

TRANSLATION, TRANSMUTATION, TRANSFORMATION: A SHORT REFLECTION ON THE INDIAN *KALĀ* TRADITION

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Abstract: This short paper wishes to look at the Indian tradition where a certain degree of interactivity and translatability (and transformability) existed among the various *kalās* like *nāṭya*, *gāna*, *chitra*, *vāstu*, *nritya* and so on. It seeks to point out that this was possible because of certain structural similarities among the *kalās*, and because of a common aesthetic goal that each strove to achieve, at least in theory. In that context, it briefly explores the notions of *tāla* (rhythm), *dosa* (defects) and *gunas* (percepts) as elements of structure common to different *kalās* and *bhāva* (aesthetic mood), *rasa* (aesthetic relish) as the goal of most of the *kalās*. It also looks at the *ragamāla* tradition both in music and painting to illustrate the above points. The postcoloniality of the exploration lies in the very desire to rethink the convention in terms of the notion of translation. In the end, it seeks to raise questions related to methodology in translating, transcreating or transgressing traditions in a postcolonial context

This reflection, in a sense, emerges out of my postcoloniality. I read most Indian texts in English and often reflect in English. While I write in English, I also write with an acute awareness of my delicate balance among many cultures - my English education, methodological training, and my desire to translate everything into everything else. Along with that I carry the burden of my 'otherness' both from my culture(s) and language(s) as well as the culture(s) of the language in which I write. If today, I try to understand translation, transmutation and transformation in the Indian tradition, it is so because of my post-coloniality (where, at least, I am free to talk about my colonial past) and my suppressed desire to show the superiority of my tradition through a language that I use with ambivalence. And through a concept, viz 'translation', which is alien to that tradition.

The *Visnudharmottara*, in a passage emphasizing the knowledge required to understand image-making, says:

“Lord of men, he who does not know properly the rules of chitra can, by no means, be able to discern the characteristics of image ... without the knowledge of the art of dancing, the rules of painting are very difficult to be understood... The practice of dancing is difficult to be understood by one who is not acquainted with music. Without singing music cannot be understood”.

Talking of 'translation' in a post-colonial context, one always carries an awareness of translation as a mode of mastering the 'other', (language or culture), of understanding it,

and thus, of being in control of it. In talking of translation here, I do not have any of those connotations in mind. In fact, to a traditional mind, the passage above would not look like an attempt at 'translation', let alone 'cultural translation' or 'translation from one mode to the other.' However, my very attempt at understanding it from within my historical context is perhaps an attempt to master this tradition or at least come to terms with it as neither an outsider nor an insider, and thus, some kind of attempt at transcultural translation.

Yet the above passage is not mere theory, nor a paradigm. It is something practiced even today, at least by practitioners of dance and music (if not of traditional painting and sculpture). Most importantly, there are examples of not only such an understanding, but of practices based on such understandings rather than on realizations.

However, before I discuss them, I wish to point out that when I talk of 'translation' here it has to be understood in another tradition, bereft of the connotations of the politics of 'property', 'authenticity', 'faithfulness' or 'ownership' so pervasively associated with the word in its own context. For instance, in talking of translation today, one has to think of the author's consent (if he is alive) or permission to translate, which practice looks at the text to be translated as something which belongs to a particular person, involving questions of authority and authenticity. But the context which I am referring to often treats its texts as belonging to a tradition or culture rather than an individual, very often in a tradition of giving up or renouncing, and finally of transcendence. Much of Indian tradition is anonymous, not because methods of documentation did not exist (Which itself points to a lack of

need for it, or a socio-cultural structure that inhabited such developments), but because of a socio-cultural precept of renunciation. In an ethos where all *kalas* can lead one to *mokṣa* or transcendence, at a personal level many artists transcended ego and thus renounced their work. On the other hand, in such an ethos, even when traditions were handed down, under social pressure, as well as in a convention that discouraged such documentation, authorships got lost over time. The point I wish to make is that when one mode (say *nritya* taken from *kavya*) was incorporated into another, when one source was used in another context, the element of authorship in relation to use was not a sensitive issue. The other point that needs clarification here is how I understand and use 'translation'. I do not use it here in the specific sense of translating a 'text' from one language to another, from one culture to another. By translation, I mean translating from one 'mode' (or call it genre which is more culture-specific) to another. It is for this reason that I also use the terms 'transmutation' and 'transformation'. I wish to suggest that there is the possibility of 'translation' from one mode to another, which implies a one-to-one correspondence of signs in two different modes - say words and gestures, where a specific gesture might have equivalence to a specific word. There is 'transmutation' where a clear cut one to one correspondence of signs does not exist, but structural similarities are evident - for instance, as in the case of sentences and note clusters, which are expected to convey similar emotions in specific cultures. There is also 'transformation', where two different modes intend to evoke the same response and succeed in doing so by different modes. Most importantly, very often, in the Indian context of *kalas*, all the processes are simultaneously evident.

To begin with, there is the possibility of 'translation' from one mode into another, which implies a one-to-one correspondence of signs in two different modes – say, words and gestures, where a specific gesture might be equivalent to a specific word.

Bāshikābhinaya (*abhinaya* or expression through words) can be effortlessly 'translated' into *āngikābhinaya* (where gestures convey meaning). Since an elaborate repertoire of gestures exists,¹ one might go to the extent of claiming that a word-by-body translation is possible here. This is especially true in the context of stylized presentation (*natyadharmi*), which uses convention and general acceptance like written or spoken language. And this extends (to an extent) also to *chitra* and *vastu* where gestures can be represented, although sequence cannot be as systematically depicted as in dance.



abhaya mudra (reassurance)



*samapada sthanakam
asana* (steadfastness)

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sentences and note clusters that are expected to convey similar emotions in specific cultures. While music is not linked directly to the 'translation' of words or gestures, it is intrinsically linked to the core elements of *bhava* and *rasa*. Since different notes and clusters are associated with different *bhavas* and *rasas*, since fragments of poems are used, as well as *dosas*, *gunas* and *alankaras*, *sangeeta* (through structural similarities, though not through a one-to-one equation) can transmute another mode to evoke a certain mood.

At the core almost all aesthetic experience in our tradition lies in *bhava* and *rasa*, something that we will discuss briefly below. In order to achieve them through different *kalas*, the same theme can be either 'shown' in different ways (*kavya*, *nritya*, *kalā*) or are suggested (as in evoking the essence of a *kavya* through *gana*). Most importantly, very often, in the Indian context of *kalas*, all these processes are simultaneously evident.

This discussion is relevant in the contemporary context, perhaps because such an underlying unity is not so clearly discernible in the Western context. Hence, translating across modes - inter-semiotic translation - raises many uneasy questions. Here, I shall refer briefly to a paper on Chinese painting. The western author, in searching for 'progression' in the history of Chinese painting (he locates such a progression in the quest for realism in western art) finally ends up with the realization that one has to look at the history of Chinese painting as one looks at the history of the western book. What comes to light in the process, to my mind, is also the realization that the western approach to reading a book and

looking at a painting are perhaps distinctively different while they have a lot in common in the Chinese tradition.

Perhaps in a similar way to the Chinese, the relation between reading, viewing an image, seeing a dance performance and listening to music have some underlying common principle in the Indian context. It is this which makes the notion of 'translation' unnecessary and internalizes it so that one does not reflect upon it or theorize its difficulties. The element that holds all the *kalas* together and that makes transmutations and finally transformations so effortless and easy is the concept of '*bhava*' (tentatively translated as a 'composite of emotions and accompanying physiological states') and the unstated notion of '*rasa*'.

Perhaps some clarification is in order here. Bharata, in his opus *Natya Sastra*, discusses, among many things, *rasa*, and considers it the soul of the entire dramatic experience. Since, then, through the centuries, different aesthetic principles have been highlighted, viz. *alankaras* (figures of speech and sound), *riti* (styles), *vakrokti* (indirection) etc. However, by the 11th century *rasa* established itself as the most powerful and dominant aesthetic theory, chiefly in the context of *kavya*. However, its implications are far reaching, so that in all the *kalas*, it is accepted as the underlying intent and *bhava* figures prominently.

But what is *rasa*? Let us roughly translate it as 'aesthetic relish', as well as the state of mind that it generates in the person who relishes a *kala*. Its methodology is roughly that of the logic of emotion. What I wish to suggest is that a work of art, with the progression of time, generates a mood as

well as psycho-physiological state combining emotion and bodily reactions, and intensifies it. Let us call this *bhava*. When this process of experiencing becomes so intense that one forgets oneself, one's ego, one's awareness of space and time, loses himself/herself in the work, one relishes *rasa*. And whether one is talking about *vastu*, *chitra*, *nritya*, *gana* or *kavya*, this term - *bhava* - figures as the essential core to be communicated. (*Bhava* figures as a very important category in the seminal theoretical writings in each of the fields mentioned). And at the culminating point of the experience of *bhava* is the notion of *rasa*. In other words, the intent of all *kalas* is the same - to generate *bhava* and in the final count, stated or unstated, *rasa*.

Now, if *bhava* is the 'intention' of all the *kalas*, in the traditional context, then in terms of "structure" there are a number of elements all *kalas* share. A *Bharatanatyam* dancer I met pointed to *tala* (rhythm) as the core structural element common in all these forms.² It is true that when one refers to the tradition of *gandharva gana*, three things are highlighted, *pada* (verse), *tala* (rhythm) and *swara* (melody). *Kavya* also has rhythm or *chhanda*, and it is perhaps for this reason that different *talas* are bound to different textual compositions, especially in the *dhrupad* and *bhajan* traditions. Rhythm is important in *nritya* and in trying to capture movement in stasis it is, thus, important both in *chitra* and *vastu*. It is perhaps now that one can recall the verse cited above from *Visnudharmottara* and see the logic underlying it.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, at the centre of the *kala* tradition lays the notion of the narrative, of an oral or written text. This is another thing that holds the various *kalas*

together. I need not mention *kavya* and *nritya* here, which borrow heavily from *puranas*, *Bhagabata* or the *mahakavyas*. Even in musical compositions, fragments from old stories are taken up to create the emotional context, the base, on which the *bhava* can develop. The same is also true of *chitra* or *vastu*.³

Another structural element, common to the various *kalas* is the notion of *dosas* (flaws) and *gunas* (good qualities). Whether one talks of *kavya*, *gana* or *chitra*, the flaws listed are to be avoided and the good qualities listed are to be encouraged. And finally, one must refer back to the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, from where these forms flow – from one common source – and hence across the ages, none of these forms forgets its link to the other.

Hence, it is not surprising to see the tradition of *rāgamāla* paintings evolve in the 16th century from an amalgam of Sanskrit, vernacular, and Persian influences, for the essence underlying the tradition continues. Here, I shall only make a few observations.

However, before that, I wish to question the notion of hierarchy that the quotation from *Vishnudharmottara* might have indicated. According to tradition, the *silpi* (the sculptor) meditates on the deity he is to make until he sees it clearly, as if in front of his own eyes. Then he translates it into material form (Coomaraswamy 1997). This is a tradition common to both Hinduism and Buddhism. *Sangitaratnākara* also encourages the tradition of meditating on the notes until they take divine forms. *Dhyānaslokas*, in Indian musical traditions,

are such verses that embody the music (image of the deity or the *rāga* or the *rāgini*) in words that weave images. *Sangita yogis*, meditating of the *nāda brahma*, making use of material, audible sounds, go into states of transcendence, where they are able to see the specific *rāga* embodied visually. They often put these down as words – *dhyānaslokas*. Thus, *dhyānaslokas* are texts that emerge in response to images, which emerge in response to sound. And, it is as if the *dhyānaslokas* have as much power to evoke the *bhāva* as the specified *raga*.



*Two examples of Raga Hindol (The Swing) from the Rāgamāla paintings. The second one has a dhyānasloka inscribed at the top.*⁴

The *rāgamāla* (garland of *rāgas*) paintings take their inspiration from such verses and try to evoke the same *bhāva*. They are the re-embodiment of the *dhyānasloka* in lines and colours. And progression is achieved since it is not a single picture but a series of pictures that one sees, woven like a garland. And like a garland, the structure eludes hierarchy, being without beginning and end, like the diurnal cycles of night and day, and over days, of changing seasons. Thus,

rāgamāla sung, is transformed (not translated) into *rāgamāla* seen. And the process is complete if both evoke the same *bhāvas* and culminate in the same *rasas*. Since the *rāgamāla* is supposed to evoke the seasons, it also transforms the world of their listener/viewer, evoking an entire cycle of year in a short span of time.

‘Translation,’ if at all the word is warranted here, must be understood in such a context. Even when talking of translating from one language into another within our culture, some of the above points might be pertinent. I have not talked here about *anuvāda* or *chaya*, since I lack competence in the field, but I have a feeling that some of the points made here may apply to them as well. But our task is also to codify the basic tenets and underlying principles of such a translation in a post-colonial context, to point out how it differs significantly from (the meaning of) ‘translation’ within our post-coloniality (which includes the memory of our coloniality as well as the practices it imbibed), to look at one tradition coloured by the other.

More importantly, one has to recognize the delicate nuances of the notion of translation in different cultures, respect their underlying philosophies, rather than use blanket terms sweepingly. In the context of inter-modal translation, the above illustrations suggest a methodology and also a totally different ideology as well as social contextualization of translation. For instance, when translating among Indian languages, should one look for consistency of style (*riti*), figures (*alankarā*) and take note of the *dosas* and *gunas*, and in the final count, *bhava* and *rasa*? Is it possible that some of

these tools can be used in the context of translating from an Indian language into English or from English into an Indian language?

Another important question that comes to mind is how, in a post-colonial context, the translation of ancient cultural texts is to be done – especially in the background of a tradition of Indological scholars having translated in certain ways. This is important since even contemporary Indologists use a method that is still colonial in its techniques and habits.

Similarly, at the level of the underlying socio-cultural ethos, ‘translation’ poses certain problems. For instance, can the Vedas be translated? On the other hand there is the tradition of the *Bhāgabhata*, which is the essence of the Vedas and the *Upanisads* for the common man (or so the tradition says). Would the process be called translation? Similarly, in regional traditions, many *Rāmāyanas*, *Mahābhāratas* and *Purānas* exist. Are they to be defined as translations? What underlying principles are used, say in *Rāmācharitamānasa*? In a tradition of sublimation, how is the author treated? How does *Rāmācharitamānasa* feel about *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* or *Kambarāmāyanas*? The notion of authorship and anonymity in the context of translation in our culture hold distinctive elements of problematization from a western perspective (within which we use ‘translation’) and need to be explored.

Finally, at the level of actual “translations” in our tradition (if at all they can be called so), the traditions, techniques and principles used need investigation. Perhaps, my

reflections above are some examples of that. However, a much more comprehensive and articulate exploration, especially in the context of post-colonial translation studies, is perhaps what is necessary.

Notes

1. *Angikabinaya* (conveying meaning and emotions through gestures) includes the repertoire of codified body movements, positions of the body (*asana*), expressions of the face (*mukhaja*), movement of the upper and lower limbs (*cestas*), hands and finger (*mudra*). This tradition begins in *Natya Sastra*, and is to be found also in *Chitra* and *Silpa Sastras* along with texts of *Nritya*.
2. Discussion with Dr. Malati Agniswaran, teacher and practitioner of *Bharatnatyam* dance.
3. In the western context, both music and painting broke away from the narrative tradition, music by the Renaissance, and painting, by the 18th century. It is interesting to note that Western classical music broke away from the tradition of combining music and words (except in Opera), which was considered very important in *gandharva gana*, and even today is of utmost importance in the *Carnatic* tradition.
4. The basic idea conveyed by such verses is something to this effect: "*He is seated in a golden swing, while a number of nymphs by whom he is surrounded, amuse him with music and keep time with the rocking of the swing on which he sits, insolently gazing on their charms, enjoying the*

sweets spontaneously offered to his shrine". Sourindra Mohan Tagore, *Hindoo Music*, p 82.

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