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Recapturing Silences

An Empirical Analysis of the Politics of Translation

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The Kannada *tatwapada* are songs of essence/value/conduct. They can be categorised under the broad umbrella of *bhakti* literature produced in the 18th -20th centuries in India. They have existed mostly in the oral form for centuries.

In this paper, I translate one such *tatwapada* and through it attempt a line-by-line reflection upon the process and immediate challenges of translation, followed by an analysis of the following issues raised in Spivak's essay "The Politics of Translation" and J. Devika's "Being 'in translation' in a Post Colony", as applied to this work:

- The self and the other in translation
- Faithful and grounded translations
- Reading caste in a historical work from a contemporary perspective
- Questions of logic and rhetoric—the politics of choosing one over the other—including the part played by phonic elements in oral texts
- Possible ways of overcoming the impasse of transfer of idioms

A brief history of the *tatwapada* in academia

Below is the translation of an excerpt from the book, *Tatwapadagalu*, Kannada Sahitya Akademi:

> When "Kannada literature" as an academic discipline was conceived of in the second and third decades of the 20th century, it was modelled on the western understanding of the humanities – and education in general. *Tatwapada* did not fit this description of literature and hence it remained out of the centres of research and pedagogy. Also, since it was accepted that a defining characteristic of "folklore" is the anonymity of the composer, these songs which contain the names of the composers, were excluded from the rubric of folk-literature as well. Moreover, a liberal inclination to the humanities required rejecting non-secular texts as non-progressive. These works which were laden with references to *bhakti* and submission of the will, were

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> considered to be religious in nature and therefore not worth being studied academically. It is only with the critical reconfiguration of the idea of literature—as not just literary and textual but as social creations—in universities, that there has been an academic interest in them. It is only thus that the expressions of communities far removed from the centres of power have begun to be accepted, studied and researched in academia.

The *tatwapada* have been composed by men and women of all castes, but are broadly known to be by two kinds of people: those belonging to institutionalized centres of spirituality ("religion" as is the contemporary definition would be unfit for that time) viz the *mathas* or monasteries and by free mendicants viz the wandering *jangamas*. They contain philosophies of life, ideas on moral values and right conduct. These philosophies are based on real-life experiences and have been sources of moral instruction for the large illiterate masses. They have been preserved over the centuries by being performed. After the *vacana* revolution in Kannada, it has only been through the *tatwapada* that the "lower orders of society"[i] viz the non-brahmanical castes have come forward in poetic articulation.

The *tatwapada* are heavy with highly contextual and extremely nuanced metaphors—sometimes addressed to local characters—and in niche regional dialects. While some contain features such as alliteration and meter, they are mostly oblivious to the Sanskrit poetry-drama conventions of the "high art forms".

I have chosen one such *tatwapada* for translation. It is by a *jangama* called Jambgi Shivasharana. Not much is known of this composer except that he was from Jambgi, a small village in northern Karnataka. Shivasharana—one who has surrendered to Shiva—is a generic term for a devotee of Shiva (often associated with the followers of Basaveshwara) and is therefore not telling of this composer in particular. While the temporality of the dialect is fairly archaic, I am familiar with the spatial aspect of it – and that I hope will give me an entry point in attempting a translation of it. Translating the present work will involve retrieval of meaning across time and culture.

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The Poem

artha ballavanige turtu kaelatini
martirabaaradu manga, maado shivasharanara sanga
prasada sikkitu dudadawanga

maatinartha maatu ballavaga, maatu bittu maatadava manga
gurtittu nadiyava guruvina maga
guriyilleno kanni kallappa ninaga

dyagayi gundappa guru iddanava hyaanga
ee hajrat oddara kwaana iddhanga
waadi shivamma emmi manakiddhaanga siddappa manshina dongidhhanga

kwabaal bavash issitin koli iddhanga
maitana mandi angaladaaga issi maadtaana tanagangaladaag
pada haadtaan bayige bandhaanga

talagi pada katti hadadarolaga
jambgi sharana baavi jhari iddhanga, jdnyaanada khottin hoari iddhanga
neevella khubbtinn nari iddhanga

A Translation

I pose this to him who knows
Don't forget, you monkey, befriend the *shivasharanas*
For the spoils go to he who toils

For him who knows speech,
Who speaks without speaking is a fool
But one who walks with an aim is the guru's son
Have you no purpose, *Kanni Kallappa*?

How a guru was *Dyagayi Gundappa*?
Like the stupid buffalo of the stone-breakers
Wadi Shivamma like the buffalo calf,
Siddappa like the crookedness of the mind

The mind, he is like a shit-picking hen
He bathes in people's yards,
Defecates in his own dish
And sings songs any way he likes

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In composing and singing this song
Jambgi Sharana is like the stream that feeds the well,
The bull-calf of wisdom
You all are like the sugarcane-eating jackals

A Reflection

The first line and beginning of the second line contain alliterative elements. For the sake of maintaining a similar aesthetic, I have attempted a parallel alliteration. I have retained the literality of the word "manga" (monkey) whereas a second such reference that does not have a similar connotation, I have chosen to translate as "fool". Many *tatwapada* are addressed to the mind and 'the monkey' is a common metaphor in Kannada, which indicates its restlessness (how it jumps from thought to thought) – the moral behind these songs being the need to rein in its energy for good thoughts, or *bhakti*. The third line contains the word *prasaada* – which in common parlance is substituted with 'holy food'. But that would be very jarring in this context. Considering the metaphor form of this line (one who labours, gets the *praasada*) I have attempted one in English for it – and the rhyme just posed itself. This can be categorised as a 'faithful' rather than a 'grounded' translation. Moreover, the prepositions—but, and, for etc.—are extrapolations since the original does not contain them. The form of disjointed sentences is characteristic of this genre of poems which unless abandoned in translation would make transfer of meaning harder due to the cultural removedness of its original idiom.

The "guru's son" is literal. It is meant as a phrase of praise and could have been replaced with something simpler like 'a wise man'. But as an exercise in grounded translation, I retained the original. I hope it works as an indicator of the impasse of transformation and hints at the difference – which is an instrument for respecting the other without romanticising it. I use a similar justification for retaining the term *Kanni Kallappa* in the following line. There are two ways of interpreting it: one where it is seen as a proper noun, as addressing a person; two where the word *kanni* is read as a gloss-over of *kanvi* which means "quarry". A *kanvi* kallappa would then be a stone quarry worker who breaks stones relentlessly without any

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greater aim or purpose. The second interpretation cannot be contained in anything other than a description since there are no equivalents to such a metaphor

Dyagayi Gundappa and *Waadi Shivamma* are proper nouns and could have been real people in that area. Now, questions such as who they were, what they stood for and what their presence in this song means, cannot be understood without more knowledge of the context and the time.

I have replaced the term "oddara" with the phrase "stone-breakers". Odda is a caste whose traditional occupation has been quarry-work – breaking stones, carrying them to construction sites etc. Certain meanings have been associated with the use of the term in such texts: the signification of pig-headedness and mindlessness, of the lack of aspiration for anything higher. Retention of this term would have been a more grounded translation but I felt that it would render the meaning too obscure. I have opted for its replacement with an equivalent—and hence a faithful translation—in this instance. Moreover the adjective 'stupid' is an extrapolation as the original does not contain it. Buffalos as a metaphor usually have negative connotations; a buffalo belonging to the *odda,* doubly so. Such a usage is meant to embody both, its own as well as its masters' obtuseness. A description as this could be seen as a thick translation – its necessity can be judged subjectively.

"Kwabal bavash" is an archaic term which has no connotation in the present. It could have been another proper noun – but that is speculative. But going by what follows, it is clearly with reference to the mind. It is possible that a name has been used to address the mind[ii] – the mind as being capable of evil; as one which seeks perverse pleasure ("shit-picking hen"), which while having evil thoughts of the other, dirties itself. These connotations cannot be brought out in English unless the mind is explicitly identified as the addressee.

In the final stanza, I have transferred the similes literally. Though uncommon, the imagery of a stream that feeds the well and the bull-calf are necessarily that of work being done; of wisdom being brought and collected, of being striven over. The sugar-cane eating jackal

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however, is harder to decipher in English. In colloquial usage, it is meant to indicate someone who hasn't worked for the benefits he receives. [iii] In calling his audience this, he gives his work a shade of humour thus: "I do all the work, consolidate this knowledge for you, and you merely accept it". I have however chosen not to find an equivalent to the jackal[iv] simile, in spite of the fact that it is obscure in its objectivity. But the idea behind "reading as translation" is that it is not objective. The reader does have to put in some mental effort in retrieving the meaning of this phrase—unlike the audience of the *shivasharana's* song—which could have several possibilities.

An Analysis

As noted, this endeavor contains a combination of faithful and grounded translations. These terms, though originally coined for a feminist subjectivity of translation, can be used with the similar meaning in the context of the marginal nature of the original poem: marginal in two ways – as non-brahminical philosophical work and as non-literary. While the historicised analysis of the first aspect could be fruitful in constructing a discourse on caste in history, a closer reading of it for the project of translating it into a modern language (English) is pertinent here. The commonality of objects from the everyday lives of the composer/singer and his/her audience indicates a diffusion of meaning on a balanced level of power. These objects serve as figures of speech and are accepted without explanation. Read in retrospect as one consolidated anti-brahminical movement, robs these discursive elements of their multidimensional purposes of practice (knowledge production based on ontological truths, not necessarily as resistance, could be one such). The usage of figures as the buffalo, the hen, the jackal, the bullock etc. as metaphors, and the mention of feces etc., can be read on the outside as points distinctive from Sanskritic poetry, but the implicit ease of their usage and acceptance is a more important idea worth noting for the process of translation. Situated in a "modern" post-colonial nation-state—and being aware of all its problematic complexities—and approaching this text as one who at once belongs and does not belong to the world of the *tatwapada,* is perhaps "being in a state of translation" (Niranjana, 1992). The authority with which a caste-name is used to indicate a quality, for instance, is not available to me. To retain it literally would be grounding it, yes, but as a question of ethics—ethics that have been re-

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formed over time—I am forced to find a less politically incorrect option – that of breaking it up into a description.

Spivak calls translation a process of going beyond the confines of one's own identity – an act of finding traces of the other in the self. This act, in fact is reinforcing the self since the identification of the other as different is a way of justifying the politics of the self.

The non-literary aspect of the text renders its translation more difficult. The awareness of the power dynamics of the historical hierarchy of literary texts over oral texts, makes the position of the postmodern translator precautious. Translation here is a two pronged process: change of form and hence cultural, and transposition of content for a linguistic exchange of meaning. It involves making a choice at each step: whether to maintain the original power equation for the purpose of highlighting its marginality or to subvert it to fit into the new discourse of resistance. When an oral nebulous form is fixed literarily, it suddenly narrows down the possibilities of meaning and interpretation which was previously afforded by its phonetic variability. The translator is accountable for the implications of this fixture. While rendering it as a literary text is climbing the power rung, the structural demands made by the new form involves toning down of the power of its other discursive elements.

This makes safety a very desirable option: safety as expressed by Spivak as choosing logic over rhetoric. But her emphasis on the rhetoricity of a text can be seen as the way to negotiate with the choices one is faced with while translating. The meaning created by the silences around words, are purely cultural. Retaining them is not a simple act of exclusion of words but the re-creation of the entire structure; with the words that frame the silences. Silences can be thought of as both, deliberate absences and the existence of possibilities other than the explicit. As mentioned earlier, the prepositions I have used between the lines are absent in the original. The silence between these sentences emphasize the composers' authority—he knows what he is saying; he is assured that he will be understood by his audience—which is unavailable to us as different kinds of readers. The translating self is the other in this context. However, I regard these inclusions as not the removal of silence but as creating others.

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"...befriend the shivasharanas *for* the spoils go to he who toils..." can either mean that by virtue of being a shivasharana, one reaps rewards... that the shivasharanas are hard-workers; it could also mean that becoming a shivasharana involves hard-labour and is an achievement in itself. In the original, this line stands separate from the preceding one; it could have been an emphasis on labour (perhaps physical as opposed to spiritual as the translation makes seem) as a means to salvation.[v] But in the absence of 'for' in the translation, not only the culturally-located meaning would have been inaccessible but the other possibilities would have been difficult to conceive of.

Translation is not without objective. Simply put, it is for transporting meaning across a cultural barrier. In spite of theories of universal grammars, the fact that the structures of *différance* are not identical in all languages (that is, they are not strictly parallel systems) means that each language ought to be regarded as a different paradigm. Therefore, meaning has to be transposed with an aim to overcome the gap. One of the ways of doing it can be by highlighting the cultural impasse by refraining from attaining too much lucidity; aspiration for universality is not desirable. These 'hard lumps' if broken down forcefully have the risk of romanticising and hence fetishizing the other – a fundamental error in postmodern academics.

Notes

[i] This is the translation of a phrase from the foreword to the book *Tatwapadagalu* published by Karnataka Sahitya Academy, Bangalore
[ii] The mind and the tongue are common objects for criticism as entities that need controlling
[iii] Jackals do eat sugarcane!
[iv] Also, 'jackal' could have been 'fox' but fox is already a much-used metaphor for cunning and scheming... which is not the case here.
[v] *Kayakave kailaasa* (work is worship) is a phrase attributed to Basaveshwara and is an important characteristic of the reformation philosophy of that time and space

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