

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 9 September 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Folktales, Translation and Glocalisation

Daisy, Ph.D.

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### Meanings of Globalisation – Not Confined to Just Trade – English, a Global Language

The language which has become synonym of all progress today and stands like a window to the world is none other than English. Needless to say that it has become the language of news, business, information, opportunity, employment, science, entertainment, radio, diplomacy and communications in most of the countries. In short, it has become the global language.

Now, Globalization has different meanings and connotations in different parts of the world. It's a multidimensional phenomenon which involves different domains of activities such as economic, political, cultural, social and linguistic. A global consciousness has also started emerging with globalization. Not confined to just trade, it now describes the growing interdependence, integration and interaction among people and countries. And as the world of shared interests needs a bridge in the form of a language, English has appeared to play that role becoming the *de*

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*facto* language of the choice of international communication. Years back, interaction and communication between countries increased with the discoveries in transport, industries and scientific inventions. Gradually, with the said discoveries, today people are becoming global citizens by having good command on English language. Even the Universities are changing their syllabuses to suit market conditions rather than having literary English courses for fear of being marginalized. Some linguists believe that it is no longer the exclusive cultural property of ‘native English speakers’, but is rather a language that is absorbing aspects of cultures worldwide as it continues to grow.

### **Translation from Regional Languages into English**

As a result of the growth of this language, much literature has been translated from English into other languages of the world, but a vast body of works in regional languages still awaits for English translations, to get recognition beyond their small regions, because English has emerged as the one and only language which is being used as the common medium of expression irrespective of the countries. According to a statement by the influential US-based online literary journal *Words without Borders*:

Few literatures have truly prospered in isolation from the world. English-speaking culture in general and American culture in particular has long benefitted from cross-pollination with other worlds and languages. Thus it is an especially dangerous imbalance when, today, 50% of all the books in translation now published worldwide are translated from English, but less than 3% are translated into English. (Merrill, 25)

### **English in India**

In India, English has become the second language. After Hindi it is the most commonly spoken language and probably the most read and written language in India. Looking at the status of English in India and all around the world, we must benefit ourselves from the stock of knowledge in English to serve our country by translating our Indian stock of literature.

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Of all nations, India can boast of having the richest and most diverse literature. This is not a recent phenomenon. It has been so since time immemorial – long before the written word came into existence. Regional literature in India is an integral and inseparable body of writings, which was the precursor of this enriched past, laced with the potential orators (in case of oral literary tradition) and writers (in case of written literature).

### **Regional *Kathas***

A strong characteristic of Indian regional literature is the sublime influence of regional *kathas*, fables, stories and myths, which later developed as a distinct genre and were termed as the `regional literature`. There are scores of writers who write in a variety of regional languages, but even the excellent ones among them are devoid of reaching a good number of audience. This is all due to very less number of translations of Indian regional texts in English. This is shocking if we consider that the country has 20-odd officially recognized languages, including Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Tamil, Gujarati, and Marathi. Not only that, there are almost 2000 odd dialects in use today in various Indian states. In the words of poet and critic Vinay Dharwadker:

“Indian-English literature by itself is inadequate to represent who we are to the rest of the world. Only a broad representation of the full range of Indian literatures, translated into a world language such as English, can do what is needed.” (Choudhury, 2010)

### **Some Recent Good Translations**

Unfortunately, Indian literature remains surprisingly short on quality translations of works from its own rich repertoire of regional languages into English and much of the regional literature does not reach beyond the original language. Consequently, the goldmine of India’s literature remains largely unexplored. But it comes as a breath of fresh air when a good English translation of a regional work appears on the scene. Some recent such publications include Vijay Dan Detha’s *Chouboli and other Stories*, Kusum Budhwar’s *Where Gods Dwell: Central Himalayan Folktales and Legends* and Mohan Gehani’s *Seven Heroines of Sindh Folklore*. Such good

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English translations of the works of regional writers do not only enrich India's national literature, but also contribute substantially to world literature.

### **Delightful Translation of Folktales**

Let's explore this fact by taking one such collection. The recent and latest translation of the Nobel nominated (2011) Rajasthani writer Vijaydan Detha is *Chouboli and other Stories* (2 volumes) which is an anthology of 25 delightful folktales of Rajasthan. These tales are carefully selected, translated and presented from the vast body of Detha's work by Christi A Merrill, in association with Kailash Kabir.



The folktales in the collection have their own rustic charm and lead the readers into a world of make-believe where animals talk and conspire, kings are nincompoops, lowly subjects smart, ghosts intervene in worldly affairs and princesses marry only when someone makes them talk or smile. They are often reflections on human frailties and mock the ways of the world. However, they dole out extra-ordinary wisdom to ordinary folks in an entertaining manner. Detha does all this with aplomb in his engaging narrations. People of Rajasthan may be familiar with many of the stories, but for others the book is a treasure house of rollicking tales.

### **Lessons of Folktales**

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Whereas some of the stories (such as *The Dilemma* and *Press the sap, light the lamp*) mock at the misplaced priorities of men who pursue business and wealth at the expense of family life and happiness, while others (like *Untold Hitlers* and *Two Lives*) have contemporary themes to appeal to the modern mind. Many others have similar, fascinating story lines to keep the reader riveted.

### **Christi A Merrill's Work**

Christi A Merrill's representation of these tales into English is a commendable work and a yeoman service to not only Rajasthani, but Indian literature. In fact she spent several years studying Detha's work intensely interacting with him and Kailash Kabir, who had translated several of Detha's stories into Hindi. As a scholar of comparative literature and cross-cultural studies, Christi has done a rigorous academic work.

In a detailed 29 page Preface, she elaborates on the rich oral traditions of Rajasthani folklore, and the challenges of translating it into written word without losing its vitality so that the stories 'be reborn again, and find new readers and new listeners age after age' as the Rajasthani narrator prays. One can imagine the challenge of translating from a language having no dictionary of Rajasthani-English words and no grammar book one could use to learn the language. Not only this, she had to take much care in translating Detha's stories which depend very much 'on the ability to combine local oral and cosmopolitan literary narrative styles in a way that rejects the colonial-era hierarchies'. (Merrill, 13)

The result of Christi's hard work is that though translated into English from Rajasthani, the book retains the colourful and compelling style of the author's narrative. Detha is himself very happy with the translations. He gives full credit to his translators Christi A Merrill and Kailash Kabir. Kabir has, in fact, translated much of Vijaydan Detha's works into Hindi and is the recipient of the National Sahitya Akademi Award for Translation. Merrill translates postcolonial writing from Hindi, Rajasthani and French, and writes on the practice and politics of translation. Her recently published work, *Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and Other Tales of*

*Possession* extensively refers to Detha's works, among other Indian writers. Detha is thrilled that translations ensure his stories get a wider audience.

### **Vijaydan Detha**



**Vijaydan Detha**

Courtesy: [http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report\\_vijaydan-detha-the-nobel-contender-from-rajasthan\\_1596594](http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report_vijaydan-detha-the-nobel-contender-from-rajasthan_1596594)

Known as the Shakespeare of Rajasthan, Vijay Dan Detha has become a living legend with his path-breaking research and archival work revitalizing oral literature of Rajasthan. Among other prestigious recognitions, he was inducted as a fellow of India's Sahitya Akademi in 2004, was awarded a Padma Shri by the government of India in 2007 and he received a Nobel Nomination in 2011. One of the most prolific and widely respected short-story writers, Detha is credited with over 800 stories which brought to prominence not only the richness of the storytelling traditions of Rajasthan, but the inventive forms of locution characteristic of Rajasthani. A narrator par excellence, his stories are lively, witty and often irreverent. The stories, known and admired worldwide for their wit, sarcasm, mockery and contempt for traditional structures are fantastic retellings of traditional folk stories from Rajasthan.

### **Folktale – A Traveling Metaphor**

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A.K. Ramanujan, the famous poet, translator, linguist, and folklorist once said that a folktale is infinitely adaptable as there is ‘a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each telling’ and in Detha’s work, the folktale, at times, seems to find in itself the energy to find not just a new meaning but a new self. This point can be proved by the following instance which occurred in 2002 in Michigan, U.S.A. Shankar Singh, a social activist from Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanathan, while speaking on how hard it is to achieve democracy, told stories to the audience to make his point clear. One of the stories was Detha’s *Weigh Your Options*. The story is of a thief who is caught stealing. He is asked by his ruler to choose his own punishment for his crime: either endure a hundred shoe lashes, or eat a hundred raw onions. He goes from one punishment to the next, back and forth, until he ends up inflicting double the penalty upon himself. Shankar Singh concluded with a mischievous flourish – ‘that’s how democracy works in India. We are given two bad choices and then told that we have total freedom ...’ (Translating as a telling praxis,19) This way, the stories of Detha while depicting the peculiar nuances of the local culture, also rise above the merely local, to reflect in full measure something that is universal in character.

The Nobel nomination of a translated work like *Chouboli and other Stories* awakens in us all the truth that our folklore can reach to the top if translated in English and makes us realize that regional literatures must NOT be ignored and neglected.

### **The Need to Focus on Glocal**

If being Global is what we need today, being Glocal is the need of this very hour. One way of doing this can be by taking the local literary heritage we have and make it Global by translating it in the Global language English. Offering our service by more and more translations, we can preserve, protect and expand this treasure of our regional heritage and honour the deserving literary masters of Indian Folklore. Also, by adopting English language for this purpose, we’ll make this global language an agent of spreading our opinions, morals, tastes and intellect to the outside world. Only then we can be responsibly committed to the cause of nation building.

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## **Freedom through English!**

Just as we live no more in the colonized society, English has also become free from its earlier colonial boundaries. Let's decolonize the colonial English too and use it to fit in the multicultural and multilingual world. But surely we need many talented translators to come forward and help India's outstanding regional literature emerge from its closet not only to bridge the multi lingual India, but bring her literature to an international audience. I say talented translators because there are 'ideological challenges one faces when translating from a post-colonial language into the language of the former colonizer' (Devy, Trivedi, 14). It is also to be taken care of that the word for translation in Hindi is *anuvad* which means that the text should not be treated as a singular piece of property to be 'carried across' (as the latin etymology of trans-latus implies) but it should be treated as one of many ongoing performances, as a 'telling in turn.'(Merrill, 15)

The Indian scholar Ganesh Devy points out that for a translator, 'the true test is the author's capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original.' (Devy, 15) This can be seen in the new versions of our mythological texts where previous literary masterpieces are reworked to make them relevant to the new generations. Similar is the case with folk tales of a particular region. They have no single origin, so the concern of the translators should not be whether the work is faithful to the original; rather it should be to 'craft the stories to make them vivid and relevant for the intended audience, so that someone else would want to pass them on.' (Detha, 16)

## **Need for Sharing Folktales across Cultures**

Every human being has the urge to be known and recognized. In addition, the inner self of every human gets the deepest satisfaction when his/her culture gets recognition worldwide. Now, folk literature is a rich source of information on popular culture of a society and 'folktales' is a general term for different varieties of traditional narrative. The telling of stories appears to be a cultural universal, common to basic and complex societies alike. Even the forms folktales take are certainly similar from culture to culture, and comparative studies of themes and narrative ways have been successful in showing these relationships. Also it is considered to be an oral tale

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to be told for everybody. Naturally, one would like to share one's own stock of traditional folk literature with other such literatures around the world. Even if one becomes global by adopting the global customs living in various foreign countries, it brings always a deep satisfaction to see and hear something local, something that sprouts from your own roots.

### **The Role of Translation**

Translation has always been an integral element of globalization because translation connects cultures. At the time when the process of globalization continues to move faster and doesn't seem to be slowing down, localization combines with globalization to increase its value manifold. It's not less than a miracle that the Indian mythological heroes like Hanuman and Ganesha are getting popular worldwide as the children watch animated movies (based on these) translated into their own languages. 'The glory of mainstream literature in English studies in India rests not by marginalizing but by accepting the oral or folk as its complimentary' says Dr. Nandini Sahu whose book *Folklore and the Alternative Modernities*, was released in February this year (Sahu, Feb 2012). In the book, she endeavors to sensitize the readers towards the preservation of folk culture.

### **Importance of Indian Folktales Translated into English**

It is said that true art not only speaks of life but is also the source of living truth. So is with our Indian folk tales which are entertaining, enriching and an enduring testament to the timeless magic of storytelling. Lively, lyrical subversive, yet deeply humane, these stories gift us with searing insights on the human predicament and blur the lines between rural and urban, ancient and contemporary, to pose riddles that find echoes across languages, cultures and ages. The folk tales of India are embedded in the Indian psyche and form a part of the value structure of the masses. The said regional books translated into English will be of much use to those too who due to Indian Diaspora across the globe have not been able to learn their languages and are trying to find their roots. It becomes the responsibility of all of us - the Indian writers and translators, to build a bridge for them so that they know what lies back home.

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