

Translation and the idea of Indian Literature

The topic assumes that there is a correlation between the idea of Indian literature and translation activity. It presupposes that there is a concept like one Indian literature written in various Indian languages and intra-lingual translation facilitates our understanding of the oneness of Indian literature. There is always a possibility to draw out other meanings of the topic which I am not taking up at the moment.

Distinguished scholars like V.K.Gokak and Nagendra asserted, in the middle of the 20th century that one could find uniformity or unity in Indian Literature in matters of choice and treatment of themes or philosophical ideas like (a) fate governing the human lives, (b) karma, punya and the cycle of births, (c) impermanence of life, (d) world as a stage, (e) irony of joy and grief co-existing, (f) concept of jiva-ajiva, and (g) ethical thoughts like the essential nobility of man, austerity and domestic bliss. This establishes the fact that at any given moment the common patterns as manifested in the literary texts can be accepted on one single level of organization. Both Gokak and Nagendra were influenced by the discourse of nationalism as one that 'imagines' the nation that needs to construct a homogenous and monolithic culture as against multifaceted India with its diversity of existing cultural practices. Even Dr Radhakrishnan, the then vice-president of Sahitya Akademi had boldly asserted that Indian literature is one though written in many languages. This imposition of

centrality restricts the revelation of the uniqueness of Indian literature and ignores the departures under the pretext of the unity of experience.

However the variation of cultural experience in content and style (Dandin says utpreksha: alliteration is the style of the writers of the South and use of bombastic language is the habit of Bengal) were always a reality however in India's multilingual situation the common patterns based on common core of metaphors and symbols, myths and legends, conventions and norms evolved in the last 1000 years have created a sense of unity in literature and that is also a reality because in Indian literature we have both unity of content and diversity of style and also diversity of cultural specificities but unity of literary traditions and all that create a situation of conflict and harmony and convey the complementariness of regional variation and pan-Indian homogeneity.

Let me explain in some detail the notion of complementariness of the unity-diversity set of opposition in the context of Indian literature.

In Indian literature the vibrant Indian ness (unity) emerges only when one understands it in our pluralistic context. Professor U.R. Ananthamurthy says in this respect that if we take the popular slogan, unity in diversity one will understand that with overstressing diversity, one begins to see the unity and if one insists on looking for unity in India then what sees is diversity.

India, in fact, represents a space where variety of life forms and life choices are available. The alternative that India

offers is not unity verses diversity, spirituality verses materialism, order, discipline and bliss of shastra or marga or classical verses protest, sarcasm and pain of loka or folk but as says Mahatma Gandhi the choice of both verses forced acceptance of one.

This has been brilliantly explained by Satyajit Ray, the writer and film director. He writes:

“What should you put in your films? What can you leave out? Would you leave the city behind and go to the village where cows graze in the endless fields and shepherd plays the flute? You can make a film here that would be pure and fresh and have the delicate rhythm of a boatman’s song.

Or would you rather go back in time – way back in the epics, where the gods and the demons took side in the great battle where brother and Lord Krishna reified a desolate prince with the words of ‘Gita’? One could do exiting things here using the great mimetic tradition of the Kathakali, as the Japanese use their Noh and Kabuki.

Or would you rather stay where you are, right in the present, in the heart of this monstrous teeming bewildering city and try to orchestrate its dizzying contrasts of sight, sound and milieu?”

These differences - the ‘dizzying contrasts’ co-exist together and indicate the various life choices which are available to us. The Indian literary categories like margi-desi(classical-folk), shastrachara-desachara(theoretical norms- local conventions), natyadharmi-lokadharmi (presentational and representational), Kshtra and desha(regional and pan-Indian) reveal the dialectics of

continuity and change, unity and plurality or identification and differentiation rooted in the Indian tradition. In our heterogeneity, in our openness lies our pride, not our disgrace.

In Indian literature the unity emerges only when you understand it in our pluralistic context. The unity-diversity set of opposition identifies a language writer, say a Tamil writer, first as a local monolingual writer, then as a Dravidian writer belonging to South-Indian region and finally as a pan-Indian writer and thereby a vital relationship at all the three levels is established. A history of Indian literature is a history of the total literary activity of the Indian people – both the unity and variety of literary traditions not in isolation from one another but as related components in a larger complex literary situation.

The idea of Indian literature as emerges from the literary works in different languages make a deep impact on the Indian readership as it projects visions of Indian nationalism as well as regional and communal aspirations and new elements of contemporary Western civilization. In our multi-lingual situation the dilemma has arisen because of our faith in the western view which is linear and binary and hence all the language and literary problems are reduced to binary oppositions and therefore all integrative solutions become redundant. Indian mind believes in holistic view of life and hence Indian literature creates a vital relationship between local, regional and pan-Indian expressions or between the notion of centrality and acknowledgement of diversity.

The advocates of Indian literature as one literature and those who say, no, it is many literature and also those who realize that Indian literature demonstrates unity through diversity for all of them translation is a political weapon. Otherwise also translation works as a culture-politics interface between SL and TL. Translation is not a politically innocent activity. The very choice of books from SL for translation and the selection of TL in which translation will take place are always a politically motivated action. Let me explain it a little in detail.

The global culture, in the last century, before consumerism and information technology was inaugurated by translation and if we take India as the reference point, all these were and are being done in English, the multi-national language of the world. In the colonial era while translating Western literature into any of the Indian bhashas Western literature or the original was always taken as supreme, the original was the giver, the donor and the receiving language was the inferior language which was trying to enrich itself. The pathetic thing today is that while in India the centralizing language for translation is either English or Hindi and when any bhasha text of Indian literature is translated into English it is accepted as enhancing the value of the original text and thereby establishing the receiving language English as superior to the original language. This is what I call the politics of translation which does not allow always the true idea of Indian literature to reveal itself.

One may assert that we are in a situation in India, where the only way to reach a Tamil novel to somebody in Assam, or

Bengal or Punjab is to situate it in English or Hindi. However, the system of Hindi planning was politically conceived and bureaucratically conducted and as a result it has constrained its position as a link language. In comparison to Hindi, which has earned a position of a language of wide circulation, the role of English as a link and world language has been projected to promote the hegemony of neo-colonial powers. And here is the catch. Translation in the process becomes a powerful political weapon. It becomes a means of appropriating power to oneself, so much so that it has become now a status symbol for a writer to get his/her creative artifact translated into English and published by Penguin India.

It is the market which has become a decisive factor about the value of a writer and with that a dangerous situation has fast developed of popular literature destabilizing and distorting the idea of India literature and attacking its pluralistic existence. Though it is difficult to dislodge good literature from the market yet the popular and the bizarre are making their presence felt by constricting good literature and avant-Garde writers like Kamal Kumar Majumdar, Ajneya and others are becoming irrelevant in the global market.

Moreover the homogenizing force of a single, dominant master or multinational language aiming at presenting the heterogeneous character of contemporary Indian literature has its own problems. We want to translate into English the literature of different Indian languages and domesticate it into pan-Indian or into a universal mode but then we become victim of the reductive and often stereotypical

homogenization involved in the process. This is problematic because this process deculturizes e.g. the Assamese culture and anglicizes it and then communicates it e.g. to a Tamil speaking audience in an anglicized form and in the process we lose our Assamese culture which we have anglicized and what we communicate is something else as we always do. In the bargain there is a transmission loss, which is absolutely minimum in case of translation from one Indian language into another and which, no doubt, has a much longer and much richer tradition.

But the vested interests and power relationships of politicians, bureaucrats, the elite and the intellectuals in the 3rd world have contributed not only to the reproduction of socio-linguistic inequality and legitimization of the hegemony of English, but also to brain drain and marginalization of Indian languages and as a result it has become difficult to sustain the idea of Indian literature. In fact we are still dominated by the colonizers in their new avatar, to a large extent, as we have been in the past, by the colonizers, who have interpreted our societies and ourselves, very often for ourselves. Very often, the Indian intellectuals have depended on the colonizers whom they have looked up as a reference model.

Besides, English has become, now the language of the global enterprise, which is affecting our use of language and having an impact on our socio-cultural thinking. Even if we think against all hopes that as the lightning struck Tagore about 100 years ago in the form of a noble prize similarly it will happen to a M.T.Vasudevan Nair or a Sunil

Gangopadhyay or a Kunwar Narain, it is not likely to happen as it is some what likelier to happen to a Vikram Seth or a Amitabh Ghosh as it happened to a Naipaul, the writer of Indian origin particularly of the use of the ‘master’ language by them and the sense of disinterestedness shown by the Euro centric world readership in the English translation of Indian literature and this can be corroborated by the fact that of all the translations, about 10 titles per year, published by Penguin India so far, the parent imprint, Penguin London, has picked up for international distribution barely any copies of hardly any titles.

But the tragedy is that the majority of the Indian Westernized middle-class intelligentsia influenced by the so called ‘illusion’ of universal modernism still believes that servility to the West is the key to progress and knowledge and as a result in their anxiety to become Western/Global they feel obliged only to talk about books from the West. This kind of a situation is very nicely highlighted by Gillian Wright in the very first page of her ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to one of the finest novels in Hindi, Raag Darbari:

“Raag Darbari is not widely read in Delhi society and you’d be hard pressed to find anyone who’d heard of it or its author at the average dinner party. The latest (Indian) English novels, on the other hand, are a favourite subject for discussion. But no novel I have read in English comes close to capturing life in an ordinary north Indian village, whereas the smell of the earth of Uttar Pradesh emanates from every page of Raag Darbari”.

The ultimate question before us in India therefore is where to situate ourselves and our literary culture vis-à-vis the new post-colonial global culture configuration of written words. Instead of global we shall have to think in terms of pan-Indian by acknowledging both the unity and the literary and cultural diversity. On the face of it, this is a strange proposition, but then this will lead us to the right course, unless awareness is created about our literature here on the home front, we cannot think of any promotion of our literature abroad. Let us subvert and bend the English language as Achebe and Nagugui wish the 3rd world to do, and the process is already on, of appropriation of English on our own terms for the promotion of both pan-Indian and the India of diverse existence and then only the use of English as a target language will become natural along with Hindi and other Indian languages to hold out against the linguistic and cultural totalization and increasing monolingual literary authoritarianism of the written word on the global grid.

The rapid use of different language codes in one's speech like Hindi-English, Hindi-Bengali and like this has provided opportunities to subvert hierarchies and contesting all forms of domination in a multilingual society to create mutual interdependence and inter signification between languages.

One can already find Indian translators like Gyatri Chakravarti Spivak stretching English language and distorting the frame of reception by stark and defamiliarizing translations of Mahasweta Devi's stories like Douloti. The concluding lines of the story are:

“Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread eagled. Kaiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all blood in her desiccated lungs..... Today, on the fifteen of August (Indian Independence day), Douliti (not as intending subject but as figured body) has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan (the school master) for planting the standard of the independence flag... What will Mohan do now? Dhouliti is all over India”.³

Spivak carefully unfolds the text and contextualize the different voices which find expression in the story and foregrounds the alternative translating practices which gives attention to the textual specifics of the work and warns against the old colonial attitude of lumping together all the 3rd world creativity as a homogenous mass.

Already in India the growing weight of the intellectual production of dalit literature has precipitated the emergence of a critique of the universality of Western theory of translation and challenged the conventional notion of linguistic equivalence or ideas of loss and gain. The emerging idea about translation has subverted Western universal hierarchies by exploding and confounding different symbolic words and separate system of signification in order to establish a total idea of Indian literature with inputs from the literature of the margin and situate the word as the globe with an internal life and unlimited external possibilities.