In the beginning was the word

Language does not simply mirror our world. Language makes it

When ninth-graders in an English class in Singapore handed in their story-writing assignments, the teacher noted that every one of the students, strongly influenced by prescribed texts, had created characters with blonde hair and blue eyes — such is the power of a language to colour the mind.

Does this sound familiar?

The second language of these students had demolished their sense of self so completely that not one of them thought that their brown or 'yellow' skins and black hair were worth fictionalising. Their Indian teacher came up with a solution: literary artillery in the form of a reading list to win the war for the Asian mind. The primary preoccupation of anyone working with languages and cultural histories would be to build as robust an intellectual tradition as possible. With the primacy of English in our own studies in India, this is not the case.

Artistic product
Can we not clip three hours a week from science classes (which can wait till children have the vocabulary to understand concepts) and use them to teach a regional language with the care and rigour we give English? Learning two languages will open up two language worlds because language does not simply mirror our world. Language makes it. Our model might be twice-Booker awardee J.M. Coetzee who said that he is the artistic product of more than one tradition.

Once upon a time, learning in India was synonymous with knowledge of either Persian or Sanskrit. By the 19th century, it was the ability to read and write English. This happened slowly, with state support, and changed everything about the way language, literature and culture had been viewed. Our transition from the oral to the written and from manuscript to print culture telescoped, with English triggering the standardisation and development of Indian languages via grammars, textbooks and knowledge production.

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Two hundred years go, identifying suitable study material for Indians from English literature set off a furious discussion in England. As the debate raged, colonial admirers of Indian knowledge systems wanted to offer Oriental texts and the classical languages of India in schools. But the Anglicists, and their cousins the evangelists, argued passionately against this proposal of the "Orientalists".

They insisted that the selections had to be chosen with a keen eye on moral grandeur. "No" to 'The Eve of St Agnes' and "Yes" to 'Paradise Lost'. There was, besides, a sociopolitical tension, a schism between the way Indian language presses represented the faces of their respective regions and the way the English-knowing bilingual elite distanced themselves from what they saw as 'backward' India while aligning themselves with "modern" interpretations of reality. They drew their identity from this association. These parallel truths continued into the domain of literature.

Around the time imperial plans to make the subcontinent English were being welded into place by Lord Bentinck's English Education Act (1835), Wilhelm von Humboldt in Germany declared that man lives as language leads him to live: "By the very act of spinning language out of himself, he spins language into himself," adding that the only escape from one's circle of language was to step into the circle of another language. Going by his thesis, a certain section of India has done very well.

Civilising mission
Every day we escape from our language circles and enter others by reading translations of each others' lives via the escape chute — English, the very language which was originally structured for study in order to civilise us, rationalise our thinking and introduce modern science into our medieval lives. Though the enterprise of English in India began as a plan which would operate in the service of the coloniser, it gave the country a language which promoted democracy and nationhood. Which other language enables us, without moving any further than a bookshelf in the same room and in the span of a single morning, to access a poem originally written in Asamiya, a novel in Odia, a one-act play in Telugu and a memoir in Marathi? It's worth noting that each rendition left its imprint on English as well.

We need to remind ourselves that we are a country with more than a thousand mother tongues. In her essay 'Authoring the Other-Text', Snehaprava Das points out that the Atharva Veda mentions many languages and religions in the land (even at that time). So today, translation can not only be a reconciling force but also a strategy to subvert hierarchies and check any form of domination in a multi-lingual society. We cannot reverse the clock, but translation, the liberating taproot of our linguistic consciousness, can feed the great tree of India.