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At Language's Edge

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Panel: At Language's Edge

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Vivek SHANBHAG

At Language's Edge

In the part of India that I come from, most people know at least three languages. I know four, thanks to the linguistic diversity of the country. My mother tongue is Konkani, but I write in a language called Kannada. The mother tongue of many of the great writers of my language is not Kannada. It is important to know that writing in a language that is not one's mother tongue happens naturally and effortlessly. The mother tongue need not be the language in which one writes.

In my everyday life, I translate all the time. This is how the several worlds around me interact with each other. While writing, many times I translate from Konkani to Kannada and English to Kannada. For example, many experiences took place in my mother tongue, so in order to write about them in another language, I must translate this experience. Fortunately, I am not conscious of this process, or else I would not be able to write a word! For instance, if I have to recollect a conversation from my childhood, I don't translate it word by word. If I become very conscious I become a translator, and I am not a translator. So, I must recreate that experience in Kannada.

With every language comes a new world, a different ethos and system of values, and a different way of perceiving this world. Moving across three languages has deeply influenced my language structure, the phrases I use, and so on. In the process, my literary language has developed its own flavour.

Despite knowing several languages, why did I choose to write fiction in Kannada? My deep engagement with this language is such that I had no choice. Kannada is the language through which literature came to me. To write fiction, one needs to be involved intensely with the language and have deep emotional and intellectual ties to it. Through the language, a writer seeks to touch and understand unknown dimensions of life. Sound and rhythm become important in capturing an experience in its entirety. I'm looking for a depth that is unknown to me, so it is a humbling and gratifying experience when a reader or a critic discovers many layers and insights of a creative work. Writing is a process that finds its fruit only when it is understood by someone else. We do it together.

In recent years, I have actively participated in the translations of my own work into English. This has made me aware of the strengths and limitations of my writing like never before. There are so many aspects that a writer takes for granted while writing in a specific language, most of which will not be available in another. This is a huge challenge that raises the inevitable question: for whom do we write? It makes one admire the literature that has survived through many centuries, crossing different cultural contexts and language barriers. I feel this awareness makes one strive for that bareness in some stories that is very pure and is closest to human nature.

I believe translation is not about bringing the meaning of every sentence of the original into another language. It is to bring what is unsaid in a work from one language into another. Words have memories and have a history of their own. There are no two words of the same meaning. Therefore, to recreate this unsaid in another language, one needs to understand what goes into making the original: what it takes to dismantle and rebuild into another language. Being involved in the translation of my work has made me aware of my writing abilities and shortcomings. I feel it is an opportunity that a writer must explore to re-look at her or his own creative process.