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Madcap Dashu

Sukumar Roy

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Abstract

Translating the works of Sukumar Ray, the pioneer of Bengali nonsense literature and satirical schoolroom humor, is a notoriously daunting task. Traditional translations of “Pagla Dashu” – such as the localized versions found in standard anthologies like *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.* – frequently lean into rigid, literal interpretations. They often translate idiomatic insults directly, turning culturally specific nuances into stiff, unnatural English prose.

In contrast, the present translation seeks to break away from literal constraint by operating as a transcreation. It prioritizes the “flavor” and energy of a turn-of-the-century Bengali schoolyard, rendering a final text that feels like a natural English short story while fiercely protecting Ray’s original comedic cadence.

The primary hurdle in translating this text lies in the heavy reliance on culturally rooted Bengali idioms and socio-behavioral insults. A literal translation would strip away the humor.

The description of Jogobondhu as a ভিজ্জেবেড়াল (literally “wet cat”) could easily be translated as a “timid person”. However, the present version captures the true malicious undercurrent of the character by rendering it as a “hypoliteral sneak”. Similarly, Dashu’s outburst – ছাঁচড়া ছোটলোক – is dynamically captured as a “petty, ill-mannered cheapskate”, preserving the playground punch of the original dialogue.

The physical description of Dashu includes a classic Bengali rhyming couplet comparison to a Jessore carp fish (যেগোরের কই). Translators often struggle here, either leaving the fish reference out or writing a literal, rhythm-less sentence. This translation seeks to overcome the barrier by transforming the verse into a poetic, self-contained English block quote: “A frail, stunted body, with a head far too grand / Like a walking pond-carp from Jessore’s fair land.” It retains the imagery, the regional nod, and the original rhythmic bounce.

At the climax, the notes inside the box read কাঁচকলা খাও (literally “eat a green banana”) and অতিরিক্ত কৌতুহল ভালো নয়. Instead of using an alienating literal translation of the fruit, the translation adapts the cultural colloquialisms into equivalent English idioms: “Go fly a kite!” and “Curiosity killed the cat.”

By favoring the emotional and comedic value of words over their literal dictionary definitions, this translation attempts to preserve Dashu’s mischievous brilliance for a global audience.

Keywords: Untranslatability, Nonsense Literature, Bengali nonsense literature, Translating Nonsense.

There wasn’t a single student in our school who didn’t know Madcap Dashu. In fact, a person who knew absolutely no one else would still manage to recognize Dashu before anyone else. That year, a new gatekeeper arrived—a complete country bumpkin. Yet, the very first time he heard the name ‘Pagla Dashu’, he correctly guessed exactly who it was. One look at Dashu’s face, his way of talking, and his general demeanour made it glaringly obvious that he had a ‘loose screw’ in his head. He had round, bulging eyes, ears that were unnecessarily large, and a head crowned with a wild bush of shaggy hair. His appearance instantly brought a certain verse to mind:

A frail, stunted body, with a head far too grand,

Like a walking pond-carp from Jessore’s fair land.

Whenever he walked in a hurry or spoke in excitement, his flailing arms and legs somehow instantly reminded one of dancing shrimps.

Not that he was stupid. When it came to mathematics—especially those long, tedious multiplications and divisions—his brain worked at an astonishing speed. Then again, there were times he would devise such brilliant pranks just to make fools out of us and enjoy the spectacle, that we

could only stare at his sheer intelligence in amazement.

When ‘Dashu—short for Dasharathi—first joined our school, Jagabandhu was universally acknowledged as the ‘good boy’ of our class. He was excellent at his studies, no doubt, but we had never seen such a jealous, hypocritical sneak. One day, Dashu went to Jagabandhu to ask the meaning of an English word. Jagabandhu gave him a piece of his mind for no reason at all, snapping, “Do you think I have nothing better to do? Today I have to explain English to you, tomorrow I’ll be solving someone else’s math, and the day after, another person will show up with a fresh demand! As if that’s my only job!”

Dashu lost his temper completely and retorted, “You really are a petty, ill-mannered killjoy!”

Jagabandhu immediately ratted him out to the Pandit Mashai, complaining, “Sir, that new boy is calling me names.” The Pandit Mashai scolded Dashu so severely that the poor fellow was utterly demotivated.

Our English teacher was Bishtu Babu, and Jagabandhu was his star pupil. Whenever Bishtu Babu needed a book while teaching, he would borrow it from Jagabandhu. One day, during class, he asked for a grammar book. Jagabandhu quickly produced his grammar book, neatly wrapped in a green cloth cover.

Opening the book, the teacher’s face suddenly grew grave. “Whose book is this?” he demanded.

Jagabandhu puffed out his chest and proudly said, “Mine, Sir.”

“I see,” the teacher remarked. “A new edition, is it? The contents seem to have completely transformed.” With that, he began to read aloud: “*Yasobanta Daroga—A Spine-chilling Detective Drama.*” Unable to fathom what was happening, Jagabandhu stared blankly like an idiot. The teacher

glared at him, his eyes bulging furiously, and barked, “So, this is the kind of precocious nonsense you’ve been learning, eh?” Jagabandhu began to stammer an explanation, but the teacher cut him off sharply, “Enough, enough! No need to put on an act of innocence—we’ve seen plenty!” Jagabandhu’s ears flushed crimson with shame and humiliation—which made the rest of us thoroughly delighted. Later, it was revealed that this too was the handiwork of Brother Dashu. Simply to have fun, he had stealthily swapped the elementary grammar book with a play covered in an identical green jacket.

We used to tease Dashu constantly, openly criticizing his brains and looks right to his face. However, he was never really annoyed by our collective efforts. In fact, there were times he would exaggerate our comments even further, spinning bizarre stories about himself. One day he claimed, “Brothers, whenever anyone in our neighbourhood makes mango-leather, they always call for me. Do you know why?” “Is it because you devour a lot of mango-leather?” we replied. “Not at all,” he said. “When they lay the mango pulp out on the roof to dry, I just go up and show my face once or twice. That’s enough to make every crow within a mile radius fly away screaming for dear life! So, they don’t even need to guard the mango-leather anymore.”

Once, he suddenly showed up to school wearing trousers. Dressed in baggy, pajama-like trousers and a coat that looked like a bolster-pillow cover, he looked utterly ridiculous. He knew it too, and it seemed to be a matter of great pride for him. We asked him, “Why are you wearing trousers?” Dashu grinned from ear to ear and replied, “So that I can learn better English!” On another occasion, he casually walked into class with a bandage wrapped around his completely shaven head, thoroughly overjoyed when we all made fun of him.

Dashu couldn't sing to save his life; he knew perfectly well that he possessed absolutely no sense of rhythm or melody. Yet, when the Inspector of Schools came to visit, Dashu bellowed out a song at the top of his lungs just to amuse us. Had any of us done something like that, we would have been severely punished, but since Dashu was 'crazy', he got away scot-free.

One day after the holidays, Dashu arrived in class carrying a bizarre box.

The teacher asked, "What is it, Dashu? What's inside that box?"

Dashu replied, "Sir, just my personal belongings."

What these 'belongings' could possibly be became a matter of fierce debate among us. Dashu already had his books, notebooks, pencils, and penknife out with him, so what on earth could these special belongings be? When we questioned him, he refused to give a straight answer. Instead, he hugged the box tight and warned, "Don't you dare touch my box, any of you!"

Then, turning the key, he pried the lid open just a fraction, peeked inside, mumbled, "All safe," nodded gravely, and began muttering calculations to himself. When I tried to sneak a peek, the madcap frantically turned the key and locked it shut.

Gradually, wild speculations broke out among us.

Someone suggested, "It's his tiffin box—there's food inside." But not once during recess did we see him open it to eat.

Another chimed in, "It must be his money-box—it's full of cash, which is why he wants it by his side at all times."

To which another retorted, "Why would he need such a massive box for money? Is he planning to start a moneylending business in school?"

One day during recess, Dashu suddenly rushed up to me in a flurry, handed me the key, and said, "Keep this with you for now, make sure you don't lose it. And if I am a bit late returning, hand the box over to the gatekeeper before you go to class." With that, he left the box in the gatekeeper's custody and dashed out.

You should have seen our excitement! The golden opportunity had finally arrived; we just needed the gatekeeper to step away for a bit. A little later, the gatekeeper lit his iron stove to bake his rotis and headed toward the tap with a bundle of utensils. This was the moment we were waiting for. The instant he was out of sight, five or six of us swarmed over the box inside his room.

I quickly unlocked it, only to find a rather heavy paper bundle wrapped tightly with strips of cloth. Hurriedly undoing the knots, we uncovered a cardboard box, inside of which lay yet another smaller bundle. Unwrapping that revealed a single card. On one side, it read: 'Go fly a kite!' and on the other side: 'Curiosity killed the cat.'

We stood there, staring at each other blankly. Finally, one of us burst out, "What a rascal! He has thoroughly hoodwinked us!"

Another said, "Wrap it up exactly the way it was, so he doesn't suspect a thing. That way, he'll be the one left embarrassed."

I agreed, "Brilliant idea. When he returns, we will act completely oblivious, ask him to show us the box, and repeatedly beg to know what's inside."

We hurriedly bundled the papers back together, tied them up just as they were, and stuffed them back into the box. I was just about to lock it when a loud, roaring peal of laughter echoed from above. We looked up, and there was Crazy Dashu sitting on the boundary wall, doubled over with laughter.

The scoundrel had been silently watching the entire comedy from his perch! It was only then we realized that giving me the key, leaving the box with the gatekeeper, and pretending to go out during recess were all part of his devilish plot. The rogue had been lugging that heavy box around for days for the sole purpose of making absolute fools out of us.

Is it any wonder we call him ‘Pagla Dashu’?