Language and Culture: a Translator's Perspective

Marian Maddern

I first met Soumyen Mukherjee about a quarter of a century ago. I was then doing postgraduate work, in the Indian Studies Department that Melbourne University used to have, on the nature of Bengali and the process of literary translation from it into English. Dr Mukherjee was looking for a translator for a project he had in mind: a collection of essays by the great nineteenth-century Bengali novelist and essayist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. My teacher and supervisor, Professor Sibnarayan Ray, thinking that I might be interested in such a project (as I was), introduced me to Dr Mukherjee—and off and on we have been collaborating ever since: first on that initial project, and more recently on translating a volume of three short novels by Bankim Chandra.

Literary translation is an activity that has been seen by different people as problematic in all sorts of ways, though this has never discouraged people from engaging in it and other people from reading its results. Rather than discuss theories of translation I have presented here some of my experiences in literary translation—experiences which have thrown light on certain aspects of the languages and cultures concerned, or have highlighted similarities and differences between them or, indeed, have thrown into relief certain intransigences, certain blind spots, as I peered into Bengali and its literature.

To 'learn' another language (however impossible it may be to do this completely) is to find a whole new area of cultural constructs opened (at least partially) to one's enquiring eye. And the very act of seeing these constructs of a different language and culture fosters a new awareness of one's own language and its constructs. Often small, specific examples can illuminate or bring home general ideas in very clear-cut

ways. Bengali is a member of the (large) Indo-European family of languages as is English. We often read about how cognate words in the two languages (and their predecessors) demonstrate their common ancestry. But to come across in a general Bengali-English dictionary entries such as:

' "tri"—(1) n. three (2) a. & in comp. three, tri- ... "tripad"—n. (math.) a tripod' [the derivation here is from the Sanskrit "tri" = three, and "pada" = foot], and

' "ma"—(1) n. mother; mamma, mama, ma', and

' "matri"—n. (in comp.) mother' (i.e., matri-)

is to feel this common ancestry with a new force. (The dictionary in question is the Samsad Bengali-English dictionary, roughly the size of the Concise Oxford.) On the other hand, there are fascinating divergences. Both English and Bengali have words which are made up of a combination of a negative and a word for 'one'—in English, 'none', in Bengali, "anek" (made up of the privative prefix "a-", from Sanskrit and cognate with the Greek privative 'a-', plus "ek" = 'one'). The English word, as we all know, means 'not one', and has a negative force, indicating no example of, not any, nothing. But the Bengali word, also meaning 'not one', equally logically, yet differently, indicates 'many'. (Interestingly, Bengali has no single word for the meaning of the English word 'none', instead constructions such as 'anything ... not', 'anyone ... not' are used.

The Bengali words quoted here have been transliterated (enclosed in double quotation marks): Bengali and English use different scripts. A comparison of the two script systems could in itself go on for quite a long and fascinating time, but I shall restrict myself here to just a few comments. Bengali uses no capitals. This means that, among other things, proper names are not marked off from other words in any way. Also, many Bengali personal names are words with meanings. This is not just in the sense that they derive from words with meaning in other languages, as is the case with English names such as Helen (Greek), Jeremy (Hebrew), Vera (Russian), Lawrence (Latin), or that they are (sometimes modified) forms of words from an earlier stage in the language, as is the case with such English names as Edgar and Harold (Old English), but in the sense that they, or the individual words they are made up of, are ordinary words. Thus the name "Charulata" is "charu" = 'graceful' plus "lata"= 'a creeper, a climbing plant'; the name

"Ashok(a)" means 'free of grief'; and the name "Bankim Chandra" means 'curved moon'—and so on. But all this can mean certain pitfalls in certain contexts. I well remember the experience, in the early days of my acquaintance with Bengali, of working on a sentence which seemed to be about a thick green, or deep-green, pandit—only to realise from the dictionary that 'deep-green', or 'dark-complexioned', an appellation of Krishna, was actually the pandit's name.

This kind of experience is salutary, and keeps one humble—but there is another kind of experience which can be equally salutary, and can keep one humble in almost an opposite way. As one continues to learn, always aware that there is more to learn, one begins to feel in an inarticulate way that total knowledge of Bengali is not only what is expected of the translator, but that it is what every educated, literary-minded Bengali has. As well as not using capitals, Bengali has not used script modifiers such as italics to carry meaning. This means that (in all but very recent printed Bengali) there is no marking off of foreign language words. A couple of years ago I was translating a poem by a contemporary Bengali poet, a poem which used, as so many contemporary poems do, fairly elliptical combinations of images. One line in particular baffled me, and I asked a Bengali friend, a poet and essayist living in Bengal, for help. My friend suggested, though without certainty, that the line referred to the return in popularity of a popular singer by the name of Pyaralal. But the poet herself later explained to me that the line referred to the return in popularity of the parallel cut in trouser styles. She had used the English word 'parallel', and this is spelled in Bengali as "pyaralal". None of us, after all, know even our own language completely. (Not all of us, for example, know that 'none' in English can take a plural verb ... Bengali, interestingly, does not distinguish singular and plural in any of its verb forms, but uses the one form for both singular and plural subjects.)

This last experience was also an example of a case where questions could and did elicit understandable answers. But this, too, is not always so. (Indeed, the belief that gaps in understanding can of course always be filled in by research and the asking of questions is probably a specific culture-linked belief in itself.) I remember many years ago working on a chapter (in my doctoral thesis on the structure and grammar of Bengali) on Bengali systems of number and measurement. As I worked, the outlines of a particular gap became clear: in the matter of quantities,

fractions and mixed numbers, it was obvious enough how formal or written Bengali expressed things like 'one-sixth', 'two and one-sixth', 'two yards' and 'one-sixth of a yard'. But, apart from a construction which my sources assured me was only used in fairly rough, colloquial speech, there seemed to be no way of saying 'two and one-sixth yards'. I tried to put this difficulty to two educated Bengalis. After a certain amount of seeming non-communication, I finally asked, 'Well, how would *you* ask for two and one sixth yards of cloth?' One of them shrugged amiably; the other replied, 'I would ask for three yards of cloth.' Yet a third Bengali speaker, some time later, said, much struck, that he had never before realised it, but that as far as he could see, there was a real gap in the language here—which is an interesting comment in itself.

The transliteration of English words or names into Bengali can present pitfalls of different kinds. In the case of the confusion between "Pyaralal" and 'parallel' there were two factors operating: the confusion about whether the word was a name or not, and the confusion about whether the word was of foreign origin or not. But either one of these is enough in itself to produce errors. Not so long ago, I managed to misread a couple of famous English writers as classical Sanskrit poets: a character in a novel, discussing in a letter the nature of different kinds of love, says that 'Kalidasa, Vayarana, Jayadeva' are the poets of one kind of love, and 'Shekshapiyara, Valmiki' are the poets of another kind. Misled by the context, and the other names in the lists, and aware that my knowledge of Sanskrit authors is far from complete, I failed to recognise the second and fourth of these names as Byron and Shakespeare.

Novels offer their own windows into culture. The same nineteenth-century novel, Bankim Chandra's *The Poison Tree*, in which those lists of writers occur, has as a central element of its plot the evil results of the ill-considered marriage of the male protagonist with a young widow. The man is married already—but it is not bigamy which constitutes the moral issue here so much as widow-remarriage, which had been socially unacceptable in Hindu society for centuries (though not specifically forbidden by any religious texts or scriptures), and which social reformers were newly debating and questioning. 'Other times, other customs'—or, as a Bengali proverb has it, 'Customs differ in different countries/regions'.

The kind of 'traditional wisdom' expressed in proverbs offers another set of examples of intriguing similarities and differences: similarities and differences in images, messages and values. Bengali has a rich collection of proverbs, many of them still in vigorous use. The poem mentioned earlier, in the course of forthrightly addressing thoroughly contemporary issues such as the overuse of tranquillisers and the existence of test-tube babies, refers to two different traditional proverbs in its eighteen lines. One line runs 'Nine of us could not sit on a tamarind leaf'—a reference to a proverb which says 'Nine good people can sit on a tamarind leaf': that is, good people are quiet enough, well-behaved enough for a number of them to be able to fit without trouble into a small space. And another line runs 'We ginger-sellers *do* know the news of the ships'—a reference to a proverb which says 'Why should ginger-sellers know the news of ships': that is, don't expect people to know of things beyond their own business; or even, people should stick to their own business. (The quoted lines are from my as yet unpublished translation of a poem by Gita Chattopadhyay.)

Some Bengali proverbs and sayings are pretty much direct equivalents of some English ones, in both images and meanings: for example, 'playing with fire', 'If there's a wish/will there's the means', and 'a thunderbolt with no cloud' (a bolt from the blue). Others have messages similar to some English ones, but express these in different images, for example, 'An uncle with only one eye is better than no uncle at all' (Half a loaf is better than no bread); or 'If he/she/they get/s to sit, he/she/they want/s to lie down' (Give him an inch and he'll take an ell); or 'If he/she/they doesn't/don't know how to dance, the courtyard is at fault' (A bad workman blames his tools). Bengali, as well as not having separate forms for plural and singular verbs, has no gendered pronouns, and often omits pronouns anyway. Sometimes, though, a seeming similarity can be misleading: 'It doesn't rain as much as it thunders' might suggest 'His bark is worse than his bite', but this would be to ignore (conditioned by English rather than Australian images?) the effect of a climate in which the rains are eagerly awaited: a nearer equivalent would usually be 'Much cry but little wool', or in a fuller form of the proverb, 'Great cry and little wool, as the Devil said when he sheared the hogs'. (This saying, derived from a medieval English miracle play, is known to Bengali writers of 'Teach Yourself Bengali' books, but, I find, unknown to most of my Australian friends

and colleagues.) We could note here, too, the Bengali expression 'Water/ rain without clouds', referring to an unexpected good or benefit.

Other proverbs again translate easily enough, but may need a degree of explanation: 'On whose shoulders are there two heads?' means, more or less, Who has a head to spare? Who can afford to take this risk? and 'Brothers, places' (actually, word for word, 'brother brother place place') means Brothers tend to go different ways; and 'You go from branch to branch, I go from leaf to leaf' means I have more knowledge of the details. And then there are the proverbs which do not have equivalents (though this is not to say they are beyond understanding), which are in one way or another more different, more culturally specific: for example, 'There's no trusting a tusked animal or a drunkard', or 'Slandering (your) guru leads to (your) rebirth as an inferior creature', or, with all the (Hindu) resonances of the word dharma, 'The drum of dharma sounds of itself'.

I continue to find the links and similarities across cultures endlessly fascinating—but equally fascinating are the unpredictable and irreducible differences. I thank Bengali, and my Bengali-speaking teachers, colleagues and friends for helping to sharpen my awareness of both.