



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-IV, Issue-V, March 2018, Page No. 80-85

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Translation & Translation Studies: A Workshop

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Abstract

Translation as an enterprise is of immense significance to literary scholarship at both regional and national level. The translation of Indian literary and mythological texts into English will not only open up regional literatures to national and international audiences but will also lead us to a position of better awareness of our own literatures and thereby to an enhanced sense of our Indian literary Identities and self esteem. Translation as a tool, i.e. translation as an extensive enterprise, would dissolve the linguistic walls that separate us from the literature of our neighbours and cultural cousins. At the moment even in the 21st century, scholarship on Indian literature is ruptured with fissures and gaps in our understanding of what we call Indian literature.

Translation as a means of bridging gaps of languages across states would equip Indian literature and literary studies with new vision, new sight. In lieu of this strategic literary enterprise, and for the love I bear towards the Indian literatures, I have undertaken upon myself the translation of some literary texts from Punjabi, my mother tongue, to English the language in which lies my training as an Assistant Professor of English. The first text in Punjabi was Bhai Jaita's Sri GurKatha – a long epical poem written in old Punjabi; thereafter I went on to translate a Punjabi novel titled, Shanti Parav, by Desraj Kali (who writes fiction about the lives of Punjabi Dalits), and currently am translating the poems of Peero a first woman poet of Punjab. The paper that follows is a sharing of findings gleaned from my practical engagement with the creative craftsmanship like task of Translation.

The Significance of Translation Studies for Indian Literature is immense and extremely vital.

Considering the fact that India is a land of many languages, many literatures and literary traditions which in a major way lie submerged in the blankets of their regional avatars, translation as an enterprise is of immense significance to literary scholarship at both regional and national level. The translation of Indian literary and mythological texts into English will not only open up regional literatures to national and international audiences but will also lead us to a position of better awareness of our own literatures and thereby to an enhanced sense of our Indian literary Identities and self esteem.

An enhanced vision, a more comprehensive and consolidated assessment of the growth, graph and strengths of each regional literary tradition and pan Indian literatures will naturally lead us to derive and formulate an authentic and coherent body of research in terms of historiography, aesthetics, literary criticism and cultural theory. The tool of translation (I mean an extensive translation enterprise), would dissolve the linguistic walls that separate us from the literature of our neighbours and cultural cousins. At the moment even in the 21st century, scholarship on Indian literature is ruptured with fissures and gaps in our understanding of what we call Indian literature. A partial access to regional literatures and regional scholarship due to the general handicap when one is dealing with a large number of languages has naturally led us exist in a state of fractured seeing (reading/knowing) where we live in a state of ignorance and are afflicted with a cultural myopia of our own wealth and riches.

This patchy comprehension of one's own national literatures is a curse waiting to become a gift if only we as scholars would endeavour to go that extra mile and bring all regional literature to light by passing it through the prism of translation. More than any other country in the world India by virtue of having several state languages, where each has its own unique literature, literary history and traditions, needs to undertake translation activity in a big way. Translation as a means of bridging the gaps of language across states would equip Indian literature and literary studies with new eyes. Equipped with new sight we would be able to arrive at an intellectual clarity which in turn would guide us to formulate with confidence, answers to questions like what does India have or what contribution can India make to world knowledge and last but not the least, what do we mean when we speak of Indian identity or Indian identities.

In lieu of this strategic politics, and the love I bear for Indian literatures, I have undertaken upon myself the translation of some literary texts from Punjabi, my mother tongue, to English the language in which lies my training as an Assistant Professor of English. The first text was a *Bhai Jaita's Sri GurKatha* – a long epic poem written in old Punjabi; and thereafter I went on to translate a novel titled, *Shanti Parav*, by Desraj Kali who is a Punjabi journalist and writes fiction about the lives of Punjabi dalits. Currently the manuscript is in process and waiting to get published. In this short paper I would like to put forth some insights and translation strategies that I have gained in the process of translating from Punjabi into English both poetry, and prose. How far is the process of translation a matter of transliteration and how much is it an exercise that is creative? What therefore are the challenges of translation / transcreation? How much of the exercise of translation is about research and craft, and how much of it a work of art? I shall base my comments in this essay upon the specifics of translating poetic verse.

The Nuts and Bolts of Translating Poetry

There are several ways of approaching translation. Here I share mine – purely from experience and the little that I have read about translation techniques. As I went through Robert Bly's essay and then Susan Bassnett's essay on translation, at several points I found myself agreeing or disagreeing with an A, B, or C approach...which while it was

enlightening, also brought home to me at the same time, the fact that there are several approaches to translating a poem/text and that all are good as long as they work. That translation activity, beyond a certain point is a matter of personal temperament and taste. Having said that I place before you now my own unique and not so unique strategies on the practical translation of a poem.

To begin with at the very base of translation, we must experience a sense of comfort and adventure - an inward connection with the original text that we wish to translate. Robert Bly in his brilliant essay, 'The Eight Stages of Translation' places the element of 'connection with the text' at the second stage – after the text has been read and transliterated. He says, 'In the second stage we decide whether to turn back or go on.' (73). This decision however, can also be achieved through close readings of the text, without going through the exercise or **tedium of transliteration** in the first place. A close reading of the poem/text is enough to help one decide if the poem speaks, fascinates and arouses in one a desire to spend more time with it, explore it and translate it.

Translation as I understand is an act of rewriting and recreating in another language, an expression, a context and an energy that belong to another language. Therefore for the enterprise to be successful we need, to begin with, a certain degree of **synergy, sympathy and cognitive valence** between the translator and the text. This is a basic given for translation from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL) to be a success. When we talk of the translation of a poem from one language to another we need to look closely at what we mean by the word 'language'. **Language as semiotics that functions at various levels – linguistic, symbolic, cultural, social and conceptual.** And this brings us to the concept of the **text and context**.

One must enter translation with a certain degree of self knowing and preparedness, and one must also be prepared to plunge into uncharted directions, to expand, evolve and explore. (for instance, my experience with the translation of Des Raj Kali's novel *Shanti Parav* led me to explore the anthropology of the dalits of east Punjab, their history, social rituals, the politics and the poverty and finally to Baba Saheb Ambedkar whom I went on to study and even read on him a paper :) Translation in that sense can also be seen as a route – a thoroughfare - to the study of literature and all that is associated with it indepth.

Translation in that sense is a workshop in language. Its business is with the seeds, branch and bark of language – language as a living *dharohar* is a treasure house and a product of the life-energies, the history, the culture and politics of a people that have given birth to it and which are contained in the flowing waters of a river changes as it flows, changing its form, pace and colour in accordance to the banks, the cities, the forests and the terrain that contains it. Therefore when we set out to transform a poem, a short story, an essay, novel or a play from one language to another, we must brace ourselves to negotiate not just the word, but all of this energy that is ungraspable but is incumbent in it and can be felt.

Thus, a precondition to translation from SL to TL is one's familiarity with both the languages. One must know both the languages rather intimately and also have a good

understanding and grasp of associated culture and histories. Another precondition that is special to the translation of a poem, a lyric or a musical drama, is that the translator should himself or herself be a poet, or else he/she must possess a taste for language – the inherent rhythms and assonance, the gifts of poetic signification and its symbolic substance/graph and the ability to transcend. Translation therefore can also be seen as a personal classroom which sets us off on a journey – gently encouraging us to enhance and polish language skills, cultivate an inner ear and a feel for the wealth of abundance incumbent in the sense and sensuality of the written word. The general rules of practical translation are a shared pool from which we all must draw commonly, and yet each experience, each method and approach vis a vis translation activity and the end product, is unique. The end product of translation has as much to do with the context as with the text.

Having shared with you my approach to practical translation, I shall now move on to discuss with you my personal strategy of translating a text, poetry in particular. The process of translation in my own workshop consists of 6 seminal stages.

In the first stage I'm like a film actor listening to a script – or reading it! With a *bidee* perched between my right thumb and first finger ☺ - my ears cocked to check whether the poem/the story speaks to me or not, whether it and I can enter into a partnership? Sometimes one reads the entire poem/novel/essay and sometimes one doesn't even need to read all of it, in order to decide whether one is going to work with it or not.

The next task is to read the Source text carefully. In case of a poem – one needs to read it again and again – to get not only its meaning, but the rhythm, the pace, the sensibilities and the sound patterns that it displays. What I do is to surround myself with its energies and its spirit and drink it in and soak myself in it. This is the only way I know to tap into its energy and touch the sensory signification that hangs in layers, between and under the literal word-web. This exercise must be performed repeatedly for each stanza sometimes as one goes along from stanza to stanza, and poem to poem.

Transliteration. The third stage which I personally know as the dictionary stage. It is like labour pains! Or even like shifting to a new house in a new city! - very messy and agonising as one faithfully decodes words and sentences from the Source text, and transfers them into the Target idiom/text/language. At this stage while transliterating from SL to TL, one must ensure utmost loyalty to the syntax and signification of the original, this will save you from the odiousness of having to make repetitive visits to the source text, and will smoothen your task in the next stage of translation.

Once the first rough draft – a faithful transliteration is accomplished, it is time to celebrate. For the next step then, promises to be very engaging, fascinating and challenging. The struggle to grapple with the transfer of meaning and 'mood' (R Bly) persists and is further amplified in this stage for here we try to recover the energy that was lost in transliteration in the brick and mortar of word transfer. We attempt here to smoothen the rough idiom, break and make where necessary, new sentence structures that are in sync with the aesthetics and sensibilities of the new/target language. Where possible one even tries to

retain the original structures – this is a sense is a stage of negotiation, compromise and barter between the SL and the TL. The guiding principle all along being **to rewrite, represent and retain on another soil a hybrid sense of that same old poem that sang with such panache on its native soil of language-culture.** Let me give you here an example from a Punjabi verse from Bhai Jaita's *Sri Gur Katha*.

Bhai Jaita who was a commander in the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh's army describes in this section scenes from the Battle of Bhangani. The battle was fought on 18th September 1688, between Guru Gobind Singh's army and the combined forces of many Rajas of the Shivalik Hills, at Bhangani near Paonta Sahib. It was a conspiracy of the hill rajas who had joined hands with Aurangzeb. It was the first battle fought by the Sikh guru at the age of 19. In the following stanza in Punjabi, Bhai Jaita recounts –

*Ab AuraNg thaan liyaa mann mahi
Gur Gobind nahiN moh soN darr paaye.
Ab loh soN lohaa kaat deeje,
Mam dosh nahiN nikaa sir aaye.
yoN soch-bichar Aurang karee,
likh Bhimchand paati bhijvaayo.
Tum karo paraaajit Gobind kao,
Mam paati Bhikhan Khan dilayo. (108)*

The rhyme scheme in the above stanza is ab,ab,ab,cc. In my translation of it in English however, I have dropped the rhyme scheme and attempted instead to work with internal rhyme and assonance, and endeavoured to recreate the energy and mood of the original poem. End rhyme has been brought in where possible towards the end, in the last four lines of the stanza in English. Also instead of Aurang I have gone in for the full name Aurangzeb, keeping in mind foreign readership I have also extended the last line of the original, and gone on to explain that Bhikhab Khan was in the service of Guru Gobind... This could also have been put in as a footnote, but I prefer as a strategy to avoid footnotes where possible, preferring to assimilate within the text as much detail as possible. The English translation:

Aurangzeb realised in his heart of hearts
how dauntless the Guru was,
and undeterred.
The hour had come, to cut iron with iron!
Not a grain of blame would fall on him
and yet he would feed, on all profit!
Thus to further strategy, the mogul king wrote
to Bhim Chand a note –
'Defeat thou in battle Guru Gobind.
Also pass this to Bhikhan Khan, *who is now with him.*' (109)

Sometimes one must even come up with a new image or a new symbol that correlates (Eliot's 'objective correlative'), with the energy of the original and accommodates the nuance and crispness of its original. That is why it is good if one is a poet when one translates the poem of yet another poet. The late novelist Khushwant Singh's English translations of Amrita Pritam's Punjabi poems are an example to heed. With all due respect to the late brilliant novelist, his translations of Amrita Pritam's poems successfully carry the gist but lack the soul and poetic energy of the original. On the other hand Niruppama Dutt's English translations of Lal Singh Dil's Punjabi poems do much more justice to their original, this could be attributed to the fact that Ms Dutt is herself a poet – a bilingual poet she writes in both English and Punjabi. She has the poet's facility, a facility to negotiate both the cognitive and the non-cognitive aspects of signification through language.

Moving on to the fourth stage, one goes back once again to the text and reading it in a leisurely manner, allowing for more refinement and design into the target language - editing, pruning and fashioning the rough edges of the source language text so they can fall in line with the essentials of the target language text. This I find, is the most creative and the most dubious stage in translation. Here we are in clearer waters - closer to the target text that has begun to emerge between our fingers. We are primarily engaged with fashioning the form and phrase of the translation at hand - assimilating the sense and smell of the original and forging new words from the ones that exist – a popular example that comes to mind, though it is not from poetry, is Salman Rushdie's experiments with English in the Hindi way in his novel *Midnight's Children*. Translation at this stage simulates alchemy wherein the translator must heat and meld metals like the alchemist stretching the English syntax, coaxing it to kneel and bend backwards to accommodate the nuance of new energies ushered in by new sentence structures. In other words here in the fourth stage the translator must perform delicate, chisel and hammer work and sculpt from a block of wood or rock, an English that is strange, familiar and new at the same time.

The last stages, the fifth and the sixth are about feedback and the formatting of the text/work. It involves taking decisions on issues of presentation and printing. Whether notes, footnotes are to be incorporated or not? A glossary or an appendix to be attached or not? Once these practical concerns have been attended to the book is ready for sending to an expert and a friend for feedback. And once that too has been received, reviewed and incorporated if and as much is necessary; send the translation to a publisher and share it with the world.

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