

## A Case for Collaborative Translation of Literary Texts in South Asia

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*Translation of contemporary works of literature from one South Asian language into another has a great potential for developing a shared understanding of the region's diverse linguistic cultures. The author shares his experience of translating and editing translations of novels, short stories, poetry, and literary non-fiction from South Asia and elsewhere into Urdu.*

In a video interview, G N Devy speaks of a rare linguistic gift of a small, disappearing community in Maharashtra as follows:

Two people stand at a distance of say three hundred or four hundred feet, and I whisper in the ears of one person in some language, say Gujarati, or Punjabi ... this fellow makes movements of hands, and the other fellow reads the movements of hands and speaks that language, whether or not that person knows that language which is being used. In other words, these persons have the ability to translate the sounds into visual symbols, and the ability to read visual symbols and re-translate those symbols into sounds. (Algebra 2018)

To my mind, the aim of the translator of a literary text is to read the visual symbols on a page or a screen representing the sounds of a language, and then create a parallel set of symbols that hope to contain as much of everything the original contained as possible in another language that expresses itself in its own sounds. Everything here literally means everything. In the case of a work of creative literature, it would include the layered meanings of the text; the evident and hidden historical, cultural and political references; and the personal stories and collective myths that fictional characters and poetic personas carry with them. All this makes it a nearly impossible goal to achieve, except in cases where the sounds are identical and only the visual symbols, the written scripts, are different; for example, Punjabi written in Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi, or Sindhi which is now increasingly being written in two scripts, Nagari (which is now called Devanagari)<sup>[1]</sup> and Arabic (which has replaced what was called “Sindhi” a couple of decades ago).<sup>[2]</sup> In such cases, the script is presumably the only barrier in communication as the cultural distance between the two is the least. In the case of Urdu and Hindi, the [online transliteration software](#) developed at the Punjabi University, Patiala, has made the conversion of the Unicode text of one language into the other quite fast and easy.<sup>[3]</sup>

Among the languages used in South Asia, there are some that are very distant from each other; the linguistic distance of several languages of South India and Sri Lanka with Urdu, Hindi or Punjabi is to such a great extent that using English to bridge this gap is inevitable while translating literature. Still, the cultural content associated with and depicted in these languages displays a high degree of mutual intelligibility. We can say that the cultural distance in such cases is considerably smaller than the linguistic distance. It is, therefore, more worthwhile to translate literary works directly from the target (the language in which the work is originally created) to the vehicle language (the one in which the work is being translated). However, translators having a reasonable familiarity with both languages is rare. What makes the issue more complex is the fact that a large proportion of people classified as speakers of a certain language speak not the standardised form, but one of several subregional dialects of that language, and literary works of that language tend to employ these linguistic nuances for a realistic portrayal of the sociocultural milieu.

A large number of literary translations carried out in colonial and postcolonial South Asia are either from English into the regional languages or vice versa. However, there is another category of literary translations done “through” English. The translators of writings from Europe, Latin America, Africa, East Asia, West Asia use, more often than not, English as a bridge language between the original tongues and the one translated into. In a broad sense, we can term these translations of translations as “collaborative translations.”

But, in cases when the translator has no clue about the original language in which the literary work was produced and relies solely on a previous translation, it does not seem right to call it a collaboration. Collaboration occurs when either the translation relies on the text of the original language and uses the English (or any other language) as the glossary;

or two people—one of whom knows the language of the original really well and the other can handle the target language with facility—join hands to create the translation. The two individuals can communicate in English or another common tongue.

In the case of South Asian languages, a collaboration between two individuals, each deft in either of the two languages involved, can result in more worthwhile and nuanced translations. It is even better if the collaborative effort simultaneously produces two translations, for example, an English or an Urdu translation of a Kannada novel. This will make the work of fiction, poetry, or non-fiction accessible to a relatively larger readership than is possible with the English translation alone.

What follows is a series of observations about the process of transliteration, translation and collaborative translation arising out of my experiences since 1981 as a translator and an editor of translations from various languages into Urdu. I give a brief overview of these experiences to provide a perspective for my recent experiment of translating a contemporary Sinhala novel into Urdu (and subsequently Hindi) in collaboration with its author while the two of us did not know each other's language and perforce used English as the bridge between us. The purpose is to compare the feel and the characteristics of this work of translation with other works that I have handled in the past, and to emphasise the need for more translations of contemporary regional literature not only into English but into other regional languages to promote a shared understanding of the life and culture of South Asia and the world around it.

## Early Experiments

The 1981 Urdu anthology called *Aaj: Pehli Kitab*, which was to become the basis of the quarterly *Aaj* in 1989, included translations from Sindhi, Hindi, Spanish, Polish, Bengali, Malayalam, and Punjabi. All translations into Urdu, except those from Sindhi, Hindi and Punjabi were done from their English translations. The Hindi poems by Sarweshwar Dayal Saxena were only transliterated almost word for word into the Urdu script by Asad Mohammad Khan, with unfamiliar Sanskrit-based words explained in footnotes.

The following year, I collaborated with Girish Damania on the translations of two Gujarati poets, Gulam Mohammad Sheikh and Suresh Joshi. In 1983, I translated the modern Persian classic novel, *Boof-e Koor* (1936) by Sadegh Hedayat into Urdu, mainly from its English translation *The Blind Owl* (1958), but using the original Persian text as a reference. In the process, I found that this strategy made a lot of difference, as the cultural distance between Persian and Urdu was much less compared to that between Persian and English, or between English and Urdu. For example, the word "kooza" could be directly used in Urdu instead of "piala" for "cup" that the English translation used. Many years later, I observed the same thing while editing the Urdu translation of a short novel *Afrāh-al Qubba* (1981) by Naguib Mahfouz. For this, the translator, Fahmida Riaz, had used, along with its English translation *Wedding Song*, the original Arabic text as reference. Riaz had retained, for example, the

Arabic term “mayyat” instead of “taboot” which could have been the legitimate translation of the English “coffin”. Both “kooza” and “mayyat” are examples of words rich in cultural connotations that are common in Urdu with Persian and Arabic respectively.<sup>[4]</sup>

When *Aaj* was launched as a literary periodical in 1989, it decided to mainly focus on Urdu translations of literature from various parts of the world. Although its 105 issues so far have showcased groundbreaking original Urdu literary works, these have been presented alongside translated short stories, novels, poems, autobiographies and essays to a small but interesting, mostly young and multilingual Pakistani readership. This literary endeavour has not only enhanced the literary and social horizon of its readers and developed a taste for translated literature, but it has also encouraged upcoming Urdu writers to experiment by taking inspiration from translated works.

With a view to closely study the development of contemporary fiction, particularly short stories, in languages close to Urdu, a series of special issues of *Aaj* were devoted to Hindi, Persian and Arabic literature. Gradually, the journal began to publish entire novels and autobiographies, both original and translated, in a single issue. Several excellent translators were encouraged to undertake book-length translations for *Aaj*. For example, the African novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by J M Coetzee (translated by Siddiq Alam as *Wehshiyon ka Intazar*, published in *Aaj*, No 96, 2016); the Arabic autobiography *Qissati maal She'r* (My Story with Poetry) by the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (translated from Arabic by Abu Amsh as *Shairi ki Rah Main*, published in *Aaj*, No 83, 2014); and the Hindi autobiography *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki (rendered into Urdu by Shiraz Hasan, *Aaj* No 94, 2015). The combined issue *Aaj* (Nos 98-99-100) featured the complete translation of Yashpal's Hindi novel *Jhoota Sach* (1958-60) (translated through audio-recording by Munira Surati) while *Aaj* No 103 comprised the Urdu translation of Arundhati Roy's new novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) (translated by Arjumand Ara as *Be-Panah Shadmani ki Mamlakat*).

Over these years, I participated in collaborative translations of two Marathi novels with Gouri Patwardhan, a Marathi-speaking film-maker. One was *Indhan* by Hamid Dalwai (Urdu translation published in *Aaj* No 50, 2005) and the other was *Enkichya Rajat* by Vilas Sarang (Urdu translation published in *Aaj*, No 64, 2008). I also translated Orhan Pamuk's Nobel Banquet Speech (2006) under the title *Abba ka Suitcase* (*Aaj*, No 55, 2007) from its Turkish original with Nameera Ahmad, a Pakistani student who had learned the language in Turkey. During these translations, I made the pleasant discovery that many Persian and Arabic expressions are common between Marathi and Urdu (for example “tafawat” which means difference) and between Turkish and Urdu (for example, “meslek” which means the artistic or political viewpoint). This is in addition to the more significant fact that the two languages are culturally closer to Urdu than to English.

While publishing Hindi texts in Urdu for the anthologies of modern Hindi short stories, I discovered that less than five per cent of the words needed to be changed, a fact which

points to these being identical languages in a large part of their creative writing. When I came across the online transliteration software from Patiala, I decided to use it to convert two of my Urdu translations into Hindi, that is, the Nagari script. These were the Iranian short stories, "Sa'edi's "Baazi Tamam Shud" (English: The Game is Over) by Gholam Husayn Sa'edi and "Baradaran-e Ghamgeen" (English: The Sad Brothers) by Amin Faqiri, that I had translated from the Persian as "Khel Khatm Hua" and "Teen Udaas Bhai" respectively (Urdu translations published in *Aaj*, No 15, 1994)). In order to see how the language employed in my Urdu translations communicated with the Hindi literary readership, I submitted both to the prestigious Hindi quarterly, *Pahal* published from Jabalpur. They were both accepted and published in *Pahal*, No 94 in 2013.

## Translating from Sinhala

When I enrolled in the PhD Sociology programme at the South Asian University, New Delhi, I was fortunate to find a Sri Lankan novelist among my batchmates. I could think of no better opportunity to study Sri Lankan society and its Sinhala-speaking community, while residing in India, than to read the Sinhala novel *Mey Rahas Kuluwen Ebenna* (2015) with its author's help and render it first in Urdu and then Hindi. On my suggestion, the novelist, Kaushalya Kumarasinghe, agreed to participate in this collaborative translation. The experience of translating the novel into Urdu and Hindi under the common title *Is Chhupi Hui Khirki Main Jhanko* (*Aaj*, No 105, 2018) was different in many ways from my earlier experiences in collaborative translation. The cultural proximity, in this case, did not consist of words and sounds, as Urdu and Sinhala are linguistically quite distant from each other, but of cultural milieu, social norms and political conditions. What is more, it turned out that the novel deals, among other things, with the theme of a failed or dysfunctional communication between two sets of characters and, indeed, between two communities divided by religion and language.

At the centre of the novel's structure is the story of sexual infidelity and revenge involving four characters who are from the professional urban middle class serving the neo-liberal economy. They are seen operating in this context aided by supporting characters whose relationship with one another is professional and material rather than personal. There is another set of characters—university students, activists campaigning for the defence of free education, garment factory labourers, club dancers and karaoke singers, sex workers, and aspiring participants of beauty pageants—who have migrated from a rural background in search of empowerment through employment and education. The lives of the latter set of characters go through hardships and disasters for economic and political reasons such as sexual exploitation, forced disappearances, suppression of protest, but the former set of characters remain unaffected by this. In fact, both sets of characters are so caught up with the stories of their own lives that, even when their paths often cross those of the others, they fail to generate an empathetic communication with one another. On the one hand these situations remind one of similar conditions in urban centres elsewhere in South Asia, and on the other, point specifically to a lack of communication between urban and rural

communities, between the northern and southern parts of the island, between the Sinhala and Tamil linguistic groups and even between different Tamil-speaking communities divided by faith and social backgrounds. One telling aspect of this emerges in the novel when two migrant sex workers discover that the Tamil Hindus and Sinhala Buddhists have been worshipping the same goddess with two different names, Pattini and Kannagi, in separate temples.

Thanks to the sociological insight shared by the author during the course of collaborative translation, I discovered that this dysfunctional communication is evident in a near lack of contact between the literary communities working in Sinhala and Tamil. Literary translations of Sinhala into Tamil and vice versa are said to be few and far between. However, Kumarasinghe's novel found a Sri Lankan Tamil translator before our collaborative effort brought it into Urdu and Hindi. It is yet to be translated into English.

## **A Case for Collaborative Translations**

Before I undertook the Urdu-Hindi translation of Kumarasinghe's novel with his collaboration, I tried to find a platform, a regular journal or series of anthologies, where writers and readers of South Asian literature could share literary works produced in the languages of the region. When I could not find such a platform, I decided to make a small beginning in this direction and launch *City: A Journal of South Asian Literature* which would solicit and publish English translations of prose and poetry of, about and from the region as also the literary works originally produced in English. Fortunately, Sophia Naz, an English and Urdu poet and translator of Pakistani origin and Indian descent, based in California, agreed to be the co-editor of *City* and together we have managed to bring out two issues so far. The 2017 issue contained a special section on Sri Lankan writing from Sinhala, Tamil and English languages, and the 2018 issue carried a similar section focusing on Nepali writing. Besides, each issue had a general section that included prose and poetry written, apart from English, in Bengali, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Telugu and so on. The writers included those belonging not only to Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and the South Asian diaspora but also, for example, a Frenchman writing in Urdu on a Pakistani subject (translated by a Bengali-speaking English poet from Calcutta), a Tamil-speaking resident of Calcutta translating a Bengali writer into English, a Greek-Belgian woman writing in English a story that has Lucknow as its setting, and an Iranian woman settled in Kathmandu writing in Persian a story with Nepali characters (translated jointly by an Afghan and a Pakistani).

This and other such platforms should be used and enhanced to develop a common South Asian literary readership and shared cultural experience, by building works of collaborative translation both in English and between languages of the regions to take these writings to the vast publics that read only in their own language.

**End Notes:**

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[1] King (1994) writes about an organisation called the Nagari Pracharini Sabha (Society for the Promotion of the Nagari Script and Language) in Benares (1893-1914).

[2] The Sindhi Academy, New Delhi, published its quarterly Sindhi journal *Sindhu Jyot* in two scripts. The script written from right to left used to be called "Sindhi." For the past decade or more, a number of Sindhi books are being published in the Nagari script. In a recent seminar at the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, transcripts of the presentations were available in both scripts. Since I was among the few people present there who could read both scripts of Sindhi, I was asked whether I would like to have the "Arabic" transcripts too. Given that the language used in all of them was Sindhi, the Sahitya Akademi official found it absurd to refer to the old script as Sindhi. Officially, the Sahitya Akademi, unlike the Sindhi Academy, does not acknowledge more than one script for a language.

[3] See <http://uh.learnpunjabi.org/>.

[4] *Shadiyane* (Urdu translation by Fahmida Riaz) published in two instalments in *Aaj*, No 23 (Fall 1996) and No 24 (Winter 1997).

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