

## **Social Responsibility and Translation of Nepali Literatures in Darjeeling Himalayas**

**BHAWANA THEENG TAMANG<sup>1</sup>**

Set against the creative crossroads of today's world, translation of literature is still inherently socially responsible, where in it still requires active human intervention while it fosters access to different literatures, preservation, enrichment of language and literary innovation. In this context, translation of Indian literatures still gives voices to the diverse and numerous regional languages of India, facilitating a synergy among the many cultures. These translations not only bridge the linguistic divides of readers but also today constitute a

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor at Gurudas College, Kolkata, West Bengal.

key component of the literary studies in the country. While literature and literary theory are continuously at crossroads and always under construction, there are still literatures of people at the margins where translation plays a pivotal role in bringing suppressed lived experiences, struggles and cultural synonymity to a wider audience and the centre, while also being a political act to claim identity. The liability of a translator is not therefore limited to only transfer language but also a rather complex one where they need to be conscious of the impact of their work on society. As Mona Baker makes an observation in her book, *In Other Words*, “it is in the interest of society as a whole for individuals to be accountable for their decisions, in professional life as elsewhere.” (Baker 274) It has been widely discussed how translation of literatures, while it mediates cross-cultural dialogues and creates linguistic bridges, also has an ethical accountability and responsibility that pervades far beyond achieving equivalence. In this paper, we will look into the efforts being made in translation of Nepali

literatures in Darjeeling in the recent years and how these endeavors are being made to offer a voice to the Indian Nepali communities.

The Indian Nepali identity with its histories constantly negotiates with the presence of heterogenous ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities within itself and as such is characterised by plurality. Richard Ashley and R.B.J Walker in, “Speaking the Language of the Exile: Dissident thought in international studies” argue that, “Ambiguity, Uncertainty and the ceaseless questioning of identity- are the resources of the exiles. These are the resources of those who would live and move in these paradoxical marginal spaces and times, and who, in order to do so must struggle to resist knowledgeable practices of power that would impose upon them a certain identity...” (Ashley and Walker 259) At present, in an age of globalization, transnationalism and mass immigration the numerous problems arising from the conceptions of identities, be it social or cultural have consequences on the lived-experiences of an individual

or a people and there is a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty when it comes to the Nepali identity and also consequently the Indian Nepali identity. It can be argued that it is in this ambiguity translation of the various Nepali literatures becomes pivotal in constituting a more perceptive picture of the plural yet cohesive characteristic of the Indian Nepali people.

Nepali is a language of Indo-Aryan origin that is widely spoken today in the nation-state of Nepal (where it also functions as a lingua franca and an official language), Sikkim, northern districts of West Bengal, Assam, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, many areas of north-east India. The Nepali-speaking communities can also be found in many cities and towns across India. After decades of democratic struggles on part of the Nepali speaking communities in India, on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1992, the Lok Sabha passed a motion to add the Nepali language to the Eight Schedule of the Constitution of India. In West Bengal the West Bengal Official Language Act of 1961 granted Nepali Language official

status for state business in Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong.

As discussed earlier the speakers of Nepali are not a homogenous entity but one which is a chorus of numerous and varied ethnic communities that use the language as a lingua-franca which they may have historically adopted due to acculturation, social and economic factors. Kumar Pradhan talks about three distinctive meanings of the term Nepali: Nepali, implying language; Nepali inferring to those who speak the Nepali language and are citizens of the political nation-state of Nepal and Nepali indicating a culturally distinctive people whose members are not confined within the political boundaries of Nepal as a nation-state (Pradhan). In his book *A History of Nepali Literature*, he says Nepali is a language spoken by the people who are also called the Gorkhas or ‘Gurkhas.’ He further iterates

how Nepali is described as *Rashtrabhasha*<sup>2</sup>, but in India it is the language of a distinct group, a *jatiyabhasha*<sup>3</sup>, a race and ethnic group, and when the word Nepali is used to denote a people, it is also to be understood that it is composed of diverse ethnic and linguistic origins. Perhaps it is also important to mention here the term Gorkha falls into the trend of being synonymously used to mean Nepali people. There is still a lot of debate concerning the term Gorkha anglicized as “gurkha” by the British which previously was defined as “martial” consisting of only the Gurung, Limbu, Magar and Rai ethnic population but which metamorphosed to indicate a linguistically homogenous identity that was integrated by a shared history, landscape and common life experiences. In Darjeeling, Nepali is a dominant language where majority of the people who are also diverse ethnic groups like Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai speak the

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<sup>2</sup>*Rashtrabhasha* directly translates to national language or language of the nation-state.

<sup>3</sup>*Jatiyabhasha* directly translates to ethnic language or language of the ethnicity.

language, and it can be argued that the language has evolved into not only a lingua-franca but also an important marker of collective identity.

Darjeeling has been famous around the world for its aromatic tea and the panoramic view of the Kanchenjunga. A popular tourist destination the small town has been crowned as the “Queen of Hills” for its Himalayan beauty. When one talks about Darjeeling there is a gaze that focuses on the scenic beauty of the hills which is however mostly bereft or stripped of human population that lives there. One may find very little talk on how difficult and obdurate this beautiful terrain can be for people who have to negotiate with this topography in the course of their day-to-day life.

Parimal Bhattacharya in his memoir, *No Path in Darjeeling is Straight* tries to paint his readers a picture of Darjeeling that has many dimensions. His memoir while narrating Darjeeling does not only include a montage of his memories but also memories of other

people in snippets from letters, travel logs, anthologies, Bengal district gazetteers, quotes, journals and newspapers. Darjeeling through its narration of the spatial and layered temporal experiences as he negotiates the different moods with the voices of the people who have visited, lived and experienced Darjeeling. The result of which in simple terms is a book about the past, present and future of Darjeeling expressed through a myriad of stories. Similarly, it is translation of these narratives and stories of Darjeeling that work like living archives, actively defining the communities and their cultures, their many shared memories, artistic worldviews, lived experiences as they adapt to emergent contexts.

Suma Priyadarshini. B. K. in, ‘The Political Aspects of Translation and Its Influence on Literature’ observes, “The translation of Dalit literature into English and other Indian languages has served as a significant political endeavour, granting prominence to under-represented voices and questioning the dominance of

caste-based power in Indian literature. Translators specialising in Dalit literature frequently employ the practice of "political translation," which involves viewing the translation process as a means to oppose oppression and establish one's dignity." (B.K 746) There have been many individuals, groups, educational institutions, regional publication houses in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas, that have been actively working with Nepali literatures, where efforts have been made to translate from Nepali literatures to other languages and from other languages to Nepali literature. Among these includes the efforts of Laali Guraas, a cultural, social and political people's collective, operating from Darjeeling hills, Dooars and Terai regions since 2012. Laali Guraas operates with the combined effort and incentives of different people in the society from students to the teagarden workers; from the young to the old. While there are those who have been associated with the workings of Laali Guraas since its inception, its representative body is a dynamic coalescence. Although

it was majorly comprised of student members in the beginning, in time, many different people of the society that included working labourers also joined the collective's efforts in its programs and activities. Their basic and fundamental standpoints manifest political and social issues like questions of nationality and identity, the struggle of laborers, a struggle for a classless society, where education, health, social securities, and civic amenities should be for the benefit of the people and of the society. As such, their endeavors are focused mainly on cultural activities, on political questions, taking standpoints on social realities with campaigns and discussions. They have also arranged medical camps, relief activities during covid times, Nepal earthquakes, Sundarban cyclones, raising questions on Teesta's dam construction and environmental concerns were also campaigned. These endeavors were therefore always alive with discussions on a wide array of social and political issues where distribution of leaflets and posters or literature, also found traction. With foundations built

on such cultural activities, from mid-2012, Laali Guraas have also been publishing a *patrika*<sup>4</sup> with the same name, envisioned as a bi-monthly with narratives that were aimed at bringing a new progressive change, amore equal society.

They had been publishing small books and pamphlets since the beginning and around the year 2020 Laali Gurass as a full-fledged publication took shape with publications of political literatures and stories reflecting different aspects of the society. Although many original works were also published, translation was prioritised with the certainty that the people's literature needed to be exchanged, that writing should be brought to the Nepali audience, and Nepali taken to readers outside.

Samik Chakraborty of the Laali Guraas collective says that literature has a social responsibility where it

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<sup>4</sup> Patrika in English could mean a magazine, journal or periodical usually referring to a publication with articles, stories, and images, often specialized or released regularly.

works as a stimulus opening new avenues of thought and concepts for people, readers and society which aids in making a person with an evolved sense of thought. He says that this can be achieved not only through literature that are blatant with political propaganda, but the artistic affect and perspective of a writer without any evident political agenda, is also a sensitive and important insight and representation of society- a cause Laali Guraas has rallied for since its inception. The numerous students and individuals of different sections of the society who have dedicated their efforts as writers and workers of Laali Guraas try to publish literature that may not probably be profitable from a business point of view, but they see this dedication as a duty to society.

As of 2025 the collection of Laali Guraas publications of translations includes *Bhramar* into English, originally written in Nepali by Roop Narayan Singh, which is considered one of the earliest modern Nepali novels and is also taught in the Nepali literature syllabus in schools.

*Diary of a Young Girl*, By Anne Frank translated into Nepali as *Gopya Kota. The Anhiliation of Caste*, written by B.R Ambedkar translated into Nepali as *Jaatko Unmulan*.

*The Russian Revolution: What Actually Happened?*, written by Jane Sayer and translated into Nepali as *Rusi Kranti: Ke Bhayeko Thiyo?*;

*The Tokolosh*, written by Roland Segal and translated into Nepali as *Tokolosh*.

A collection of Palestinian poems translated into Nepali with the title, *Jahan Amahary Kahiley Nidaudainan* (Where the mothers never sleep).

*Nun Cha* (Salty Tea), originally written in Bengali by Bimal Lama and translated into Nepali as *Nunko Chiya* which recounts the experiences of the writer in the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986.

*Letter to a Teacher from School of Barbiana*, written by eight Italian boys which criticizes the traditional

education translated into Nepali as *Barbiana Schoolbata Sikshaklai Patra*.

The Nepali translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Karl Marx and Fedrich Engles.

Satyendranarayan Majumder's book- *Kanchenjanghar Gum Bhangche*, translated as *Biujhiraheko Kunchenjunga*, which retells the lives and struggles of tea-garden workers at the beginnings of the tea industry in the eastern Himalayas under the British.

Devanur Mahadeva's *RSS: The Long and Short of It*, translated into Nepali as *RSS: Lambai Ra Chaudai*.

Apart from these there are also Nepali translations of children's literature: *The Live Hat*, written by Nikolay Nosov and translated into Nepali as *Jiudo Topi*.

Laali Guraas has also worked and published Bengali translations of Nepali literature: *Ajja Ramita Cha*, translated into Bengali as *Aaj Ramita*, which is a popular and important Nepali novel by Sahita Akademi winning

Nepali author Indra Bahadur Rai, where he explores the questions of identity and the cultural ambiguities of Indian Nepali people of the Darjeeling Himalayas.

Similarly, another significant Nepali novel, *Fatsung* written by Chuden Kabimo, has been translated into Bengali. It is a work of historical fiction that depicts the disillusionment and political turmoil through the lives of the people during the Gorkhaland movement.

*Ullar*, originally written in Nepali by Nayan Raj Pandey, is another popular novel that reflects social inequality in Nepali society and has been translated into Bengali.

The publications from Laali Guraas sees circulations in mechanisms that are not always fixed, be it literary programs and book fairs, and bookshops in the Darjeeling- Dooars and Terai regions. Samik Chakraborty of Laali Guraas observes that a large part of its readers are senior members of the society as opposed to young people, perhaps owing to the ingress of digital

media. He also adds that the numbers in their readers have significantly increased among the working-class people of the tea gardens, bazaars and also the towns. The circulation of particularly the *patrika* in urban areas has seen a dwindling trend and young readers are observed to prefer reading in English. Even then, he says the practice of reading Nepali literature is not as abysmal as popularly conceived and discussed, this also being dependent on the proficiency and skill involved in writing, and ability to connect with young readers, where books like *Fatsung* by Chuden Kabimo has revived the interest in reading Nepali Literature.

Viewing the endeavors of Laali Guraas, it can be argued that translation is a crucial tool for bringing a reading culture to the rural societies, fostering intellectual growth. From generating awareness envisioning equitable access of knowledge, translation of literatures also becomes a profoundly political act, through their publications Laali Guraas strives to fulfill a political social responsibility. Translation from Nepali to

Bengali or form Bengali to Nepali seeks to enhance empathy and understanding across regions that have had historical conflicts.

BukAnt Publications, a three-year-old publication house based in Siliguri, works primarily with publishing and research. It sees circulation on both offline and online platforms while it also proposes to venture into audiobooks and eBooks as auxiliary pillars. As of today, they have worked with numerous languages and literatures, their corpus of work beyond a hundred titles in seven different languages. The publications from BukAnt sees poetry, fiction, non-fiction, history, folk literature, children's literature, graphic novels and also literary criticism that are mostly connected together with the eastern Himalayas.

The founder of BukAnt Publications, Raja Puniani, a Nepali language poet and performer, says that working with publishing, translating and documenting literature is like “working against the storm”, a battle to

attract people to books which he considers to be heritage that needs to be saved. BukAnt Publications translates to give a dais to voices that need to be heard, the voices of histories and stories of the Himalayas. An avenue to bring social transformation. He says that the process of translation and its publication is an expensive affair and it almost functions as Corporate Social Responsibility for BukAnt publications. They also have been acutely publishing research and documentation of folk traditions and narratives granting wider access to these often-times oral traditions.

While Nepali is a language, we must also attend to the distinctive meaning of Nepali indicating a culturally distinctive people whose members are not confined within the political boundaries of Nepal as a nation-state but speak the language and are synthesized together with shared histories. The folktales and oral narratives of the many ethnic communities that constitute this Nepali identity have been gaining greater accessibility through translation into other languages

facilitating global communication, cultural understanding, knowledge sharing, preservation and archiving. As Historian Kumar Pradhan points out “Nepali folk literature is made richer both by its intrinsic attributes and variety. An added dimension to its variety has come from the manner in which Nepali community has evolved. In the process of its evolution, the traditions and tunes, the fables and lores of various Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman elements have made their contributions to make the aggregate rich.” (Pradhan 12) One can observe that owing to Nepali being a lingua-franca, many of these folktales of different ethnicities may have existed in Nepali language and were later also translated and documented in languages like English. At the same time these stories have also been compiled directly from the ethnic languages, written or oral and now accessible in the English language. While the repository of folktales and folksongs are oral usually without any fixed author or authorial identity, they are a repository of culture preserving and transmitting a community's collective

memory, values, beliefs, customs, and history across generations through oral tradition and informal channels, serving as vital tools for moral education, social bonding, and understanding worldview, reflecting societal norms while also evolving with cultural change.

L. Tamsang has compiled, edited and translated the book *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs* which is a collection of folklore and folksongs of the Lepcha community where origin stories, expressions of utopia and interdependence with nature are some apparent major themes. *Yathung Mundhumlore*, published by BukAnt publications and compiled and edited by Sandhya SubbaSingzango has been describes as a “deep rooted research based collection of twenty folk tales”, oral narratives that become a guide to the philosophy, wisdom, customs and lived experiences of Limbu ancestors. Another BukAnt publication is *Duwangdum*, a collection of eight Kirat Rai Mythos curated by Spatika Rai, that allows a look into Kirat Rai people’s culture, history, and identity.

Oral traditions encompass cultural context in performance, stories, songs, myths and history, they may not fully transfer to written form and require cultural sensitivity while preserving in written form. One can observe the people from different Nepali ethnicities like Lepcha, Rai and Tamang have themselves become researchers, documenters and preservers of their cultures, with these stories being documented in languages like English and Nepali which have a wider accessibility.

In the terrain of responsible translation of Nepali literatures, the facilitation of translation of Indian Languages by The Center of Translation of Indian Literatures (CENTIL), Jadavpur University is rigorous, continuous and remarkable. While they focus mainly on indigenous and marginalized traditions engaging in translation into English, Bengali and Nepali they have worked with literature of numerous languages like Odia, Asamiya, Bodo, Lepcha, Sadri and Kurux. In collaboration with numerous institutions international,

national and regional, CENTIL often incorporates collaborative translation workshops, translation training courses, and projects to further translation activities. CENTIL strives to build their ever-increasing volume of translation endeavours for Indian literatures in general and Nepali literatures in particular. Translation workshops aimed towards translation of Nepali poetry, stories, literary criticism, folktales and folksongs are regularly organised, where it is not only the end product of a text translated to a target language that is given prominence, but the practice of consensual collaborative translation itself is also examined, experimented and valued as a tool of cultural and social exchange and dialogue. The practice of consensual translation involves resource persons or original language speakers during the process of translation, safeguarding authenticity and preservation of cultural contexts.

Some of the published volumes of translation of Nepali literature undertaken by CENTIL include *Tamang Selo: Annotated Text and English Translation*

Edited by Sayantan Dasgupta and Shradhanjai Tamang; *Call of the Hills: A coursebook of Indian Nepali Literature in Translation* edited by Sayantan Dasgupta and Kabita Lama, and more recently, *Selected Writings from Chandrika: Parasmani Pradhan and Early Nepali Periodical Culture*.

It also becomes imperative to explore the contributions made by India's National Academy of letters, Sahitya Akademi in the context of Indian Nepali literatures. Established by the Government of India in 1954 it plays a vital role in promoting Indian literature through translations and its recognitive encouragement of the same with the Sahitya Akademi Award for Translations. Beside conducting translation workshops and establishing centres for translation, Sahitya Akademi also publishes translated works, making them accessible to a wider audience. The recognition of languages by Sahitya Akademi is independent from the recognition of languages by the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India and it had recognised Nepali long before its

recognition in 1992, and with Indra Bahadur Rai being given the first Sahitya Akademi Award for the Nepali language for his work on literary criticism, *Nepali Upanyaska Adharharu* (The Foundations of Nepali Novels). While holding an impressive catalogue of Nepali novels, short stories, plays, history of Nepali literature, children's literature, the national academy of letters is also actively engaged in translation of these texts.

It is also important to comment here how during discussion on any aspect of Nepali literature, the Nepali literature form Nepal cannot be left unattended. While the nation states of India and Nepal are divided by political borders, it is understood that the historical, cultural and linguistic association between the Nepali people of these two countries negates exclusion of literature from Nepal within the context of Nepali literature. Taking Nepali literature to a global audience involves deliberate translation, organizing international literary events, and offering prominence to

unique cultural themes like indigenous and marginal identity. Translation of Nepali into a dominantly global language like English therefore becomes a powerful tool to realize social exchange. Some important and widely available English translations of Nepali literature are Chuden Kabimo's, *Faatsung* translated into English as *Song of the Soil* by Ajit Baral has now also been added to the BA English curriculum at the SRM University in Sikkim. Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues* translated into English by Michael Hutt. Hutt's other translations of Nepali works include Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Muna Madan* in 1996 and Lil Bahadur Chhetri's *Basain* (as *Mountains Painted with Turmeric*) in 2008. Indra bahadur Rai's *Aaja Ramita Cha*, translated into English by Manjushree Thapa as *There's A Carnival Today*. Narayan Wagle's popular and Madan Puraskar winning Nepali novel, *Palpasa Café*, Translated into English by Bikash Sangraula. Parijat's existential Nepal novel *Sirish ko Phool*, translated into English by Sondra

Zeidenstein with the help of Tankavilash Bharya as  
*The Blue Mimosa*.

Since the translation of Adhyatma Ramayana by Bhanu Bhakta Acharya in the 17<sup>th</sup> century made Valmiki's Sanskrit epic assessable in Nepali language, the culture of translation has been firmly established in Nepali language. There has been a plethora of translations of Nepali writings into other languages and other languages into Nepali language. It goes without saying that translation has played a vital role in expanding the literary reserve of Nepali language, with Nepali literary culture imbibing themes, genres and expressions from other languages. While the culture of translation sees a gain in momentum, the individuals, groups, institutions, centres, publications can be increasing seen to be cognizant of the social implications of translation of literatures. Among those who engage in literary translation- it is seen as an agent of social change. While the retelling of different stories of Darjeeling becomes an expression of the complexities

and nuances of the lived experiences of the people, these stories also become a powerful social and political tool to understand the world better as envisioned by the translators of Laali Guraas. The societal role that translation plays goes beyond purely academic objectives while promoting indigenous languages through ethical preservation of oral narratives. Illustrating a richer, more vibrant and arguably more perceptive tapestry of the lives of the people's literature it translates, to granting prominence to under-represented voices- translation of literature preserves, accesses and includes not just languages but also the collective human memory, history and varied realities of the society.

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