

## An Interview with Maya Pandit

UMESH KUMAR

Maya Pandit (hereafter MP) has been a professor of English Language Teaching (ELT) at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad till recently. A renowned translator from Marathi to English and vice-versa, she has published extensively on gender, caste, alternative Marathi theatre, and teacher's education and so on. Most of her translations have undergone several reprints. Her masterful English translation of Jotirao Phuley's *Slavery* (2002), Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* (2008) among others have achieved 'rich afterlife'. As engaged translations, Prof. Pandit's work is often considered an important source material for understanding those of our society who remain on the margins, still.

Umesh Kumar (abbreviated as UK) is an Assistant Professor, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India.

**UK:** Professor Maya, if one scrolls through your areas of interest and specializations, they are diverse. However, translation seems to be a common thread among them. In fact, I came to know that the title of your doctoral dissertation was "Linguistic Study of Translation in Nineteenth Century Maharashtra." Take us through your formative years in the field of translation/Translation Studies.

**MP:** I did my doctoral work in the nineties and it took almost six-seven years. I came to know that it was the first thesis in Marathi in the domain of cultural history of Marathi translation. Of course, by then, people had written about translated books, educational translation etc. but mine was a comprehensive attempt to decode a certain translation culture

that emerged in colonial Maharashtra between 1824 and 1894 and commented on its politics.

But all this was much later. Before it, I had done M.Phil. in Psycholinguistics from then CIEFL, Hyderabad. My Adviser Professor Nadkarni wanted me to work in sociolinguistics for a Ph.D. for he believed that I had the right temperament for it! However, I had enough of linguistics by then and wanted to cross over to a different field of enquiry. Translation came to me as a natural choice. I had a lot of interest in practical translation. For example, I remember to have translated Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* during my college days and quite a few other things including poetry.

I did not want to be part of the canonical research of English literary studies, though that could have been an easier option for me. On the contrary, I decided to go back to my own culture, my own language. However, translation studies, as an institutional field of enquiry had not yet taken deep roots in India. Though translations were happening consistently, there was no exclusive space for translation studies *per se*. naturally, then, English and Linguistics departments used to be the 'academic refugee camps' for people like us. I must also mention that my readings of indigenous scholars such as that of Datto Vaman Potdar and others also impacted me a lot. For instance, Potdar's *Marathi Gadyacha Ingraji Avtar* (English Incarnation of Marathi Prose, 1922) raised quite a few questions for me. As a researcher, I was compelled to decode the impact of English on Marathi language. The process and culture of translation activities during the colonial period became the reference point to explore into those questions.

**UK:** Notwithstanding a continuity of practical translations in India, translation studies, as an academic enterprise is an 'import' from the West. However, of late, it is attempting to carve out a position for itself. One can infer it from the way it

defines itself in Indian context such as *Anuvaad*, *Bhashantar*, *Bhavanuvaad*, *Roopantar* etc. –which not only attempts to redefine the historical definitions of the discipline but also gives a ‘new turn’ to it. Scholars like Ganesh Devy have also argued about the possibility of an ‘Indian view’ of translation. How do you understand translation in Indian context? Do you have a specific way of looking at it?

**MP:** I do not have a rigid or fix way of looking at this process. Neither would I advertise that translation should be caged in definitions –either of the East or of West. For me translation is a very synchronic and dynamic enterprise. Language –the basic tool of translation is itself very porous and flexible. In our own context, philosophically, language is understood to be operating at four different stages or degrees namely - *Para*, *Pashyanti*, *Madhyama* and *Vaikhari*. These symbolize the four stages of producing language that is audible or can be read. It is the four stages, comparable to Chomsky’s concepts of the deep structure to surface structure. So, these four stages symbolize the journey of production of speech from what you feel at the deepest level of consciousness to the empirically observable.

These four degrees may not necessarily be operating in isolation and conflict. But what is important is that they connote different sense perceptions in a very subtle way. Firstly, we have *Para* –the untold, beyond all objects and all encompassing at the same time. *Pashyanti* –the second stage of human speech is where sounds get translated into feelings. You see it happening. At this level we acquire the ability of distinction. The next level belongs to *Madhyama* –the mental speech. It is verbalized but remains unspoken unlike *Vaikhari*. When you establish an internal discussion with yourself –your *Madhyama* faculty becomes active. It is a stage of transition from performance to competence. *Madhyama* has qualitative

aspects attached to it too. When something comes to your mind it questions, evaluates, edits and presents itself in words that are true translations of your intentions.

*Vaikhari* is the hyper used, everyday verbal speech –the actualization of language itself. It is called as a device of *kriya Shakti* (power of action). It operates from the domain of conscious/physical mind. One can say that human civilization has banked historically on *Vaikhari* for its social bonding.

I believe in this four-tier structure and that's why for me –even speech is translation. Conceptualizing thus, translation is as fundamental as language. For me it is not a secondary or subservient act. Cognitively, almost everything is translation. Your act of speaking itself is a translation of what is already in your mind. We basically live in/through translation.

**UK:** Taking advantage of knowing your work, I know that you have been an ELT expert, teacher educator and a research guide in the field of critical humanities. At the same time, you have displayed consistent engagements with alternative Marathi theatre, women's movement and so on. How does translation fit into all this? Is translation a complimentary part of your engagements?

**MP:** No, it is not a complimentary part. Not at all! By depositing it as a complimentary element one will be doing gross disservice to the very act of translation. As far as the area(s) of engagement that you have suggested, translation is an integral part of all of them. For example, even as an ELT expert you are dealing with the 'mother tongue' and the 'other tongue.' Learning the other tongue involves translation from the mother at various stages of language use: linguistic, social, cultural so on and so forth. So, a breaking of hierarchy is taking place through translation there. Personally too, I am very uncomfortable with boundaries. How can you confine one in boundaries when one's consciousness does not operate in

boundaries? You tend to naturally flow from one boundary to other, from one perception to the other. You reject one thing and embrace another –precisely the way we do things in our lives and especially in our minds. Disciplinary boundaries, according to me, should be understood in terms of convenience and not in the sense of an all-encompassing rule. Unfortunately, it is the later that prevails. I am all for breaking hierarchical boundaries that are suffocating. And when I talk about hierarchy –I do so in the sense of value-oriented hierarchy and not the descriptive hierarchy. Descriptive hierarchies may be needed for convenience of comprehension.

**UK:** By looking into your theoretical work in translation studies, it is not difficult to infer that with regard to ‘choices for translator’ you are quite categorical. You seem to emphasize on the ‘resistance writing’ as a translator. Is this a deliberate choice and an extension of your quest to break suffocating boundaries?

**MP:** What we popularly call as resistance writing are also cultural dialogues at other level. These cultural dialogues are basic units for challenging and breaking the suffocating boundaries created already in a specific society. While studying, I was part of the students’ movements and thereafter teachers’ and women’s movements. In fact, I was in the struggles all the time. Translations and all other arts forms were political statements for our struggles. Even in theatre, we would consciously do plays that would challenge the status quo. As a generation also, I would say we were angrier than today! In my extended family there were four *baal vidhwas* (child widows) with shaven heads. They were prohibited to wear blouses because the tradition will not allow it. Women like them became widows at the age of seven or nine and died at the age of ninety plus. Their whole life was spent like this. Such a criminal wastage of human life!

Slowly and gradually I became aware of the prevailing injustice in the society especially with reference to caste, class and gender. Most often, the modus operandi of the prevailing injustice is structural. Translation, then, becomes the tool to expose this structural, covert violence around us. For example, I remember to have translated Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (Italian: *Morte accidentale di un Anarchico*) into Marathi. Though set in Italy, as a political farce the play is as much relevant to our society as it is to the country of its origin. As a translator, I chose this play for my group Pratyaya to perform because it offers multiple and almost contradictory endings. It is for the spectators to decide which side they would be on. Resistance may not always come directly. It could also be suggestive. When the spectators see it in Marathi, they do so by aligning it with their own social reality. Such an alignment immediately dismantles the geographical boundaries between Marathis and Italians and may lead them towards 'higher concerns. It is only through translations that such cross connections are possible.

**UK:** Your formulations of 'higher concerns' in translation, the way I understand them, must be related with the idea of justice, equality among others? You also talked about translating a play –how difficult or easy for a translator to translate in this genre?

**MP:** With regard to your first question –theoretically yes. As I have already suggested, translation –among many other things could also be an important tool of nurturing resistance. Nurturing resistance in such a way is different, say, from nurturing an armed struggle. On the contrary, by using languages as a bridge –resistance translations attempt to channelize opinions, sometimes by giving twists to those that are already in circulation and continue to search possibilities for a better, equitable future. Let us take some examples. It is

only after the publication of *Poisoned Bread* that our society became aware of the historical injustice, and humiliation meted out to dalits particularly in Maharashtra and generally in India. Moreover, if you see the history of this (translated) book, you will find that it was quite instrumental in the upsurge of (new) dalit writings from other pockets of India and in other Indian languages. Similarly, books like *Golpitha* or plays of Tendulkar humanize us about different aspects and nuances of dalit lives. How would all this be possible without translations?

Secondly, I am not in a position to provide you a qualitative value judgment of *difficult* or *easy* in terms of translating a play. But one can say with considerable degree of certainty that translating a play has to do with ‘translating the performance’ ingrained within it. However, it is altogether a different thing if you are translating it solely for a closet reading. As a translator, one has to negotiate these performance constraints, which are in tune with the performance traditions of that language. In retrospect, I feel that my translations of Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Deshpande’s *Chanakya Vishnugupta*, Datta Bhagat’s *Routes and Escape Routes* or for that matter Pawar’s *Adhantar* and even the other plays that I have translated –remain very close to Marathi performance traditions.

**UK:** You have also translated non-fiction. I am reminded of Jotirao Phule’s *Gulamgiri* (Slavery). Notwithstanding the intellectual capital of the monograph, the book is also a translation success. Share your experiences of translating Phule.

**MP:** Phule is a translator’s nightmare. He has a very ‘direct’ and polemical style. His is a language that is crude yet full of vigour. One does not find a continuous tradition of prose writing in Marathi before Phule. So, he was also attempting to

manufacture and remould the expressions in Marathi prose writing itself. Much of his language basically comes from the colloquial Marathi that is at loggerheads with the ‘standard’ literary Marathi. He was attempting to assemble a social movement for the *streeshudraatishudra* and eventually accommodated the language spoken by them even in his writings. It is not to say that before Phule nobody talked about the problems and injustices within Marathi tradition. In fact, Phule himself borrows from the preceding Marathi saint poets such as Tukaram. However, the major break between Phule and his predecessors is that of form. People before him were operating through orality whereas Phule was negotiating and engaging his politics through print culture. For example, every now and then he uses expressions like: ‘*Sadhe hoke buddheka yeh pahla salaam lev*’ (in any case, accept the greetings of this old man). The Marathi Muslims used the above expression in the nineteenth century. By pushing such phrases into (print) Marathi, he was not only trying to enlarge its semantic boundaries but also claiming that the brahmanical literary Marathi must not claim itself to be the language of the masses.

Further, Phule had immense fascination for the dialogic form – in the Socratic tradition if you like. In *Slavery* too there are two interlocutors –the writer and Dhondiba. They are engaged in debating the contemporary contentious social issue of injustice meted out to shudras, atishudras by the Brahmans. One of the advantages of a dialogic discussion is that it resists the one-sided authorial dominance and we get to understand the views and the counter-views when two persons are speaking. Jotirao plays the role of Platonic Socrates who is more practical, logical and scientific in his approach whereas the other character Dhondiba raises doubts, initiates the discussions and at times presents the prevailing and established ideological perspectives. However, for a translator it is very important to understand the pun intended in the dialogic conversations. If

one misses it, the secondary level of signification is lost. In such a scenario, the translator may end up doing more injustice to the text than doing any justice.

**UK:** Any scholarly attempt of auditing the upsurge of dalit women's autobiographies in India remains incomplete without discussing Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* – both of which are translated by you. However, in my research I came to know that you changed Kamble's original title drastically in your translation. What were the reasons?

**MP:** These are first person narratives by dalit women and according to me 'strong' books. While translating people from the margins/oppressed sections of a society, the translator is no less than a political agent, pollinating resistance across the similarly oppressed communities. In such a scenario, then, translation fosters resistance by crossing the boundaries through its subversion. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* can exemplify the same. The original title of the book was *Jina Amucha* which could be translated as *Our Miserable Lives or This Wretched Life of Ours*. However, when I read the book, I found that the title was absolutely misleading. The original title hints it to be a narrative of victimhood. On the contrary, the book actually talks about the combativeness of the entire Mahar community and especially the women of Mahar community under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership. It is not only the story of suffering but courage. With its focus on the women of the community, the undercurrent of Kamble's narrative is to highlight the everyday struggles of dalits to achieve dignity and self-respect. The original title failed to capture the spirit of the narrative. Consequently, after having consulted the author, I changed the title from the literal *This Wretched Life of Ours* to *The Prisons We Broke*. This may be classified as 'compensatory' translation strategy of the translator. With all

its limitations, the new title manages to contextualize the political context of the struggle, self-assertion for individuality and the role of women in emancipatory struggles.

At the same time, the translator needs to be judicious about her 'compensatory' involvements. The original title of Urmila Pawar's autobiography was *Aaydan*. The idea of weaving is central to making an *Aaydan* –a generic term for manufacturing the indigenous utensils from bamboo sticks. Another meaning of *Aaydan* is weapon. Pawar herself understood her mother's act of basket weaving and her own act of writing as similar and organically linked. In her own words, her writing 'is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us'. In such a scenario, I was convinced by the working capital of the original title. Eventually, you will find that my English title is a literal translation of the Marathi original.

**UK:** Your recent work has brought to light new and refreshing women writers from Marathi. Pradnya Pawar and Saniya come to mind immediately. Is there a difference between the previous generation and the new? You have the experience of translating both...

**MP:** I translated Pradnya Pawar's fourteen stories that are published in an anthology titled *Let the Rumours Be True* (2017). On the other hand, Saniya's novella *Tyanantar* came out in translation as *Thereafter* (2013). There is a considerable difference between the two generations. This difference is more of a transition that happens from one generation to the other. Pradnya's stories are modern narratives of dalit subjectivities situated in urban geographies –a break from the village setting of her predecessors. Writers like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and even Pradnya's father Daya Pawar – took pride in being called dalits. But the new dalits writers call themselves as Ambedkarites and more commonly as neo-Buddhists. In that sense Pradnya represents a new emergent

consciousness among dalits. Translation, again, becomes the vehicle to represent these new emerging trends. I shall give you an example:

In *Let the Rumours Be True*, there is a story about a middle-aged couple Disha and Gautam titled: *Diamonds are Forever*. They represent the next generation of dalits –educated, well settled in personal lives, holding powerful positions in state machinery etc. They are playing a game of telling each other their hidden food secrets. After Gautam’s hatred for potatoes, Disha reveals her fascination for *chunchunya*. There are slight variations in defining *chunchunya*. But it refers to the dried-up intestine of the dead animal. Gautam becomes absolutely furious with his wife because it reminds him the humiliation and agony his ancestors had to face when they were asked to drag dead animals! He calls it a stupid beggar’s food. He feels to have come a long way from that painful past of his community. *Chunchunya*’s disgusting appearance through his wife reminds him that heinous past. However, Disha’s argument is different. She considers *chunchunya* as a mere food item, which has a delicious taste! She considers it beyond reason to discard *chunchunya* –the food. Being followers of Babasaheb, her community is supposed to see reason and rationality into everything. How come they miss it in relation to such a tasty food item called *chunchunya*, she wonders!

Saniya’s *Tyanantar* is slightly alternative kind of feminist narrative, apparently unobtrusive but still manages to raise vital gender issues. She has a ‘new’ kind of language about which I have also discussed in my translator’s note. Her use of colloquial Marathi coupled with monosyllabic words provides this newness. She continuously uses brackets and asides to convey complex tones and covert undercurrents of her narrative. My familiarity with her style as a reader really helped me translating *Tyanantar* into English.

**UK:** As we reach the fag end of our discussion, I request you to reveal the most important quality, according to you, that a potential translator must possess in her armoury.

**MP:** The answer to this question shall always be relative and subjective! But in my opinion, a translator must have empathy. It is only with empathy that you become one with the text which is to be translated. Further, the idea of becoming one must not be understood in terms of complete irrational surrender to the original text but a critical and rational engagement with it. I shall cite a quick example to bring home the point.

A reputed publisher (name is not important here) approached me to translate Bhimsen Joshi's authorized biography written by his son into English. After reading the book, I came to know that Joshi had two wives. The son who has written the biography belongs to the first wife. Almost immediately, I could infer that the narrative of the book portrays the second wife into a very poor light. In fact, she is made responsible for all the negativities within the narrative. How could one individual be responsible all the time? Translating that book would have also meant giving an 'afterlife' to that one-sided biasness. I politely wrote to the publisher and declined the offer to translate the book for ideological reasons.

I am not a professional translator. I have never been. But I am a political translator! By all means.

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