
Processes and Models of Translation: Cases from Medieval Kannada Literature

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Abstract

Contrary to the iconicity associated between the original and its translations as conceived in the West, medieval Indian literature provides examples of multiple tellings and renderings (Ramanujan 1992) of texts that are radically different from their so called 'originals', implying an altogether different type of interrelationship among texts. It has been further observed that medieval Indian translations are actually tellings, renderings and cultural transactions. In order to understand these phenomena in medieval India, we need to interrogate the nature of texts, the types of intertextual spaces, the way communities defined the role of such texts based on linguistic, religious, professional (caste) and other criteria, the construction of texts as databases of the community's knowledge and information systems and lastly, the processes of mutually sharing such knowledge and information systems.

Taking instances from medieval Kannada literature, the paper interrogates different modes of tellings, renderings and cultural transactions to map out different models of translation strategies used by communities, in order to translate and culturally transact knowledge and information. A vrat-kathā model of cultural transaction has been proposed as one of the models on which medieval Indian texts are rendered from one language to another. It has been suggested that categories such as gender, caste, religion, sect and language not only interconnect each other but at the same time, insulate and protect the communities' rights over their knowledge and

information systems and make telling and rendering activities, an exclusively in-group activity meant for the consumption of the rightful owners of knowledge and information systems. Thus despite the fact that different groups share a pluralistic epistemology which enables them to mutually understand each other's knowledge systems, their group-specific right over knowledge and information remains protected through multiple tellings, renderings and transactions on which they could retain their monopolistic control.

1. Introduction

1.1 The issue of what translation meant to traditional civilizations such as India has become the subject matter of two international conferences held recently. If translation is a concept that represents an activity of the age of mechanical reproduction of texts, then how traditional cultures of Asia dealt with transfer of knowledge and information from one language to another in their long literary tradition is not only a matter of curiosity but also a matter of significance for understanding traditional modes of cultural transaction. The present paper is an attempt to continue the current debate about the dynamics of what is called 'cultural' translation and the diverse translation discourses in Asia.

1.2 To start with, within the modernistic framework literature and translation are directly connected with literacy, writing systems, creativity, intellectuality, and are individualistic in nature. But literature is radically different if one looks at medieval literatures of India. Literature was typically oral, despite being in a scripto-centric format, and often existed only in performance. In this sense, it was not just a mere text; it also bore medieval knowledge and information systems. In the majority of the cases, literary texts also become a part of ritualistic worship. Thus by being sectarian and ritualistic in nature, different tellings and renderings provided

access not only to the legitimate users of such knowledge-base but also prevented them from being accessed freely by others.

1.3 In a recent study (Satyanath forthcoming), taking the specific episode of Kirāta Śiva and Arjuna from the *Mahābhārata*, from scripto-centric (writing/manuscript tradition), phono-centric (oral tradition) and body-centric (ritual performing tradition) renderings of the episode from medieval Karnataka, it has been pointed out that categories such as gender, caste, religion, sects and language not only interconnect each other but at the same time, protect their exclusive rights over their knowledge and information systems. This makes telling and rendering activities, be they scripto-centric, phono-centric or body-centric, an exclusively in-group activity meant only for the consumption of the rightful owners of knowledge and information systems. Thus despite different groups sharing a pluralistic epistemology, which enabled them to understand each other, their group-specific right over knowledge and information remained protected through multiple telling and rendering systems over which they retained a monopolistic control. In this paper, a further attempt has been made to understand the processes of such cultural transactions and to identify the models through which such tellings and renderings operate in a community.

2. Ritualistic Context of Tellings and Renderings

2.1 One of the issues that concern us with regard to medieval tellings and renderings in Karnataka is the religious and ritualistic context in which a majority of the Kannada texts have been set. A survey of Kannada literature during the period from the ninth to nineteenth century C.E. and its links with other Indian literatures clearly suggests that Kannada might have interacted with several literatures, not only with Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit but also with Tamil, Telugu and Marathi. As many medieval Kannada poets

have claimed to be poets with bilingual proficiency (*'ubhaya-kavis'*), the movements of texts, of cultural transactions rather, are of bidirectional nature. It is also interesting to know that these possibilities of translation were made possible because of the multilingual populations that Brahminical Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Bhakti religions had encountered among their followers in medieval Karnataka. The multidimensionality of interaction of Kannada with different sectarian and linguistic communities can be schematically conceptualized as shown in Figure 1. Such a complex scheme of cultural transaction is crucial for understanding the processes of telling and rendering in medieval Karnataka.

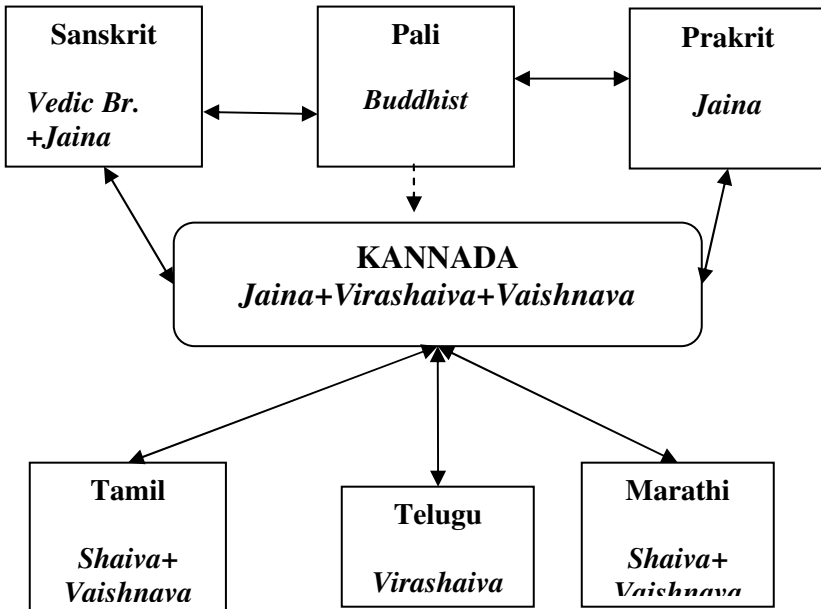


Figure 1: Schematic Diagram Showing Various Possibilities of Translation among Different Sectarian and Linguistic Communities.

2.2 In order to understand the processes and models that operated behind different sectarian tellings and renderings, we have to look into Jaina, Vīraśaiva, Vaiṣṇava traditions, the commentary (*ṭīkā*) tradition and the folk tradition of tellings and renderings. In a recent paper, Tarakeshwar (2005) has attempted to understand certain issues of translation processes that were prevalent during the ninth-tenth century C.E. in Kannada. This has been further explored here, taking a closer look at the processes and models operating behind the religious and ritualistic aspects of tellings and renderings.

To start with let us consider the text *Vaḍḍārādhane* ('The Worship of Elders', *vaḍḍa* < *vṛddha* Skt.), a text that has been claimed to have been written by Śivakōṭyāchārya during the early part of the tenth century (c. 920 C.E.). Kannada scholars have pointed out that this is an anthology consisting of nineteen life-stories of legendary Jaina holy men. The text also has an alternative title *Upasarga-kēvaligaḷa-kathe* ('The Story of Holy Men Who Overcame Obstacles'). It has also been noted that the stories in this text are common to the Prakrit *Bhagavatī-ārāadhanā* by Bhrājṣṇu and the Sanskrit *Brhatkathā-kośa* of Hariṣēṇa. Considering the formulaic *gāhes* (< *gāthā*) that appear before the beginning of each story, it has been suggested by scholars that *Vaḍḍārādhane* might have been based either on a Prakrit commentary (*vyākhyāna*) of *Bhagavatī-ārāadhanā*, or on *Bhagavatī-ārāadhanā*, also a Prakrit text.¹

It is important to note that the manuscripts of the stories in *Vaḍḍārādhane* end with the colophon *vaḍḍārāadhaneya-kavachavumangalam* ('the sacred shield of *Vaḍḍārādhane*, blessings to everyone'), suggesting that the text needs to be considered as a ritualistic shield. Similarly, the beginning of some of the manuscripts starts with the statement *kavachārōhayāhi* ('the beginning (hoisting) of the shield'), suggesting the Prakrit formulaic *gāhe*, its commentary in Sanskrit/Prakrit and the subsequent

expansion of the formulaic *gāhe* into a life-story, was probably meant as a story to be recited for the benefit of the Kannada-knowing Jaina laymen as a part of the performance of the ritual. Moreover, the term *ārādhane* ‘worship’ which is part of the title of the text and the tradition of the existence of such texts in the Jaina literary tradition further suggests that the reading or recitation of the text might have been intended as the concluding part of a ritual worship similar to the story recitation of a *vrata-kathā* among the sectarian communities of medieval Hinduism.

Structurally, the stories in *Vadḍārādhane* start with a Prakrit *gāhe* that tells the story line in a synoptic manner. In certain stories, *gāhes* could also be found in the middle of the story and occasionally towards the end. In some stories, along with the *gāhes*, Sanskrit *ślokas* and Kannada verses could also be found in the narrative part of the story. It has been estimated by scholars that about 142 verses have been thus incorporated into *Vadḍārādhane*. Ignoring the repetition of certain verses, there are in all 62 Prakrit *gāhes*, 57 Sanskrit *ślokas* and 10 Kannada verses in the text.

The stories in *Vadḍārādhane* describe the details of the ritual deaths, viz. *samādhi-maraṇa* and *sallēkhana* that the followers of Jaina holymen observe. This is made clear at the beginning of the text after the implicative verses:

Having done namaskāra to śrī vīra-varḍhamāna-bhatāraḱar (Mahavira), I narrate the stories of great people who achieved salvation and went to sarvārtha-siddhi, after having won the four upasargas (the agency that causes the obstacles for penance), namely, god (dēva), human (manuṣya), animal (tirik, tiryaka), non-living (acētana), having tolerated the trouble from the twenty-two body-linked requirements (parīṣahas), having won over the five senses (indriyas), having discarded the external temptations, having excelled in twelve types of

meditations (tapa), having done the sanyasana (leaving the mortal body) by prāyōpagamana, and having destroyed all the encrusted karma.

The recitation and listening of the stories not only constitute a sacred ritualistic narration but also act as a *kavacha*, a (sacred) shield that protects the listeners against all types of evil and sin that attempt to threaten the maintenance of the Jaina path. The multilingual nature of the text and the renderings that take place from one language to another within the text itself provides the model of translation and cultural transaction. I have called the model *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā* model, as not only *Vaddārādhane* and several Jaina texts use such a model but also its variants could be found in many Indian languages, both at popular and folk levels. Thus *mantra*, ritual and narration of the ritualistic story in the language become the characteristic structure of such cultural transactions. The interconnections among different linguistic codes and their functions can be diagrammatically visualized as shown in Figure 2.

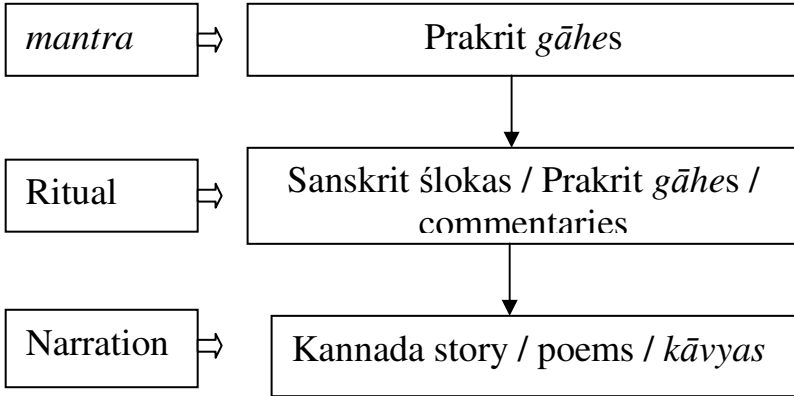


Figure 2: Schematic model of the translation process for the life-stories in *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā*.

2.3 Mention has already been made of the ritualistic aspect of the life-stories of *Vaddārādhane* and the recitation of the Kannada part of the story as the story narrated during a *vrata-kathā*. Incidentally, Jains have several *vratas* of this sort. They have been called *nōmpis* ‘vow’.² In the body of the text of *Vaddārādhane* itself there are several references both to *vratas* and *nōmpis*. The two terms appear to complement each other and overlap in their meaning, although their exact meanings are not clearly evident. The names of the vows are given below and the page numbers refer to Narasimhachar’s (1971) edition.

- pancha-mahā-vrata* (p.6)
aṇu-vrata (p.13), (*pancāṇu-vrata*)
 having vowed the eighth-day (p.33), (*aṣṭamiyam nōntu*); refers to *jīvadāyaṣṭami nōmpi*.
 Used here as a verb, ‘vowing’.
- aṣṭāhnikā-mahime* (p.33): a festival vow observed for eight days starting from the eighth day to the full moon day of the full moon cycle in the *āsāḍha*, *kārtika*, and *phālguna* months.
- phālguna-nandīśvara* (p.106): a festival vow observed for eight days from the eighth day to the full moon day of the full moon cycle in the *phālguna* month.
- ācāmla-vardhanamemba-nōmpi* (p.66): a vow performed for the well-being of the body.
- puruṣa-vrata* (p.112): celibacy, abstinence from sex, could be observed by both men and women.
- brahmacharya-vrata* (p.116): refers to *puruṣa-vrata*.
- guṇa-vrata* (p.127): daily restrictions that the Jaina monks impose on themselves, *dig*

(direction), *deśa* (region) and *danda-virati* are the three types of vows.

śikṣā-vrata (p.127).

simhaniṣkrīḍita-nōmpi (p.172) an 80-day fasting vow in which the follower keeps fast for 60 days and eats interspersingly for 20 days.

2.4 It is important to note that the observation of a vow is more like a ritual performance and ends with the recitation of the relevant story associated with the ritualistic vow. One of them, *jīvadāyaṣṭami-nōmpi* ‘the vow of showing kindness (compassion) to animal life’ is accompanied by the recitation of the story of *Yaśōdhara-carite* (Raghavachar 1941). One of the renderings of the texts has been called *jīvadāyaṣṭami-nōmpiya-kathe* (‘The Story of the Vow of Kindness to Animal Life’) (16th century C.E.). It starts with formulaic poems and the story of Yaśōdhara. It is worth noting that medieval Karnataka used to treat multiple renderings of a text, whether it was in Sanskrit, Prakrit or Kannada, as texts or *kṛtis* of equal significance. One of the introductory verses of *Yaśōdhara-carite* (1.2) elucidates this as follows.

In this world, this *kṛti* has been rendered into Kannada based on the earlier *kṛtis* in Sanskrit and Prakrit, rendered by earlier poets. Let their wisdom provide support to me in the art of poetry.

Table 1 provides details about the popularity of *jīvadāyaṣṭam-nōmpi* as well as the story that used to be recited at the end of the ritual. All these suggest that the Jaina tellings and renderings of Prakrit stories were ritualistic texts usually narrated in regional languages like Kannada, Tamil, Gujarati and Hindi as part of ritualistic worship. There are at least eighteen tellings of the text available, out of which five renderings are in Kannada, four each in Sanskrit and Gujarati, two in Apabhrahmsha and one each in Prakrit,

Tamil and Hindi. The details of these texts are given in Table 1. This suggests the high popularity of the vow, its ritual enactment and narration, and the model of translation suggested earlier. The vow of *jīvadāyaṣṭami*, its ritual and narration of the story in Kannada together constitute the entire ritual of the vow. *Yaśōdhara-carite* (1.3) makes this point clear.

During the fasting of the followers (śrāvaka-jana) in the vow of *jīvadāyaṣṭami*, this story (vastu-kathana) is feast to the ears; having thought like this, kavibhāla-locana (‘Janna’) composed this text.

Text	Author	Language	Period
<i>Samarāiccha-kahā</i>	Haribhadra	Prakrit	8 th C
<i>Trīṣaṣṭīlakṣaṇa-mahāpurāṇa</i>	Jinasena	Sanskrit	9 th C
<i>Tisaṭṭhi-mahāpurisa-guṇāṅkāra</i>	Pushpadanta	Apabrahmsha	10 th C
<i>Jasahara-carīu</i>	Pushpadanta	Apabrahmsha	10 th C
<i>Yaśastilaka-campū</i>	Somadeva	Sanskrit	10 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	Vadiraaja	Sanskrit	11 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-kāppiyam</i>	?	Tamil	11 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	Janna	Kannada	12 th C
<i>Yyaśōdhara-carite</i>	Padumanabha	Kannada	15 th C
<i>Yaśōdhar-carite</i>	Chandravarni	Kannada	15 th C
<i>Jīvadāyaṣṭami-nōmpi</i>	?	Kannada	16 th C
<i>Yaśōdhar-carite</i>	Jinachandra Suri	Gujarati	16 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	Devendra	Gujarati	16 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	Lavanyaratna	Gujarati	16 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	?	Kannada	16 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	Manohara Dasa	Gujarati	17 th C
<i>Yaśōdhara-carite</i>	Lakshmi Dasa	Hindi	18 th C

Table1: Table showing the details of multilingual renderings of *Yaśōdhara-carite* in Indian languages.

2.5 In order to demonstrate that the *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā* model of ritualistic tellings and renderings was not confined to

Jainism but was a wide spread practice among other sectarian groups as well, we can look at Vīraśaivism. If we consider the cases of the Nāyanārs of Tamil Nadu and the Vīraśaiva Śaranas of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the hagiographies depicting the life-stories of these saints were as sacred as, if not more than, the Purānas depicting the sixty-four *līlās* of Śiva. In Tamil, Kannada and Telugu, the hagiographies of these saints were written not only before the compilation of the *Śiva-purāna* but also have remained as popular as, if not more popular than, the Purānas. Let us look at the case of Cirutṭoṇḍar, a Nāyanār among the sixty-three saints from Tamil Śaivism whose story has been retold several times in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Sanskrit and in literary, popular and folk versions.

Cirutṭoṇḍar ‘little servant’ who is called Siriyāla in Kannada and Telugu, Sirāl Seṭh in Marathi and Seṭh Saḡuṇ Shah in Gujarati, was historically known as Paranjyōti. He was the Commander-in-Chief for the Pallava king Narasimha Varma. He is said to have been responsible for the fall of Vatapi, the capital of the Chalukya king Pulikeshi II in 642 C.E. Though rudimentary versions of his life are revealed in verses composed by Sundarar (c 850 C.E.) and Nambiyāṇḍār Nambi (c 10th cent. C.E.), it was Śēkkiḷār (1064 C.E.) who wrote the first detailed hagiography of Cirutṭoṇḍar. Nearly twenty retellings of his story could be seen in Kannada and Telugu. At least one text in Marathi and an oral version in Gujarati have been reported. In addition, in Karnataka there is a vow (*vrata*) known as *siriyāla-seṭṭiya-vrata*. There are also folk versions of the ritual in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The tellings and renderings of the story of Cirutṭoṇḍar in Tamil come to an end with Śēkkiḷār. However, the Kannada and Telugu hagiographers provide multiple renderings of the story during the subsequent period. As Vīraśaivism gradually spread over Maharashtra, the Marathi renderings of the episode came into existence. In addition, the folk versions of the

renderings could be found in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (*Palnāṭi-vīruni-kathā*), the popular renderings could be seen in *Siriyāḷa-seṭṭi-vrata-kathā*.³

The story of Ciruttonḍar had become a ritual enactment by 10th century C.E. By the time the Tamil hagiography got composed, the story of the sacrifice of the only son by Ciruttonḍar and his wife had become worthy of worship resulting in a folk temple cult as pointed out by Dahejia (1988).

Independent shrines to the saint and his blessed son Sirala were constructed in the 10th century as we know from an inscription recording gifts for lighting of lamps in the shrines. In the year A.D. 998 three small copper images of the Siruttondar family was dedicated to the Tanjavur temple...Siruttondar festivals were celebrated yearly and an inscription in the year A.D. 1003 tells us of the image of Sirala being carried in procession from the Sirala shrine to the Siruttondar temple. Later records detail the laying out of a special route for his procession, and inscriptions also speak of festival to mark the occasion when Siva gave salvation to Siruttondar.

Existence of similar cultic rituals in other parts of South India has been observed by Pāḷkurki Sōmanātha in his *Basava-purāṇa*, a Telugu hagiographic work belonging to 1220 C.E. Sōmanātha notes that the stories of the saints of the Vīraśaiva cult had become popular among the devotees and used to be enacted and narrated in the homes of the devotees and that he has put together those stories to compose *Basava-purāṇa*. The meter and style of the text suits singing and narration of the text to the gathering of devotees and the actual recitation of the text is said to be still continuing to this day. We can notice here the Vīraśaiva hagiographic tradition itself has been based on a *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā* model discussed earlier. The dynamics of the complex

interactions between linguistic and social categories that was discussed for the episode of Cirutṅḍar is diagrammatically represented in Figure 3.

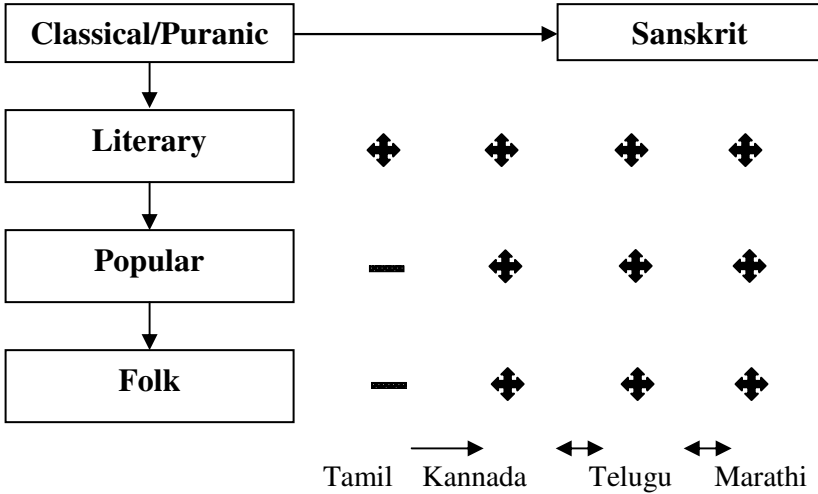


Figure 3. Diagrammatic representation of the complex interactions between linguistic and social categories in the *vrata-kathā* model.

2.6 We also have to understand and problematize the nature of the written text, the oral recitation of the text as a ritualistic part of the vow, and the performative dimensions of the texts during the period of medieval Kannada literature. The written versions of the Jaina texts, the Vīraśaiḥa hagiographies, or *Kumāravṃśa-bhārata* (16th century C.E.) and *Torave-rāmāyaṇa* (17th century C.E.), the most popular religious texts of Brahminical Hinduism in Kannada, were all available in plenty on palm leaf manuscripts but the texts were in use more through oral recitation performances called *gamaka-vāchana*. A text's sectarian ritual connotation as a vow, its musical recitation done orally without using a written text and

sometimes accompanied by an oral interpretation (*vyakhyāna*, *ṭīkā* ‘commentary’) in a dramatic dialogic format constitutes a typical traditional ritual vow performance. Although palm-leaf manuscripts of the two above-mentioned Brahminical texts are available in plenty, their oral transmission has continued even to this day through *gamaka-vāchanas* and folk plays.

The lack of a distinction between scripto-centric and phono-centric texts on the one hand and the crucial role of body-centric performative traditions in shaping and determining the nature of performing texts on the other has played an important role, both at the conceptual and performative levels. This eventually shaped the construction, composition, sustenance and transmission of textual, oral and performing traditions of Karnataka. Above all, their ritualistic nature in the form of vows, as *vratas* and *nōmpis*, is very crucial to the existence, continuation and transmission of texts as tellings, renderings, and more generally, as cultural transactions. These salient features of medieval Kannada literature appear to have continued in the folk plays and performances till the nineteenth and twentieth century, when the print media and its mode of mechanical reproduction changed the paradigm of knowledge, its documentation, construction and retrieval among the educated population of the country. The complex interaction of different forms of texts that we noticed in medieval Karnataka not only contests the neatly generalized definitions of scripto-centric, phono-centric dichotomies proposed for documentation of knowledge on the one hand and the concept of translation on the other but also demonstrates the need for understanding and reconstructing the processes and models of cultural transactions such as tellings and renderings.

2.7 The *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā* model that has been proposed for capturing the processes involved in medieval tellings and renderings has significant implications for similar cultural

transactions in other Indian literary traditions. Although a systematic study has not been attempted, a cursory look at the Purānic and ritualistic aspects of the medieval Bengali ritual cult, *dharmapujā*, prompts us to extend the proposed model for other linguistic, regional and sectarian traditions as well. Though Ferrari (2003) refers to '*the uselessness of translation in the Bengali Dharmapujā*', it is important to note here that the utilitarian aspects are of no significance in ritualistic traditions such as *Dharmapujā*.⁴

As a matter of fact all of the mantras uttered on occasion of rituals *have* to be inaccessible to devotees, yet at the same time – given the low origin of the *pandits* – they have lost significance for the performers themselves (ibid. 2003).

It is important to note that the meaning or utterance of the *mantras* have a ritual significance like the Prakrit *gāhes* that we noticed in the case of *Vaḍḍārādhane* and are an integral part of the *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā* model of tellings and renderings. Ferrari appears to be perplexed by questions like why neither priests nor devotees care about knowing their meaning, why it is felt that translation is not necessary and what represents 'the word' in Dharma ritualism'. The answer to such questions lies in the fact that the *mantras* are like the seeds and constitute an integral part of the rituals on the one hand and tellings and renderings in regional languages on the other. What is more significant for our purposes is that these lines which suggest how multilingual texts are sustained in the *vrata-kathā* or *nōmpi-kathā* model even in the absence of the comprehension of multilingual codes, thereby making cultural transactions such as telling and rendering activities a process of translation.

NOTES

1. The summary of opinions given here is based on Nagarajaiah (1999), Narasimhachar (1971), Shivarudrappa (1975) and Upadhye (1943).
2. The occurrence and meaning of *nōmpi* well attested in all the south Dravidian languages: *nōnpu* (Tamil), *nōmpi* (Kannada), *nōmpu* (Malayalam and Tulu), *nōmu* (Telugu) have meanings such as ‘ceremonial fasting, abstinence, penance’ etc. (*DED*, 3147).
3. For details see Satyanath (1999).
4. Ferrari’s position quoted here is based on an abstract available on the website.

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