

COSMOPOLIS

Cultures as lone fortresses or unfurling roads

Icelandic defines Icelanders in no small way. But globalisation has created fissures in this tiny community and its language which dates back to the Vikings



Fenced in Isolation in the north Atlantic makes Icelandic different from sibling Scandinavian tongues

I'm lucky to live in New York City, a metropolis so capacious that it is home to the most obscure conversations. My wife and I recently went to the city's Scandinavian Institute, where we attended an event about short fiction written in Icelandic. It is a language spoken by just over 3,30,000 people, but it has a proud tradition stretching back to the sagas of the Viking age. Though its entire population would barely make up a neighbourhood of an Indian city, Iceland sustains an active literary culture, with many regionally (and even a few globally) well-regarded writers.

The writers on stage shared the many ways they revelled in Icelandic, their love for the Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, for instance, or the rich idioms of a language steeped in the sea and murk of their glacial island. And they shared their fears. One older writer in particular fretted about the way English was becoming ubiquitous, to the point where Icelanders now might greet each other on the street in English. Worse, young Icelanders were allowing social media to distort their Icelandic, filling it with neologisms and slang from elsewhere. In his mind, globalisation and Facebook were pushing his 1,000-year-old language off a cliff.

Later, somebody in the audience piped up. I had noticed him earlier with his mane of blond hair, whispering animatedly to a friend, and occasionally kicking the empty seat in front as he listened to the panellists. He, too, was an Icelandic writer, albeit of a younger generation, and he rejected the doom-mon-

gering. "What you've been saying," he addressed the older writer, "is horseshit" (he used an English colloquialism). A heated tirade followed, in which the younger writer insisted that Icelandic was in no danger, that more people were reading in Icelandic than ever before, and that languages are dynamic and naturally change over time. To expect them to stay the same would be to consign them to a museum.

I found it a remarkable exchange that captured much more than the internal tensions of the Icelandic literary scene. This is a fault-line in societies everywhere that grapple with change in the era of "globalisation." Two fundamentally opposed views could be distilled from that duel of Icelandic writers. On the one hand, there are those who imagine their cultures as lonely fortresses besieged by the strangeness of the outside world. On the other hand, there are those who see their cultures as unfurling roads, always in the process of crossing new territory.

Icelanders have a right to be sensitive about the fate of their language. Thanks to their isolation in the north Atlantic, Icelandic remains considerably different from its sibling Scandinavian tongues. In no small way, its use defines Icelanders as Icelanders. And yet a language is a means of communication, it is not an end in and of itself. Its survival depends on having the vitality both to deliver the world to its speakers and for its speakers to deliver their

world to others.

I confess that I'm drawn to the romantic notion of Icelandic — the language of firelight in mead-halls, bearded Vikings, and their tall tales — persevering on a lonely rock near the Arctic. But my sympathies lie with the younger Icelandic writer, who wasn't so concerned about the survival or transformation of his language.

A few years ago, I had the chance to visit Iceland. I was surprised by many things: the otherworldly landscape of wind-blasted heath and icy fjord; how I could walk across the capital Reykjavik in 30 minutes; the sun at 2 am on a summer night; the exorbitant cost of a pint of beer. But nothing surprised me more than the amazing number of bookshops in Reykjavik. My wife joked that only with mounds of books could the natives endure their nearly sunless winters — and she was surely right. The density of bookshops was also testament to something else: the immense availability of books in a language spoken by so few people.

This was a fortune that the young blond Icelandic writer recognised. Iceland is a fairly prosperous nation with a strong commitment to investment in the arts and literature. The government-funded Icelandic Literature Centre lists over 40 active publishers serving a market of just 3,00,000 people. Most Icelanders understand English now, but it is still possible for them to read global literature translated into Icelandic, to read news of other places in Icelandic, to feel connected to the wider world through Icelandic.

Many significantly larger languages don't have that privilege. Earlier this year, I was at a literary festival in Bhubaneswar, where I met several Odia-language writers. Like Icelandic, Odia prose dates back to the 12th century. Nearly 100 times as many people speak Odia as speak Icelandic. And yet not even a fraction of the translation that occurs into and out from Icelandic happens in Odia. None of the writers I met made a living from their books. They worried about the wider impact of their work and the future of Odia literature.

A big gulf in resources separates Bhubaneswar from Reykjavik, and that is a pity. Languages are precious for the history they contain, the traditions and innovations that have shaped them over time. But in the 21st century, a language will only thrive if it can both open its readers to a wider world and help locate them in changing times.

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