Translating Calcutta / Kolkata

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Abstract

Calcutta now 'postcolonised' as Kolkata, with its history a little over three hundred years, has been a constant source of inspiration and provocation for writers, artists and film-makers. No matter how dirty the city is, how outrageous its politicians are and how 'impossible' life seems to be here, Calcutta has never met with indifference. A mere Indian twist to the name given by the colonial masters cannot change its history. Nor can the colonial hangover which still looms ghost-like over the city, be underestimated. Just as each and every place has a flavour, odour, sound, tone and intonation of its own, Calcutta too has a dialect singularly its own. The main dialect, which the bhadralok class speaks, is commonly known as the 'Kolkataiya Bangla'. Though there have been earlier attempts by Tekchand Thakur to familiarize people with this dialect, the father of this Bengali is evidently Tagore. He could successfully modernize the language by using the "chalti Bangla" instead of the"shudha bhasha" as used by his predecessor Bankimchandra and by his contemporaries like Saratchandra. Besides this mainstream urbane Bengali there are other dialects, - the voices and the tones of the suburbs and the bangal accent in the language of the people who migrated to

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Calcutta in the wake of partition. And even within the bhadralok class there is a difference in the use of the spoken Bengali in the north and the south of the metropolis. For those who have watched the film made on Tagore's Chokher Bali *by the director Rituparno Ghosh, the point would be clear indeed. Interestingly, a study of dialects can be a study of culture too. The spoken word with its tone and intonation speaks of the cultural / educational background of the speaker and his social status. Rendering the difference of dialect and division is easy in a film as for example the word pronounced as "aishee" and "ashchee" meaning "I am coming" would immediately appeal to the ear. But how does a translator, translating the text into English, make this difference visible and audible through translation? Most of the publishing houses in their endeavour to maintain the Indian flavour in English just end up by following certain stereotypical norms, which may lead to mistranslation of expressions and give wrong impressions. Just a mere retaining of cultural expressions like "Hai Ram!" or "Hai Rabba!" cannot carry enough weight as cultural signifiers. This paper will take up the issue of translating the Calcutta mainstream culture and its other(s) with illustrations from existing English translations and a few other relevant Bengali texts. It will attempt to discuss the 'untranslatable' or the problems involved in crossing over cultural barriers and the possibility of cultural slippage in English translation.*

Ajob Shahar Kolkata
Randhi Bari Judigadi
Michey kather ke keta

(Seth 1990:314)

Any place has a sound, smell, language, atmosphere of its own which the mind absorbs and tries to rationalize or translate in definite terms. Such an act of translating perceptions into language and literature and re-translating it into other languages is a complex process indeed. When there is interplay of many languages and dialects, the task of the translator becomes further complicated and difficult. Calcutta or Kolkata, like the other metropolises Delhi and Mumbai, is a cultural text involving problematic subtexts such as dialect, which includes para-texts like race, class and caste differences, through a diachronic historical perspective. As there never was any question of cultural purity from the very beginning, one cannot look for any coherent cultural identity in the Kolkata of the present times or the Calcutta of yore. Kolkata has never been free from cultural contaminations. Whore-like in its cultural charm it has attracted visitors, artists, tradesmen and dwellers from time to time. It has had a rich cultural matrix not always free from filthy and complex political and ideological strife. For developing a proper perspective, a casual reading of translations of Bengali texts in any regional language or in English may not be sufficient. The social history of Kolkata is a dialectical one; so supplementary reading of background, social history and dialects are important. The postcolonial debate about the *Bengalisising* of Calcutta as Kolkata in the above context is possibly a rather simplistic gesture of pinning down the city in a word. A brief look at the controversy regarding the name may help justify the case.

Well-known historians like Suniti Chattopadhyay argue that *Kolikata* is a pure Bengali word. He goes on to say that in Bengali it actually means 'lime shell'. *Koli* (lime) was obtained from the specialized process of burning shells *(kata)* and was stacked in a

place close to what we now know as Strand Road. Binoy Ghosh adds on to Suniti Chattopadhyay's argument by pointing out that there were three roads namely, Chunapukur Lane, Chunagali and Chunarpara Lane where the lime trade was carried on by lime-merchants across the Ganges, which flowed at that time by the side of the Strand Road. There are also theories about the derivation of Kolkata from *Kali Kota,* where *kota* ('mandir or temple') refers to the famous *Kali* temple at Kalighat. So some scholars suggest that Kolkata owes its name to one of the oldest pilgrimage shrines or the *Kali temple* at Kalighat. Certain critics however are of the view that Calcutta is derived from Calicut. The Portuguese ship merchants had embarked on a trip to Calicut to begin their trade with India, so the name Calicut became quite familiar to the European ears even before the British merchants came. Later on the Armenians and the British used the name of Calicut, which had already made a reputation for itself for its products on their native soils. But they actually collected their raw materials from the port at Saptagram and then later from Sutanati, Gobidopur and the Garden Reach, Strand Road areas. It was much later that Calicut was changed to Calcutta. Purnendu Patri quotes Hunter in his book *Purono Kolkatar Kathachitra* to suggest another theory of the name's origin:

> "It (Kolkata) was identified by our mariners with Golgatha, the place of skulls". [1]
>
> (Patri 1979:111-113)

The Chowringhee area at that time was notorious for dacoits, associating skulls and Golgatha with Kolkata, which many critics later had pointed out as a picturesque error. Purnendu Patri and H.E.A Cotton (Cotton 1980: 22-23) posit yet another view that The name, they say, could be derived from Kilkila, by which the area between *Saraswati* on the west and *Jamuna* on the east was formerly known. There are thus many conjectures about the name *Kolikata* or *Kolkata* and the colonial version, *Calcutta.* Thus no deterministic principle can be worked out in fixing the etymology of

the name *Kolkata.* So Suniti Chattopadhyay's argument about *Kolkata* as a pure Bengali word, which underlies the race of *Kolkatans* as being purely Bengali, is questionable.

Perhaps it was Tagore who quite aptly defined the cultural possibilities of the Bengalis in their fervour for the assimilation of cultures, races and linguistic nuances in a very brief statement in his *Japan Jatri:*

> "In such a huge nation such as India, the Bengalis were the first to accept the new ideas and even now they have this absorbing quality to accept and re-invent … There has been a rigorous mixing of blood in Bengalis; it is doubtful whether there has been such mixing elsewhere in India"
>
> "The task of inaugurating the gateway for an exchange between East and West has been on the *Bengalis".*
>
> (Rabindra Rachonaboli 1961: 526-527)

He continues his debate on culture in the same essay, where he suggests,

> "The mind of a profusely mixed race cannot be cast into a definite mould. In the process of confrontation between various ideas it has to have a progressive outlook … if we are hell-bent looking for purity in blood, we can find it only in the race of barbarians".
>
> (Rabindra Rachonaboli 1961: 526-527)

Here he comes quite close to Edward Said's opinion of 'culture' as a theatre of sorts engaged in an interplay of ideology and political strategies together … of being not monolithic … not the e*xclusive property of East and West, nor of small groups of men and women* (Said 1994: xxvii). Tagore's debate on the Bengalis and his

definition of 'culture' paralleling Said's definition of culture, calls to mind an interesting anecdote about the beginnings of bi-lingualism in Kolkata. Nakul Chattopadhyay in his book, *Tin Shataker Kolkata* (Chattopadhyay 1965:2) humorously narrates how the first Britishers of the ship Falcon in 1679 at Garden-Reach had created a *do-bhashiya* or the *bi-lingual* to solve their problems of communication with the inhabitants of the land. When the Britishers spelled out their need for a *do-bhashiya* to the dominant community of *Basaks* in the place, there was confusion about ascertaining the meaning of the word. The *Basaks* had mistaken the meaning of *do-bhashiya* for *dhopa* or the 'washer-man' as they thought that the *sahibs* desperately needed someone to wash their clothes in the ship. So they sent a washer-man (not before a lot of coaxing and bribing for the man scared him out of his wits), all garbed in new clothes along with few molasses, nuts and gifts via a boat to *Falcon*. The washer-man was to his surprise received with a lot of celebration and gifts that made him change his mind about the British and prompted him to be a regular visitor to the ship. The interaction proved fruitful for he gradually picked up enough English to act as a mediator between the British and the local inhabitants. So with the help of their mediator, the British had a *palkee* or *palanquin* sent for them by the *Basaks*, which finally gave them the access to the inland area and set up their trade in that region. With the gradual infiltration of the British there is the resultant syncretism of cultures in this phase of the history of Kolkata as evident from the paintings, travelers' documents and *Calcutta Gazette* of the period. Cotton gives a vivid description of the re-invention of the *palanquin*, which the Britishers once used as their mode of transport. He also gives details of how *hookah* smoking became a fashion among the Europeans in those days *(Cotton 1980: 77)*. Thus taking into account that from its very beginnings Kolkata has always been receptive to all kinds of influences, we can attempt to detect these changes in Bengali literature and consider their translatability.

Prior to Lebedoff's theatre in 1795 and the beginnings of Bengali literature in print we have had a long tradition of *Kabi-sangeet*, which were vibrant with the strains of the popular culture. According to Sri Bhudeb Choudhury *(Choudhury 1964)*, this tradition gradually died out after Ram Basu's *kabiyal* in the nineteenth century and was absorbed into *toppas*, which were becoming popular. However the last strains of this long tradition of *kabi-geeti* beautifully capture the cultural milieu of those times. Take for example the following lines which depict a dialogue between Ram Basu and Anthony Henceman or Anthony Firingee as he was popularly known, who had a Portuguese father and an Indian mother and was a devotee of *Kali*:

> "Oh come on Anthony, tell me the story
> What became of your hat and coat in this country*?*"
>
> (Balo hey Antuni ami ekta katha jante chai
> Eshe edeshe ebeshe tomar gaye keno kurti nai)

And Anthony replies:

> "In this Bengal, the Bengali garb suits me fine.
> Have changed my attire as Thakur Sinha's father's jamai".
>
> (Ei Banglai Bangalir beshe anande acchi
> Hoye Thakre Simher baper jamai kurti-tupi ccherechi)
>
> (Choudhury 1964: 9)

If we compare the original version of the limerick with the possible translation, there are cultural slippages that cannot be helped. In the Bangla version, *thakur* is pronounced as *thakre*. Such instances of colloquial strain in *kobir lorai* sessions are typical and one misses much of the fun in English translation. The same light-

hearted spirit is evoked through the slang *baper* in *baper jamai*, which is flattened out in English; *kurti* and *tupi*, the Bengalisised versions of the *sahebi* attire, which in Hindi version would be *kurta* and *topi* have a touch of harmless sarcasm which ring out probably only to the Indian ears and those who are familiar with the milieu. More complex are the lines that follow:

> "For nothing Saheb, you shaved your head and laid it down on those black feet.
> If that padri Saheb, your father knows, he will smear your face with lime and grit"
>
> (Saheb mithhe tui Krishna paode-e matha murrali
> O tor padri saheb shunte pele gale debe chun-kali)

And Anthony answers firmly:

> There's hardly any difference between Krishna and Christ, brother
> Never heard that the sound of names could make things matter
> No different is my god from the Hindu Hari whom you claim as yours…
>
> (Christe aar Krishte kicchu bhinno nai-re bhai
> Shudhu nam-er fere manush fere e-o katha shuni nai
> Amar khoda Hindu hari she…)
>
> (Choudhury 1964)

While *padri* colloquially refers to clergymen, *firinghee* would mean a half-caste and later, Eurasian and then Anglo-Indian. There's a play of ideas in *Krishna* paod. Ram Basu was definitely referring to *Kali* for Anthony was known to be a *Kali* devotee. But when Anthony replies he changes it to *Krishna,* both *Kali* and *Krishna* being dark-complexioned. Again the word *murrali*

beautifully puns at shaving of head as a part of Anthony's initiation into the worship of *Kali* along with self-dedication at the altar of the goddess. The suggestion that Anthony has made a fool of himself cannot be missed in the line, for the act of shaving has another cultural overtone, that of declaring oneself a fool. Probably there is much more to these tongue-in-cheek verses as they provide a moving cultural picture of the times. While these limericks reflect the Bengali reception of Anthony into their religion and culture, it also calls to mind the worship of *Kali* popularized by Ramakrishna at Dakshineshwar and his ideas on religion based on *jato mat tato path* (As many religions, as many ways to the same God) in the nineteenth century and provide links to the socio-cultural-religious history of the period. The idea of many cultures enriching the Bengali culture continues to be accepted by the Kolkatans from various angles.

As *toppas* take over and Ramnidhi Gupta creates a style of his own which is adopted by his followers to form a school of Nidhubabur toppa, he too sings:

> Various regions speaking various tongues
> Without which the mother-tongue
> Can its dreams flutter?
>
> (Nanan desher nanan bhasa
> bine swadeshi bhasha
> poore kee aasa*?*)
>
> (Choudhury 1964: 47)

Dasu Roy's *pachali-gaan* or *jatra-sangeet* too captures the changing socio-cultural matrix in its praise of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocating widow remarriage:

> The talk about widow-remarriage
> Has painted the supreme of all kolis (flower-buds)

Kolikata red …
Salutations to him
One Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar by name
He is the leader of Bengalis
And a professor too of the company's Hindu College.

(Bidhoba-bibaho pratha
Koli-r prodhan kolikata
Nagar-e uthecche oti rob …
Dhanya dhanya goonodham
Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar naam
Tini karta bangalir
Tate abar companyr
Hindu colleger odhyapok)

(Choudhury 1964:50)

These *kabi-gaan*, *toppas* and *pachali-gaan* create the background for Bengali theatre and prose manuals like Dikdarshan published by the missionaries of Serampore in 1888. Publication of Dikdarshan, was followed within a month by Marshman edited Samachar Darpan. William Carey edited Itihasmala and Kathopokathan were also published around the same time, as Fort William College publications. Ramram Basu created interest in national history with the publication of the Raja Protapaditya Charitro in 1801, followed by Batrish Sinhashan, Hitopodesh, and Rajaboli Probod Chandrika by Mrittunjoy Bidyalankar in 1813; these were also published by Fort William college publications. Such interest in national history later finds its fine flowering in Bankim Chandra's works. Prose manuals in conversational Bangla inspired Kali Prasanna Sinha to write his satirized version of Kolkata society of the times, in Hutum Panchar Naksha. The book is the first attempt at modernizing Bengali literature in print and incorporating the parole or the *chalti Bangla* rather than the langue. An extract from the naksha will reveal how vibrantly, vividly and picturesquely the sound and smell of Kolkata are captured in Hutum's description:

The sophisticated merchant house worker washed his face and hands and finished his tiffin to pick up his sitar. In the next room, the kids shout - "a bog - *nicher ghar*" (a room downstairs), "a nap, *ek aalpo nidra*" (mild sleep), "a doll, *baloker kelibar ghari*" (a boy's playwatch) - they're reading Vidyasagar's *Barno-Parichay*. *Pil iyar cchokras* (good for nothing rascals) have learnt to fly. The goldsmiths use the *Durgapradip* (meaning a huge lamp) as a blowpipe. A few clothes, furniture and utensil shops flank both sides of the street. The *rokor* - shopkeeper, *Poddar* - who deals with the buying and selling of gold and silver and gold merchants, count their cash and talk at length about their monetary dealings. At Shobhabazaar downtown - market owned by the rajas of the place, fisher-women with lamps in their hands sort out the decayed fish and salty *hilsa* and shout provocations to the prospective buyers - "*O*" the *gamocha* cries, "*want some good fish?*" They cajole "*… O Khengra Goopo minshe, will you give four annas for it?*" Some customers respond teasingly to be abused in turn for it. Opium addicts, drunkards and hemp-smokers with empty pockets stroll down the streets pretending to be blind - "*Some alms for the blind Brahmin please!*" and they make provision for procuring narcotics. Then at this hour, a *dhak* booms out at the *gajan tola* owned by the *babu* people - "*Bole Bhadesshwar Shibo*" - this kicks up a row, '*this time it is the case of a fake sanyas…*' These people cling to the rich as cooing doves in their residence. They never put their cunning to rest. So when the *babu* is in need of a woman, they fetch that too.

(Sinha 1861: 37)

The slang locutions used in the passage are a part of the colourful evening scenario in the open North Kolkata market place. The fact that English was taught in schools like number tables, finds mention in Bhudeb Choudhury's book too (*Choudhury* 1964: 18). The mistakes in the corresponding Bangla meanings of the English words were deliberate satirization of the business class's endeavors toward learning English. Probably after a second thought, this satirization was removed from the second edition. But the *Babu* continued to be satirized by *Hutum* in many pages of the book. Even Pearychand Mitra or *Tekchand Thakur* was not spared the sarcasm. The illustration in the book with the caption: "*Thonthon-er hathat abotar*" or *the sudden arrival of "Thonthon"* depicts the Brahmin in *dhoti* and full sleeved *kameez* with a shawl around his neck, *kocha* in hand and *tupi* or cap on his head along with his five disciples, the last being Pearychand Mitra. A Brahmin *pandit* with a *tiki* and *gamocha* on his shoulder smokes a cigarette as he holds an umbrella over *thonthon's* head. *Thonthon*, as one might guess, is the *Babu* - a cross-cultural product of Bengali-European syncreticism. *Hutum* describes *thonthon* as a *janto shong* or *a living clown*. The illustration in *Hutum's* book on wood engraving of *Bindubashini* by one Ramdhon goldsmith depicts beautifully the co-mingling of the two cultures, where *Durga, Unicorn and Angels* figure together. A humorous description of the *barowari protima* or the public place idol and her worship in his tongue-in-cheek vein perfectly matches with the illustration in *Hutum*:

> The news spread in the town rapidly that there was to be a *half aankrai* in a public place of worship in a certain part of the town. Whether it was the *iyaar* type schoolboy, or the seventy-year-old invalid, everyone was crazy about *half aankrai*. There was a hullabaloo in the market. The washer-man started earning at the opportunity. The price for the puckered *dhoti*, the neatly ironed *kameez* and the

> striped *urni* of Shantipur variety hiked to eight annas …
>
> The public place of worship filled up with people - on the one hand was the mud clown in an encircling wooden frame and on the other hand were the *living clowns* in colourful attires within the wooden framework and outside it. The big people in their *tanshwala tupi, chapkan*, belt and desire looked even more arrogant than the demon in the *chalchitra*. The principal, Birkrishna Babu was roving round like a fop-top, betel leaf spittle streamed down the sides of his lips like some blood teethed demon - servants, couriers, *sarkars*, clerks, managers nobody had any time to breathe even.
>
> (Sinha 1864: 87-88)

True to his intention *Hutum's* alias Kaliprasanna Sinha's lively description in colloquial tongue paints a moving chronicle of Kolkata in the 1860s. The book also contains a self-illustration, where *Hutum* does not spare himself either from self-caricature. Hutum in the drawing is seen to be a Brahmin *pandit* with a tiki wearing a *dhoti* and full-sleeve *kameez*, sitting on a globe and flying *nakshas* or satirical sketches. The caption runs: *Hutum Paancha ashman-e bosh-e naksha orancchen* (*Hutum* the owl is flying *nakshas* in the sky). The distinction between the *Bengali Babu* and *Hutum* is thus that of a *tupi* and a *tiki*; one is as wise as an owl in his satirical vision and the other a cross-cultural clown. While much of the art and architecture in this period reflect such hybrid quality about them, the *Babu* becomes an unlimited subject of ridicule in many literary works. Saratchandra in his three-part novel *Srikanta* satirizes the *Bengali Babu* or the *thonthon* as *Natunda* singing *thunthun peyala* (Part One). *Srikanta's* narration describes the shock and amazement at the *Kolkataiya Babu* when he goes over to meet his friend Indra one winter evening:

> The sight of him in the moonlight was quite a scare. A *kolkataiya babu* - means a terrible *babu*. Silk socks, glittering pump-shoe, wrapped in an over-coat from head to feet, gloves, a *tupi* for the head - there's no limit to his precautionary strategies against the western winter. Slighting our favourite canoe as disgusting in a tone of firm admonition, he balanced his body-weight on Indra's shoulders and held on to my hand for support and with careful steps after a lot of hassle settled himself snugly at the centre of the boat.
>
> "*What's your name?*"
> "*Srikanta*" I replied fearfully.
>
> He responded with a grimace,
> "*Sri and then Kanta -! Only Kanta will suffice. Come on; arrange the tobacco leaves. Indra, where did you keep the hookah and the tobacco bowl? Give that to this rascal - let him do it!*"
>
> (Sarat Rachonaboli 1975:36)

In Tagore, the theme is taken up once again in many of his novels, say, for example, *Shesher Kobita*. Amit Roy, the modern *Bengali Babu* without his *hookah* and *tupi* but with a copy of *Donne* in his pocket is the strange creature *Amitray*. He is a split personality, for his pseudonym is Nibaran Chakraborty, when he wishes to project his Bengali self. *Ketaki* is *Ketki* and *Naredra Mittir* is *Naren Mitter*. Tagore here makes two clear-cut distinctions: the *Babu* and the *Bengali*. While *Ketaki*, whom *Amit* marries against his wishes is the Anglicized Bengali woman and is despicable for her *Anglo mannerisms* Labonya has been idealized by Tagore as the *modern Bengali woman* in the making. She may not be all glowing with ideologies like *Suchorita* in *Gora*, but she has developed her

own identity as a product of cherished cultural syncreticism. Tagore maneuvers the plot, blending it with his ideological presumptions that *Ketkis* will become *Ketakis* when married to *Nibaran Chakrabortys* and not *Amitrays*; Amit too will be able to balance his high-flown poetic sensibilities with commonsense. The strife between *Babu* and the *Bengali*, regionalism, nationalism and internationalism probably required a larger canvas, which we find in *Gora* (1909). The name *Gora*, meaning the European or the *sahib*, becomes a contested plane of ideas in the novel.

There is a gap of around fifty years between Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutum* (1861) and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta* (1917) and then again another eleven years passed before Tagore wrote his *Shesher Kobita* (1928). By this time *babuwana* had been a part of the city's culture. While the *sahibs* were hooked on to their *hookahs*, the *Bengali Babus* languished over teacups as they took their puff from the *hookahs*. Then the *sahibs*, and the *babus* after them, discovered the cigarette. Bangla language too underwent certain noticeable changes. Kali Prasanna's *Bangla*, which still provides an enjoyable reading, is written exclusively in the North Kolkatan conversational dialect. It is *chalti bhasha* in a typical North Kolkata ch strain as *karche*, *khachche*, instead of *korchhe*, *kachhe* etc. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's literature compared to the *Bankimi bhasha* is *shudha Bangla* (as *koriyacche* instead of *karcche* would show), with a difference. Unlike Bankim, his language is fluid, bordering on the colloquial. He does not use ch as in North Kolkata dialect but *chh* instead. It was Pearychand Mitra or *Tekchand Thakur* as he was nicknamed, who took up the banner against the *Bankimi* style referring to him and his followers as the *shab pora maura dahor daul* (*shab* in *shudha bhasha*, meaning the dead body, is *maura* in *chalti bangla* and *daho* referring to funeral rites, is *pora* in *chalti bhasha*). The sarcasm is intended at the *Bankimi* writers mixing up the two strains and producing a hotchpotch Bangla in their endeavor to remain *shudha* or pure. Pearychand Mitra's *Alaler Ghare Dulal*, serves to be another

dialectical chronicle of Kolkata like *Hutum* in the late nineteenth century. Works like *Kalpatoru* by Indranath Bandopadhyay, *Model Bhogini* by Jogendranath Basu, *Sneholata* by Swarnakumari Debi, around the same time reflect the influence of Kaliprasanna Sinha and Pearychand Mitra. For example, the intermingling of sounds, notes and dialects at the *Ahirtola Ganga Ghat* in Sneholata's book, recall the dialogical descriptions in *Hutum*. Voices, attitudes are vividly portrayed along with a variety of dialects. Voices of fisherwomen shouting, business class abusing each other, students discussing their classroom achievements, tunes from mercantile boats in *Chattogram* dialect co-mingle to create the evening canvas on the *Ahirtola Ganga ghat*. While it is easier for a painter to depict the polyphony in shades of colour or for a filmmaker to translate the atmosphere, translating the same in another language, especially into English with its foreign origins is no easy task. Take for example the lines floating across the Ganges waters in Sneholata's book:

> Aaar kuyelan dahio
> Bandhu gecche bedeshat, khat na lehan
> Chhomashat
> Bandhur lagi mor kalija jauli jauli jai
> Koyela na dahio
>
> (Dasgupta 1989:742)

A translation of the same into English can retain the meaning without flavour, its cultural contours flattened out. Precisely, dialects such as this are untranslatable just as the differences between *ch* and *chh* or pronunciation of *lebu* as *nebu* meaning lemon, are also untranslatable. There can be so much of a cultural slippage between the two sounds - *l* is how the *South Kolkatans*, initially from the East-Bengal pronounce and n is how the North Kolkatans, the people of *adi-Kolkata* pronounce. As Narendranath Dasgupta in *Pearychand Mitra*: *Samaj Chinta o Sahitya* (Dasgupta 1989:17) points out - language that we utter reflects our intention, our background, our mental set up and how we

wish to project ourselves. Language creates a dialectical relationship between human beings and their society. In translation, where dialectical differences cannot be retained, communication process is also faulty. While Tagore's predecessors experimented with *shudha* or *chalti bhasha* as their style, in Tagore we find both. Novels like Gora, Ghare Baire and Chaturanga are written in *shudha bhasha* with *kariachhe, giyacche* etc, but *Shesher Kobita*, *Jogajog*, *Char Odhyay* are in *chalti bhasha* and closer to the spoken language of the *bhadralok* class of our century. The modernization of Bangla in Tagore can be traced by comparing his earlier works with the later ones. Here too when the translator would set himself to the task of translating in another language or English, the hidden cultural history will be dismissed or has to be stated in *notes* or *footnotes*. In a film probably, the changing times could be depicted artistically as Rituparno Ghosh does in *Chokher Bali*. Asha, who is illiterate, uses her rustic dialect, where ascchi is *aishee*. Mahendra, her educated husband, a doctor by profession, in his arrogance puns at her *aishee* as *I see*, which bewilders the simplistic Asha. The dialectical difference brings out the complexities in their ill-matched marriage. Binodini's convent education, her knowledge of English is her charm. She is what Asha is not. Binodini is the new woman, while Asha is the typical one. So just by the sound of a word, so much can be told.

The 1920s are marked by an anti-Tagore modernity, which Tagore had anticipated in his characterization of Amit Ray, the hero in *Shesher Kobita*. This anti-Tagore modernity phase or the Bengal renaissance owes its source to the literary *addas* and little magazines around the time. In 1921, Gokulchandra Nag and Dineshranjan Das set up the *Four Arts Club* on Hazra Road, in association with Manindralal Basu and Sunita Debi. This was a kind of a prelude to the *adda* that grew up around the magazine *Kallol*, which was celebrated largely owing to Achintokumar Sengupta's *Kallol Yug*. It included writers like Shibram Chakraborty, Pramothonath Bishi, Premendra Mitra, Shailajananda Mukherji, Tarashankar Banerji,

Nazrul Islam and others. Along with *Kallol* the other journals, which joined hands in their striving for anti-Rabindranath modernity, were *Sanhati* (1923), *Uttara* (1925), *Kalikalam* (1926), *Pragati* (1926) and *Purbasha* (1932). In the words of Premendranath, *Kallol* was "*a rebellious wave risen from the sullen vacancy of the material and intellectual world after First World War … It was anxious to test all life and civilization for inertness and decay*" (Chaudhuri (np): 230). Wedding Marx to Freud, the *Kallol Yug* saw the human entity as a combination of the biological man and the economical man. Possibly in carrying the Prufrockian strain to its extreme, the *Kallol* writers were charged with obscenity. Shanibarer Chithi, though no friend of Tagore's, began to criticize openly the Kallol writers on the ground of depicting the hyper-reality or the *curry powder reality - the flaunting poverty combined with unrestrained lust*. The modernization of the language initiated by Kaliprasanna Sinha comes a long way in the writings of these young men in the rapidly changing 1920s and 30s. Poetry, in the main catches the changing moods - the disillusionment, disgust, hope, despairs and hunger in the Kolkata metropolis. Jibanananda Das's *Midnight* gives us a glimpse of a nocturnal scene on a Kolkata street:

> The leper licks water from the hydrant
> Or perhaps the hydrant is broken.
> Now midnight crowds upon the city:
> A car passes with a foolish cough.
>
> (Chaudhuri (nd): 253)

The poet in his hopeful moods, which is not, however without a touch of irony, utters what now has become proverbial: *Kolkata*, *one day, will be a vibrant Tilottama*. As time marches on, India is partitioned and we are pushed into the post-colonial realities. The changing phases of politics and cultural milieu continue to be the source of inspiration for the writers in 1946-47. Riots, partition, independence and the change of times find reflection in the writings of Jibanananda Das, Bishnu Dey, Nirad Majumdar and others. The

poet Jibanananda Das records in his *Dhusor Pandulipi* (Bleak Manuscript), the *strange darkness around him in those days*:

> 'I'm Yaseen,
> Hanif, Muhammad, Maqbul, Karim, Aziz -
> And you?' Hand on my breast, his eyes upraised
> In his dead face, churning the bloody river
> He'll say: 'I'm Gagan, Bipin, Shashi, of
> Pathuriaghata,
> Maniktala, Shyambazar, Galiff Street, Entali …'
> (Chaudhuri (nd): 235)

Jal Dao ('Give Me Water') by Nirad Majumdar weaves together the painful memories and afflictions of the partition years:

> Everywhere see homeless men gasp in the shadows
> In parks, camps, roadways, mansion porches, beds
> On hard floors -
> What do they think? Have they left their homes to
> Look for their country?
> Where will they go? Perhaps to Howrah, perhaps to
> Dhaka …
> (Chaudhuri (nd): 236)

The romantic note of the Bengal renaissance continues in the writings of writers like Protibha Basu. Protibha Basu and Ashapurna Debi's stories and novels, and Maitraye Debi's *Nahanyate* beautifully depict the various facets of the Kolkata middle class society in these transition years - the phase marked by the *colonial hangover* and the *post-colonial modernity*. The writings of fifties and sixties continue to depict the influence of modernist writers/poets in the West. The *Eliotsian* strain continues in the lines of Subhash Mukhopadhyay:

> On the lane the evening slowly falls,
> The hawkers cry their old tunes on the way

The radio in the distance spreads a dream
The burning gas marks the end of a day …
(Chaudhuri (nd.): 254)

Sunil Gangopadhyay wishes to smother the Tilottama Kolkata in his arms:

Where can you find refuge in Kolkata?
I shall turn round all the ships on the Ganga
I shall focus their giant searchlights
On the darkness of the Maidan:
I shall then smother you in my arms.
(Chaudhuri (nd.): 253)

However, the *Tilottama* is beaten up and abused again in the 1970s by the naxalite struggle, which devastates a generation of young intellectuals. This is depicted in the second and the third parts of Samaresh Majumdar's Trilogy: *Uttaradhikar*, *Kalbela* and *Kalpurush* and in Mahasweta Debi's *Hajar Churashir Ma*. Though the relationship between the poet / writer and Kolkata has always been a dialectical one, the language used from the 1920s onwards to the late 60s, unfolding the contradictory moods, dreams and realities of Kolkata, is the *chalti bhasha* of the middle class intellectual with permissible slang expressions here and there to add flavour to the conversation sometimes. The interplay of dialects signifying class division is not much noticed. The novel *Kalpurush* by Samaresh Majumdar depicting the post-naxalite phase, where the low and the middle classes mix and idealisms are crushed or renamed uses a play of dialects. The translated passage below attempts to capture as in the original the cultural and ideological premises of the speaker(s), and the ensuing conflict:

Arko entered the room with tea, "*It's possible that Anu's mother will <u>not last for much long</u>*" *(tenshe jabe)*

> "*Anu's mother?*" The dialect *tenshe jabe* hit her in the ears.
>
> (Majumdar 1985:14)

Here *her* refers to *Madhabilata*, wife of an idealist husband who has been maimed in the naxalite torture. They are compelled to live in a slum for economic and social reasons after the naxalite fervour dies down reducing their dreams and aspirations to ashes. Their son is Arko. So it is natural that the colloquial *tenshe jabe*, a slum slang which differentiates the *bhadra samaj* from the uneducated, coming as it does from her own blood, upsets *Madhabilata*.

While such use of dialects can pose hazards in translation, the experimentation in the language continues in the writings of the contemporary novelists and poets as they attempt to depict Kolkata in its variety. Such mingling of regional languages with the mainstream Kolkata dialect found in the writings of the colonial times too as mentioned earlier in the essay, sometimes produces a strange language. Take for example such a line: *Hapner to ekta banduk bhi aacche* (Basu 2003: 229). This - which is a quaint Bangla-Hindi mix - is also a part of the Kolkata dialect. Anyone listening to the Bangla FM will have the privilege of listening to more of this stuff with a peculiar intonation, not always by the non-Bengalis, but by *pucca Kolkatans*. While in the colonial era such sprinkling of Hindi in Bengali was the spoken tongue of the mercantile class from other regions in India, now there is a tendency toward it developing as a particular style taken up by persons in the media. The *bhadralok* class, which owes its modernity to the efforts of Kaliprasanna Sinha, Pearychand Mitra and Tagore in the main, too has their differentiating characteristics. Many of Bani Basu's stories and novels based on Kolkata reveal the absorption of the Tagore culture by the middle-class. A novel like *Gandharbi* or a short story like *Kharap Chhele*, weaves its language and imagination with melodies from Tagore to depict how deeply the culture has

sunk into these minds. While the translation of the interplay of dialects in the above illustrations can be a translator's headache, translation of Bani Basu is not an easy task either. Just to cite an example of mistranslation here:

> What, Why? What's new about them? Pishi-Mesho, you know them inside out. Old wine in a new bottle? Hasn't the poet said, knowing it's old, don't ask for it, don't ask for it … from the corners of your half closed eyes! Jina laughed merrily.
>
> (Basu 2002: 153)

The translated quote in the extract produces almost a lurid effect! The *cheyo na* in the original *Purano jania cheyo na, cheyo na tomar adheko aankhir-o kone, tomar aulosho onnyo- mon-e* appeals to the sight (*Don't slight me by such a casual glance* is the idea). *Cheyo na* is definitely not *ask* as in the translation. The idea of *desirability* is subsumed in the neglect suggested by the words and the rhythm of the line. There's no lurid suggestion in the poet but teasing and pleading blended into one, which perfectly fits into the light-hearted conversation between the two sisters about the fond old folk in the family. There are other cases too of mistranslation, which results from the adoption of a homogenous strategy for retaining the flavour of the work and italicizing the original words in the translated text. As evident from the discussion in my paper it's not just the word, which is important as a signifier of a culture, the sound of the word, the intonation is also important. Translation of "*tai na?*" in Bengali is often Indianised in English "*isn't it na?*" A sensitive ear will immediately feel the difference, for the English version is the translation of the Hindi-speaking Bengali or the *probashi* Bengali where "*hai na?*" is changed to "*hocche na?*" A Kolkatan Bengali would never use this dialect.

While one can consider the cases of the untranslatable dialects, such mistranslations can surely be avoided. Just the

knowledge of the language won't do. A translator has to be an insider to the culture to depict its flavour, colour, smell and sounds. Or else we would find ourselves groping for authenticity in a constant slippage of cultural signifiers and excuse our blunders as *post-modernism* or is it *solipsism*?

NOTES

1. Patri discusses in detail these conjectures about the transmogrification of Calcutta as 'Kolkata'. He also mentions Job Charnock quoting from other sources that he too must have named Calcutta after Kalighat.

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