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PRINCIPLES FOR RENDERING INDIAN EPICS
AND *PURĀṆAS* INTO THE WESTERN LANGUAGES

Introductory

The Indian Epics and *Purāṇas*, it is well known, form a branch of the vast Hindu literature wherein are depicted various facets of the land and the people as they prevailed in early times. These texts, each extending to several thousands of verses in chaste Sanskrit, have, mostly, a central theme which, along with the several secondary adjuncts connected with it, directly, indirectly or remotely, deal with numerous aspects of the country and the people, including religion, society, customs and manners, values in life, morals, history, geography, the sciences and the like. Innumerable anecdotes, legends, allusions, precepts and hymns figure in these narratives woven round the main theme, and these enlivened the imagination of the people of the land and formulated their bent of thought and practical life. Couched in easy elegant verses, these taught without tears what the abstract religion prescribed and abstruse philosophical treatises expounded.

Modern Indian mind is capable of being inculcated, with ease, into the truths and teachings contained in the Epics and *Purāṇas* for the reason that it is ingrained with the inherited past and the culture of the land. With its inherent background of religious, social, philosophical and cultural strata it is able to understand and appreciate the presentations in the epics and the *Purāṇas* with little difficulty whatsoever.

ver. But not so is the non-Indian mind which has been nurtured in a different cultural background.

It is noteworthy that much of the spiritual, moral and social values embedded in the epics and purāṇas are of universal application. Herein lies the desideratum in rendering these texts into the languages of other climes for the benefit of the speakers of those tongues. In such renderings the teachings cannot be separated from the original setting and the nuances of the original language for that will impair the force of teachings. Hence arises the necessity of translating the Sanskrit texts in such a manner that the renderings would look natural in the recipient languages while, at the same time, they are faithful to their originals. While rendering into the English language the prime Sanskrit epic in 24,000 verses, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmiki, the present writer evolved certain principles and formulated certain methodologies so that the nuances of the original were preserved intact in the translation which therefore reads like a work in the English language itself. These principles and methodologies, which can be adapted in the case of other recipient languages also, are being set out here so that other scholars who are engaged in enterprises of a similar nature can adopt them with such modifications as circumstances may require.

The Perfect Translation

A perfect translation of a literary piece in one language into another language is said to be one in which the expression, content and thought in the former have been rendered in such a manner that the translation would seem to be an original piece in the recipient language. This is not very problematic when the vocabulary, mode of expression and thought currents in the languages are similar. The more the two languages are divergent, as between, the Indian languages and Western languages, special efforts require to be made in matters like phraseology, idioms, syntax and voice construction. The case would be complicated in the case of poetic texts wherein the word order would be exotic and which, more often than not, involve a lot of figures of speech, including alliteration, simile, metaphor and exagge-

ration, which and Indian reader can understand and appreciate easily, but not so the Westerner. Matters become confounded when puranic, religious and ritualistic allusion which are all intelligible to Indians without explanation. Worse is the case with the synonyms of personages. For instance, Rāghava, Kākutstha, Raghukulatilaka, Lakṣmaṇāgraja and Rāvaṇāntaka which Indians know as referring to the same person Rāma, and Vaidehī, Maithilī, Rāmapatnī and Janakātmajā refer to Sītā, but at which a Westerner would be confused and confounded.

It follows from the above that an Indianist-oriented mind which is well acquainted with and so can visualise the limitations of the Western mind would be best suited to translate an Indian work for the Westerner by devising methods to obviate the limitations of the western mind.

Translation of the Rāmāyaṇa

This recognition has spurred the present writer to take up the translation of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* into English and identify methodologies as envisaged above and go ahead with the work of its translation with the due application of those methodologies. The present paper enunciates those methodologies so that other scholars also who have undertaken similar work can make use of those practices.

In the case of a good English translation of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* what is required is a version which will appear to be an original work in English besides possessing fidelity to the original and clarity of sense at first sight. The other qualities that would be expected include:

- i. The use of good idiomatic English, simple and definitive, not rough and jarring.
- ii. Being as literal as possible, with word to word, expression to expression and idea to idea correspondence, all suited to the recipient language, but losing neither the spirit of the original nor the English idiom.
- iii. Effectiveness in conveying the nuances of the original text.
- iv. A proper portrayal of the moods and sentiments expressed in the original in different contexts.

v. The translation should not be laboured, longwinded, weighty and boring, for, if so, it will lose charm and grace.

vi. The rule of proximity should be maintained in that adjectives precede the words qualified and adverbs follow the verbs as far as possible and *dūrānvaya* is avoided.

vii. Tautology is avoided by the use of synonyms and variations in the placement of the words in the sentence.

Analysis of the factors involved

In order to secure the above-said effects in the presentation of the nuances involved special care has to be bestowed on the following:

Verbs, Adverbs and Adjectives.

Common nouns, compound words and gender of pronouns.

Voice, active and passive.

Number, singular, dual and plural.

Expression, direct and indirect.

Appellation, personal and otherwise.

Figures of speech including simile metaphor, hyperbole, double entendre.

Synonyms which are mostly meaningful and characteristic.

Explanation

Simple on the face of it, the significance of the above might be demonstrated by means of a few examples.

1. Verbs. For the simple Sanskrit verbal *uvāca* "said" use appropriately the English forms asked, replied, observed, queried, remarked, declared, questioned, suggested, exclaimed, whispered, roared, repeated, added, uttered, affirmed, spoke, mentioned, questioned, dictated, harangued, addressed, ranted and proclaimed as would suit the context and give a pen-picture of the scene.

2. Adverbs. To cite an example, translate the adverb *śanaih*, "slowly" by such words as leisurely, lazily, sluggishly, hesitatingly, reluctantly, cautiously and haltingly to suit the context and make the translation impressive.

3. Adjectives. Use crisp adjectives where translations would be jarring. For example use “truthful” for *satyavādin* which would literally mean “one who speaks the truth”, “courageous” for “one who is full of courage”, “still-born” for one who was dead when born, “formidable” for “one could not be attacked” and “dilemma” for “something which is difficult to decide”.

4. Compound words. Use compound words for translating descriptive expressions like “pot-bellied” for “one with a swelling belly”, “well-read” for “one who had studied well” and “milk-maid” for “one who milks cows”.

5. Gender of nouns and pronouns. In Sanskrit gender of words is often determined by grammar and usage. For example *kalatram* “wife” is neuter while *dhanuḥ* “bow” is masculine, while in English gender follows common sense. The translation has to be done taking note of this fact.

6. Voice, active and passive. In the translation one for the other can be used whichever reads better.

7. Number, singular, dual and plural. Since the dual is not recognised in English grammar, the words “two” or “pair” is to be used to denote dual or the sense is allowed to be understood from the context. For example *tau kumārau*, “the two princes”, *tau pakṣinau*, “the pair of birds” and *tau Rāmalakṣmaṇau*, “Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa”.

8. Expression, direct and indirect. While the form of the original is to be preferred, when it does not suit the English idiom the form can be reversed. For example: *gamyatām ity uvāca rāmaḥ* is better translated “Rāma gave them leave” than “Rāma said «go»”.

9. Appellation. In accosting others appellations current in English and contextual are to be preferred for a literal translation. Thus “dear” would translate the Sanskrit *vatsa* used to accost children, and *dayita* meaning “wife”.

10. Figures of speech. Here, use words current in English to suit the context. For example, for simile, words such as looked like or looked alike, similar to, as if, akin to, can be used. The other figures of speech can also be translated according to the context.

11. Proper nouns. Sanskrit Proper nouns pose a problem in the matter of translation, since most of the names are meaningful, referring to some aspect of the person connoted. The *Rāmāyaṇa* being an

epic wherein exploits of heroes are narrated their names occur several times, quite often in their different synonyms based on their different characteristics. Thus Rāma is referred to as Raghunandana, Sītāpati, Rāmacandra, Dāśarathī, Kākutstha, Kausalyātanaya, Lakṣmaṇāgraja, Jānakijāni, Daśarathanandana, Daśamukhāntaka and Rāmabhadrā. Sītā is referred to by the names Vaidehī, Jānakī, Rāmāpatnī Videhātmaajā, Mauthilī and Janakatanayā. Hanumān is referred to by such names as Māruti, Añjanāsuta, Pavanatanaya, Vāyuputra, Āñjaneya, Sugrīvasakhā, Akṣahantā and Vātātmaja. Every other character in the epic is referred to by more than one name. The reason for this is that *Rāmāyaṇa* being a work in verse the frequently occurring names had to be fitted into the verses according to metre. It might not be difficult for an Indian who has the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in his blood to identify correctly this plethora of synonyms for the several characters. But they will cause confusion confounded in a non-Indian.

The solution lies in the translator adopting one name of each character as the base and use it wherever the person is referred to by his different synonyms. The etymological meanings can also be given alongside not within brackets, but alongside as an adjunct. Thus for Dāśarathī, the translation would be “Rāma, son of Daśaratha”, for Videhātmaajā, “Sītā daughter of the king of Videha” and for Vāyuputra, “Son of the Wind-god”. As the translation progresses, when the translator feels that the synonyms have become familiar to the reader this practice might gradually be dropped.

Among still other matters that could be kept in view are:

12. Do not resort to any explanation in the translation. A reader might be expected to understand the idea involved from the translated word and the context.

13. Use short expressions for long ones, words for phrases and phrases for clauses. If the style and context accept them this procedure would make the translation crisp and readable.

14. Frame sentences variedly. The order of the words need not always be subject-object-verb. For example: “«Shoot», ordered Rāma” would read better than “Rāma said «shoot»”; which would be the literal translation.

15. Prefer direct speech to the indirect when that would be more effective.

16. Have a uniform translation, may be with minor variations, for the self-same terms. This should be the case in terms of address and technical, philosophical and religious terms.

17. A full-fledged Glossary should be provided giving the meanings of the terms, proper nouns and the like along with the etymology of the words, as needed.

18. Footnotes are better avoided. Their purpose would be served by the Glossary.

19. For the benefit of the readers it would be necessary to provide a brief account of the epic in the beginning of the translation.

20. A detailed note on the prevalence of the epic in India and outside India mentioning other translations and works based on the epic in the form of abridgements, poems, prose and drama as also the changes effected in the main story, especially in its South-East Asian versions and China and Japan, would form an instructive Appendix to the translation.

A specimen translation

In order to demonstrate the effect on the application of the principles enunciated above in the *Rāmāyaṇa* might be set out the following table quoting an existing translation and applying the methodologies suggested above.

Text	Existing Translation	Present Translation
<i>ko nv asmin sāmprataṃ loke guṇavān</i>	who among the living in the world today is in the possession of vir- tue	who in the world today is virtuous
<i>vīryavān</i>	equipped with valour	valorous
<i>dharmajñāś ca</i>	who is also the knower of dharma	righteous
<i>kṛtajñāś ca</i>	who also knows gratitu- de	grateful
<i>satyavākya</i>	whose speaks the truth	truthful
<i>dr̥ḍhavrataḥ</i>	has taken the vow of firmness	firm in resolve
<i>cāritreṇa ca ko yuktaḥ</i>	endowed with good con- duct	of good character
<i>sarvabhūtahite rataḥ</i>	interested in the good of all beings	devoted to the world's welfare
<i>vidvān</i>	a scholar	scholarly
<i>samarthaś ca</i>	also with skill	skilful
<i>ekapriyadarśanaḥ</i>	who appears lovable	pleasing to see
<i>ātmavān</i>	with great courage	courageous
<i>jitakrodhaḥ</i>	one who has conquered anger	controller of anger
<i>dyutimān</i>	one who is resplendent	resplendent
<i>anasūyakaḥ</i>	one who has no enemy	nonenvious
<i>kasya bibhyati devāś ca jātaroṣasya saṃyuge</i>	one whom even the gods fear when he is angry during battle	frightening even to the gods in the battlefield when angry