



BENYAMIN'S GOAT DAYS: TRANSLATING THE BROKEN SOUL OF INDIA'S DIASPORA

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The word 'translation' consists of two Latin words – *trans* meaning 'across' and *lacion* meaning 'to take' (derived from the Latin verb *transfero*, *transfere*, *translatum*). Eugene Nida describes translation as a science, Theodore Savory terms it an art, and Eric Jacobson visualizes it as a craft (Das 167). Noted translation theorist Paul Engle wrote in the 1980s, "As this world shrinks together like an aging orange and all peoples in all cultures move closer together...it may be that the crucial sentence for our remaining years on earth may be very simply: TRANSLATE OR DIE. The lives of every creature on the earth may one day depend on the instant and accurate translation of one word" (Engle and Engle 2).

Unlike the West, classical Indian translation is characterized by loose adaptation and creative re-telling rather than close translation. As K. Satchidanandan observes, "India's culture of translation dates back to pre-colonial times that had witnessed several kinds of literary translation, though our ancients may not claim to be doing so. This is perhaps natural to multilingual culture where poets... easily moved from one language to another without even being aware of it and translators did not fear being executed for deviations as in the West.... Our predecessors used texts as take-off points and freely retold and resituated them, as was done in the case of many Ramayanas, Mahabharatas and Bhagavatas in different languages. ... This tendency to transform texts from older languages like Prakrit, Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil or Persian continued almost to the end of the pre-colonial period...." (Satchidanandan *The Hindu Literary Review*).



In the colonial era, the entry of the English language led to widespread translation of Indian literatures into English. Scholars like William Jones, MacDonnell, MaxMuller, Wilson, Griffiths and Jacobs were the pioneers. "... by late 19th century, Indian scholars like Romesh Chandra Dutt... also joined the effort, sometimes with the noble intention of correcting Western perceptions of Indian texts. This is a living tradition as we realize from the practices of P.Lal, A.K.Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Velcheru Narayana Rao, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arshia Sattar, H.S. Shivaprakash, Ranjit Hoskote, Vijay Nambisan, Bibek Debroy, and several other poets and scholars" (Satchidanandan *The Hindu Literary Review*). The world has been enriched by English translations of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Buddhist texts and *Panchatantra*, the masterpieces of Panini and Kalidas in Sanskrit, Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir, Meera, Premchand, Bharatendu, Dinkar, Agyeya in Hindi, Ghalib and Iqbal in Urdu, Chandidas, Saratchandra and Tagore in Bengali, Narsi Mehta in Gujarati, Pothanna and Vemana in Telugu, Jagannath Das in Odiya, Shankar Dev in Assamese, Purandardas in Kannada, Kumaran Asan and Vallathol in Malayalam, Kusumagraj and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Kamban and Andal in Tamil – to name only a few.

However, the process of translation or building a bridge between two languages is far from simple. The translator has to essentially play three roles – that of the reader who must grasp the original text in its entirety, of the bi-linguist who must master and equate the unique rules, styles, socio-cultural contexts and worldviews of two different languages, and, of the creator who creates a new text keeping in mind the essence, sensibilities and intentions of the original text and writer, and the nature of his readers. Given India's numerous autonomous language-communities, the translator shoulders the onerous responsibility of bridging a deeply fragmented world. He/She is expected to be multilingual and multicultural and strike a fine balance between imitating the original and producing a new creation. The ultimate aim is to draw readers towards the original and its related language, literature and culture.

Benyamin's Goat Days (translated from Malayalam by Dr. Joseph Koyipally) –

In the present Indian scenario, fiction being one of the most popular choices of translators, it would be interesting to analyse a rather recent and highly acclaimed English translation of the Malayalam novel *Goat Days*(2012). Malayalam literature is vibrant, immensely rich in styles and themes, and has a history of several centuries. It began with spiritual and philosophical lyrics and poems and later moved on to other genres while embodying themes of humanism, existentialism, social commitment, nationalism, culture and politics, post-modern controversies and disillusionment, etc. Malayalam fiction is known for the bold experiments with controversial personal and social issues and daring advocacy of the traditionally marginalized sections of society – poor, women, lower castes, rebels, etc.

Goat Days published by Penguin India in 2012 is Dr. Joseph Koyipally's English translation of Benyamin's Malayalam novel *Aatujeevitham* (2008). Benyamin alias Benny Benjamin Daniel was born in 1971 in Kerala and rose from being a migrant labourer in the Gulf to writing over twenty short-stories and four novels. His international best-seller novel *Aatujeevitham* (2008) won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 2009 and is a bible of the ordeal of thousands of poor Keralites working in the Arab countries. The translator Dr. Joseph Koyipally teaches comparative literature at the Central University of Kerala. He has preserved the essence of the original text without compromising on the stylistic nuances of either Malayalam or English languages.

By taking up the challenge of translating such a diasporic native language text into English, Joseph Koyipally has not only made the text globally accessible but also contributed immensely to Indian English literature. Koyipally's translation re-creates Benyamin's raw depiction of a real life story. Najeeb a poor labourer from Kerala lands in Saudi Arabia in April 1992 to earn a living. Kidnapped by a cruel Arab, he is forced to work as a shepherd in the middle of the inhospitable Saudi desert. Hungry, thirsty, humiliated, threatened and mercilessly whipped, he tends hundreds of goats, sheep and camels. Najeeb spends his days and nights in the open, without being allowed to even wash himself. After three years of



such miserable loneliness, he makes a miraculous and daring escape through the deadly desert.

Goat Days is a striking novel that defies several conventions. Benyamin's raw depiction of real life borders on the thin dividing line between memoir/biography and fiction/novel. However, soon enough, this brief and seemingly simple tale of suffering and endurance sears our souls and unravels an unfathomably deep and wise vision of life. It moves beyond the lives of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf to become the universal tale of every individual's existential crisis in a world where there is little difference between a man's life and a goat's life. In his review of *Goat Days*, Shreekumar Varma writes, "This is the chilling account of extreme subjugation of body and mind, a journey into darkness that could easily lead to defeat or self-annihilation but for the existence of that third entity, the spirit. No one prepared us for this" (Varma, *The Hindu* – Oct 6, 2012).

Goat Days is based on the real story of Najeeb, a labourer involved in sand-quarrying in Kerala. Tired of a life of utter poverty, Najeeb leaves his loving home for Saudi Arabia in the fond hope of earning just enough to secure the future of his mother, wife and unborn child. Events take a bizarre turn when he lands at Riyadh airport on 4th April, 1992. His Arab employer never turns up to receive him. Instead his passport is seized by another Arab who takes him and his companion Hakeem to work as shepherds in the middle of the Saudi desert. As Najeeb puts it, "... an unknown fear began to envelop my mind ... a feeling that his journey was not leading me to the Gulf life that I had been dreaming about and craving for. The Gulf I had learned about from so many people was not like this. A whiff of danger. Nothing clear" (GD 52). Caught unawares and unable to speak or understand Arabic, Najeeb is condemned to a life of wretched slavery. Hungry, thirsty, humiliated, threatened and mercilessly whipped, he single-handedly takes care of hundreds of goats, sheep and camels. Exposed to the harsh climate of the desert, Najeeb spends his days and nights in the open, wearing a rotten robe lent by his master and without being allowed to even wash himself. It is amazing that in three years of such misery, deprived of human company, Najeeb neither loses his sanity

nor curses God. A man with a heart of gold, his immeasurably deep faith in Allah, his undying hope and endless patience stand him in good stead. He befriends the goats and bonds with them. A silent observer and quick learner, he perseveres long enough to learn an alien language, to learn the new task of tending and milking goats and camels, and above all to learn how to survive in the inhospitable desert. Constantly watched over by his master who wields a gun and a set of binoculars, Najeeb gives up all hope of escape from the desert prison, after a couple of failed attempts to do so - "...I realized that my life had become inescapably bound to those goats" (GD 73).

However, an unexpected shower of rain which makes his master flee in fear, gives him the chance to meet his long lost companion Hakeem who works in the neighbouring goat farm. One day, Hakeem gets a new co-worker – a giant Somalian named Ibrahim Khadiri. Najeeb, Hakeem and Khadiri who knows the desert very well, escape one night when their masters leave to attend a wedding. They run for days and nights, narrowly escaping being spotted by other Arabs. However, instead of moving towards the highway, their panic makes them lose their way in the endless desert sands. Hunger, thirst and fatigue overwhelm them. Finally, the penniless Najeeb faints in front of Malabar Restaurant run by the compassionate Keralite named Kunjikka. Najeeb is fed, bathed, shaven, clothed, treated by a doctor and regains consciousness after three days. When he is told that the date is 13th August 1995, he realizes that three years, four months and nine days have passed since his landing in Saudi Arabia. He is so disfigured that he cannot recognize himself in the mirror.

After some months, on the advice of Kunjikka, Najeeb and another escaped farm labourer Hameed decide to surrender to the police. Compared to what he has endured in the desert, the prison is a luxurious place for Najeeb. As he asks, "Can you imagine how much suffering I must have endured to voluntarily choose imprisonment!" (GD 12) Yet, all live in the fear of the weekly identification parades when Arab employers come to the prison looking for their runaway workers. The Indian embassy offers a free out pass to Najeeb and eighty other Indians



trapped without legal documents. As they are herded into the flight back home, Najeeb remembers how he used to herd the goats together in the desert. His life has truly been a goat's life. He has suffered the fate meant for some other worker. Yet, accepting everything as his divinely ordained inescapable destiny, he returns home to a quiet life. Having learnt some great truth of life on each day of his ordeal, his deep wisdom only enhances his humility. The saga of this shy and simple soul becomes a powerful testimony of the triumph of the human spirit over all adversities.

Joseph Koyipally's translation assumes great significance chiefly because *Goat Days* is a novel of the less-privileged, non-English speaking diaspora, a rare departure from the elitist expatriates writing about their Western experiences. It deals with the sparsely recorded interaction between Indian and Arab cultures, critiquing popular assumptions about the golden era of globalization. Perhaps no other Indian English novel casts the migrant Gulf worker as its principal character. *Goat Days* explores the indirect effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism that have created innumerable exiles in an unequal world ruled by ruthless capitalist conglomerates. Drawing on his own experience, Benjamin portrays the pain and adaptation of the Indian diaspora, forever trying to create a semblance of their homeland in the midst of the orthodox, rigidly conservative and closed Arab societies. They are often alienated, denied equality before the law, deprived of fundamental human rights, forced to live and work like slaves.

Speaking at the 2014 Jaipur Literature Festival, Benjamin observed, "It is difficult to find an English account of sufferings faced by Indian emigrants in Gulf countries, and it is something that needs to be told to an international audience" (qtd. in "A book on plight of Indians in Saudi Arabia", *The Hindu* – Jan 17, 2014). Joseph Koyipally feels that the world should know of discriminatory treatment meted out to Indians in the Gulf countries - "They ask us whether Indians are able to teach English at a university or college level. They identify Indians with sweepers, drivers or petty shop runners" (qtd. in "A book on plight of Indians in Saudi Arabia", *The Hindu* – Jan 17, 2014).

Other than this diasporic theme, the translation also evokes the humanism, existential dilemma and respect for human resilience pervading Benjamin's novel. *Goat Days* stands out as a magnificent tribute to the spiritual triumphs of struggling humanity as a whole. Illiterate Najeeb's innate nobility lends deep meaning to three years of wretchedness. He transforms loneliness into solitude and solitude into spiritual enlightenment. Human life is in fact 'goat days'— brief and ruled by an arbitrary fate. Yet, souls like Najeeb are set apart by faith, perseverance, acceptance, and selfless 'love' even for enemies.

Dr. Koyipally takes his liberties without being unfaithful to the original text. He maintains a fine balance between the profuse lyrical poignance of the Malayalam language and the discipline and restraint of modern English. Infact *Aatujeevitham* literally means 'A Goat's Life' in Malayalam, but Koyipally chooses the title *Goat Days*. While the original conveys deep emotions and philosophy through the innate verbosity and ornateness of Malayalam, Koyipally's wry humour, tender sarcasm, and highly suggestive understatement are in tune with the character of the English language. The Malayalam text has 43 chapters and one misses in the English version, the illustrations, the editorial note, the preface by N. Radhakrishnan Nair and a long essay by Benayamin. Perhaps Koyipally would have done well to translate these items of critical interest, but his text is more reader-friendly. He divides the novel into four books - Prison, Desert, Escape and Refuge and empathetically translates the brief 'author's note'.

Koyipally effortlessly negotiates Benjamin's style that ranges from baffling simplicity and directness to searing emotion and complex philosophy. He should be appreciated for relegating Benjamin's occasional intellectual poetics to the background and foregrounding the grim prose of the unlettered migrant worker, the few striking images and deep sighs that convey more about human life than entire epics can. It is a daunting task to match the opulence of loaded Malayalam expressions which do not have suitable equivalents in English. This forces the translator to sometimes keep the Malayalam usages untranslated as in - *ikka/kunjikka* (respectful or affectionate form of address among



Keralite Muslims), 'like the *maniyan* fly, an unknown fear began to envelop my mind' (GD 52), 'eye-piercing darkness' (GD 54), 'words shattered against the barrier of language' (GD 65), 'my eyes and mind were filled with tears' (GD 66), 'like a dog wagging its tail, I followed him' (GD 67), '*kaadi* – a type of cattle-drink' (GD 83), 'the rain's snake-whistle' (GD 136) and sometimes to change the sequence of or eschew certain lines altogether. This removes some superfluous lines but also leads to omission of important lines found in the original like '*Ee bhumiyl eetavum nissaranaya jeevi njan aanu*' meaning 'I am the least of all creatures on this earth' (Benyamin, *Aatujeevitham* 161). Koyipally wisely imitates Benyamin in transliterating Arabic terms like *arbab* (master/savior), *khubus* (bread), *masara* (enclosure for goats) so as to preserve the effect of the original. While he has done away several repetitions, he never crosses his limits and tries his very best to reproduce the deep pathos and unimaginable horror of the desert and the essence of the Keralite culture, especially in Chapter Nineteen where Najeeb writes an imaginary letter to his wife and in Chapter Twenty-Five where he names the goats after Malayalee movie stars, politicians or his own acquaintances. Najeeb's musings in the desert are instances of heartfelt translation filled with native flavor – "...it was impossible to wipe out life on this earth whatever man's misdeeds. For how many months had this desert been lying under scorching heat! There had been no sign of life on those burning sands. As the cold wind blew, signaling summer's end, a green carpet surfaced on the dry sand. Those plants taught me life's great lessons of hope. They whispered to me: Najeeb, adopted son of the desert, like us, you too must preserve your life and wrestle with this desert...Don't give in. Lie half-dead ... Feign nothingness ... Then,... spring to freedom. Bloom and come to fruit in the morrow" (GD 144,145).

While the original text touches more native chords, the translation opens up the possibility of myriad global interpretations. Koyipally's transcreation, while adding a new dimension to Indian English fiction, also draws readers to explore the Malayalam text as also the literature, language and culture that have produced it. The publishers of

the Malayalam edition rightly conclude that new interpretations of the novel in English have created an epoch by taking Benyamin the writer to new heights (qtd. in Benyamin, *Aatujeevitham* publisher's note).

Summing Up –

In this era of globalization, translations of Indian literature into English are essential not only for India to discover her own self but also for India to connect with and take her rightful place among the community of nations. Such translations make vital additions to the essence of India's national unity and also showcase India's rich diversity to the world. The dictum "lost in translation" no longer holds good. These are the days of "gained through translation". The need of the hour is to end the traditional rivalry between those who write in English and the regional languages. Collaboration between regional language writers and English translators can help in mutual literary enrichment, in more publicity and income for both original and translated texts. Collective and aggressive marketing can give a new lease of life to impoverished regional language writers and publishers as also to poorly paid English translators. To quote famous Indian author Kiran Nagarkar, "I can't think of...being more penurious than not having translations...Those who translate are the world's first globalisers.... There is no bank on the face of the earth that can match the treasures translations hold" (qtd. in Phadke, *The Times Of India*). The great French philosopher and translation theorist Paul Ricouer regards translation as an act of selflessness, of embracing the world of the 'other' and allowing the 'other' to inhabit one's own world. Translation is an endless task filled with joy and pain, of taking up and letting go, of expressing oneself and welcoming others. In translation lies the hope of the modern world, for "it is only when we translate our own wounds into the language of strangers and retranslate the wounds of strangers into our own language that healing and reconciliation can take place" (Kearney xv-xx).

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