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SOME QUESTIONS CONCERNING TEACHING, RESEARCH AND TRANSLATING MODERN HINDI LITERATURE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

DAGMAR MARKOVÁ,
ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE CZECH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, PRAGUE

In order to be seriously concerned with Hindi literature (or, as the case may be, with any modern literature of India), it is necessary not only to be well versed in the language, but also, firstly, to have some basic knowledge of the classical literature, and, secondly, to know as much as possible about Indian traditions and realities of life. As to the popularisation of Hindi literature, translating from Hindi into Czech is the best way of doing so. However, we must be careful in the choice of texts to translate. Many recurrent motifs of Hindi literature are beyond understanding for a European reader who does not know their background.

We can suppose that similar questions emerge anywhere when the literature of a distant culture is taught, studied and popularised. These are not world-shattering problems; yet many a misunderstanding can be avoided if we give attention to them.

Firstly, there is the question of continuity. The students usually take either Sanskrit and ancient India as their subjects, or a modern Indian language plus literature and modern history of India. If someone specialises in ancient Indian literature, it is good if he or she gets some knowledge of contemporary India and modern Indian literature too. But if one specialises in modern Hindi literature (or, as the case may be, in other varieties of the modern literature of India), then some basic knowledge of the classical literature is a must.

For example, when discussing *Rāmcaritmānas*, mentioning old Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* not only cannot be avoided, but it is necessary to go into some important details about it. The story of Sītā is different: why? Because the situation was different. In Tulsīdās' times, while Muslims were stabilizing their rule over India, the Hindus were strengthening their inner world. Both communities tried to protect their women from the sight of the other, and so Sītā had to be hidden in the fire as a metaphor of the seclusion of women, meant as their protection. In Vālmīki's time, the situation had been different. Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas*, in fact, reflected the problems of its time.

In modern Hindi literature, too, there are many allusions to ancient Sanskrit scripts. For example, in the pages of modern Hindi fiction, readers come across many of the principles of Manu, be it as objects of the writer's disapproval or approval or just as recurrent motifs mirroring real contemporary life.[1]

[1] For more information, see: Marková, Dagmar, Family motifs in modern Hindi fiction and the Laws of Manu. In: *Indian Culture: Continuity and Discontinuity*. Edited by Heidrich, Joachim, Rüstau, Hiltrud and Weidemann, Dietrich. Trafo-Verlag, Berlin 2002, pp. 167–184.

As the principles of Manu as well as other traditions are alive in the minds of people (and, thus, reflected in literature), a sound knowledge of the Hindu traditions living in contemporary social reality (and if possible some basic knowledge of the Muslim tradition, too), is another must for anybody concerned seriously with modern Hindi literature.

For example, a number of Hindi writers seem to be over-concerned with food, with preparing, serving and consuming meals. At first reading, they might appear to be concerned with shallow non-issues. Just a few examples: in the short story The Fish by Uṣā Priyaṃvadā, Vijī, one of the female characters, a North Indian girl, prepares *upmā*, a typical South Indian dish, for her South Indian friend.

> There was a smell of pure melted butter in the room, and then a heap of onion was added.
> 'What are you cooking, Vijī?' Naṭrāj asked in a loud voice.
> Vijī looked out of the kitchenette with a stainless ladle in her hand. 'Just a bit of something.'
> 'How many times have I told you to put mustard seeds in the butter first? If you put onions in first, the seeds do not crack properly.' Naṭrāj stood up a little and sat down again…
> Today he is Vijī's guest, he should not meddle in the kitchen. The days are gone when the apartment belonged to Manīś and Naṭrāj and when he had ruled the kitchen. Manīś liked Southern dishes, therefore Vijī had become Naṭrāj's pupil with enthusiasm. She had started to mould herself completely according to Manīś's taste…
> Vijī brought two plates of upmā, put them on the table and returned to bring coffee. Naṭrāj's expert eyes noticed that the preparation was not correct, that the semolina is burnt here and there, but when Vijī came back with coffee, Naṭrāj started eating quietly. Vijī herself took two small spoonfuls of upmā, put the plate aside and said: 'It is not prepared correctly, is it?'
> 'Oh, no, it's all right,' Naṭrāj said. He felt that meanwhile Vijī had withdrawn even a little more. The distance between them, the wall of untold words, was increasing. (Priyaṃvadā, pp. 100–101)

The distance between them is the question in point. Neither of them is sure about his feelings. Vijī is ready to adapt herself, to comply with the wishes of anybody who would be ready to offer her emotional support. That, however, will not be Naṭrāj who, no doubt, likes her and feels sorry for her but nothing more. There is no better way to render this vague relation than by means of the spoiled South Indian dish, incorrectly prepared by a North Indian girl. Another point is also made: if the man's relation to the girl had been less vague, he would without ceremony have criticised her imperfect cooking, and would not have just said: "It's all right." In an Indian context, all of this is very transparent.

When we know that food was, in a way, a means of communication between people and their gods, when we know that much room was given to food and eating in *Manusmṛti* (pp. 67–68), the *Bhagavadgītā* (pp. 79–80), in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, transferred into Hindi as The Ocean of Love, and in Krishnaite poetry generally, then it does not surprise us that in India serving and consuming meals is a certain means of expressing one's feelings.

The short story "Oh you Rascal" by Bhīṣma Sāhnī can be taken as another example. Lāl, a Punjabi, brings his European wife Helen on a visit to India. They visit Lāl's best school friend. The latter's wife is preparing maize pancakes:

> While frying one pancake after another, her bangles were jingling. She took hot pancakes from the griddle with both hands and, laughing, put them on our plates. I was watching this scene once again after many years and it was sweeter and more fascinating for me than the most beautiful dream. (Sāhnī, p. 92)

The maize pancakes are poetised in a way, or rather preparing and serving them is poetised and the hero's native country is personified in his friend's wife and in the dish prepared by her.

> She was sitting at the stove and frying something. Immediately she stood up and stepped towards me, wiping her hands with her shawl. Her face was rosy; locks of hair were falling over her forehead. A true Punjabi woman, full of warmth, friendly, cheerful. When I saw her standing up, emotions surged up within me. My own sister-in-law, too, used to rise up from the stove like this, wiping her hands with her shawl, and so did my elder sister and my mother. (Sāhnī 1993, p. 91)

The relationship between Lāl and his friend's wife is that of a younger brother-in-law, *devar*, and his elder sister-in-law, *bhābhī*, a traditional and particularly warm relationship. Lāl's European wife Helen is not able to appreciate the popular Punjabi dish and, what is more, she suspects her husband of having flirted with his friend's wife. A European reader finds himself in the position of Helen, unless he knows something about Indian traditions. The relationship between *bhābhī* and *devar* is another motif appearing in modern Hindi literature, which can easily be misunderstood or is beyond all understanding without some knowledge of the traditions, of the realities of life and/or *Rāmāyaṇa*, resp. *Rāmcaritmānas*.

As for popularisation, we regard translating from Hindi into Czech as the best way of doing so. Mainly short stories are being translated because there unfortunately is not much opportunity of having a novel published.

The sound way to translate fiction is first to parse every sentence of the language of origin (Hindi) and then to form it again in the language of translation (Czech). That is not as intricate and tedious as it might seem at first sight; it is only necessary to have a good philological education and a feeling for one's mother tongue. To translate only according to one's intuition is rather misleading, because the result may be quite far away from the original meaning. The first Czech expert in Hindi, Vincenc Pořízka, called the intuitional method "bungling the text."

Translating is very satisfying work; a translator feels that he/she opens a window into a remote world.

However, in the case of different cultures, we should be careful. Once again, it is about different traditions and different values.

There is an excellent short story by Nāsirā Śarmā, *Human Race*. In the short story, a young married couple is going to visit the husband's ailing mother in the countryside. The young wife is going there for the first time; her mother-in-law did not even participate in their wedding. An Indian reader understands the reasons for the tension in the first two paragraphs: The young couple's names are Savitā and Navāb: they are a mixed Hindu-Muslim couple. This is not explicitly mentioned in the story because it is not

necessary for an Indian reader. But it may be beyond understanding for a European reader who does not know the realities of Indian life. During the visit, the family relations become settled, the Muslim family accepts the Hindu daughter-in-law, but the short story ends with a similar problem to the one it had begun with: in the neighbouring village, an intercaste couple's lives are jeopardised. Navāb and Savitā speedily leave the village for a safer place.

Czech students of Hindi who read this short story in the class of *Reading Hindi Texts* understood it immediately and appreciated it highly, but, when asked, they expressed their opinion that is was not suitable for translation.

Short stories concerning the Hindu-Muslim problem are very topical and grasp the atmosphere very well, but usually they are beyond understanding for a Central European. For example, there is the short story *Hurt Lights* by Prabhunāth Sinh Āzmī. It begins: "Curfew. A word. A situation. Complete desolation, gloom, dim lights of glimmering street lighting, dried-up drain… Curfew – the reason for all that." (Sinh 1996, p. 80).

The point is that two villages, adjacent to each other and now strongly separated because of Hindu-Muslim riots, Ibrāhīmpur and Picṛī, became enemies. The short story is written very convincingly, but a reader who does not know the problems of real life might not understand what the author wanted to say: it is easy to incite the two communities against each other, but it is not easy to establish peace again.

It is not only about the Hindu-Muslim problem. There are not many short stories as witty and as aptly written as *Safāī* by Mahīp Sinh. Unfortunately even the title is difficult to convert into another language: *cleaning* or *defence?* The title is aptly ambiguous. The story is about street cleaners who are Dalits and about a group of neighbours of higher communities who are not ready to admit that they keep to the concept of "untouchability". They justify themselves with phrases of all sorts. The short story gives a wonderful insight into a mini-sample of the whole society as if through a magnifying glass – if the reader knows basic facts about the society. Under another title it would lose its point.

Another example is the excellent short story by Omprakāś Vālmīki *Where should Satīś go?*, about a young studying worker staying as a paying guest with an elderly couple. All hell breaks out when it comes to light that he is the son of a road sweeper. The story is full of subtle allusions, which a European reader would hardly understand. It is not explicitly said that the couple are Brahmans – only their name, Pant, is mentioned. Mr Pant gets very angry with his friend Śarmā who had arranged to sublet (Sinh 1996, p. 17): "I won't let him, either, enter the house any more. Who knows if he is really a Śarmā!" Of course the text could be made easier to understand by supplying the word Brahman right in the beginning and then by replacing the name Śarmā by the word Brahman in the sentence quoted above, but that would be interfering in the text, the story would be devoid of much of its originality and who knows whether a European reader would really fully understand the shock of a Brahman who has just realised the real state of affairs and does not trust anything any more, not even the Brahmanship of his friend?

To sum up: to be fruitfully concerned with the literature of any culturally different region distant from the reader, it is necessary not only to penetrate the language deeply enough, but also to know enough of its cultural background. Sound knowledge of the language is, of course, the precondition, because many specifics of the way of thinking are reflected in the language itself.

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