

March 16 – 31, 2018

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MADRAS MUSINGS

English made easy in recent book...

The *Words in Indian English: A Guide to English Communication in South Asia* by S. Muthiah, (Palaniappa Brothers) was recently released. The overflowing hall reflected the audience's interest in the etymological theme of the evening and their high regard for the author and his writings.

Dr. Albert P. Rayan, a Professor of English, and Editor of the *Journal of ELT*, expounded the implications of adapted English and how even that was not uniform all over the country as each region had its own cultural variant. Shanta Gabriel, a former English Language teacher, explained select portions from the book in a delivery marked by authentic pronunciation and diction, which, incidentally, demonstrated how English should be spoken. In a discussion with S.R. Madhu, senior Journalist, the author said that spoken and written English among the younger generation are today poor mainly because of lack of qualified and trained language teachers. He believed that this situation must be corrected if India is to retain the unique advantage of being an English-knowing nation. But at the same time, whatever we are taught, we will continue to speak our own variants of English.

The book catalogues Indian usages that have crept into Indian English, almost making it a different language from the original. The book would, therefore, come in handy to visitors to India to be able to understand English as spoken and written here – peppered with local expressions and literal translations of culture-

related usages and idioms. The book is *English Made Easy*.

The proceedings would have led several among the audience to introspect on their present speaking and writing styles. Such an exercise might at times be unsettling. Years and years ago, a friend suggested I read *Plain Words* by Ernest Gowers, an ex-Post Master General of UK, which was a classic in those times, on "correct English". The reading knocked out my confidence to speak and write. I was all at sea till, after a time, I managed to regain my orientation. The second knock-out came years later when I submitted my very first professional report, of quite some length, to my boss. He was an Englishman who was a product of a Public School and

Oxford. Incidentally, Englishmen, who were not fortunate enough to go to Public School, developed a complex in engaging with their own fellow countrymen of the Public School variety. To return to the story, my boss told me that all I needed to do was to re-read the report and remove superfluous articles, prepositions, adverbs and adjectives. I did just that. Not much of my report was left. I relived this experience listening to the speakers of that evening. I felt like the centipede, in a Greek saying, which was advised to go to a consultant to know how to use its hundred legs in a scientific manner. After the consultation, the centipede is said to be standing still at the same spot to this day.

The MC held the meeting on a tight leash and ensured that it did not ramble into irrelevance. The speaker chosen on the spot, either by arrangement or by chance, to propose the vote of thanks was it seemed, accustomed to speaking English the Indian way. At the outset, he calmed fears of a long speech under the guise of a vote of thanks, by assuring us that he had no time to make a speech, much as he would like, as "his wife was not well, was lonely at home and being the only husband of his wife, he had to go home very fast to take care of her". The occasion, however, demanded that he should thank the speakers on the dais and praise their accomplishments. He said they were all nice people when someone whispered to him that it is not nice to use the word *nice* in this context as the word, in *prosa* English, really meant *slimy* or *tricky*. He defended his usage saying what I tell, in India, we tell like that only. Eventually, he yielded and said that the people on the dais were not nice at all. At this, again, there were murmurs and he corrected himself saying that the persons on the stage were not nice and they were good. Even this did not go down well. Having got into a verbal trap, he decided to wind up the meeting by thanking everyone profusely and concluded that it was time for all to go and come, a phrase the author of the book regularly uses.

... & more of it

Reference MMM's column on Indian English (MM, March 1st), here are a few suggested inclusions:

- What is your good name? (As though there is a bad name)
- You may be rest assured
- He gets annoyed at small small things
- Britisher
- Native place
- He went on talking about this thing and that thing
- Honourable Supreme Court / High Court
- History sheeter – This uniquely Indian (Madras!) expression for a habitual offender has gained a fair amount of respectability, with even news papers like *The Hindu* freely using it. The honorific *is* bestowed probably only on some one who has a crime history at least one foolscap sheet long.
- I will give you a ring – the speaker has no intention of presenting a diamond ring but intends to only call you on the phone.

Then there are some English-Indian (Tamil) combo expressions:

eg. This is the wayaa? for 'Is this the way?'

The list could go on..There is a delightful book *Indlish* by Jyoti Sanyal, formerly of Statesman, Calcutta (published by Viva Books, 2006) which has delved deep into this fascinating subject. But of course, the field is constantly evolving.

K.Balakesari
balakesarik@gmail.com

N.S. Parthasarathy
pacha1931@gmail.com