

Translating Agamsingh Giri: Problems Re-visited

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Abstract

Mukhia intends to share his experience of translating some poems of Agamsingh Giri, a great Indian Nepali Poet. In re-visiting the problems he sums them up under three heads of problems before during and after the translation. He says that the objectives of translating Agamsingh Giri into English were to introduce Giri as an Indian Nepali poet to the non-Nepali speaking audience and thus to contribute something to the literary terrain of translation.

Keywords: Translation, Source Text, Target Text, Target Audience, Objectivity.

The singular objective of this write up is to share my experience of translation of some poems of Agamsingh Giri, a great Indian Nepali poet. In the course of translation I encountered problems which can be summed up under three heads: (a) Problems before the translation: What to translate (source text)? For whom to translate (target audience)? Why to translate (reason)? (b) Problems during the translation: How to translate? How to remain faithful to the text and to the Poet? (c) Problems after the translation: Was the target text faithful to the source text? What would be the response of the readers? What more could I do?

The objectives of the translations on beginning the work were threefold: Firstly, to translate some poems of Agamsingh Giri. Secondly, to introduce Agamsingh Giri as a Great Indian Nepali poet to non-Nepali audience and to give them a taste and feel of Giri's poems. So the target audience was non-Nepali speaking who understood English. Thirdly, to contribute at least something to the literary terrain of translation by presenting the translation of Giri's poems. The answers to the questions came in as follows: What to translate? For whom to translate? Why to translate? The source text was Giri's poems. The target text was the English translations of the poems and the target audience was non-Nepali audience who did not know Nepali language but could read and understand English.

The Methodology and the Challenges

I started reading the poems of Agamsingh Giri. I liked the poems. Then I encountered the questions again: What to translate? There was a problem of choice. My choice fell on few poems which I decided to translate fully and I also selected some poems of which I translated some parts. I selected seven poems: *Victory to the Gorkhas* because

it was the first published poem of Giri; *The Expectation of an Old Prisoner*, as it was considered the first unpublished poem of Giri; *Dawn of Existence* published in *Astitva*, year 1, No. 2, January 1971, of which Giri himself was the co-editor; *Life Here is Lonely* (1969) a poetic song sung by Shanti Thatal; *I Shall Keep Singing* another poetic song, the first song sung by Dalsingh Ghataraj and Nawin Bardewa in Darjeeling. It was composed by Giri on the occasion of the staging of Bir Bikram Gurung's skit '*Jwar-Bhata*' in 1957; *Million Stars (Nawlakh Tara)* sung by Ambar Gurung (this song was the outcome of the pitiful political situation of the Nepalese living outside Nepal), *Guest not for Long* (1959) sung by Ambar Gurung (it was even included in the syllabus of schools), and *You Have Become Unrecognizable (Nachinine Bhayechau)*, a powerful satire which satirizes the Nepalese who seem to be losing self-identity. In a satirical way he tells his people (Nepalese) that they have become unrecognizable because they no more look like Gorkhas or Nepalese!¹ I will present the translation of a few poems only as illustrations.

The first poem chosen was *Nawlakh Tara*.² The title itself brought a big challenge. I had to spend a long time in translating just these two words! *Nawlakh* literally means 'nine lakhs' and *Tara* means 'stars'. When I translated it as *Nine Lakh Stars* it was too literal and sounded very funny. Then I focused on what Giri actually wanted to communicate through the title. For this I needed to consider the poem as a whole. The words and sentences in parts did not help me. Then I understood that Giri had used the words to mean 'numerous' or 'uncountable stars'. Still I could not use *Numerous Stars* or *Uncountable Stars*. Moreover 'Numerous' meant *Dherai* and 'Uncountable' meant *Gannai Nasakine* in Nepali. This led to the decision to use the equivalent English expression 'Million Stars'. But when I translated 'Million Stars' back into Nepali it meant 'Ten Lakh Stars' and not 'Nine Lakhs'! Ultimately I had to choose and decide upon one. Considering the text as a whole 'Million Stars' was very close to the 'Nawlakh Tara' and thought it fit to be used. Here is the translated version:

Million Stars

Million stars rise, the firmament of earth smiles
It is autumn in the forest the flowers make bond of love.
Without shining the star of mind has died
Though rhododendron bloomed in the hills, the flowers of our mind have withered
Don't think that Nepalese are living in peace
There is no reason to be happy when there are no flowers among thorns.
Why did you bring the golden dream filled in tears
Why did you come here to put off your mind's fire.

1 I selected these poems from Dr. Jiwan Namdung's book *Agamsingh Girika Kavitako Adhyan ra Adhar [Background and Study of the Poems of Agamsingh Giri]*, Darjeeling, Shyam Brother's Prakashan, 2000. Later I cross checked the poems with the original versions.

2 Cfr. Agamsingh Giri, *Nawlakh Tara Udaye [Million Stars Rise]*, Kalimpong, Gorkha, 14/8, August, 1961. For the Translation see Terence Mukhia, *Agamsingh Giri*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2010, p. 72.

We have the same blood but sorrows are different
Did you recognize us, we who have different wounds in the heart.
Look at our eyes without tears
If we cry we may be considered weak
Who can understand the sorrow in our heart
Happiness is apparent with sorrow within
Why did you nip the hilly flower at bud
Why did you come here forgetting your home.
Go back to the foothills of the Himalaya in the forest
Don't confide to others the story of our sorrow
Don't exchange the hard reality or else our dream will be shattered
The reality ends here before life is lived to the full.
The conflagration of heart has not been put off
There is still a load on chest and it is not yet released.
You came here to spray dry laughter in our tears
Why did you come here to be tied in the cage
Don't call us the brave offspring because our hearts burn with pain
The knot of the Nepali hearts will be loosened inside the cage.
We could not enjoy good days
The cry of the weak does not move the brave heart.
One day we will come to ask for the offering of blood
For time being don't cross the border (river Mechi)
Don't come to spray the dry laughter full of tears.³

Similarly it was tough translating the Khandkavya *Yaad* by Giri which was rendered as Reminiscence. The first two lines which are repeated at the end of every page offered a real challenge. I completed the first phase of literal translation of the khandakavya *Yaad* in one night. But it took more than three months to reach a satisfactory translation. Moreover, I was not satisfied with my translation of the opening lines of *Yaad*. I consulted three eminent personalities: Dr. Jiwan Namdung, an expert in Nepali language and literature who worked in Translation Centre, Darjeeling, Dr. Irshad Ahmed, authority in English language, HoD, Department of English, Government College Darjeeling, and Mr. Jogen Darnal, Nepali teacher, St. Robert's H. S. School, Darjeeling. We had exchange of views whether to use 'vindictive', 'painful' or 'cruel' for the word *nirmam*. Moreover, the difficulty in translating the very first sentence was acknowledged by all. I threw the challenge open to my colleagues as well another came up with my final version. The very first part of the translation is as follows:

Waking up the dream of life's moments
There came a cruel reminiscence
In the emptiness of this world
Time and again I get frightened

3 Ibid.

Thinking about life full of dream
I get really disheartened
The pleasant reverie of the past
The happiness of the present
In the darkness of the future
Shedding of tears is latent
The hazy memories in my mind
I must have been dreaming
In the acuteness of the past life
My heart is searching for something
The remembrance of my childhood
How should I write with contentment
Waking up the dream of life's moments
There came a cruel reminiscence!⁴

Translation: Challenges and Insights

I went ahead with the translation of seven poems to find that they were firstly text oriented and in places still literal.

Secondly, some of the poems has lines that rhymed. The first line was rhyming with the second line and the second with the fourth. Or at least the lines rhymed alternately. I tried to maintain the rhyme in these poems. But it was a tough job and when I evaluated the result I found that the words had been forced upon to maintain the rhythm. Translation was literal. Here I would like to cite an example from my book *Agamsingh Giri*. The verse is from *Phagun*, written in 1961, a lyrical poem which expresses the sorrows of Nepalese living in India. I thought the translation was liberal but it was not: "Phagunko hariyalisangako yo kasto nawlo khusiyali, jali-jali ajha pani yashari muskurayrahecha Nepali (What a fresh moment of delight of phagun's greenery, the Nepalese are suffering and yet still smiling.)"

It did not take me long to realize that literal translation actually seemed awkward and at times distorted the meaning of the original text. It was almost like what Dryden called 'paraphrase' or sentence to sentence translation.

My interest led me to translate *Nachinine Bhayechau* which I translated as *you have become unrecognizable*.⁵ In Nepali when we say *nachinine bhayechau*, the phrase has the second person intact in it which remains hidden. The first line of the poem makes it explicit: '*timi ta yaha nachinine bhayechau*' or 'you have become unrecognizable here'

4 For the original text in Nepali see Agamsingh Giri, *Yaad*, Darjeeling, Narendra Thapa, 1955, p.1. The translated version is ready for publication. There may be further changes in the published version.

5 Agamsingh Giri, *Atma Byatha [Pangs of Soul]*, Darjeeling, Navayug Nepali Pustak Mandir, 1959, p. 50.

I translated the first and the last verses of the poem and later the entire poem. But only the first and the last parts of the poem were included in my book. I would like to present the first verse here:

You have become unrecognizable here
Blood in your face has dried
Lustre of your eyes has gone
You look as though asleep while crying
Like a child
The suffering of a cruel prison
Like a dejected prisoner
Robbed of food and dwelling
Like an unfortunate person
You have become different
You have become unrecognizable.⁶

During the course of research I found that Giri had 22 metrical compositions out of 156 published poems. The problem became acute. At least the meter could not be translated as I realized that a great challenge was in front of me as how to translate the poems? Thus it was on completing a set of translation that the realization of the real problems in translation began to dawn.

Thirdly, I tried to be less literal and more liberal. The outcome was tremendous! I was reminded of Robert Browning who wrote in the foreword to his translation of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus that it is the translator's duty 'to be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language' and 'the use of certain allowable constructions which, happening to be out of daily favour, are all the more appropriate to archaic workmanship.'⁷ I could not afford to be literal always, similarly I could not be liberal always. I had to go according to the text and its meaning.

Fourthly, the meaning of the text having being retained, I derived some sense of satisfaction but was sorry that I had achieved that at the expense of sacrificing the originality of the poet which was apparent in the source text. In the process of bringing out the meaning of the text in English I felt that I murdered the original style of the poet. I kept asking myself: 'Am I faithful to the poet and to the meaning of the original text?'

Fifthly, as I read the original poems and the translated ones again and again I found that each poem had a context and it was related to some facts and events that surrounded the poet's life. I discovered that in the process of translation it was not enough to have the text only but a translator should have a good knowledge of the context and the background of the poem and the poet as well which were not always

6 Cfr. Mukhia, *op.cit*, p. 45.

7 J.M. Cohen, *English Translators and Translations*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1962, pp. 26-27.

self-evident from the poems. This led to the efforts to understand the background, read more and in consulting with experts. After having heard from them some parts of my translations appeared hilarious and it led to the revision of the translated version of poems.

Sixthly, this translation concentrates on one or two verses more from few other poems of Giri. Further, I translated the titles of all the poems of Giri to prepare a list. The final draft was ready. A question struck my mind: Was the target text faithful to the source text? What would be the response of the audience? What more could I do? It was after the publication of the work I found that some titles and some words in the poetry used by the poet were borrowed. Unless one has a good knowledge of these related works translation would not be perfect.

Seventhly, I discovered that in the task of translating a text/poem the job of a translator is not only to highlight the text and the author. One should become one with the poet and feel with the poet. Now since I am not the poet how could I be him? But more I read about him the better was the translation. So even though I could not be Giri I felt the need to be Giri intentionally by learning about him more and more.

Eighthly, there came the realization that not only the original author (the poet) is lost in the process of translation but I, the translator, as well'. That is, original content and style of the poet cannot be maintained and 'what I want to write' should not be there so as to achieve greater objectivity.

Ninthly, I discovered one more point: 'not only the context of the poem but also the present context is important in the work of translation'. Here two things occurred to me: Firstly, there may be change in the taste and standards of people of every new generation. So the translation should suit the taste and standard of the people. Here I came to understand better what has been said by one great translator, "[e]very great book demands to be re-translated once in a century, to suit the change in standards and taste of new generations, which will differ radically from those of the past".⁸ Secondly, if the present socio-political context matches with the context of the text, people welcome the translations. However, we should not always go by the criterion of making it 'favourable'. The following event helped me to get this point:

On sharing my work with my friends and some experts they liked just some of the translated poems. These were *Gorkhako Jai Hos* (Victory to the Gorkhas) and *Naw lakh Tara* (Million Stars), *Astitoa Udbodhan* (Dawn of Existence) and *You have become Unrecognizable* (*Nachinine Bhayechau*). I went around interviewing those people who knew the context of these poems. It did not take me long to realize that the present context too played a great role in translation. The present context of Darjeeling is that of political turmoil. Demand for a separate state is going on because the people feel

⁸ *Op.cit.*, p.9.

that their condition in the hills is not satisfactory. The context of the above mentioned poems is more or less similar to the present socio-political context. I would like to present the first four lines of the poem *Victory to the Gorkhas*: "We have dared to do something/We will not let down the Gorkha Flag/We will not retreat even if we need to die/Whom shall we fear if we have to die."

The poet shows his concern with the problem of identity of his people living in India in the poem Dawn of Existence. Let me present the first two lines and the last two lines of the poem: "I rise and look for bright new firmament /What has thrown into darkness our future existence". And finally concludes by saying: "There may be obstacles to embrace us aright / But let's march forward cautiously making existence bright". Surprisingly, there is no punctuation mark like comma and full stop in the poem.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there came the question of being faithful to the author or the poet. I felt that the poems of Agamsingh Giri were lost in the work of translation since I had the target text in place of the source text. Moreover, there had been many adaptations and improvisations at the expense of the original style of the poet. In the process of being more faithful I had become unfaithful! I felt the need to be faithfully unfaithful to the poet. I felt I was the traitor, was I? I say that in the process of translation if the meaning of the text is aimed at, the translation becomes text oriented and it is achieved at the expense of the original style of the author. To maintain both the style of expression and the meaning at the same time is difficult perhaps impossible in the work of translation.

I used to wonder why I could not have a satisfactory translation! During the course of translation I realized that the words and lines used in poetry are often in compact form telling and suggesting plenty in few words and lines. Therefore to find always the exact equivalents in the target text is a Herculean task. On 26 July (Monday) 2010, I heard from an erudite scholar that Giri was very much concerned with the identity and development of the Gorkhas or Nepalese. He was interested in preparing a literary background to establish a base for identity of his people. So he had seen the need of creating a solid basis for creating Indian Nepali Literature. He hastened to help but found himself helpless to help his fellow humans. Perhaps, he failed to get the much desired support. An untimely death at the age of forty four on 31 January 1971 brought an end to his life but a new beginning in the history of Indian Nepali Literature. When re-read with this new insight they seemed to be different!