



Translating Bangla Dalit Poetry: Negotiating the politics of language

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In a multilingual and multicultural society it is not possible to be conversant with all the languages and the literature written in them. Translation helps in facilitating a cross-cultural interchange between the different languages and regions of India and the world. It goes without saying that this exchange or traffic between the languages is ordained by existing power structures and is by no means an equitable one. Tacit hierarchies exist among the languages. Thus, more texts are translated from and into Hindi than into any other Indian language. Being the designated National language, Hindi is officially promoted and therefore commands substantial resources. It has a wider market, readership, and visibility than other regional languages.

The position of Hindi is rivaled only by that of English on account of its National and International presence. English and Hindi are therefore, the two important link languages in India. The 'power' and 'prestige' that accrues to English makes writers prefer to be translated into English than into other regional languages. Unlike the regional languages including Hindi,

English is spoken and understood by the educated reading public across India. Thus, translations from one Indian language to another are often carried out through the mediation of English.

An English translation of a vernacular text acts as a *via media* between the different Indian languages. For example, it allows a Bengali or Telegu reader who does not know Marathi or Hindi access to Marathi Dalit writings through the English translation. The English translation may further form the base for a Bangla translation. This makes it available to a class of Bangla readers who cannot read either Hindi or English. Many Bangla Dalit readers would fall into this category. The problem is that much of the culture specific usages of the Marathi Dalits would have been lost in the English translation. A further translation from the English to Bangla denotes a double loss. This loss can be minimized if translations are done directly from one Indian language to the other.

Though the assumption of a shared, common Indian heritage across languages and regions may generally hold true, it is contested by marginalized groups like the Dalits. The Dalits challenge the entrenched hegemony of the socially forward classes. It is but natural, that in their literature the language of the Dalits emerges with renewed vigour to assert their identity. The nuances of language, spoken and written, have always differed from caste to caste and stratum to stratum. There is a sense of a common cause and solidarity now emerging among Dalits and the backward classes across geographic, linguistic, and other frontiers. This is bound to leave new impact on various languages, their dictions and specific nuances. There is a conscious effort to re-visit the classics in regional literatures from a subaltern perspective.

Translation remains the most powerful tool for better understanding among cultures. One world is represented for another in translation. The bilingual and bicultural nature of translation is further challenged by Dalit writing which translates the Dalit self for the Savarnas. Translation of Dalit literature into the regional languages and the link languages is needed to popularize it and help it to gain wider readership and recognition. These translations would contribute to the Pan-Indian Dalit movement and strengthen it.

Dalits are acutely sensitive to the power politics operating within the domains of language. Their idiomatic use of language amply demonstrates this. The awareness that any

mediation between the source language and the target language is by no means innocent or free of power politics, complicates the translator's task.

Take the case of English for example. The hegemonic presence and dominance of English in India is all pervasive. English is the language of the educated, dominant elite and it clearly operates within the framework of a caste and class hierarchy. In the colonial period those who mastered the dominant language also formed the dominant community. The lower castes and classes did not have access to English education. English still remains the domain of the privileged classes and the object of middle class aspiration. English thus represents an elite and alien culture, and is not perceived as the language of the masses.

When one attempts to translate from the Indian languages into English, it entails that the cultural and regional nuances tend to get homogenized by the use of standardised English. Translators need to find ways to counter the hegemony of academic English. One way this can be done, is to remember that, English is very much part of our day to day life. Its usage has even percolated down from the middle classes to the lower classes. It is very common to hear their conversations peppered with English words. In other words, English has been Indianised with a vengeance. The English that is spoken and written in the academia is different from that we hear and see all around us. In the different regions of India, English is highly localized in intonation, vocabulary, and spelling. The translator can make use of this local, indianised, 'chutnified' English to communicate the cultural nuances of the vernacular text. This would work well with an Indian readership. When the translation is targeted toward a western or international audience, explanatory notes would need to be appended. Care should also be taken to avoid transforming the text into the other's cultural idiom or to universalize it.

Bangla Dalit Literature suffers from lack of visibility because it has not been extensively translated. There is a need to translate these texts into English for practical and pragmatic purposes. English has a special place in the Dalit agenda. They believe that English is caste neutral and can be a tool of their empowerment. Some of the Bangla Dalit writers have begun to write prose essays in English. But the bulk of their creative and critical writing is in Bangla.

This paper is an account of the practical and critical problems I encountered while I attempted to translate some Bangla Dalit poems into English for the purpose of my research.

Some of these poems I also translated into Hindi for publication in an anthology of Dalit poems. This exercise of dual translation made me contend with the peculiar problems of translating Dalit writing. Firstly, I needed to translate the dalit idiom without losing its caste-specific, regional nuances and resonances. I soon discovered that it was easier to translate the Dalit's use of a casteist vocabulary into Hindi, than into an alien, caste-neutral language like English. The best option in such cases was to retain the original words in the English translation. For example, the word 'chamar' pejoratively denotes both a caste and a profession. It has an exact equivalent in Hindi. But, to translate it as 'cobbler' in English seemed very literal and woefully inadequate.

Translators work with many constraints, not the least among them being that of language. In the English version I was free of the restraints imposed by publishers and editors regarding theme, subject matter, target readership etc. I therefore, moved away from the general practice of English translations and did not aim at a western reader but at a multilingual, English-speaking Indian reader. Such a reader would generally be familiar with the Indian socio-cultural scene, and would not require a footnote on 'caste' or idiomatic usages like 'Jaat-Paat'. While I was translating for my research, my sole aim was to be able to communicate the meaning without tampering with the culture-specific registers used by the Dalit writers. In the absence of an English equivalent for commonly-used caste words, I felt it was better to retain the original Bangla word than to homogenize it into English and lose all the cultural resonances of the word.

When I was translating into Hindi, I had to conform to the specifications of the editor/publisher regarding the choice of authors, the length of the poems, their subject-matter, style, theme, and use of language. The editor had clearly specified that the translation had to be in clear and simple Hindi. Sometimes difficult, complex, elliptical-syntax and symbolical-usage were simplified. This can give the wrong impression that Dalit poetry is simple. By insisting on a simple, uncomplicated translation, such anthologies impose this as a standard for Dalit poetry. I feel a translator has to learn to trust her readers. I am against over-explaining and ironing out the difficulties of the source poem. This is required because these translated anthologies play a very important role in the cross fertilization of Dalit writings from different regions of India. They are also responsible for projecting a particular kind of writing as Dalit writing. Subjects like sexual exploitation of Dalit women, Dalit protest against atrocities, Dalit celebration of Ambedkar, and

Dalit-liberation ideology are privileged over other general topics on which Dalits write. Selective anthologizing does not present the true picture of Dalit writing. Language politics ensures that anthologies do not have an even representation of poets from all over India. As the anthology was in Hindi, Dalit poets from the Hindi-belt were well represented.

The Dalit poets attempt to review the everyday happenings through a Dalit perspective. They recontextualise myths and general notions regarding them. For instance, notions of love, alienation, gender disparity are given a Dalit overview. Any translation of these therefore has to be specially sensitive to these nuances and see to it that they get adequately transferred. I faced this problem while attempting to translate the Bangla Dalit poem 'Bibikto Uthoney Ghar' by Manohar Biswas. The opening stanza is as follows:

Bibikto Uthoney Ghar (Bangla)

Bibikto uthoney ghar
Gacher chaya Jhukchey dirgho dirgho hoye bhumitoley
Jaat-Paat nei boley taar
Ei uthon thekey shei uthoney
Dui uthoner majhkhaney lamba taana daag
Aamake aalada kore diyeche
Bibikto uthoney thaki
Bhangte paari naa shimana durbal bole
Chanta para koney
Shei purano Jhool kali bhara
Makorshar Jaale atkano machir moton ami
Anadikaaker karandon
Kende chalechi aajo-

The poet deliberately uses words that are not used in common day-to-day usage. Words like, 'bibikto', 'bhumitol', 'dirgho', 'krandon' are part of academic or 'shuddh' Bangla. By using these words, the Dalit poet announces his command over the language of the upper-caste educated elite. He also moves away from the common assumption that a Dalit writes only for fellow Dalits and is most comfortable writing in the colloquial idiom used by them in their everyday lives. In such a scenario, the translator has to be cautious not to oversimplify the language and render void the writer's political usage of Savarna language. In the Hindi translation I used 'Tatsam' words. By using a Sanskritised Hindi I was able to retain the political nuances of language usage by the writer. In the English version these differences got homogenized.

In the English version my aim was to be able to communicate the essence of the poem. The poem evokes the Dalit's sense of being trapped by age old musty, moth balled traditions and customs which have kept them segregated and discriminated against till date. The poet had gone for a literal translation and called it 'A house in a separate campus'. The title did not capture the Dalit's sense of casteist discrimination and segregation. I translated it as 'A hut in a segregated compound'. The poem narrates the Dalit writer's sense of alienation. The writer historicizes the Dalit predicament. The English and the Hindi translations are as follows:

A hut in a segregated compound' (English)

A hut in a segregated compound

The elongated shadow of the tree bends, touches the ground

Moves from this compound to the other

Because it has no caste

Between the two compounds a long straight scar line

Has separated me from the others.

I live in a segregated compound

Being powerless I cannot break down the boundary-

In the mildewed corner
I am like the fly, trapped in the ancient sooty spider web
From time immemorial I have been crying
I am still crying

Prithak aangan mein jhonpdi (Hindi)

Prithak aangan mey jhonpdi
Ped ki chaon lambi ho jhukti dharti par
Chukar chalti is aangan se us aangan
Kyunki uski koi jaat-paat nahi hai
Is aangan aur us aangan ke beech
Lambi kheechi hui ek lakeer
Mujhe alagh kar deti hai
Prithak aangan mey rahta hoon
Durbal hoon, tod nahi sakta is ghery ko.
Kai jami hui koney me
Purana, kalik bhara makdi
Ke jaale me fansi hui makhi ki
Tarah hoon may
Anadi kaal ka krandaan
Aaj bhi roe raha hoon.

‘Uthon’ in Bangla translates well as ‘aangan’ in Hindi, and ‘compound’ seemed the best English equivalent to communicate the sense of a fenced enclosure within which the Dalit’s hut exists. The phrase segregated compound also captures the nature of Dalit settlements which are on the outskirts of the Savarna village. They live in close proximity, but the boundaries of caste

irrevocably divide them. The boundaries of these settlements are clearly demarcated and the Dalits have to remain confined within them. They are not allowed to cross over or over step them. In the original Bangla version the poet deliberately leaves the line regarding the trees shadow ambiguously vague. He leaves it to the reader to figure out that the shadow of the tree can move and touch both the Savarna and the Dalit compound without fear of contamination because it has no caste. The Dalit on the other hand is trapped by the line or boundaries of caste. He cannot move for fear that his shadow would contaminate the 'Other'. For the sake of clarity in the English I added the words 'moves' and 'touches' and the Hindi equivalent 'chukar chalti' in the Hindi version. Many things that are left unsaid in the source poem for aesthetic and other reasons need to be made clear in a translation. At times this is at the cost of poetic subtleties that are lost in an over explained translation. I therefore chose not to elaborate too much through extensive footnotes. A translator has to take these decisions depending on the target audience. A western audience would require such explanation to get the meaning across.

Hindi, another link language for translation, requires less intensive footnoting because of shared cultural values across regions of India. The situation of Dalits varies in degree but their sense of ostracism and discrimination is similar and therefore the nuances can be easily translated into Hindi.

In Hindi I faced a different set of problems. Many Bangla words have an exact Hindi equivalent but in many cases, their usage varies. Words that are part of everyday 'Chalit Bhasha' in Bangla like 'Bhishan' are part of Sanskritised Hindi. For instance the phrase 'bhishan bhalo' would translate as 'very good' in English and 'bahut accha' in Hindi and not as 'bhishan accha'. Thus idiomatic usages between the Indian languages vary and the translator has to keep these in mind.

In my attempt to keep intact the writer's language politics discussed above, I tried and used 'Hindi' rather than 'Hindustani' or 'Bol Chal ki Hindi'. I therefore translated 'Bibikto' as 'Prithak' rather than the more commonly used term 'alagh'. I retained 'anadikaal' and 'krandan' because it would be easily understood by Hindi readers and also keep intact the 'Bangla' or 'regional' touch of the poem. I feel this is important as in doing so the translation carries a bit of

the regional flavour of its source language. I would argue, where possible this can be attempted in English too, when the target reader is Indian. This I attempted in my translation of Gautam Aali's poem. Aali uses a very colloquial idiomatic Bangla to register his Dalit voice and identity. He translates very well into colloquial Hindustani. I tried to retain some of his colloquial idiomatic usages even in my English translation of his poem 'Jaat-Paat? Dhush.'

I also felt Indianised English which is very much part of the public domain would serve the purpose of capturing the tongue in-cheek ironic irreverence of the title. I therefore translated it as 'Caste-Wast? Rubbish'. The poem interrogates the 'upper-caste' Bengali 'bhadralok's' denial of casteism in Bengal. It uses a prosaic, conversational, East-Bengal dialect to register the Dalit voice. The poet uses a naïve, illiterate, gullible voice to ironically address the presumed 'upper-caste' auditor, 'Aamaar boro shad hoyeche ithihaash charcha kori, / Jodi anumoti dyen to- (Bangla). Translated as, 'I have this desire to dabble in history, If you will kindly permit'. The history he 'dabbles' in is the discrimination Ambedkar faced when he went to school:

Maharashter ek chemra neha-pori shiktey chai.

Iskool jai. Kintuk-

Ha etta kintuk aache. Mashter moshai aar chawrara

Keu taake kilashe dhuktey dei naa.

Ken debey?

Chemrada ki manush naki? Mane annage moton manush?

Motei naa.

Trnaslated as :

A young fella in Maharashtra wanted to read n' write.

He goes to ischool. But-

Yes, there is a 'But' here. The master and other students,

None allow him to enter the kilaas.

Why should they?

Was that chap a human being? I mean ‘human’ like other people?

Not at all.

He continues to discuss various instances of caste atrocities in different parts of the country and then naively states, ‘Bishash Koren, jaat paater moton chhoto byapar /aamader ei laal duggey nai.’- / ‘Believe me, such petty things like caste-wast /does not exist in our red fortress’. The upper-caste auditor presumably quotes from newspapers to remind the Dalit speaker about caste atrocities in Bengal. The speaker does not believe him. This reflects the extent to which the Dalits in Bengal have been co-opted and brain washed by the ruling power. The poem ends with the hypnotic mimicking of the upper-caste rhetoric by the Dalit. ‘Jaat-paat? Ei Banglai? Dhush-’ / Caste-wast? In Bengal? Rubbish.’

I would like to conclude with an anecdote which clearly highlights the pitfalls that translators face or fall into. ‘Aali’ is the pseudonym the poet uses instead of his caste surname. I was tempted to note in his choice an attempt to create a Dalit-Muslim or Dalit-Buddhist-Muslim conjoined identity suggesting their possible alliance. The name seemed to encapsulate the concept of the Dalit-Bahujan identity and fitted in with the current political climate. It so happened that in the course of my conversation with the poet, I mentioned my theory regarding his pseudonym. He immediately refuted my suggestion saying, ‘Aali’ did not denote a Muslim identity or an attempt to forge an alliance with them. He had used it to refer to one who stands on the ‘aal’ or the mud ‘bund’ that demarcate the borders of the paddy fields. It denotes the precarious and marginal position of the Dalit. It also foregrounds his peasant ancestry.

This brought home the need to keep in mind the historical context as well as the authorial intent in choosing a given meaning while translating. In the cited example I had interpreted the author’s pseudonym as representing the Dalits’ political annexing of Buddhism and their forging alliances with other minorities. Despite the fact that the authorial intent was something else, I feel the translator-interpreter is free to suggest nuances that she feels are historically probable. A translator needs to continually negotiate between the multiple meanings of a word and chose the

one that best communicates the nuances and resonances of the source text. This choice becomes an interpretive and political choice.

In my experience, the politically charged and highly subversive use of regional dialects and upper-caste language by the Bangla Dalit poets translates very well into 'khari boli' or Hindi. Unlike the South Indian languages Bangla has close affinity with Hindi, therefore, transference of language nuances from one to the other can be easily achieved during translation. More Inter-language translations are needed to unite Dalit activists and writers across India.

Despite its drawbacks we need to translate into English as many regions in India politically resist Hindi. Thus in the absence of regional language translation, English remains the best option. Translation in Indian-English works better and is creatively more fruitful.

References:

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