement of farmers from their leased land.

Having said that, one must remember that *Dauka Puraan* is a novel and not a history book. A novel is meant to entertain and facts and figures given in it are not to be taken too seriously. That is one reason the main character of the novel must be taken with a grain of salt. And that's part of the fun. You can't take everything he says altogether seriously. Take, for example, what he says about his hand at the time of his birth!

The author says that, moved by the uprooting of farmers and consequently a loss of a whole way of life, he wanted his novel to preserve that fast-vanishing culture and language. People who have lived in any part of rural Fiji in the period the novel circumscribes, will easily recognise, often with nostalgia, the way of life and the language. This is a very strong part of the pleasure of perusing a novel like *Dauka Puraan*. For younger people or urban dwellers, the novel will serve as an archive of life and language peculiar to a particular place and time.

The author, through his chief narrator, catalogues and maps certain names and places to hold them still. He was 'moved by the uprooting of farmers'; for him eviction meant 'not only the loss of livelihood for farmers, but also the loss of a whole way of life'. The various narrations give us a panoramic view of village life in the past, particularly the communal life of Indo-Fijians. If the Indo-Fijian rural life is at the centre, the indigenous Fijian life occupies a significant periphery.

Subramani aimed to have laughter on every page—and to have achieved that throughout the 520-odd pages of the tome is a truly remarkable feat by any standards. The desire to entertain, to introduce humour in a depressed state of affairs is no doubt deliberate on the author's part, for there is no better antidote to political tension, instability and uncertainty than plain open laughter. The novel is then a trip to the author's own childhood and the reader is invited to share the sense of nostalgia that is very much a part of such a journey, in terms of both language and experiences. Childhood often appears to be the happiest times of our life, free of the anxieties and complications of adult life and certainly free of the times Fiji has gone through in the recent past.

While on the whole I am most impressed by the achievement, I have some small reservations. For example, a practical problem, from the reader's point of view, has to do with length. On the whole the chapters are often too long, without breathing spaces. Longer chapters could have been divided into shorter sections, so that the reader can take more convenient breaks. Several readers have commented on this aspect of the text. One can understand such a complaint given the fact that the Pacific islands are not known for their avid readers. A related problem is the overall length of the novel, and hence the cost. I suggested to the author that perhaps it could have been written in two separate volumes. But the author responded by presenting me with two bits of pure *dauka* logic that seemed irrefutable: first, because it was a *puraan*, it had to be long; and secondly, photocopying such a tome will certainly prove to be a prohibitive exercise!

Dauka Puraan is the longest piece of fiction from Fiji in any language. It is a deceptively simple novel and people can read it at various levels. With laughter on every page notwithstanding, the novel is part comic and part tragic, half serious and half farcical. The plot itself is relatively weak in comparison to the vitality of the language. One does not want to read on simply to find out 'what happens next'. One reads on because the language of the text is so engaging. While the characters are neatly defined in many cases, the plot is merely in outline form.

An aspect that can be improved with a reprint is better proof-reading. My personal irritation was the author's penchant for coining words together when indeed they could be separated. The joining of two familiar words into a single word slows down the reading as the newly coined word looks unfamiliar. Again, I raised this issue with the author before the book's publication, but Subramani insisted on this kind of coinage in the name of accuracy and authenticity. In other words, for him the spelling must exactly reflect the actual pronunciation. From the reader's point of view, however, it must be admitted that sometimes the deciphering becomes an annoying linguistic game.

There are other less important personal dissatisfactions; for example, when Fijilal and the novel come to Vitilevu, there isn't sufficient change in the language to signal the move. Perhaps also more could have been done to make the language peculiar to the various characters—so that the reader could tell who is speaking from the way one spoke.

But this is nit-picking. When compared to all the many strengths of the novel, the weaknesses pale into significance. As the famous novelist Henry James says, the only requirement we can impose on a good novel is that 'it be interesting'. And I can assure the reader that *Dauka Puraan* is most certainly interesting. For one thing, traces of the author's erudition in literature—or his penchant for films for that matter—are to be found everywhere in the novel. There is no shortage of literary allusions. I have already mentioned the case of Naipaul. On the first page of the novel there is also a teasing reference to a thoroughly '*dauka*' friend, Satendra Nandan's notoriously funny lines regarding the arrival of indentured labourers to Fiji: '*Babu, bada dukh se ain—rowat, gawat, heelat, dolat, adat padat*'. Such inter-textuality adds immensely to the fun of reading the novel.

Whether these allusions are serious or tongue-in-cheek, the reader can decide for himself or herself. The images of *chutney* and pickles are

subtle references to the work of Rushdie and Roy. The narrator chooses his own language as a reaction against the *chutnification* of language that occurs when two or more languages are mixed. But even though the narrator wants to avoid making *chutney* or pickle out of language (or history for that matter), he cannot help using a variety of languages in his own and others' narratives. *Chutnification* seems unavoidable in the modern world.

If there is sadness in the novel, it results from life itself, the sense of passage of time and everyone growing older and dying; newer generations taking over from, and replacing, the older generation. There is the sense that those good old days are not going to return.

There is an underlying religiosity in the novel as a whole and some aspects of this religiosity are subjected to light-hearted satirical treatment. Furthermore, people are often preoccupied with black magic and exorcism of one sort or another, and shades of insanity are never too far away. If there is superstition, there is also plenty of plain common sense in the life of the rural people. Bigger issues are always hinted at, not necessarily spelt out.

One of the funniest episodes in the novel is the conference of *aujhas* (exorcists or witch-doctors). The conference is meticulously organised by the villagers, complete with name tags and end-of-conference tours! No doubt Subramani's personal experience puts him in an ideal position to delectably satirise the many literary and other pretentious conferences he has observed, if not participated in or organised. As one reader puts it, the grand scale of the humour includes the fascinating 'panorama of myths, ceremonies, customs, traditions, fears and hopes of simple rural people', the nostalgic depictions of the farcical goings on at a school or at the introduction of the gramophone and the radio in village life, or the 'hilarious account of a group of old indentured labourers going to their first movie'.

The novel is not only great fun to read but also a ground-breaking fictional creation. It is epic in both its size and ostensible intentions. The title itself is an indicator of the covert complexity of the work. The *Puraanas* are supposed to be sacred books of mythological and epic lore compiled by the legendary sage and poet Vyasa. There are 18 *Puraanas* (*puraana*, 'ancient, legendary') and associated with each a number of secondary *puraanas*. Among the latter are reckoned the great epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

The allusion of the ancient sacred epics is as deliberately facetious as the first part of the title, *Dauka*. Apart from referring to a certain low caste of people, it suggests the idea of a rogue, a scoundrel, a 'larrikan'—in the Australian sense. In the design of the book, the novel pretends to be a history of *daukas*. That at one level at least the history of *daukas*, or conmen who are habitual liars, should be associated with sacred books is hilarious. If for most people the title, *Dauka Puraan*, itself intriguing there are others who would find it somewhat offensive—even without reading a single page of the novel! (It's a bit like the sad fate of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*). They see a *puraan* as a sacred book and find its association with as low a term as 'dauka' simply inexcusable. But people who take offence at this jocular and deliberate coinage ought to realise that even the great *puraan* the *Mahabharat* is used metaphorically like this on a daily basis when referring to huge family fights. No offence is taken

then even by the most rabid fundamentalists.

Of course, as a reviewer I cannot disclose the ending. But here's an anecdote concerning the author that might stand as an apt if serendipitous parallel to that end. Like other academics interested in postcolonial literatures, Professor Subramani attended the last ACLALS conference, held in Canberra. Among the delegates was Professor Vijay Mishra, formerly of Fiji but now at Murdoch University. Having got his hands on one of the first copies of *Dauka Puraan* at the conference, Vijay got so interested in the novel that he read it within 48 hours, which in itself must be some kind of a record! Not only that, he decided to replace his already prepared theoretical paper with a new paper—on *Dauka Puraan*, of course! Unaware of Vijay Mishra's last minute change of plans, Subramani arrived at the conference venue just as Professor Mishra was ending his erudite paper on the late arriving professor's novel. People present at the hilarious session assure me that the whole incident occurred in pure *dauka* style.

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