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Navigating Translations in Multilingual India. A Personal Response

A recent call to delve into my personal translational experience presented me with the opportunity to vent my frustrations and to visit my achievements in this quarter. But the most significant offshoot was that this afforded me a chance to reflect on the purpose and pertinence of the exercise of translation. Sharing my experiences with colleagues and experts who weighed in with their expertise to comment on the process has enabled a fair assessment about the practice of translation, a subject very close to my heart, both as a reader and a practitioner.

In India, a country which is home to about 1650 languages at the last count, and in which, at any given point in time, several languages are engaged in a colloquy, the translational exercise is a living, continuous attribute of our existence. Early in October 2004, one of India's best-known literary critics, Meenakshi Mukherjee, recognizing that 'translation [was] a part of the natural ambience we live in,' (Mukherjee, 2004: 66) and that 'translations have always been a vital part of Indian literary culture,' (Mukherjee in Ganesh and Thakkar: 108), verbalized this in her remark that 'most of us lead parallel or simultaneous lives in more than one language without being self-conscious

about this plurality…Several languages are in constant interaction.'[1] This 'pluri-lingual cultural environment' as Dilip Chitre calls it (Dilip Chitre in Ganesh and Thakkar: 125), makes translation an essential component of the Indian translating sensibility.[2] Having put to rest the colonial pseudo-conciliatory patriarchal translational gambit, which had only ended up in exoticizing some selectively singled 'Oriental' texts, today the drive has taken on quite another colour. The current resurgent spurt in translation activity in India's multilingual/multiliterary environment is witness to the mutual respect and recognition that exists between the languages. This fact is noted and applauded by Sujit Mukherjee, the renowned translation scholar, who says that in India, 'people constantly practise translation creatively and naturally, even in everyday interaction.' I believe that this constant translational give and take makes for an extremely fertile ground for the change, growth and evolution of languages and cultures and is a most obvious effort to integration in India. This contemporary spurt in the translation drive, quite different from the condescending superiority that underlay the 'orientalist' translation exercise of the Colonialists, has a genuine impulse of making available and visible literatures that have been closed to many, both national and international non-users of the languages in which they have originally been written. This respectful practice of continuing translation, recognizing the autonomy and worth of every language, fosters multilingual/multiliterary development and coexistence. This laudable impulse persists even as right-wing regressive revivalism seeks to hijack it and steer it to serve narrow political concerns. Gulzar, one of India's foremost living poets and lyricists, alibis this when he applauds the translation of the 1913 Nobel Prize Winner Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* into English by the poet himself. Speaking about this great Indian poet in the context of translation he says: 'He was too great a poet of India to be kept limited to Bengal.

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[1] Quoted by Sahitya Akademi Award Winning novelist, Namita Gokhale, "Negotiating multilingual literary spaces," *LITERARY LANDSCAPES,* a symposium on language, power and recognition in Indian writing, August 2009. https://www.india-seminar.com/2009/600/600_namita_gokhale.htm.

[2] Dilip Purushottam Chitre (1938–2009) was a preeminent bilingual Marathi and English writer, poet and critic in post-Independence India. He was also a teacher, a painter, a filmmaker and a magazine columnist.

Everybody should read and celebrate him.' (Gulzar, 2017)[3] It is a point to note that Gulzar writes in Urdu and Rabindranath Tagore is a Bangla writer. And we are talking of a translation into English that globalized the translation and earned the poet the Nobel Prize.[4]

Writing and translating in this majorly multilingual space, against this protean and complex politico-historical matrix, I have had many encounters with the process, some of which have been gratifying, and some which have been exhaustingly exasperating. This association has been augmented by being forced into yet another critical arena by the call to teach translations in a paper called Indian Writing in Translation to University students. Moreover, from time to time, I have also been asked to review and critique translations. There are, as is more than evident, overlaps in all these calls.

Now that I have established the background for my personal experience of translating, let me take you on a short spin into some of my experiences, all of them undertaken for deeply personal reasons. I must, at the outset, make it clear that I translate from the Urdu and Hindi into English. My original writing, both creative and critical is done in English, 'the language of global mobility,' as G.J.V. Prasad calls it. (Prasad, 2023) Most of my translation efforts have been focused on prose writings—again both creative and critical--though I have ventured into poetry translations too.

Long, long ago, I was asked to do a special translation feature to mark the 75th anniversary of Bharat Bhushan Agrawal, a path-breaking Modern Hindi poet, for *Indian Literature,* the journal brought out by India's premier literary Institution, the Sahitya Akademi.[5] I was expected to cull out some representative

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[3] Interview by Yogesh "Gitanjali' is not Tagore's best work, says Gulzar," *DNA*, Updated: Dec 05, 2017. https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/interview-gitanjali-is-not-tagore-s-best-work-says-gulzar-2202825. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1937–2009), the 2003 Sahitya Akademi Award winner, was a leading literary critic and educationist.

[4] Gulzar (born 1934), regarded as one of the greatest contemporary Urdu poets, is also a much-feted lyricist, author, screenwriter and Hindi film director. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the Bard of Bengal, was a Bengali poet, writer, playwright, music and song composer, philosopher, social reformer, educationist and painter of the Bengal Renaissance. He won the 1913 Nobel Prize in literature.

[5] Bharat Bhushan Agrawal (1919–1975) was a pioneering experimental Modern Hindi poet-one of the Tar Saptak--and litterateur, posthumously awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978. The Sahitya Akademi, founded in 1954, is India's National Academy of Letters

poems and some critical essays on his work by leading Hindi critics. At this juncture I need to acknowledge the reasons why I was approached. My ability as a translator had been recognized due to my early-career, successful participation in a Translation Workshop held in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The reason for singling me out from other participants was that I had a personal connection with the original vanguard writer: he was my husband's late father, who had met with a premature death a couple of decades earlier. The personal angle was strong enough to pressurize me to saying yes to this translational invite.

In this engagement with Bharat Bhushan Agrawal, the prose and the poetry posed different kinds of challenges. The critics used very pointed, critical terminology which needed the identification of exact critical equivalents in English. This necessitated that I educate myself by engaging in deep research into the Hindi critical lexicon since I was not very familiar with the space of Hindi criticism. But once I broached this area, I soon figured out that this was not going to be too difficult an exercise, the reason being that contemporary Hindi critical terminology had identified its foundational cues in the available critical tradition in English with which I was quite conversant.

But when it came to the poetry, the task became tough. Not only was it difficult to replicate the cadences of the original in a language belonging to a different language family, but the proliferation of the idiom of conventional exchange made the challenge even greater. Finding the words to catch the exact flavour of the original and approximation of meaning was a demanding task. Sifting through the poet's wide-ranging work, comprising of hundreds of poems, was a hard enough commission but finally accomplished. But one out of the ten odd poems that I selected gave me real grief. 'Samadhi Lekh' is a short four-line poem, an epitaph written by the then forty-six-year-old poet for himself (Bharat Bhushan Agrawal 1965). I spent days attempting several translations but none of them satisfied me. But by far, the most distressing realization was that there was only one word that was causing me worry, the word on which the whole essence of the deeply philosophical poem hinged. Not one English

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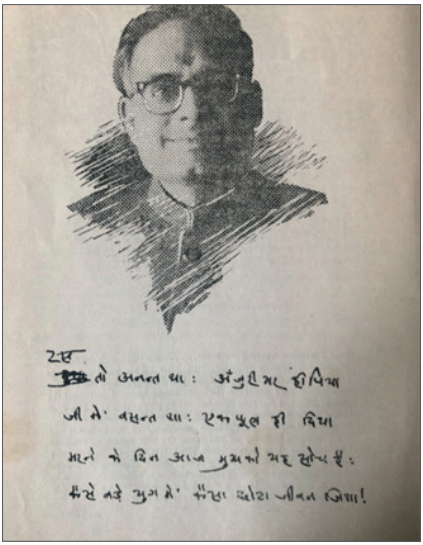
promoting literature and languages of India by giving annual awards in 24 languages, by hosting regional and national workshops and seminars, and publishing books, journals and encyclopedias.

equivalent for this word! Ultimately, accepting defeat, it was decided after due consultation with the editor of the journal, that we should totally drop the idea of translating it. But in recognition of the singularity of the poem, it was decided that we print the original manuscript version in the poet's attractive handwriting on the back cover of the journal.



But the thought of translating the poem was a constant niggle. In the years that followed, in the course of the classes on reading translations that I conducted, I would set this exercise for my students giving them the 4 short lines to translate. I even pitched this exercise at colleagues and established fellow-translators and poets. But I am sorry to say that I have yet to find the translation that catches the spirit of the original.

This experience forced me to accept certain conclusions that possibly every translator is forced to reckon with:

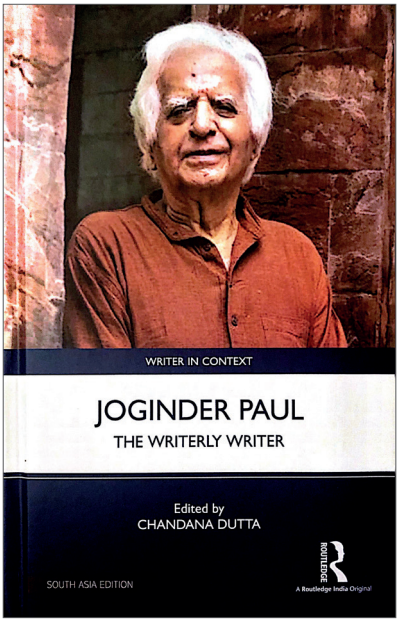
1. That translation is not an easy task, however great the translator's competency in both the original and target languages, a fact iterated by Augusto de Campos as being 'demanding and exhausting' (Augusto de Campos: 27).

2. Presuming the competency mentioned in my first point, the most stringent standard set for the particular translation achievement is that set by the translator herself.
3. It is only after that, that readerly standards come into play.
4. That 'choosing' something for translation is the first step in the exercise and the reasons for the choice impact the end-product.

The next personal example that I want to dip into is a request by the writer's daughter to translate the short fiction of one of my favourite Urdu short fiction writers, Joginder Paul.[6] Here too, I may have said 'yes' to the request for translating Joginder Paul for personal reasons but as before, I was totally unprepared for the experience. In more ways than one!

The text leapt at me with a simultaneous apprehension of relatability and a jolting sense of shock. For starters, my access to the Urdu stories was not through the nastaliq Urdu script but through the Devanagari script. With no knowledge of the script and therefore, no direct access to the original, the eye was met with the familiar Devnagari script but the words that were thrown up were patently in a unfamiliar visual setting. But once the weirdness of the initial disjunction between script and language had been accepted, the act of reading and enjoying the stories immediately took over. Paradoxically, it was this fact of being totally enraptured by the stories which brought me face to face with the first real challenge of translating Joginder Paul. My translation had to aim for the same kind of enjoyment, the same kind of effect in the target reader as the 'original' had had on me. Even if, with de Campos, I believed in my all-powerful ability as a reader and in being a free agent as a writer, Paul's powerful stories made me mindful about my fallibility and weighed me down with a deep, chafing sense of responsibility to his word. (Haroldo de Campos, Transcreation: Poetics and Semiotics of the Translation Operation, 1985).

[6] Joginder Paul (1925–2016) was an Urdu short story writer and novelist, particularly known for his sharp political and sociological insights.



Truly, the task of translating Paul has been an unexpectedly arduous one. The primary reason for the difficulty in translating his work is his use of immense linguistic variableness and variety, both across his works and within a single story. Calling up a vocabulary and style to suit the theme, at one point his Urdu could be highly erudite and ponderous as in 'Multiracial (मलटी रेशयिल),' and at others, trippingly conversational as in 'Kamina' ('कमीना') and 'Har Jagah' ('हर जगह'). The political debate and deliberations in Parliament by self-important politicos about the issue of racism fall back on a dense, academically demanding variant of Urdu in 'Multiracial.' The story's spectacular 'high' vocabulary forced me to make a bee-line to specialists in the language—people like my father, who, like Joginder Paul, had received their education through the medium of Urdu. I even consulted the Urdu-English dictionary as a last resort for clarifying the packed meaning. It was hard work!

Consequently, the ease of access to his other stories initially seemed to take the edge of the labour I had to put into translating 'Multiracial.' But I soon found that these apparently simpler and straightforward stories posed

yet another kind of test. The everyday exchange amongst the 'plebs' submitted even more diverse registers. This scintillating unpredictability of registers, evident in the choice of the vehicle, had to be approached and approximated through the translation. The narration, more than liberally offset by dialogue, presents an early tier for this translational battle. Apart from the high Urdu of the professional, educated upper classes and the common man's everyday discourse, the fact that the vocabulary and conversational rhythms of multiple languages are at play all the time, often simultaneously, both in the narration and in the dialogue further complicates matters.

'Multiracial' abounding in the inclusion of English words, signalled by the title, is a true representation of parliamentary exchange in the British colonies. The visitors sit on 'benches' (बेंचों) in the 'public gallery' (पब्लिक गैलरी) of the 'Parliament (पार्लियामेंट).' The 'MultiRacial Society' (मल्टी रेशियल सोसाइटी) is represented by the 'Honourable' (ऑनरेबल) Kumar in the 'House' (हाउस). After straightening the 'knot' (नॉट) of his 'tie (टाई),' he addresses his peers in the customary way, 'Mister Speaker and the Honourable members' (मिस्टर स्पीकर एंड दीऑनरेबल मेम्बर्स) asking to move a 'motion' (मोशन) for the 'government' (गवर्नमेंट) to pass. How does one translate the English of the original to fit in with the translation of the Urdu into English? The reverberations of the linguistic presence of English in the Urdu, a striking postcolonial comment on the impact of the colonial supremacist cultural takeover, are lost in the levelling translation into English. The short story 'Kamina' too makes references to the African 'location' (लोकेशन) The characters turn the 'car' (कार) towards 'River Road' (रिवर रोड) to go to a friend's 'office' (ऑफिस). They turn the 'steering' (स्टीयरिंग) to head to the 'City Council' (सिटीकाउंसिल) Fleeting thoughts 'rock 'n roll' (रॉक एन रोल) through the character's mind. Retaining the culturally locating 'Afriki' words—the Swahili, 'Jambo'—creates less of a problem than transposing the nuanced cadences of the Hindi, Punjabi and the English into the translation. In addition to this high-low language, the translator needs must be alert to the nuanced dialogic variances induced by race, nationality, age and gender that Paul observes and abides by, for instance, the curse words that women use (मुए, muey) are different from those of their menfolk (साले, saale).

So, even as in the best of circumstances, translation is a challenge, when the translator is faced with Paul's thesis-based, idea-driven, socially-conscious writing, the responsibility increases manifold. As a translator, I was called upon to recognize the vehicle of satire that he concertedly and committedly uses and meet the demand of carrying its edge into the translation. One of the most difficult translational acts is to identify the underlying seriousness in the humour and to maintain the bite of the irony. The complete story, 'Multiracial' is a case in point. The capping ironical twist of the ending puts everything in perspective. The Honourable Kumar who has been eloquently batting for racial equality by espousing the cause of the 'Multi Racial Society,' is looking for a place to eat lunch:

> The Honourable Kumar and his companion walked a short distance from the Parliament House and halted near a bar. Stepping inside, Honourable Kumar noticed that there were only Africans sitting there.
>
> 'This appears to be an African bar. Let us go and sit in our bar,' Honourable Kumar remarked unthinkingly as he beat a hasty retreat.

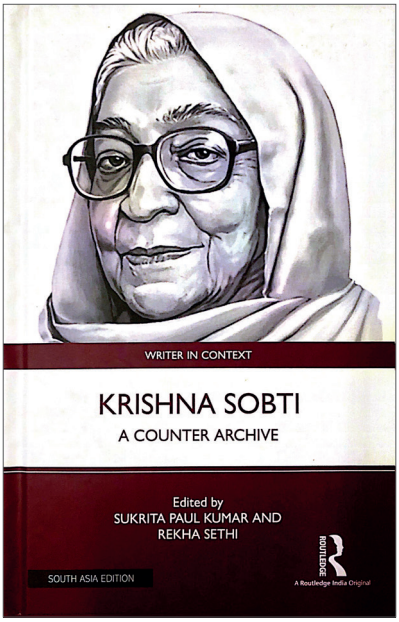
The hollowness and the political expediency of all Honourable Kumar's earlier public utterances are laid bare. The substantial and reiterated themes of racial discrimination, religious differences, emigration, displacement and exile, nationalistic impulses, of the shifting, contesting concept of 'home' and 'belonging,' all demand that a translator be alert and aware of his responsibility in taking these to his audience, who, in turn may be located in different linguistic and cultural settings.

It emerges that the cerebral nature of Paul's themes does not rule out the more particular human emotions like nostalgia for homes left behind, which gets reverse ironical emphasis in the figure of a child yearning to go back 'home' in Africa. The hurt of the breakdown in relationships as a result of years of separation from loved ones, induced by the move away to Africa, the covetous yearning for gold bangles, the child-ish thoughts, the 'nanhe-munne khyalaat' (नन्हे मुन्ने ख्यालात) that assail mankind, all share equal space. The translator has to manage and maintain this delicate balance between the mind and the heart by choosing words carefully.

But, by far the most tantalizing aspect of Joginder Paul's writing that keeps the translator on his toes is his inimitable style—the style which, chameleon-like, changes, adapts according to the subject matter and theme. We've already noted the high Urdu of 'Multiracial' and the conversational tenor of the other stories. The beauty is that whatever the weight of the vocabulary and standard, the smoothness in the flow of the narrative is unfalteringly maintained. It becomes incumbent upon the translator to try every trick of the trade to mirror Paul's effortless spontaneity evident in his choice of apposite language and stylistic technique. This experimentation in making nimble apt variations in style--a rarity, hardly ever seen in Urdu writing before—and his unapologetic use of words from another language, mainly English, is a hallmark of his work.

The confusion with which the multilingual conundrum of Indian reality and therefore, of Indian creativity, weighs down on the translation experience as the Paul experience highlights, seeps into the experience of translating other Indian writers too. I faced similar issues while translating Hindi writer Krishna Sobti.[7] Her singular feel for words and deep respect for the creative process mark the superior craftsmanship of her work. This is most evident in her alertness to the richness of her mixed linguistic heritage of Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu, and her concerted adherence to it in her avowed creative decision to mirror language as it was spoken, are qualities that mark her literary credo. So, how was I, the translator, who understood all three languages, to translate the invigorating play of the three in the original, into one single target language without losing the essence of the unique Sobti text? This necessitated hard choices of which words from which language I ought to retain to carry the cultural nuantial fabric of the original into the translation.

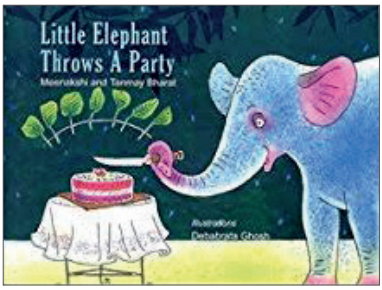
[7] Krishna Sobti (1925–2019), the 1980 Sahitya Akademi Award winner, was an Indian Hindi fiction writer and essayist. She was given the Jnanapith Award in 2017 for her singular contribution to Hindi literature.

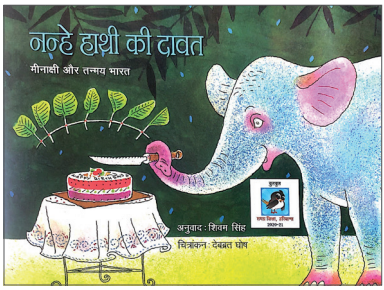


So, in effect, the act of translating Hindi poet, Bharat Bhushan Agrawal, the Urdu short fiction writer, Joginder Paul and the Hindi short story writer, Krishna Sobti have really been exercises in getting to know Bharat Bhushan Agrawal, Joginder Paul and Krishna Sobti. The effort has marked an evolving relationship from being daunted by the sheer intellectual reach and tenacity of their superlative oeuvre, to learning to 'see' like them, to see with them. Ultimately, this act can no longer be labelled as a onerous 'task.' The journey with their words has been a singularly illuminating one—a journey which has been, to use Nikolas Kompridis's words, 'a possibility disclosing' venture. (Nikolas Kompridis, 2006)[8]

[8] Kompridis: 34, 74, 137 among many other references.

Translating myself: *Little Elephant Throws a Party*





At this point, I am pushed to saying something more about my relationship with words. Apart from being a translator, cultural theorist, and critic, I am also a creative writer. I write short fiction for both adults and children. In this capacity too I have been pushed to the act of translation. Some years ago, I published an illustrated short story for little children called *Little Elephant Throws a Party.* One major attraction of the contract with the leading Indian publishing house for children was the possibility of my book getting translated into various other major languages of the country. A year later, they came out with the Hindi translation and promptly sent me five author copies. My elation at the implied recognition of my original story, turned to extreme unhappiness when I read through the translated text: ill-chosen Hindi word equivalents and tense inconsistencies had turned the translation into a nightmare. I immediately shot off a mail to the publisher expressing my distress and asking them to recall the copies out in the market. Their initial responses were disconcerting: I was told over and over again that the translator was a seasoned, respected translator and that there could be *nothing wrong* with the translation. But the print copy signalled otherwise! I must clarify that I was certainly not upset on my own account. I was agitated more because we were guilty of transmitting a patently flawed translation in incorrect Hindi to unknowing gullible minds. Very obviously, the publisher had fallen short in recognizing the magnitude of their responsibility and erred in discharging their responsibility to the intended child audience.

Utterly miffed, I immediately sat down to translate my story myself and sent it to them asking them to use my version for a corrected print run. I also called them out for not letting me know beforehand and passing the translation without running it past me. Now, I have another book coming out from the same publishers and have taken care to include translation rights to the Hindi for myself.

This particular experience too has been an eye-opening one:

1. It served to highlight that even with what seems to be a comparatively simple text—limited vocabulary, simpler sentence construction—it was possible to go wrong in the translation.
2. It was not the reputation of the translator that guaranteed a good translation but an honesty of effort and the achievement of carrying the vision of the writer through to the reading audience.
3. The responsibility of the translator is great because a work can be run to dust by a bad, half-baked effort.

In this case, my angst is multiplied because I have no way of gauging if the translated versions in the other Indian languages pass muster since I am not familiar with them.

The exasperations of my variegated translational experience have also spilled over into my teaching of translations. I have often been forced to confront very basic questions from young doubters who ask if there is any point in translational activity and whether it is at all necessary. Even as I steer them to the recognition of the laudable impulse to carry over valuable original literature to those not familiar with the source language, I find myself landing in a highly contentious space. It now becomes necessary to fight the fallacious presumption that any work that has been translated is innately valuable. The burden of pointing out to these naive readers that there is a hidden subjectivity that underlies every act of translation. The impulse to translation may be highly politically motivated (as the paternalistic colonialist impulses had been) and as a great deal of contemporary translation in India is. It is but obvious that the translators' ability and their agenda need to be recognized. The act of translation is not solely a creative act. It is also a highly political act. On the other hand, it could also be that a translator seeing value in a work that has not quite met with readerly success in the original language, sees creative potential in the act

of translation and seeks to communicate this value to others by making it better through a translation. Here lies the creative original value of a translation, the transcreation that de Campos propounded. (Haroldo de Campos, 1963)

One of my repeat exercises has been to exhort my students to translate 'Samadhi Lekh' (समाधि लेख) by Bharat Bhushan Agarwal, the poem that had, as I mentioned earlier, given me great grief in my initial efforts at translation.

रस तो अनंत था; अंजुरी भर ही पिया
जी में वसंत था, एक फूल ही दिया
मिटने के दिन आज मुझको यह सोच है
कैसे बड़े युग में कैसा छोटा जीवन जिया.

(Ras toh anant tha; anjuri bhar hi piya
Jee mein vasant tha, Ek phool hi diya
Mitne ke din aaj mujhko yeh soch hai
Kaise bade yug mein Kaisa chhota jivan jiya.)

This workshop exercise of getting the same single piece translated by a class has highlighted that there are almost as many possible translations as there are practitioners. Clearly, the translation exercise is an interpretational exercise, and as interpretations go, every translation is an individual interpretation.

One translation may seem better to me, and another to you. This leads us to the vexing question of which is the best translation. Even as we come to engage with the fraught question of what makes a good translation and what bad, we are forced to face the next question of who has the right to judge. My experience tells me simply that the translation that reads smoothly and is meaningful is a good translation. Moreover, if the reader has the wherewithal to read the original, then they also need to see if, and how, the original lives on in the translation; whether the authorial direction has been superimposed by the translator's aims. This, in turn, keeps the idea of the 'source' and the 'target', the translator and the receiver entities in the picture. So, when we take cognizance of the politics of translation, we also need to take into account the nature of the receiver.

To me, the process of translation is intrinsic to our human character and basic to human interaction and communication since we think something and then we translate it orally into words. Most of the time we manage to do

it exceedingly well. But there are times that we are at a loss for the word. And it is just this search for the right word, the right translation that engages us, that confounds us. Ultimately, translation is a *process* that marks a unique cultural matrix in which the cultures of both the source and target languages are written into the emergence of a unique new cultural output. Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novelist, Namita Gokhale affirmed this cultural enrichment through translational activity by quoting U.R. Ananthamurthy at the Neemrana Literature Festival, 2002, at a session titled 'Many languages, one literature'. Ananthamurthy had this to say: 'I cannot live only in one language. I live in English, I live in Kannada, I live in Sanskrit, I live in so many translations…' Philosophically and metaphorically, the bridging of linguistic cultures through translation, marked by an openness of one culture to the overtures of an-OTHER linguistic culture, becomes the embodiment of tolerance, a much-needed faculty in a world shrinking into insularity and inconsiderateness.

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Navigating Translations in Multilingual India. A Personal Response

Summary

In multicultural, multilingual India, languages are constantly engaged in a colloquy, thus making the translational exercise a living, continuous attribute of subcontinental existence. This essay is a reflection on the purpose and pertinence of the exercise of translation in the context of a deeply personal engagement with it in a constantly changing and complex politico-historical matrix. Revisiting both gratifying and frustrating translational experiences over the years, I attempt to uncover its value to humanity and its long-term impact as a bridge between different linguistic cultures.

Keywords: The Indian subcontinent; multilingualism; translation; orientalist translation; colonialist translation; self-translation; children's literature

Słowa kluczowe: Subkontynent indyjski, wielojęzyczność, przekład, przekład orientalistyczny, przekład kolonialny, przekład własny, literatura dla dzieci

Cytowanie

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