

COMING OF AGE

Indians writing in English are now based more here than abroad and they have managed to get it right. By RAVI SUBRAMANIAN

SAKE DEAN MAHOMET? WHO'S THAT?

You could be forgiven if your reaction was even more violent. No one in modern India is expected to know who Sake Dean Mahomet is. Let's now ask - Chetan Bhagat? If in response you shake your head and say: "Don't know!" you could be crucified.

There is a link between the two names. However, it's not obvious. Even a diehard literary fan in this country would not know that these two are at the divergent ends of a time pole called Indian literature.

The first known book in English, written by an Indian, dates back to 1793. Back then, there were no computers. No Microsoft Word. Those were the times when putting pen to paper, meant actually that. Sake Dean Mahomet, in those pre-imperial days, painstakingly penned *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, the first known English book by an Indian author. From there to the days of Chetan Bhagat, whose latest book, *Three Mistakes of My Life*, hit the stands three months ago, it has been a long and eventful journey for Indian authors in general and Indian English literature in particular.

Indian writing in English was in the news recently when Salman Rushdie won the Best of Booker Prize (awarded to the best Booker winning book in the 40 years of Booker history) for his *Midnight's Children* which he had written in the early 1980s. Rushdie, the first real poster boy of Indian literature, is a British Indian, whose stories are often set in the Indian subcontinent and are about the various associations, bonds and pairs in the migrations between the western world and Asia.

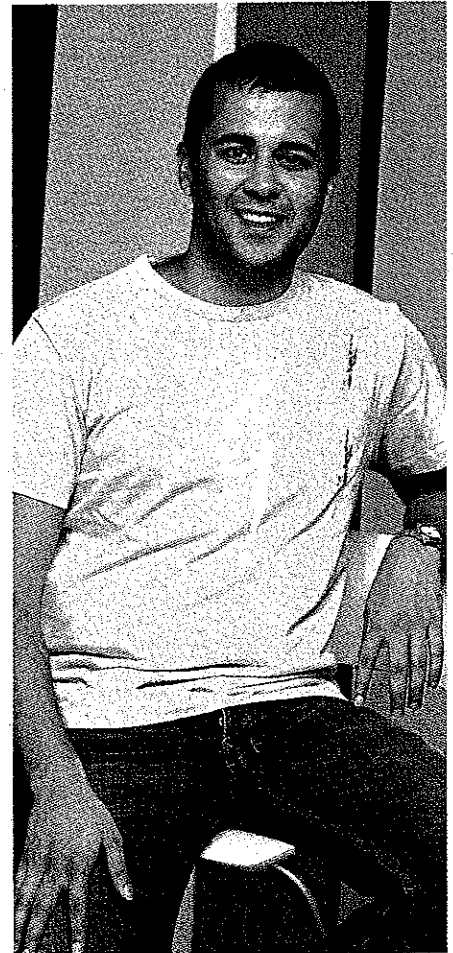
Till early 1990s Indian writing was seen as the work of a few foreign bred, Harvard educated, British or American writers of Indian origin. And rightfully so. V S Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Chaudhari and others were Indians on account of a technicality. No one can, however, take away the fact that during their days, some of the best writings across

the multi-linguistic options that India offered emanated from their pens and were in English. Rushdie himself epitomised this thought in his *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* where he commented: "The ironic proposition that India's best writing since Independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear." It was a telling commentary on the state of Indian writing.

That was then. A lot has changed since. The language remains the same, except that now the bestsellers flow from the pens of resident Indian authors rather than the diaspora. A casual drop into the book stores will be enough to confirm this. The section on Indian fiction, which used to be home to R K Narayan and Rabindranath Tagore, and maybe Salman Rushdie and V S Naipaul, is a lot more prominent, voluminous and variant. The number of titles on display are increasing by the day.

The event list at all leading book stores is cluttered with book launches of titles by Indian authors. Even the recent Vodafone Crossword book awards for fiction in India had a long-list of 62 titles - the highest so far. In 2007, over a 1000 titles were released in the market. These were all encompassing, covering a wide range of subjects. Campus stories to culture, to emotions to chic-lit - a mosaic of everything that's human. The language itself has moved away from the heavy, accented Queens English. Characters speak English the way it is spoken - colloquial with a dash of local lingo. People relate to it.

In India, new age authors are emerging almost every day. Some make it, some don't. But that is not deterring people from writing. Housewives, corporate honchos, young college graduates, socialites are all taking to writing as if it going out of fashion. Some have made it the only passion of their lives. Anita Nair, for instance, after writing her first book *Satyr of the Subway and Eleven other Stories* in



Chetan Bhagat got the pricing formula right

1997, went on to write 11 more in the next decade. And almost all of them have gone on to become bestsellers. Set in Kerala, her books have sharp characterisation and do not concentrate on the cerebral. Each has a bit of "her" in them.

The easy availability and affordability of books have contributed enormously to the surge in demand and consequently in Indian writing. The mushrooming of book stores like Crossword, Landmark and Danai has made books even more accessible. In the past stores