

Negotiating Literary Transactions: Translation as Mapping Empowerment through Dissemination

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Abstract

This paper argues for wider negotiation of Dalit literary discourse through translation amongst Indian languages. This would provide a marshalling of cultural and political solidarity amongst Dalit communities and help in the movement for social justice and inclusive transformation in a pluralist culture that is the core marker of Indian social rubric. The paper argues that a translator works under constraints imposed by the publishing industry regarding choice of author to be translated, themes and genres to be accessed, thereby restricting wider dissemination of powerful narratives in regional languages. A translator has to negotiate a subversive strategy to initiate a healthier exchange of literary discourse amongst Indian languages and English. The paper analyses possibilities through translation of the same text in English and an Indian language to illustrate the political, activist choices of choosing an Indian language over English in a translation project.

Keywords: Dalit Poetry, Translation, Subversion, Dissemination, Marginalised Voices.

Translation from Indian languages to English acquired a new momentum in the late nineties with the introduction of a new syllabus for the undergraduate programme in English at Delhi University. For the first time, a paper on Indian writing in translation was being included in the curriculum. Teachers who have been oriented to teach British, American and Western classics were very excited as well as apprehensive about teaching this paper which included writings of Tagore, Premchand, Basheer, Sri Sri, Jayanta Mahapatra, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Ismat Chughtai, Ambai, Amitav Ghosh, Muktibodh to mention a few! Our discussion at various workshops on the new syllabus often veered towards the quality of translation of the selected text. Exactness, equivalences, traffic between source and target language and various theories of translation became the buzz word among us.

My experience of editing Ambai's short story in Tamil translated into English as *Squirrel* by Lakshmi Holmstrom led me to explore other translations of the story in English. The available translations of the story in English, one by L. Holmstrom and another by Vasantha Kannabiran, I found, rather disappointing. They proved inadequate to bring out the musical rhythm, colloquial register and the easy transition from the narratorial to the conversational tone evident in the original.

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My choice of translating the Tamil story into Hindi as an academic exercise to counter the inadequacies of the English translations aimed at overcoming the restraints of homogenizing the complex, often monosyllabic, rhythmic structure of Tamil speech patterns into a standardized, anglicized register with a dash of ‘di’ or ‘da’ to denote a Tamil specificity. Kannabiran’s translation constantly paraphrased and offered explanatory comments on allusions and myths used in the story. In the Tamil text, the allusions sport a stark crispness and an assumption of easy familiarity amongst the readers. The English translation, clearly, aims at a western/anglicized readership and feels the need to offer elaborate emendations or incorporate annotative notes within the primary text. It also fails to convey the conventional colloquial nuances of the Tamil text. It does not manage to foreground a creative friction between literality and cultural specificity that a translated text is expected to reflect. Kannabiran’s translation of Ambai’s ‘Anil’ made a literal, rather verbose translation that often resulted in a mockery of the very enterprise of translation. A friendly, casual banter among women colleagues at the library, whereby there is an intimate intermixing of gender connotative address is utterly undermined in the English text, when Kannabiran translates “*Aamaampa*” as “Yes, father”! The unwitting metamorphosis of one of the women into a father figure is bizarre, misleading and a provoking distortion of meaning. In my Hindi translation, I could translate this rather smoothly as “Haan baba” and convey the bonhomie among the women staff.

Lakshmi Holmstrom, on the other hand, goes out of her way to invoke a culture specific register. She resorts to the use of “Yes, di” or intersperses the conversation with a generous dose of di or da even when not warranted by the source text. Holmstrom also takes recourse to use of long sentences in standardised English, adding an emendation here and there. The Tamil text, in fact is marked by short, monosyllabic words and rhythmic sentences steeped in wit and subversive humor.

My attempt at translating *Anil* into *Gilhari* in Hindi helped me recognize the easy negotiability among Indian languages. Despite the traditional, political friction concerning Hindi and Tamil over their respective hegemonic presence in the national culture during the sixties, I realized that an unobtrusive traffic between the two languages is possible and remarkably successful. I now, firmly believe, that translation among Indian languages is a more amenable, satisfying, a much-needed, politically sound strategy than translation of Indian language texts into English. Notwithstanding the lure of a wider, metropolitan, Indian/Western academic readership that an English translation invariably offers, translation enterprise among Indian languages is more rewarding (for reasons apart from the academic as I would argue below).

A Tamil text translated into Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Hindi or Punjabi can generate significant subtexts that foreground the cultural affinity, the linguistic and idiomatic proximity among the languages and the rubric of a social structure that throws up forms of oppression and social injustice common to different linguistic/regional communities in the country. Translation among Indian languages, I believe, becomes a much needed political

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exercise in the context of literature of the marginalized. Dalit literature, for instance would gain a significant visibility and meaningful exchange of ideas when translated into various Indian languages. The issue of social injustice and oppression meted out to Dalits is a pan-Indian social problem that merits a continuous dialogue and ideological intervention among Dalits, Dalit activists and the academic community from different regional, linguistic zones. Dalit literature translated into English achieves political resonance for reasons different from the ones potentially present in translations amongst Indian languages. Further, the rich earthy, spoken vocabulary of Dalits gets erased and standardized or is subjected to clumsy paraphrasing and exoticisation for the benefit of the monolingual, English reader.

My experience of translating, Tamil Dalit literary texts into English and Hindi has been both satisfying and alarming on different counts. As a translator, my choice of translating a Dalit text initiates me to an enormously challenging space wherein I need to marshal exacting levels of scholarship, linguistic innovation, and sensitivity to questions of identity, self articulation of the marginalized and the specificity of diction and vocabulary. The political reverberations of choice of texts as well as my choice of target language is yet another area of critical concern.

Translation of Tamil Dalit texts into English assures the writers a wider, receptive readership that is empowered to make interventions in the academic domain whereby Dalit literary output gains an entry into curriculum, academic recognition and legitimacy in dissemination process. Surely, this is a much needed and well-deserved shot for Tamil Dalit literature. However, translation of Tamil Dalit texts into Hindi or other Indian languages would serve the Dalit cause much better by paving the way for organizing and unifying Dalits drawn from different linguistic profiles but facing a similar pattern of oppression. It would ably further the effort towards political empowerment of Dalits. In the absence of a mass-based political organization that could reach out to all the regions of the country, Dalit literature could be posited to take up the mantle of intellectual leadership for the political organization and empowerment of Dalit communities across India. Hence, translations into various Indian languages could aid the Dalit movement in literary as well as political space.

Further, the innovative linguistic experimentation and radical aesthetic paradigms employed by Dalit writers in one language are more easily glimpsed and grasped in other Indian languages than in English. Today, there is an urgent need to share such inputs amongst various Indian languages and their literatures. A healthy, *aadaan pradaan* in Dalit discourse drawn from various Indian languages would make a significant impact on the course of Dalit movement in both literary and political domain. My argument above, however, does not seek to undermine the pragmatic usefulness of English translations of Dalit texts. Such a process enables greater visibility and marshals political momentum amongst the English reading public globally. But chances of impacting a network of organized, agitationist movement to ensure social justice is far higher through negotiations amongst Indian languages.

Often, I choose to translate a particular Dalit text (in Tamil) into both English and Hindi. This allows me to examine the literary, political and cultural nuances that find a

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negotiation at an ideological plane. Without contradicting the critical commonplace that an English translation could guarantee better renown to the text/writer even as it erodes the linguistic and cultural specificity of an Indian language text, I wish to argue that in a multilingual space, univocality retards political interventions. Multiple translations of a Dalit text ensure an ideological climate conducive to greater strengthening of the Dalit cause. Mobilization of Dalits and their empowerment in society has to be addressed at multiple levels. My suggestion of multiple translations of a Dalit text could pave the way for a fruitful dialogue in a pluralistic, non-hierarchical domain. The subversive politics of Dalit literary discourse demands marshalling of a pluralistic critical enterprise.

The Tamil Dalit poet Anbadavan's poem, *Saba Varam* is an interesting instance in the context of the above discussion. I translated the poem into English for purposes of research and into Hindi for publication (as a part of an anthology of Dalit poems from different Indian languages into Hindi). Anbadavan's poem uses fantasy and political comment to depict the inhuman living conditions of Dalits in their *Cheris/Colonies*. In this poem, God decides to take yet another *avatar* – this time as a Dalit. His divine wives and other gods desert him and ostracize him. Once on earth, he is unable to bear the terribly unhygienic, pathetic living conditions of the Dalit *cheri (colony)*. He misses his daily puja and the ritual pampering showered on him by the priests at his temple abode. He ultimately flees and renounces his avatar as a foolish enterprise for he had not armed himself with celestial weapons for his survival as a Dalit. The poem points out that Dalits live under such conditions that even a God cannot cope with. The absence of weapons in the Dalit avatar points to the need for an armed resistance against an oppressive social structure. The poem points out that Dalits have gained nothing substantial through non-violent, democratic negotiations with the dominant community.

Anbadavan uses a highly Sanskritised Tamil to locate the priestly rituals and oblations that Gods have been habituated to. On the other hand, he counters it with a monosyllabic, stark, scatological idiom to locate the milieu of dalit *cheri* where God has descended to in his latest avatar as a Dalit.

Saba Varam (Tamil)

Idu Karumilada Pudu Avataramedukka

Inaikkadavulkalodu Alochitar Kadavul

Ketavudane Tikaithu Nagardanar

Tunaiviyarum Marandanar Teendalai.....

Avadarithaar Bumiyl Dalitena

Madangalum Aadinangalun Purakkanika

Kidaithathu Oru Kudisai

Agamangal Aarukala Poojaikaluku Vaypillai

Mandira Ucchadangalil Kudamuzhuku Vaibavangalil

Chetha Mohzhiyai Kettu Uraindu Poyindiravarku

Tenay Enithana Cherizglin Vasavugal

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Ethirparada Malamoothira Abishekathil
Tigaiththar Tirumoorthy
Tanakuthane Nondukondar:
‘Kosuvana Pirapinum
Kidaithirukum Bayamum Mariyadayum
Dalit Vazhvai Vazha Iraivanalum Mudiyaadu
Ayudangalilla Dalit Avataram
Mutaltanamana Tiruvilaiyadal’
Suyasabathil Kartrazal
Verumai aanadu Garbagraham.

Anbadavan’s use of Sanskritised Tamil here is a political strategy to interrogate priestly hegemony over the language. The age-old denial of learning opportunities to Dalits and legacy of exclusivist rights over the Sanskrit language by brahminical forces are being challenged in the Dalit poet’s appropriation of a Sanskritic Tamil to draw our attention to appalling living conditions of Dalits. He invokes Sanskritic vocabulary only to reject it as a lifeless idiom and juxtaposes it to a colourful, vibrant, swear-words infested Dalit vocabulary that is rooted in its lived-reality. The poem claims that Dalit vocabulary is as sweet as honey to God’s ears hitherto accustomed to a dead language over the ages.

The reference to elaborate *Abishekam* (ritual bath) of temple deities with milk, coconut water, sandal and honey is juxtaposed to the oblation of urine and shit that the lord is subjected to in his new habitat, a Dalit *cheri*. References to *Aarukala pujai*, *Abishekam*, *kudamuzhukku*, *Garbagraham* required elaborate paraphrasing and annotation in the English translation. In my Hindi translation, on the other hand, I could translate with easy assurance, play upon the Hindi readers’ familiarity with oblation vocabulary. Hence the Hindi translation could stay closer to the Tamil text and keep the easy flowing rhythm of the Tamil text.

Further, in the English translation I could not convey the interplay of dual registers, the juxtaposing of Sanskritic and colloquial Tamil spoken by Dalits as effectively as I could in my translation in Hindi. In the Hindi translation, I could draw upon Sanskritised Hindi and colloquial Hindustani, intersperse Dalit vocabulary with a Sanskritised, *tatsam*-abundant Hindi one and convey the subversive intent of the poem. Dalit poetry’s linguistic experimentation for political strategies/intent could be better conveyed in Hindi thereby initiating a debate on Dalit aesthetics and ideological use of poetic form in the course of Dalit movement. Such a translation can seek to establish a dialogue between Hindi and Tamil Dalit discourse, a much needed intervention in Dalit studies. It could, in all possibilities underscore a political affinity between the Tamil speaking and Hindi speaking Dalits, notwithstanding the friction over imposition of Hindi as Official language in the context of Tamil sub-nationalism and anti-Hindi agitation in the past. Even the title *Sabavaram* with its Sanskritic register gains a political resonance in Hindi as *Abishapth Vardaan* as against the mere suggestion of an oxymoronic phrase in English as “A cursed boon”. While the use of a

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Sanskritic register in a Dalit poem is difficult to indicate in an English translation, the interplay of Sanskritic and colloquial Hindi vocabulary successfully conveys the political purport of the Tamil poem. The interplay of formal and colloquial, of Sanskritised and Hindustani Hindi, of anger and wit, of sacred and scatological imagery found easy (easier) negotiation in Hindi.

Abishaph Vardaan (Hindi)

Ek Anoota Naveen Avatar Lene Ko

Huye Taiyaar Eshwar

Devlok Me Jab Kiya paramarsh

Chakit Rah Gaye Devghan

Kisak Chale Chupchap

Deviyan Bi Peeche Hatin

Sparsh-Sukh Tyag Uthin

Dangh Rah Gaye Eshwar

Magar Ade Rahe Nirmaypar

Avatarit Huye Dalit Ban Bumi par

Uchit Anuchit Se Rahe Bezaar

Math, Ashram Ne Kiye Apne Kiwad Bandh

Panah Mili Ek Jhonpidi Mein

Niyam, Aachar, Neivedhya, Puja, Aarati

Nahin Huye Unhe Naseeb

Mantra Uchcharan, Kumbabishek Aur Kolahal Se

Huye Mukht

Yugon Se Mruth Bhasha Se Aagath Kanon Ko

Shahad Si Lagi Daliton Ki Gaali

Magar Taiyari Thi Adhuri

Mal-Mooth Ke Abishek Se

Hathprab huye Trimoorthis

Apne Aap Ko Kos Uthe

“Macchar Ka Avatar bi Leta

Raub Aur Aadar to Patha

Dalit Ki Zindagi Koi Eshwar Bi

Na Jee Paye

Bin Astra –Shastra Ke Dalit Avatar

Hain Bevkoofti Bara Chamatkar”

Is Abishaph Avatar Se Haath Dho Baithe

Soona Pada Hain Kab Se Garbagrah

So far, I have discussed my choices in the context of linguistic restraints. But translators operate in a space constrained by expectations and impositions of editors, publishers and critics as well. Editors of anthologies have a very rigid, codified framework

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that allows a translator very limited choice in terms of selection of writers or more interestingly even in the choice of subject matter or issues raised by a particular writer or a category of writers. This becomes particularly a political combat of sorts in the context of translation of Dalit writing. Editors/publishers (who often act in collusion) dictate to translators which Dalit writer requires to be translated, they decide on the Dalit identity of a writer and prescribe to the translator to look for specific “themes”, “topics” and “areas of interest” that they expect or rather ordain Dalit writers to deal with in their writings.

One editor asked me to choose four Dalit poems for a translation project but insisted that two of them ought to be by women Dalit poets, one by a Christian Dalit poet and the fourth by a Hindu male Dalit poet! I was asked to choose only those Dalit poems which dealt with

- (a) Dalit women’s dual oppression
- (b) On Ambedkarite ideology and its influence on Dalit poetry
- (c) Casteist discrimination
- (d) Dalit lifestyle

A Dalit poet could write only on these outlined issues and my argument that contemporary Dalit poets are dealing with a variety of issues expressing concern on prevailing social matrix, on corruption, on dilemmas of the middle class, on an intellectual’s role in a stratified society, on the rise of sectarian conflicts, environment concerns, farm distress etc. did not cut ice with the editor–publisher. I was asked to choose only those poems which fitted in with a codified perception regarding what constituted Dalit poetry.

Such an attitude promotes a stereotypical notion of Dalit literature and a false valorization of a codified Dalit writing thereby undermining the political and subversive purport of Dalit poetry. It leads to suppression of a self-reflexive, interrogative, introspective Dalit poetry. It also denies Dalit poets the right to take up “non-Dalit” issues that could be central to one’s social, political milieu or offer his /her comments on those issues (for instance, globalization, terrorism, inflation, school admissions, alternative sexuality, international relations, global warming, or whatever). These are not considered Dalit issues fit for handling by a Dalit poet. But Dalit poets are writing on such subjects, indeed, in almost all the languages and in a variety of genres.

A translator needs to subvert such a mindset by making her choices more extensive, more inclusive and more representative. Some authors or particular issues could be consciously avoided while undertaking translation work. One way to subvert such restraints could be to choose lesser-known works of known writers, choose an unknown author over a known writer, expand written Dalit poetry to include oral/folk Dalit songs, focus on experimentation in genre, style and language.

In my experience, marginalized voices in Tamil resonate more powerfully when translated into Hindi or other Indian languages. The Hindi language offers more empowering possibilities in the use of creative language while its critical vocabulary is too dense and forbidding for a reader friendly translation. In the case of the English language, the reverse trend operates. English critical vocabulary enables better communication of ideas and

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argument while creative use of English is restrictive, limiting and inadequate to reflect the rich, complex texture of Indian languages, especially Tamil. A judicious combination of Indian English and Indian languages would be a refreshing and fruitful negotiation in wider and meaningful negotiations of Dalit literary discourse. This paper argues not for an either/Or approach but a pluralist, inclusive, multivocal dissemination of Dalit writings through translation.

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