

A Pot of Rice and Roasted Rats

*Jugaad*¹ by Prem Kumar Mani in Hindi
Translated by BINDU SINGH

Translator's Note

When I first read the story *Jugaad* by Prem Kumar Mani, it was a poignant and heartrending experience. I read it in the anthology of Hindi short stories by various writers – *Katha Mein Kisan*. All the stories in the collection centred on farmers and landless rural workers struggling to survive amidst the problems of famine, drought, loan sharks, and many who perished in their struggle. I felt an inexplicable sadness while reading these stories. But this particular story was different. Though about poverty, the sheer *joie de vivre* it displayed was very inspiring. My liking for the story was instant, and the decision to translate it was immediate. A story with a happy ending and an evocative rural landscape offering glimpses of the moral economy of the village so different from my urban middle-class world and its inexorable greed that I immediately put my pen to paper. Its language was also infused with a rhythm of joy. And that joy, I thought, must be shared with all.

The act of translation like any other creative endeavour is fraught with anxiety and restlessness. Moreover, if a beginner undertakes this creative journey then the level of challenge of that task is too high. I also toiled with several creative anxieties, not only limited to my skills as a translator but also concerned with the question of fidelity, clarity, and equivalence. I believe that efficiency in transferring the style, tone, and cultural elements of the original story into another language is what makes a good translation. With these tenets in

¹ *Jugaad* (Hack) was published in Prem Kumar Mani's collection of stories *Upsangar* in 2009 by Rajkamal Prakashan. For the present translation refer to the story from this collection.

mind, I undertook the task of translation. Still a novice in the art of translation, I am dictated by the innocent appeal of my senses. I have valued the evocative aspects of the language more than its semiotic semblance. In the process of translation, I have found myself fumbling for exact equivalent words. At times, I have struggled to preserve as much as possible from the source text, which added to my self-reflexive moments of annoyance and dissatisfaction. On some other occasions, I have tried to take the liberties of free translation, blending my subjective meanings into the textual fabric of the source text. I have realized that literary translations are not mere transliterations but transcreations. Here I have no qualms in acknowledging that there have been some creative omissions in favour of the beauty of language. It is not that I have shunned the idea of faithfulness in my translation. In fact, to the best of my efforts, I have kept the spirit of the original story intact.

Jugaad means manoeuvring but to capture the attention of readers I abstained from a literal translation of the title and fashioned it with a new title – *A Pot of Rice and Roasted Rats*. The reason is that I find the title intriguing that will coax the readers to find more about the events in the story. I also realized the complexities of expressing many Indian words in English and discovered that not all the nuances of the regional/provincial culture are possible to express in translation. Several words denoting unique objects, cognition, sensations, and emotions lack equivalent technical terminology. The epistemological predicament of translation is perplexing: if one acknowledges that words are embedded in a cultural context that is not translatable, then one is committing the logical fallacy of suggesting that translation is impossible. So, the job of a translator is to fashion the epistemological conditions for inter-lingual and inter-cultural dialogue. With this hypothesis in my mind, I searched for functional

commonalities between the words, structures of the two languages. Since I could see that there was not any direct compatibility between the languages, I tried using parallel and equivalent words, if not exact. At places where the translation of a word in English from Hindi disrupted the flow and perspicuity, I have retained the original word to express the local flavour in a global language, adding footnotes for the nuanced understanding of the reader in the target language.

Another difficulty that I faced was in the translation of object-words that are extra-linguistic culturally specific like 'kathari', 'raar', 'bhoot', 'chapua', and so on. Further, several verbs like 'sulgana' and 'hudakana' that are exclusive to Bhojpuri cultural expressions (to find equivalents for these words in Hindi too are difficult, if not impossible) posed the biggest challenge. The complexity involved in the translation of these words originated due to particular cultural contexts of their use. To avoid these problems, throughout I have followed the functional approach to translation that values the social experience in the cultural construction and evolution of a language and appreciates this cultural distinctness endeavouring to keep as much as possible of the original without hampering the smooth reception of the text in the target language.

So why did I translate this story, with several language barriers of cross-cultural communication? The only reasonable answer that comes to my mind is that translatability is always guided by—both individual and cultural—necessity/urgency to translate. Jugaad, a story with its distinct regional flavour, conveyed the pure emotions and rural sensibilities in words so distinct to that region that it urged me to undertake the project of its retelling in another language. Its Bhojpuri tenor also motivated me to choose this piece for translation. I felt an emotional connection with the regional linguistic expression as

it happens to be my mother-tongue. But more than anything, it was its epiphanic insight embedded in the narrative that made me a translator: money alone cannot make a man live with happiness. This story tells us that even a family of limited resources can be happy. When Binda's family celebrates the frugal meal that is somehow managed like a festival, it gives us a lesson to find joy in small and simple things. Such a profound philosophical understanding of life was moving enough to create an urgency to translate it for a wider audience.

A Pot of Rice and Roasted Rats

It is the month of January and the third day of continuous drizzle. It's not cold but chilly. Shivering has beset every soul. On the floor lies a layer of straw covered with a rug made from tattered clothes and from the other corner comes the rising warmth of the burning hearth but still the bitterly cold winds chilled everyone to the bone.

Binda turned over and gathered her courage to get up. For quite some time she was feeling the need to wake up. But she could not find the strength to rise. When her head started throbbing than she got up listlessly. After relieving herself when she was returning, she heard a rattling sound coming from the backyard. Possibly the bitch living near the hut must be making some arrangements for the pups. God only knows how the pups were surviving in this downpour.

Binda wanted to wash the utensils. But she was feeling lazy. She again returned to her bed.

Her entire family, wrapped in an old worn-out rug, was sleeping on the floor on a bed made of straws. Hirwa's father opened his eyes for a moment but quickly pulled the rug above his head again. When his legs were uncovered, he folded them

towards his stomach. Binda came back and sat down. She puts her legs inside the rug. Towards the eastern side of the hut, there was a thick grove of bamboos. On its branches the crows are cawing. But their voice appears very tired as if they are also dozing and preaching mankind to curl up in a rug.

Binda is sitting; she does not lie down. After caressing the forehead of Hirwa, she covered his bare legs with the rug. She felt like singing hymns in praise of *Nirgun*² but all sorts of nonsense fill her mind. The thought of singing withered.

It isn't good for Hirwa's father to sleep for so long. Before the masters reach the barn, he must be there. What work can be done in such weather but he had already been paid for ploughing ten *kattha*³ and one has to honour the payment. Among all the householders, there is nobody like this master. Unnecessarily why to make him angry.

"Hirwa's father, oh Hirwa's father."

She called him. He squirmed, keeping his eyes closed, he assessed the world with his ears and changing the direction of the rug he curled towards the other side. He felt like getting up and giving his wife a hard smack. She is poking even when it's still drizzling outside. She has so much regard for the work of the master as if she is not his but the faithful wife of the landlord. He minced within himself a foul word and fastened himself no matter what not to wake up till an hour later.

Hirwa and Johani fluttered their eyes on the first call. Binda caressed Johani's head. She felt so loved that she put her hand in her mother's lap. Suddenly, Hirwa thought of something and

² Nirgun means without attribute i.e. God is infinite and endless. The believers of Nirgun do not worship idols but the recognizable qualities of God.

³ Kattha is used as a unit of land measurement in the eastern regions of India and one kattha corresponds to 720 square feet.

quickly threw the rug and stood up. Swiftly he walked towards the hearth in the corner and started digging out the potatoes from the dying ashes.

“Light the fire, Hirwa.” Binda said to him.

She is waiting for his lovely smile which flashed across Hirwa’s face when he is told to light the fire. It has been only a few days since he learned to rub the stick against the matchbox and light it. Hirwa is filled with enthusiasm and searched for the matchbox. Johani stood up and brought a handful of straw.

Hirwa scolded- “So much of straw, take half only, *Mae*⁴, see how much straw she is going to burn.”

“If you waste even one matchstick then I will ask you. Even this much straw will not be sufficient, we will need more, understood.” Johani answered back.

Both fought on this issue. Binda was lost in her thoughts. When the battle amplified, she scolded- “Early morning, don’t start squabbling like dogs. Both of you have already started quarrelling at the break of dawn. If I come there, I will slap both of you.”

Hearing about the slap, the children quieten. Hirwa had lighted the hearth. Johani remembered something. She murmured in Hirwa’s ears. Hirwa listened carefully and then gave a hard stare in the direction of his mother. Mother is still lost in her thoughts. He gave Johani one roasted potato and she accepted it with gratitude. Then he made a gesture to say something. Johani understood his message and quietly walked out of the hut. After some time, Hirwa also stood up and stealthily followed the footsteps of his sister.

⁴ In regional language mother is also addressed as Mae.

Binda is sitting. Hirwa's father lying in bed on the floor realises that the children are not there. He opens his eyes once again to make sure and then he rolls towards Binda as if he was a crocodile. He started rubbing his face against the edge of Binda's lap. He forgets that just a while ago he was babbling curses at her.

Binda is roused. Many a times, in the thickness of night she had wanted him to show his affection in this manner. But his husband kept his distance lying in one corner like an enemy. And in the broad daylight, he is showering her with affections. Had he shown this affection a while before she would not have awakened the children.

The pouring nature outside fills Binda's heart with love. She caresses her husband's head and then softly scolds him- "It's morning now. Don't you have any worry about work? There aren't any rations left. Understand."

"Ten kilos of rice are already finished?"

"You want an account of ten kilos of rice. Have you counted how many days it lasted? It has been drizzling for the last three days. And then your sister's husband had come and ate two times. Won't you take into account that also? I cooked one *ser*⁵ of rice only for him. The quantity consumed by our entire family; he ate alone. What a greedy fellow!"

"Be quiet. He eats less than your brother. Now you will count food eaten by guests also? Have our days gone so badly! I also visit them. How much do I eat, you don't know? Who knows your brother's wife may have also called me greedy!"

"The members of my family are not so stingy."

⁵ Ser is an obsolete unit of dry volume which was close to the metric values of volume approx. equal to a litre. But it is still used in colloquial speech.

“Then I am stingy, or you are? Tell me. Why do you make such comments then?”

“Why would I comment? I cooked for him with great care. I mentioned it just like that, without thinking about it. But he is a glutton. If he gets tasty food, he doesn’t even bother to drink water. He kept staring at my face all along when he ate.”

“Oh! Then you mean to say that he ate so much by looking at your face. If somebody so beautiful is sitting in front, who won’t eat twice his diet.” He responded with a clever quip.

“Say nothing. I understand all the praise in my beauty is a lie. I may be beautiful for someone but you find beauty in others. In the house of the master who gives you jaggery, I know all about it.”

Hirwa and Johani entered the hut, each carrying a pup. The mother of the pups is also peeping from the door. The hut fills up with their cooing noises. Binda scolds them but the children don’t pay any heed. They go near the hearth and sit down carrying the pups in their lap. Johani tries to feed a roasted potato to the pup she is holding. But the pup turned away his mouth majestically like a *Sahib*⁶.

“*Arrey* Johaniya, go in the courtyard and bring some firewood. The fire in the hearth is dying down.”

Binda ordered her while sitting there.

Johani goes out and returns with wet sticks. “*Mae*, all the sticks are wet.”

Keeping the wet sticks on one side, she sat down again with the pup. Slowly the smoke billowed from the hearth.

⁶ Sahib is a term used by some people in India to address or refer to a man in a position of authority. It was used especially of white government officials in the period of British rule.

Hirwa's father gets up and sits down. He is thinking about something! Binda who is washing the utensils, is also thinking. They are both manoeuvring about managing the rations. It is not worth going to the master's house. *Scoundrel* will only give a kilo of grain and instruct work for the entire day. Going to him is useless today. He shared his thoughts with Binda and asked- "Not even little rice is left?"

"What will a little amount of rice do? It will not be sufficient to cook two square meals with it."

"Listen, cook something for the children. Make them eat."

"And what about us?"

"I will make some arrangements for us."

He took out the sniffing-box knotted in his loincloth and rubbed tobacco in his palm. In such weather, he felt like doing nothing at all, not even getting up to attend the call of nature. But some arrangement has to be made for the meals. He puts the tobacco in his mouth and then crouches on the floor. The weather is damp. But it hardly bothered Binda who is washing the utensils. Her *pallu*⁷ is all wet. Hirwa's father forcibly spat the tobacco and started piling up the wet sticks one above the other in the courtyard. Who knows how long this drizzle will last? The dried roots of bamboo are the only saviour in this cold. Nobody seems to care about it. To dig it out took hard efforts. Spade, axe and hoe and only then you take out these roots of bamboo.

After piling the sticks, he tied his towel around his waist, as if mustering courage to go out in this cold. Then holding the hoe in one hand, he walks away.

⁷ Pallu-- the loose end of a saree—generally draped over shoulders- is integral in saree drape. It starts where the pleats end and gracefully covers the midriff and bosom.

Binda finished washing the utensils. After sweeping the floor, she lights the fire in the hearth. Suddenly she remembers that she had massaged the daughter-in-law of Kisnu landlord for eight days and had still not received the payment for four days.

“After all, when are they going to pay? When we are dead and reduced to ashes? Oh my God! More than three months have passed. In the damp rainy season, I had gone to massage her and she made payments for only four days and kept quiet about the rest. If I forgot about it, should she also forget to pay me? I very well understand the dishonesty that resides in the hearts of the women in the house of landlords. Withhold the payment and if one forgets to ask, you will not receive it.”

“*Aey Johniya*, go to the house of Kisnu landlord. I had massaged his daughter-in-law for eight days. Four days payment remains. Go and ask her if she will pay in this adversity or will keep it?”

“I will not go; the path is slippery. Send brother.”

“Oh! So wise! Behaving as if you are Hirwa's grandmother. Why have you lifted that pup in your lap? Is he your husband? Will you keep it down or not? Oh! The path is slippery, then stuff the rug in your mouth and just sit. And if you ask anything to eat, I will force this ladle in your mouth.”

Hirwa tried to assess the situation from all the sides. Kishnu Landlord's daughter-in-law is very beautiful, like a fairy. She is very lovely to look at; like a statue of Goddess *Durga*⁸. She is also very good by heart. She will surely give jaggery and some puffed rice. The memory of “puffed rice” makes his mouth watery. He said- “*Mae*, I will go and say uncle has

⁸ Durga, is the goddess of war, the warrior form of the Hindu Goddess Parvati, whose mythology centres around combating evils and demonic forces that threaten peace, prosperity and Dharma.

come and there aren't any rations. Mother has asked for half kilos of rice."

"Am I begging for half kilos of rice? Tell her that payment of four days of massage is due."

Before leaving, Hirwa said something in the ears of Johani. And then he swiftly walked out. Johani gets agitated. "If brother gets puffed rice, I will also take from that puffed rice."

"Oh ho, the mother of puffed rice. Just now you were thinking about slippery path, and now you are thinking about the puffed rice. I will smack you so hard that you will fall headlong to the floor."

But Binda realizes the reason behind Hirwa's enthusiasm and smiled at her son's intelligence.

"Let Hirwa return. I will make him give you half of the puffed rice. He is not like you who gobbles up everything outside."

Johani knew about her brother's habit and she also believed in her mother's assurance and stopped agitating and asked- "*Mae*, should I sweep the floor?"

"You want to sweep the floor? Isn't it! Till now you were busy in the pup. When I have already done the sweeping, you want to sweep. Are you blind that you did not see when I was sweeping?"

Mother and the daughter sit near the hearth. Mother starts digging the fire. The daughter puts another wet stick to burn. Billows of smoke poured from it.

"*Mae*, should I put some straws also in the fire!" Johani asked frighteningly.

"Yes" Binda also wanted a blazing fire.

Johani brings a large quantity of straw. Mother and the daughter started putting the straw into fire like a *Purohit*⁹ performing a *Yajna*¹⁰.

Hirwa returned with lots of goods. In his bundle, there was rice, potatoes and puffed rice, and also a piece of jaggery. Hirwa said – “New bride gave it when nobody was looking. She asked you to come on this Sunday to massage her.”

Binda looked inside the bundle. Johani said- “*Mae*, the potatoes are not less than *a kilo*.”

Mother scolded- “Unweighted one eats and sings with trumpets. How much is your *kilo*? This is more than two *kilos*. And the quantity of rice is also good.” She took some grains in her palm and tried to recognize its variety. The rice was clean. She said- “Poor thing, her soul is as beautiful as her body.”

Hirwa took out something from the bundle and quietly showed it to Johani. Johani shouted- “*Mae*, look there, look there. Brother is holding black *ladoos*¹¹.”

Binda scolded- “What is it? Bring it here. How many times have I told you when you get something from anybody first show it to me? Many in the village can put black magic in it.”

Hearing about black magic, Hirwa gets scared. Last year his friend Bangur died because of black magic within a day of his illness. People said it was brain fever but *Mae* said that somebody had put black magic into something he ate.

Hirwa puts both the *ladoos* in front of his Mother. She broke a bit from each, puts it in her mouth, and said- “*Ladoos* are made

⁹ Purohit, in the Indian religious context, means family priest.

¹⁰ Yajna refers in Hinduism to a ritual sacrifice offered to sacred fire with a specific objective.

¹¹ Ladoos are a popular Indian sweet made from a mixture of various kinds of flour, sugar and ghee which is shaped into a ball.

of *meethi*¹². It must have come from the bride's mother's house. Kisnu's daughter-in-law doesn't have the skill to make it."

She gave one *ladoo each* to both of them.

Binda decides what she is going to cook. Boiled rice with a curry of beans and potatoes. When Hirwa's father returns home, he will be so happy. And if he sleeps in one corner tonight, she will not give him anything to eat tomorrow--that's for sure!

She lighted the hearth and then puts the pot of rice to boil. She said to Johani- "Sit and break the beans into pieces."

The rice is cooked and kept on one side and the curry in the pot is boiling when Hirwa's father walks briskly inside the hut as if he too had conquered the world like the Emperor, Alexander the Great. He is very happy. He killed eight mice in the barn. He had knotted it in his towel.

Johani and Hirwa jumped in joy – "Rat-Rat"

The house is filled with the aroma of cooked rice and curry. Seeing the rice and potatoes in the corner, he understands the situation. He is overjoyed. He asks Binda- "How did you make the arrangements? I thought if there won't be anything then we will cook this and eat them." He untied the knot of his towel and dead mice fell on the ground.

Hirwa and Johani started making arrangements to roast the mice. Their heart is already filled with the fragrance of the roasted mice.

¹² Methi is the traditional Hindi name for a plant; the seeds of this plant are also called Methi and are known as fenugreek seeds in English. The seeds are a common ingredient in dishes from the Indian Subcontinent in South Asia.

Bindu Singh

Binda looks into the eyes of her husband. They reflect love and gratitude. Overjoyed, she smiles at him. And her husband is delighted.

About the Author

Prem Kumar Mani was born in the year 1953 in Patna, Bihar. He is a journalist and a writer by profession. He has to his credit a novel, four collections of stories, two essay collections and a biography on Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. He has been awarded the Srikant Verma Smriti Puraskar (1993), Sahitya Sewa Samman (1993), Vivekanand Yuva Purashkar (1995), and many more other awards. His narratives focus on the lives of poor and bring to the fore their hardships, but it also celebrates the zest for life these simple rural folks display. For us—the urban educated middle-class Indians, the realities of ways of survival in rural regions of India is hard to believe. Can we imagine that roasted mice can serve as a meal! When greed for more has become a bane for modern society such regional stories like *Jugaad* shows that even a frugal meal is enough to celebrate the day as a festival.

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