

Kattabomman Kuttu:
Issues in Translating Tamil Ballad

Dr. S. Ganeshram
Principal
Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College
SATTUR – 626 203, Tamil Nadu, India
[**nsganeshram@gmail.com**](mailto:nsganeshram@gmail.com)

=====
India is a multilingual country and its history, culture and tradition are richly found in the regional literature. Translation is a tool which unlocks the treasure of the varied culture of India buried in the regional literature to the world. Translation is a linguistic activity, but belongs to semiotics, the science that studies sign systems or structures, sign processes and sign functions as delineated by Hawkes in *Structuralism and Semiotics*¹. Translation is not just the transfer of meaning from one set of language sign to another set of language sign but involves extra-linguistic criteria. Edward Sapir claims that human beings are at the mercy of language which is a medium of expression in the society. According to him language determines experiences, which are individualistic representing a separate entity. No two languages are similar, and they do not represent same social reality.²

Soviet Semiotics scholar Juri Lotman declares that, “No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language”.³ This confirms that language cannot be separated from culture. So if a translator treats the text in isolation from the culture it is done at his own risk. Therefore language is the heart within the body of culture. One cannot be separated from the other.

On the linguistic level, translation into the first language provides the translator with some advantages, such as an instinctive knowledge of morphological, semantic, syntactic, and lexical aspects of his or her mother tongue because the translator acquires these linguistic elements naturally in the course of time. Whereas translation into a second language is advanced by bookish knowledge and through knowledge learnt outside its natural context and not acquired. The translator has to consult more than one reference and dictionary for arriving at the right meaning of a certain word or phrase. The search for an appropriate equivalent in the target language takes a long time.

Popovic's translation equivalence identifies Stylistic (translational) equivalence which aims at functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation and aims at an expressive identity with invariably identical meaning. Translation involves, not just the replacement of the lexical and grammatical items but is the process of discarding the basic linguistic elements of the

Source Language text to achieve Popovic's 'expressive identity' between the original and translated work.

Volosinor's work on Marxism and Philosophy, Makarovsky's on the semiotics of art and Jakobson and Levy's on translation established new criteria and show that translation is not a pursuit accessible to anyone with a "a minimal knowledge of another language"⁴ but as Randolph Quirk says it is the most difficult task taken upon by a writer. Susan Bassnett quotes Levy in *Translation Studies*, "A translation is not a monastic composition, but an interpenetration and conglomerate of two cultures. On the one hand there are the semantic content and the formal contour of the original, on the other hand the entire system of aesthetic features bound up with the language of the translator".⁵ This is quite contradictory to Hillaire Belloc's view in his lecture *On Translation* on the status of translation which is considered as a subsidiary art⁶. It is not given the dignity of an original work. This natural underestimation of its value has had the bad practical effect of lowering the standard demanded, and in some periods has almost destroyed the art together. The corresponding misunderstanding of its character has added to its degradation: neither its importance nor its difficulty has been grasped.⁷ Thus translation was considered to be a mechanical work rather than a creative work. But now it has achieved prominence as a primary activity, as it adds to accumulated and unknown knowledge.

The present translation is the process of transfer from the Source Language to the Target Language. In this process one realizes that no full equivalence can be achieved at and accepts the untranslatability of the poetic form. George Mounin affirms Jakobson's arguments on the problem of linguistic untranslatability and perceives that translation is a series of operations comprising signification and function within a given culture. Even the translation of simple word of greeting depends on the social context, the class position and the status of the speaker and the resultant weight of colloquial greeting in different societies. So the translation of the most straightforward word can be difficult. Based on the above theoretical information on translation, one can easily comprehend the difficulties involved in translating a Tamil ballad which is interpolated with Telugu script to a large extent.

I

Tamil culture abounds in ballads and it forms a good source for the historians to reconstruct the past. These folklores depict the life and history, social and religious customs and culture of the people. *Ramappayyan Ammanai* is one of the earliest historical ballads in Tamil and *Kaṭṭabommaṅ kūttu* or *Kattabomman Kathai Padal* is probably the most popular one and stands foremost among all. The story of Kattabomman is a familiar one. It is interesting to reconstruct the story of Kaṭṭabommaṅ from the local folk *kūttu* which have been rendered in compilations by Tamil scholars. The English translation of the Kattabomman kuttu would be of scholarly significance to those who are interested in the Indian Freedom Movement.

Kaṭṭabommaṅ, popularly called VīraPāṇḍya Kaṭṭabommaṅ belonged to a family of Telugu feudal chieftains who held command over a small principality around Pancālaṅkuricci (erstwhile

Tirunelvēli district) in the latter half of the 18th century. Centuries earlier, the Telugus had come to the Tamil country, ruled the land and mixed with the local population. Vīra Pāṇḍya Kaṭṭabommu Nāyaka was nominated the chief of his fief by the family at about the age of thirty in 1791 and he commanded the good will of his brothers, officers of the estate and the subjects. He was a man of peaceful disposition. He refused to pay the *kist* to the British so the arrears of *kist* accumulated. The Company administration followed the policy of divide and rule and conducted a survey of pālayams and took away two of the villages (Aruṅkuḷam and Subbalāpuram) belonging to Pāncālankuṛicci and assigned them to the Eṭṭayāpuram pālayam that was related to the family of Pāncālankuṛicci. This led to the confrontation between the British and Kattabomman.

The British initiated military action against Kattabomman and determined to annihilate his palayam. Col. Heron, Major Fullerton and Jackson tried to defeat Kattabomman in different battles but in vein. At last John Bannerman succeeded in capturing Kattabomman due to treachery of Vijaya Raghunatha Tondaiman of Pudukottai.

On 16th October 1799, Kaṭṭabommaṅ was brought to Kayattāru for a trial. A charge-sheet was read and Kaṭṭabommaṅ was decreed to be hanged to death. Kattabomman was not ready to counter the charges or seek pardon but very boldly accepted the charges levelled against him. At the end of trial, the English commander pronounced his judgement and awarded the death sentence. On the evening of 16th October he was taken to a tamarind tree near the old fort of Kayattar and hanged. Bannerman writes in his memoirs:

It may not be amiss here to observe that the manner and behaviour of the Poligar during the whole time of his being before those who were assembled yesterday at the examination, which took place, were undaunted and supercilious. He frequently eyed the Etiapore (Eṭṭayāpuram) Poligar, who had been so active in attempting to secure his person, and the Poligar of Sivagiri with an appearance of indignant scorn, and when he went out to be executed, he walked with a firm and daring air and cast looks of sullen contempt on the Poligars to his right and left, as he passed. It was reported to me that on his way to the place of execution, he expressed some anxiety for his dumb brother (Oomathurai) alone; and said, when he reached the foot of the tree, on which he was hanged, that he then regretted having left his fort, in defense of which it would have been better for him to have died⁸.

Thus, Kattabomman's valor was acknowledged even by the foe. Until death he did not surrender to anyone or beg for life. He rose against British authoritarianism and his fight for the motherland can be called the first war of Independence, though an unorganized one.

Vira Pandiya Kattabomman, the name was ever in the hearts of the local people and his heroic deeds were popularized through local ballads. There have been popular rulers, but not many have found place in Tamil folklore. *Kattabomman Kuttu* very clearly reveals information which has not been brought to light by other sources. This led to the translation of the *Kuttu* for the purpose of

recording historicity. However, in the process of translation, one comes across a different kind of obstacle as it is rendered bilingually in Tamil and Telugu. The Tamil scholars who compiled the *Kuttu* were unable to find the right equivalent for the Telugu words in Tamil. They resorted to code-mixing and used the Tamil script to reproduce the Telugu words. Hence, it becomes essential that the translator of *Kattabomman Kuttu* should be proficient in bilingualism and have a thorough knowledge of both the Telugu and Tamil Language, at least in the spoken form, to translate it into English. In the process, some of the passages posed a challenge because of its bilingual script. A few are quoted from the *Kuttu* here.

II

In the current Tamil ballad the Tamil scholars have resorted to code-mixing as mentioned earlier to record the Telugu words that had been used in the folklore. The following lines have been quoted from the original and the translation is produced for discussion.

**கம்பளத்தார் மழையில்லாமல் வருத்தமுற்று செல்லபொம்முதுரையிட முரைத்தல்-
கம்பளத்தார் சொல்வது மேற்படி சந்தம்-தெலுங்கு**

ஒரே ஒரே ரண்டா ஓக உத்த மாட்டலு செப்ப பொய்யேன்
வான மந்த சூடண்டரா மஞ்சு வொகட்டியுங் கானமுரா
இல்லவுண்டித்த மேந்தரு எல்லபது கேதி செப்பண்டரா
மோக்கே தெய்வமுரேகான மோசமு சேதிதா பொய் யேசனே
வித்தின பத்தி செட்டந்த விட்டிலு தினேசி பொய் யேசனே
ஏமிசேசேதி செப்பண்டரா எந்து பொய்யேதி செப் பண்டரா
வானகுரிசின தேச முகுமேமு பொய்யி பதுக வாலாரா
தச்சண சீமைகு போக வாலா தல்லி பிட்டலு பாரி ரண்டா

**This event is presumed to have taken place in the original native land of the
kambaḷattār in Ballary.**

Due to the failure of rain the kambaḷams plan to migrate southward.

This part of the text is in Telugu:

“Come my brothers. There is no rain.

The cotton plants have been eaten by the beetles. The goddesses have deserted us. Let us move south in search of a better home where rain pours”.

தெச்சணம் நோக்கிக் கம்பளம் செல்வது மேற்படி சந்தம்-தெலுங்கு

ரண்டரா ரண்டரா போத்தமுரா ராஜா வாக்கட செப்பாய
ராஜாவாக்கட செப்பாய நஸ்ஸவுண்டாதி நம்பதுகு
எல்லவுண்டினாலு முண்டி பொய்யி இன்னடே தச்சணம் போகவாலா
தச்சண சீமைகு போத்தேதா ஒச்சின துன்பமு தீர்பொய்யி

The migrating chief tells his comrades (Telugu):

Ranḍarā Ranḍarā pottāmurā rājā vākkāḍa ceppāya “Come, come (my brothers), I have got the permission of the king, let us move”. We shall go to the south, then only our sufferings will cease.

The above mentioned lines posed a problem for the translator as the Telugu vocabulary is in Tamil script. “Ranḍarā Ranḍarā pottāmurā rājā vākkāḍa ceppāya” is the English transliteration of the Telugu words. Since the translator is well versed in both the languages, that is Tamil and Telugu he is able to translate it into English. He retains the cultural and historical content present in the text.

The lines that follow also pose a challenge which is tackled with care to retain the originality of text to the utmost.

சென்ற கம்பளங்கள் இடையிடையே தங்க வேண்டிய இடங்களில் தங்கி,
செக்காரக்குடி சென்று இதில் வாசம் செய்வோமென ஆலோசனை-பெரிய நாயக்கர்
சொல்வது

மேற்படி சந்தம்

ஓரே ஓரே முத்தாலு ஓக உத்த மாட்டலு செப்ப பொய்யேன்
ஈதாராமன அந்தருனு இன்பமு பெட்டி பத்துகவலா
சக்கம்மா இல்லுகட்டவலா சந்தோஷ முகபத்துகவலா
மனகுமில்லு கட்டவாலா மங்கள் கோழமு பெட்டவாலா

The migration of the kambalams start, they go on moving staying on the way in places for rest and finally reach a place called Cekkārakuṭi in Tirunelvēli.

On reaching Cekkārakuṭi the chief says:

Ore ore Muddālu oka uttamamāṭṭalu ceppa poyyen O Mudyalu, I am going to tell you a word.

This is the place where we could live happily.

Let us build a house for Jakkamma and live a happy life. Our subjects shall be happy.

ஆட்டுக்காரர் சொன்னதைக் கேட்டவுடன் நமது ராஜாக்கள்தான் அங்கே
வந்திருக்கலாம். இப்போது சென்று பார்க்க வேண்டுமெனக் கம்பளங்கள் கெற்சிதம்-
மேற்படி சந்தம் பெரிய நாயக்கர் சொல்வது

ஓரே ஓரே முத்தாலு ஓக உத்த மாட்டலு செப்ப பொய்யேன்
அந்து ஒச்சின ராஜாவாரு அந்தருனு மன தல்லி பிட்ட
ஈபோடுலு செப்பமாட்ட இங்க ஓகலிசை வின வண்டறா
அந்தரு ரண்டரா போத்தமுரா அய்யா வாறுத்த சூடவாலா
மச்சி காலமொச்சேசே மங்குகாலமு பொய்யேசே
போத்தமுரா ஒரேபோத்தமுரா போடுலா அந்தரு போத்தமுரா

It is quite likely that our rājas have come, right now let us go and see;

Periyanāyaka says:

Speaks in Telugu: Ore Ore Mutyālu oka māṭṭalu ceppapoyyēn “O! Muttālu I am going to tell you a word”.

Our rājas have come.

Those that have come are our mothers’ children (Telugu: *talli biddalu*).

Listen to me. Let us all go and see them.

The good times are coming.

The bad days have gone.

Let us go, Let us all go.

The ballad confronts the translator with a challenge to produce a piece beneficial in every way. The translator overcomes these challenges and comes out successful in tackling the Telugu script code-mixed in the Tamil script.

III

The translator does not just face the hurdle of a bilingual text, but he also comes across passages where there are expressions which cannot be understood by a person who does not understand the Tamil culture and tradition.

In the following passage there is reference to a washerwoman singing to her husband and addresses her lineage proudly. She uses the expression "Hurrei Hurrei Hei! Hurrei Hurrei Hei" which is actually the sound let out by a person riding a horse or a donkey. This cannot be translated. Hence the translator transliterates the expression as it is in the original.

வண்ணாத்தி வஸ்திரம் சலவை செய்யப் புறப்படல்-தெம்மாங்கு சந்தம்

ஆனைமேலே அழுக்கெடுக்கும் ஏமச்சான்
ஆண்டிவண்ணான் பேத்தி நானே தில்லேலே லோலே லோலே லோ
தன்னன்னானானானே குதிரைமேலே அழுக்கெடுக்கும் ஏமச்சான்
குமரவண்ணான் பேத்திநானே தில்லேலே லோலோ லோலே லோ
கழுதைமேலே அழுக்கெடுக்கும் ஏமாமா கருப்பவண்ணான் பேத்தி நானே
தில்லேலே லோலே லோ

The Washerwoman’s Song

Oh my hubby! Sitting on the elephant and lording it over me,
I know you are only washing it.
Please remember washerman Andi is my grand dad
Hurrei Hurrei Hei! Hurrei Hurrei Hei!
Oh you mounted on horse-back
And lording it over me,
I know you are only washing it
Please remember washerman Kumaran is my grand dad.
Hurrei Hurrei Hei! Hurrei Hurrei Hei!

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Dr. S. Jayanthi, Editor. Translation: Exploring the Nuances and Possibilities of Mediating Intercultural Texts

Dr. S. Ganeshram

KattabommanKuttu: Issues in Translating Tamil Ballad

Oh my hubby! mounted on the donkey and washing it,
Please remember, washerman Karuppan too is my grand dad.
Hurrei Hurrei Hei! Hurrei Hurrei Hei!

வண்ணாத்தி தன் புருஷனைப் பார்த்துச் சொல்வது

கழுகுமலை குருவிகுளம் ஏசண்டாளா
கண்டெடுத்த சுண்டுமுத்து ஏசண்டாளா
சுண்டுமுத்தைக் காணாமல் ஏசண்டாளா
சுண்டுதனே கண்ணீரை ஏசண்டாளா
நானும் நடந்திருப்பேன் ஏசண்டாளா
நடப்பாரைப் பார்த்திருப்பேன் ஏசண்டாளா
சாமி நடையைப் போலே ஏசண்டாளா
சையலிலே நானகாணேன் ஏசண்டாளா

Washerwoman tells her husband

Kalugumalai Kuruvikulam oh you chandala!
A pearl-marble treasure find oh you chandala!
Not finding the pearl-marble oh you chandala!
He is wiping pearl like tear oh you chandala!
I too have walked oh you chandala
I have seen others walk oh you chandala!
Like the walk of the lord oh you chandala!
Haven't seen any gait oh you chandala!

In the above lines the washerwoman chides her husband calling him a 'chandala' which in reality a word of abuse used to call a wrong doer. But this woman uses it as a word of endearment. Only a native Tamil speaker can connote the real meaning of the word in the passage. The following provides a comic interlude to the tragic end. Here the washerwoman sings relating her day to day life.

ஊரில் அழுக்கெடுப்பது-தன்னனச் சந்தம்

கழுதை பத்தவும் நேரமாச்சு கஞ்சிஊத்துங்கோ அம்மா மாறே
அழுக்கெடுக்கவும் நேரமாச்சு அன்னம் போடுங்கோ அம்மா மாறே
துறைக்குப் போகவும் நேரமாச்சு சோறு போடுங்கோ அம்மா மாறே
சோறு போடுங்கோ அம்மா மாறே நேரமாகுது போக வேணும்

The washerwoman sings while collecting dirty clothes from door to door. The washerwoman and her husband are introduced to provide the comic interlude before the tragic end of the play.

It's time to drive the donkey,

=====
Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Dr. S. Jayanthi, Editor. *Translation: Exploring the Nuances and Possibilities of Mediating Intercultural Texts*

Dr. S. Ganeshram

KattabommanKuttu: Issues in Translating Tamil Ballad

Pour me the gruel, oh my ladies!
It's time for collecting the dirty clothes,
Fill my bowl with rice, oh my ladies?
It's late for going to the river,
Give me rice, oh you ladies!
Give me the rice ladies, it is late, I should go.

வண்ணாத்தி சேலை துவைப்பது

கட்டபொம்மு சீமையிலே சோ சோ சோ
காரணங்கள் மெத்த உண்டாம் சை சை சை
ஊமைத்துரை சீமையிலே சோ சோ சோ
ஊக்கங்களுமெத்த உண்டாம் சை சை சை
பாஞ்சாலி சீமையிலே சோ சோ சோ
பாக்கியங்கள் மெத்த உண்டாம் சை சை சை
சதுரகிரி மலை யோரம் சோ சோ சோ
சார்ந்திருக்கும் திருகுகள்ளி சை சை சை
திருகுகள்ளி பூவெடுக்க சோ சோ சோ
திரிந்தேன் சிலகாலம் சை சை சை
என் புருஷன் அழுக்கெடுக்க சோ சோ சோ
இரு பேரும் பொதி சுமக்க சை சை சை
பின்புருஷன் முன்னே போக சோ சோ சோ
பேசமாட்டா சக்களத்தி சை சை சை
ஆற்றுக்குள்ளே ஊத்துத்தோண்டி சோ சோ சோ
அழுக்குச் சேலை யெல்லாந் தப்பி சை சை சை
வேற்றுப் பொழுதாகு முன்னே சோ சோ சோ
வீட்டுக்கு நாம் போக வேணும் சை சை சை

Similarly, in the lines that are mentioned below, the washerwoman sings the praise of Lord Oomaithurai and the land of Kattabomman and Panchali and about her routine work. As she is washing the clothes, sound emanates from her lips, such as "chochocho," and "chai chaichai" which alternates with her song in the form of a chorus. She utters these words to relieve her exhaustion. These words cannot be translated but can only be transliterated.

The washerwoman sings while beating the clothes on the washing stone

In the land of Kattabomman cho cho cho,
Causes are so many chai chai chai,
Lord Oomaithurai cho cho cho,
His courage is matchless chai chai chai,
In the land of Panchali cho cho cho,
Fortunes are so many chai chai chai,
On the foot hills of Chaturagiri cho cho cho,
There grows tirukalli chai chai chai,
To pick flowers of tirukalli cho cho cho,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Dr. S. Jayanthi, Editor. Translation: Exploring the Nuances and Possibilities of Mediating Intercultural Texts

Dr. S. Ganeshram

KattabommanKuttu: Issues in Translating Tamil Ballad

I wandered a while chai chai chai,
My hubby will collect the wash cho cho cho,
Both of us will carry the bundles chai chai chai,
My hubby will walk before me cho cho cho,
My co-wife can't talk to him chai chai chai,
Digging a spring on the river-bed cho cho cho,
We'll wash all the soiled sarees chai chai chai,
Before the day changes into night cho cho cho,
We have to reach our home chai chai chai.

The ballad is thus translated beautifully without compromising its authenticity. The translator succeeds in producing a translation which is true to its original. He facilitates in producing a valuable piece of translation which adds to the literary treasure. He moves beyond the old distinctions which devalues the study and practice of translation.

The translation of the Tamil ballad *Kattabomman Kuttu* has brought to light the different barriers that the translator comes across. The ballad is rendered bilingual and the translator is benefitted by his knowledge of the two languages that is Tamil and Telugu. Of course, there are hurdles in finding the equivalent word to expressions which denote cultural and traditional meaning. But it is overcome, and the result is the book. In the process one can assess the difficulty of a translator who takes upon a bilingual text for translation with the intention of recording history for posterity. He takes the responsibility to overcome the challenges and render a translation by retaining the originality.

End Notes

¹Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*(London: Rutledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2002).

²Sapir, Edward. *Culture, Language and Personality* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), p. 69

³Lotman, Jurí. and B.A.Uspensky, 'On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture', *New Literary History*, IX (2), 1978, pp. 211–32

⁴Jakobson, Roman, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', in R.A. Brower (ed.), *On Translation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1959), PP.232-9.

Levy, J, *Umeni Prekladu* (The Art of Translation) (Prague, 1963), cited in J. Holmes(ed.), *The Nature of Translation* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

⁵Bassnett Susan, *Translation Studies* (London: Rutledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2002).

⁶Belloc, Hilaire, *On Translation* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1931).

⁷Bassnett *Translation Studies* (London: Rutledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2002).

⁸ S. Ganeshram, *History Memory Tradition: Kattabomman Kuttu* (Chennai: Indian University Press, 2015).