
INTERVIEWING TRANSLATORS

Malayalam translators Ajith Kumar A.S. and S. Sanjeev talk about various issues related to the question of translation in general and translation of the ‘literature of the marginalized’ in particular and its impact on the Kerala reading public.

Ashokan Nambiar C.

Ashokan: Let us begin our discussion by talking generally about the translation scenario in Malayalam/Kerala.

Ajith: I think the translation scenario in Kerala has always been very vibrant. Huge numbers of literary works were/are being translated from and into Malayalam. If we talk about the present day scenario, most of the Latin American literary works get translated into Malayalam. Writers like Marquez, Neruda etc. are house hold names here. Not just literary works, a huge volume of Marxist literature has been translated and widely disseminated here.

Sanjeev: I agree with Ajith about the vibrancy of the translation scenario in the Kerala context. It has been very crucial in the introduction and evolution of certain modern literary forms in Malayalam. Some scholars have argued that formation/ shaping of the novel in Malayalam was a consequence of translation during the late 19th century. We also know that *Indulekha*, hailed as the first “modern” novel in Malayalam was a result of a failed attempt by the author to translate an English novel. But having said that I feel that there is a serious lacuna in the translation scenario in the Kerala context and the kind of work we take up is a conscious effort to fill it. I consider translation as a concept/process with lot of other dimensions and not just as the passage from one language to another. But I don't think we need to go into such a discussion here, need we?"

Ashokan: Right. Tell me the circumstances, context - the ‘lacunae’- and also the reason that triggered your interest in translation as an activity.

Sanjeev: In the early 1990s when I started seriously engaging with the public sphere, what has come to be known as ‘mandal-masjid’ issue was in the air. And we got to know and read English translation of works that come under the category of ‘Dalit Literature’. Today I would not say that such literature was not produced then in Malayalam, but it was not available and there was no visibility. I think the complete works of Dr. Ambedkar had been translated by the state much before this. But as far as I know these translations have never confronted the question of the perennial structural relation between the systems of caste and language.

We also came to know that there were academic studies, of gender and caste in Kerala society, in universities located outside Kerala. Needless to say, they were in English. Our attempt, through the translation of such studies, was to disseminate in its ‘location’ and to see whether it was possible to ‘produce’ such materials in Malayalam itself. That is what we tried to do in the journals *Samvadham* and *Pachakuthira* and translations of *Why I Am not A Hindu*, *Buffalo Nationalism*, *Subaltern Studies* etc.

Ajith: Caste is something that we talk about in the ‘public space’ with much discomfiture. Scholars like M.S.S. Pandian talk about how Indian Modernity silenced/s any talk on caste in the public sphere. This is very much the case in Kerala society as well. The ‘absence’ of literature(s), which engage with caste in its own terms, both in Malayalam and in translation, is the ‘lacunae’ that we were talking about. So while translating these works it was those things that were ‘not there’ that come to the fore

Approaching the Source Text, Question of Fidelity, language(s) etc.

Ashokan: What kind of approach do you take towards the source text when you translate the kind of texts you translate? I may be raising the question of fidelity here, assuming that you may have to maintain total fidelity towards the source text.

Sanjeev: It need not be or I would rather say that it is not ‘fidelity’ towards the source text that drives the translation. Various factors are involved in this extremely complex process. We need to engage more with the language of the target text, Malayalam in this case. Let me elaborate, when we translate a writer like *Iliah* the very nature of his approach towards an institution like caste would require us to search for a ‘new’ vocabulary in Malayalam. More than the original it is the other translation works or the language of such works that we engage with or quarrel with when we translate.

Ajith: There is also a question of what kind of language within Malayalam that we can possibly think of for translation. There is an already existing highly sanskritised/elitist language which are often unreadable, which we consciously avoid.

Ashokan: Can you elaborate further by specifically talking about your experience as a translator of *Why I am not a Hindu?*

Sanjeev: The crux of this book is that it advocates a dalit-bahujan politics for language, culture etc. When we translate such a work we face lots of problems regarding the choice of language. As a translator, I can use a language which is already available with in the existing print culture, which as Ajith said is elitist. And even the language/vocabulary, which are now in vogue in Malayalam while translating subaltern literature, such as *vyavaharam*, *varenyam*, *keezhalatham*, etc. is not a commonly used/shared language. So, as Ajith pointed

out, translation is not driven by a concern vis-à-vis the original but the contemporary concerns of the target language. Is it possible to develop a dalit-bahujan discourse within the existing language system? Even if we are able to do it whether it could be appealing to the publisher etc are things we should address. I am talking about the actual professional problems.

Translating Concepts

Ashokan: Now let us discuss about translating concepts, since you are primarily involved in such a process.

Ajith: Translating concepts presents lots of problems and raise a series of questions especially when you try to translate the ‘subaltern’ texts. For example when we translate the term/concept ‘communalism’, we are not very sure whether the commonly used term in Malayalam ‘vargeeyatha’ is adequate enough to capture the sense in which subaltern historians use it, so is the case with ‘secularism’. Say for instance we are writing or translating a work that is a critique of the so called classical music from a dalit point of view, I feel that the available term in Malayalam ‘sasthriya sangeetham’, would not serve the purpose at all.

Ashokan: So in such cases we need to evolve a new language so as to capture these nuances.

Ajith: Yes.

Sanjeev: The very necessity of translation stems from the ‘absence’ of certain literature in the target language. We are translating concepts that have evolved in some other contexts, which are expressed in that language. It is precisely because of this reason that we face the ‘difficulty’ and the ‘problems’ while translating. But my point is that we don’t need to consider it as a problem at all and it is important to present the translated text as a translated text itself, any pretension otherwise is not desirable.

Ashokan: Can you elaborate?

Sanjeev: Since we are talking about the Kerala context, let us take the case of Marxism, which we are more familiar with. Marxism is a translated concept. It was evolved elsewhere. There is no point in asserting otherwise. The consequence of doing that would be the failure of Marxism as both a theory and practice. In essence what I am saying is that there is absolutely no necessity to erase the presence of translation.

Politics of translation

Ashokan: Nowadays there is a lot of talk about everything being political! What do you have to say about it, especially with regard to your own involvement in the act of translation?

Ajith: I think that we partake in the ‘politics of translation’ in our day-to-day life and also when you translate ‘texts’. Take for instance the way we use ‘vulgar’ terms. We tend to use the English ‘four letter’ words although we have Malayalam equivalents to it. Although semantically the same, I think, these terms when used in English have different connotation. It is quite interesting. In Malayalam there are many such examples of using ‘standard’ terms, especially in print, which are often Sanskrit or Sanskritised Malayalam terms. ‘Pornographic books’ is often translated into Malayalam as ‘Ashleela Sahityam’, where as the commonly used term ‘kambi pusthakam’ is rarely used!

Sanjeev: While translating Jyothirmaya Sharma’s book, *Terrifying Vision: M.S. Golwalker, RSS and India*, I translated the pronoun ‘he’ whenever the author refers to Golwalker, as ‘ayaal’ rather than ‘adheham’. This is a very conscious political decision since I did not want to use ‘adheham’, which has reverence-value. And there are certain ‘concepts/terms’ we do not translate. Say for example ‘hindutva’, ‘sangh parivar’ etc. We leave them as they are, which is quite a conscious decision.

Ashokan: What could be the other factors that might determine the ‘choice’ of terms for translation, or translation per se?

Ajith: The existing print language could be a determining factor. Say for example, the ‘exact’ or ‘word-to-word’ translation of ‘Buffalo Nationalism’ is ‘Erumadesiyatha vadam’, which appears as ‘odd’ in print especially as a title of a book. So the title of the translation is ‘chosen’ as ‘Erumadesiyatha’. Here it is the print culture of the target language which is the determining factor.

Sanjeev: In the case of ‘Why I am not a Hindu’, the title is translated as ‘Njanenthukondu oru hinduvalla’. If we go by linguistic rules there is no need of an ‘oru’ there. But it is added so as to emphasise the very personal nature of the book.

Translating caste

Ashokan: You have been translating into Malayalam, works that primarily engage with caste for more than a decade. What impact do you think it had on the ‘reading public’?

Ajith: I think there is a tendency among certain translators, when they translate works which engage with caste, to negate the presence of caste in Kerala society. It is as if to say that caste is something that exists elsewhere. That is a ‘savarna’, ‘upper’ caste attitude. We need to be conscious of this prevailing hegemonic tendency so as to resist such tendency and also develop strategies of translation to counter it. This demands a complex engagement with the language, its vocabulary etc.

I think translations open up new possibilities. Translation of Dalit literature can help the dalit communities, who are located in different parts of the country speaking different languages, to imagine themselves to be a part of a larger community. The sharing of experiences, expressed through various forms of literature, mediated through translation, will strengthen the political struggle of Dalits.

Sanjeev: A writer like Kancha Iliah has become a household name today. His books are translated immediately and the major publishers are keen to publish them. His positions, views etc. are debated or fought against in reputed journals, magazines etc. This is one very visible impact the translation had. I also think that the translation could create a public discourse on caste that was hitherto absent in Kerala.

Ajith Kumar A. S. has translated Kancha Iliah's *Buffalo Nationalism*; Gyanendra Pandey's paper *Can a Muslim be an Indian* and Sanjay Shrivastava's paper *Pedestrian Desires*. He is also a music composer and a member of dalit music group called 'Ormakootam'.

S. Sanjeev has translated Kancha Iliah's *Why I am not a Hindu* and Jyotirmaya Sharma's *Terrifying Vision: M.S. Golwalker, RSS and India*; edited Malayalam journals *Samvadam* and *Pachakuthira* ; co-edited, with Susie Tharu, a selection of *Subaltern Studies* translations in Malayalam. He is currently editing an anthology of Cultural Studies on Kerala.

