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## **Translation of Indian Devotional Poetry and Contribution of A. K. Ramanujan**

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### **Abstract:**

Indian Devotional Poetry carries a significant bulk of writings in its original and translated form. 'Bhakti poetry occurs at the confluence of Sanskrit with India's vernacular traditions. It also exceeds the reach of either'. The bhakti poetry tradition was oral in nature. Linguistic expression of this oral tradition imparted permanence to it while translation provided it the sovereignty to transgress the confines of a language. Mircea Eliade defines it as a 'process of destroying and reinventing language'. He further writes that these traditions 'are composed in ... a secret, dark, ambiguous language, in which a state of consciousness is expressed'. (Eliade 1958: 249). The present paper proposes to throw an incandescence of analysis on the translation of Indian devotional poetry and attempts to highlight the Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan's translation of Tamil and Telugu devotional poetry into English. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the challenges and significance of translation of Indian bhakti poetry whereas the second part unveils various vital aspects of A. K. Ramanujan's translation of Shaivite, Vaishnava, Virasaiva and Padama poets.

**Keywords:** Devotional Poetry, translation, bhakti literature, 'saguna', 'nirguna', 'shaiva', 'shakta' and 'virasaiva'.

Indian Devotional Poetry carries a significant bulk of writings in its original and translated form. 'Bhakti poetry occurs at the confluence of Sanskrit with India's vernacular traditions. It also exceeds the reach of either'. The bhakti poetry tradition was oral in nature. Linguistic expression of this oral tradition imparted permanence to it while translation provided it the sovereignty to transgress the confines of a language. Mircea Eliade defines it as a 'process of destroying and reinventing language'. He further writes that these traditions 'are composed in ... a secret, dark, ambiguous language, in which a state of consciousness is

expressed'. (Eliade 1958: 249). The present paper proposes to throw an incandescence of analysis on the translation of Indian devotional poetry and attempts to highlight the Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan's translation of Tamil and Telugu devotional poetry into English. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the challenges and significance of translation of Indian bhakti poetry whereas the second part unveils various vital aspects of A. K. Ramanujan's translation of Shaivite, Vaishnava, Virasaiva and Padama poets.

## I

Devotional poetry in India exhibited a fierce desire for spiritual liberty, heartfelt deep emotions, ebb and flow of emotional edginess, eternal craving for the 'Istha' or favourite deity, and cultural associations. '...the process of translation within a culture or outside the culture is a process of transmission, transformation and ultimately re – creation, and every age and each linguistic society must do it with its own interest in the mind, leaving other cultures to follow the example'. (Hajela, S C. editorial Dialogue). Various folds of mystery and mystical experiences equip bhakti poetry with a strange and distinctive quality. An American Poet and anthropologist Nathaniel Tarn could not believe the frenzied love of Mirabai when he read the translated versions of her 'padas'. 'How, he asked, could a person live their whole life on such an edge? So perilously in love with an unattainable beloved? How could she maintain the tension of her ferocious unrequited love for Krishna for decades?' (Schelling, Andrew. xiv). Translation becomes the vehicle of migration of such strange emotional states into a different linguistic impression.

### Indian Devotional Poetry

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Saguna Bhakti Poetry	Nirguna Bhakti Poetry
(With attributes+figurative)	(Free of attributes+Non-figurative)
Panchdevopasana	=====
(Devotional Poetry for five deities)	

			Sat- Nam	Guru Poetry
			Ram	
			(Kabir & Dadu Dayal's)	
<hr/>				
Shaivite	Shakta	Saura	Smarta	Ganpatya
(for Shiva)	( for Goddess)	( for Sun)	(for Vishnu)	( for Ganesh)
		-----		
<hr/>				
=====			Collectively called	
			Vaishnav poetry	
Pashupatvirasaiva	Lingayat			

Translation of devotional poetry witnesses various impediments and hurdles in its way. Major challenge in translating a bhakti text is its ‘total translation’. ‘Translation often cannot replicate tones of speech, steep climbs and ornamental descents of the singer’s voice, the repetition of words and phrases: it cannot do justice to vocal sounds that holds no fixed meanings, or to words that undergo deliberate or ritual distortion’. ( Schelling. Andrew xix). Ambiguous language of ‘Sidh’ and ‘Nath’ yogin’s is very difficult to translate. Schelling writes that there are very few poets ‘who have luckily found a capable translator – a translator who has worked to instil the echoes, ambiguities, or other non – semantic procedures of poetry. (xx) ‘Translation for Meaning’ is just partial translation. Jerome Rothenberg in his essay ‘Total Translation’ expressed his views on translation. ‘Translation is a carry – over’ for him. This essay was included in the Ethnopoetics section of Stony Brook. Rothenberg writes: ‘It begins with a forced change of language, but a change too that opens up the possibility of greater understanding. Everything in these song – poems is finally translatable: words, sounds, voice, melody, gesture, event etc., in the reconstruction of a unity that would be shattered by approaching each element in isolation’. (<http://damnthecaesars.blogspot.in/2011/jerome-rothenberg-his-total-translation.html>). Total

translation brings forth the “full verbo – vocal – visual spectrum’ of a particular work for him. Most of the time ‘the non – word elements’ get vanished during the process of translation.

A good or rather faithful translation depends on some other vital factors also. Here, we need to focus on following question – Can we translate the culture successfully and justly? Rubel and Rosman believe that ‘Translation can be seen as a betrayal as it can violate the cultural intimacy of the inside ... Translation is a negotiation between that local experience and target language’. ( 2003: 13- 14). A faithful translation decodes the culture in target language. As per Tymoczko; “Translating means translating cultures, not languages... Therefore, a translator, in obscuring or muting cultural disjunctions ceases to be faithful’. (2003: 21). Language can be defined as projector of culture. To define the relationship between the two Sanjiv Kumar builds a metaphor of an iceberg when he writes: ‘The metaphor of iceberg best defines the relationship between the two where the visible part symbolizes the language (as one component of culture) while the greater part which lies beneath the surface, is the visible aspect of culture (with all its essential attributes)’. He further writes, ‘From a communicative point of view, if communication is swimming, then language is the swimming skill, and culture is water’. These two things are inseparable. For Wenying Jiang ‘language is flesh and culture is blood’. (Pg. 328). Culture specific words are difficult to be translated faithfully. The question becomes much more complex when it comes to the translation of devotional poetry. Ezra Pound while translating KabirDas could not translate words like , ‘tilak’, ‘Kaliyuga’, ‘Ananda’, ‘Rishi’, and ‘Chakora’. Andrew Schelling is Professor of writing and Poetics at Naropa University in America. He has some ‘facility in Sanskrit – thirty off – and – on years as a translator, with excursions into Hindi, Pali, and some of the Prakrits’. He received the Academy of American poets translation prize for his book *Dropping the Bow: Poems from Ancient India*. But while translating the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva he puts some words as they are e.g. ‘Samadhi’, ‘amrita’, ‘Kamini’, and ‘dukula – cloth’. Rachel Fell McDermott teaches at Bernard College in New York. She has published various books on goddess worship in Bengal and ‘translated the renowned Shakta poets and recently co – edited two volumes, *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West and Breaking Boundaries with the Goddess: New Directions in the Study of Shaktism*’. (p.266) Ramprasad Sen a renowned Shakta poet has been translated by her in her book *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal* where she did not replace the word ‘Ma’ with English substitute mother.

Thundering ‘Ma! Ma! Ma!’

Clouds clash

Bedecking mountains

With lightening flashes –

Smiles of bliss.

She also did not try to translate words like ‘Agamas’, ‘Nigamas’, ‘Tantrasara’, ‘yogi’, ‘Saguna’ and ‘Nirguna’. Language of Naths, Siddhas and Yogis is also difficult to translate. Terminology associated with ‘Hathyoga’ has always been left untranslated in the Process of translation.

In each glorious lotus

muladhara, swadhisthana, manipura at the navel,

anahata, and vissuddha

You incarnate as letters

Vtos, b tol, dtoph, ktoth,

Sixteen vowels at the throat

And hand ks between the eyebrows.

(- Ramprasad Sen, translated by Rachel Mc Dermott) p. 251.

There are still hundreds of devotional poets whose works are still waiting to be translated faithfully. Schelling believes that “literary approaches to bhakti have been secluded in the domain of scholars and specialists, largely because the poems exist in local dialects , and there is little reward for poets to do committed work with the languages.” (Pg XXVI). There are lots of expectations from the translators to contribute fairly, faithfully and fulsomely. Indian devotional poetry has joined the ‘international community’ of eminent poets. On account of attentive and candid efforts of the translators such devotional poets writing in their local dialects ‘visit villages far from their own’.

## II

Ramanujan taught at the University of Chicago for more than three decades, where he served as the chairman of the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He received the Padma Shri in 1976 and a MacArthur Fellowship in 1983.

‘In recognition of the excellence of his translations, the South Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies (SAC) has established the A.K. Ramanujan Book Prize

for Translation. The award of \$1,000, is given every other year, and is intended to recognize and encourage translations from South Asian languages into English. Translations will be judged by their aesthetic quality and contributions to the field of South Asian studies. Special consideration will be given to innovative work that reaches a wide audience’.

Here is a record of the winners of the AAS South Asia Council (SAC) Ramanujan Book Prize for translations from South Asian languages into English: In year 2012 Christi A. Merrill received this award for *Chouboli and Other Stories by VijaydanDetha* (Fordham University Press in collaboration with Katha, 2010). In 2010, Steven P. Hopkins got this honour for *An Ornament for Jewels: Love Poems for the Lord of Gods by Vedantdesika* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Julius J. Lipner received it for *Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood* (Oxford University Press, 2005) in 2008. Clinton B. Seely’s book *The Slaying of Meghanada: A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2004) got this in 2006, Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman for *Classical Telegu Poetry: An Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2002) in 2004, George L. Hart and Hank Heifetz for *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom* (Columbia University Press, 2000) in 2002, Stuart Blackburn for *The Fatal Rumour: A Nineteenth Century Indian Novel* (Oxford University Press, 1998) in 2000, Patrick Olivelle for *Upanisads* (Oxford University Press, 1993) in 1998 and Rajagopal Parthasarathy for *Cilappatikaram of IlankoAtikal (The Tale of an Aklet): An Epic of South India* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993) in year 1996.

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan’s three volumes of poetry: *Speaking of Siva* (1973), *Hymns of the Drowning* (1981) and *Poems of Love and War* (1986) are three major milestones in the journey of translation of Indian devotional poetry. Following chart shows the diverse areas of A.K.Ramanujan’s translation of South Indian Bhakti poetry.

### A K Ramanujan’s Translation of Devotional Poetry

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	<hr/>	
<b>Tamil Poetry</b>		<b>Telugu</b>
<b>Poetry</b>		

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|**PADAM POETS**

A. Kshetrayya

B. Sarangapani

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**SAIVITE POETS****VAISHNAV POETS****VIRASAIVA POETS**

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|

A. Tipputtolar

(Alvar Poets)

(Heroes of Siva)

|

|

B. NakkirarNammalvar

A. DevaraDasimayya

C. Manikkavacakar

B. Allama Prabhu

C. Basavanna

D. Mahadeviyakka

Ramanujan translated Tipputtolar and poems devoted to Lord ‘Murukan’ ‘the Red One’, a war-god who at some later point in history becomes identified with Siva.’ About Murukan Ramanujan himself writes that : “Murukan and his motifs appear in the earliest Tamil poems. He is a god of the mountain... he is in the Red One, god of love, war and fertility.’

Red is the battifield

As he crushes

the demons,

red his arrow shafts,

red the tusks

of his elephants

He also translated Nakkirar, who is also considered the composer of ‘the earliest, long, full – fledged bhakti poem’ in India. As per Andrew Schelling ; “ The primal experience of bhakti that Ramanujan speaks of is one in which all the arts – melody, rhythm, dance, visualization, poetry – are ‘techniques of ecstasy’, a term coined by Mircea Eliade, referring to the art of shamanism. In most cultures we know of, dance has been central to shamanic ritual, and one of the primordial methods for drawing down the attention of the gods”.(p.4)

The possessed shaman with the spear  
wears wreaths of green leaves  
with aromatic nuts between them  
and beautiful long pepper,  
wild jasmine and the three-lobed  
white nightshade.

Manikkavacakar, a ninth – century Saivite poet has also been translated by Ramanujan. ‘Manikkavacakar was one of the poets of the Hindu bhakti revival and his work forms one volume of the Tirumurai, the key religious text of Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta. His work is a poetic expression of the joy of God-experience, the anguish of being separated from God.

This great saint who aided the spiritual and religious revival is revered as one of the four SamayakKuravarkai (Alvars) of Shaivism who took birth in the world to show the path of elevating oneself to the Supreme Shiva.’

(<http://www.arunachalasangraha.org/manikkavacakar.html#top>). Visceral force of Mannika’s imagery is noticeable in following lines:

Love pierced me  
like a nail  
driven into a green tree.  
Overflowing, I tossed  
like a sea,  
heart growing tender  
body shivering,  
while the world called me Demon!

Indian bhakti poets of South India can be divided into two groups: Nayannars or Saivite poets and Alvars or Vishnava poets. Meaning of word ‘Alvar’ is ‘one who has dived

deep' in the bhakti of the lord Vishnu. There were twelve Alvars among them Nammalvar is considered the greatest one. Ramanujan, the translator of Nammalvar calls these individual songs or poems of Nammalvaras 'forebears of later traditions of Vaishnava poetry... Characteristic pan – Indian themes find some of their first and finest expression in the poetry of the alvars'.

My Lord  
 who swept me away forever  
 into joy that day,  
 made me over into myself  
 and sang in Tamil  
 his own songs  
 through me:

Virasaiva poets started appearing in the tenth century. DevaraDasimayya's songs were devoted to 'Ramanatha' (Lord of Rama i.e. Shiva). 'Without doubt Dasimayya was an active proselytizer, setting the course for a strong Saivite period in the south. A.K.Ramanujan, his translator into English, notes that the legends point to the tenth century as a period of fierce conflict between Virasaiva devotees and competing traditions'. (Schelling p.29)

In the mother's womb  
 the child does not know  
 his mother's face  
 nor can she ever know  
 his face

The man in the world's illusion  
 does not know the Lord

nor the Lord him  
 Ramanatha.

Allama Prabhu wrote in eleventh century. Most of his poems carry the title Guhesvara, Lord of Caves, and "hold the strangest and the most paradoxical imagery in the Virasaiva tradition." (Schelling p.33). He writes, 'If mountains shiver in the cold/ with what/ will they wrap them? / If space go naked / with what / shall they cloth it?'. Allama Prabhu wrote in illogical, ambiguous, esoteric symbolic and cryptic language. 'Bedgaina' is a tamil

word for the 'lyrics that use occult imagery and illogical paradox. Allama composed riddles in form of poetry. As per Andrew Schelling: "These poems do not describe an experience of spiritual freedom, their intent is to provoke it. In this way stand close to mantra or spell, actively recovering one of poetry's archaic mandates: to contact the supernatural, the divine, or the powers hidden within."

A wilderness grew  
in the sky.  
In that wilderness  
a hunter.  
In the hunter's hands  
a deer.

The hunter will not die  
till the beast  
is killed.

Awareness is not easy  
is it  
O Lord of Caves?..

Basavanna is one of the most famous Virasaiva poets. Githa Hariharan in her famous novel *In Times of Siege* refers to Basava as a reformer poet, 'mystic, finance minister and political activist man of people and man of god'. She also writes that; 'The vachanas were created and spoken and sung in a people's language, in words that were no strangers to poor homes or dirty streets'.

The rich  
will make temples for Siva.  
What shall? ,  
a poor man,  
do?

My legs are pillars,  
the body the shrine,  
the head a cupola  
of gold.

Next big name in the series of Virasaiva poets is Mahadeviyakka, who has been dextrously translated by A.K.Ramanujan. Just like Mirabai and Antal she devoted her life to her favourite lord as a wife. She has been referred as a ‘love – child’ by Ramanujan. As per Ramanujan: “In her the phases of human love are metaphors for the phases of mystic ascent.’

Not one, not two, not three or four,  
but through eighty-four thousand vaginas  
have I come,  
I have come  
through unlikely worlds,  
guzzled on  
pleasure and pain.  
Whatever be  
all previous lives  
show me mercy  
this one day  
O lord  
white as jasmine.

Ksetrayya and Sarangapani are two other Telugu ‘Padama Poets’ who have been translated by A.K. Ramanujan, V. Narayana Rao and Davil Shulman in their collection *When God is a Customer: Telugu courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and others*. Ksetrayya belonged to the oral tradition. As a wandering bhakti poet he moved from temple to temple, in order to dedicate and perform his oral poetry. It is believed that he was court poet, composing for, and with the assumed persona of the sophisticated and cultured courtesans who performed before gods and kings’. In words of Schelling: “It is clear in Ksetrayya’s more explicit lyrics that the singer’s persona is a courtesan or even a more common prostitute, who speaks to the god as though he were a patron. Based on these lyrics, the translators titled their book of Telugu poetry *When God is a Customer*.”

I'm seeing you at last

It's been four or five months,

Muvva Gopala!

Last Night in my dream

You took shape before my eyes..

Sarangapani composed a number of padas , of them only two hundred survived. 'As a pada karta, Sarangapani deserves praise and recognition like Kshetrayya, whose name has come to be synonymous with padams... Like Kshetrayya, Sarangapani was also an ardent devotee of Sri Venugopala, the only difference being, if that can be called a difference, the former worshipped Him at Moova, the latter at Karvetinagaram.'

All those days he called you,

You were too proud.

Now you're circling

his house.

Are you in love,

after you're in past

the age of men?

Don't be coquettish now.

All those days Venugopala called you,

You were too proud.

Tamil devotional poetry exhibited the boldness of ritual and orthodoxy; denial of educated speech or stylized metrics; and a turning away from classical guidance in poetics. These intensely personal poems displayed strikingly modern or rather 'troubling imagery'. 'Bhakti, with its dozens of languages and hundreds of vital poets, its rebellious spirit, erotic

candour, and rough old use of the power of the spoken word, ought to draw more and more poets to its domains.’ (Schelling. pg.xxvii). Githa Hariharan in her novel *In Times of Siege* quotes the vachanas taken from A K Ramanujan’s translations of Basavanna in *Speaking of Siva*. She herself writes that, “In 1974 when I was a student in Bombay, a friend gave me a copy of Ramnujan’s book, and this inspiring translation of medieval vachanas was my introduction to the poetry of Basava. Now, more than twenty five years later, I find that my pleasure in these translations, and my gratitude for them, endures”. A.K. Ramanujan’s translation of Telugu and Tamil bhakti poetry is indubitably a venerated treasure that longs for the attention and care of its readers.

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