

English teachers as in the past. Furthermore, they have little occasion to meet our people socially and so brush it up; intercourse is official and at a minimum, and even where there are mixed clubs the two communities in them keep apart. So it is not surprising that their English is poor. They have learnt it from Indians and practise it on Indians. And if you are disposed to be contemptuous about this, what about your French? You have probably learnt it from English people and practised it on English people. What sort of impression do you expect to make on a Frenchman?

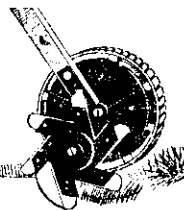
Why talk English at all? Ah! This question was hotly debated at the P.E.N. conference of All-India writers. Writers from central or upper India were in favour of Urdu or Hindi as a common language for the whole peninsula. Writers from Bengal favoured Bengali, and it has great claims from the literary point of view. Writers from the south, on the other hand, preferred English. The debate, if I may say so, continues, and into it, as into everything, come politics. I mention it to indicate to you the trend of events, the change in emphasis. Meanwhile, in this uneasy interregnum, English does get talked and gets interlarded in the oddest way with the Indian vernacular. I was travelling one day to Baroda in a crowded second-class carriage. Indians, my luggage, their luggage, myself and a number of loose oranges were piled up together in confusion, and the Indians were arguing. Their language was Gujarati, but they used so many English words that I followed what they were saying. They were arguing about religion and free-thought. I intervened and was welcomed into the conversation, which was now carried on entirely in English out of courtesy to me. I did not follow it the better for that, but they peeled me an orange and we parted friends. Indeed, it is difficult to conclude an Indian railway journey on any other note. Their response to ordinary civility is immediate. I don't think they are particularly friendly in the street—if you ask them the way they are suspicious. But squashed in a railway carriage they seem to expand. And my reason for wanting English to be the common language for India is a purely selfish reason: I like these chance encounters, I value far more the relationships of years, and if Indians had not spoken English my own life would have been infinitely poorer.

Back to London

My visit out there ended all too soon. On a Friday afternoon in December—it was again a Friday—I was walking about in the sunshine of Karachi. And on the Sunday evening I was in London. Our train was icy cold, it arrived at the terminus two hours late, midnight, thick yellow fog, refreshment rooms closed, waiting-rooms closed, local trains gone, no taxi could leave the station. The grumpy railway policeman to whom we appealed was glad we were uncomfortable, and said so, while a poster on the wall exhorted us to practise even greater austerity, since it was peace time. It was not much of a return, it was not like the arrival in Delhi, and as the policeman's sulky bulky back disappeared into the gloom I found it understandable that everybody should not care for England.

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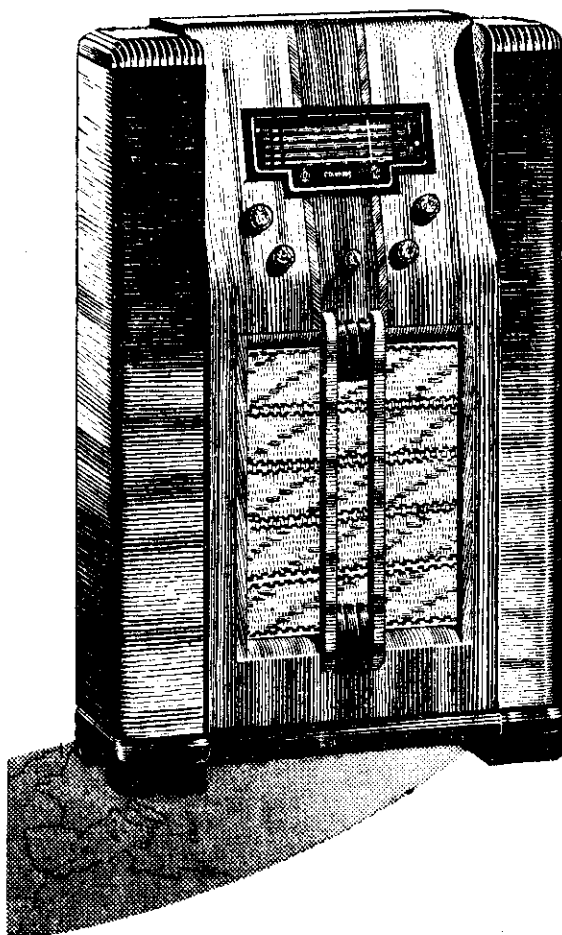
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