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Archives of Minority: 'Little' Publications and the Politics of Friendship in Post-Colonial Bombay

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers several literary archives connected to Bombay/Mumbai: the 'Bombay poets' and Bombay modernisms archive; the archives of the PEN All-India Centre and those of the US-backed liberal 'front' in the Cultural Cold War. What does the vulnerability of these archives tell us of the practices, poetics and the politics of these writers, and what may bind them together? 'Minority', also epitomised by the figure of Nissim Ezekiel, is the key word here, and I will decline its many forms. I also argue for a revaluation of 'minority' that may be less a predicament than a condition of worldliness and a prerequisite for (creative and critical) freedom. These 'archives of minority', like many of the little magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, often stood up to authority. But if minority can be a 'resource' it's also in the sense of a certain type of archival work. Recollecting histories from these apparently worthless snippets of world literature is all the more rewarding as they unsettle the dividing lines between what is obscure and canonical, local and worldly, trivial and political.

KEYWORDS

Bombay/Mumbai; Indian modernisms; Indian poetry; minority; Nissim Ezekiel; post-colonial little magazines

In the poem 'Summer Break', Arvind Krishna Mehrotra evokes the 'old house' he will return to, where the mangoes will ripen, and the litchis *still* be green. It is a poem about permanence, but also about decay: 'there are/Termite, secretive, shy/Multiplying like cancer cells/In door-frames and window-sills/It's a losing battle'.¹ The old house—which is reminiscent of A.K. Ramanujan's 'Great House'—where 'things come in every day/to lose themselves among other things/lost long ago among other things', and where 'unread library books... begin to lay a row of little eggs... in the succulence of Victorian parchment'²—can also be read as a metaphor for Indian literature, and for some of its archives.

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1. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'Summer Break', in *Collected Poems* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo Publishing, 2016), pp. 186–7.
2. A.K. Ramanujan, 'Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House', in *Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 96.

Mehrotra has in fact repeatedly expressed his frustration at the forgetfulness that seems to swallow much of Indian cultural and literary history, and for which he holds the critical neglect of the academic community accountable. If his work as a poet is inseparable from his work as anthologist, essayist, critic, translator and editor, it's because he has been waging a lifelong 'battle' against cultural amnesia, keeping trace of the many lives, histories and pasts spent 'in the rain shadow region' of literary history.³

In the frequent absence of formal archives and organised library holdings, Indian writers often represent the prime archivists of India's literary and artistic cultures. This explains why many scholars have found their homes, their bookshelves and their memories an invaluable source of archival material. Adil Jussawalla's eighteenth-floor flat in South Bombay, for instance, has been described as Noah's ark,⁴ a fitting description for a poet who spent a lifetime rescuing neglected figures, or inciting others to do so, and building (one clipping, letter or little magazine at a time) an impressive private archive.⁵

In India today, many books, magazines and manuscripts still run the risk of turning into dust, either literally eaten away by white ants, or figuratively by neglect. That is indeed the fate threatening some of the archives connected to Mumbai (formerly Bombay) on which I have been working, and which I will henceforth designate as 'the Bombay poets and Bombay modernisms "archive"'; the PEN All-India Centre 'archive'; and the archives of the Cultural Cold War in India.

The present essay represents a reflexive, and inevitably personal, attempt at understanding what the vulnerability of these archives says of the practices and communities, the poetics and politics of these writers, as well as an attempt at understanding what drew me to these archives and what may bind them together. 'Minority' or littleness could be the key word here. While Andrew Rubin turned his attention to the 'formidable structures of cultural domination'⁶ that shaped a whole mode and ideology of world literature during the Cold War, and focused on how these 'archives of authority' (mainly the globally-circulated journals) reflected or reinforced these structures, I have been more attuned to the *archives of minority*. While it is indispensable to recognise the ways by which powerful ideologies shape the fields of literary canonicity and legitimacy, the archives discussed below seem all the more fascinating because they often contest or exceed these structures of cultural domination, its binaries and finalities—even when they seem to proceed (as a journal born from the struggles of the Cold War such as *Quest* does) from them.⁷ Their 'littleness' or 'minority' to which I

3. Expression used in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Translating the Indian Past and Other Literary Histories* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2019), p. xiv.

4. Gayatri Jayaraman, 'Noah's Archive', *Livemint* (30 June 2012) [<https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/TuHTZtoaMrngevNh7lvLHJ/Poetry-Noah8217s-archive.html>, accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

5. Jerry Pinto recalled his gratitude when Jussawalla gave him the Clearing House correspondence: 'For as long as I can remember, I have bewailed the absence of archive.... Every so often one hears another terrible story: a photographic studio in Mumbai that had a treasure trove of theatre photographs closes down and all the negatives are sold to the rag-and-bone man; a library's records flooded'. Jerry Pinto, 'The Blue Rexine Archive: A Short History of Clearing House, a Poets' Cooperative of the 1970s', in Rosinka Chaudhuri (ed.), *A History of Indian Poetry in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 176–89 [177].

6. Andrew Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture and the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 51.

7. See Laetitia Zecchini, "'What Filters through the Curtain': Reconsidering Indian Modernisms, Travelling Literatures and Little Magazines in a Cold War Context', in *Interventions*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (2020), pp. 172–94, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1649183>; and Laetitia Zecchini, 'The Meanings, Forms and Exercise of "Freedom": The Indian PEN and the ICCF', in Francesca Orsini et al. (eds), *The Form of Ideology and the Ideology*

return below exposes literary cartographies, histories and practices that are far less regulated, conformist or univocal than commonly assumed.

Turning our attention to these archives also helps to understand that ‘minority’ may at times be less a *predicament* than a condition of worldliness, of singularity and emancipation, as well as a ‘resource’, to take up the words of Leela Gandhi in another context. Minority, as she suggests, involves a protest of what is ‘currently dominant, conventional, normative or institutional’, and is connected to the trope (and the politics, after Derrida) of friendship that gestures toward all those invisible affective gestures ‘that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging’.⁸

The figure that connects these archives to each other is Nissim Ezekiel. He was all at once the quintessential ‘Bombay poet’; a prominent figure of the Indian PEN, and editor (or enabler) of a constellation of journals, including *The Indian PEN (TIP)*, and Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom (ICCF)-sponsored journals such as *Quest*, *Freedom First* and *Imprint*. Although Ezekiel is largely recognised as the ‘big daddy’ of modern Indian poetry in English, his prolific critical work remains neglected. Not only does ‘littleness’ seem extraordinarily consistent with the forms he privileged (poems, reviews, small publications, etc.) as a writer and editor, but he has also time and again claimed to represent a ‘minor figure’, by which he gestured towards the necessary critical distance vis-à-vis majoritarian modes and dogmas that makes freedom of thought possible. That is also how minority can be understood: as ‘an experience of ambivalence’,⁹ to borrow the words of Amit Chaudhuri, and uncertainty, in part, perhaps, because minority is tied with the notion of vulnerability, and is the target of increasing violence today in India.

A tale of three archives and one city

The first archives I turn to are the mostly private, and sometimes unpublished, archives of ‘Bombay modernisms’ and of the so-called ‘Bombay poets’ who started writing in the 1950s and 1960s, and are made up of individual writers’ private papers, their drafts, diaries, manuscripts, clippings, forgotten interviews, little magazines and other ephemera. If some of this material is now, thanks to Bronwen Bledsoe and Anjali Nerlekar, part of the ‘Bombay Poets Archive’ which they set up in 2018 at the Cornell University Library, a lot of it is still in the hands of the writers themselves, or with their friends. These archives (their discovery as much as their forgetfulness) have long been characterised by instability and by randomness. They can ‘open’ and ‘close’ unpredictably, can be lost, found, then lost again,¹⁰ because they largely depend on a few individuals,

of *Form: Cold War, Decolonization and Third World Print Cultures* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2022), pp. 177–214.

8. See Leela Gandhi, ‘Utonal Life: A Genealogy for Global Ethics’, in Bruce Robbins *et al.* (eds), *Cosmopolitanisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pp. 65–88 [66]; and Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 10.

9. Amit Chaudhuri, *Telling Tales* (London: Union Books, 2013), p. 304.

10. This may explain why I compulsively asked to photograph the documents I was allowed to see when I was researching my book on Kolatkar. ‘Archival fever’ in this case was also linked to a sense of urgency, to the precariousness of the material and of its access.

the dialogue goes on so let us
ok old us talk
 across a table across a room across the ocean
 and even across the centuries

 a strange kind of a dialogue
 where what you say may take a thousand years to reach me
 as if we were not on the opposite sides of the same planet
 or indeed it may never reach me but to someone a 1000
 and if i have anything to say by way of a reply away on another
 but you may not hear me because you may be too busy
 trying to figure out what i said 5000 years ago

 and you may ask me to repeat myself
 what i say is more in the nature of
 and the message is meant for anyone who may find it
 on any shore, anywhere there's no name and address on the
 bottle no postage stamp either

 like the barber in the story, each one of us has stumbled
 upon a secret that he alone knows, a secret he's permitted to
 no one/no soul in the world must know
 an unbearable secret ~~we don't have to do with it so we don't~~ shouted into a hole in the ground
 if a tree grows on that spot, and a drum is made from the
 wood of the tree, the drum may announce the secret so that
 the whole world may hear it and all may share it
 east west north south everywhere penguins not excluded
 and why, even you may hear it, the king has long ears

Figure 1. 'Message in a Bottle', Kolatkar's papers. Source: Author's own photograph, January 2011, courtesy Ashok Shahane.

and also on the chance encounters and often the friendships of scholars with these individuals. Just like the 'message in a bottle' metaphor Kolatkar used for his poems, which is meant for any reader and any shore, and may take a hundred or a thousand years to reach their destination, these accidental routes, unpredictable exhumations and 'strange kinds of dialogues' are also what archival *encounters* are about (Figure 1).

Because many of these documents are preserved in cardboard boxes, trunks, or rusting old almirahs, under beds or on top of bookshelves, they are vulnerable to heat, humidity, termites and other accidents of life. And although this specific context is outside the scope of this essay, it is important to note that they are also threatened by the many forms of intimidation and (self-) censorship to which writers, publishers and cultural practitioners are subjected in India.

Some of Kolatkar's archival or unpublished material is still at risk of being lost, and a lot of it remains inaccessible. For instance, much of the material that Kolatkar's first wife, Darshan Chhabda, had preserved for more than forty years has (temporarily?) disappeared after her death in 2011. And if an important part of Kolatkar's library was sent to the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune after he passed away, some documents have vanished between my two visits to the Institute in 2010 and in 2015 (all the censorship and the Rushdie clippings, for instance). Both Kolatkar's second wife, Soonoo Kolatkar, and his publisher, Ashok Shahane, have also explicitly told me that the fear of violent backlash had prevented them from publishing some of his manuscripts (such as *Balwant Bua*, whose three 'primary colors', as Kolatkar once acknowledged, are commerce, religion and sex). For a writer like Kolatkar, staying away from the limelight—and even from publication—were conditions of his



Figure 3. The Indian PEN archives. Source: Author's own photographs, courtesy of PEN All-India Centre, March 2015 and February 2018.

the Theosophy Hall building in South Mumbai after the demise of Nissim Ezekiel in 2004. The material includes the whole run of the monthly, *The Indian PEN*, from the 1930s to the 1990s, transcripts of meetings and conferences, books, periodicals, correspondence from all over India and the world, but also more idiosyncratic documents like photos and personal postage registers.

In his introduction to a book published in 1943, K.R. Iyengar suggested that the old files of *The Indian PEN* will be cherished as 'invaluable reference works in the years to come'.¹² The future proved him wrong. Seventy years on, a newspaper article on the Theosophy Hall library offers a dystopian snapshot: rare books lie tattered, or crumble upon being taken out.¹³ PEN documents are crammed in cupboards, and some have deteriorated to the point of unreadability. Access is uncertain; drawers are jammed; the keys to others have been lost. 'What passes for libraries in India are unlit rooms full of books gathering dust and with a fearsome lock hanging outside', wrote Mehrotra in a characteristically incisive comment that could apply to the PEN archive (Figure 3).¹⁴

12. K.R. Iyengar, 'Introduction', in *Literature and Authorship in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), p. 12.

13. Although the Indian PEN archives are not part of the Theosophy library their condition was similar until recently, since our AHRC-funded project on the PEN started in 2017 also aimed to digitalise this material, and our research assistant, Chinmay Sharma, scanned part of it; see also Tejas Mehta, 'Once Upon a Time in Mumbai: Theosophy Hall, Where Philosophy Still Thrives', *The Indian Express* (22 May 2016) [<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/once-upon-a-time-in-mumbai-theosophy-hall-where-philosophy-still-thrives-2813069/>, accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

14. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'Being Here: Delighting in the Poet Adil Jussawalla's Prose', *The Caravan* (1 April 2014) [<https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-essays/being-here>, accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

Because the Indian PEN was part of the same intellectual constellation as the Indian branch of the anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom (the ICCF, founded in 1951 in Bombay), covertly funded by the CIA, and because so many of the 'Bombay poets' were published in ICCF journals, the archives related to the Cultural Cold War in India, and especially to the largely overlooked US-backed liberal front, emerged as an indispensable background to reconsider both the history of PEN and the story of Bombay modernisms. More formal archives fortunately exist in this case,¹⁵ but a lot of material is still difficult to access (the whole run of the journal *Thought*, for instance), and important figures of the time have vanished from literary history. This is the case for the critic and frequent contributor to the journal *Quest*, Jyoti Swarup Saxena, who died utterly forgotten in the 1970s,¹⁶ but whose essays are remarkable for their freedom of tone and complexity, their intellectual rage and range.

The many forms of 'littleness'

There are of course considerable differences between these archives, which are, for a start, different in status and in nature: largely private and informal archives of individual 'Bombay' writers on the one hand, and archives of formalised (but small) organisations such as the ICCF and the Indian PEN on the other. Despite these differences, however, I would suggest that 'littleness' or 'minority' binds them together.

How is this littleness declined? The anti-commercial, mimeographed or cyclostyled 'little magazine' which became a privileged medium of Indian modernisms and of poets in English and other Indian languages from the 1950s–1970s exemplify a 'littleness' in genre, form and format. But, as I argue below, this 'littleness' was characteristic of PEN and ICCF publications as well, if we think for instance of the slim journal-cum-newsletter *The Indian PEN*, started in 1934, or even of *Quest* and *Freedom First*. All these journals whose readership and print run remained limited were largely made up of small literary vignettes such as excerpts, notes, summaries and quotations from both Indian and world books or newspapers, while short forms such as reviews and poems figured significantly.¹⁷

It is actually striking to note the prominence of poets in many of these publishing ventures. 'Poetry thrives and will continue to flourish as long as people care to listen to a small voice pointing to something they would not otherwise notice', acknowledged the English-Marathi poet Dilip Chitre.¹⁸ Littleness is here also a question of poetics. The 'small voice' that can define the genre of poetry says something of the modernism and the aesthetics of the time. In the work of many of these poets, 'no event is too

15. Both *Quest* and *Freedom First* are partly available online; see [<http://www.freedomfirst.in> and <http://www.freedomfirst.in/quest/quest-archives.aspx>, accessed 21 Feb. 2021]. The CCF Records in the Special Collections of the University of Chicago library also include some Indian archives.

16. In *Quest*, he is only mentioned by his initials and it took me some time to identify him. Even Achal Prabhala, who compiled a selection of *Quest* material, refers to him (admiratively, but incorrectly) in a fascinating interview as this 'one JS Saxena, (who) seemed never to have written another word' apart from an article published in a 1970 issue of *Quest*: see Michael Vazquez, 'The Bequest of *Quest*', in *Bidoun* (Fall 2011) [<https://www.bidoun.org/articles/the-bequest-of-quest>, accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

17. See Laetitia Zecchini, 'Practices, Constructions and Deconstructions of "World Literature" and "Indian Literature" from the PEN to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', in *Journal of World Literature*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2019), pp. 82–106.

18. Dilip Chitre, 'At My Age and Of My Age', *The Hindu* (4 Jan. 2009), italics mine [<https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-literaryreview/At-my-age-and-of-my-age/article15942041.ece>, accessed 06 Mar. 2017].

trivial to go unnoticed', to borrow Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's words in another context.¹⁹ And it is interesting to recall that modernism was dismissed by the Communist bloc for precisely its 'littleness'. At the first Soviet Writers' Congress held in Moscow in 1934, which endorsed socialist realism, modernist experimentalism, epitomised by James Joyce (whose work is said to illustrate the 'conviction that there is nothing big in life—no big events, no big people, no big ideas'), was disparaged for the 'triviality' of its form and content.²⁰

The everyday and the wayside (both literally and figuratively, in the sense of what is brushed aside), what is considered too 'little', banal or filthy to register on the map of literature and history, defines the poetics of many Bombay modernists and the everyday language their poems often adopted. Many of the texts discussed here (the poems, the essays, the little publications themselves with their intertextual fabric) are in fact constructed like assemblages of recycled quotations, and other 'scraps' of the world, world literature and world journals. Kolatkar's poetry can in fact be defined, after Perec, as an exploration of the infra-ordinary: the opposite of the spectacular, the gigantic, the 'big event', the 'front-page splash'.²¹ Like other Indian writers and artists of the time, he collected hundreds of newspaper articles in voluminous files and scrap-books (Figure 4).

As briefly suggested above, this rescuing of 'littleness' extends to these writers' work as translators and editors, critics and anthologists, but also avid readers, archivists and collectors. Kolatkar's glutton-like (by his own admission) bibliomania, and his extraordinarily eclectic library (where chronicles of everyday life across time and space figure prominently), could be the focus of a study in itself.

'Rag-pickers' of literature and history, these writers can salvage what is threatened by neglect, oblivion or damage. Mehrotra's entire critical and poetic *oeuvre* may be summed up in the following lines:

If at one end is the great work of literature which will stand the test of time, at the other is the minor work that will vanish, or seem to vanish, very soon after it is produced. At one end permanence; at the other literary ephemerality in its various forms: brief notice, little magazine, self-published book.... This can sometimes extend to literary lives too, lives untouched by fame... lived in the rainshadow region of literature.²²

Interested in what is on the 'other end' of permanence, his essays and poems show that the ephemeral, overlooked and trivial are in fact both remarkable and memorable.

That is also how we must understand Mehrotra's editorial work on Kolatkar: to make sure that his friend does not sink into oblivion, and 'India's best kept literary secret' (as Mehrotra once called Kolatkar)²³ does not remain one. He didn't. Today,

19. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'True Confessions of a Literary Translator', unpublished essay presented at the Department of South Asian Studies at Harvard, on 20 Nov. 2019 [<https://sas.fas.harvard.edu/event/arvind-krishna-mehrotra-true-confessions-literary-translator>, accessed 21 Feb. 2022].

20. [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/radek1934/sovietwritercongress.htm#s7>, accessed 15 Oct. 2020].

21. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 219–20. For a discussion of the poetics of the infra-ordinary and the trope of recycling along with a discussion of part of Kolatkar's library, see my monograph: Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2014).

22. Mehrotra, *Translating the Indian Past and Other Literary Histories*, p. xiv.



Figure 4. Kolatkar clippings and notes on newspapers from which some of his poems sprung. Source: Author's own collage, courtesy Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and Ashok Shahane.

the 'unseen genius' has been recognised, the 'secret' shared outside India. And, yet, Kolatkar's consecration remains fragile: the international edition of his *Collected Poems in English* hasn't even sold 1,000 copies in ten years.

'We salvage literature from little known little people', Mehrotra once wrote in his little magazine *damn you*²⁴. Of course, in this semi-ironic, defiant statement, a brash young writer was making a case for himself, for other Indian poets, and for *alternative* voices in the 1960s, clearing and claiming a space on the global literary highway for supposedly marginal or irrelevant locations, subjects and idioms. He was also turning the principles, processes (and habitual 'western-centric' flows) of literary recognition on their head, dismissing, in the same statement, 'the capitals of the skyscraping earth'.

For this 'littleness' could signal dissent. It defined the anti-mainstream agenda of many of these writers and their publications, especially the avant-garde little mags which thrived in the 1950s–1970s, and the small publishing cooperatives many 'Bombay Poets' in English and in Marathi privileged. These 'communities of the medium'²⁵ were also conspiracies of friendship: 'We have been the only means by which poetry has been kept alive while the *big publishers* slept, welcome to the conspiracy', wrote Adil Jussawalla (*italics mine*).²⁶ Since these little magazines and small

23. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'The Unseen Genius', *Tehelka* (28 Aug. 2004), p. 33. Of course, thanks to Shahane's publishing activism, Kolatkar was much less of a 'secret' in the Marathi literary world, though he remained a marginal figure until his death.

24. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Alok Rai and Vijay Chauhan (eds), *damn you: a magazine of the arts* (Allahabad: Ezra-Fakir Press, 1968), n.p.

25. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London/New York: Verso, 1989), p. 45.

presses have been the focus of earlier publications that need not be rehearsed, let me only highlight that by privileging unestablished voices, and flaunting their kinship with all kinds of minor art forms and artefacts of popular culture, they explicitly challenged instances of consecration that aim, in Bourdieu's words, at policing literary legitimacy, and at discriminating who or what is deemed 'major' or 'minor'. They also positioned themselves outside and against the establishment decline in different ways: the academies, the conferences and literature *sammelans*, the mainstream publishers and journals, the award-winning writers, and other middlemen or gatekeepers of literary value.

In a 1963 text first published in English and hailed as a manifest of the Marathi little magazine movement, Ashok Shahane described his micro-community of fellow writers and friends (Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, Bhalchandra Nemade, etc.) The 'we' he used throughout the text not only signalled a shared agenda, but the persona of a future publisher and enabler of many editorial conspiracies. If their output was minimal (a few book reviews, scattered stories, poems and translations, the issues of one or two little magazines), these 'mere drops in the ocean' were enough, as Shahane asserted, to establish affiliation with the giants of Indian and world literature (from Tukaram to Jibanananda Das, Ionesco to Antonin Artaud). Littleness, marginality, and even obscurity (which are nonetheless *staged* very publicly in this text), become valuable as conditions of writerly independence. These writers flaunt their disregard of the powers of consecration—including consecration by the 'market'—and position themselves as their own creators of literary value:

The little that has been published (by us) is an attempt to show the sheer joy in living.... We have never felt the pressure to keep doing something big. (We) write if we feel like it and keep it with us at home. At the most (we) show it to a friend.²⁷

The Indian PEN and the ICCF were, though in different ways, also founded on communities of friendship. In the case of PEN, ideals of conviviality and friendliness between world writers, and between Indian writers in the regional languages, were at the heart of the organisation, and the PEN was repeatedly described by Sophia Wadia as a brotherhood driven by the idea of world/Indian neighbourliness. What's more, the organisation, its publications and events largely depended on the vast personal networks and communities of the two successive secretaries of the organisation, Sophia Wadia and Nissim Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's PEN office in Theosophy Hall has time and again been described as a literary meeting ground, a home, a refuge, even a sanctuary for (and by) many Bombay writers and aspiring poets. As Imtiaz and Anil Dharker acknowledged in 1979, to Ezekiel, no magazine was 'too raw or unestablished to be given a poem'; no poet was 'too green and unformed to be denied the advice he so brashly demands'.²⁸ He too seemed to function as the prodigal informal literary archivist of

27. 'Key Document: Extracts from "Ajakalachya Marathi Vangmayavar 'Ksha' Kiran" ("An X-Ray of Today's Marathi Literature") by Ashok Shahane', A. Nerlekar (excerpt. and trans.), in *JPW*, Vol. LIII, nos. 1–2 (2017), pp. 134–7 [135–6]; also see 'Key Document: Extracts from "Halli Lekhakacha Lekhakarao Hoto to Ka?" ("How Does the Writer Become Mr Writer Nowadays?") by Bhalchandra Nemade', A. Nerlekar (excerpt. and trans.), in *JPW*, Vol. LIII, nos. 1–2 (2017), pp. 131–3 [132].

28. '(Nissim Ezekiel Interview) With Imtiaz and Anil Dharker', in Havovi Anklesaria (ed.), *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), pp. 43–50 [43].

Bombay, with foreign and Indian writers or scholars drawing on his collection of books, clippings and journals and relying on his vast editorial connections. Saleem Peeradina also evokes Ezekiel in his PEN office as 'lord of the mess', presiding 'among the dusty books and files, typescripts of poems, loose sheets of paper, journals of Commonwealth origin, paper-weighted letters, more magazines stacked on a chair, more loose sheets spilling out of a rotting briefcase, assorted odds and ends strewn on the table'.²⁹ No wonder the poet cast himself with a briefcase 'filled with letters,/papers, other people's business/which is also mine', in his poem 'Events'.³⁰

If these writers and their publishing spaces represented and constructed micro-communities where they not only published together, but also wrote for each other, this must be connected to one of the languages in which many of them wrote: English. Although English is a far less contested literary language in India today than in the four decades following Independence, its use has long been plagued by accusations of cultural inauthenticity, even anti-nationalism. At the time these writers started writing, English was certainly not a legitimate means of literary expression. Not only was their Indianness viciously cast in doubt, but there was no obvious lineage to fall back on and no obvious readership to address. When Amit Chaudhuri defines Ezekiel as the 'poet of a minor literature', that is also what he reminds us of:³¹ the precariousness of Ezekiel's situation in the 1950s and 1960s, when Indian writing in English was minor in relation to two *major* lineages ('English literature' and 'Indian literature'), and Indian poetry in English soon dwarfed by the Indian novel in English.

This explains why Dilip Chitre could argue that Ezekiel's Jewish identity was characteristic of Indian English poetry, whose members were part of the same 'micro-community' and a 'permanent soft target for populist and majoritarian politics'.³² And yet, if at the height of the language wars in India, 'anything in the colonial language was a red rag to a bull', Mehrotra also suggests that minority can turn into a 'signature of dissent', and English recast as an anti-mainstream signature of defiance: 'Who were we saying Damn You (or Fuck You) to? To the world at large, but perhaps, more specifically, if unconsciously to the Angrezi Hatao ('Remove English') Hindi mob'.³³

The choice of littleness³⁴

A few points may be emphasised here. First, if these archives remain vulnerable, it's precisely because they are often connected to 'missing persons' (the title of Adil Jussawalla's collection published by the small press Clearing House in 1976). Like Jussawalla who acknowledged that he is 'happier being on the sidelines',³⁵ or like

29. '(Nissim Ezekiel Interview) With Saleem Peeradina, in *Nissim*, pp. 51–61 [52].

30. Nissim Ezekiel, 'Events', in *Nissim*, p. 85.

31. Amit Chaudhuri, 'Nissim Ezekiel: Poet of a Minor Literature', in Rosinka Chaudhuri (ed.), *A History of Indian Poetry in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 205–22.

32. Dilip Chitre, 'Losing Contemporaries', in *New Quest*, no. 157–158, (Jul.–Dec. 2004), pp. 5–6 [6].

33. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'The Closing of the Bhasha Mind', in *Biblio: A Review of Books* no. XVII, (2012), p. 27.

34. See Miguel Abensour's splendid postface ('*Le Choix du Petit*') to Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (Paris: Payot, 1991), pp. 27–28 [27].

35. Anjali Nerlekar and Laetitia Zecchini, 'Perhaps I'm Happier Being on the Sidelines: An Interview with Adil Jussawalla', *JPW*, 221.

Kolatar who shunned publicity and publication, wrote for a tight circle of friends, and lost, rewrote (or found again) some of his most important manuscripts, or even like Nissim Ezekiel who saw himself as an ‘odd man’ who preferred *not* to enter the mainstream,³⁶ the eccentricity and minority that these writers cultivated account for the vulnerability of the archival material today.

Of course, this ‘missingness’ is also the stuff legends are made of. Arguably, as suggested above, this did not always prevent the (recent) consecration of some of these figures. And in the case of the ‘Bombay poets’, the recovery of these archives, and sometimes of the writers themselves, often depended on the love and activism of fellow poets. Yet a retrospective look must not ignore the fact that these (today memorable) writers could have sunk into oblivion. What’s more, there are countless ‘missing persons’ to be recovered, such as J.S. Saxena, but even foundational ‘Bombay poets’ like Dilip Chitre or Eunice de Souza have not received the recognition they deserved. The latter example also signals that innumerable missing *women* have been obliterated from these literary histories. Sophia Wadia’s extraordinary life, for instance, is dying to be written.

Second, and this is also consistent with the recognition bestowed on some of these writers *outside* India, this ‘littleness’ is not exclusive of worldliness. I have often argued about the extent to which these writers’ marginality also accounted for their cosmopolitanism—by giving them the freedom to make their pacts outside of mainstream institutions, inherited communities and national assignments, including literary ones. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, for instance, who corresponded for years with writers like Howard McCord and Douglas Blazek, was first published in American little magazines before being published in India. Remember also Ashok Shahane’s claim that the ‘little’ they wrote, read or showed each other was enough to establish relationships with the best of world literature. This littleness gave many of these writers the freedom to invent themselves, to create the world in which they wanted to be placed, and, to a large extent, to *choose* by whom they wanted to be read.³⁷

That is why Leela Gandhi’s discussion of minor and even heretical lineages of internationalism and cosmopolitanism, and her understanding of the trope of friendship as a signifier for gestures that refuse alignment along the ‘secure axes’ of filiation, is relevant. It is interesting to note that the two pivotal figures of the Indian PEN—Sophia Wadia, who became Indian by marriage, and Nissim Ezekiel, whose Jewishness he famously described as ‘making him a natural outsider’³⁸—also embodied a position of marginality or ‘outsidedness’, which they converted into worldly affiliations (to which their pivotal role in the Indian branches of international organisations like the PEN, the CCF or the Theosophical Society gives evidence).³⁹

Hence, if some of these ‘little’ spaces and communities claimed, like *damn you*, to dismiss the ‘capitals of the skyscraping earth’, they were nonetheless connected to transnational subcultures and networks. Several Indian little mags of the 1960s

36. ‘Nissim Ezekiel Interview With Saleem Peeradina’, *Nissim*, ed. Anklesaria, p. 58.

37. ‘Americans have to qualify to read Kolatar’, Ashok Shahane once told me in Bombay!

38. Nissim Ezekiel, ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine’, in *Selected Prose* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 83–102.

39. Also see Edward Said on various eccentric figures, such as Jean Genet, ‘a man who in his own society was an outcast and outlaw, but who transformed this marginality into ... a kind of passionate attachment to other peoples’, in *Power, Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 148.

travelled the world. When they did not, their intertextual fabric (translations, excerpts, letters, etc.) and the various currencies featured on their covers *staged* their transnational affiliations.

The Indian PEN, which was sent to PEN Centres throughout the world, was similarly largely made up of notes, quotes or summaries of various Indian and world periodicals. And if the newsletter could be too hastily disqualified for its apparent ‘insignificance’ or ‘locality’, this is an extraordinary archive to look into: not only because countless literary, cultural and political events in India *and* the world are refracted in its pages, at least from the 1930s up to the 1960s, but also because you find excerpts of speeches—sometimes unpublished—from key figures of the time (Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, H.G Wells, E.M. Forster, Storm Jameson, etc.) and personal accounts of the debates that were taking place in major international congresses.

Finally, as regional branches of two international organisations, the publications of the Indian PEN and the ICCF necessarily represented spaces of negotiation between the local and the worldly, between private and public alignments, between personal circuits and more institutional ones. The expression ‘politics of friendship’ may in fact provide a good definition of PEN, whose first president, John Galsworthy, argued that the principle of hospitable friendliness between world writers on which the organisation was founded, served the cause of international peace. PEN also officially positioned itself above state or party politics. These affective and minor practices often cut across national, political or ideological assignments, and to a certain extent also across the structures of cultural domination (and warfare) identified by Andrew Rubin. In the 1930s, when the world was on the brink of disaster, many pages of *The Indian PEN* give evidence of this great faith in writers (‘the writers of a country wield greater power than its lawmakers’),⁴⁰ but also in all the little, apparently irrelevant relationships, communities and journals working towards peace, freedom and unity.

Hence, if, ‘from the worldly point of view’, in terms of its financial and numerical insignificance, the Indian PEN could be considered negligible, Sophia Wadia defiantly asserted its worldliness and agency:

If we were asked to define what we are ... we might call ourselves an embryonic but a vital and integral part of the dream which we all share, the dream of a World Community Numerically we are small, we are insignificant Financially, we are poor and therefore we are insignificant from the worldly point of view ... unknown and unrecognized. But, friends, we do not feel small or weak; we are powerful, and we want to use our might and power for good only, for fraternity, for friendship.⁴¹

From an ‘embryonic’ centre in Bombay, India spoke to the world and claimed its place in the world. In fact, the Indian PEN aimed from its inception at redressing the asymmetric recognition of non-Western literatures on the world stage. In some ways, the Bombay organisation could also be read as working towards salvaging literature ‘from little known little people’ and asserting their worth.

The last point I would like to highlight is that ‘littleness’ can be a condition of independence, a prerequisite for (creative and critical) freedom—even dissent. In that sense,

40. *The Indian PEN*, in Sophia Wadia (ed), *Bombay: The PEN All-India Centre*, August 1936, p. 40.

41. *The Indian PEN*, in Sophia Wadia (ed), *Bombay: The PEN All-India Centre*, Jan. 1948, p. 3.

it is indeed a 'resource', to take up the words of Leela Gandhi again, when she argued that although 'minor' usually describes a debased position, it may turn into a 'revolutionary practice' that involves protest of the dominant and the dogmatic. Nissim Ezekiel would probably not have identified with the word 'revolutionary', but he hinted at a similar inversion of perspective when he dismissed the finality of the conventional opinion: 'To be called minor is a condemnation, a relegation to the ranks of those who do not matter and need not even be read' in order to embrace minority. Not only, he acknowledged, were all 'Indo-English writers' minor, but he himself had functioned exclusively 'as a minor commentator' on literature and the arts.⁴²

Minority is here understood as a (self-) critical ethos that resists final judgements (like 'major' and 'minor') and non-discriminative or dogmatic generalisations. It is from the sidelines, or from a position of distance and eccentricity, that you may contest prevailing political, cultural and aesthetic orthodoxies. Hence Ezekiel's championing of the writer (and of 'the creative writer as critic') as someone able to struggle against 'the processes by which a nation is made to conform',⁴³ and the systematic correlation he made between 'minority' and criticism, whose experimental and uncertain nature he emphasised. 'If your certainties lack the flavour of uncertainty, the restraining power of doubt, you become a murderer in the realm of ideas', he wrote in the beautiful essay-column tellingly entitled 'Uncertain Certainties' (published in the journal *Fulcrum* during the Emergency),⁴⁴ which also explains why he viewed criticism as the best antidote to forces of totalitarianism and repression.

These 'little publications' appear as spaces where individual, plural or dissenting voices and forms can flourish. Here, strikingly, the medium is indeed part of the message. This may seem obvious for the avant-garde little mags that dismissed the instances of consecration mentioned above. I must add briefly that the dismissal of the 'capitals' of the earth and the 'so-called giant nations'⁴⁵ often took anti-imperialist and Third World connotations. These little magazines with their 'jaywalking' poets⁴⁶ and 'zigzag trenches'⁴⁷ often claimed to bypass the dichotomisation of the world, and to emancipate themselves from political and cultural co-optation. Their dismissal of predictable alignments must also be understood with the Cold War background in mind.⁴⁸

Although the dissidence and independence seem less obvious for the 'little publications' associated with the CCF, since they officially favoured one side of the Cold War, I have argued that these publishing spaces were *also* used by writers of varying ideological persuasions to hone their creative and polemical skills; to articulate their concerns, and sometimes their 'uncertain certainties'; to exercise their critical freedom, cultivate their individuality; and to challenge majoritarian modes that suppress 'inconvenient voices from the margin'.⁴⁹

42. Nissim Ezekiel, 'The Creative Writer as Critic', in *Nissim*, pp. 200–210 [200].

43. Nissim Ezekiel, 'Censorship and the Writer', in *Nissim*, pp. 209–215 [212].

44. Nissim Ezekiel, 'Uncertain Certainties', in *Selected Prose* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 105–38.

45. *Vrishchik*, no. 6–7 (April–May 1971).

46. Arun Kolatkar, 'Make Way Poet', in *Collected Poems in English* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), pp. 221.

47. *damn you: a magazine of the arts*, no. 6, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Bombay: Ezra-Fakir Press, 1968).

48. See Zecchini, "What Filters through the Curtain"; and Zecchini, 'The Meanings, Forms and Exercise of "Freedom"'.⁴⁹

49. Nissim Ezekiel, 'Poetry in the Times of Tempests', in *Nissim*, pp. 221–223 [222].

That was what liberalism stood for in the eyes of writers like Ezekiel, Dilip Chitre, Agyeya and others associated with the liberal front: the primacy of the individual and of the 'inconvenient' voice, not straightjacketed by cultural, ideological or nationalist dictates or doxas that could be variously equated with communism and socialist realism (defined in an article in *Quest* as flowering in a regime where art and literature become the 'wheels' and 'screws' of the great state machine),⁵⁰ but also with other totalitarianisms of the Left and reactionarisms of the Right, with an overpowering central state, with ideological dogmatism or aesthetic conformism. Art and literature had to stand up to what J.S. Saxena also called the stentorian voice: 'only a totalitarian society tends to produce a monolithic individual elite, structurally centralised, speaking with a stentorian voice to the whole of society'.⁵¹

'We must probe, doubt, question, question, question', also wrote Ezekiel,⁵² who called for a 'ferment of ideas' to displace the 'co-existence of ideologies'.⁵³ That was indeed the aim of journals like *Quest*, in which writers, ideas, political icons (Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, etc.) and accepted notions (such as 'freedom', 'socialism' and 'culture') were discussed and criticised. The cultivation of a critical culture, where no voice is suppressed, seemed to condition India's survival as a democracy. And because 'cultural regression links up to political reaction',⁵⁴ and the lack of literary and cultural pluralism was seen as paving the way for censorship in all its forms, many of the journals that Ezekiel edited or to which he contributed gave space to minor, or marginalised, forms of writing at the time: modern Indian poetry, including Indian poetry in English; translations from different Indian languages; long opined critical essays; book, film and art reviews; and budding modernist or experimentalist voices.⁵⁵

When, still in 'Uncertain Certainties', Ezekiel claimed that 'the origin of the new is always the individual', he was also possibly defining both liberalism *and* modernism. Many of the journals associated with the liberal cultural front in fact cleared a space for modernism.⁵⁶ These 'little' publications were once again paving the way for the soon-to-be canonical: important modernists writing in English were published in the pages of *Quest*, for instance, but also many significant writers in the regional languages such as Buddhadeva Bose, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Indira Sant, Amrita Pritam, Jibananda Das, P.S. Rege, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, Kamleshwar and U.R. Ananthamurthy.

It is actually important to keep in mind that if liberalism stood for individual and at times minor voices, this was in more senses than one, since in the 1950s and 1960s, the ideological sympathies of most Indian intellectuals and newspaper editors leaned towards Marxism and even the Soviets. What's more, modernism was never the 'dominant tradition' it came to represent in the West, and certainly not in the 1950s and 1960s, in part because it was perceived as an offspring of the West and regarded

50. Anonymous, 'Socialist Realism', *Quest*, ed. Abu Sayeed Ayub (Calcutta, Oct.-Dec. 1959), p. 54.

51. Jyoti Swarup Saxena, *Modern Essays* (Allahabad: Chaitanya Publishing House, 1960), p. 90.

52. 'Editorial' in *Quest*, ed. Nissim Ezekiel (Bombay, April-May 1956), pp. 3-4.

53. 'Editorial', in *Quest*, ed. Nissim Ezekiel (Bombay, Feb.-Mar. 1957), p. 9.

54. Nissim Ezekiel, 'Some Problems of Modern Indian Culture', in *Selected Prose*, pp. 70-82 [74].

55. Ezekiel remembered the disdain of editors towards Indian poetry in English when he went from publisher to publisher with his manuscripts in the 1950s or looked in vain for review space: Ezekiel, 'Poetry in the Times of Tempests', p. 222.

56. This was also consistent with the fact that 'modernism' became a cultural-diplomatic weapon and was redefined as an expression of Cold War liberalism.

with suspicion. Cultural nationalism was virtually required of writers and artists during the struggle against colonial rule and in the two to three decades following Independence. This explains Yashodhara Dalmia's claim that the powerful individualistic possibilities of modernism could be considered a betrayal in India. The 'red rag' metaphor used by Mehrotra for the 'English' language could also apply to a modernism (and to one of its privileged mediums, the 'little magazine') that infuriated the nationalist/nativist bull.

Conclusion: The value of 'small rags'

In its inaugural editorial (July 1952), *Freedom First* defined itself as 'a little journal', asserting the primacy of the individual against forces of regimentation and authoritarianism. Twenty years later, in the same journal, and in the context of Indira Gandhi's constitutional amendments that also prefigured the assaults on democracy during the Emergency, Minoo Masani wrote:

Confronted to the grave danger of the larger and better organised newspapers being made to conform... and the voice of dissent being stilled.... It may well be that in the next few years it will be only in *small 'rags'* like *Freedom First* that we will be able to keep the torch burning.⁵⁷ (*italics mine*)

Let us recall that *Freedom First* was one of the rare journals that fought pre-censorship laws in court during the Emergency, while *Quest* eventually ceased publication in protest of these laws. These 'archives of minority' in effect stood up to authority.

The choice of littleness must hence be read politically. In her introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt evokes Benjamin's passion for small, even minute things, and quotes Adorno for whom Benjamin's project was to capture 'the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps as it were'.⁵⁸ This task is also taken up by many of the writers discussed here, either because they too are avid collectors and 'rag-pickers' of literature, literary history, and the debris of the world or because their poetry and their essays recollect the names and details of a micrological everyday, the little stories, people and voices which have been lost or engulfed in 'destructive torrents and explosions'.⁵⁹

Littleness, which could provide another name for the irreducibly different or singular, may be shored up against terror, or against what Arendt equated with 'total domination' that 'strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just one individual'.⁶⁰ Recollecting what is apparently trivial (the 'myriad of little truths' that 'humiliate the Truth', in the words of Ezekiel) is political, especially in a country where 'Indianness' is connected to the Hindu majority, and where religious and cultural minorities are targeted, along with 'deviant', foreign or minor narratives of tradition.

57. Minoo Masani, 'Editorial', in *Freedom First, A Journal of Liberal Ideas*, (Jan. 1972), p. 1.

58. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 83.

59. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 438.

60. Nissim Ezekiel, 'Art and Literature in Emerging India', in *Sameeksha, a Quarterly of Arts and Ideas*, (Dec. 1965), pp. 54–58 [56].

‘Small rags’ are also a metaphor for these archives. And literary scholars are, in many ways, rag-pickers as well. Archival work is also about recollecting or resurrecting histories from these bits and pieces, scraps of conversations, memories, and journals, and from all these apparently worthless features of world literature. Yet these ‘small rags’ are, precisely, potent and valuable. That’s what Nissim Ezekiel gestured towards when he claimed to think about literature as a small man thinking about a small book, and considered the ‘brilliant translation of a single good book’ to be the most valuable contribution to Indian literature in India:

Literature for me is only the next book I am going to read, and art is only the next exhibition I am going to see . . . I want to look at (literature) as a small man who wants to read a small book and think about it . . . I think we have to fall back on small groups and individuals working behind the scenes. In cultural affairs, any colossal attempt at cultural development often fails.⁶¹

In this passage, which is particularly revealing with regard to this ethics, poetics and even politics of (literature and criticism as) littleness, Ezekiel is both overturning the rules of literary/academic consecration, and reminding us what scholarship can (should?) be. Starting from the ‘small book’ or ‘rag’, from the specificity and materiality of the archive, is all the more rewarding in that these ‘small rags’ often unsettle the *general* frameworks often taken for granted, like the dividing lines between what is ‘minor’ and ‘major’, obscure and canonical, local and worldly, trivial and political. In the largely neglected publications of the Indian PEN and the ICCF, the history of the world was recorded and written, and the most significant Indian writers, critics and artists first appeared in the perishable little magazines of the 1950s and 1960s.

These ‘archives of minority’ are everything but only ‘informative ethnographic specimens, suitable for the limited attention of experts and area specialists’.⁶³ They hint at a worldliness defined by the many little stories and small voices that *make* and renew the memorable (and connected) texture of literary history.

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61. Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 383.