

OPINION by Shyam Bhat

Accent envy

An old friend of mine called me the other day from London, after we reconnected on Facebook.

"Shyam," the voice said. "How are you? This is Jay, It's been a long time."

It took me a few seconds to realise that this was indeed Jay, my Malayali friend who had previously spoken with a mild and pleasant Malayali accent.

So what was this? Why was he sounding like Sir John Gielgud?

Should I call him on it? Should I say, "Dude why are you speaking like that?" Or would that be offensive, like asking a man wearing a fake Rolex, "Dude, is that really a Rolex?"

I had thought that people like Jay were beyond this. Back in school, he had never been what one might kindly refer to as "aspirational"; he had never been the sort of fellow who aped the latest trend, or did what was considered "cool". In fact, in his day he had been considered a bit of a rebel, always questioning authority and seemingly destined to forging his own path.

But now as we spoke, I could hear in the fake perfection of his accent the pressures of immigration, the perils of having to forge an identity in a foreign land where Indian accents are still subtly mocked by stand up comics and movies and talk show hosts.

Even comic god Russell Peters is not beyond resorting to mimicking the Indian accent for the sake of a few cheap laughs. Our own stand up comics do it too, but by specialising in regional accents – Tamilian, Kannadiga, Punjabi, and so on. I felt a bit sad then, for Jay, for myself, and for all Indians labouring the inferiority complex of speaking a language that is still not seen as our own.

How was I any better than Jay? Although I had resisted trying to sound American during my ten years in the US, I had changed the way I spoke at work, with my colleagues, and with anyone American: I slowed down my speech, enunciating my words with more care than I did with my Indian friends. As a consequence, a few people remarked that I sounded English. And what was worse, (believe me I deplore this reaction in myself as much as you

do), I even felt vaguely complimented that they thought I sounded British.

My accent envy showed itself up in other, more subtle ways. When an American would ask, as they often did, "How did you learn such good English?" I would feel offended by their surprise, perhaps at the thought that they would ever doubt that my English could be anything but impeccable. "I grew up speaking English," I would say and sometimes unnecessarily add for emphasis, "I think in English and dream in English just as you do."

'But after a few years abroad, I began to miss not knowing another language, a mother tongue.'

It took me a whole year to understand that the only reason that I was offended by an American's surprise at my fluency in English was because I'd made a value judgment: along the way I had unfortunately learned to equate the ignorance of English with an inferior education.

There is a phrase for people like me, I had learned a few years ago, when, in my first year of medical school, some in the senior class seemed to take offence at my relative inability to speak in Kannada, as opposed to English.

"You are a Thames Thikka", they said to me a few times, and another classmate, who spoke English with a curious Welsh lilt, the result of a childhood in Cardiff, went through most of college known as "Thames".

That phrase literally means "Thames Arse"; a classmate explained it to me in this way: "It means that you are acting as if you have washed your arse in the river Thames."

What a remarkable epithet! Full of all kinds of socio-political connotations, which I would urge you to ponder.

But after a few years abroad, I began to miss not knowing another language, a mother tongue, with an accent and

vocabulary and cultural references that would have defined me when someone said, "You speak English so well."

I envied people like my friend Kamath, who spoke English fluently and unashamedly in an unaffected accent, and also spoke his mother tongue, Tulu with equal felicity.

But then one day, I went out to a bachelor's party - Yemi, a Nigerian friend of mine was getting married.

The details of the party themselves are the subject of another column, but what struck me was the accent of the other Indian guy there, Biju, who like me had an itinerant life. He had spent his early childhood in Nigeria, then India for ten years, and after that had been in the US for five years.

Although I sometimes struggled with the use of an accent, feeling vaguely guilty about trying to speak slower for my American friends, and embarrassed that I was speaking in a different accent to my friends from home, and possibly – and I was not even sure here – in a slightly different accent and rhythm with my parents, Biju demonstrated an entirely different approach.

When he spoke with me, he did so in urban, Indian accented English, with all the familiarity of my friends at home. But when Yemi asked him a question, he answered, without missing a beat, in Nigerian accented English, "E no go better, I do not believe it, aje pako," he said, and then, a few minutes later I was impressed to hear his American accent as he approached a young lady waiting outside the club, "Hey how are ya? This place any good?"

He had demonstrated a simple truth, that accents are languages and

just as you might switch languages while speaking with people from different countries (if you were fluent in several languages), you can also legitimately switch accents.

When you, without embarrassment, switch accents in order to facilitate communication, then that is far more authentic than changing your accent permanently.

"You still on the line?" Jay was asking, in his British accent.

"Still here, man," I replied, "Welcome to Bangalore." I felt my accent changing, its location moving rapidly towards the bank of the river Thames, and I had to stop myself before I added, "Old chap."

