Moving from the Margins

Shreyashi Chettri

Abstract

Translation and/or transcreation often becomes a complex process because of the social complexities which society expresses in various ways. Yet it becomes a medium to make voices heard. Perhaps, for the first time Indian Nepali Poetry has tried to break its silent marginal borders, and the translation in English has undoubtedly been given a flavour, which unmistakably belongs to the displaced and marginalised Nepal is of the Indian citizenry who now prefer to call themselves as 'Gorkha'. 'Voices from the Margin' (2009), a joint production of Remika Thapa and Manprasad Subba, and jointly translated into English by Dr. Kumar Pradhan and Manprasad Subba have best expressed the spirit of the marginalised Gorkhas living under the multiple pressures of postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, internal colonialism and internal strifes which calls for immediate social reforms and change. Correspondingly, in 'The Nation and other Poems' (in press), written by Remika Thapa and now translated by this author, we shall find the concepts of nation-state, nationalism, borders, migration, women' s emancipation with all their social and cultural implications coming to the fore. These poets were not satisfied by simply writing in Nepali but both have taken positive steps towards translations which they believe is the only way to reach out and herald changes which has become the need of the hour.This paper seeks to examine how translation of important Indian Nepali texts has become necessary in the emerging socio-cultural, linguistic context. Subsequently, it unfolds how through translation, these poets have tried to speak from the margins and make their voices heard, so as to effect a new era of social change and mobility.

Subaltern Studies after its inception in the 1970's has given us a variety of new concepts through which we can analyse the society and culture. It undoubtedly began with Ranajit Guha who gathered

a host of historians around him who would direct their efforts into recovering Indian history from the elite national consciousness and that history would have to take into account the politics of the people. This resulted in the production of 'Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society' (1982/83) and a later volume of 'Select Subaltern Studies' (1988) which was co-edited by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and Ranajit Guha. However, in the later years the Subaltern Studies group in their efforts of providing a perspective of 'history from below' moved towards a more postcolonial and postmodernist critique. As such there arose a discrepancy in the Subaltern Studies group itself because on one hand the group was trying to provide a critique of subaltern history as opposed to elitism and on the other hand the subaltern group itself was a group of elite Indians who were educated in the western metropolis. In his Introduction to 'Select Subaltern Studies', Said (1988) writes that the Third World texts and writings must now be able to directly address the central western metropolis. However, Ahmad (1994) points out that in this case only those texts and writings which appear to be capable of answering back to the centre are taken into consideration while the rest are labelled as "cultural nationalist. " It is here that one cannot help but ponder over the large variety of texts which has long been shaped by particular social, political, cultural and economic dimensions of changing times and which they seek to reflect but which at the same time has not yet been translated into the language of the central dominant discourses. Rejecting them as being "cultural nationalist" would simply push them further into the margins.

Subsequently, Ahmad (ibid.) strongly attacks the so-called representatives of the Third-World subalterns who generally constitute the elite intelligentsia who claim to have taken upon themselves the responsibility of the "world's revolutionary vanguard." This line of argument has also been forwarded by Trivedi (1983) especially with reference to Spivak's evocative question- "Can the Subaltern speak?" (Spivak 1988: 26). Trivedi believes that the subalterns have always spoken but only in their native tongues. In order to get their voices across to the centre they have to speak in English or the language of the wider reading and theorising public. Indeed, the subaltern

has always spoken. They do have a voice of their own and they want to talk about their issues and bring about positive changes in their socio-cultural scenario. The question, therefore, no longer remains "can the subaltern speak?" but rather one has to ask "can they be heard?" and even after being heard "can they be understood?" To understand them will be impossible until and unless one has delved into their rudimentary socio-linguistic systems. Now, with regard to literary production a variety of texts are written in the author's mother tongue which expresses the paradoxes and anomalies to which the marginalised groups are subjected into. However, in a society where there are linguistic and cultural differences between the dominant and the suppressed classes, such voices as expressed in the mother tongue will always be seen and heard as mere babbles. The interpretation, if done at all, will always be translated so as to suit the purposes of the dominant groups. Therefore, what is required now is translation to spring forth from the marginals themselves which will gradually translate this otherwise obvious babble of voices into a language which will compel the dominant groups to give it its due credence. It is here that translation must come into the fore and provide a bridge from where the margins can now access the centre and make themselves heard and understood.

This is especially true with regard to a multilingual society like India where in the postcolonial era the struggles for power and dominance continues where the larger ethnic minorities have tried to reassert the so-called "Indian identity" of a unified Indian nation. In implementing and propagating this Indian identity of a unified Indian nation (which however many subaltern historians like Kaviraj (1993) has pointed out is rather an 'invention' than a 'discovery'), the dominant groups have conveniently excluded the ethnic minorities from the mainstream. A Nepali poet from Darjeeling, Manprasad Subba in his Preface to "Voices from the Margin" (2009) therefore asks, "What is Indianness? Is it Aryan-Dravid feature or a concept? Appearance or a deep feeling? just an idea or an ideal?" The experiences of such an exclusion from such an invented identity is something with which we from north-eastern part of India are well accustomed to. Furthermore, Subba recounts his own experience.

> "As I sit to write preface to these poems entitled Voices from the Margin, my memory takes me back to the days of March 21-23, 2006 when the 7th World Poetry Day organized by the Sikkim Akademi in collaboration with the Poets' Foundation, Kolkata, was being observed at Gangtok. The participating poets were listed under the names of the States they represented, and the names of the poets from Darjeeling & Dooars who write in Nepali, were found inserted into the long list of Bengali speaking poets from West Bengal. I wished that the Nepali speaking poets from Darjeeling & Dooars were listed separately.
>
> Despite our belief that the poets and all those related with aesthetic art are not confined to the national, racial and religious boundary, their respective cultural base and distinctive flavour of their soil cannot be brushed aside. Our being universal in thinking cannot altogether sever us from our roots. Even when one is uprooted, the pain of his lost cultural root remains in one form or the other in his/her consciousness or subconscious."

While being excluded and while dwelling on the margins we are always trying to speak for "ourselves" rather than be "spoken for." A dialogue, therefore, becomes necessary between the centre and the margin. Here translation can solve socio-cultural issues as it is capable of transcending traditional and imperial monologues on the part of the centre and haphazard resistance or "assertion-within-deference" (Sarkar 1989: 6) on the part of the marginalized. Perhaps a dialogue is now possible through translation from wherein we may touch the consciousness of the marginalized and allow for the possibility of the representation of the marginals by the subaltern themselves.

Consequently, it is perhaps a new effort now that Indian Nepali Poetry has tried to break its silent marginal borders and handicaps and finally come out with a translation using the English language, which has undoubtedly been given a flavour which unmistakeably belongs to the displaced and marginalised Indian

Nepalese people who now prefer to call themselves as Gorkhas (see Golay 2006).

This first translated volume of *"Kinara ka Awazharu"* (2008), a joint production of Remika Thapa and Manprasad Subba and translated into "Voices from the Margin" (2009) by Dr. Kumar Pradhan and Manprasad Subba himself, has best expressed the spirit of the repressed and marginalized Gorkhas, who are all now living under the multiple pressures of postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, and internal colonialism. Likewise in ' *Desh ra anya Kavitaharu* (The Nation and other Poems) (2008), written by Remika Thapa, which has been recently translated by this author (Chettri *in press*) in English, she explores the issues of nation-state, borders, identity, marginalization and the subaltern gender. Both these poets were not gratified by simply writing in Nepali. They have opted to translate their respective poems into English so that the socio-cultural issues which they have raised in their volumes will not be a subject of discussion among the subaltern Gorkhas only but then also among the mainstream Indians.

Indeed, it is this seemingly unfathomable gap between the mainstream Indians and the Gorkhas that the translated version of 'Voices from the Margin' seeks to narrow. The Gorkhas in the eyes of the mainstream Indians are labelled as immigrants from Nepal and in the eyes of Nepal we are the "Nepalese Diaspora." Manprasad Subba expresses this predicament of an Indian Nepali in the following words in his poem 'Mainstream and Me.'

Today
the voice of my psyche is in full spate
My whole self is in deluge of my own song
A tongue of real flesh has grown
In the mouth of my muteness.
Now
I don't want to sing what the
Mainstream wants me to

Until my own melody is not given
A chord in its composition
I won' t be mesmerized by its glittering words
That usually come
To benumb my own words.

No,
1 no longer crave for the mainstream Instead mainstream should come Out of its own whirlpool To know and feel my face And heartbeats.

Here he brings forth the agony of a community which has not as yet been translated into the wider social network. Efforts have been made to merge in with the mainstream but it has always been pushed back to the margins by the monologic discourse of the mainstream representatives which seems to "benumb" the voices of those represented. In this context, Bidhan Golay (2006) writes about the various texts which the dominant white men wrote with regard to the Gorkha natives, "There is an innate feeling that the native's history can be authenticated only when it is culled from Western sources - the Vansittarts, the Hookers, the 0' Mallcy' s. In effect, the very colonial discourses have become the canonical texts for the production of knowledge about the community both from without and from within. The native voice is often lost in the cacophony of the metropolitan and 'mainstream' voices." One has to surmount this monologic discourse and accordingly in the end the poet makes a solemn resolve to make no more efforts to enter into an authoritarian monologic discourse with the mainstream but instead chooses to come forth with a translation where a dialogic approach is possible, where the mainstream will be compelled to "come out of its own whirlpool" and actually feel what is it like to be a marginalized. It is in this site of a translated dialogic form, wherein the alternative repressed voices speak for themselves, that a social reform and change can actually be anticipated. This urge to start with the dialogic process comes even more strongly in Remika Thapa' s poem entitled *"Naam ko Gamhhirta"* (A Serious Matter of Name).

She concludes her poem and her section of 'Voices from the Margin', with a series of interrogations while waiting, in what appears to be a very long queue and anxiously waiting for at least some action to stir in a favourable direction.

Who sitting in the centre, has decided this, eh?
Since when will the debate on my name in
the draft of the budget commence?
Since when in the name of democracy,
Standing on the line of 'others'
will they discuss a national verdict to come?

Here, we see the usual postcolonial bifurcations coming to the fore with the subaltern Gorkhas finally resisting the central forces. Such oppositions forwarded by dominant discourses do not allow for a record of alternative thinking because one of the most powerful distinctions between the dominant and the subservient is the emphatic difference between a speaker with agency and the figure of the silent or silenced subaltern. In this case it must be pointed out that the silent subalternness of the Gorkhas has always been romanticized by the dominant groups. Time and again the Gorkhas have been essentialized as a martial race or as simple, silent folks who are born to naturally take orders. The new generation of Gorkhas like these two poets, however, now want to speak directly to the agencies and the central forces at large through translations and its enabling transcreations so as to send a clear message that the Gorkhas are characterized by their heterogeneity and are changing ever so continuously through struggles, thus, defying any kind of essentialising into particular frameworks. This is expressed by Subba in his poem *"subalternko shir"* (Subaltern's Head).

Ah! Subaltern's salute! How smart! How delicious! Those saluted are proud

But . . . what is it?
Striking through the stout helmet

green grass-leaves are out today
Suppressed for years under iron
the grass of conscience refusing to die
is now caressing its share of the sky.
I'11 hurl this helmet forthwith
My sky has descended
to affectionately fondle my head.

Like every new translation which seeks to fill in the gaps and fissures of the source text so that the target text can be replete with meaning through new perspectives, so are the Gorkhas a society which is undergoing a dynamic transformation to evolve from the margins until the marginals can now directly touch the consciousness of the centre.

At this point some of us may question as to why translate in English when translation into the various Modern Indian Languages can also provide for the site where such dialogues and solutions are possible. This choice for the English language is perhaps, to a certain degree, because of the changes that can be witnessed with regard to the readership in the social scenario. In the past few decades, English has certainly turned out to be *the* language of the mainstream. Corresponding to this, like in any society with a former colonial set up, there has been a rise in the readership of the colonial literature while over the years there has been a serious decline in the readership of Nepali literature. This decline in readership was even more strongly felt when Nepali had not as yet been included as a Modern Indian Language and prior to its inclusion one had to opt for Hindi or more so Bengali- a language and culture with which the Gorkhas have been haphazardly shoved into. Perhaps, it is to arouse the interest of the younger English educated generations that the poets have resorted to English translations and more so in an effort to move from the margins. While translating, both the volumes have tried to retain the simplicity and clarity of the original. Some words and phrases which are distinct to the Nepali culture and language have been left untranslated with immediate footnotes which further

adds to the charm and authenticity of the poems. For instance words like ' *asarko pandhra* (too busy for anything), *viranf* (a Nepali folk tune), ' *kulairi* (which is a nativised pronunciation for quinine) are left without translations. These words at first may hinder the reading process but gradually as their meaning unfolds so does the culture and ethos of a repressed society gradually emerge.

Indeed to write or to speak to the centre itself takes enormous strength and fortitude on the part of the repressed people as Thapa expresses in her poem, *"lekhai"* (writing).

I must invoke my soul's spirit
to write
Since I am
in a village tucked in the corner of the nation
To find this corner
this dot
in the map
it takes courage in me
indeed J

Even "a dot" or "a corner" becomes important in nation building. It cannot simply be overlooked.

Here, we finally do realize that translations become one of the many processes which enables an exchange of dialogues resulting in subsequent policies and decisions by acknowledging the existence of the margins and their inhabitants who otherwise become ignored, partly because their voices could never be understood. In any nation, progress is possible only when the problems at the grass root level are properly addressed (which many analysts analyse in terms of security- internal, human, domestic) especially in a nation like ours which is a panchayati raj system. Translation helps in this case as translations are a two way process such that, if the decisions and policies of the centre affect every "dot" and "corner" then the voices from here must also be taken into account for nation building as these " dots" and "corners" are integral part of a nation. Adopting

such practices of translating from the margins will enable a more balanced understanding of the other's worldview and the evolution and heterogeneity of a culture which will gradually culminate in a social progress, and provides spaces to all in nation building, at large.

REFERENCES

Ahmad, Aizaz, 1994. *In Theory Classes Nations Literatures*. India: Oxford University Press. Chettri, Shreyashi (trans.). In press. *The Nation and other Poems.* Siliguri: Ekta Publications.

Golay, Bidhan, 2006. Rethinking Gorkha Identity: Outside the imperium of discourse, hegemony and history. *Peace and Democracy in South Asia,* vol. 2, nos. 1 & 2: 23-49.

Guha, Ranajit (ed.) 1982/83. *Subaltern Studies'- Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Guha, Ranajit & Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (eds.), 1988. *Select Subaltern* Studies. New York. Oxford University Press. Kaviraj, Sudipta. 1993. The Imaginary Institution of India.

Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies vol. 7, Writings on South Asian History and Society.* 1-39. Delhi. Oxford University Press.

Remika Thapa. 2008. *kinanra ka awazharu.* Kalimpong: Upama Publications. Thapa, Remika. 2007. *desh ra anya kavitaharu.* Namchi: Nirman Prakashan.

Sarkar, Sumit. 1989. The Kali Avatar of Bikrampur: A village scandal in early twentieth century Bengal. In Ranajit Guha (ed.), S*ubaltern Studies vol. 6. 1- 53.* Delhi. Oxford University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak? In Carry, Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the*

Interpretation of Culture. 24-28. London. Macmillan.

Subba, Manprasad & Kumar Pradhan (trans.), 2009. *Voices from the Margin*. Siliguri: Sunchari Publications. Subba, Manprasad &

Trivedi, Harish & Meenakshi Mukherjee (eds.), 1996. *Interrogating Postcolonialism- Theory, Text and Context*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.