

Preface

I arrived in West Lafayette, Indiana, on 15 September, 1987. That was the year Alan Bloom had published *The Closing of the American Mind*, which was on the lists of all the book clubs I tried to join. The central thesis of the book, that a curriculum should include the traditional canon of Western culture starting from the Greeks and Romans because an 'openness' to all types of literature and ideas in American schools had made young Americans confused about what is really good literature, was provocative. According to Bloom (1987) this 'openness' had actually resulted in closing the American mind. Bloom's idea was the antithesis of Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, which most English literature students in developing countries are familiar with, and which attacks this very canon. Said's contention is that colonial empires were founded and hegemonized on the basis of the superiority of Greek and Roman origins of Western culture.

When I described Bloom's controversial ideas to my father in New Delhi in one of my phone conversations, he remarked in perfect Indian English, 'हाँ (yes), that means that these Americans are like Indians only. The only problem is they don't know how to speak English'. As I had been hired by Purdue University as a teaching assistant to teach Rhetoric and Composition in the English Department, he had some evidence for his second contention. The first was based on the fact that any society that can live with glaring contradictions must be like India.

The India I left in 1987, at the age of 23, had a socialist economy where the middle class had elevated financial resourcefulness and managing scarcity to an art. It was not unusual for women to open presents carefully so that they could use the wrapping paper again and give children dough to play with before making roti instead of buying plasticine (now called playdoh). It was an India where color TV was just a few years old, there was one government owned channel and all the advertisements on TV were stills. 'Readymade' clothes, i.e. mass produced garments, which no Indian trusted, as most people used tailors, had just entered the market. When I was in high school, there was national pride in the fact that the Coke company was disallowed from doing business in India and an Indian Campa Cola was launched.

I lived in Philadelphia from 1989 onwards as a member of the Penn community and a student at the Graduate School of Education. This melting pot experience, called hybridity in postcolonial theory, greatly

influenced me. The strongest influence in my graduate experience was that of Nancy H. Hornberger and her work in Peru. The years she spent in Peru and the way she lived in a rural community by participating in their work was inspiring. Equally inspiring were friendships with my colleagues who were working on language in education issues in Ecuador, Arkansas and Indonesia. I only brought a rudimentary knowledge of Said with me from India. It was attending seminars at Penn by members of the South Asia, Anthropology and History departments, along with the enormous resources of the Van Pelt library that made this rudimentary interest into the conceptual framework for my dissertation.

The dissertation that emerged from this experience was Vidyashakti: Literacy and Empowerment in India, the Continua of Biliteracy in Action (Vaish, 2004). In this text I compared two schools with different bilingual programs: the Rajkiya Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya (RSKV) and the Nagar Nigam Bal Vidyalaya (NNBV). In an attempt to tell this story to a wider audience I have used only the RSKV in this book, as this is the school that includes English substantially in its curriculum. Another difference between the two texts is that my dissertation was only on the primary wing of the RSKV and the NNBV. In this book I have also analyzed data from the high school of the RSKV as I wanted to make comments on the life pathways of the graduating students after 12 years of English-medium education.

When I started my fieldwork in December 2000, India had been globalizing for nearly 10 years. In this India billboards for foreign brands like Benetton and Coke (yes, the company finally made it into the Indian market) jostled with signs for the Rapidex English Speaking Course, which promised to inject fluency in English and confidence into Indians and at the same time open enchanted doors of opportunity. There was a rash of cyber cafes all over the face of New Delhi, most of them operating on personal generators, as New Delhi does not generate enough electricity for its 13 million inhabitants.

In 1987, when I moved to the USA, if there was news about India in *The New York Times* by Barbara Crosette, it was usually about floods and earthquakes. In 2007 *The International Herald Tribune*, which includes articles from *The New York Times*, reports on India as a developing country with enormous potential and as the center of the world's outsourcing businesses because of its growing English-knowing middle class. The international image of India has changed in the last two decades from an elephantine socialist economy to one of the fastest growing 'Asian tiger' economies; the role of the increasing pool of English-knowing bilinguals has been central to this change in image.

I currently work as an Assistant Professor in Singapore's National Institute of Education. The Center for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, to which I am attached, conducts research on the government-run school system of Singapore. Thus this book has given my evenings and weekends windows with which to explore other avenues, to return the gaze towards home. It has also been interesting to compare these two postcolonies – India and Singapore – that have taken different pathways in their economy, politics and bilingual educational policy after independence from the British. But that is another story...

Viniti Vaish
Singapore

