Translation of Bhakti Poetry into English: A Case Study of Narsinh Mehta

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Abstract

Since the colonial times, translation into English by bilingual poet-translators is a strategy to decolonize one's soul. The translators always wanted to locate themselves in the 'true Indian society' by translating what they conceive of as 'truly Indian'. However, the notion of 'true Indian' has changed over the period of time. In case of translators of Indian literature into English like Sri Aurobindo, Indianness meant pan-Indian Sanskritic heritage while in the case of modernists like A.K, Ramanujan, Indianness means pre-colonial heritage in the modern Indian languages-the bhashas. As the poetics of Bhakti is largely indigenous, mass based, oral and performative, its translation into English whose poetics is predominantly elite, written and Westernized, involves intensely creative interaction between two widely disparate cultural domains. This interaction helps the translator overcome his own feeling of being cut off from his own cultural and social milieu and helps to rehabilitate and relocate his sensibility in the Indian context. This paper is a detailed discussion of my spiritually moving encounter of translating Narsinh Mehta, the renowned fifteenth century Gujarati poet into English. There is a discussion on the challenges arising out of the great divergence between two languages, cultures, poetics and traditions and the strategies I have used as a translator.

Since colonial times, one of the predominant themes in Indian intellectual discourses is the quest for 'true' and 'authentic'

national identity. Largely influenced by the Orientalist writings, the Indian intellectuals of the colonial period believed that the pan-Indian Sanskritic literature, often termed as '*margiya'* tradition, embodied the 'true essential Indianness'. However, after Independence, the Indian intellectuals with modernist leanings found this notion of India discriminatory, brahminical and hence very constricting. They disapproved of the whole elitist project of colonial modernity with its emphasis on the western education, literacy, and the westernized-brahminical notion of nationhood. Accentuating the import of more `local' and `demotic' oral traditions, they found an alternative to this elitist colonial modernity in the Bhakti literature. Apart from the fact that Bhakti poetry belongs to the pre-colonial, oral and folk cultural traditions of our society, it also embodies a far more radical and democratic vision in contrast to the Sanskritic-Brahminical literature. In the words of Aijaz Ahmed, 'Bhakti had been associated, on the whole, with an enormous democratization of literary language; had pressed the cultural forms of caste hegemony in favour of the artisanate and peasants ...was ideologically anti- brahminical; had deeply problematised the gender construction of all dialogic relations.' (1992:273). The Bhakti literature also provided an indigenous model of modernity for many modernist and postcolonial intellectuals. Due to this modernist revisionary reading of the Indian literary history and tradition, today the Bhakti poetry has come to mean something unambiguously native and Indian and hence extremely crucial to our identity.

Historically, the shift from the hegemonic Sanskrit literature to Bhakti is believed to have occurred somewhere towards the end of the first millennium. A.K. Ramanujan (1993:103) observes, 'A great many-sided shift occurred in the Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century ... *Bhakti* is one name for that shift...' He has made an interesting use of the word 'shift' as he says to suggest a linguistic analogy, for example, 'the great consonantal

shift' precisely described in Indo-European linguistics. The characteristic feature of this literature is that it is devotional and religious in nature. The abundant devotional literature in the modern Indian languages is often termed as Bhakti literature. Though it is religious in outlook, it is far more complex and many faceted. It is very different from earlier Sanskritic literature which is elite, brahminical and conventional.

Its poetics too, differed radically from Sanskritic poetics. The poetics of the Bhakti literature, unlike the classical Sanskrit literature, presupposed the oral performance of the composition. The performers and their audience were face to face. Most of the types of compositions like *'bhajans', 'kirtana', 'abhangas',* and *'padas'* were meant to be performed aloud. Music, recital, incantations were indispensable aspects of these compositions. Both the production and the reception of this discourse differed greatly from the modern written discourse. The aesthetics of the Bhakti was very much specific to the performance; therefore, most of the tools of present academic literary criticism are of little use as they largely presuppose a printed text (Ahmed 1992:253). The aesthetics of this kind of poetry involve the aesthetics of personal involvement unlike, as Ramanujan (1993:161-162) comments, the classical *rasa* aesthetics where the aesthetic experience is generalized, distanced and depersonalized by the means of poesis, the *Bhakti* poetry prizes *bhava*, *anubhava*, the personal feeling, an intense involvement and intense identification.

The translation of Indian literature into English is a widespread activity among the English educated elite since the colonial times. They strive to overcome the sense of alienation by translating literature from the Indian languages into English. Translation becomes one of the inevitable and creative contrivances of giving oneself a sense of belonging, a nationality and of locating oneself in the present historical and cultural context. Translation into English by bilingual poet-translators is a strategy to decolonize one's

soul or to bring about something of positive convergence of the two cultures and civilizations. The translators have sought to locate themselves in the 'true Indian society' by translating what they conceive of as 'truly Indian'. However, the notion of 'truly Indian' has changed over the period of time. In case of translators of Indian literature into English like Sri Aurobindo or R.C. Dutt, Indianness meant pan-Indian Sanskritic heritage, whereas in the case of modernists like Dilip Chitre or A.K. Ramanujan, Indianness means pre-colonial heritage in the modern Indian languages-the *bhashas* (Ketkar: 2003,2004). However, translation of what is primarily oral, performative, pre-colonial and demotic cultural traditions into a culture, which is primarily written, elitist, and post-colonial raises a host of complicated questions. In this context, I wish to discuss the challenges and strategies of translating Bhakti literature into English and for this, I will use my own experiences as a translator of Narsinh Mehta, the great fifteenth century Gujarati saint poet.

As a bilingual writer writing in Marathi and English, and as Maharashtrian born and brought up in Gujarat, translation is a creative, existential and ethical act of relating concretely to the other, a sort of chicken soup for an alienated and fragmented soul. Translation becomes a rhizome like activity of connecting horizontally without creating hierarchies across the multilingual and multicultural topography I inhabit. Translation also helped me to overcome the politics of `either/or' binary logic of identity, which forces you to accept a single identity: you are a Maharashtrian or you are a Gujarati, either you are a true native or you are westernized elite and so on.

As the poetics and practice of Bhakti poetry is largely indigenous, mass based, oral and performative, its translation into English whose poetics is predominantly elite, written and westernized involves intensely creative interaction between two widely disparate cultural domains. This interaction helps the

translator to overcome his own feeling of being cut off from his own cultural and social environment and helps to rehabilitate and relocate his sensibility in the Indian context. The detailed account of this spiritually moving personal encounter which follows is by no means a normative statement. I hope that the deliberations over these issues and questions like culture, literariness, oral traditions and so on, will have a wider relevance and will be of some use to other translators.

Interestingly, most of Narsinh Mehta's work is preserved orally and the authorship of many of the composition is disputable. The sole way of signing the orally performed text in the medieval Bhakti tradition was by the use of `*bhanita'* or the signature line such as `Narsaiyyachya swami' or `Bhale maliya Narsaiyyachya Swami' in the compositions of Narsinh Mehta or `Kahat Kabir Suno Bhai Saadho' in the case of Kabir. One recalls Foucault's incisive scrutiny of the shifting and problematic nature of `author function' in the Western culture (1988:197-210). The relationship between the text and its author has never been universal and constant across cultures, historical periods and the domains of discourse. The medieval Indian audience perceived the relation between the orally performed text and the author in a different way from today's audience and therefore translation of this relationship into contemporary terms is not possible.

However, the biggest challenge I had to face as a translator was that that Narsinh's poems are actually *songs*, and they are meant to be performed live before the audience, which even includes the God, and in a certain religious conventional context. For instance, his famous matutinals, or `*prabhatiyas'* as they are called, are conventionally sung in the morning. Some of his songs are usually sung in a religious gathering in a temple or at home. William Radice (1995:28), in his introduction to the translation of Rabindranath Tagore's poems, calls attention to the fact that the songs being very culture specific are impossible to translate. The emotive associations of Narsinh's word music have no equivalents in English. The

compositions are full of features that mark them as oral performative texts, for example, features like consonance, internal and end rhymes, refrains, repetitions, parallelisms, meters used for the songs, the specification for a particular *raga* and so on. In short, the extensive use of what Indian aestheticians call *sabdalamkar* or the `ornaments of sound' is a characteristic feature of Narsinh's poetry as well as most of the medieval Indian poetry. In Indian aesthetics, *sabdalamkar*as form a contrast to the *arathalamkars* or the `ornaments of sense'. The *arthalamkaras* include figures of speech like hyperbole, irony as well as simile, metaphor and the like.

As great amount of the Bhakti poetry consists of songs meant to be sung live before an audience, the very conception of literature as something printed has to be set aside. Walter.J. Ong's main argument in the essay `A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives' (1972:499) is that while considering a poem as some sort of object or a thing, one overlooks the fact that it is also sound. The `tactile and visualist bias' is very old and pervasive especially when we consider the work of literature in terms of objects, structures, skeletons and other spatial analogies. Nevertheless, when we consider literature in terms of sound, oral and aural existence, we enter more profoundly into this world of sound as such, `the I-thou world', where, through the mysterious interior resonance persons commune with persons, reaching one another's interiors in a way in which one can never reach the interior of an object. The reduction of sound to spatial analogies is much too facile. `In its ineluctable interiority,' writes Ong, ` related to this irreducible and elusive and interior economy of the sound world, all verbal expression, and in particular all true literature, remains forever something mysterious.' This means that a written text is already a loss of this mysterious element, and it is already a translation of words as sounds. Narsinh Mehta's songs already lose this mysterious quality once they are presented in print but come back to life mysteriously when retranslated into oral performance. This is a rather painful realization

for a contemporary translator as songs are inseparable from the cultural environment and language.

If one considers the suggestion put forward by Riffaterre (1992:204-217), to substitute all `literariness-inducing' devices in the source text with literally parallel devices in the target text and translate songs into songs, rhymes into rhymes, consonance into consonance, meter into meter, then great liberties will have to be taken with the semantic content of the original. One would rather agree with W.H. Auden's observation (1962:34) that the sound of words, their rhythmical relations and all meanings and associations of meanings, which depend upon sound, like rhymes and puns, are untranslatable. He points out, `poetry is not, like music, pure sound. Any elements in a poem which are not based on verbal experience are to some degree, translatable into another tongue, for example, images, similes and metaphors which are drawn from sensory experience'.

In the case of Narsinh's poetry, many elements like meter, word music, consonance, and rhymes had to be done away with in order to stay close to the semantic content. Gujarati meter of course, cannot have an equivalent in English because the Indian languages, in contrast to the accentual English language are quantitative; that is, it is the length of the syllable rather than the stress that gives them their distinctive character. Besides, as Lefevere (cited by Susan Bassnett, 1980:81-82) has opined that imitating meter, rhyme, and alliteration usually distorts the poem altogether. I have translated Narsinh's songs into nonmetrical verse in order to do better justice to the semantic element. I have as well tried to retain the poetic quality as much as possible. I have attempted to reproduce the lyrical quality of the compositions by reproducing approximately some refrains, repetitions, and some consonance wherever possible. However, I have tried to replicate this quality mainly by imitating the lyrical tone and the lyrical outlook of the compositions.

Light, Light brilliant lamps!
Draw rangoli with exquisite pearls!
Sing; sing the auspicious hymns, sweet proud girls,
And beat, beat the festive drums,
For today is Diwali! It's Festival of Lights for me!
For the Lord with garland of wild flowers, at last, has
come to me!

Or

Tell me truly, my dark beloved,
To which lovely girl were you making love?

However, this lyrical quality was difficult to copy in the case of Narsinh's devotional, didactic and philosophical verse. The fact that word music imparts a great deal of beauty to Narsinh's poetry makes it difficult to translate this type of poetry into English, as its propositional content is not lyrical in the conventional sense of the word. The success of these poems is largely due to the happy marriage of the word music with the sentimental moralistic and philosophical content. The epigrammatic and compact expressions inevitably had to be recomposed into rather loose syntactical patterns of English. In this type of poetry, as most of the word music and sentimental verbal associations could not be recomposed into the language as different as English, the translations appear dull, prosaic and without the impact which the source texts have in Gujarati. For instance, the famous *Vaishnava Jana to* ...was rendered in following way:

He who feels others grief as his own,
He who obliges others in distress
Without being swollen with pride,
He alone can be called a Vaishnava!

Humbly he bows before everyone in the world
And he disparages none.

He is resolute in his words,
Deeds and mind - Glory be to his mother!
For he alone is a true Vaishnava!

He views everyone with equal eyes;
He has relinquished the tormenting thirst
And looks upon another's woman
As his own mother!
He alone can be called a Vaishnava!

In some *padas,* the content is technical and occult rather than conventionally lyrical. Therefore, the translation is in danger of being awkward and stiff, for instance in a composition like this

Meditate, meditate, the lord is in your eye, as a divine ecstasy in your inner forehead.
In person, he will touch you with love, his wonderful face with incomparable eyes!

The inner forehead referred here is the occult `third eye' or the *aajnya chakra* in certain esoteric *tantrik* practices of *kundalini* energy.

Besides, I could not reproduce certain expressions typical to Gujarati songs like *re* and *lol* coming at the end of a musical phrase and which are vocal gestures of endearment, and in English. In certain places, expression *O* is used. However, the excessive use of *O* in English translation would sound old-fashioned or even more terrible-it would sound Victorian.

I took particular care not to translate songs into the `modernist' free verse, which relies on devices like dislocation of syntax and use of minimalist-imagists conventions. In translating a text from different poetics, equivalent, I believe should be sought at the level of aesthetics that affect the text. The attempts to adapt a

text belonging to radically different poetics, to contemporary modernist poetics do not do full justice to the source language text. As translation is reading, a modernist reading of the Bhakti literature creates an illusion that the Bhakti literature was modernist. As a result, though we are blinded by the brilliance of A.K. Ramanujan's extraordinary readings/translations of the Bhakti poetry, the realization that the Bhakti literature was *never* modernist in the Continental and American sense of the term makes us uneasy.

Translating a discourse whose medium is oral word and whose performer-audience relationship is largely face-to-face, into a discourse, whose medium is written word and the relationship between the performer and the audience is not face-to-face, raises some complex questions. What one does here is not merely reproducing sense and style of the source language text but also *shifting* one type of *discourse* into another type. This type of discourse shift is involved in the translation of most of the medieval Indian poetry into English. Most accusations and laments for loss of `flavour' and `charm' from people against the translation of Bhakti poetry are actually laments for loss of `ear experience' of the word music and emotive associations linked to the source language text. This results not only from difference between two acoustic personalities of the languages but also from the difference between two types of discourses. This does not, of course, mean that I consider translation as mourning over the loss of the `original'. Translation is always a gain and profit. It produces a new text in another language and opens one more window on the other language and culture. The sooner we come out of the rhetoric of loss in discussing translation the better. However, what I am doing here is highlighting the structure of difference one encounters in the practice of translation. It is because I am writing as a translator that certain vocabulary of loss may creep into my article here. However, translation studies have come out of `practice-oriented' perspective of translation, and I have no quarrel with it as it has opened up the

field in an unprecedented way. At the same time, it is always extremely interesting and enlightening to know what is left out while translating, because it educates us about a different culture and different ways of looking at the world.

The difference between cultures is another obvious and major challenge one faces while translating poets like Narsinh into English. In fact, language and culture cannot be separated and both are inextricably interwoven with each other. Julia Kristeva's thesis (1988:59-60) that one signifying cultural practice is interwoven with the elements from other signifying cultural practices.That is, the notion of intertextuality is particularly important here. A verbal text as a signifying practice already contains elements from other signifying systems like mythology, systems of food and fashion, indigenous medicinal system, metaphysics, literary conventions and genres, musical system, festivals, religious-ritualistic beliefs and even superstitions. No text can be an island or can remain isolated in a network of signifying structures called culture. Hence, one does not translate a piece of text, though it may seem isolated, but tries to find equivalents for the entire network involved in the construction of the text. All this becomes very apparent when one attempts to translate Narsinh.

Genres hardly have equivalents in a different literary tradition, as they are conventions of a particular literary tradition. They may travel to another tradition but they are no longer the same. The flexible and lyrical form of *Pada*, which has been discussed in the chapter three, has no equivalent in English. Hence, the free verse renderings of Narsinh's poems have no fixed form in English.

Of course, the mythology of Krishna and Radha has no equivalent in English culture, nor do the allusions and references to *Puranic* characters and events have parallel in the target language culture. They are untranslatable and therefore I have only transliterated them. I also provided a glossary of culture-specific

Indian terms as appendix. Narsinh often refers to *Puranic* characters like Pralhad, Harishchandra, Shukadevaji, and Narada to give an illustration of true devotees and the miracles they can bring about. A glossary seems to be the only way out.

Certain items referring to codes of dress and food too do not have equivalents in English or even if it has a rough and approximate equivalent, the connotations and details are very different. For instance, *`choli'* which occurs often is a sort of bodice, but the whole lot of conventional erotic associations and connotations are lost and certain type of triviality sets in. It may also be because the whole way of looking at sex and the erotic is greatly different in the Indian and the Western culture. It can be said about *`jhanjhar'* and *`payal'* which means anklets but in Gujarati, it carries a distinct charge of erotic associations. In such cases, in some places I have only borrowed the lexical items in English or replaced equivalents in English. I have mainly borrowed *`choli'* within italics and used anklets for *`jhanjhar'.* The same can be applied to Gujarati food items, for instance certain Gujarati delicacies like *`rabdi'* a kind of sweetmeat have been only transliterated. The terms are explained in the glossary. Items belonging to the indigenous medicinal system, *`ayurveda'* are also to be found in the compositions. In an interesting *`pada',* Narsinh compares his beloved Lord with various types of ayurvedic medicines like dried ginger or *`ajmain'*. In most of the places, I have borrowed the item in English or replaced it by approximate equivalents. Certain omens like `fluttering of left eye' and `auspicious moment' or *`muhurat'* are culture specific and are untranslatable.

So are traditional kinship terms and the conventional stereotypes that are so peculiar to the Indian culture. For instance, *saasu* or the mother-in-law is a stereotypical oppressor of her daughter-in-law along with *nanand* or the sister-in-law as her accomplice. Hence, in many *padas* of Narsinh, when Radha, a

married girl in love with Krishna, refers to her in-laws she is evoking a typical or rather stereotyped situation where the in-laws are keeping an eye on their daughter-in-law's activities. Allegorically they connote the norms and the dictates of the mundane world, which interfere with devotional activities and thus are detrimental in *Bhakti*.

Similarly, *gopi* or Radha addresses her female companion as *sakhi*, which literally means female friend. However, the use of words like female friend or girl friend would not be appropriate in English. Hence, the word friend had to be used. Yet, the word *sakhi* has special connotation in certain Vaishnava sects. The ideal devotee would be like *sakhi* to the Lord, His girl friend. This signification cannot be rendered into English.

Certain references to the Indian eroticism, especially the reference to *Kamashastra* or the lore of eroticism, appear awkward in translation. For instance, there is a reference to woman-on-man coital position called *vipreeta rati* or literally `intercourse in contrary way' that is, woman on the top position, in one of Narsinh's poems. As using the phrase like `the contrary way' would appear awkward and even incomprehensible, I have used, ` I rolled over him in our love play' in order to suggest the playful element in the whole business.

> This is how I bewitched him, friend,
> I rolled over him in our love play!
> `No, no!' cried he as he tried to flee,
> And he cried out for his mother!

Associated with eroticism is the conventional notion of what constitutes a woman's beauty in the Indian tradition. For instance, in the following poem:

> Wear these ornaments and necklaces, elephant-gaited one!
> How many times to tell you to get started!
> We'll kiss the nectarous mouth of our admirer, embrace him, and gambol
> Casting aside all our coyness and shame!
> Let's go and play dear friend! Leave aside the churning of curds

The reference to the girl as `elephant gaited one' would raise brows or sniggers in West. *Gajagamini* or the woman whose gait is like that of an elephant is considered beautiful in the Indian tradition. A plump woman with narrow waist but `droops slightly from the weight of breasts' is sexually attractive in Indian erotic traditions. This notion of woman's attractiveness is quite different from the Western notion of woman's beauty. Therefore, it becomes difficult to convey such a notion in English translation.

The words like *ras*, which literally means `flavour', `sap', `essence', and `nectar' is used in many ways in Indian tradition. It is used in Indian aesthetics to denote an aesthetic mood that is based on *bhava* or the essence of aesthetic experience and *rasika* is the person who wants to enjoy the *rasa.* I have translated *rasika* for Krishna, when he is erotically aroused, as connoisseur. However, the word connoisseur hardly communicates this sense.

Terms belonging to Indian metaphysical and philosophical systems also do not have accurate equivalents in English. I have at times rendered concepts like *maya* or the *Brahman* as `illusion' or `the absolute' only to avoid monotony, though they are not quite the same. In most places, they have been borrowed in English. The words that describe the *brahman* like the *satchitananda* literally meaning that which has the qualities of the Truth, the Consciousness, and the ultimate Bliss have been borrowed without translating. In fact, the whole way of looking at things differs in the

two cultures especially the way of looking at sexuality, religion, sentimentality, and even the moral issues. These of course cannot be translated.

Culture and language are not mutually exclusive domains of human signification. There is a great difference in the syntactical and lexical organization between Gujarati and English language. For instance, while the verb usually occurs at the end of clause in Gujarati, it occurs between the subject and the remaining part of the predicate in English. Gujarati has more inflexions and hence greater flexibility in word order compared to the more or less rigid order of English. As a result whereas an inversion would not appear as a jarring deviation in Gujarati, it would certainly appear so in English. Unlike the prepositions in English, Gujarati has post-positions. These differences in the syntactic and lexical organization between the two languages call for a number of `adjustments' while reproducing the message in the receptor language. For instance, the famous composition *bhootal Bhakti padarath motu...* had to be rendered as:

> Great is the wealth of Bhakti found only on the earth,
> Not found even in the realms of Brahma!

However literally it would be something like:

> (Earth-on) (Bhakti) (Wealth) (Great) (Brahma's realm-in)(Not)

At the lexical level, too the distinction between pronouns of address in Gujarati like honorific '*tamey'* and familiar '*tu'* cannot be rendered into English. Some lexical peculiarities of Narsinh's poetry could not be reproduced in English. For example, Narsinh's fondness for using '*di'* suffix to nouns like '*gori'* (fair one) or '*deha'* (body) turning them into '*gordi'* (dear cute fair one) or '*dehadi'* (cute little body). This suffix turns the nouns into their diminutive forms and at the same time, it signifies excessive fondness for the thing.

Translating idioms word by word is almost impossible for an idiom, by definition means a group of words whose meaning considered as a unit, is different from the meaning of each word considered separately. Certain idioms in Narsinh Mehta's poems have a function which is not merely semantic, that is, the images signified by the idiom are very poetic and hence add to the overall experience of the poem. For instance, in a poem *`doodhe voothya meh, sakarna dhim jaamya re',* the refrain is an idiomatic expression which literally means `it was raining milk and sugar was being heaped' and connotes a feeling of extreme bliss or ecstasy. Nevertheless, the image of sugar and raining milk is important in the poem, as the experience of Krishna is not just of extreme ecstasy but of extreme sweetness. Krishna is associated with sweetness, he is known as *`madhuradhipati'* - the killer of a demon named Madhu and also the lord of sweetness whose everything is sweet. Hence, the image suggested by the idiom is retained in the translation.

> `As if it was rapture of rains of milk
> And all the sweetness of sugar was being hoarded in heaps!'

Ambiguity arises when there is more than one clear interpretation. A signifier does not have a single unequivocal signified in such cases. Ambiguity is not considered as a flaw in a literary text but is seen as one of the properties that enhance aesthetic quality of the text.

Narsinh's very famous composition, *`prem ras paa ne*....'contains an interesting example of ambiguity. In the composition, Narsinh says, *`tatva nu tupanu tuchh a laage*..' in which the word *`tupanu'* is interpreted by the critics in two ways: i) as *`tu -panu'* as `you-ness' to signify the otherness or separateness of the Lord as a lover and as an entity and ii) as the noted critic Anantrai Rawal (1994:96) has observed it indicates the chaffing or

producing useless husk which metaphorically denotes arid and futile philosophical debates disliked by Narsinh who lays great stress on affective rather than rational relationship with the divine. These interpretations are not mutually contradictory as both denote the things Narsinh disliked and hence have negative associations, but while the first one is distinctly Vedantic as well as erotic, the other interpretation is more appropriate in the context as the next line uses the metaphor of husk and grain, and had to be retained. The translation offered is as follows:

> Serve me the draught of love's ambrosia
> One bedecked with peacock feathers!
> This futile threshing of arid philosophies tastes so insipid!
> These emaciated cattle crave merely the dry husk,
> They pine not for the ultimate release!
> Serve me the draught of love's ambrosia
> One bedecked with peacock feathers!

Another interesting example of ambiguity arises from the clever use of the word *bhog* which can mean not just enjoyment but also suffering in the well known philosophical poem *Jaagi ne jou to jagat dise nahi*, *oongh ma atpata bhog bhaase*. It means that when I am awake spiritually I cannot see the phenomenal world, but only in sleep do I perceive the bewildering temptations/woes. Sleeping and awakening of course are used as metaphors for the states of ignorance and enlightenment respectively. It turns on the head the conventional belief that we can perceive the phenomenal world only when we are awake. The cognition of the phenomenal world and all its temptations and woes is actually a dream and illusion born out of the sleep of ignorance. In English, however, the word that combines the signification of pleasure and suffering was not available. Hence, a compromise had to be made

> When I wake up, the world recedes from my sight.
> Only in sleep, its bewildering miseries and enjoyment perplexes me!

This of course takes away much of the force and poetic quality of the poem but somehow the plurisignation had to be rendered in order to capture Narsinh's fatalistic vision of the phenomenal world.

Another interesting situation arises when a text contains two languages, a situation alluded to by Derrida (1992:218-227). Many Sanskrit phrases from the Geeta Govind are borrowed directly by Narsinh in his poem. The poem is *Sundariratna-mukhchandra avalokva....* In the second stanza Narsinh puts a Sanskrit phrase *twamasi mam jeevan* in the mouth of the charming milkmaid, Radha, to which Krishna replies using Sanskrit phrases twamasi *shringar mam, twamasi mam* .In translation, these portions are translated into archaic English and also put into italics to suggest that they have been borrowed into the text. The poem in translation appears as follows:

> The dark one turned to gaze the moonlike face of the jewel among beauties,
> Their eyes met, their desolation ended, the lord pleaded and took the other half of his self close to him.
>
> Putting her arms around him, the girl with a ravishing face said, ` *Thou art my life,'* the lord replied, `*Thou art my* embellishment, my garland, *in thee alone* am I absorbed and thou alone sway my soul.'

The last line of this poem is also a case of ambiguity. Krishna is lavishly praising Radha throughout the poem and in the end Narsinh Mehta says *Narsaiya no swami sukhsagar, eh ni stuti eh karta. Eh ni stuti eh karta* can mean two things: first, he is praising her and at the same time it can mean he is praising himself. This deliberate ambiguity suggests the fundamental oneness within the differences between Radha and Krishna. They are separate yet they

are one. Krishna in praising Radha is actually praising himself! This is due to the clever use of pronouns in Gujarati. In translation this sense has been retained in following way at the cost of ambiguity in the original:

> Blessed is this beautiful girl, the most desirable, whom Krishna himself praises,
> The very Godhead on whom the likes of Shiva and Virancha meditate,
> Narsaiyya's Lord is the ocean of bliss, is indeed praising himself!

While translating, I have tried to remain as close to the stanza and line length of the original and yet in English the line usually turns out to be longer and occupies larger visual space. Therefore, the stanza form many times does not match in terms of number of lines or in terms of the length of lines in the stanzas. The compactness of sentence construction makes it difficult to reproduce the line length and the length of stanza of the original. The compact philosophical expression is only approximately conveyed in English .For instance, the compact and dense lines

> *hu khare tu kharo, hu vina tu nahin;*
> *hu re haiesh tahan lagi tu re haishe.*

This had to be rendered in loose and elaborate constructions,

> Only because *I* truly exist, *you* exist! Without me, you cannot be!
> You will exist only as long as I exist!
> If I no longer exist, you too will cease to be, and become ineffable,
> For who will name you if I cease to be?

However, there is no addition in the semantic message of the original text.

Translation is inevitably interpretation of a text from one language by the means of another and it is very difficult to render the richly suggestive plurivalency of signifiers in another language. The formal properties of language and culture are usually `lost' in translation. One has to abandon many times the whole structure of `signifier', and ideally replace another signifier to the signified in one language without changing it. Nevertheless, it is impossible to completely separate the signified from its signifier. The whole problematic of translation, it seems is the problematic of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the form and the `meaning'. This theoretical problem strikes the translator with even more intensity when one is dealing with ambiguities and contradictions in the source language text.

From this detailed theoretical account, one can see that the activity of translation of Bhakti poetry is an acute creative encounter and negotiation between two seemingly incompatible traditions, histories, and poetics. However, it becomes almost an existential and cultural imperative of a translator like me who has grown up in a particular multi lingual and multi-cultural ethos. It is his profound personal need to yoke together these seemingly incompatible cultural domains. Translation becomes for me almost a yogic act, the act of yoking together of the duality and an act which embodies the personal quest for salvation in the post-colonial society.

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