On Translations and Adaptations

P. L. Deshpande

A lot of important problems arise when we discuss translations or adaptations. People generally believe that it is exceedingly difficult to render the humour of the original into another language. But this kind of difficulty is not confined to comedy alone. There are certain elements in a culture which simply rule out attempts at adaptation. For example, I translated *Oedipus Rex* into Marathi. I could never have dreamt of adapting it. The whole structure of a Greek myth and the elements of the irrational (which form so intrinsic a part of any culture) do not lend themselves to transposition into another culture. Can the *Ramayana* be adapted for European readers? Where would they find parallels in their culture for a king with three queens, a son fulfilling a promise made by his father, a wife following her husband into exile? When no parallels are to be found in the

A scene from *Teen Paishacha Tamasha*



culture of a people for whom a work is intended, the wisest course is to concentrate on a faithful rendering, on the near-impossible task of conveying the poetic quality of the original. This is what I sought to do in *Oedipus Rex:* to capture the poetry of the play, to bring alive the cruel play of Fate. I don't know if I succeeded. My translation is based on English versions, Sombhu Mitra's Bengali rendering. In fact, it was the tremendous impact of Sombhu's performance and of his version of the play which triggered off the idea of translating it into Marathi. It could be that some of the spirit of the original disappeared during this journey.

I recall an interesting episode after I finished translating *Oedipus.* I read it out to my friend, Vasantrao Deshpande, the well-known singer and actor. He mentioned it to his mother. She came out with one of our own *Satvai* stories which included several ingredients similar to the Oedipus myth. Just imagine what would have happened had I heard the *Satvai* legend first and based a play on the story. People would have said I had borrowed elements from *Oedipus Rex* and placed them in an Indian setting!

In the sphere of comedy, what can be adapted with a fair amount of success are situations. It is possible to conceive of parallel situations in our millieu and make them credible. But what is difficult to convey is the nuance, the unexpected use in the original work of a word in a particular context and situation. To find such a word evoking the same kind of response in our own language is well-nigh impossible.

The three plays I adapted had a strong core of social criticism, and while reading the originals, I could at once see parallel situations in our culture. The first one was Gogol's *Inspector General*. Even as I read it, I could imagine the same events happening here. In a tiny princely state (which I called Surungwad), a little after the merger. I could visualize such characters and their operations in that small state. The pair (Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky), I made them into those stock characters of our earlier plays—two Brahmins. And I did so for a very good reason. I had to think of a kind of profession, which allowed free and unhindered entry into any home. Brahmins had this advantage (and also the barber to some extent since he used his razor on a king and a commoner). The pair of Brahmins came in handy. They made a comic twosome; they became purveyors of news and gossip. In a sense, the Brahmin was unproductive and, as a social entity, dispensable. Even so, he had his place in the scheme of things and that was enough for my purpose. Besides, I had our own tradition sanctioning the use of this team as a source of comedy and the two served as a vehicle for conveying exactly what Gogol's two landowners did. So, in this sense, it was easy to transpose the comic element into our setting.

But a real problem does arise when the humour is wholly rooted in the particular culture of a social segment of a country. The humour of P. G. Wodehouse, for example, is wholly untranslatable. If one has at one's command the resources of language he had, one can at best be inspired to write in his vein. But to adapt him is out of the question.

Certain transpositions come naturally. There is in Gogol that reference to the History teacher who forgets himself and speaks with such fervour

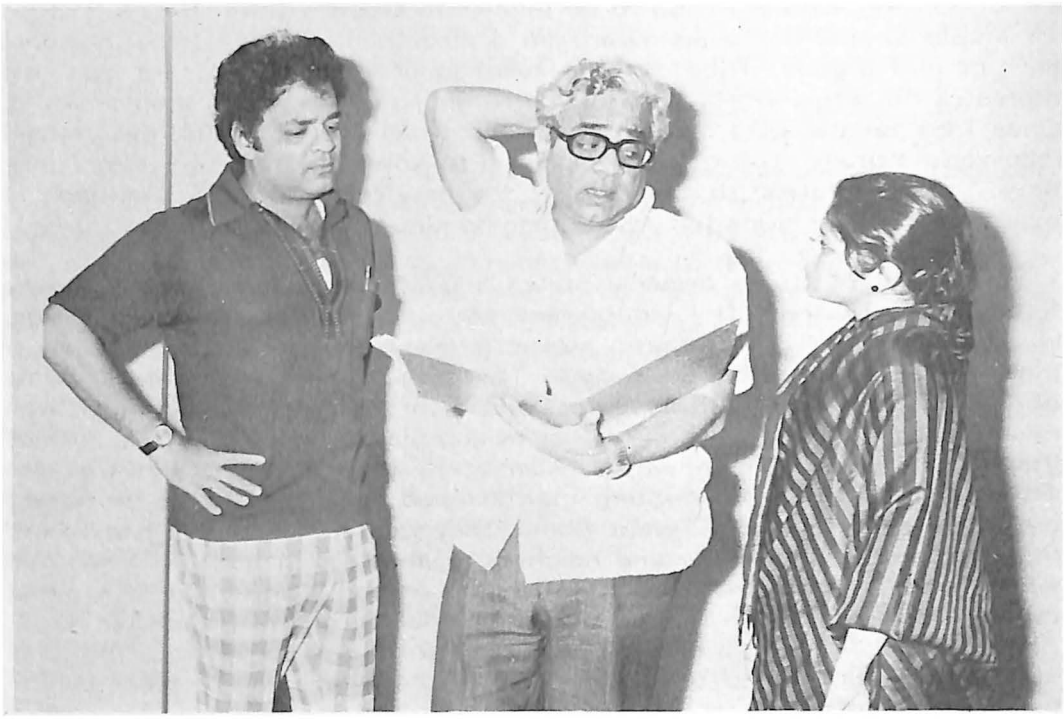
when describing Alexander the Great that one might think the whole place was on fire. In our Marathi context, a History teacher getting carried away by the episode of Shivaji killing Afzul Khan seemed entirely apt.

On the whole, I tried to be faithful to Gogol's spirit. Here's a group of stupid people not even aware (in a strong moral sense) that they are corrupt and greedy. Their actions seem in character, stemming from the mores of the small world they inhabit. I had to think of such a small world. Once I hit on the idea of Surungwad, a small princely state, every thing followed naturally. The officials, so used to kowtowing to the ruling family, have now transferred that 'loyalty' to the new rulers in Delhi. The habit of misusing their positions for private gain continues unabated.

Think of those princely states just after Independence. Land was fetching good prices. The landowners were sending their sons to college. I had met types like Sarjerao (Gogol's Hlestakov) in Kolhapur. Each of them had an attendant and a cook. These young men found life at home boring. College was an excuse for merriment and expensive living. I even recall a chap who wrote to his father asking him for 'gabardine' fee, sure of the fact that the old man would never know that gabardine was trousers material. In college, these young men listened to writers speak on literary problems and when they went home, they quoted what they had heard, thus impressing the family and neighbours. In creating Sarjerao I had this whole class of landowners' sons to fall back on and their style of living fitted the bill. (There was an interesting bit of criticism of this character. D. K. Bedekar said that Gogol had intended him to be a hobo. Actually that was how he was conceived by Danny Kaye in the film. Bedekar went by the film, without reference to Gogol.)

Surungwad and its atmosphere seemed parallel to the situation described by Gogol. I sought 'to domesticate' Gogol's world. The doctor clearing a government hospital and the maternity ward to house the bridegroom's party during his daughter's marriage is an act so typical of our petty bureaucrats! Whatever took place, it had to have, in Shakespeare's words, 'a local habitation and a name'. Otherwise I would never have been able to communicate what Gogol wanted to convey to the audience and I would have ceased to have a meaningful dialogue with the spectators.

Our earlier adaptations of Shakespeare, *Zunzarrao* (*Othello*) for instance, capture the spirit of the original and the characters come alive. Granted that the poetic essence is sometimes lost. But in a literal translation both may be missed out. Even in the utterance of a name, our own inflexion harmonizes with our own names. Vinda Karandikar's translation of *King Lear* is accurate, excellent. It's a unique achievement. But if we tried to stage it, the words would communicate little. Even for the poetic essence to be transmitted, one has to have recourse to one's own poetic tradition, the associations that words and sounds bring and their rhythm. (In Gadkari's *Rajsanyasa*, for example, the lyricism of *Raya, manata asel te bol, manata nasel te bol.*) Even a concept like a storm has different associations for us and the west.



P. L. Deshpande directing Satish Dubhashi and Bhakti Barve in Ti Phularani.

I am fully in favour of straight translations for certain kinds of literature. I translated Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and a Georgian novel *Anything May Happen.* There I took no liberties with the text. I concentrated on a faithful rendering into Marathi of the original, without changing a single name. But when it comes to a play, I feel differently. Then adaptation comes more naturally to me. It might be argued that an adaptation loses somewhat in literary value. But for me it is the only way of making a play stage-worthy. Certain departures from the original become inevitable. For instance, the Mayor's wife is vain and pampered. I made her his second wife, someone much younger and, therefore, able to wheedle anything out of him. It was the only way she could have been acceptable to our audiences.

That is why an adaptation becomes a 'parallel' creation. When an author reads the original, he tells himself, 'How very like what happens here! What Gogol is depicting is so universal!'. But when he begins to adapt, it is not just the original that grips him. Along with the original, there is his own experience of living, his own observation of human beings, institutions, situations. When the original has such experiences as its ally, the adapta-

tion finds roots. It communicates the essence of the original through an experience that can be shared with spectators who, as a result, finds the new work wholly credible. Here is a pack of exceedingly foolish people. The kind one might meet anywhere. They are corrupt and petty. But it's their folly that makes for the humour and the corruption is not of a kind that arouses anger or indignation. One might here recall the fact that Gogol's *Inspector General* was rejected by the censors who regarded it as an indictment of the regime, but Tsar Nicholas I found this comedy so funny that he overruled them. I tried to be faithful to the comic spirit of Gogol's original and that is why audiences found the play so exceedingly enjoyable!

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With *Pygmalion* the problem was of a different order. Its core is language, and the mimic in me was fascinated by this opportunity to play with the nuances, the pronunciation, the stress, the word order in our language. Think of the Marathi spoken in the Shahpur area near Belgaum. Its inflextion is so endearing. The whole point here was not to criticize any of the varieties spoken but to project them, with fun and affection. My instincts guided me to a language with rich pictorial potential. I remember years ago waiting for a service motor at the stand in Shirval. Two farmers were arguing vehemently and then the one who had the last word said, "Now, speak up. So your wheel has got stuck?" Shaw's language has the force of an intellectual argument. I depended for impact on words and their associations, on usage where grammatical rules proved insufficient. For instance, *hota* (was) is regarded as the correct pronunciation and *vhata* as incorrect. But by what logic is the negative *navhata* accepted as correct?

The speech of Dagdoba (Doolittle) offered plenty of scope for several down-to-earth and homely images, with a slightly rural flavour. (*I'm not in the habit of speaking once this way and again that way, like the folds of a dhoti when it is tied round the waist . . . Does the mango tree alone boast of leaves? Doesn't the castor tree also have leaves? Sure, both have leaves. But have you ever heard of castor leaves decorating entrances?*) Here was an opportunity for assonance, alliteration, rhyme and I used it to the full.

And, of course, there is the end of Act Three, when the creative energy in me ran away with the words. Manjula (Eliza) is still smarting under the humiliations she has received at the hands of Dr. Ashok (Higgins). Alone on the stage, she breaks out in lines directed at him. A little diffident at first, *"The lizard's bounded by a hedge. Can the lapwing swallow up the sea?"* She is over-reaching herself perhaps. But then her fury spills out. *"Wait awhile, your pot of sins is now full. And it's time I taught you a good lesson".* She fantasizes, imagining herself a queen, and Ashok, the victim, pleading for mercy and receiving a reprieve. The lines are brisk; they are accompanied by swift action. Bhakti Barve (who plays Manjula—Eliza) struts about on the stage and invariably wins the applause of spectators.

In this adaptation I did not merely 'domesticate' the original. I had to up-date it. In *Pygmalion*, during the visit to the house of Higgins' mother, Clara says that she finds Eliza's 'new small talk' delightful. I replaced this

by 'the new language of the angry generation'. It hit the mark: the ambition of fashionable ladies to be 'in' with the latest events, in literature and the arts. (You discuss a play with them, they will not speak of the play or the actors, but of 'lighting effects' though not one of them can tell a 'baby' from a 'spot'.)

Vasant (Freddy in *Pygmalion*) is doing his B.A. with Sanskrit. The type is established at once. The image conjured is *not* that of an erudite scholar but of a single innocuous male student in a class of girls. Once the up-dating process begins you bring in the last cinema show, the jackpot, *matka*, everything. I have seen a Ramlila production where Hanuman walks from shop to shop collecting kerosene for the burning up of Lanka. There are all those jibes against hoarding, black-marketing and the audiences don't think of it as an anachronism but accept it in their stride.

But, on the whole, the mood of the adaptation is implicit in the title. *Ti Phularani*, Balkavi's poem. It's a charming moment. Manjula (Eliza) has learnt to recite the poem. But she insists that when Ashok (Higgins) recites it, the words sound beautiful. She starts reciting the poem. The other two join in. These are moments with a touch of lyricism: the image of the Phularani playing on the carpet of green grass, with a shy glance at the sun in the sky. The fields, the forest, the beasts are soon asleep. A love-strain is heard afar in the sky and there is the gift of a tender kiss on the ground. There is just a hint of a bond between two disparate and distant things, with Dr. Joshi (Pickering) aptly reciting the lines about the evening breeze which has guessed this relationship.

Ever since I read it, the poem has been one of my favourites. I remember that in 1950 I even wrote to B. S. Murdhekar asking him to translate it and send it to Walt Disney. I was enthralled by the delicacy of the tie between the sun and the Phularani. The title came in a flash as the only possible one for a flower-seller and the text of the poem crept in to add a touch of tenderness to the play. A line-by-line analysis of the poem is hardly necessary. It's a matter of total comprehension. The poem echoes the ties being formed, but left unspoken in the play.

I admit I paid little heed to Shaw's long essay at the end of the play. Perhaps, the Fabian in him might have felt a twinge of guilt at the 'romantic' possibilities in the play. I stuck to the text and while adapting it, I experienced the joy of discovering the nuances, the facets, the rhythm of my own language.

Of course, it can be argued that my version lacks the intellectual stature of Shaw's original. I confess that I did not find here traces of that intellectual element so evident in *St. Joan.* There only the first scene is hilarious (about the hens beginning to lay eggs as soon as the Captain agrees to take Joan to the Dauphin). But many of the other scenes contain a good deal of argument. Some of it is based on the concept of nationhood: whether one should be loyal to the feudal lord and the Church or to God, the king and the nation. Joan even refers to God giving us "our countries and language", almost equating the idea of a nation with a common language spoken by its people. Medieval ideas are seen replaced by a new concept of nationhood.

Pygmalion, too, makes the point that the way a language is spoken determines the class of the speaker. There is discussion round this point, but it is all in a lighter vein, and very enjoyable. Middle-class morality is ridiculed but without a trace of bitterness, the way our *tamasha* folk satirize the respectable and the educated. And, in the main, language aside, it is centred round a person's desire to be considered not just a guinea pig but a human.

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Adapting Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* posed an altogether different problem. I was attracted by its music, the bite in the satire. There is no 'black' humour in the play. Instead there is exuberance, abandon. Of the many plays of the Berliner Ensemble that I had witnessed, the one that I found really grim was 'Mother Courage'. I was reminded of our women in Marathwada, whose life-business it is to exist. Their only problem—one of survival . . .

Now turning to *Teen Paishacha Tamasha*, my adaptation of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. Once music becomes an integral part of a play, it ushers in norms of its own. In this particular case, our traditional music (including *natya sangeet* and *bhavgeet*) would have proved inadequate for the content of the play. Jabbar Patel was absolutely right in using pop, jazz, rock. This music supplied the harshness needed to project the satire in the work. But Jenny's songs called for another, very different treatment. I took her to Vasantrao Deshpande. He taught her to acquire the strength and projection of the *tawaifi* voice (which, in the old days, had to carry all the way down the lane). Madhuri Purandare who played the role quickly absorbed Vasantrao's teaching. In the seventh scene, she comes right up to the edge of the stage, looks at the spectators straight in the eye and relates her story. "If some of you ladies cared to visit me, you might find your husbands or fathers in my bed. To be poor is a sin, to be poor is a curse, to be poor is agony. As we sell our bodies, God stands before us in the form of *bhakri*". Spectators are moved by the direct, unsentimental delivery. That kind of presentation, in the sophisticated sphere of music, used to come so naturally to Siddeshwari Devi!

The play is called a *tamasha* but I did not think of it in terms of that particular folk form. I conceived it in the broader sense of a *tamasha* as spectacle or performance. In the text, I came to the point at once. 'One paisa for song (*gan*), the second for dance (*nach*), the third . . . the third as a bribe (*lach*)'.

I tried to bring the experience into the orbit of life in Bombay. The early hours of the morning. The police and the assistant editors on night shifts, the night duty nurses, the actors, the *tamasha* folk (who turn night into day), and, of course, the drama critics, and the gurkha watchman will now lie down to sleep. The women clerks in the milk booths, the newspaper vendors, the municipal sweepers, the temple priests and the announcer of the first *sabha* of AIR will now embark on the day's work. I tried in every possible way to localize and 'domesticate' the play. Janumama (Peachum) makes no bones about the achievements of his Training Centre for Beggers.

"Other educational institutes lure innocent youngsters with prospects of employment. We frankly declare that we teach our students how to beg and thus ensure them a living wage". The announcement of Malan (Polly), in her capacity as Chairman of the Mutual Benefit Bank, that the days (and especially the nights) of petty thefts are over, that for thieves it is sounder policy now not to break open safes and raid banks; they should start and control banks themselves. She continues, "The feudal mode of individual action must now make way for joint ventures in consonance with a democratic era". The henchmen of Ankush (Macheath) sitting in a Board meeting in their new role as 'respectable' social figures are easy to recognize. The spectators immediately identify them with the directors of 'co-operative' banks, known for embezzlement and fraud.

The barbs against hypocrisy, the edge of social criticism are retained, as in the first two adaptations, but re-inforced by vibrant music which laces the instructive element in the play with fun and merriment.

[*The article is based on an informal discussion with Dr. Kumud Mehta.—Editor*]