

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Crossing the Ravi Part – 2

Length: 33:38

Professor: Hello and welcome to the discussion on “Crossing the Ravi” by Gulzar. This story is a translation and the story was originally written in Hindi. And today we are going to look at some of the aspects of the text which indicate that it has been translated from a different language.

So, I want to begin with this question. What are the indications in the text which suggest that it is a different culture, it is a different language, which is the source for this particular story? Sanchar, what are your thoughts on this?

Student 1: I think in the very first is the selection, certain languages, certain words are very apparent in that sense. For example, the word Bappaji itself is something which is very, is not really it is a kind of region-oriented. So, that is something which they have not translated, it is something which is familiar to ‘father’ so they have kept Bappaji as it is.

And plus, since it is kind of, they have used the term Gurudwara itself in that sense. So, it is not something like the translated text also acknowledges the fact that the same thing remains there. And more importantly, there is also a small proverb given to us written like, so one have to find the courage in the blessed Guru, and he is the one who is the ship.

So, Nanak is the ship, he who boards the ship will cross safely. This actually is Sikh proverb so which is pretty much I think, prevalent in the Punjab provinces in that sense. So, here the way it has been translated, it is more like a word-to-word translation. So, I think that these kinds of phrases and lines and words which are chosen in most of the story, they make it much more explicit that it is kind of a translated text in that sense.

Professor: Yes. Yeah, very good. So, let us just kind of go back over Sanchar’s comments. And I want to begin not just at the gurudwara, but in fact go a bit further back and start with the name Darshan Singh. ‘It is a wonder that Darshan Singh did not go mad.’ The name itself, the surname Singh kind of gives us a sense that this is a name which comes from a particular culture, the Punjabi culture, and Sikhism is the predominant religion in that culture. And as you

pointed out, Gurudwara the particular temple to go to in this particular religion also indicates that this is from a country-specific region, the story is from a cultural specific region.

And there are further evidences that suggests, on page 255 in collection, cries of “Jo bole so nihaal” and that is the beginning of a kind of a saying, which ends, that is actually a call. So, it means, if you evoke the words, you will be blessed, something like that. So, I think I have a kind of transliteration ‘whoever utters, shall be happy, shall be fulfilled.’ So, that is the idea behind that saying “Jo bole so nihaal” which is frequently evoked by the people who kind of have faith in this particular religion Sikhism to somehow help them tide over periods of distress and similar situation circumstances.

So, all this is kind of very closely bring us to that particular cultural, state of affairs and there are others, as such I have pointed out, the blessed Guru refers to Guru Nanak, the very first Guru of this particular religion. And there is a tradition, as Sanchar pointed out, that has become almost like a proverb, but it’s source is from, from the Guru Granth, the Holy Scripture of Sikhs and they quote from to kind of strengthen their desire to do something.

So, if they want to leave they kind of quote this idea that Nanak is the ship, he who boards the ship will cross safely. So they want to cross over to this new nation of India from a land, instead of becoming foreign to them because of this divide.

And so they kind of draw sustenance from the structure and this one thing it tells us that they are going back to their roots, they are going back to their culture, they going back to their religion. They go deep down to the roots to kind of help them tide over this difficult political divide and that tells us, ‘Okay, this is not something which is familiar to all of us, but is the experience of a particular community.’

So, all these facets give us this kind of suggestion. So, Mridula, what are your perspectives in relation to the other translation in relation to the other culture specificity? And at the same time, if you want you can also discuss how there are common elements which make us all Indians, even though there are culturally specific experiences.

Student 2: In this text there are a lot of references that are very much specific to a particular region, but at the same time, there are a lot of instances that tells us that it is very much similar to other regions of our country. So, one such is the, there is a mention about this special day Sankrant. So although we all know that we have this Sankranti is a very special day, it is a

festival day and it is celebrated throughout the country but it has different names. I think here it is called Sankranti in South India.

Professor: Yeah absolutely, we have their own particular festivals with a different name, but it is all celebrated at the same time, more or less.

Student 2: So, that is one instance. And here, you have a lot of reference to the places which also tells that it is from this particular, this story is set from this particular region. And this is actually I will just take the names out, one is Khairabad when they are about to crossing, they are about to reach and they are about to cross the river, they say that we have just crossed Khairabad.

And then once says that this is Gujranwala. So, and then again, they say that we are about to reach Lahore, which is one, if we reach Lahore it is just like we have reached Hindustan. And one thing that is very much explicit in this text that tells us that this is something related to Punjabi household, is one, as you pointed out, the name Darshan Singh. The other one is that towards the end of story, there is this person who asked Darshan Singh to throw the dead baby into the river and he addresses him as 'Sardarji'. So that is one instance.

Professor: And even earlier too we have a reference to that word Sardarji on page 256 in my collection. He says "leave now Sardarji one by one, we shall go across the border, we will bring your mother in." The priest intervenes. Darshan Singh is trying to convince his mother to leave with him and his family. He says, you go first, we will bring your mother with us. So the word Sardarji is evoked once more, so you're right. So, that there are very specific references to kind of, anchor the story in that particular culture of Punjab and Sikhism so that is there.

And what about other words in the text which indicates that even there is a confluence of this culture along with another culture. The Hindu culture as well is there, isn't it? Certain words in the text suggest that, we can see these two religions you know living cheek-by-jowl, right?. There is no hostility between these two and then those kind of indications and also there, would you like to comment on that? Any references which says that this is Hindi language too, this is not Punjabi?

Student 1: Pretty much right, because the religious chants which they are having of course you have 'har har mahadev!'

Professor: Yes, Lord Shiva.

Student 1: It is a fundamental chant for all the Hindu people throughout the country not from a particular region.

Professor: Yeah.

Student 1: The reason I think that this idea of where he is talking about this Sankrant, we call it Sankranti. So it is the same thing which is spoken everywhere throughout.

Professor: We celebrate it as well.

Student 1: Exactly, it is not something which is specific so I think that in that sense, this entire story has a lot of parallels with Hindu culture, it is in the type of the worshiping, which they are doing.

Professor: Staying in a temple, it is a temple based structure, congregating in a particular place for security. The men and the women. There is a community kitchen. So, which is also similar to all the temple prasadam that you receive when you go for your prayers. So, the symbolic offering of food, whereas we have a full fledged community kitchen here. So, which is also part of Gurudwara.

So, we do see parallels between the two religions. So, and at the same time, it shows you that Sankranti is really important because it kind of shows you how the different parts of India is partaking in a common festival. It is celebrated in Tamil Nadu, it is celebrated in Odisha and in northern parts as well. So, lots of people are participating in this common culture, which happens at the same time for the majority of the Hindus and Sikhs. So, that is something which is interesting and significant to know.

What are the other aspects in the text, which also indicate that the solution or the resolution of the story also derives from this kind of common cultural faith? If I want a kind of response to that question, I would think back to that, that whisper. That whisper into Darshan Singh's ear, 'Sardarji, throw the dead baby into the Ravi. That will be the end of its journey. What good will it do to take it across the border?' And I want to compare that comment with the earlier comments made by the priest who says, 'Leave now Sardarji. One by one we shall go across the border. We will bring your mother with us.'

So, there are two similar advice, there are two advice, I wouldn't call them similar actually, offered to Darshan Singh and he takes it. And there are other advises as well, perhaps the one offered by his father too. So the father does not want to go to Gurudwara because he wants to

stay in the house, right? And at his death he goes, isn't it, there? Once the father is no longer, he joins the rest of the community taking refuge in the Gurudwara. So, what do we make of that kind of structure of advice being offered and Darshan Singh taking it? So, any thoughts on that?

Student 2: In the first instance where he leaves his mother, his mother is actually, she does not want to go along with Darshan Singh. So, you cannot solely say that it is Darshan Singh's decision to leave his mother that he has taken whole heartedly what the priest has said, because his mother is also old, he has to respect her decision as well. So, that is there.

But when it comes to the, the last section of the story, he goes with what the stranger says, he just not even think about it. And I do not know whether we should, we must really understand the mental condition that he is in because he is very much saddened by the fact that his child is dead now. But that loud cry that he gives before throwing that dead body into the river, he cries "Waheguru" as if it is a sacrifice to the God. It is as if like he is saying that 'I am leaving this child, so just take care of me hereafter,' while it does not go well with him.

Professor: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah because he sacrifices because he is throwing a live child in place of the dead one. So, you have got points. Very interesting point and it is a very interesting take on some of the reactions of some of the characters. To go back to the reaction of the mother, the mother does not want to leave, it kind of, you pay attention to her refusing to leave and that reminds me of other characters as well such as Toba Tek Singh for instance.

He generally believes that Toba Tek Singh is on this side of the border and he wants to stay with his village. And so that stubborn refusal to leave once needed land, the land that he has lived in. So, there are lots of things in her silence in her refusal, which we need to address so I am glad that you brought that in. I was focusing on Darshan Singh and the kind of impact on him through the community here, that it is a good observation.

The other point about the other's sacrifice is also very interesting. He takes the name of lord, the Sikh God and he throws the babies "Waheguru". So he does that with good faith but there is another silence as well there, which we will come to. But the idea of taking the advice of a stranger on that train, we don't have to judge Darshan Singh, but we, but we can think about other factors, or the clamour, the confusion, the crowd, the darkness. They are not able to see anything very clearly, visibility is very low. They tried to come up with things ,they said, 'Oh, this must be this place,' or 'I think we have crossed this place.' So, there is a lot of assumptions

and they want to kind of see the bright side of things as well. That is human nature despite all the chaos, despite the rupture, despite the great migration that they are embarking on. They also want to kind of leave this, so in that act that they are forced on to throw the right baby and that part is pretty clear. They just want to leave behind the past, the gory past, the painful past, and begin new life and with that idea they kind of throw that dead child. But it turns out to be the live one. And the silence that I was referring to was Shahini's, who was clutching the dead baby for so long and she didn't want to let go of the child. And there is also this saying that the other child will not drink milk without the brother, right?

So, all these things are there and you wonder, 'How far was she aware of the fact that the husband is snatching away the dead child?' So all those dramatic arguments are there, so what do you think, Sanchar? What are your comments on this set of ideas?

Student 1: It is like this particular part where the character was Shahini, there is a lot of metaphors at play. So, the very act of partition that they are basically forced to leave the country to go to Hindustan, and during this time how the body politics is playing, like how the dead child is taken or even ironically, how the living child is taken away. That has, if we look at it in a further manner, we can connect it to the greater understanding that our country itself gets disconnected.

So, I may be feeling too far, but the thing is that there is a certain amount of relation that I can personally find really, they can be drawn that how the character of the mother can be important with the character of collective nation, and certainly then these two nations get partitioned.

Now, there is a question like which one is dead, which one is living? But the thing is that this division, which is already created where they are throwing out something, marginalizing something outside and basically dragging something out of the total existence that is actually something which is very well connected to the character of Shahini. So I think that Shahini's character's plight, her pain, her pathetic situation can be somehow or the other can act as a relay, can be related to that of the whole situation of the nation as a whole.

Professor: Yes, yes. Yes. Absolutely, that parallel is very much there.

Student 1: So, in that sense, the metaphors are really very simple.

Professor: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, she stands for that. Shahini stands for that exhausted mother figure that we associate with this particular land which is going through such a trauma doing

that period. So, she symbolizes that, and there is one child and there are twins, two children, two nations are, you know, in the making. Two children have been given birth, two nations are in the process of being birthed. So, one you can easily think of as India, the other Pakistan and the mother cannot choose between the two. She is torn. The other is weak, and then she tries to give it sustenance as much as she could but she fails.

So, when the father wants to kind of get rid of the one that is no longer alive, the mother is unable to do anything about it, not even comment and the silence becomes deafening. And that's a very very significant silence. So, all those parallels with the nation are very much there.

What about the structure of this story? Do you find it significant, there are breaks in the stories? Sometimes we just have one paragraph, a very short paragraph which is kind of sectioned out, right? From there one which has gone before and the one which is going to come after that. That, Any talk on that kind of structure?

Student 2: As you have pointed out it is highly structured when it comes to reading. There are a lot of divisions, and it is clearly marked out. In the first section, you can see that the writer is actually telling us what is going to happen and what has happened. It is like an interview, or a prologue to the story.

Second structure actually talks about the things that are about to unfurl, before the Partition. It talks about the household, insecurities, and after that, the next section again, it talks about the death of the father and then later followed by the rites, how they managed to manage to perform the last rites of the Father.

Again, then there is description wherein the next section talks about they going to Gurudwara and it also talks about other the plight of the other people who are also in Gurudwara. And followed by the other section, the last section where we can call it the crux of the story because that is where the action is really taking place.

Professor: The point about the prologue is really interesting to me. The very first section, it's chorus-like, it is, it kind of sets the story out for a little bit, in order to kind of gives you a sense of things that has happened and it is to come. So, the chorus or the prologue or this introductory paragraph tells the reader that his father had died.

Then we see the death again, staged for us, performed for us in para 3, 'One night, 10 or 15 days later the sound of Bappaji falling down in the courtyard woke everyone up.' So, it is once

again kind of performed, staged. So if, this chorus function here tells what is going to come for the reader.

And then finally when they reach the Gurdwara, Darshan Singh and his wife when they reach the Gurudwara, the story actually sets out in written, they travel over train and then these tragedies happen. So, it is a very interesting structure in which this past and the present, going backwards and forwards, so that is something we need to keep in mind.

What are the connections that we can draw with the Amrita Pritam story? Since we have recognised that story to belong to that culture as well, we have seen the culture of Punjab, right? So, what are the parallels we can draw between that story and this one? Are you able to see similar scenarios or is it like two distinct pieces that have come from similar? Sanchar, what do you think?

Student 1: There are parallels, but the thing is that it may not be explicit, but they will be kind of ligand in that sense. The basic thing which is coming I think, it is a very apparent parallel that I am feeling to draw attention, is the character of the mother. Because it is in both this book, the novel, I'm sorry, the short stories, they come across the fact that the son without an unquestionably, follows what the mother says. So, if we go to Stench of Kerosene when the mother kind of orders to Manak to desert Guleri and welcome the new wife, the second wife, he does not have any opinion against it.

Similarly, here in the case when they are leaving for the train, the mother also, it is not ordering, but there is a different level of emotion, but the mother's verdict is taken or the mother's statement is taken as the absolute one, and Darshan Singh doesn't really go for different argument there. So, he leaves with his family and sons. So that role of the mother is there, but on different emotional levels. One is more authoritative in the case of the Stench of Kerosene, but what, while it is much more emotionally charged and solemn, I think in this case of Crossing the Ravi.

And rather than that, I think that the same things come across. Like the choice of languages, like the flute, the rural scenario which is there, and the lifestyle of the characters in the story. Even the character of Guleri as well as the character of Shahini. It is always like Shahini is a grown-up character of Guleri in that sense. So, there are a lot of parallels, grown-up character in the sense like, age wise I am saying, may be different on the character base. So, I think that the local areas which they have located there, there this, the fair which is there. The valley of

Chumba, which is there and the harvest festival. Harvest festival is something that is very characteristic of the Punjab province.

So, I think that the story of the rural lifestyle which is there in the Stench of Kerosene and the way of life which is shown here in this story, there are a lot of factors. We can consider the fact that they are from a regional standpoint in that sense.

Professor: Yeah. Yeah. Okay, so lots of things there. . I could also kind of relate to the parallels between the mother figures in both these stories that immediately comes to mind, the kind of resolution, I do not want to call it stubbornness, but the resolution not to leave this land, and stay in the Gurudwara with the rest of the community. And at the same time, the resolution of the mother there in The Stench of Kerosene to see a child being born to her son. Very strong characters. They want what they want. And they kind of put it into practice.

The other side of the coin is that the male figures, they seem to be quiet, they have to take the advice. In Darshan Singh takes the advice of the stranger on the train that not we cannot keep calling it the stranger, the companion, the fellow traveller who is traveling with Darshan and so many others in this new country, there is a community feeling there. Even though they are not very closely linked to one another, they are travellers on a common pursuit and that has to be recognised. So, Darshan Singh is taking the advice of another figure and Manak of course, is taking the advice of his mother.

So, the male figure seems to be following the assigned regulations of this community. And you can see how Darshan Singh argues with his father, but doesn't kind of break the advice, or doesn't kind of step outside the boundaries that has been set by father. So, the mother figures yes, Stench of Kerosene and this one, strong ones, very caring towards the son, but at the same time following their principles.

Now, the younger females. Shahini and Guleri are pretty interesting. We see that Guleri is not a mother, we see Shahini as a mother exhausted by the burden and also caught in a particularly turbulent time. So we have the history of the nation in the making in this part, Crossing the Ravi. There it is more of a domestic tale, I guess more a romantic tale and it is a personal history in The Stench of Kerosene. But one thing is pretty clear as we already talked about, as Sanchar has pointed out, we do not see the wife being consulted. Shahini is not consulted, when the baby is snatched and thrown into the river, the husband does not stop and ask, 'Should we kind of do this as a kind of, a gesture, a sacrificial gesture, gesture to appease God, he doesn't kind

of have that chat, so that is pretty interesting. And then I am always reminded of Guleri's questions in *The Stench of Kerosene*. And when she keeps asking Manak, 'What is bothering you, why don't you tell me?' and he is totally silent. And that refusal to share, to let Guleri partake in this pain, that is very interesting.

So, there is no kind of a camaraderie, between the male and the female figures who are jointly either travelling on the domestic trajectory or on the national trajectory here. So, that is pretty interesting in these two figures, society and Guleri are wrong in their own ways, and in unique ways, like with these histories authored by men. So, history is authored by men in the sense that the story is kind of directed by men, as we can see in *Amrita Pritam's* tale. Of course we have a female writer who captures that directorial command of patriarchy.

So, we need to realize we have talked about at length in our other sessions as well, we know that the mother is a female and if it's a female, then it's not the female, but we know what is dictating her, we know that it is the patriarchal ideology which is dictating her to do the things that she does. So, in that sense, we can see the parallels of the domestic story with the national story. So, anything else you want to comment on this story?

Student 2: In both the stories you can see that there is this idea of madness. In *The Stench of Kerosene*, the protagonist, he goes mad towards the end of the story. And in this story we can see that it's the protagonist itself. So, in the introductory passage, the writer has the sentence 'It is wonder that Darshan Singh did not go mad.' Because of the amount of difficulty or the kind of problems that he had faced. The writer does not know why he is still not mad, why he is still not insane.

So, tragedy is troubling both these short stories though both the short stories are extremely tragic. And in terms of themes, they are extremely different like, although you can compare them but the tone, style, or the treatment of the story and theme and extremely is different but still you can draw a lot of parallels between them.

Professor: This is interesting, yes. I'm struck by the fact that you bring up Manak's reactions at the end of the story when he is not able to enjoy his new son. So, his weird reaction, his bizarre reaction can be taken as madness, the fact that he can sense the stench of kerosene emanating from that child, that innocent child, tells you that he has gone mad and maybe it has been coming that madness.

So, here this narrator is wondering why Darshan Singh did not go mad, his father has died, his mother is not willing to leave the Gurudwara, his wife has given birth to two babies at a time when you cannot enjoy them because it is a great shift, systemic shift.

But I am more interested in that line, “Fate had dealt in a strange deal, taken away with one hand what she had given with the other”. So, this passage finds resonance with the ending of *The Stench of Kerosene*. The child that the family had wanted so long is there for him, Fate had given him that, but had taken away his happiness, his romance, his sense of peace with the world has gone, it has been snatched away. So, there is a kind of a structural parallel with the *Amrita Pritam* the story as well.

Thank you for your thoughts, Sanchar, Mridula. We will catch up with you in the next session.
Thank you.