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Title: Gazing into the 'Mirror of Gesture': Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpana* in Translation

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Gazing into the 'Mirror of Gesture': Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpana* in Translation

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Ancient works in lesser known languages accessible only through old and at times incomplete manuscripts often live on and attain popular readership only through translation. One such text is Nandikeswara's 2nd to 11th century A.D. text *Abhinaya Darpana*. Consisting of descriptions of various gestures, postures and techniques used in Indian classical performing arts, *Abhinaya Darpana* is widely regarded as an instruction manual for Indian dance and drama. The work first gained public attention due to the 1917 English translation by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Kristnayya Duggirala, from the Nagari transcript of the second edition of a Telugu translation published in 1887 which is now considered to be lost. This prompted the first critical edition published in 1934 with Sanskrit and English texts by Dr. Manomohan Ghosh, which was repeatedly revised till 1975. While the 1917 edition, published in Cambridge, was aimed to inspire and aid European drama practices by virtue of its brevity in comparison to *Natyasastra*, today *Abhinaya Darpana* has become an important text for Indian Classical Dance theory and practice with several translations available in English and various Indian languages. Through an analysis of some English and Hindi translations of a text on performance like *Abhinaya Darpana* with respect to shifting contexts like cultural and historical conditions of production, the target readership and influence of earlier translations, this paper tries to understand how translation can help shape performance traditions.

Translating a lesser known, ancient language creates a host of problems, not least of which is that many words and corresponding concepts have no direct equivalent in the target language, making it difficult or even impossible for the translator to convey the essence of the original, especially while dealing with a theoretical work rooted in a very specific time and tradition. Barbara Cassin calls such terms "untranslatables" (xvii) since they keep prompting further translations, none of which are completely satisfactory. Terms like *natya*, *abhinaya*, *gati-bhed* etc. have no equivalent in other languages. Even in languages like Hindi which are close to the source, the words are either jargon or have come to acquire somewhat different meanings over time and warrant lengthy explanations.

The title *Abhinaya Darpana* itself well exemplifies the difficulties faced in translation. Coomaraswamy and Duggirala have translated it as *Mirror of Gesture being the Abhinaya Darpan of Nandikesvara*. While 'mirror' is a direct translation of '*darpan'*, the word '*abhinaya'* today would generally be taken to mean 'acting' or 'drama', hence making the word 'gesture' seem like a deviation. Coomaraswamy has, however, chosen to convey the implied rather than the supposed literal meaning of the term. Formed by adding the prefix '*abhi*' ('towards') to the verb root '*nayati'* ('to take' or 'to carry'), *abhinaya* entails 'taking' the audience 'towards' a particular meaning through the use of appropriate gestures or actions. Hence *Abhinaya Darpan*, a text detailing performance technique, becomes a mirror reflecting various gestures used in performing arts.

The title of Manomohan Ghosh's critical edition is an interesting demonstration of how translations are often affected by socio-political circumstances and may even carry an agenda. While the first two editions, published in 1934 and 1957, are titled *Nandikesvara's*

Abhinaya Darpanam: A Manual of Gesture and Posture used in Hindu Dance and Drama, from the 1975 third edition onwards 'Hindu' was replaced by 'Ancient Indian'. This marks a shift in the position of Indian classical arts as they were elevated to the status of shared national heritage from ancient times that the country's multicultural citizens could take pride in, and the government's project to promote Indian classical arts gained momentum leading to the setting up of secular training institutions where the text was increasingly incorporated into syllabi. Also noteworthy is Ghosh's use of "dance and drama", is explained by the fact that the Indian concept of '*natya*', in which *abhinaya* is used, is very different from the western conception of theatre and refers to a combination of dance, drama and music into a complete performing art[1].

If the title itself warrants an explanation, the text is full of "untranslatables" at both the linguistic and conceptual levels, necessitating an explanation of key concepts separate from the text itself irrespective of the target language, which most translators opt to provide in the Introduction. Even when dealing with Indian languages, though corresponding words can be found comparatively more easily, these do not always communicate the essence or the theoretical aspect needs drawing attention to.

Tensions between dominant and marginal languages automatically come into play in context of the circulation and popularisation of a text through translation. *Abhinaya Darpana* owes its survival, or at least its easy availability, to its English translation. Marina V. Orelskaya even goes so far as to attribute its 'discovery' to A. Coomaraswamy, the first person to render the text into English, even though the text had been translated into Indian languages and published much earlier. Two editions of the Telugu translation – which

became Coomaraswamy's source but were lost by the time of Ghosh's edition in 1934 – had already been published in the 1880s while a 1901 Sanskrit-Marathi print has also been 'discovered'. That these early publications have not survived or had to be rediscovered says much about the marginal status of Indian regional languages. In contrast, English as a language of power brought *Abhinaya Darpana* into limelight and sparked a series of translations. Future translators have continued to acknowledge a debt to Coomaraswamy for bringing the work out of obscurity. Vachaspati Gairola dedicates his 1967 Hindi interpretation to 'the *sadhak* of Indian arts and translator of *Abhinaya Darpana*, Shri Anand Coomaraswamy'. Here we encounter an untranslatable in the book's dedication itself. The term '*sadhak*' has no English equivalent. It can mean both seeker and achiever of a difficult aim, almost like enlightenment in the concerned field. Gairola thus elevates the translator to the status of '*sadhu*', a saint or wise person.

Its recognition notwithstanding, Coomaraswamy's 1917 rendition is not an authoritative version of *Abhinaya Darpana*. Considering that it entered English via a Telugu interpretation of a Sanskrit work, that is, through an act of double translation, and neither of the source texts is available, the authenticity of this translation and its value in a philological analysis is called into question. Besides, its content is different from that which is currently accepted as original, reproduced in Manomohan Ghosh's critical edition. Coomaraswamy's source, the second edition of Madabhushi Tiruvenkata's Telugu translation, incorporates lines from other works on Indian dance and drama elaborating on the subject matter, adding "a total of four hundred and eight new verses… and therewith a simple translation with easy Telugu words such as women and children can understand."[2] Hence the English version

would incorporate the biases of both the Telugu and English translators. This choice of source text clearly indicates that Coomaraswamy's purpose was not merely to translate but to create a manual of "technical instruction" on Indian performing arts.[3]

The popularity of *Mirror of Gesture* is perhaps owing to the fact that it was produced for European consumption, prompted by a need for new inspiration in English drama in the early twentieth century which was then threatened by "the finished article of the East" with increasing popularity of exotic arts, a fear expressed by Mr. Gordon Craig in his 1915 letter to the translator, and was published at Harvard which eased its circulation.[4] One can clearly see a colonial influence in the translation. Aimed at English theatre artists, the dedication of the book reads, "Inscribed by the translators with affectionate greeting to all actors and actresses" (iii), despite the translators' clear knowledge – revealed in the 'Introduction' – that the Indian concept of '*Natya*' encompasses both acting and dancing and that the text has traditionally been a part of dance classes. Influences of colonialism are evident. The Indian translator constantly refers to the classical tradition as "Oriental arts" and the entire introduction is dedicated to a detailed explanation of '*Natya*' as distinct from English drama, since for a European readership it would be an alien concept.

While *Mirror of Gesture* was clearly aimed at Western acting circles, it prompted translations which have made *Abhinaya Darpana* indispensable for classical dance students in India. Its ready availability with easy translations in several Indian languages including Tamil, Marathi, Hindi and Bengali has made it an essential part of classical dance syllabi. It is through translatorial choice that the text has helped define present-day classical dance aesthetics by shaping classroom approaches. The 1938 Sanskrit-Bengali bilingual edition

carries a foreword by Abanindranath Tagore, and Ghosh in his extensive Introduction to his own English translation draws a link between the subject matter of *Abhinaya Darpan* and Rabindranath Tagore's observances on dance. Vachaspati Gairola's1967 Hindi version is entitled *Bharatiya Natya Parampara aur Abhinayadarpan* and the first half of the book comprises of a theoretical exploration of Indian classical dance and drama tradition drawing from several works like *Natyasastra* and *Sangit Ratnakar*, and also gives a history of its translation. The second half of the book contains the interpretation, which follows a format common in Sanskrit-Hindi editions in verse – shloka followed by its interpretation in prose. Evidently, the various renditions of *Abhinaya Darpana* tend to be much more than mere translations, and have an educational as well as critical purpose.

This educational purpose has prompted a rather interesting translation by Puru Dadheech. As he acknowledges in his Preface, the target audience of his bilingual Sanskrit-Hindi edition comprises of young classical dancers in India and the aim is to aid retention through an interpretation which is easy to memorise. While most interpretations are done in prose due to difficulty of retaining form while translating Sanskrit shlokas which have a very different syntax and structure from the target language, Dadheech places an additional constraint on himself by translating the text in rhyming verse with a fixed metre. Occasionally where the meter cannot be sustained, the rhythm is maintained. The use of octameter allows the lines to be set in *Teentaal* or *Keherwa Taal*, two basic *taals* or fixed sets of beats used in Indian music and dance with sixteen and eight beats respectively, so that they can be recited or sung easily. Once set in *taal*, the verse can also be choreographed, since it is common practice in classical dance to perform on poetry. Thus a text about performance

itself becomes performative through translation.

Adhering to a specific structure creates additional problems while translating. Dadheech occasionally deviates from octameter, especially when the number of lines is increased in translation, as he perhaps cannot condense the meaning into a corresponding number of lines but also cannot find enough words required to sustain the meter when new lines are added. Even so, he tries to maintain uniformity within the stanza, usually resorting to hexameter in such cases. The opening verse itself is an example of such a deviation, the two-line shloka being rendered into four lines to maintain clarity by separating different clauses.

Indeed the opening couplet offers an excellent study of the various concerns discussed in this paper. My transliteration of Nandikesvara's Sanskrit shloka reproduced in Dadheech (16) reads, "*Namaskriya: Aangikam bhuvanam yasya vachikam sarvvangmayam / Aaharyam chandrataradi tam numah sattvikam shivam*".

Anand Coomaraswamy's has translated the lines as, "The movement of whose body is the world, whose speech the sum of all language, / whose jewels are the moon and stars—to that pure Siva I bow!"(13). This reads like an invocation at the beginning of a work, a device common in oral tradition, dedicated here to Shiva who is considered Nataraja, the King of Dancers. The shloka also carries a connotation of '*Chaturvidha Abhinaya*' or four ways of communicating meaning through performance, which has been alluded to by Coomaraswamy only in passing in a footnote, while later translators have primarily focussed upon this latter interpretation of the lines, in keeping with the theme of the treatise.

Manomohan Ghosh shifts the focus of his interpretation to fit the context of *abhinaya*: "Salutation. We bow to the *sattvika* Siva whose *aangika* is the world, *vacika* is the entire language, and whose *aharya* is the moon and the stars etc."(39). This translation brings into focus the image of Shiva as the embodiment of the four types of *abhinayas – aangika, vacika, aharya and sattvika*. This meaning, however, can be clearly understood only in context of the extensive introduction and footnotes Ghosh provides. In itself, it is a rather awkward translation for an English reader, since *aangika* – 'physical' or 'via the body' and *vacika* – 'oral' or 'verbal' are adjectives substituted for nouns, without clarifying the actual noun – *abhinaya* – these adjectives are describing.

Puru Dadheech's verse translation in Hindi is different still:

Aangika abhinaya hai jinka saara sansaar,

Aur vaachika abhinaya samagra vaani vyavhaar;

Chaand sitaare aadi jinka hain aharya,

Un saattvika Shivji ko pranaam hai baarambaar. (16, my transliteration)

My English translation of Dadheech's interpretation is close to Ghosh's work but with slight deviations:

Whose *aangika abhinaya* is the entire world,

And *vaachika abhinaya* all oral communication,

The moon and stars etc. are whose *aharya*,

To that *saattvika* Shiva I bow again and again.

Dadheech expands the couplet into a quartet in hexameter. This interpretation best incorporates both connotations of the shloka, as an invocation and a description of *Chaturvidha Abhinaya* (four types of *abhinaya*), perhaps because of the relative closeness of Hindi and Sanskrit. However, Dadheech knowingly alters meaning in a quest to maintain rhyme and meter. '*Baarambaar'*, or 'again and again', added for this very purpose, has nothing corresponding to it in the original. To the shloka's 'to that *saattvika* Shiva I bow' he adds 'again and again'. Such an interpolation may not take away its essence but does deviate from the exact meaning contained in the source text.

All the renderings discussed above pose some problem or the other. Vachaspati Gairola's Hindi translation in prose, unrestricted by form and in a language close to the original, perhaps comes closest to the essence: "*Yeh samast vishva jinka aangika abhinaya hai; yeh sampoorn vaangmaya jinka vaachika abhinaya hai; aur yeh Chandra tatha ye taaragan jinka aharya abhinaya hai, un saattvika abhinaya-swaroop bhagvaan Shankar ko hum namaskaar karte hain*" (191, My transliteration).

My translation of the same goes, "The entire world is whose *angika abhinaya* (bodily gestures), the entire language and literature is whose *vachika abhinaya* (through oral/verbal means), the moon and the stars are whose *aharya* (costume and make up), we bow to that embodiment of *sattvik abhinaya*, Lord Shiva."[5] This is close to Ghosh's translation but makes meaning clearer by adding the word '*abhinaya*' after each of its types mentioned.

Through this extensive meditation on one couplet, I wish to draw a parallel between

the processes of *abhinaya* and translation. As discussed earlier, *abhinaya* involves 'carrying' a meaning 'towards' the observer through suitable *bhavas* ('states' of being) which would invoke corresponding *rasas* ('sentiments') in the audience.[6] It is essentially an act of translating a character's supposed state of mind in a way which can best communicate the desired meaning to the audience. Thus both the translator and the *nata* (performer) are involved in a process of transference of meaning from one form to another such that it does not lose its essence. If one sees the *nata* as a translator in the shloka under consideration, Shiva becomes a manifestation of the supreme translator ('Nataraja' – king of performers), whose text encompasses the entire world, who has all language and literature at his disposal, who can adorn his text with suitable font, cover and supplementary illustrations (costume and make up) which aid comprehension, and who embodies the essence of the text which can be communicated only through an understanding of its 'psyche'.[7]

Following this interpretation, the Indian conception of the translator is very different from the Western one. The ideal translator is neither a "writer of genius" as per the Romantic notion (5), nor is he the producer of "interesting" experimental versions originating in "translation workshops" (8), two conceptions of the translator discussed by Lefevere. Rather, he is a man of learning and wisdom, an *Acharya* or teacher who undertakes a translation after extensive study and research, making it the work of a lifetime. The younger translator or the *nata* cannot improvise or experiment but must follow the ideals established by predecessors like Bharat 'Muni' and 'Acharya' Nandikeswara – one would never find their names without an honorific in Sanskrit and Hindi texts. Translators of *Abhinaya Darpana* have given this honourable place to Ananda Coomaraswamy, Gairola designating him as its '*sadhak*', as

discussed earlier.

Returning to the shloka, one can see translators aspiring to the ideal of Shiva – the supreme translator, trying to communicate the essence of *Abhinaya Darpana* rather than merely a literal meaning. Following in the footsteps of their inspiration Coomaraswamy who himself imitated his lost source, Tiruvenkata's second edition in Telugu, the translations are supplemented with illustrations of the various hand gestures (*hasta mudras*) defined in the text, as it was felt that the readers would not be able to comprehend what was being described without a frame of reference.[8] That this is an influence of previous translations and not a need felt by later translators themselves can be gleaned from the fact that editions emerging till the first decade of the twenty-first century carry illustrations of just the hand gestures. Only in Puru Dadheech's translation published as late as 2010 have the various gestures of the head (*shirobhed*), eyes (*drishtibhed*), standing postures (*mandalas*), resting postures (*sthanak*) etc. been illustrated as well, which, one would presume, can be equally difficult to comprehend without a frame of reference. These illustrations can be seen in terms of the *aharya* aspect of *abhinaya*, visual adornment to the translation independent of but complementing the gestures or language used.

The rest of the shloka under examination, interpreted in terms of a reference to an imagined all-encompassing text containing the entire literature and language of the world, can be seen as a desire for an ideal language which can accommodate all philosophy. This, however, is an impossible ideal belonging to the realm of the divine, Shiva, and any search for the same is bound to fail.[9] The translators of *Abhinaya Darpana* do not and cannot know all aspects of even the text they are working with, let alone the entirety of language, which is

visible in their translations. Orelskaya draws attention to the need for comparing interpretations "made independently by both an artist and a scholar" (248), to highlight the limited knowledge and biases of the translator. Coomaraswamy and Ghosh, scholars writing for an English-speaking audience under a colonial government, compare Western and Indian theatre practices and also the role of performing arts in theatre, while Puru Dadheech, a trained Kathak dancer and teacher, writes primarily for the dance student.[10]

The tensions between *Abhinaya Darpana* and other works in the field are all too clear and the translators are well aware that it cannot be the desired all-encompassing text. Both Coomaraswamy and Ghosh openly accept that *Natyasastra* is a much more detailed compendium on the theme concerned and the choice of text for translation is simply due to the practical reason that *Abhinaya Darpana* is a much shorter text offering an "introduction to Indian method" (Coomaraswamy 1); Tiruvenkata, and hence the translator of his interpretation Coomaraswamy, has incorporated more than four hundred verses from what he repeatedly refers to merely as "another book" while Gairola in the theoretical section of his book constantly quotes from other works, especially *Natyasastra*.[11]

It is clear that the translators of *Abhinaya Darpana* are critics and theoreticians in their own right. Not only did the early translators reconstruct the text through careful selection from almost complete and partial manuscripts, they also provided explanations to aid the lay reader. Gairola discusses the various theoretical concepts involved in detail, and even goes on to trace the history of translation of this work. Dadheech does a cartographic and linguistic analysis along with citing conflicting critical opinion to determine the possible origins of the text and its author Nandikesvara, suggesting that since all surviving

manuscripts are in Telugu script or translation the author might have belonged to the region currently known as Andhra Pradesh.[12]

It is owing to the skill of the translators that *Abhinaya Darpana* has survived and come to occupy a central place in Indian classical dance theory and practice. Lefevere's statement, "texts that are not translated do not live on" (7), is perfectly justified here. Only through translation has *Abhinaya Darpana* today become an easily accessible and comprehensible Sanskrit treatise on performing arts used by Indian classical dancers around the globe and continues to gain 'afterlives' as artists find newer applications for the concepts contained therein.

End Notes

[1]For detailed explanation of *abhinaya* and *natya*, refer Introduction to Manmohan Ghosh's *Abhinaya Darpanam*.

[2]Refer Madabhushi Tiruvenkata's 'Preface' to the second edition translated into English in A. Coomaraswamy's *Mirror of Gesture*.

[3]From Mr. Gordon Craig's 1915 letter to the translator quoted in the beginning of the 'Introduction' to *Mirror of Gesture*. The translation may thus be seen as a response to requests from English friends.

[4]Refer Note 3.

[5]The word '*vaangmaya*' can be variously translated as 'language', 'literature' and 'eloquent' (speech).

[6]The translations of *rasa* and *bhava* have been taken from Ghosh and warrant some explanation to convey the exact meaning of the terms. Refer to Ghosh's Introduction to his translation of the *Natyasastra*.

[7]Manomohan Ghosh in his Introduction sees *sattvik abhinaya* as an expression of the psyche. Drawing from the word '*sattva*' which indicates purity, the *sattvik* can be linked to the soul.

[8]According to the translation of his Preface reproduced in *Mirror of Gesture*, Tiruvenkata introduced "pictures of the Hands" in his second edition.

[9]The idea of an all-encompassing language has been well debunked in Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*.

[10]See Introductions to Coomaraswamy's, Ghosh's and Dadheech's respective translations of *Abhinaya Darpana*.

[11]At various places in *Mirror of Gesture*, probably in keeping with the source text, where additions from other texts are made the translator simply writes, "According to another book" without specifying the source of the

verses incorporated.

[12]Before languages were linked to specific scripts under colonial influence, many Sanskrit texts, especially ones produced in South India, were written in Telugu script.

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