

**Translations Serves Cultural Confluence:
U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Bharathipura***

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In the Indian context, translation assumes added significance in view of the fact that India is a multi-lingual country. Indian culture is a mosaic of different sub- cultures in their linguistic plurality comprising different lingual regions, their regional literatures and felt styles. Indian literature has had a rich tradition. But for translation a large number of master pieces in each one of the Indian languages will remain locked up treasures to the readers not acquainted with the languages in which they are written. Even national integration will remain a utopian ideal if the best that is produced in the country is not disseminated through translation.

U.R. Ananthamurthy, is amongst those important novelists who have made a name for themselves in the category of post-colonial writers of India. He is a teacher of English who writes in his mother tongue, Kannada. He has written such works as *Samskara* and has to his credit collections of short stories and poems that have, at times, added polemical elements to Kannada literature. He has also enriched regional literature and made it stand on a par with Indian writing in English.

Bharathipura was first published in 1973 in Kannada. Though the idea of the novel seems dated, the narrative has not ceased to touch a chord among sensitive readers who have decided to turn over the pages. This translation into English by Susheela Punitha — a teacher of English language and literature — gives readers a fair idea about the original work. Punitha manages to retain some of the flavour of the original, though like all translations this work, too, cannot be looked upon as an alternative to the original. But for us who have no knowledge of the language, the translation helps to break the misconception that regional literature is inferior to works written in English.

Together with *Samskara*, *Bharathipura* forms the major works of U.R. Ananthamurthy. The novel deals with the sensitive topics of untouchability and caste system in India during the 1970s. Nearly 40 years after Prem Chand's *Godan*, *Bharathipura*, once again, made people sit up and think whether everything was okay about the age-old concept of the caste system in traditional Indian society.

India was slowly inching towards modernity brought about by the economic forces inside and outside the country during the post-independence era. These forces were changing the outlook of the people. The plot contains a beautiful story line. A wealthy landlord returns home, only to be confronted

with realities on multiple fronts which he wants to change. Back from England, Jagannatha discovers that people from the lower caste continue to be debarred from entering the temple of Manjunatha. This is because the locals believe that the spirit of the Bhootaraya may drag them by the feet and make them spit blood. Jagannatha wants to take these exploited people into the temple in order to prove that nothing of the sort will ever take place. He wants to break the myth of the gods that has kept the Holeyaru — people from the lower caste — in subservience for thousands of years. The whole novel is about how he manages to create awareness in a people who refuse to break free from the tyranny of old bonds. This was not only because the Brahmins regarded them as lowly born but also because over a period of time, they had started believing that they really were untouchables.

Ananthamurthy weaves a complex web of myth and reality into the narrative. He uses images and symbols to deconstruct the past, merge it with the present, and then chart a course for the future so as to liberate the Indian way of life from a make-belief world and help it confront the changing realities of the post-Nehruvian era. The novel not only demystifies an old belief, but it also chronicles encounters with new realities on different fronts.

Some of the images in the novel remain etched in our memories. For example, when the Holeyarus touch the *saligrama* — the holy object in the temple — or when Jagannatha asks them to touch him, the novel seems to have succeeded in defying the constraints of time and space. Touch plays an important part in the novel as it does in many other stories by Ananthamurthy. This is because the notion of touch is intrinsically linked to the caste system.

But such moments are few and far between. There are certain things that Ananthamurthy seems to have blissfully forgotten, probably because of the medium he has chosen to do his writing in. For instance, had he been writing in English, he would have taken into consideration the possibility that the discerning reader may not be pleased with the narrative technique that he has employed in the novel. The characters fail to keep pace with the changes in the events as the novel continues to stick to the world of action.

One more thing is that Jagannatha tries to take the people from the lower caste to the temple, but the irony is that he knows very little about them. Since 1973, much has taken place as far as Dalit emancipation is concerned. Therefore, reading a novel like *Bharathipura* today may compel readers to think that the setting has fallen behind the times.

Ananthamurthy's contemporaries failed to understand him because of his ideas. The Brahmins thought him to be anti-Brahmin and the progressives thought he was a reactionary. But he was neither, for like any other writer he was only experimenting with ideas. As he once told one of his interviewers, a writer "is a guinea pig, who experiments on himself". Had *Bharathipura* been re-invented to adapt to the changes prevalent in modern India, the novel would have had a greater punch than it does.

When *Bharathipura* was translated by Susheela Punitha, she met many difficulties. Ananthamurthy appreciated her that she had translated from her heart and spirit. That was an

invaluable insight. It helped her to see her mission as a translator. He was to transport the heart, the spirit of the text in Kannada into its English version. There was so much else to translation she was yet to discover. The most humbling was to realise there was something in *Bharathipura* that she could not translate. It is the way the Brahmin protagonist, Jagannatha, sees the Holeyas. Part of the problem is with grammar. The English plural, *they*, does not differentiate between human and non-human animates. For instance, in English, when we say, “They came”, we could be referring to a group of people or a herd of animals. But in Kannada, we say, “*avarubandhar*” for human and “*avu bandhavu*” for non-human animates.

The other part of the problem is with usage. One context in which we use *avu bandhavu* for human beings is while referring to children, to express endearment, to be indulgent. Here, the attitude is positive. But in any other context when we use it to refer to adults it is generally negative. The use implies contempt, as if we are equating people with animals. And that’s exactly what Jagannatha thinks when a group of Holeyas come to him every evening to attend the adult education classes he conducts for them; ‘*avu bandhavu*’, he says to himself as if they were not human. This is tragic, because he is a well-meaning social activist committed to breaking down caste barriers and yet he has not transformed himself; he cannot see them as people. Jagannatha’s inability to change his attitude towards the lower castes is central to the angst in the story and yet she could not transfer it to the English version because the language is not equipped to describe that kind of bothering.

English has no way of showing how the protagonist dehumanises the Holeyas by using the non-human third person plural personal pronoun to refer to them. And so, *they came* as it occurs in the translation, is neutral in attitude. It is not coloured with contempt as it is in the original. She had to add, *as if they were a herd of cattle* to the text to bring out the negative attitude of the protagonist towards them.

She has faced similar problems many times since then. The idiom of the Holeyas, Chooda’s mother in *Bharathipura* as she defends her dead son has no equivalent variety in English. And so, she could not transfer her pronunciation and style of speaking to the master, Jagannatha. It is unfair to her that her lines are in chaste English.

Susheela had similar problems while translating Vaidehi’s *Asprushyaru*. She could not be faithful to the local variety of Kundapur Kannada with its mix of Tulu and Kannada. It was indeed a tightrope walk to find a fine balance between being faithful to the flavour of the text and being concerned with its intelligibility to the reader.

In Kannada, one word suffices to describe Byra and Hala: *Huttalugalu*. The expression connotes with their social and cultural predicament. But translating that expression literally as *labourers bonded from birth* would puzzle a reader unaware of a specific social system in India. The contextual value of the original expression, *huttalugalu*, requires an extended explanation in English: *They were bonded labourers, bonded from birth to their masters as repayment of debt owed by their father or grandfather.*

We found that the translation of the intention in a piece of literary writing is achieved through multiple levels of reading that lead to multiple levels of writing. The spontaneity of retelling a story is stalled by the meta-reader in the translator as she sees gaps in meaning, significance and flavour and closes them by choosing from both languages to make the third language of the specific translated text. And this third language keeps changing to meet the peculiar demands of each text.

The most difficult part of this exercise was in transferring the flavour of the original in *Vasudeva's Family* where Vaidehi uses a local variety of Kundapura Kannada which is a mix of Kannada and Tulu expressions. And then there were the cultural nuances of Sanskrit in URA's *Bharathipura* and of Tamil in Diwakar's *Kraurya*.

Translation could have not worked isolation. It is a collaborative effort. We have to work the meanings of expressions into the context wherever possible to keep the footnotes to a minimum. The translator also suggested chapter headings as sign-posts.

Translation is a means to an end. Let us hope that the connections we make through translations will equip us to see more similarities than differences in our multicultural milieu. That would serve to make translation a powerful tool for a cultural confluence. To be worthy of its mission, translation has to fulfill that deeper necessity.

References

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