

Towards a Humane Realization of the ‘Child’: A Study through Bira Kishore Parhi’s Poems in Translation

Madhumita Nayak

Abstract

This proposal is part of a larger issue; that of looking at the prospect of dismantling the human cultural constructs such as adult policy, adult theorizing interests over that of the children who are synonymous with that of nature. It seeks to vindicate the idea of social, communal harmony and secularism by exploring a few Odia poems written initially for children, sung and read in school assemblies, cultural events in order to sensitize the young brains in a more effective manner than that of adult preaching. It attempts to investigate the data in developing suitable material in the direction of reframing literature pedagogy and curriculum. The poems are translated retaining the spirit of the original texts as far as possible. They provide a strong literary, cultural merit and a promise of strengthening the integral growth of the children in particular and human species in general with its environment. The poems are written by Bira Kishore Parhi, litterateur, social reformer, writer, from Odisha with an illustrious career in teaching with the values of Utkalamani Gopabandhu Das’s Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya as his ideal. An unassuming personality, Parhi possessed tremendous will power with his undaunted mission of social reform through his writing. His literary output was not separated from his act of nation building in the form of student capital. The school for him was an extension of Mahatma Gandhi’s vision of self-reliance, non-violence and cleanliness. He started a hand written magazine *Gaanbhuin* (1950-2010) that featured his inimitable columns on agriculture, education, women empowerment, creative writing and political views.

Keywords: Culture, Odia Poetry, Pedagogy, Sensitisation, Translation

Introduction

Bira Kishore Parhi’s poems, essays and plays displayed a consistent effort in sensitizing people of the noble goal of equality bringing an end to the evils of untouchability and social hierarchy. He continued his lifelong pursuit of putting in place an art that sustains the native, colloquial tongue simultaneously evoking a sense of empathy with the downtrodden and marginalized. He is one of the

leading figures in children's literature in Odisha and was honoured with the Odisha Sahitya Akademy award in 2003 apart from plenty of other recognitions from respectable literary societies. Recently his portrait was unveiled at Sri Ram Chandra Bhawan, Cuttack by the initiatives of Utkala Sahitya Samaj.

Translation acts as a medium of exchange between two cultures developing a sort of intimacy and assigning the translator the role of a cultural guide. In every possible way by translating, a translator is adding to the creative world of literature. Translating poetry is not so privileged in comparison to prose in one count that prose is provided with some leverage to rely on the lexical. But the unprivileged translator of poetry has in fact this fortune of translating the lexical and refining the formal.

Aaron Coleman is of the opinion that poetry is as much a thing of words as it is a thing of sound (Bowman). When a translator translates a text, he takes a big risk. The risk of losing the soul and intention of the poet in translation is high but as David Damrosch puts it while addressing the issue of translation:

...“what is lost and what is gained” that “Read intelligently, an excellent translation can be seen as an expansive transformation of the original, a concrete manifestation of cultural exchange and a new stage in a work's life as it moves from its first home out into the world.”
(Damrosch 66)

One can hence say that it is more about the rendering and the temperament of the translator which goes same for the original poet. While looking for an exchange of meaning, the translator of poetry keeps the formal finish ahead of meaning in order to strike the right message in terms of rhyme, rhythm, pace and syllabic measures. The author of prose and its translator are free from anxiety of this formal, decorative fine tuning since the reader looks for more or less factual information. On the other hand, if the poetry at hand is not a part of the modern, matter-of-fact writing with some day-to-day events or representative, realistic expression, it will fail attempting a translation of equivalent. Rather it would transcend the realm of the words and share the essence of tone.

The emphasis is on this that the words used in poetry are already distant from their conceptual and denotative meaning. So, in a way they are multidimensional and they need each other to maintain the flow of the poetry. In other words, they are consciously removed from a familiarity with their usual meaning. Once the translator tries to match it for the target audience, he/she

transforms that essence into an experience that can stand on its own even away from the ambit of the original expression.

Despite the multi lingual nature of India, what binds the culture is the regional literature. One cannot deny that it is the regional literature that has a major contribution in fostering national identity, consciousness and culture. And hence by providing data from the native Odia poetry and its translation by applying the above parameters we would see how far these claims look convincing.

The argument this paper holds is that a body of writing from the native, provincial space in a language of the common people carries promise of a moral, spiritual and holistic growth of the little children. More so, when a technology driven society has robbed our young minds of their close affinity with the landscape, the dust and dirt of the surrounding resulting in a complete disconnect between them and the animating life around. These texts serve as suitable material for generating a sensitive appreciation of nature and empathy in them. The poems invariably appeal children both from the country and that of the city by their soothing and lyrical tone while addressing the adult sensibility which seems to create a space for social awareness during a time that has witnessed inequality and cut-throat competition in the material world.

I would first like to bring attention to the page below; the scanned copy of the first page of one of the editions of *Gaan Bhuin*, the magazine Parhi published and edited over a span of fifty years where the author visualizes his vocation as surrender to this earth:

Saluting the dust
I am the village poet
I am the bard of the dust
This is my mother modest
My life's lot
This is what shows me, shines me, writes my song
This is my festive bed, her field my womb
Her music, boughs magic, fruits that I love
Under her shade, equally made, life's courses serve
Everyone here potent, pure, no one is less
Birds and barns, Bhagabat, banyan, stand here and bless. (Trans.
Parhi A)

The Odia original appears below.

I have selected seven more poems here with set goals; the first remembering Baji Raut, the child from an Odisha village who dared the British officers in pre-independence India, the next three with an aim of sensitizing young children with the values of fellow feeling, compassion, generosity, egalitarianism, communal harmony and unity. The fifth and sixth are selected from the ones he wrote as prayer songs in school assembly. We can find out how the poems cherish the ideals of rejoicing in the earth and natural surroundings, celebrating the soil, river and mundane life before us rather than running after imaginary gods and goddesses. The values of tolerance, empathy and social equality embedded in these songs have inspired and influenced generations of children more than the contemporary ideology driven world and its prescriptive preaching. And the seventh, synonymous with our dream as a nation is a song that impressed generations of school going children in villages unlike the modern-day public-school products. There are the usual limitations of translating the tone and tenor of such poetry. The Odia original of the first four poems are taken from Parhi's *Kunumuni Kabita* published in 1962 under support from Odisha Sishu Sahitya Committee and the Government of Odisha, the next two from *Dipatie Hoi* published in 1995 (republished by *Utkala Sahitya Samaja* in 2018) and the last one is the scanned copy of author's handwritten copy recovered recently.

There was a little bud
There was a little boy like you and me
In his twelfth year
He was not a flower yet a bud mere
Had still time to blossom and smile
Bracing odd and braving chest thought for a while
Rain filled and stormy the night was deep dark
Brahmani was furious roaring its current black
The soldiers called up, hey, bring your boat swine
'I am loyal to my king, ferrying you is insult mine
I will not bring you ashore, he shouted bold
Bullets rained but he laughed proud
A boy like you and me who lived twelve years
Shot at and blood bath, fought with cheers

Brahmani today sings him as heroic tale

Come my sons, lay down life, runs her trail. (Trans. Parhi A)

A sense of patriotism is evoked in the heart of every child who would read this poem. This is also the case with an adult who will go a step further in analysing the history associated with Baji Raut, a young boy from a princely state of Odisha in colonial India who refused to take the British soldiers ashore and creating awareness among the children with whom they deal at home and outside. Parhi's approach towards the historical theme is not charged with ideology but speaks to the malleable minds of his child readers with simplicity. Through this ballad of patriotism, courage and conviction, Parhi is rewriting the romantic idea of knighthood as seen in the poems of Scott in terms of Odia identity.

Little Child's Quest

In our school studies a little child

Torn shirt, dirty his pant to hide

Born of poor father from poor village

Single pair he comes in all the days

Neither his dresses change in festive game

Nor he gets money to clean the same

How can he buy a book, pen or paper, ink

Where can he read without light or wick

He doesn't know to read the stack

Coming daily to school and sitting back

One day the officer from the town

Came and asked questions up and down

Looking at the boy asked his plight

Answered he in eyes with tears bright

Understood the Sahib his eyes moist

Holding him in lap said "you my son lost"

I shall bring you book and dress

You'll read well and become fresh

Since then, came he, tidy and shine.

Smiled ever, a gem fine. (Trans. Parhi A)

Parhi's optimism is apparent in this poem about hopes and desires of an innocent child. The poem relies on simple diction and intense pathos to create a sense of gratitude and humility in its readers. The Gandhian notion of minimalism is all-pervading in the narrative.

Mansion and the Shack (*Kotha O Kudia*)

Once, a mansion
Sat upon and pondered
I'm born and pampered
Amidst the rich,
Neat and clean, white muslin
Never facing a breach
Sat and cheered, in cities near
Brought up by the wealthy,
Witty and wise, leaders rise
On my knees
Came to my sight –
Gold, silver, Money in packets
Feasting with plenty, music in baskets
Rickshaws, motor cars in fleet
Halted at my feet
No one else in the state
Would be enjoying my fate
So much happiness that comes to me
Brooding over this, the mansion turned in glee
Stared at the village hut about to bend and flee
Called aloud as witness
Narrating his greater happiness
The muddy, earthen hut
Listened all in short
Although very small and timid
Devoid of fear in his mind

Fluttering her palm leaf roof plates
She smiled and began to answer the threats,
Have not seen gold, money or motor car
Whiten my face with lime or hold strong by huge cement pillar
Grew among soil, stick and straw
Standing firm in flood, cyclone raw
Am not proud of riches like you
Brick is made of soil that I know
Under the shade of dense trees that you see
Down the soiled village I am free
Do you find pleasure, treasure than we? (*Kotha O Kudia*)

Poems like “Mansion and the Shack” expose the superficial divides which corrode the society and aim towards eliminating them. Parhi attempts to sensitize children about the importance of inclusivity beyond matters of class and caste, country and city. The poem shows urban life as lacking in humility and true community feeling as opposed to the village which has the power to bring fundamental change in the society at grass-root level.

Festival comes for all Children (*Sabu Pilankara Paraba Ase*)
All children in country ours
Some smart some looking trash
Eating chapatti or watery rice
Some naked some dressed in price
Some stay in capital lot
Or spending time in cottage hut
For all children festival comes
Once a year in autumn rush
Every home today tunes applause
Everywhere the sounds buzz
All the children dress afresh
Every home has cakes no less
Devi Durga will come in ride

School, study works pushed aside
Chatashali book left behind
Kids' heart is heaven's kind
For Devi's Darshan run our feet
Neither cane nor teacher's threat
All our country's children same
Dussehra comes for your game
To your smile and heart's play
All festivals visit the day
Heaven's queen, mother goddess
To see you happy and shower bless
You all my son and daughter
Declares Devi, your mother
No one is poor or rich
Mother's love share of each
To paint a smile in children mine
I come today being divine. (*Sabu Pilankara Paraba Ase*)

One of the most important poems in Parhi's oeuvre, it makes a statement about the universal nature of nature as opposed to the ways it has been confined in practice. Communal harmony is the key concern of the poem and festivals across religions serve as the medium to foster unity in diversity which was one of the most important aspects of Indian national identity during Parhi's time.

Light, Darkness
Light, darkness, rain, storm, spring and summer
All these are your gifts, where you are evident
Hills, forest, deserts, spring, rivers and the soft brown grass
Your sublime sweet smile visits them
You have given the small eyes to see your there
I shall sing your soothing song in my baby like lips in return
I shall not ask for jewels and royal attire, neither material riches
My heart and spirit shall lie on the paths of truth and service

indraprasth

In obeisance to the righteous acts
I would be blessed by your limitless compassion and inspiration every day
And shall make my life a wick to spread light everywhere
Let the flower of my soul be a part of your huge stream of universal love
This is what I wish and pray you for, an innocent kid that I am. (*Sabu Pilankara Paraba Ase*)

Give me language of truth and love
Someone tells that you are in Baikuntha, some say, in Kailash
I don't 'have the power to go there to worship
I see you every day in my dusty, earthy *Maakola*
I can see and feel your smiles in my yard's small grass and flowers
Riding your chariot of knowledge
You come to this earth every day in sun and shower
Storm and winter sing your song of life
Whatever be the suffering and adversity this life
Give me strength to bear them and serve society like the flowing fountain.
Give me hope to wade through fear and defeat
Give me the language to adore the mother and our motherland. (*Sabu Pilankara Paraba Ase*)

The above two poems used to be sung as prayer songs in school assemblies due to their secular approach towards religion. In the guise of religious hymns, the poems promote a deep appreciation for the natural environment and represent nature as the one true religion. This pantheism is woven deeply into the fabric of Odia identity and forms an important aspect of how Odia people connect with the divine.

We Are the New Age Children
We are new age children
Shall build up this world anew
One day, this earth shall smile in our hands
By golden scythe we shall reap golden paddy

When our land will smile amidst its golden fields
We shall fly to the moon and play
Shall tell our names and
Inform that our mother earth has sent us
We shall float by *Boita* to Java, Baali
From Paradeepa on sea
The deep water will be our saviour
To come back safe carrying pearls

We shall climb the Himalaya peak
Unfurl our flag, we tigers not meek
Shocking the neighbour China's trick

We will not attend to untruth or bribe
We shall not bother about the high-low jibe
Smearing love in heart
We will embrace each other till we last

Today's buds that we are
Shall be blooming tomorrow
And lend our lives for earth
The world shall smile with us
And India shall be the site of
Promise for whole universe. (*Sabu Pilankara Paraba Ase*)

The poem written way back in 1957 to be recited on the occasion of Children's Day inspired and motivated young children while India was still on its arduous task of developing as a nation looking forward to consolidating its economic and political stability. It anticipates man stepping into the surface of the moon, achieve the fruits of green revolution, *sunadhanakerikeraamejibukaati re*, glamourises Odisha's ancient glory, *ratanamanikaghenileutibanaa re*, ignites in us the patriotic spirit, *eimati maa pain debu ama mula re* and so on. The present border crisis reminds us how the author reflected upon the continual threats of China and

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infused confidence among kids, *maa ramahatapaainhebubirabeshare, Chainakuchamakaidebubaghachhua re*. But nowhere any political or social ambition gets precedence over its lyrical and lucid diction. The imaginative splendour Parhi weaves in course of his word play for children at an impressionable age is peerless: *Aamejibukhelikhelisaragakuudi, janhamamunagana re khelibubagudi*.

In fact, every child looks at the moon with an aspiration to catch it and the Indian imagination has taught him/her of this bonding to be extremely personal. Then, this India is the site of salvation for the whole world (*E Bharata heba sara Jagatarasaha re*) categorically leads the reader towards a form of nationalism that is accommodative and not exclusivist.

Conclusion

The paper due to its limited scope has only been able to initiate a discussion on Odia children's poetry in translation through select poems of Bira Kishore Parhi. Much remains to be unearthed from Parhi's oeuvre whose significance towards understanding contemporary Odia society cannot be overstated. Parhi's idea of childhood has a universal appeal across ages and cultures. His poems provide readers with a glimpse of the identity of the Odia child and its influence on the overall Odia sensibility. Wordsworth, in his poem "The Rainbow" states, "The Child is the father of the Man." Parhi's way of approaching childhood is similar in that he does not dismiss children as ineligible to be citizens of the society but rather looks at them as the genesis of a civilization. Hence, the themes of secularism, communal harmony and inclusivity are of paramount importance when featuring in poetry for children and their careful study a necessary addition to children's literature studies.

Notes

1. Baikuntha-Abode of Vishnu
2. Kailash-Abode of Shiva
3. Maakola-Mother's lap
4. *Boita*-A legendary country boat, a heritage of Odisha

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