

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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PRACTICING LITERARY TRANSLATION

A SYMPOSIUM BY MAIL

ROUND 11

V. V. B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

PRACTICING LITERARY TRANSLATION
A SYMPOSIUM BY MAIL: Round Eleven
Moderator: V.V. B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

Expanding Horizons and Bringing Fresh Lives

- 1. Translation is no longer done by people who have nothing better to do.*
- 2. The translator's consciousness inhabits two worlds at the same time, each trying to ignore the power of the other afraid of contamination and of being dominated.*

(Mini Krishnan, *The Hindu Magazine* Sept. 24, 2006)

Before sitting down to start uploading this round I was thinking of an icebreaker when my eye caught the morning paper in which Mini Krishnan made these two statements.

The first is an insight well worth appreciation. The second gives scope for the translator to navigate and negotiate between one language in an age and another age and another language.

MY VIEW

To my mind, there could be no domination or contamination, for literary translation is a task voluntarily undertaken with sufficient concern and interest for both the original text and the target readership. There is no temptation to shortchange. The consciousness inhabiting the two worlds is inclusively large-hearted and understanding. The practicing translator prefers being behind the curtain unobtrusively and does not arrogate to powers he does not have. It is an exercise in self-effacement, a near divine quality.

EXPANDING LIFE

Literary texts are given expanding life in that they are carried into another language to another speech community. The texts are rejuvenated in

the sense that in a new language they are given another wash and polishing with the result that they attract attention of further readers providing opportunities for the text to enter fresh fields in the area of literature. This kind of creative work sustains itself as long as man goes in for fresh insights and fresh understanding of the cultures around. And then, the exercise, as Mini Krishnan says rightly, is a patriotic one too.

Jesscha Kessler

I was pleased to contribute a short essay on the processes of Collaborative Translation since I have been practicing that sort of work for many decades. I have always enjoyed the labor of attempting to say in American English, in a voice that is not my own, yet also ineluctably mine, (how could it be otherwise?), what a poet or fiction writer has written in a language with which I have no connection whatsoever. I have avoided languages that I can read, viz., Italian, German, French, Spanish/Portuguese, because I have not needed to perform such work for my living.

On the other hand, the challenge of working my way intuitively into the texture of the speech and psychology of an alien mentality and its experience in our world, by the means of paying close attention to a minimal text prepared for me in English, line by line, (indeed, word by word, in its original word order and syntax!), that challenge seems to be a great stimulant.

At bottom, the translation of a poem, no matter how difficult to achieve as a poetic work in one's own speech, is not terribly anxious-making, since the writer has already solved, for better or worse, the completion of the individual text with which one is concerned. Whereas, as every writer knows, there is always present the misery of not really knowing where the next line or sentence may come from, after the opening phrases have been set down.

My essay, contributed to the Symposium, describes in detail my principles and method of work with a collaborator, my choice of partners, and my basic, minimal requirements.

N. Kunju, (b.1929), worked for 25 years in the army out of which 5 years as Sub-editor of *Sainik Samachar*; later, 20 years with *CARAVAN*, left as Senior Editor. Author of 12 books on military subjects. Two collections of

poems. Translated 5 Malayalam novels into English, two of them for Kerala Sahitya Akademi. Now a free-lance journalist.

I am a journalist and not a professional translator. My opinion on translation could be amateurish, even partial. Therefore, translators, professional and official, should pardon my raving if they feel it to be sour, or even offensive.

My success as a translator should be attributed to my choice of the literary pieces I have translated. I have never taken up an assignment for translation. I translated what I thought I should translate because the original was familiar to my life and my experience, which touched on my emotions and moved me.

It was while serving in the army (my initial career) that I felt like translating some of the short stories and novels written by my soldier-colleagues whose works had appeared in prestigious Malayalam publications under pseudonyms for obvious service compulsions. The bylines - Parappurath, Nandanar, Kovilan and Ekalavyan - were familiar with discriminating Malayalam readers; their unique style was appearing as a rainbow in Malayalam literary horizon in the rather clouded environment of aggressive realism with political overtones. I have translated one each of the novels of these authors.

I had a flair for writing, but no academic qualifications or linguistic proficiency of English language into which I translated the Malayalam works. In fact, I was only a matriculate when I translated the novels of my army friends. The one non-military book that I translated was one by Vaikom Mohamed Basheer, the famous Malayalam writer, who was not even a matriculate.

In fact, my "uneducated" state helped me in the translation. I could stick to simple English, the language that could be understood by common soldiers. As another soldier, I could understand what the author of the original meant to convey, and I could freely decide on the best way to convey the idea or feeling in simple English. If I had a wider vocabulary, the temptation to use a difficult word, which I may consider to be more appropriate, would have been irresistible. Also I would have preferred to stick to grammar to the extent of hampering the impact of the dialogue or down-to-earth _expression of a soldier.

It is a long time since I left translation. Meanwhile I graduated and got a diploma in journalism. As Mark Twain said, I had earned a college degree but that didn't interfere with my education. I have been writing articles and editorials on various subjects under the sun, mainly politics, for the past 35 years. And in the process, my English became sophisticated, but also unfit for translation of creative literature of the genre of popular fiction. Now, if I have to attempt translation, I will have to 'de-educate' myself to come to the ground level of the authors.

Divik Ramesh (b.1946) is an eminent poet with eight collections and a Children's writer. A prolific writer, he is an educational administrator, now Principal of Motilal Nehru College, Delhi University. He is interested in translation as well.

Sometimes a translator may come across such a piece of literature, which becomes rather impossible to get translated in a satisfactory finish. At that time the translator may pray to have knowledge of each and every language to all. But this is not possible. Hence, translation being good or bad, is inevitable in this civilized world of thousands languages to communicate emotions, thoughts, sensibilities and on the whole ourselves to each and other in the interest of humane society.

An Indian, who lives within canvas of several languages, can understand this need more easily. They say that literature, being creative one, brings the people closer in a positive way. It gives an eye of humanity - love and peace. Therefore in this era of economic (materialistic) globalization, literary and cultural globalization is much more needed to save this planet, the Earth from becoming insensitive and indifferent.

So, we may agree that we need a world culture too, and to achieve this we may also agree that the role of translation is essential.

In the preface of '*Contemporary French Poetry*', Paul Angel rightly wrote that as much the world squeezes, the need of translation widens. Needless to mention that it is the literature only which cannot afford to be anti-humanity.

We should remember that a man is man everywhere. To understand this truth, literature of each and every part of the land should have an access to each and every reader and the translation makes the access easier.

There is a debate whether a translator must know the source and target languages for good and authentic translation or it is possible to have the translation through another language as medium. For example, in India, the translators depend most of the time on English translations to translate literature of other than English languages.

I think this debate is not needed much at this stage.

Yes, a committed translator must find out the most authentic English translation for this purpose. No doubt if someone knows both the source and target languages, he or she will be in a more comfortable situation. But one should also know that merely knowledge of the source and target languages is not enough for authentic translation.

When one translates a poem, he or she does not translate only the words or meanings as per dictionary. One can find many words of geographical and cultural roots, which require much more preparation for the translator. Then the very flavor of that poem in its own language and style remains a great challenge for its translator. Therefore, it is right to say that no translator can claim to do the ultimate translation.

Out of my own experience I may say that no or some knowledge of source language is less big challenge or obstacle in comparison of less or no knowledge of the roots and environment of the piece of literature for its translation. The best translation in my opinion is that which may give original taste of the original in such a way that the translation itself becomes an original piece.

Dr. Poranki Dakshinamurty (b.1935), creative writer and translator translated devotional/spiritual texts with distinction. He retired as Deputy Director of Telugu Academy, which has been doing great service producing standard textbooks in various disciplines.

... When we try to put the poetic/imaginative idea expressed in another language in our own, we follow one of the two methods: either conveying its substance or rendering it in our language in an imaginative/poetic way. The

second can be called transcreation. When the way it is said in another language is different, it may be called *anusarana*, or saying the thing ‘going behind’ the original. We consider both different from ‘translation’. The most important thing is to say what is in the original and not conveying what is not in it. Saying what was said in a way that suits our language is the ‘standard’. Normally translators follow this standard.

In my childhood I learnt a little Hindi and with my acquaintance (of that language) I used to read essays, stories and poems. I read an essay on the theory of evolution. Out of interest, I translated it into Telugu in the way I could. I think it was in 1954. I sent it to KINNERA monthly. That was used and I felt happy.

Later I was attracted to Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and began translating it. After starting it I was confronted with a problem. In Carnegie’s book the incidents and the life styles of people natural to the people there proved difficult to render (with my little knowledge) into my language. I gave up realizing that I was unequal to my task. From then on even till today I do not seem to have seen that work rendered in Telugu.

In 1962 while working as sub-editor in PRAJAPRABHA, I translated some English essays into Telugu. One essay impressed me most: ‘That day ... the last in Gandhiji’s. life’. After two years I started translating Gurazada Apparao’s famous ‘Minute of Dissent’ (1914) (from English into Telugu). The difficulty I encountered there was to search and find equivalents to the Grammatical terms he used. ANDHRA PRABHA Daily used it in their Sunday Supplements serially and Visalandhra Publishing House published it in a book form in 1968.

Subsequently I translated the veteran editor of NATIONAL HERALD M.Chalapathi Rau’s (a favourite of Jawaharlal Nehru’s) ALL IN ALL into Telugu as ‘*endaroo mahaan bhaavulu*’. Sri P.V. Narasimha Rao (our Prime Minister later) wrote a foreword to this. ...

The text that proved to be the most trying to my abilities was Sri Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*.... In my half a century’s experience, I never had to undergo such trouble as I had to in this. I was happy that my effort bore fruit. In some places to translate a word or phrase, I had to consult many. A sentence by way of a sample: “A saint who

is sad is a sad saint.’ The way it was done into Kannada and Hindi did not satisfy me. At last a friend came to my rescue: “What is grief for an ascetic? One who grieves is no ascetic at all.’ I took liberties with the text and followed my friend.... No names of translators appear on the publications of Yogada Satsanga Society of India / Self-realization Fellowship. Their translators never looked either for fame or money. ...

Based on Sri Aurobindo’s *Foundations of Indian Culture*, disciple Charuchandra Dutta wrote *Culture of India as Envisaged by Sri Aurobindo*. This author was quoting several passages from the spiritual exemplar. I found it very difficult to translate Yogananda’s autobiography, but translating the grandeur of Sri Aurobindo’s style proved to be more difficult. But for the sage’s blessing would it have been possible at all?

Rekha Vyas (b.1965) is an eminent translator with extensive knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindi, Gujarati and Rajasthani. This is her approved translation into English of her contribution in Hindi.

1. Translation is like *parakaayapravEsha* (literally ‘getting into another body’), getting into the mind and imagination of the original author.
2. It is possible to make (in translation) very complex things simple. It is not possible for every translator to convey securely the ‘*vakrokti*’, artistically subtle and oblique statement of an idea in the unique style of the original writer.
3. I studied Vedic Sanskrit with seriousness and a measure of depth for three years. Just by taking a ‘course,’ translation wouldn’t become simple or easy. It is necessary to study words, their nature, origin, contextuality and their history. It has been a challenge for me to translate into our every day language the Vedic texts, which are suffused with sublime imagination. Building a bridge across time is difficult. Unless one has depth of understanding in both languages, good renderings cannot come out from the translator.

Sometimes between *sabda*, the word and *artha*, the meaning there may be a gulf of variance since the meanings many be many. The translator has to choose the correct meaning the author intended. This is like diamond cutting. A free and fast flow between word and meaning would make a good translation eminently readable.

Nowadays literary works are spreading all over. Translated works should read like originals. Chekov, Tolstoy and Shakespeare have become popular all over the world. When we read those writers we do not feel like reading a writer of an alien country.

A word from the Moderator

One way of acquiring insights is listening to the experiences of others. Kindly come forward with your ideas and experiences. The more we think and read, the more would be the opportunity to tread new paths. May the Deity of Learning lead us forward!

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