

The Unbearable Freshness of Things

In this age when everything is getting increasingly “glocal,” small-town India’s rummy appropriation of the English language is, *By God se*, downright amusing.

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The small town in Bihar where we had stopped for the night exuded an old-world charm. The chowkidar at the Circuit House was courteous and suitably obsequious. He asked me to go and become “fresh” and then he would lay out dinner since it was already late. Assuming that he wanted me to have a wash, I promptly went and washed my face and came out for dinner in under two minutes. I could not figure out the extremely surprised expression on his face but decided to ignore it. It was only much later that I found out that “*fresh hona*” in eastern India is the polite cognate for evacuation of the bowels!

Interestingly, the mobility of people from the East, especially in the last few decades, has ensured that this expression is now commonly understood even in North India. Or why else would a popular laxative “chooran” advertise itself as “Easyfresh?”

But this was not always the case. Expressions, especially those derived from English, have changed. When I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s—in the small, dusty town of Gurgaon (yes, hard it may be to believe that the Cybercity was once indeed a truly small town)—there were several English words which were common currency. These were used by everyone, including those who had no idea whatsoever of the English language. But they had entered the common idiom and were easily understood in their nuances. Of course, they sounded weird, or indeed, in some cases, plain wrong to someone who was not familiar with the angularities of the local language.

“*By God se*” was one such expression. It had nothing to do with the fanatic Hindu Mahasabha hero but was simply a way to attest to the veracity of one’s statement as in “*By God se, mere paas koi paisa nahin hai*”—when asked to treat a friend. To curse one’s luck would be to exclaim “*Meri to bad luck kharaab hai*.” The redundancy in this never seemed to bother us, maybe because as the linguists tell us, the more redundant a language, the better it is!

Redundancy, it seems, was popular: “*Sunday vale din jaana hai*” or “*Birthday vale din ham appu ghar jaayenge*” were common. Another peculiarity was to refer to a cousin as “cousin brother” or “cousin sister.” In fact, this one is so ingrained that I have heard it being used even now. And as children, one always craved for “*lemonchoos*” which was simply fruit-flavoured hard sweets mostly manufactured then

by Ravalgaon Sweets. For adults, these were the preferred remedy for motion sickness.

“*Holsol*” and “*lumsum*” are two expressions which were not in frequent use earlier but are now used extensively, especially by artisans and shopkeepers. The meaning conveyed by “*holsol*” is not quite the same as its homophone, whole sole. It is commonly used to refer to the whole of things rather than a single agency with complete control. Thus, “*Holsol mein 4 din ka kaam hai*.” Similarly, “*lumsum*” means slightly different from its basic root of “lump sum.” It typically refers to an approximation rather than a sum. Thus, “*Lumsum mein 50 rupaiye lagenge*.”

Words or expressions also undergo an evolution with time in terms of their context. My favourite example is the use of the word “local” to describe an inferior, non-brand name product. Thus, earlier one could either buy a cheap “local” fan or mixie (itself a strange word for a mixer!) or buy one from Murphy (of the chubby-cheeked boy fame) or the time-tested Bajaj. But now things seem to have become inverted. The other day when I went to buy an electronic call bell, the shopkeeper offered a “local” one for ₹100 while a branded one was going for ₹175. This seemed alright till I realised that the “local” one was made in China and the branded one was made in Uttarakhand! Maybe we have taken to heart the new wave concept of the “glocal!”

Then there are some expressions which seem to have become obsolete because of changing societal mores. In our small town of the 1960s, a girl wearing a sleeveless dress or trousers or, heaven forbid, seen talking to members of the opposite sex in college was invariably termed “forward” as in “*Woh to bahut forward hai*.” Now, with jeans becoming ubiquitous and more and more girls joining the workforce, this expression is outdated.

On the other hand, some words in Hindi are still used commonly though their origins are not very clear. Thus, while a screwdriver is obviously a “*pechkas*,” a plier is a “*plaas*,” which seems to have no connection to its functionality but instead is obviously a vernacular adaptation of “pliers.” Interestingly, the plumber’s wrench or monkey wrench for some reason has become “*tota plaas*” (parrot wrench) in the vernacular, no doubt owing to its peculiar shape.

Similarly, when you first learned to ride a bicycle, you always rode “*karanchi*,” which was possibly a distortion

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of the Hindi word for scissors, given the contorted shape that one had to acquire to ride the bicycle, not sitting on the seat (which was too high) but in a sort of a cross-shaped fashion.

And when one got some goods transported, one had to go and get the “*bilty*” released as in “*bilty chuddwana*.” A “*bilty*” is basically a dispatch note or a goods receipt with all the information about transportation charges, consignee, value of goods, etc. From the sound of it, it seems to be a distortion of some English word (maybe bill of lading) but it is not clear which one. However, this is still used extensively and in our Digital India, there is now even a package developed by Manglait Solutions called “*Bilty Software!*”

During my recent visit to Bihar, when I asked the driver about the bad condition of the highway, he assured me that a few miles on, the road was “*phor lane*.” And, after a little distance, we did come to a divided road. Except this one was a six-laned highway rather than a four-laned one! Clearly, “*phor lane*” is a concept which has little to do with its literal meaning.

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