

## Translating the “little narratives”: Mediation, Negotiation and Historiography

*Nandini Saha*

Professor

Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal

### Abstract

Translation has always facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and literature, across linguistic, geographic and cultural borders. We in India live in a society that uses and understands the language of division, discrimination and fission. The worst kind of discrimination happens when one is segregated for what one is born as. Not only is there discrimination against groups who belong to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy, members of such groups are victims of social constructions by being characterized and stereotyped. 75 years of Indian Independence is a long time and also the perfect time for re-evaluation of our social structures. This paper intends to explore some issues involved in the translation of writings by members of such discriminated groups, specifically Dalit writers from Bengal, from my own experience as a translator. These are writings from the margins, the “little narratives” that usually tend to get disregarded and brushed under the carpet. I strongly believe that translation of such narratives helps to propagate the voices of resistance. Through this paper I also intend to identify the processes of mediation and negotiation that happen in such translations, and the importance of translation as historiography as far as Dalit writing is concerned.

**Keywords:** translation, mediation, negotiation, historiography, power, Bengali Dalit writing

“The best of men cannot be moral if the basis of relationship between them and their fellows is fundamentally a wrong relationship”<sup>1</sup>

“Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.”<sup>2</sup>

Speaking about the unequal standards of Hinduism and the discriminatory attitudes of Hindu society towards the members of the Dalit communities, Babasaheb Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste* asserts how the Hindu Varnavyavastha breeds an unequal relationship between fellow Indians, and thus a “wrong relationship”. That was 1936 and

here we stand in 2022 still not too sure as to how much of progress Indian society has really made in this aspect. Walter Benjamin speaks of the communication between languages and thus the intercultural communication that is facilitated by translation, in his essay “The Task of a Translator”, the essay from where the second quote above has been taken. Translation is the imperative activity that aids in bridging cultures. When this crucial act is used to translate from a local Indian language to another Indian language or even English, it becomes an act of service towards such Dalit communities. A search for synonyms of “little narratives” would yield phrases like ‘trivial story’ or ‘insignificant story’. The inclusion of this phrase in the title will be dealt with in a separate section of this paper. Negotiation is what a translator deals with while working between two languages. And it is my conviction that translation is an important historiographical process, also posited by Benjamin when he explains the ‘afterlife’ of an original work that is achieved through translation. Thus the various sections of this paper will deal with translation, specifically of Bengali Dalit writings, translation being a powerful agent of mediation, negotiation and an important method of documenting and archiving history through these “little narratives”.

### **Translation as Mediation and Negotiation**

With regard to intercultural communication in the age of migration and in the postcolonial scenario, Homi Bhabha uses the term ‘translation’ in the etymological sense of being carried across from one place to another. He uses the term translation metaphorically to describe the condition of the contemporary world, a world in which millions migrate and change their location every other day. In such a world translation is crucial – “We should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”<sup>3</sup> For Bhabha, translation then resides in that space that lies between two cultures which are interacting with each other. It then becomes an activity that enables the important intercultural dialogue that is so vital in the current global scenario.

In the backdrop of such western discourses, trained as we are in the language of our colonial masters, we nonetheless seek our identities – identities that help to make explicit our own indigenous and ethnic position and thus our moral responsibilities towards the same. Through the function of mediation rendered by the activity of translation, Bengali Dalit writing has managed to spread its reach to a much larger reading audience. This has ensured the recognition of such writing that emanates from the state of West Bengal. Now we can even boast of such works being included as texts in several syllabi. The function of translation as mediator between different languages and thus cultures, in the case of Bengali Dalit writing, has helped to accord that elusive space in the literary academic sphere. And that is no mean feat for sure. So going as far back as 2012, a decade back, when *Survival and Other Stories* was published by Orient Blackswan or when there is a recent spurt in publication of translations of existing works on or by Bengali Dalit writers, it sure is something for scholars in this field to cheer about!

We in India live in a society that uses and understands the language of division, discrimination and fission – and honestly that is what anyone and everyone is comfortable with. The worst kind of discrimination happens when one is segregated for what one is born as. Starting from Babasaheb Ambedkar to modern writers on caste whether Anand Teltumbde, Sharankumar Limbale, Kancha Illaiah, Gopal Guru, Manohar Mouli Biswas or Manoranjan Byapari, all employ their own experiences of

caste and discrimination to denounce the caste-based system of Indian society. For those of us who still continue to live caste, irrespective of our education, profession and place in the class hierarchy, would understand the importance of the power that comes from expression through literature. For the lower castes of the society, translation of caste literature from the local language Bangla into a global language like English, effectively ensures the transmission of their 'voices' to the world at large. For the members of these castes, from being 'non-existent' to being 'heard' is a major achievement. And when such translations get recognition by winning awards, the instance when the translated version of Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography won the Hindu non-fiction prize in 2018, is a further step forward in the rising power of these voices.

In the Introduction to the Special Issue of *The Translator*, titled *Translation and Minority*, Lawrence Venuti in defining 'minority' asserts, "This [minority] position is occupied by languages and literatures that lack prestige or authority, the non-standard and the non-canonical, what is not spoken or read much by a hegemonic culture."<sup>4</sup> [emphasis mine] This 'lack' that Venuti mentions gets compensated to some extent when the writings of Bengali Dalit writers get published, read and then translated into other languages that enable the widespread reach of such literature. Some such instances would be how writings on Indian Dalit literature and Bengali Dalit literature in Bengali have existed since the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. However the translations of these important works have been undertaken only in the last couple of years. It is said the *Charyapadas*, composed between the tenth and twelfth centuries, during the reign of the Pala dynasty in Bengal, are the earliest writings by members of the lower castes. Thus it is not correct to believe that Dalit writings in Bangla are a very recent phenomenon. It is also noticeable the way in which Dalit literature from Bengal has gained currency in the recent times. Newer editions of texts, translations of existing texts, are all indicators of this extremely positive development.

We then come to the aspect of negotiation. Teaching the text of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's short story 'Survival' I have often had to answer queries from students about the title of the story. Some students would prefer to keep the term 'primitive' from the original title in the translated version. Their argument is that the conditions under which the lowly castes continue to survive in are actually primitive. I sometimes wonder how they are really not completely wrong in their submission. This is where debates about fidelity and translatability arise. This is where the translator of such literature seriously negotiates – not only between two languages and cultures but also between time zones and thus varying generations. The ever growing and ever changing evolutionary process of language that Benjamin would emphasise in his premise about the 'afterlife' of original texts that is possible through translation, functions as negotiation when the translator works on the translation of the text. At times the translator would therefore agree to retain the local dialect or words in the local language in the translation so as to keep the TL text "transparent, not covering the original, not blocking its light"<sup>5</sup> as Sipra Mukherjee, a translator mentions. As my own experiences of translating Dalit writing has taught me that the nuances of the Bengali language is at times difficult to negotiate when translating into English. Nonetheless a way always needs to be found, because the work of translation has to continue. Hence the processes of mediation and negotiation – between author and translator, between two languages, between two cultures, two generations, two time zones, et al. The list is endless which keeps on increasing with the passage of time. Hopefully no matter how many issues need to be resolved to continue

with the translation of Bengali Dalit writing, may such work continue to be in production.

### **Translating the “Little Narratives”: The Voices of Dissent**

From the endless processes of mediation and negotiation follows the invaluable and essential function of translation as documenting of history. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) Jean-François Lyotard’s “little narratives” were mentioned as political alliances that worked to shatter the meta-narratives of society. A simple google search for synonyms of “little narratives” would yield phrases like ‘trivial story’ or ‘insignificant story’. And nothing could be more ‘trivial’ or ‘insignificant’ than the Dalit narratives that are documents of the lives and torturous experiences of the most ‘trivial’ and ‘insignificant’ members of our country – the Dalits. Hence I use this phrase “little narratives” to refer to works from India – that would be the writings by Dalits that would aid the rupture of the monolith of the Hindu caste system and the construction of hierarchical discourses in existing canonical texts by upper caste educated elites. To justify why Lyotard’s phrase is used in a paper on Dalit literature, I strongly contend that oppression of and discrimination against the Dalit communities in India as also in West Bengal is an equation of power and politics. So it is only right that the phrase be used to signify the politically charged relations that have given the Dalit communities their low status in society and the degradation they live in their lives.

Hopefully the translation and thus the wide circulation of such literature might be the eye opener needed for the ‘sociologically blind’ society when they tend to turn a blind eye to the lives, sufferings and tortures endured by the Dalits in society. The theoretical assumptions of postmodern times have also focused on the importance of documentation of history through the unconventional documents that are not the regular records or books of history. Authors of the mainstream like Amitav Ghosh have made this method of historiography, the process of documenting history, popular and pivotal. This is the process where social, cultural, and importantly the national history, gets documented through personal stories – as documented in letters, diaries and even oral stories. And this is where our “little narratives” – narratives written or documented by the Dalits of our country, state, region, get to be the indispensable contributor to the Indian national historiography.

It was in the 10<sup>th</sup> century that the earliest writings in Bangla are supposed to have been composed in the form of the *Charyapadas*. These were composed by members of the low caste communities mostly. It was during the rule of the Pala dynasty between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries that most of these *Charyapadas* were composed. Then the folk songs, hymns and dohas composed by the Auls and Bauls, folk singers of Bengal, and the oral compositions of the Kobiyals, are all proof, if documented and recorded and archived for posterity, of the history of the lives and the social, cultural and economic conditions of these places. Thus, the importance of all such, both written and oral, texts of Dalit literature as documents of history cannot be denied.

Translation has always facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and literature, across linguistic, geographic and cultural borders – essentially across all kinds of borders. We pride ourselves in a society that ironically only understands and appreciates the language of division, discrimination and fission. We speak in a language that camouflages all of the fissures in the elusive ‘unity in diversity’ or a ‘global culture’ adage. We believe in a

culture that divides us into various groups – on the basis of colour, race, class, caste, gender and any innumerable number of things we can think of. Everyone has one's own preferences for the kind of people one can like and interact and communicate with. But the worst kind of discrimination happens when one is segregated for what one is born as. Not only is there discrimination against groups who belong to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy, members of such groups are victims of social constructions by being characterized and stereotyped – how they look, how they dress, what they eat, so on and so forth. Anything to the contrary of any such belief/stereotype is rejected. And today, after seventy five years of Independence, India still fails to punish those who commit crimes against members of the lower castes.

The term 'Dalit' literally means 'crushed' or 'ground' and refers to a large group in India, almost 20% of the total Indian population according to an earlier census, who have been oppressed for centuries living a life of dire poverty and humiliation on the margins. The emphasis in the current social system is on the group's social exclusion as they have been designated as 'untouchables' by the law-givers of the traditional 'Varna' system. They have been made to do menial and dirty jobs, often very hard and toilsome. For centuries these people have been economically exploited, socially discriminated against and culturally marginalized. Literature that is written by members of this oppressed and much exploited group is therefore in momentous need of circulation. Translation of such literature aids the exposition of this dark facet of our society. But the grave issue here is how dissemination of such literature aid in the regular lives of such people. My rejoinder – maybe not much, but it is still important that 'such communities' exist in the dark shadows of civilized society, needs to be acknowledged. If we acknowledge their existence and their contribution to society, and larger numbers are made aware of their plight, maybe some change will be effected. This is where translation of their literature, that flow from their pens, their own voices, stands to stimulate society and affect change.

The "cracks in the homogeneous discourse of nationalism"<sup>6</sup> are easily visible when one tries to read Dalit literature especially from Bengal. In Bengal the usual attitude is to ignore the existence of the Dalit communities and along with it their literature. Literature by Dalit writers, from all corners of India, echoes the existence of a strong Dalit identity. Dalit writing in Marathi has had a remarkably powerful, long and influential history. Dalit literatures in Malayalam, Telegu, Tamil and Kannada have also had a fair amount of visibility. Bengali Dalit writing on the contrary has failed to make a mark on the literary and academic scene in Bengal till recently. Is it because we in Bengal refuse to accept the political ramifications of the existence of such communities? Dalit writing is now being taught and discussed in certain academic departments in Bengal. There is a certain determined refusal to recognize the works of Dalit writers writing in Bangla. Or more importantly the 'sociological blindness' towards the existence of the Dalit communities is most evident in Bengal. The predominance of the feeling of caste that deters academics from including these writers in their literary and scholarly endeavours is sad because Bengal prides itself among the more progressive of cultures and as an important center of development in this nation of a "Democratic Republic". The histories of the Dalit communities in our country are a trajectory of pain and suppression. Such stories most often remain untold and that is the way society prefers it – hence it has remained untold and unheard. It is ironic that no other caste in our state and country has to ever prove their caste identity except for the lower castes. Why do we always have to answer a question like "Are you really a Dalit? How much of a Dalit are you?" Why do

we never find a similar question being asked of the other communities – “Are you really a Brahmin or are you really a Kshatriya?” or “How much of a Brahmin or a Kshatriya are you?”

[T]ranslation as an activity... [that] takes place not in an ideal neutral site but in real social and political situations, involving groups who have vested interests in the production and reception of texts across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not simply a process of faithful reproduction any longer but invariably involves deliberate acts of selection, construction, and omission. It is inextricably linked to issues of cultural dominance, assertion, and resistance—in short, to power.<sup>7</sup>

So where does the power lie when we discuss translation of Dalit literature? It is my personal claim that no matter who does the translation or for what end result, the purpose of the outreach of the Dalit voice is achieved by translating Dalit writing. Again when we speak of translating India – which India do we mean? How do we define this India that we intend to translate? Do all such claims of translating India include translating the margins? Or are we still in the space where translation of literature from the margins is not regarded as essential or necessary because firstly of the query as to whether all such works are “literature” at all and secondly what purpose does it serve to translate such literature? It sure is far past the hour to raise doubts regarding the ‘value’ of such literature because that has long been dealt with. It can convincingly be claimed that these ‘little narratives’ have stamped their power all over such literature and made their presence felt adequately enough to compel their inclusion in discussion forums and volumes of publication both at the national and international levels. It is because of such ‘little narratives’ and their translations that the younger generation from such communities have started to find the spirit and space to raise their voices and speak for themselves. Dalit writings, the documenting of their lives and the spread of their experiential chronicles validate their undeniable share in the historiographical processes of the recording of national history.

The dimensions of power is inherent in the translation process itself—in the relationship of translator to author, between the source text and translated text, between the two sets of readers. So the process of translation would mean a negotiation of power between two groups. Hence the process itself establishes a hierarchy. Translation of Dalit literature, I feel, subverts or at least attempts to subvert the social hierarchy. The uneducated and the illiterate Dalit is easily acceptable. However a Dalit who can write and that the literature written by a Dalit is not only being read by a local populace but globally at large, sure are significant signs of a subversion of the social hierarchy – disruption of the existing power equations in society signalling a change in the existing structures. Therefore the task of challenging the grand narratives of the Hindu caste system is undoubtedly and successfully done by these ‘little narratives’.

Since power is related to economy and education that is vested in the hands of the upper castes in India, the upper caste men and women are better placed than their lower caste peers. So it is unfair if those who are better off, or should I say higher placed, question the difficulties of the Dalit existence. Based on experiential knowledge or rather the lack of it, one from the upper caste who belongs to an affluent educated family can never gauge the extent of the suffering or oppression the Dalits face in their regular existence. And the only way of knowing or creating a space for these ‘different’ voices is to let

them speak for themselves – let them be heard. It is equally important that the rest of society needs to learn to listen. Hence I would strongly vouch for translation of Dalit writings that thus facilitates the processes to rewrite the socio-cultural ‘his-story’ by including ‘their’ stories.

Translation of Dalit literature is imperative for the dissemination of such literature to a larger reading audience. Issues and problems in the translation of Dalit literature are diverse and different from those of translation of other literatures. I intend to deal with issues and problems that are specific to the translation of Dalit writing. Addressing these issues will facilitate an understanding of Dalit literature itself and also help to study the ‘nation state’ of India. In a state where the existence of Dalit communities and their literature is suspect, translation of such literature becomes all the more mandatory. And here I refer specifically to Bengali Dalit Literature. At this point I would like to include some of my own experiences as a translator. When I am translating I am only transferring in another language that which is already scripted. I am only rendering the original work in another language. There are of course problems in such transference because there are problematic issues in the process of translation itself. What do we translate? Do we need to or can we afford to avoid the essentials of language in translating such literature? ‘Writing’ through translation would mean voicing on behalf of someone else, which I would consciously refrain from. I would not want to be their voice, but rather the medium through whom their own voice can reach a much larger audience. And herein lies the first hurdle that we are likely to confront while translating from Bangla to English - approximation. Local cultural terms, idioms are some such difficult aspects of language that obstructs smooth translation.<sup>8</sup> The dialects that such writings use are an identity marker for such writing. “Dalit literature is unflinching in portraying the seamier side of Dalit life...Authentic representation, then, involves an unromanticised and unputying reflection in literature of the materiality of Dalit life in all its dimensions.”<sup>9</sup> This is the observation of Alok Mukherjee in his chapter in the translated version of Limbale’s book. One of the “materiality” and “seamier side” of Dalit life is the use of vulgar and uncouth language, but that is their reality, their existence and that is what will get reflected in their life’s documentation. How is using of cuss words in English good and that in Bangla bad? This discrimination needs to be called out. However these are also aspects which are the hurdles that a translator has to deal with while translating such works.

Personally the problems of translating Dalit writing that I have faced are those of culture (from Bangla culture to English culture) and of dialect in language. I have found it extremely difficult to transfer the flavour of dialect from Bangla to English, especially because I have been translating writers who write in the local regular spoken Bangla. My experience of translating writings by Kalyani Thakur Charal has hit hurdles because, as is the case with most authors, she has a very specific personal style. Of course I have the privilege of calling her up and asking her the exact connotation of her writings. But in most cases the authors may not be available, what then? Translating without referring back to the original author, will it mean the using of my power as translator or interpreter? Can I have a free hand to interpret a certain text as I deem fit? – Is that okay? That is the dilemma all translators have to anyway take a call on. This is a part of the job that the translator has committed to – a part of all the mediation and negotiation that is intrinsic to the process of translation.

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to address issues with regard to the translation of Bengali Dalit literature – its import and its difficulties. None of what is mentioned is anything extraordinarily new. The intent has been to revisit writings by several writers and critics and try to make it work for our own writings by Dalit writers in Bangla. The sole purpose was a strong emphasis and reiteration of the momentous need to translate such writings. Is it not true that translation is meant for readers who do not understand the original? At the risk of repeating myself, it is essential for the various crucial reasons mentioned above in this paper, to reiterate that translation becomes necessary when a particular text needs to reach out to a larger reading audience. Therefore translation of Bengali Dalit writing becomes an urgent necessity in today's India. Finally translators can also “create the reception context of a given text... [They] can be the authority who manipulates the culture, politics, literature, and their acceptance (or lack thereof) in the target culture.”<sup>10</sup> Thereby, translators have the access to actively participate in the construction of knowledge across different languages and cultural borders. This gives us, translators, power to be able to script a difference – affect a long awaited and much needed change. And it is high time that those who can, should thus, actively be a part of this much needed project of translating Dalit writing. It is believed that “Translation has been a major shaping force in the development of world culture.” (Bassnett/ Lefevre 12) This perspective of translation simultaneously allows for a stronger emphasis on ideology, politics, ethics and control in the context of translation. Thus “[t]he key topic that has provided the impetus for the new directions that translation studies have taken ... is power” (Gentzler/ Tymoczko xvi). While insisting on translation of Bengali Dalit writing, it therefore seems justified to conclude with the above quote. It is to emphasise on the power to change that the translations of the “little narratives” of the Indian literary scenario, the Dalit writings from Bengal, can affect in a society that desperately needs such changes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, New Delhi: Navayana, 2014, 3. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, in *Selected Writings, Vol.1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print

<sup>3</sup>Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 38. Print

<sup>4</sup>Lawrence Venuti, Introduction, *Translation and Minority: Special Issue of "The Translator" - 1st Edit* (routledge.com). Also from M. Asaduddin, Preface to *Survival and Other Stories*, ed. Sankar Prasad Singha & Indranil Acharya, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2012, rpt 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Sipra Mukherjee, ‘A Note by the Translator’, *Interrogating My Chandal Life. An Autobiography of a Dalit*, by Manoranjan Byapari, New Delhi: Samya Sage, 2018, xx. Print.



<sup>6</sup>Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*, New Delhi: OUP, 1999. Print.

<sup>7</sup>Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler ed., *Translation and Power*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/4406>

<sup>8</sup>I will have to apologise for not being able to provide examples from the translations I am currently engaged in, because that would give rise to copyright infringement.

<sup>9</sup>Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature. History, Controversies and Considerations*, Alok Mukherjee trans, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004, rpt 2018. Print

<sup>10</sup>Álvarez and Vidal 1996; "Translation: A Political Act". (71) Translation: A Political Act | M<sup>a</sup> del Carmen África Vidal Claramonte - Academia.edu

## Works Cited

Álvarez, Roman, and Carmen A. Vidal. "Translation: A Political Act." [Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/11111111/Translation:_A_Political_Act). Web.

Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Navyana, 2014. Print.

Bassnett, Susan, and Andre Lefevere. *Translation, History and Culture*. London: Pinter Publishers, 1990. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Selected Writings, Vol.1, 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Byapari, Manoranjan. *Interrogating My Chandal Life. An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Trans. Sipra Mukherjee. New Delhi: Samya Sage, 2018. Print.

Sethi, Rumina. *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*. New Delhi: OUP, 1999. Print.

Singha, Sankar Prasad, and Indranil Acharya, eds. *Survival and Other Stories*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2012, rpt 2013. Print

Tymoczko, Maria, and Edwin Gentzler, eds. *Translation and Power*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. Web.

Venuti, Lawrence. Introduction. *Translation and Minority: Special Issue of "The Translator"*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1998. Web.