

Found in Translation and Poetry: In Conversation with Ra Sh

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Ravi Shankar aka Ra Sh is a renowned poet-translator from Palakkad, Kerala. His poetry departs from traditional poetic imagery and clichéd diction to articulate a critique of the pseudo-morality of society in a distinct tongue that is boldly carnal. Ra Sh has published several volumes of poetry including *The Bullet Train and other loaded poems*, *Kintsugi by Hadni*, and *Architecture of Flesh*. His works have been translated into German, French, and other global languages. Most recently, his poem ‘Silent Farewell’ has been translated over 150 times into various Indian and world languages and is slated to be published as an anthology.

As a translator, he has been celebrated as having a unique take on the process. For instance, his translation of *Mother Forest: An Unfinished Autobiography*, the autobiography of CK Janu from Malayalam is one of the earliest attempts in the English language to represent the nuanced voice of a tribal leader. His other published translations include Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

1. I am very interested in knowing how translation became something that you do. What was the first work that you translated? Was it a conscious choice?

When you are doing theatre or some kind of politico-cultural work, it is inevitable that you get into translation. It may, in the beginning, be the translation of some articles or books. Thus, I have done translations of certain chapters of the political activist K Venu’s seminal work ‘The Philosophical problems of Revolution’ into English. A similar work for translation in the opposite direction, from English to Malayalam, was Paulo Freire’s classic book ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed.’ They were done with much exactitude and care for the social problems they addressed. They also went very well with my emerging political beliefs. Later, in theatre, I did translations in Malayalam of Dario Fo’s play ‘Accidental Death of an Anarchist.’ All these became published works.

I did translations of Badal Sircar’s plays ‘Michil’, portions of the play ‘Spartacus’ and Durenmutt’s play ‘The Visit’ for production purposes. Again, these were works of political significance.

2. How do you describe your own method of translation? Is there a particular technique that you follow in the process of translation?

There can be no set pattern or process of translation, specially if you take non-fiction, fiction, and poetry separately. Each are different and need to be treated so.

3. How do you choose a text or a poem for translation? How personal is that process of choosing a poem/work for translating? As a poet yourself, do you find translating poetry to be more difficult than prose? Is there something that you do differently when you take up poetry as opposed to prose? How do you tackle with the question of loyalty in translation, especially in the context of poetry?

I have done that only with poetry. In fiction and non-fiction, the works were works of necessity with a certain social purpose involved. Clearly, my preference lies with translation of poetry. I believe translating poetry is a much more challenging work as one has to be a poet to translate poetry. It becomes another creative work as much as when one writes one's own poetry. In the original text, one has to identify the social background, cultural specifications, significance or meaning, word patterns, line patterns, stanza patterns, the temperament, the pathos or level of empathy involved in each poem when you translate. If you have some knowledge of the louvre of a poet, it is better. After some time, you get to like a poet more than another and then you translate more of that poet. Of course, there is also a question of 'translatability.' Everything cannot be translated. There is a tendency now in Malayalam poems to go more local using local slangs etc that makes the work of a translator very difficult. Some like to play with words by combining or altering them. It is impossible to bring that effect in translation and one has to tell the poet.

I edited a book of translations of 101 poems in Malayalam to English, titled 'How to translate an Earthworm.' 95 of those poems were translated by me. The poems ranged from those writing in the eighties to the latest ones, targeting those poets who were relatively unknown and poets who were young. This selection was a tough one and many poets in this range were left out. I am still doing the translation of 3 poems, each of two poets for an online magazine every month. This selection, often, is subjective.

4. As a translator, how do you see the editorial interventions made to published translations? You mention how some objected to your unique style of translation of Janu's speech before it was published and hence had to rework the draft. You also speak of how individuals such as Mini Krishnan and Ritu Menon helped you fine-tune the text. What do you think is their role, as publishers and editors in the production of this text (especially in the context of marginalized writings)?

Mini Krishnan was only instrumental in introducing me. I had to deal mainly with Rosamma, one of Ritu's editors. The version I talked about is prior to that. I had twisted some words or elongated them to fit in with Janu's speech (in a way assaulting the English language) and this did not go down well with the people I consulted. I think I have given an example in my note.

So, the text that went to Ritu was already standard English. I did not face much difficulties with Rosamma as we could converse in Malayalam. But, one thing

I could never make her understand was why certain Nouns have Capital letters. Like – Road, Motor, Party etc. What I meant was that anything exterior to Adivasi life should bear a Capital letter. Because they were new things entering their life. You can see this when you read the text.



5. How much role do you think the global market plays in the selection, publication, and dissemination of a marginalized text in translation? Do you see a larger politics of consumption unravelling in the increased interest in marginalized literatures in English?

I was not aware of it at that time, but I learnt later that such texts dealing with marginalized life has an assured (if not huge) market globally. Thus Feminist, Dalit, Transgender, Sex worker, Tribal, Subaltern literature get a preference in the alternative market. There is a pretty strong network connecting them.

6. Do you see yourself as a mediator of the text you translate to a larger international audience, especially since English translations are made to cater to a pan-global readership? How do you try to accommodate the text to a foreign audience, so as to make the reception of the text easier for an outsider-reader?

The translator's primary task is to transplant one culture from its language to another language. For that, the text is not required to be redesigned. Text by itself is strong enough to carry itself. I am talking about prose here. Many times, the flavour of the original is maintained by using idioms from the original. If the text is peppered with such usages unique to the original language, the global reader will quickly pick it up. The translator's ability is in determining how much of the original can be retained without hurting the reader's sensibility and affinity towards his own language.

I developed a Glossary for the text of 'Mother Forest' which is appended to the book. Someone told me the Glossary itself is a work of art. It's not the normal glossary you often find. Bhaskaran has no role in it.

In my translation of the Tamil writer Bama's short stories, one had to go one notch up on all this. Because one was not dealing with just the standard Tamil language, but also the language of the Dalits in the villages. A normal Tamilian is not familiar with it. Many terms are not found in dictionaries. The only way to do it was to sit with the author and go through the stories with the translations.

But, my attempt always is to reduce the glossary as much as possible, limiting it to two or three each page where needed. A page for the entire Glossary helps as usual.

7. Do you feel that translations have become academized over the years? For example, the number of editorial paratexts that are attached to translations has explicitly increased. I take *Mother Forest*, which came out in 2004, and *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior*, which came out in 2018 to be examples that would highlight this trend. While the former contains minimal paratexts, the latter is affixed with academic treatises which would serve as pointers to prospective academics. Do you think this trend has to do with the increasing academic (market) interest in marginalized or even bhasha literatures?

Too much academic intervention is bound to damage the text. The reader will lose interest in the narrative with such constant breaks. This is also because academicians treat texts like treatises. They forget the literature content in it. After all, any literature is meant to give you the pleasure of reading and not to teach you things.

There is, of course, the interventions where academic treatises are pointed out. The books quoted here are different in their treatment.

To give an example, as I said earlier, I had translated Paulo Friere's seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" into Malayalam. I found that each page had only seven or eight lines of text, but the rest of the page was taken over by foot notes. The foot notes themselves could be compiled into another book.

But, unlike the biography of Mayilamma or a book-length treatise like 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', *Mother Forest* is not a long essay, but a piece of literature. It is as literature that it finds its locus standi.



8. *Mother Forest* was a unique piece of translation not just as the first Malayalee tribal autobiography to be translated into English, but also as one

among the earliest translations of Dalit-Adivasi literature. Was it that the publishers found this text in Malayalam and approached you for its translation or vice versa? It would be interesting to know about the process of the publication if you don't mind sharing the experience?

I went with Bhaskaran to Wayanad to interview Janu at her home. We spent a night at her place. But, a book in English was never thought of at that time.

When Bhaskaran published this in a mag and later DC Books made it a book, its popularity made us think in terms of a translation. I had a job in Kochi at that time and was staying with Bhaskaran on and off. In fact, when DC organised a book launching, someone asked Bhaskaran about an English translation and Bhaskaran pointed out to me and said, "Ravi is doing it." I was a non-entity at that time.

Once the translation was complete, we showed it to Paul Zacharia, the writer, who suggested we sent it to Mini Krishnan of OUP. I wrote to Mini and she was so impressed that she introduced me to Ritu Menon of Women Unlimited. In fact, Ritu came down from Delhi to Chennai and it was settled. We went through several drafts of the book before it was published. (This association with Ritu Menon also resulted in another assignment for me to translate Tamil Dalit writer Bama's short stories into English. This book was published after Mother Forest titled 'Harum Scarum Saar and other stories.' All these became part of a larger book with more stories titled 'The Ichy tree monkey and other Stories' which was published this year.

9. Though the text is autobiographical in nature, only Bhaskaran is credited as the author of the text and nowhere in the title of the Malayalam text or the translation, is the genre of the text specified. Is there an ambiguity concerning the text's genre as an autobiography? Had this issue been taken up during the process of translation? Why do you think the authorship of the text is solely ascribed to Bhaskaran?

It is written in the first person, as if Janu is narrating the story. That was what was unique about it. Bhaskaran wrote it as if Janu was writing it. He must have based it on the sound recordings he had of the interviews with Janu. He created a language of first person speech as an Adivasi would speak it in Malayalam. It is not Janu's speech. The creative effort is of Bhaskaran. That's why the book has the caption "The life story of Janu" in Malayalam and not "autobiography."

When the translation was taken up for publication, this issue was raised by Ritu. I had to explain it all to her and her editors. Finally, it is described as "The Unfinished story of C.K.Janu" "As told to and written by Bhaskaran."

10. The syntactic style of *Mother Forest's* first chapter is truly one of a kind. You speak of your desire to retain the "flavour of Janu's intonation and the sing-song nature of her speech". Why did you choose to represent Janu's voice in this fashion?

In the present translation, this is not done with much success. Bhaskaran is using his version of a Malayalam spoken by Janu. But, it cannot satisfactorily be translated for obvious reasons. This was the version I was referring to against Question No 6 and 7. Please read them too.

As mentioned in my Translator's Note, The first para of the text ran like this: *“where we all lived there was a time when work just meant pulling out the paddy seedlings transplanting them in the fields aand such/ mostly work related to paddy faarming/ plantation work became common much later/ work like manuring coffee manuring pepper aand such were simply not there/ most of the toiling we did only in the rice fields/ carrying dung to the fields digging up the soil with the spades sowing pulling out the seedlings transplanting them weeding watering reaping carrying the sheaves of corn aand such / ”*

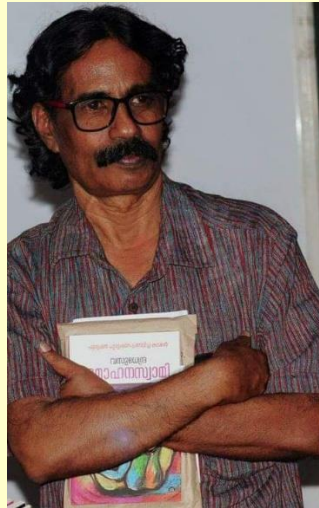
I meant to convey how some words relating to work are given a stress in their language. The entire text would have carried on this way. But, some friends asked me not to do it. I relented and thus what we see now is standard English, spelling intact.

11. There is a prevalent debate on whether marginalized literatures can be translated/transcribed by those from outside cultures/castes and/or from a privileged background? Do you think these texts/lives must be dealt with only by people from the same socio-political and caste background?

It is not by merely being born into a situation that you want to create/ translate/ transcreate a work. You should also have the creative urge, passion and application to do it. Mere education does not give you that ability. Neither does scholarship. Coming to translations, the person has to know two languages more or less adequately. The present education helps in getting jobs, but not in creativity or language skills.

As long as creative minds with the qualities described above do not come up from the marginalised communities, this field will be open to privileged people like me. Because, it is the language of expression that matters, not just the experience. I have translated Dalit works from Malayalam and Tamil. The Tamil work was a lesson to me. Bama's text was considered vulgar and uncivilised by all the Tamil friends I had consulted. Because it was not standard Tamil. Bama's Tamil was born from the soil, from the fields of Tamil Nadu, from the feudal system that still existed there. So, I went all the way from Palakkad to Kanjipuram where Bama is working as a teacher. I sat with her and went through the text line by line. It was only after this, that I translated it and Bama approved it after many drafts. So, a translator has to be both creative and have a zeal for the work he/she is doing. In that sense, I believe that my efforts would match with a Dalit translator if he/she had done it.

A fallacy is that a Dalit in TN has the same experiences as a Dalit from Kerala. They are so vastly different. So, a Malayali Dalit cannot really lay a better claim to understand Tamil Dalit life than me. But, definitely, writers from the same communities will come up to describe their own joys and sorrows. Privileged people like me do not have to be around at that time.



12. One of your recent poems have the distinction of having been translated more than 100 times into various Indian and world languages. What do you feel about this unique honour? The process must've been invigorating as a translator yourself, to see your work get transcreated in so many different dialects and languages, interpreted and reinterpreted in so many ways.

I wrote the poem 'Silent Farewells' in fifteen minutes or so, sitting up in bed on 17th Nov Morning. I didn't think much of the poem, except that it was an 'innocent' poem without my usual afflictions like having a strong political stand, using sexuality as a political statement, liberal use of sexual terms etc. But, something struck the minds of my readers and by evening I got many translations in Malayalam. This became an avalanche and within two weeks there were many translations by old and new poets in many styles of their own. For translations from other languages, I had to coax my friends a bit. What was happening in Malayalam was unique and unheard of. Some poets began doing three or four variations of the poem in many slangs. Weather-beaten poets like Balachandran Chullikkadu, Nazeer Kadikkadu, Sachidanandan Puzhankara, PP Ramachandran and finally, the maestro K. Satchidanandan made their appearance. Sachi Mash¹ did five variations of translation like in the styles of Ezhuthachan, Poonthaanam, Changampuzha, Mappilappattu and a lullaby.

Within a month there were 110 Malayalam translations, translations in Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Bengali, Assamese, Karbi and Urdu. Also in foreign languages like Italian, French, German, Spanish, Danish and Indonesian languages.

This was certainly invigorating to me as a poet and a translator. Also, it showed in how many tongues in the same language the same poem can be translated far differing from each other. It is a lesson in the process of translation.

A book with all these translations is coming out soon.

¹ A Malayalam term used, often endearingly, to refer to teachers. Its origins can be traced to the English word 'Master'.