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Divided by a Common Language

Translations have always been a vital part of Indian literary culture even when the word 'translation' or any of its Indian language equivalents — ***anuvad***, ***tarjuma***, ***bhashantar*** or ***vivartanam*** — were not evoked to describe the activity. The ***Ramayana*** and ***Mahabharata*** have been retold in almost every Indian language, and stories not only from Sanskrit but Arabic and Persian also have freely travelled from region to region through adaptations and modifications. Folk tales circulate in India, as they do all over the world, paying scant heed to language boundaries. In the early era of the novel in India, many English novels were indigenized in our languages sometimes with necessary modifications to give them a local habitation and a name. Translations, adaptations, abridgements and recreations were overlapping activities and it was not considered important to mark their separate jurisdictions. I grew up reading abridged children's classics in Bangla — ranging from ***The Iliad, Sindbad the Sailor, Les Miserables, The Three Musketeers*** and ***Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea***, many of which, I am ashamed to admit, I never went on to read either in the original or in fuller versions in later life and did not feel particularly deprived.

What has changed in the situation is that now we are focusing on translation as a field of study rather than as part of the natural ambience we live in. It is certainly a more self-conscious act today, and is being discussed more than ever before; in 1998, for example, there have been no less than half a dozen seminars, workshops and conferences on translation in India, some of which I have attended, others I have heard about. In the last quarter of the twentieth century an academic discipline has evolved — first in the European and North American universities, and now gradually making its way to our shores — which concerns itself with the semantic, cultural and political issues involved in the act of linguistic transfer and its history through the centuries. As in other disciplines, in the humanities and social sciences in India, only much more so in Translation Studies, people in this field cannot get very far by being derivative of its western model. The complex linguistic dynamics within the country and the ambivalent position of English in present-day Indian culture (simultaneously a local as well as global medium) create, along with porous language boundaries[1] and many other factors peculiar to India, a unique configuration that cannot be analysed by existing translation theories originating in Europe. But first, we need to gather a great deal of empirical data on the situation in India before theoretical tools of our own can emerge.

Even without statistical surveys, certain diachronic changes in translation practice in India seem fairly apparent. The translation of novels from one Indian language to another (and here I am going to look at novels only), which was a major conduit of cultural transmission within the country for nearly a century, seems to have declined in recent decades to make way for a new activity which is fast growing in visibility — the translation of Indian language fiction into English. In the early part of the twentieth century Marathi readers knew Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay through direct translations from Bangla and Harinarain Apte, a

major early novelist in Marathi, would have been known in the neighbouring regions in Kannada or Telugu versions. Lalithambika Antherjanam (1909–88) acknowledges the early influence not only of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and Outside* on her writing, but of a much less known Bangla writer Sitadevi Chattopadhyay on her Malayalam writing.[2] I have met several North Indian readers who casually assumed that Saratchandra Chatterjee was originally a Hindi writer — such was the widespread availability of his novels in translation, and his grass-roots popularity in regions outside Bengal. In my classroom in Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi) where a cross-section of selected students come from all over the country, even in the late 1980s I used to come across an occasional student from Kerala who knew Premchand's *Godan* or Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Arogya Niketan* through Malayalam translation, but such readers are far fewer today than they were a generation ago.

To me this decline is a matter of regret for several reasons. Transferring a text — say from Hindi to Bangla or from Marathi to Kannada — is a far more natural and satisfactory activity both for the translator and the reader than when the same novels are rendered into English, where negotiating semantic and cultural hurdles to achieve equivalence of meaning tends to be a relatively uphill task. I say this in full awareness of Edward Sapir's statement that 'No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality' (p. 69). It is true that even neighbouring languages do not inhabit identical universes but intersecting penumbras of meaning between two languages in the subcontinent are likely to generate a richer resonance of recognition and discovery than the against-the-grain 'elevation' into the master language of the world with certain inevitable attenuation of specificity. The target audiences are also very different in each case. The potential readers for an English translation of, say, a novel by Shivarama Karanth or Manik Bandhopadhyay

would be an indeterminate and undifferentiated mass, situated either in the same region or in another part of India. Among them some may have rural hinterlands in their background not entirely unlike what these writers draw from, or they may be cosmopolitan urban Indians in the metropolis with no exposure, either direct or literary, to subaltern Indian life. Or the reader may be in another country altogether, with no previous knowledge of the ethos being represented. As a result, the anxiety of communication gets reflected in an explicatory or dilutionary tendency. But the translation, say from Gujarati into Hindi or from Oriya into Bangla used to be undertaken for a very specific and well-defined audience, and consequently the nervous uncertainty about decoding culture would be less evident. Moreover, when a local language text gets translated into a global and economically stronger language like English, there is an implicit and inevitable hierarchy involved in the process. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have pointed out: 'translation takes place where two, invariably unequal worlds collide, and ... there are always relationships of power involved when one world is represented for another in translation' (p. xxii). Since most Indian languages (hopefully) occupied roughly parallel spaces in our culture, specially in relation to the master space occupied by English, the politics of power might have played a lesser part in these mutual translations. It would however be simplistic to assume that all the Indian languages, either in their own self-perceptions or in perceptions of each other, had equal partnership in a common literary endeavour. The discrepancy in the numbers of translations from and into a particular language is one of the indices of this inequality. For example, many Bangla novels were translated into Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Marathi, but the reverse did not happen. But by and large that does not substantially alter my statement that translation among Indian languages used to be a major literary activity in the past.

I speak in the past tense not because such translations have

ceased altogether, but because they are no longer perceived as important in the respective languages while every English publisher in Mumbai, Chennai or Delhi is hastening to add titles in translation to their existing catalogues to keep up with the times. Only in the realm of drama the state of mutual translation continues to be relatively healthy and vigorous. Perhaps the general dearth of good plays in India makes the theatre world conscious of the need to share whatever is available. Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchvar, G.P. Deshpande, Satish Alekar and now Mahesh Dattani travel from language to language with ease, to be performed successfully in different parts of the country, although not all these translated scripts achieve the permanence of printed books.

But in the genre of the novel mutual translation is now by and large a neglected literary activity, while a growing number of people — many of them connected with English teaching at the college and university level — are trying their hand at translating Indian-language texts into English. Some amount of translation activity does continue in languages like Hindi and Malayalam, traditionally more hospitable to texts from other parts of India than some other languages, and over the decades these languages have been enriched by this ready receptivity. In contrast Bangla is a poorer language to the extent that, although eager to translate from European literature, it has been stubbornly resistant to contemporary writing from the rest of the country. The alleged literary superiority of Bangla is a matter of history now, but the arrogance perpetrated by that myth continues to the present day. The few available Bangla translations from Tamil, Urdu or Marathi are all officially undertaken projects, sponsored by the Sahitya Akademi or the National Book Trust, hence reflect neither popular interest nor literary predilections.

In 1996 when a three-cornered project called Kaveri–Ganga was launched as one of the many activities of the *Katha* imprint to

produce direct translations among three languages — Bangla, Tamil and Kannada — the real difficulty turned out to be identifying bilingual translators.[3] Evidently proficiency in Indian languages is no longer the marker of sophistication and culture as it had once been in India. The few capable translators located after an intense search turned out to be all elderly and retired people. Among the metropolitan youth today, even among those interested in literature, literary knowledge of even one Indian language — not to speak of two — is considered redundant if one has proficiency in English. Global monolingualism is the aspiration of the younger generation today.

In July 1997 the Kaveri–Ganga project succeeded in producing three slim but excellent volumes in three languages — Tamil, Kannada and Bangla. But amid the din of publicity of books with bigger marketing budgets, not much has been heard of this modest venture, even in the respective languages. Books are noticed and read not necessarily because of their intrinsic quality; their success often depends on strategies of publicity and distribution. Hence books translated from one Indian language to another may never compete with translations into English which have, to begin with, an all-India urban market, and potentially a bigger one in other English-speaking countries.

However, once we accept the inevitability of this change as the consequence of globalization, instead of merely regretting the decline in mutual translations we should also be looking into the positive potential of this publication boom of English translations from Indian-language fiction. Hypothetically, Bhalchandra Nemade's Marathi novel *Kosla* (in English translation *The Cocoon*) or O.V. Vijayan's Malayalam novel *Khasakinte Ithihasam* (in translation *The Legend of Khasak*), both much acclaimed in the 1960s in their respective languages, now become available not only to Indian readers who do not read Marathi or Malayalam, but also to readers in Australia, Canada, Britain or USA should they want

to read these books. How widely this is actually happening is a question worth considering.

It is not that English translations of Indian fiction are an entirely new phenomenon, but, barring a few exceptions, until the sixties of the twentieth century it had been like a sporadic cottage industry — the author himself or his friends attempting amateurish translations of isolated texts and bringing out limited editions privately — which were hardly ever commercially distributed. In the sixties came a few organized ventures, by Jaico Paperbacks, Hind Pocket Books, and Asia Publishing House. There was also an excellent series sponsored by UNESCO which made well-known novels like *Pather Panchali, Umrao Jan Ada, Chemmeen, Garambicha Bapu* and *Putul Nacher Itikatha* available in English. But that was a trickle compared to the spate we are witnessing now. Except for the UNESCO project, which in any case did not originate here, Indian publishers in the sixties did not display much professionalism in their enterprise. Very rarely would there be an attempt to introduce the author or the text or to provide a suitable frame to help the uninitiated reader. Sangam Paperbacks, an imprint of Orient Longman, in the seventies were the only exception, and might have, without too much fanfare, paved the way to the more systematic activity we have been witnessing in the next two decades. There is now a careful selection — or at least a semblance of it — of the texts to be translated, an attempt to provide a suitable context for each text through an Introduction, Translator's Preface and Notes, and a consciousness about the need for quality control over the texture of the language. The latter however is an activity fraught with controversy. It seems the policy of certain translators to achieve smoothness and readerly ease at any cost while others take a deliberate position that the language of translation must contain syntactical as well as lexical reminders that the source text comes from another culture. One recalls that the editors of the influential two volumes of

Women Writing in India were the earliest to formulate the second position:

> We have tried therefore (not always successfully) to strain against the reductive and often stereotypical homogenization involved in the process. We preferred translations that did not domesticate the work either into a pan-Indian or into a 'universalist' mode, but demanded of the reader too a translation of herself into another socio-cultural ethos (p. xxii).

A result of such articulation of positions there is now a consciousness about the issues involved and a healthy debate has ensued about criteria of judgement in evaluating translation.

The imprints that have high visibility today in this area of fiction translation into English are Macmillan India who have published twenty-four novels in three years, Katha, Seagull Books, Penguin India, Disha Books, Affiliated East–West, Kali for Women, Stree —and institutions like Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust. Even a research centre like The Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla has of late been publishing translations from Hindi and Urdu. The total number of Indian fiction texts available in English translation is not negligible today, even though these would constitute the tip of the iceberg when compared to what remains untranslated.

It is true that some of the most enduring novels in each of our languages are virtually untranslatable because of their local and specific frames of reference and the play upon variations of language and dialect, which invariably suffer attenuation when translated in English but may not suffer as drastically when translated into another Indian language. One example is Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1947) a novel that would figure in my personal list of the ten best novels of the world in the twentieth century, which has never been translated into English, perhaps because the caste/class/tribe interaction in the novel is represented partially through variegated registers of speech. Incidentally, an excellent Hindi translation of this book has been

available for some years. Similarly, a Bangla novel called *Aranyer Adhikar* (1979), which for me is the best work of Mahasweta Devi, is still not available in English although some of her short stories are. But this novel was translated into Hindi, Telugu and a few other Indian languages a couple of decades ago. There may be more such examples in languages to which I do not have access.

Indeed, the totality of our fiction texts available in English translation may be an infinitesimal fraction of what actually exists in any of the major languages of India, nor do the texts always represent the best but quantitatively this entire body can compare favourably with, say, Indian novels originally written in English, which used to be a trickle earlier, but in the last two decades have become a steady stream daily gaining in volume.

Thus we have two numerically comparable sets — Indian novels *written* in English and Indian novels *translated* into English, and the asymmetry in their reception is evident to all. Novelists who choose to write in English, at least the best of them, attract international media attention, their books sell in other countries as well as in India, and get translated into several European languages. Even within India people in the urban areas are far more knowledgeable about the latest novel by an Indian English writer and the amount of advance or royalty he or she is getting than in keeping up with what is available from the Indian languages. There is a vague feeling that such translations are a good idea, and some of them, specially those connected with English Studies, even aspire to do some translations from their mother tongue some day — but if pressed they would admit that they have never read a single novel from another Indian language in English translation. Bookshops display new novels in English prominently, but in order to find the translated ones, one would have to go to the back of the shop and bend in uncomfortable positions to locate a few dusty copies. While writers like Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhuri, Rohinton Mistry and Arundhati Roy are reviewed and

interviewed widely, invited for readings from Seattle to Sydney, not many outside the borders of India, and very few outside the specific language communities within India, have heard of Ismat Chughtai, Gopinath Mohanty, Shivaram Karanth or Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay who write in Urdu, Oriya, Kannada and Bangla, respectively. But language need not be a barrier to accessibility because English translations of at least one novel by each of these writers and in some cases more, are available quite easily for anyone who would care to look for them.

But who should care to look for them and why? Books do not exist in the abstract realm of aesthetic value alone. People read books either because the desire to read a specific text is created through advertisement and discussion in the media, which are then seductively marketed like any other consumer product. Alternatively, they are read if put on reading lists in academic courses. One of the reasons of their relative invisibility may well be that translated novels are brought out mostly by Indian publishing houses that neither have large advertising budgets nor a promotional network to project their books outside the country. The question to ask then is why do multinational publishing concerns — generally based in London or New York — never touch translations from India, when they do, more and more, publish and promote Indian novels written originally in English? The standard reason put forward to explain away this omission — poor quality of translations[4] — does not seem adequate because translation is no longer an entirely amateur activity in India and the entire question of who decides the criteria for good translation throws up issues about the hierarchy of cultures. The natural superiority of an original novel over a translated novel cannot also be sustained as a reason at a time when all the old adages propagating the secondary status of a translated text have been challenged and discarded. 'Translation is the reverse side of the carpet', 'the translator is a traitor', 'poetry is what is lost in translation': such cliches of an

earlier era are now anathema to translators and translation theorists the world over who see translation as a creative and interpretative act. In this altered state of consciousness when the earlier metaphors of inequality between the original and the translation (master/slave or male/female, the most offensive being the one that sees faithfulness and beauty being mutually exclusive) are being turned upside down, one has to look for other reasons why multinational publishers do not consider taking up translations from India. Specially when the same publishers have no difficulty in publishing and selling translations from Colombia, Argentina, Poland or Czechoslovakia and securing world-wide media coverage for them.

The category of writers called 'The Third World Cosmopolitans', who are globally visible, who are taught in postcolonial classrooms the world over, and who are hailed in the review pages of western journals as interpreters and authentic voices of the non-western world, hardly ever include a writer from India who does not write in English. This group includes Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Isabel Allende, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and a few others. It is interesting that even though this list contains Latin American writers who have been translated into English, the precondition for belonging to this club for an Indian is that s/he must write originally in English. Implicit here is an erasure of the diversity of India.

There is also a pedagogical factor in the dissemination of books: when prescribed in university curricula, novels certainly get a wider currency. Unfortunately, in Indian universities, English departments by and large continue to be orthodox in their course of studies, and even though some might prescribe Homer or Dostoevsky or Ibsen in English translation, inclusion of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916) or O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889) is strongly resisted on the grounds that a student of English only be given books that are composed in that language. The argument that a translated novel enriches the receiving

language is hardly ever considered. The situation may be changing a little, but only in the more progressive universities.

Less explicable is the absence of translated Indian novels in postcolonial literature courses that are proliferating in the numerous English departments of universities in the USA, Canada, Australia and several places in Europe, partly in response to the increasing multicultural components in their own population, and partly due to an ideological climate that emphasizes the need to open out an Euro-centric academia to the plurality of the world. These universities are far more innovative and the teachers there have greater autonomy in the selection of texts than what the system allows in India. Yet, when these courses include Indian texts, they invariably bring in R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul (who for some reason often qualifies there as an Indian), Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai — and sometimes younger writers in English like Rohinton Mistry or, more recently, Arundhati Roy. The only two writers sometimes to be included who do not write originally in English are U.R.Anantha Murthy (only his novel ***Samskara*** which was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan), and Mahasweta Devi (the short stories translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak).[5] In both cases the translators' credentials in the American academy and their appropriate mediation of the texts (through commentary, interpretation and prefatory material) may be as much the reason for such inclusion as the intrinsic quality of the texts themselves, because works by these authors translated by others have not received similar academic attention. For example, Anantha Murthy's second novel ***Bharatipura***, also available in English translation, to me a far more complex and nuanced work foregrounding an individual situated at the cusp of history and very different from the fable-like quality that marks ***Samskara***, has hardly been critically noticed outside Karnataka. The attraction of ***Samskara*** to those outside its cultural milieu may well be the timeless, allegorical quality of the protagonist's existentialist

dilemma. *Bharatipura* on the other hand, presents an intricate web of predicaments, tangled in caste and class tensions and kinship and ritual patterns peculiar to that region of Karnataka, and a specific moment in time. Although the shifting configuration of a community's public and private value systems are its major focus, the novel cannot be simplified into a predictable bi-polar tradition/modernity dialectic. The stubbornly local and regional novels in the Indian languages, at least the best of them, generally resist such reductive readings, often refusing easy accessibility to those outside the culture. This may be one of the many reasons why some of the best novels from India do not find a ready readership abroad. The novels written originally in English, on the other hand, do not take for granted too many cultural assumptions, because they are addressing a heterogeneous audience. This question of addressivity may well be at the root of the asymmetry mentioned earlier.

Indian writers in English have for a long time been engaged — though not always self-consciously — in the construction of a clearly defined and recognizable India. Raja Rao's definition had a brahmanic frame; R.K. Narayan distilled its essence through a benign small town, middle-class and upper-caste in its composition; some others constructed their India in opposition to what the West was supposed to connote. What appeared homogeneous from a certain discursive perspective easily dissolved into pluralities in Indian-language fiction because the perspective is from within. Because the original target audience of the English novel about India is different from that of the specific audience of the Hindi or Bangla novel, certain shifts in representation become inevitable. Also the socio-economic as well as spatial location of the two sets of writers create differences in their angles of vision. For the urban or diasporic English writer issues of caste, subcaste and tribe, tensions and pressures of a convoluted local variety do not assume the same intricacy and urgency as those directly involved in them.

A comment recently made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can be used here to strengthen the point:

> The relationship between the writer of 'vernacular' and Indo-Anglian literature is a site of class–cultural struggle. Indeed the sphere of Indo-Anglian writing and vernacular writing are usually not in serious contact. By class–cultural struggle is meant a struggle in the production of cultural or cultural–political identity. (pp. 126–7)

The novelist in the Indian language seems more involved with the local and the particular, compared to the national project in English which has a greater anxiety to appear 'Indian' because the target readership is diffuse and may include those who have no first-hand experience of India. This anxiety sometimes manifests itself in a pull towards homogenization, an inability to perceive those realities which are situated outside the cognitive limits imposed by English and which cannot be appropriated into the East–West or colonial–indigenous paradigms.

It is not only the earlier writers who felt the need to construct a unitary and recognizable India. In a book published as recently as 1997 (*Love and Longing in Bombay* by Vikram Chandra) the author calls the five sections 'Dharma', 'Bhakti', 'Kama', 'Shakti' and 'Shanti' — disembodied signifiers for India that promise to live up to the unambiguous alterity of the title. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), the second book by a California-based Indian writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, contains the kind of exotic colours to evoke the country that might have embarrassed an Indian language writer: 'my birthland, land of aquamarine feathers, sunset skies as brilliant as blood'. In this tale of a mysterious eastern woman, the distinctly 'Indian' flavour of the title is intensified by naming the sections 'Turmeric', 'Red Chilli', 'Peppercorn', 'Lotus Root' and ending, for good measure, with a climactic chapter called 'Maya', in case the seasonings have not been sufficiently cooked. For those in India, spices are taken-for-granted ingredients of daily cooking and do not carry any cultural connotation. They assume a symbolic

value only when dislodged from their normal context. Since novels in English are read in many regions across the globe, there is perhaps an urgency to announce the specificity of India fairly early in the novel, or in the chapter headings, if not in the title itself.

Certain words, objects and concepts are associated with India in the popular imagination outside the country, which the writer in English may be tempted to deploy as short-cuts to create an ambience. The imperative to essentialize India through evocation of local colour or standard signifiers is naturally less perceptible in the Indian-language novel where intricate tensions of community, religion, caste, language, region and class assume a greater immediacy and the question of Indianness is seldom addressed. In this context Jorge Louis Borges' comments on how 'what is truly native can and often does dispense with local colour' is worth remembering. U.R. Anantha Murthy quotes this passage from Borges as an epigraph to one of his essays:

> Gibbon observes that in the Arabian book par excellence, in the Koran, there are no camels; I believe if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this absence of camels would be sufficient to prove it is an Arabian work. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were specially Arabian; for him they were part of reality, he had no reason to emphasize them ... he knew he could be an Arab without camels (p. 105).

Does this mean if the Koran been written originally in English, the presence of camels might have been unavoidable?. One does not know. While all generalizations in literature are hazardous, and one always looks forward to exceptions that would challenge truism, Borges' camels might for the sake of convenience serve as a suitable metaphor for the differential representation I have been trying to describe. In India the constituency of readership is determined by the language of original composition. Even when a Hindi or Bangla text is translated into English, the subtext of assumptions and references do not always get easily transferred to

another culture. Thus the fates of the Indian novel in English and the Indian novel in English translation might continue to be dissimilar in the global market. But there is a potentially large domestic market to justify the present surge of translations into English.

Notes

1. For example the poet Vidyapati is claimed both by Bangla and Maithilli, and Meerabai's language has elements of both Rajasthani and Gujarati.

2. 'A Woman Writer's Reply', translated by Gita Krishnankutty in *Cast Me Out If You Will: Stories and Memoirs*, p. 53. The translator in her Introduction to the volume informs us that the Malayalam translation that Lalithambika read was done by B. Kalyani Amma in 1921.

3. My data about this is derived from conversations with Enakshi Chatterjee, the Bangla co-ordinator for the project.

4. Dilip Chitre expressed this view categorically when an earlier version of this paper was presented at the Asiatic Society, Mumbai, in November 1997.

5. The data for these comments on the courses of study is based on my experience of interacting with students and researchers during my teaching assignments and lecture tours in the USA in 1990, 1997 and 1998, in Canada in 1992 and 1997, and in Australia in 1993 and 1996.

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