CHAPTER VII

INDIAN ENGLISH IDIOMS
The words idiom, idiot, idiocy, idiosyncrasy are cognates. They all have one common semantic characteristic, "something different from the accepted norm'. An idiot is so called because he is different from normal human being in spite of his commonsense and understanding. Similarly idiosyncrasy is highly individualistic and individulizing manner of speech or behaviour which distinguishes one from the norms of society.

Similarly the word 'idiom' means a way of expression different from the normal pattern of the usage of words. In an ordinary syntactic structure the meaning of a phrase is the sum total of the meanings of the individual words that go into its structure. For example, "to
take something after something ' is a syntactic phrase. The meaning of it is the total meaning of its constituents or the component words. The meaning of the phrase contains partly the meaning of the word 'take' and partly the meaning of the word 'after' and so on. This is how a syntactic structure behave semantically. It can be used in situations like:

I take coffee after dinner

He takes breakfast after bath.

In such usages there is no distortion of meaning. The total phrase means just what the constituent words mean as a group. The total meaning of an idiom is very different from the meaning of its constituents. Quite often there is no relationship between the meaning of an idiom and the meaning of one or all of the component words. Let us take, for example, the idiom 'to take after'. Syntactically it is a phrase. Let us call it a phrasal idiom. But semantically it does not partake of the meaning of individual words. As an idiom it means 'to resemble' or 'to have the appearance of'. This idiomatic meaning has no
relationship with either take or after. It means entirely different.

The English language has a wealth of idioms. They have come into existence imperceptibly over the past thousand years. Mc Mordie observes:

English has, as we have seen, drawn elements from many sources; hence its copiousness of vocabulary and its great power of expressing distinctions of meaning. It is particularly rich in idiomatic expressions. Under 'Idiom' we include peculiar uses of particular words, and also particular phrases or turns of expression which, from long usage, have become stereotyped in English. (1)

An idiom defies the normal semantic rules. It comes into being not as a dictate of a grammarian but as a result of a long practice or tradition uses it. Brackenbury observes:

An expression may be perfectly correct in one case and wrong in another, the deciding factors being the intention of the writer and context. The English language is not, in
fact, based upon rules, but the rules are based on the habits of language that have grown up in the course of centuries. Certain expressions customary in the times of Shakespeare would be considered wrong now; but we must not, therefore, say they are "wrong", but that they are no longer "customary". (2)

In the long battle between grammar and usage, the latter wins the battle and gives rise to the idioms. As McMordie observes "long usage has fixed the idiomatic expression -------------- and from the idiom we may not swerve". (3)

Idiomatic expressions are not the monopoly of any single language, although some languages have more of them than the other. Stylistically an idiom is a turn of expression, terse, vivid and forcible. When an idiom is explained in another set of words the meaning is not communicated with equal force and brevity. Idioms cannot be replaced nor substituted by synonymous words or expressions because nothing can communicate the shade or the nuance of the idiom with the same vividness, brevity and force.
Every language has its own stock of idioms. Ordinarily idioms are not borrowed from one language to another. When such borrowing is to take place they are preceded by an intimate contact between the speech communities of the lending and the borrowing languages. In the history of English it happened several times. One important historic event was the Scandinavian invasion of Britain following which the Scandinavians (Sweeds, Norwegians and Danes) and the Anglo-Saxons lived in great harmony and therefore there was an influx of Scandinavian idioms into the English language. The Norman conquest of Britain was yet another historic occasion when many French idioms found their way into English. The long contact between English and the Indian languages during the British rule did not however lead to borrowing of idioms from Indian languages into English. If there were some few sporadic borrowings they do not fall under the purview of this study. However idioms of lending language translated into the borrowing language is a process known as loan translation or Calque. Many such loan translations were freely transacted between English and Indian languages.
However they did not establish themselves as idioms. The idioms of Indian languages with their racy oriental flavour have not found a permanent place in British standard English. But certainly they have enriched Indian English. In the process of enrichment of Indian English, Indian writers in English particularly novelists and short story writers and to a lesser extent journalists have played a major role.

Indian English idioms are originally idioms in one or the other Indian languages. They do not find equivalents or synonymous expressions in English. In spoken and written English, most users of the language translate the idioms of their mother tongue, knowingly or unknowingly into English. This has been taking place at the colloquial level as well as in the formal written forms of language. A large number of idioms of native languages transported into Indian English have contributed to the development of racy and distinctive modes of expression which are Indian to the core. Such translation of idioms are not acceptable to standard English speaker in India and outside. Some purists and fetishists might frown upon
them as ungrammatical expressions. But they have the sanction of the people at large who use English in colloquial context or for creative purposes. For example, the idiom "to eat one's head" is a translation of Hindi idiom दिमाग स्खन (dimag khana) which means 'to worry somebody beyond tolerance'. This is a popular expression in Hindi and when the native speaker of Hindi uses English he cannot resist the temptation to use the idiom in translation. To the native speakers of English and to non Indian Speakers of English it does not mean anything. But it is indispensable to a large section of the people who use English in India.

Similarly to express the corruption of a political leader or a government official, there is a pan Indian idiom that cuts across all language boundaries in the country. In Hindi it is धूली सकन "paisa khana". In Telugu it is 'dabbulu thinuta'. In all other Indian languages the idiom exists in the same syntactic form and in the same meaning. When it is literally translated into English it becomes 'to eat money'. For non Indian Speakers
of English it communicates nothing. But no idiom in English can communicate well the Indian social evil like corruption.

One cannot say with certainty how idioms originate. But in the case of idioms in Indian English it can be said with a certain degree of correctness that there are two possible origins. First, an idiom in vogue in any Indian language is translated in the colloquial use of English by the common man. As it gains popularity, it is accepted in English literary and creative circles in India, whence it passes into creative and journalistic writings. The second possibility is the other way round. A popular Indian English writer like Mulkraj Anand or R.K.Narayan or Raja Rao translates the idioms from into their respective native languages and their reader accepts them as standard form of expression and give them currency in colloquial circles. What follows here is a classified list of Indian idioms of English with their meaning.

It must be mentioned here that the idiomatic lore of the language reflects the mental, material and social culture of the community. With wide variety of languages,
India has varieties of culture and communicative idioms. Many of them have found their way into Indian English. Besides the linguistic turns of expression the vocabulary dealing with the flora and fauna, the Indian idioms of English are Indian to the core and lend a deep shade of Indianness to the English language. It can therefore be said idioms in the original language or in translation are essentially ethnic in origin because they reflect the cultural ethos of the community.

The list given here cannot be claimed exhaustive. There is a scope for minute categorization of idioms. However, they are representative groups. Allotment of idioms to a particular category cannot be said to be final. Looking at idioms from some other point of view may lead us to list some of them under a different category.

1. **Calques:** Calques are broadly defined as translations in which the contextual meaning is transferred from Indian languages to English. The phonology and grammar of Calque is that of English but the meaning is that of the source language. Kachru observes:

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"a calque may be defined as rank-bound translation which may be parallel in terms of the units $L_1$ and $L_2$, but may also be item-bound. That is, an attempt may be made to find equivalence in the open-set items which operate in the structures concerned."^4

The Calque category of idioms may be classified into three groups based on the meaning of the idiom.

a) **Indian Idiom translated**: The idioms under this group are listed the idioms of Indian languages, literally translated into English. Such translations may not be intelligible to the speakers of English in other countries. But to Indians the meaning is very clear. For example:^5

' to hit on one's belly' – to deprive someone of his means of livelihood.

'snoring of lakhs of rupees' – to have a great deal of idle money often ill-gotten
' to swallow someone' — to harm somebody

' to eat one's salt'⁶ — to be obliged or grateful to somebody for some one's great help.

' My name is not ' — a form of swearing or taking a vow to do or not to do something.

' to break one's own head' — to be troubled with problems.

b) curses or abuses:— Curses or abuses have certain social contexts. They may represent individual curses or sometimes communal or caste curses. They may be curses between two hostile groups or families. Sometimes curses may be from parents to children or from men to women. Some of the curses are confined to only women. But we have not attempted to classify curses on these social lines. The following are some examples.

'son of a concubine'⁷ — child born of a mother on illicit relations
'noosed rope' - a source or cause of danger to one's life

'whore sons' - children born of a mother on illicit relations.

to eat one's master' - ungrateful or disloyal to the master (a master cursing a servant)

to eat one's own words' - to go back on one's promises.

to eat one's life' - to trouble some one throughout life (a parent cursing a child)

'a wish that one had died in one's womb' - a curse regretting having given birth to a troublesome child.
'one's womb to be dead' - a curse made to a woman that she would not beget children

'eater of one's own child' - a curse addressed to a widowed daughter-in-law (by her mother-in-law)

'to throw bangles at somebody' - to humiliate someone it suggests that he is womanly.

c) Greetings: The greetings are essentially cultural in their context. Most greetings are idiomatic in the sense that the meaning of the phrase expressing greeting is not the sum total of the constituent members of the greeting. For example, the English way of greeting 'good morning' or 'good evening' reflects rather a cultural item than the literal meaning of 'good' and 'morning' or 'evening'. Similarly among the Hindus it is customary to say, 'Ram, Ram' when they meet first time on any day. Some of the Indian greetings in English are listed below.
‘to bow one’s forehead’ — to show respect and humility

‘to bow at one’s feet’ — to show excessive humility (a servant to the master)

‘to touch one’s feet’ — have more or less the same idiomatic connotation

‘to fall at one’s feet’ — an expression of servitude of a slave to the master or the ruler

‘to bless one’s hut with’ — to be kind enough to visit a poorman’s house (a psychofant addressing his master or benefactor)
2. SOCIO-CULTURE ORIENTED IDIOMS:

The linguistic interactions imply the socio-cultural give and take. The idioms listed here may also be described as calques owing to the social context and cultural content, we have classified them as a separate category. Examples:

'bonded labour' - a labourer for lifetime with no or meagre chances of emancipation

'brahmin hotel' - a vegetarian hotel not necessarily be managed by or patronised by brahmins

'Military hotel' - a non-vegetarian hotel where non-vegetarian food is given. Neither the management nor the patron has any association with military.
'country liquor' - alcoholic drink manufactured in indigenous method (opposed to foreign liquor which is an alcoholic drink of a foreign formula imported or manufactured in India).

'Black money' - ill-gotten money for which no tax is paid.

'sons of the soil'\textsuperscript{12} - people born or domiciled in a particular region

'converted into white' - to bring the ill-gotten money into circulation by devious means

'sacred-rice'\textsuperscript{13} - rice mixed with turmeric considered sacred for rituals and ceremonies
'dust-devil' - whirlwind

'separate-eating'14 - a feast where segregation is observed on caste or community lines.

'name giving ceremony' - a religious ceremony of giving a name to a new born child similar to the Western baptismal ceremony.

'hair - cutting ceremony' - the first hair cutting of a child ceremoniously performed according to religious rites.

3. FIGURATIVE IDIOMS:-

Every language has its own figurative expressions. Figurative expressions are not the monopoly of the creative writers. When figures of expressions are used at
the lower level of the society, they tend to develop idiomatic dimensions. The following are some of them.

'know when to slaken' - an idea drawn from or tighten one's reins' horse-riding meaning to discipline or to be liberal with one as the occasion demands

'wring one's ear lobes' - to give physical punishment

'throw like puppies' - to discord or abandon someone in a helpless state

'turn one's face the other way' - to pretend not to have seen someone whom you know

'raise the head to the sky' - to feel arrogant or proud
'pot - bellied'  - to have a belley shaped like a pot

'iron - discipline' - strict regimentation

'to throw dust into the eyes' - to cheat someone in broad day light.

'house of sand and dreams' - unrealistic house

'house of cards' - fragile constructions or hopes

'to be like one's two eyes' - to be as dear and precious like the two eyes of a person

'to die a dog's death' - to die a miserable death unwept.

'to plant oneself like a banana tree' - to be like a guest unwanted in some one's house
"to squeeze a heart like a wet cloth" - to cause almost pain or suffering to someone (emotional)

"heart beat like a drum" - fear

"to be stationary like a milestone" - not to move out from place to place; to live alive in a fixed place

"to live the life of a torn-leaf" - to live the life of suffering without any use to anybody.

4. IDIOMS OF IRONY:

Irony, understatement, Sarcasm, Euphemism are some of the sources or causes of idioms. These linguistic devices often overlap. For example, "bribe giving/taking is euphemistically and ironically called 'the usual procedure' in some parts of India. The following idioms further illustrate this process.
'to grease the palm'\textsuperscript{18} - It is a semantic way of describing the bribe giving or taking. Just as grease helps free and smooth running of wheels, money in the palm helps smooth and quick movement of files in Indian offices.

'Big-men'\textsuperscript{19} - When somebody is called a big man there is sarcasm hidden behind it. 'Like Antony's 'honourable men' (In Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar'), 'Big men' in Indian context are often scoundrels, criminals and mophia gangsters.

'double-faced' - 'man of hypocrisy or double standards'

eve-teasing' - It is a euphemism to describe the act of loafers and scoundrels who tease girls.
'warm hands with money' - Like greasing the palm, this is used to signify corrupt practices like bribing.

'give a fine welcome with a broom stick' - An ironic way of saying to beat somebody with a broomstick.

'get a marriage greeting' - Sarcastic or euphemistic expression which means to beat a person

'story teller' - Ironical way of describing a habitual liar.

5. PURE IDIOMS:

Pure idioms are mostly drawn from the wealth of idioms in Indian languages. Some of them are similar to calques and most of them, however, are idioms nourished in the lower strata of society. They do not entirely conform to our definition of idiom as a deviant meaning of a group
of words different from the total of the constituent elements. The idiom, here, has something to do with one or the other elements that make the idiom. They are called pure in the sense that they are not associated with creative writing. The following are some of the better known idioms that we come across in the less educated sections of English speaking circles in India.

'to give an examination'} - All these three expressions are equivalent to the English expression 'to take the examination'.
'to sit for/in examination' –
'to appear at the examination'

These three idioms are used in different parts of India. In Hindi region they use the idiom 'to give an examination'. In Southern States of India the other two idioms are more popular.
'to sit on somebody's neck' - to pressurize somebody to do something.

'out of station' - This is a pan-Indian idiom which means away from the town or village.

'Cooling glasses' - equivalent to Indian way of calling sun glasses.

'glaring glasses' - These expressions are common among the Indian students. They mean to get a 'zero' in the examination or to get no profit in any enterprise.

'duck's egg' - A physical maturity of a girl or a boy.

'hen's egg' -

'coming of age' -

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'cut a joke'
- to speak in a jocular manner or to tell a joke

'fluke shot'
- an unexpected good result.

'four twenty'
- It is a typical Indian idiom of English taken from the Indian Penal Code, clause 420, according to which cheating in any form is a cognizable offence. From the act of cheating the Idiom refers to be the person who cheats.

'soft-corner'
- A popular idiom which means a special sympathy or favourable attitude.

'on talking or speaking terms'
- hostile enough not to talk with each other.
'pin-drop silence' - A typical Indian idiom which means a silent audience where even a pin drop is heard.

'it goes without saying' - It is a pan-Indian English idiom which means it is obvious or it does not need any specific mentioning.

These are some of the few samples selected at random. Out of hundreds of such Indian English idioms there are in fact so many that they can make a separate topic for research study. The following list of idioms is further illustrative of the idiomatic wealth of Indian English.

'shifting house'

'neck to neck'

'all in all'
'today it self'
'no other go'
'veillage elder'
'The buffalo... will dry soon'
'a rogue number ten'
'to throw the dignity to the wind'
'blood bath'
'to roll in money'
'with what face do you ask money?'
'stand on word'
'right hand'
'lip-sympathy'
'born with a silver spoon'
'tell those tales to white washed walls'
'that house people'
'gods' extra'
'word-for-word fight'
'I don't tie my daughter to the neck of a pariah mixer.
'says this and that'
'this boy and that boy'
'delivery boy'
Sometimes the line that separates an idiom from a proverb is very thin. Indeed Mc Mordie's 'English Idiom and how to use them' contains a sizable number of proverbs as well. It is possible to make a distinction between an idiom and a proverb. An idiom is concerned with the total meaning of a syntactic construction or a phrase. Proverb is primarily concerned with wisdom or a moral that it communicates. But this distinction is not always maintained by the compilers of dictionaries of idioms and proverbs. For the purpose of this study we isolate idioms that sound like proverbs or the proverbs that are like idioms and we call them proverb-idioms. Examples:

'growing in your shadow'
'drop outs'
'royal we'
'poverty does not matter so long as you have a big heart'

- This is not so much an idiom as it is a proverb. It exhorts that a man with a great liberal heart does not mind poverty.

'Fat blinds eyes'

- A rich man is blind to realities of life.

'Friendship is friendship and business is business'

- This is a total proverb sentence which makes the distinction between two activities of life namely business and friendship.

'say one thing and do the opposite'

- A contradiction between precept and practice.

'every squirrel has his day'

- This is an Indianized proverb where English
prototype is 'every dog has his own day' which means every person has his ups and downs in life.

'Lakshmi and Saraswathi never go together'

- This is a popular conviction among Hindus that the two mythical goddesses Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, Saraswathi, the goddess of learning do not co-exist, which means that wealth and learning are incompatible to each other.

'a house bred chicken tastes no better than lentils'

- This is a translation of a similar proverb in Indian languages. It means home made things do not taste well. There are many variations of this proverb in many Indian languages.

Most proverbs and the proverb like idioms have their origin in literary writings. Poets and other creative writers invent such proverbs or use the existing
proverbs and give them popularity and thirdly a wise statement that they make it found to have wider applicability and people use them as quotations and later when it goes down to the masses it becomes a proverb. The number of such proverb-idioms is infinite. The following are merely illustrative.

‘kinship vanishes uncherished and loan vanishes unasked’

‘A brahmin’s front yard and muslims backyard’

‘One coal does not burn well alone, and the road seems long to the lonely traveller’

‘money is money and business is business’

‘It is neither Udho’s talking nor Madho’s giving ...... it is the true talk’

‘white hair does not make one old, a sword in hand does not make one bold’

‘we will be free from troubles when we enter the grave’
'Go happily and come prosperously.'

'If you put a dog on the throne he will jump down on the sight of dirt.'

'When a warrior is full he will be brave in fight, but his belley is empty he will be brave in flight.'

'Like moonlight in the jungle.'

'If possible, he seizes the tuft, if not, the feet.'

'Enemity with a wise man is better than friendship with a fool.'

'Not being able to dance, she abused the drum.' (A bad workman complains of his tools)

'In the house a buzzing of files, outside the hum of plankin barers. (Outward show)

'If you even drink milk under the date tree, people will say it is toddy (People are judged by the company they keep)

'The bullock pulled towards the sun, and the buffalo towards the shade. (A bad match)
'Like dogs barking at an elephant'

'To hide one lie a thousand lies are wanted'
(one lie makes many)

'False gold is very bright'

'If you sit and eat, even a mountain will be consumed'

'Like a drop of water on a lotus leaf'
(a very unsettled state)

'Like a hemp plant growing in the Tulsi garden'
(A black sheep in the family)

'Put all things in order while the lamp is yet burning'
(make good use of your opportunities)

'He opens the door for the robber and then awakes his master'
(a double dealing rascal)

'Like tying bald heads and knees in a knot'
(said of a very cunning person)

'Let what is to come come, and what is past be past'
(Let bygones be bygones)
‘The past is better than future’
   (The good old times)

‘Cold water to hot water, hot water to cold water’
   (a beneficial union of different dispositions)

‘Happiness is half strength’

English is spoken in India by a larger number of people than the entire population of Britain. Considering the wide spread of use of the country, one would expect a greater wealth of idioms peculiar to Indian English. Although there are hundreds of them, they are not considered very significant. One of the reasons is that the Oxford English Dictionary does not give them due recognition as it has given to Indian words of English. Secondly, Indian English idioms are regional and ethnic in nature and do not have pan-Indian circulation. Thirdly the purists and Academics in India tend to look down upon the Indian idioms as Indianisms to be avoided or Indian errors of English to be remedied. The last important reason is English studied in India as a second language
and is confined to the upper class sections of the society.

Idioms of language are created by the masses who always seek novelty in the form of expression. But the most English knowing people in India try to confirm to standard English rather than seek unconventional ways of speech. If the number of idioms in Indian English is disappointingly less, it is because English has never been the language of the Indian masses.
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