

Translating and Reviewing Tribal Folktales: Understanding Socio-Cultural Proximity

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Abstract

The activity of translation is not confined only to transferring from one language to another but it also involves socio-cultural aspects. If these aspects play an important role in the process of translation, then it becomes a prerequisite for the translator to have not only knowledge of both the languages but also some understanding of socio-cultural reality of both the traditions—of the source and the target. This may apply to the reviewers as well, as they not only study both but come out with judgments on the translation which includes all these aspects. In order to explain this position, I would like to share my own experience as a translator of a collection of Tribal Folktales from Oriya to English. I would like to argue that in this case, the translator's proximity to the socio-cultural milieu helped a great deal in translating the collection.

The activity of translation not only involves transference of meaning from one language to the other but it also includes the socio-cultural aspects of the two languages. For this reason, it is imperative for the translator to be familiar with these aspects. This familiarity facilitates better translation. In this paper I have made an attempt to illustrate this point by sharing my experience in translating tribal folktales into English. I would like to argue that the linguistic and socio-cultural proximity helped me a great deal in translating the selection. I would like to add, that some awareness of the socio-cultural factors and the process of translation would facilitate better the review

of a translation. The collection I refer to is a set of fifty five tales compiled and edited by Sri Ashok Kumar Mishra and Girish Chandra Dash. It was published in Oriya by the National Book Trust of India as *Aranyara Swara: Dakshina Odissara Adivasi Lokakatha* in 1998. I translated it into English for the non-Oriya reader and called it *Voices of the Forest: Tribal Folktales from Southern Orissa*.

The folktales are from different tribal languages in Orissa: Paraja, Gadaba, Banda and Didai. The tribal communities live in the Southern parts of Orissa which stretch from the district of Gajapati to Malkangiri. Each tribe is different in terms of their cultural and social structure, and these folktales reflect some of these aspects. But folktales do travel and change with time. For this reason, their ownership is not confined to a particular tribe. There have been influences, assimilations and variations. But as these tales reveal certain social and cultural practices, they are very specific to certain tribes. Because of this reason some of the folktales are identified with a particular community. It is worth discussing some specific cultural practices here.

The communities these tales talk about largely depend on agriculture, food gathering and on daily wages. Usually a tribal village is surrounded by forests, fields and streams. The fields are situated near the forests. The forests are cleared and cultivated. Here one needs to understand the context of the forest in a different way. People go to the fields early morning and come back in the evening or at noon. If they don't come home for lunch, their food is carried to them by a member of the family. These small scale farmers grow rice, mandia, maize, pulses, groundnuts, and vegetables such as cucumber, bitter-gourd and ridge-gourd.

As a young boy growing up in the neighbouring district of this region, I myself have participated in many of these activities and have acquired first hand experience of this culture.

The tribals have their gods and goddesses. They worship trees, animals, and the priest is from their own community. They sacrifice birds and animals in honour of their deities. They also offer vermilion, rice, fruits and flowers.

These communities don't have the dowry system. Instead, the groom has to pay bride price. If he is not able to do so, he has to work for the bride's parents. As these tales reflect, women take part in all spheres of life. As we can see in these tales they move out of their domestic confines and work in the fields and forests. There are numerous social customs, rituals and systems that exist among the tribal communities and it is important for the translator to be aware of them.

In addition to these, awareness of language is a significant factor. Certain terms are very specific to these tribes and the neighbouring region and are different from the mainstream Oriya words. So only a person from this or the neighbouring region can have access to them. We may cite a few of them:

Words used among

tribes of Southern Orissa	Orissa	Sambalpuri	Oriya equivalent
Meaning			
Dhangri	Dhangri	Jubati	young girl
Kalia	Kulhiha	Siala	Jackal
Pandaka	Pandaka	Kapota	Pigeon
Banj	Banj	Bandhya	Childless
Gidh	Gidha	Shaguna	Vulture
Pujidebi	Pujidemi	Hanidebi	Kill you
Khara	Khara	Thekua	Rabbit
Badhni	Badhni	Jhadu	Broomstick

It can be observed that the words used in the Koraput (Southern Orissa) and Sambalpur region are closer in terms of sound and meaning, whereas the mainstream Oriya words are very different.

From the words, we shall move to certain concepts and cultural practices which throw up greater challenge to the translator as they are specific to this region. Some of them are listed below:

1. Udulia = flee = marriage without social sanction

2. Dangor = forest that is used as field as well.
3. Marshad = special kind of friendship
4. Mohul = a kind of flower available only in this region.
5. Shag = curry (In other regions it means only leafy vegetable)

The above terms are culture specific and prevalent in Southern and its neighbouring regions but are almost alien to other parts of Orissa. If the translators come from this region they will have an added advantage.

This is not to say that only people from the regions of the tales should translate them, but as I was translating this collection, I felt that it was relatively easy for me as I was familiar with many terms and customs. I had an advantage of being familiar with the culture. This prompted me to share some of my experiences.

Received knowledge in the area of Translation Studies believes that a translated text should be evaluated on the basis of the status it holds in the target language and the impact it makes on the target culture. Translated texts succeed if they produce a strong aesthetic response in the minds of its readers and provide them with a sense of culture. The above mentioned view lays more emphasis on the target culture but ignores the source culture and background. I feel that adequate attention should also be paid to the source culture, especially in the case of tribal oral narratives, more so when different levels of transmission take place.

Therefore, the role of the reviewers also becomes very important in reviewing such translations. They have to keep track of several stages of the translation process. In this case, the tales were first in the form of oral narratives. They were translated into the written form. At this stage, it is important to note the changes taking place. For instance, when a tale is told in the oral form, it is associated with performance, and this aspect cannot be captured in the written form. The gestures of the storyteller, the active participation of the audience in telling them and many such things get omitted in the written form.

At the second stage, they were translated from tribal languages into Oriya. Here, though the translators are aware of the languages, the assisting staff such as the typist, composer and other people may contribute to the appropriation of certain terms. The translators have retained the nuances of the tribal languages. They have provided footnotes and anecdotes. (These provided a great deal of background knowledge to me) The third stage is my translation from Oriya into English. Reviewers need to study all these stages. They should also be aware of some of the issues involved. That will, I feel, facilitate a better view of the translation.

Reference

Mishra, Ashok Kumar and Girish Chandra Dash (1998) *Aranyara Swara (Voices of the Forest)*, Delhi: NBT.