

## Translating Region: A Case of Kannada and Telugu Oral Epics

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### **Abstract:**

The paper seeks to examine the concept of region through the English translations of Kannada and Telugu oral epics. It takes up *Strings and Cymbals* and *Palnativirula Katha* for the exploration. These epics are translated into English at different time periods in the twentieth century and thereby they provide ample scope to study the implication of translation into English while also making space for the study of the region as a space that lends itself as a category not just as a part of geography but can be identified as a cultural space transcending physical boundary.

**Keywords:** Translation, Region, Oral epic, Cultural space.

### **Introduction:**

In this paper I seek to explore the English translations of two texts of oral epics from Kannada and Telugu and discuss the dynamics of how these texts map the trajectory of region while also examining the many layers of translation that takes place in the process. The two relevant concepts to grapple with are translation and region. The many debates on textual translation deal with the translatability of a text from one language to another particularly so if the translation is from an Indian language into English rather than between two Indian languages. In such a situation, obstacles would be many. As the title suggests the paper engages with translation at many levels, of the regional epics. The collection of Kannada oral epics *Strings and Cymbals: Selections from Kannada Oral Epics* is translated by C.N Ramachandran and Padma Sarma in 2007 while the popular Telugu oral epic *The Epic of Palnadu: A Study and Translation of Palnativirula Katha* is translated by Gene Roghair in 1982. The Kannada translation into English comes at a time when the complex of consumerism-globalization-media is at its peak (more on this later) and the Telugu oral epic was published in the 1980s almost twenty years before the publication of the Kannada oral epics. The Kannada translation is viewed as an

attempt at writing back to the empire, foregrounding the postcolonial search for the self where as the Telugu translation of *Palnavirula Katha* signifies a different dialectic of translation

The paper is roughly divided into two sections. The first part discusses the import of terms like translation and region and the second section examines the implications of the links between the oral and written traditions while attempting to place the English translations in context. The paper hopes to identify certain trends and patterns, continuities and discontinuities of the oral traditions that evolve in the act of translation in these two not so different cultural regions.

### **Region**

This section attempts to address the problematic of the definition of the terms region, and translation. Definition of terms has always been a tough task and so is the case with region and translation. Scholars in geography identify region as a unit larger than locality and smaller than nation. In area studies a group of adjacent nations are referred to as region. The region, in this context refers to Andhra and Karnataka as also to smaller regions within these larger geographical units. The regions referred to could be identified with a 'R' and 'r' for the sake of convenience. R/region is often referred to and described in terms of its spatial dimensions. This paper too, largely attempts to grapple with the literary genre associated<sup>1</sup> with region while distinguishing itself from all other mainstream traditions, writing and culture.

Similarly, an all-inclusive definition of translation may be difficult when one considers the transformation that these oral epics undergo. I shall discuss the method of translation here to draw some larger arguments about the whole process. Firstly, translation takes place at the level of change of medium from oral to written and secondly from one language to another that is from Kannada and Telugu to English. The Kannada oral epics have been collected in the 1970s and published in Kannada in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> And the present translation into English as *Strings and Cymbals* is done from the available texts in Kannada and the path of translation in this case, is relatively linear. In case of *The Epic of Palnadu*, the translation is not as simple, for Roghair did not go in for readily available texts in Telugu. Instead, he chose to work with the oral narrators and directly translate the narrative into English; his translation of the narration of the singers is rendered into prose, which he calls "detailed summaries" instead of the original narrative-dialogue style. In Kannada an oral epic is called a *kathe* and episodes within the epic are called *sālu* whereas in Telugu both, the oral epic as well as the episodes are referred to as *katha*; but

individual episodes are identified after a major character or incident in the story.<sup>3</sup> (Roghair 5) The singers of the epic call the epic *Palnativīrula Katha* instead of *Palnativīra Caritra* (the title used for the written texts) because of the oral nature of the epic. His translation evolves out of the oral performatory tradition of the Palnādu epic.

Roghair's choice of working with the oral singers and the rejection of the written texts for translation are issues that can be probed into, for locating the region. Roghair makes claims for a regional space in these traditions precisely because "much that is most meaningful to the audience of a local epic is of no interest to a nationalist audience." (Roghair 6) The singers of the Telugu oral epics are men of 'lower caste', while women have their own share in the singing of the Kannada oral epics. Both Kannada and Telugu oral epics deal with specific non-Brahmin caste histories. *Palnativīrula Katha* is about the Velama heroes and their battles for their land. The Kannada translation is a compilation of selections from many oral epics; it is devoted to specific themes like the creation myths, alternative versions of the classics, women and society, nature and man and the political ballads. Both the oral narrations provide insights into a local social system. These epics deal with man-woman relations and male-female heroic ideals. The details of everyday life, food, omens, manners, superstitions childbirth, birds, beasts, animals, trees and all the complexities of life are discussed.

An attempt is made here to locate region as an offshoot of the translations of the oral epics. The reasons for calling it region rather than locality is that the translators and editors identify the oral epics with the region and call it regional epics because of its origin in the countryside. In these narratives' R/region comes into existence at many levels. In case of the Telugu epic, when we look at Roghair's process of selection and elimination by which he arrives at the preset mode of translation, we get an insight into his efforts at recovering the epic to the people of Palnādu. He describes his attempt as an act of retrieving the epic to its place, to its rightful people to the people of Palnādu and to the *vīra vidyāvāntulu*<sup>4</sup> the traditional singers of the epic, from the usurpers, the brahmanical 'upper castes,' who have appropriated the epic and claim it as the 'national' epic of the Telugus. Roghair in his extensive and brilliant critical introduction to the epic and its cult discusses the many gaps that occur in the compilation of the epic in Telugu. This reveals the saga of the travails of oral tradition in a world dominated by written culture.

While literary traditions in Telugu and Kannada were dominated by 'upper-castes,' oral literature is primarily sung by people of 'lower castes' like *māla*, *mādiga* and *jangama*. Any

song or poetry is seen as only a diluted and derivative form of a written text. *Palnātivīrula Katha* and the Kannada oral epics survive under similar assumptions. The ‘upper-caste’ writers have tried to appropriate the epic *Palnātivīrula Katha* into the written culture and show its written origins. They have been arguing that the Palnādu heroes are Telugu ‘national’ heroes and Srinatha the 15 C Telugu poet as the original author of the epic. This, according to the literary elite, would increase value and respect for the oral epic among literary historians and the elite; but according to Roghair it diverts the attention from the base itself. He raises some serious objections to the edited versions of palm-leaf manuscripts by Akkiraju Umakantham in 1911 and Pingali Lakshmikantham in 1967. He calls such claims as an instance of “scholarly, elitist tampering with oral traditions.” (Roghair 15) He “suspects” these editions and does not regard them as faithful expositions of the epic as it evolved in its original and native context. None of these editors have made an effort to record and print the text from the singers (unfortunately Roghair too hasn’t published a text in Telugu from his recording of the songs). Tangirala Venkata Subbaravu, one of the many editors of the epic who interviewed the singers, but declared that the epic could not be obtained as a whole. Roghair opines, the Telugu brahmancial scholars have never questioned the accepted belief that the oral tradition is a derivative of the written text. Such attempts bolster the view of Srinatha’s authorship. This is precisely the space which Roghair makes for his translation: the gap between the literary elite and the oral tradition is used for making a case for the oral narratives within the Telugu literary scene.

In refusing to translate from established texts available in Telugu, Roghair makes the first move towards drawing the boundaries of what is called the Palnādu tradition. Hence, he localizes the epic from brahmin to non-brahmin māla castes to the *vīra vidyāvantulu* and again distinguishing it from other singing traditions of the epic which might use it for entertainment and thus reclaim the region’s homogeneity through these factors. Medukonduru Chennayya and Galeyya, the singers with whom Roghair worked, consistently stress their position in the Palnati *āchāramu*. According to Roghair, “the epic as sung by *vīra vidyāvantulu* is not simply a collection of stories that are popular in Palnādu. It is a product of a focusing process that selectively utilizes traditional material to formulate a local world-view. The world-view is coherent from a specific perspective. Just as other points of view distort the world in order to accommodate it to their own focus.” (ibid.) And therefore, the process of translation from one medium/language to another is not simply a change of medium or language but one of ideology.

There is a kind of assumed homogeneity to the oral epic which is brought back through the efforts of Roghair. The reasons for his dismissal of the written texts are that this harmony or world-view is disturbed in the botched-up palm-leaf manuscripts and hence he works with the oral singers. For him, the *vīra vidyāvāntulu* symbolize homogeneity in a world that has lost its cultural unity, with the intervention of colonial and other market forces. Most of the singers mainly belong to the *māla* caste and the dialect that they use for singing the epic and the region to which they belong to are factors according to Roghair that contribute to the unique characteristics of the Palnādu tradition. He cites an example of *vīra vidyāvāntulu* who have withstood the impact of conversion to Christianity and have preserved the Palnādu tradition even while all other *mālas* were converting to Christianity. Medukonduru Chennayya's family refrained from accepting Christianity unlike the fellow *mālas*. For the other *mālas* the epic was one among several traditions which they could use in structuring their own world-views. For Chennayya's grandfather, however Christian religious world-view disturbed the world-view expressed in the epic. They believe that the *vīra vidyāvāntulu*, "who have fully integrated the epic world-view within his own world-view and who was responsible for its continuity of existence, recognized any alien world-view as a threat to the structure of the local world represented by the epic." (Roghair 121)

If Gene Roghair's attempt is to remedy the damage done to *Palnātivīrula Katha*, the Kannada oral epics on the contrary are brought together to be published in English for the first time. The Kannada oral epics too signify uniqueness through a linguistic and cultural identity in their themes and techniques. Interestingly enough, some of the singers are equally at ease in singing these epics in other neighbouring languages like Telugu. So this particular region superimposes itself into other regions making it a separate and unique cultural unit which is home for these singers and also home for these traditions. In that sense the Kannada oral epics are as much a part of Kannada culture as they are of Telugu culture. The overlapping of boundaries marks yet another cultural region with its own unique ethos giving rise to a new dimension to the conceptualization of the linguistic regions. It is a new and dynamic region which does not acknowledge frontiers but assimilates them, evolving perhaps into a new cultural region. The Kannada epics used for the English translation are from a textual source, the oral epics have already undergone one level of translation in being textualized. Though there are many oral performers alive and who practice the singing of the art form. One of them is Burrakatha Eramma and her family.

## Oral Epic

Let us take a look at some questions that these translations throw up. Firstly, what are the continuities and discontinuities of the oral tradition and secondly what is the fate of these translated texts in the present scenario? Though writing offers the scope of larger readership and makes the epics more permanent, orality or oral culture becomes less relevant and the singers who have been preserving these cultures also become irrelevant especially in a world where cyber culture rules the roost; that the future of a printed text itself is threatened is a widely accepted phenomenon across the world. This is not to deny the co-existence of the two traditions- oral and written- together like in the case of the Telugu epic *Palnātivīrula Katha* or the various versions of *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* which have been part of the oral and written traditions at the same time in India.

Some Kannada oral epics like *Kumara Rama* and *Malemadeshwara* have enjoyed the status of written texts and were also available as plays, and poems, prior to their publication. *The Epic of Palnādu* has had eight hundred years of oral history<sup>5</sup> and several centuries of written history. It can be found in the form of plays, novels, children's stories, elementary school texts and motion pictures etc. Gene Roghair does mention some changes that have occurred on the epic style and singing during these many years, like the inclusion of literary Telugu if the singers are familiar with written Telugu and also the inclusion of foreign words like Urdu and Persian. But, he says, they consciously avoid the use of English in their rendition. That shows an awareness of a threat to the epic tradition from foreign influences but their usage of Urdu and Persian words Roghair attributes to their lack of understanding of these languages as foreign. Most of the singers of the epic are illiterate or semiliterate and hence the question of their borrowing directly from a written source is less likely; but the various written traditions, films and theatre performances might have influenced the oral performances and vice versa. However, the only instance of interaction between the mainstream and the marginal traditions, though at a different level is in the negative; where the brahmanical elite not only try to appropriate the oral epic into the elite literary tradition but also use the modern administrative mechanism and power to make the singers of the epic forgo their customs and traditions of oral culture which they perform before singing the epic *Palnātivīrula Katha*. The singers were forced by the government to give up the caste breaking meal and animal sacrifices which are performed as part of the ritual. Galeyya the singer with whom Roghair had worked was imprisoned as he did not yield to pressure and stop singing the epic.

The texts present a good example of the oral written complex with its rich variety of epic narratives. If the translation of the epics is an attempt at retrieving the indigenous systems of knowledge that are replaced by western systems mainly due to colonial intervention, it also seems to justify the post-colonial situation that the ultimate goal of any narrative is to end up in a written text, in English. Both Gene Roghair and the editors and translators of the Kannada epics C.N. Ramachandran and Padma Sharma claim that the present enterprise of translating the oral epics into English is to make these texts available for a larger readership across the world including the general readers in Kannada and Telugu and for research in the oral traditions and other allied fields. These texts serve area studies purpose aptly. Roghair's purpose throughout, while questioning the mainstream tradition, is to restore the epic to its original place and status. He hails from a long list of Indologists for whom India is an object of curiosity and study. He says that "anyone interested in India may profit from an introduction to an alternative to Brahmin elite ideology." (Roghair 3) If the early generation of Indologists studied mainstream literatures, scholars like Gene Roghair, Stuart Blackburn and David Shulman make a departure in their approach with subtle shift of emphasis on alternative/marginal traditions, cultures and literatures.

The text *Strings and Cymbals* is published at a point when translation is a conscious activity unlike in the past when texts were translated by unknown translators; now it comes as a package, which includes- regional, oral and other marginalized literatures in English translation with glossy covers and with prefaces and introductions by top-heavy academics; ready to be consumed and propagated. While discussing continuities of traditions, one must say that translation is one such act of continuity, which requires the patronage of institutions and individuals- consisting of largely the urban middleclass who happen to be the main patrons of such literature and arts. Also, that is the class which engages itself with a post-colonial search for the self or the roots. As the coordinator Tharakeshwar discusses in his Introduction to the series of Kannada oral epics, this is a class of readers who know only the oral form of their mother tongue and the written form of English. Hence it is important for them to be connected to their roots in some way while retaining the English educated status, to carry on their pursuit of search for the self and the culture- to recover a lost inheritance for their children in an urban environment like the non-resident Indians do. It also gives them a sense of connectedness and helps them shed their guilt of having gone away from the regional culture and roots to an urban, middle class life. Both the regional and the global are important for the urban Indian while

mother tongue represents the regional, English keeps them connected with the metropolitan. And this, perhaps, is the context of the (English) translation of the region.<sup>6</sup>

Yet there is no finite proof as to whether there has been any kind of exchange of ideas between the two traditions of the written and the oral epics. A sustained interaction between the two traditions, where one influences the structure and function of the other is difficult to obtain owing to the limited availability of research and resources in the field. However, an examination of the two traditions reveals that, not all written texts are fixed and all oral narratives are fluid. 'Fixed phrase' and 'fluid phrase' to borrow an idea from A.K. Ramanujan exist both in the written and the oral.<sup>7</sup> In spite of being classics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have allowed changes, while some of the oral epics have retained their original form even though they are fluid in nature, even after having traversed through time and space. The fact that the singers of oral epics haven't included new tales to their repertoire and that the length of the stories is almost fixed indicates the rigidity of the oral text. In case of *Palnātivīrula Katha*, many groups of *vīra vidyāvāntulu* sing the epic unlike the Kannada epics where only one particular family seems to be preserving one particular oral epic tradition. Though the formulaic structure of the oral epics and the sequence of events are largely the same, the details many a time differ from singer to singer. For example, where a particular singer takes a break and resumes singing of the epic and the sequence of events within the epic are matters left to the individual singer's own understanding of the epic structure. Hence the oral epic is both fixed and fluid in terms of its structure and content.

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<sup>1</sup> Epic is usually associated with nation while in this paper I explore the oral epic as representative of marginality in terms of the themes, people and places linked with the epic.

<sup>2</sup> The political narratives included in the text were collected by John Faithful Fleet and translated into English in 1867-1889.

<sup>3</sup> All Telugu oral epics are rendered in prose and verse. It is prose that plays a larger role. The Kannada oral epics are rendered in verse.

<sup>4</sup> The men who sing the epic are known by the name. It literally means men learned in the heroic tradition of Palnādu.

<sup>5</sup> It is only a claim, needs inscriptional or other textual evidence.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion on translation and publication in the post-colonial, post-liberalised world, see Rita Kothari's *Translating India*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion on the same see *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*. Vinay Dharwadkar (ed), New Delhi: OUP, 2004, p.532-552.



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