

Translation — a bridge between cultures

By Krishna Dulal Barua

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Culture is a trans-historical component of civilization that enriches and enlivens the distinctive identity of different linguistic groups of people. Apart from its significant contribution towards mankind's refinement and reformation, culture instils into the hearts and minds of people a strong sense of self-esteem and pride along with the spirit of resistance against transculturation. Culture acts as a vibrant background to literature. Translators and interpreters play the important role of bridging cultures thereby enabling people from different cultural backgrounds understand each other better. Translation, as a bridge, fosters cultural equality.

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In a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural social set-up as in India, translation has a very significant role to play. For initiating better understanding among cultures, translation is the most powerful tool. Apart from enabling people acquire ideas of the varied works of other regional literature by unveiling the wealth and diversity of their resources, it can contribute significantly to national integration. Differences of divisions in multi-lingual societies can be bridged in a worth-while manner by translations from one language and culture to another bringing different segments of humanity closer to one another.

Hindi and English have continued to serve as the main link languages of literary exchange furthering indirect translations. Had these link languages not been in use, texts from many languages would never have got translated at all. Organizations like the Sahitya Akademi, the National Book Trust of India etc. have been working commendably in this field by promoting translations of regional literature and bringing out a wide array of publications through which the bridging of cultures has been facilitated simultaneously. Preparation of comprehensive bilingual dictionaries and a pan-India vocabulary have become primary requirements that the esteemed organizations can venture upon.

A sizeable percentage of the vocabulary of modern Indian languages is Sanskritic in origin. When the source and the target languages are closely related, e.g. Sanskrit, Hindi, Assamese and Bangla, to name a few, the problems in translation are comparatively less intense. But translation

to or from a foreign language, or even a language within the country with unfamiliar expressions and features, pose stiff challenges. When the text centres round traditional backgrounds with folk and ethnic elements in abundance, the complexities in rendition soar, at times, to unmanageable proportions. Herein lies the urgent need of a pan-Indian dictionary. In subsequent phases select words from such an arrangement could go on to be accepted in the global circuit through the Oxford or other trusted dictionaries as in the case of Indian words like avatar, aiyo, bazaar, bungalow, cheetah, cot, dacoit, ghee, guru, jungle, khaki, karma, loot, lathi, maharajah, mantra, pundit, pyjamas, thug, veranda, yoga etc. The attainment of universality by our regional words surely are occasions of no mean significance. This can ease the inconveniences of translation, too, most effectively.

Due to the unavailability of the aforesaid resource materials, in Assamese even common words like 'gamocha', 'pirali', 'thapona', 'chadar', 'agloti kalapat', 'nongola', 'naam-ghar' for instance, have been getting compromised with words or terms like 'Assamese towel', 'plinth', 'altar', 'breast-cloth', 'tip of a banana leaf', 'bamboo gate', 'temple' as English equivalents where, besides the inaccuracy or incompleteness in meanings, the cultural contexts associated with them get alienated. The 'gamocha' is not simply a towel, it is a symbol of honour used even in the altars of prayer-houses apart from honouring guests, respected people and achievers. Male Bihu performers tie it across their foreheads. The front portion of a fresh-grown banana leaf is an indispensable item in Assamese society during rituals. The 'nongola' constructed as the gate-way in front of the houses in Assamese villages is not simply a 'bamboo gate' but a typical construction designed with bamboo poles. The 'naam-ghar', too, is not just a common temple but the combination of a prayer-house and a congregational hall together.

Footnoting, no doubt, is a much better option than going for vague cultural parallels, but the frequent use of foot-notes tends to ruffle the reader's concentration and mar the level of reading pleasure. Moreover, some of our regional words e.g. the 'nongola' seem to require even supporting illustrations for conveying the actual idea of our cultural objects. Of course, at times, a metaphoric or idiomatic expression in the target text could be more convincing an equivalent than a forced interpretation of the source text. Translation endeavours bring to the fore numerous limitations and inadequacies in the English vocabulary too. For example, there is no reverential version of the word 'you' while addressing in English to differentiate between a senior or a respectable person from a youngster as prevalent in Indian societies or cultures. English cannot distinguish between the different types of uncles, aunts and in-laws. While translating one of Nilmani Phookan's poems, I came across a situation of extreme helplessness. In the poem (a couplet), the funeral pyre's flames do not get extinguished — the pyre keeps on burning. The situation demands the term 'inextinguishing / unextinguishing pyre' to express the continuity of the fire burning in the pyre. But pitifully, owing to the inexistence of the words 'inextinguishing' or 'unextinguishing' in English, I had to settle for the term 'unextinguished pyre' in utter helplessness and unease :

"In the green frontiers a gong breaks into a clangour,
It's evening now over the unextinguished pyre."

The inexistence of a word in the target language led to an unsolicited state of inaccuracy in the translation — a bridge there was but with a rift!

A translator needs to grow with his experience and find answers on his own along the journey. Varieties of experiences open the doors of our perception and broaden the expanse of our horizon. The judicious choice of strategies is simultaneously promoted. Translation, after all, as Herstranche said, is neither a creative nor an imitative art but stands somewhere between the two!

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