

Translations of the Mahabharata in Malayalam

K.G. Paulose

Dharmavir Bharati's *Andh Yug, The Blind Age*, (1954) is the greatest play based on Mahabharata in the post independent India. Dharmavir reveals to us why he goes after Vyasa every time he is in trouble. Quote: 'But you know, this Vyasa, he tells nothing but truth, no matter how bitter it may be. I talk to him when ever I have a problem.' No wonder, Vyasa consoles authors of all ages and inspires them. That is the greatness of Krishnadvaipayana!

We are distanced from Vyasa at least by thirty centuries. The earliest manuscript of his work available to us from Nepal dates back to 12th century, ie 18 centuries after Vyasa. This means that the original Mahabharata is far far earlier than the text we have with us today.

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There are multiple layers in the inner structure of the epic. The textual tradition is only one among them. The real Mahabharata emerged through oral traditions. We know the names of the heroes who fought the Kurukshetra war. But real fighters were tribal groups who came far away from the forests, the villages. They have no names, no faces. They are the unsung heroes. Scholars have enlisted as many as 361 aboriginal groups who fought the fierce war on either side. Anthropologists have identified 38 of them in the Kaurava side and 59 in the Pandava side. 264 groups still remain to be identified. Many of them fell in the battle field. But those who returned to their villages were excited. They narrated their experiences to their neighbours, mostly drawn from wild imagination. Thus every village in India has a river where Kunti used to take bath, rock-beds where Bhima used to sleep and fragrant flowers which Draupadi used to smell. The aborigines have their own narrations, different from the one reported by Sanjaya or copied down by Ganapati. These stories orally transmitted from generation to generation form the core of the real Mahabharata. They are in regional dialects or their cognates and are beyond the scope of translations.

There is another layer of Mahabharata in the collective consciousness of people belonging to the marginalised groups in the society. The fisherman in Sakuntala, in one of our local versions claims the origin of his clan directly from Vyasa. Some group of Mala-arayas believe that the Pandavas lived with them during their exile. The Kuravans of Kerala also inherit such a belief. There is an interesting folk-tale adapted to Kathakali by name Nizhalkuthu telling the story of a Kuravan and Kuratti and their relation to the Pandavas. The Velans and Pulayas also have similar stories to share with us. You may perhaps be surprised to hear that there is a temple dedicated to Duryodhana in Kerala where he is worshipped as a saviour. According to the official story-tellers of the epic, Duryodhana is the very incarnation of all vices; but he is worshipped as a God by the people.

What I am trying to share with you is this – When we study the translations of Mahabharata in a regional language we are likely to miss the cardinal point that Mahabharata was alive in that region even before the emergence of that language. Literary texts appeared at a later stage. Any how we have only textual traditions to rely for our study.

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Sanskrit came to Kerala rather late, perhaps in the 3rd / 4th centuries of Common Era. It flourished with official patronage during the period of the second Chera empire – ie. 8th to 12th centuries of CE. The Chera kings encouraged Sanskrit and introduced the practice of reciting Mahabharata regularly in the temples. The preceptors were called Mahabharatabhattars. They taught the epic regularly to the masses. The charm of Mahabharata fascinated King Kulasekhara. He boasts of himself as the one who imbibed the nectar-like knowledge of the epic – $\alpha Xn-a-\dot{U}-c-a-YnX$ alm-`m-cX]mcm-hmc]cn-Kr-lo-X-Úm-\m-ar-X-ky. He wrote two Sanskrit dramas based on Mahabharata stories. These were, perhaps, some of the early encounters of Kerala with the great epic. Everything at this point was in Sanskrit, Malayalam was yet to come up.

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Literal translations of Mahabharata began to appear in Malayalam by the 14th, 15th centuries. The Kannasa Panikkars translated parts of the epic from Sanskrit to Malayalam. This can be treated as the early attempts in this field.

1. The most important contribution in this field came from the Father of our language, Thunjath Ezhuthachan in the 16th century. He rendered both the epics to enrich the language. His Sree Mahabharatam can be considered the most fruitful attempt to bring Mahabharata to the hearts of every Malayali.

Ezhuthachan did not try for a literal translation of Vyasabharata. He condensed the voluminous work keeping the story line intact. Vyasa wanted his readers to approach his text with Bhakti, Yukti and Vibhakti. But Ezhuthachan's concern was bhakti alone. Hence he omitted all intellectual discourses like the Gita, Anugita, Sanalsujatheeam etc. He focused on bhakti and adopted the lucid *Inf-n-m-v* style to achieve this motive. He was addressing the finer sentiments of the masses.

Xt̄! hcn-l-cn-l-̄-§ncn aa
 Nn̄w aplp-c]n sXfn-^an-X-t̄m.
 \nXyw \ncp-]-a-`àym \n-hn-s\mp
 Sn^ow Ncn-X-§-fp-c-sNbvXp \o.
 \mcm-b-W³IY tlt«m-f-hp-a-Xnp
 tedp-¶]nXp cpNn Inf-n-a-ltf!
 _mte! Inf-n-a-ltf! IYm-ti-jhpw
 Imte]dl \o km\-\mu-tam-ate!
 \oem-gn-hÀ^{®3}]c-a³]cm-]-c³
]mem-gn-am-\n-\o-h-Ã-`-\o-iz-c³

See the beautiful description of Parthasarathi.

\nd¶]]oen-lÄ \nc-]th lp̄n
 \ndp-l-bnÂ lq«n-̄n-d-samSp sl«n
 lcn-ap-ln-sem̄ Nnlp-c-`m-chpw
 aWn-lÄ an¶]p¶] aWn-]n-co-Shpw
 lp\p-lp-s\-"n¶]pw lpcpÄ\n-c-X-t·Â
 \p-\-s,m-Sn-s^amcp s]mSn]än

See the description of kanvasrama

]pjv]-šÄ Xfn-cp-lÄ ^e-šÄ \nd-t^am-tcmp
jÄ,-Z-ip-l-]n-l-tl-ln-lÄ \mZ-t^mSpw
hr£-šÄ tXmdpW Npän-, -äoSpw hÄn-lfpw

]£n-lÄ arK-š-sf-¶pÅ P´p-j-fmepw
C£p-Pw-_o-c-tlc lZfo hrµ-^mmepw
ioX-Xz-kp-K-Ô-Xz-am-µymZn KpWw-tXSpw
hmX-t]m-X-š-fmepw tkhy-am-{i-a-tZiw

The society at that time was morally corrupt and had de-generated beyond redemption. The only way of salvage was to enculturate it with ethical values. Ezhuthachan realised that sermons will not help at this point. Hence he applied bhakti as a liberating force. To make it more appealing to the masses he chose the delightful style of Kilippattu.

2. The next important milestone in translation of Mahabharata is the one by Kodungallor Kunjukuttan Thampuran in the last century. He translated in verse the entire text of the great epic of one lakh verses in 874 days (two years and five months) and added later on the Harivamsa of 25000 verses in 3 ½ months. It still remains a wonder how he could achieve this Himalayan task within such a short time. He started the work while he was staying at Kottakkal and continued the work where ever he went with out break. – This is a monumental work which brought him the coveted title of Kerala Vyasa. Poet Vallathol qualifies him as :

Xln^v aqhm-n-S-slmv km£mÄ
alm-[`]m-cXw XÄÖ-sN-bvX- [o-am^³.

He started the work in 1904 and the translation was serially published from 1905. The first edition in book form came out after 46 years in 1957. This work is now available

in eight volumes. It is perhaps for the first time that the whole of Mahabharata was translated into a regional language word by word in keeping the metrical format..

Thampuran was an advocate of]"a-e-bmfw and hence the translation is simple and lucid and at times excels the original.

The words of Gandhari to Krishna after the war when everything was lost.

"cmtÚmkymÔky hr²ky
lX-]p-}Xky tlih
]mPsshx klntXm hoc
Xzw KXnx]pcp-tjm-ā'

"l-lm-Wm-jn-g-h³ a;Ä
N⁻ a¶¶p tlih!
hoc!]mP-h-tcm-sSm⁻
\\otb KXn P\mÀ±\!

The famous advise of Srikrishna to Arjuna in Geetha :

£p{Zw lrZb ZuÀ_eyw
XyàvtXzm-ñjvT]c-']

XpÑ-an-ñ⁻ ZuÀ_eyw
hnt«-bv|p|]c-']!

From the advice of Vidura :

kpe`mx]pcpjm cmP³
kXXw {]nb-hm-Zn\X
A{]n-bky N]Yyky
hàm t{imXm N ZpÀe`x

Btf-sd-bpmw cmPmth!
\\nXyw tkh]d-^an-Sm³

tkh-hn«p lnXw sNmÂthm³
tlÄjp-thm\pw Npcp-jamw

This is the greatest and true rendering of the epic in Malayalam, the centenary of which was celebrated in 2006. The idea of a critical edition (BORI) was conceived only in 1919 and the 21 volume text in about 72000 verses materialised in 1971. The translation of Kerala Vyasa comes about almost double of the BORI text.

3. Another serious effort to bring out Mahabharata in its original form was taken up by Kannampuzha S Krishna Varier in 1951. He retained the original Sanskrit verse and gave detailed commentary in Malayalam for each verse. The most authentic commentary of the epic is the Bharatabhavadeepam of Sri Nilakantha. Sri Varier followed him. I have seen three big volumes upto the end of Sabha Parva which came out in 1959. It seems that he might have completed it with a fourth volume, copy of which may be available with some scholars.

This translation – cum commentary is very useful for those who want to have a close understanding of the epic. Sri Varier was a teacher who did not have the aura of Thampuran. But his love for Malayalam prompted him to do this work, single handedly.

ssZz]m-b-t\m-ZnX kp[m-a-b-Nm-cp-hmWo
X̄zm-h-t_m-[l Xo{h]cn-{i-taW
hymJymZy tX\ cNnXm \nP-am-Xr-`m-jmp
Zmtk\ kw{K-l-X-am- kp-[nbx]p\´p.

4. Another mile stone in this path came in 1968 in the form of a complete translation of the epic in simple prose by Vidvan K. Prakasam. He translated the work in three years and serially published it simultaneously in 40 volumes. Now it is available in 10 volumes. The agony caused by the loss of his daughter led him to the epic and the words of Vyasa consoled him. As Dharmavir said Vyasa responds to every one in his anguish.

Prakasam's translation is the best guide for the ordinary Malayalee to acquaint with Vyasa through his own words. It reads like a novel, so interesting and absorbing.

We could not, for want of time, touch upon many like KVM, Kannan Janardana and many others who have enriched our language with their contributions.

Contemporary re-readings and multiple interpretations of Mahabharata have invigorated the Malayalee mind by infusing new ideas. Translations just open the door to that admirable world.

Dr. K. G. Paulose, Former Vice chancellor, Kerala Kalamandalam Deemed to be University for Art and Culture, Kerala; www.kgpaulose.info.com