

# A Reconsideration of Satish Alekar's Plays in English Translation

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**Abstract**— A translation studies in India is an evolving discipline. Historically, it was only in mid-nineteenth century that the translation became a significant intellectual issue in India when the question of imagining a nation became problematic with the realization of multilingual and multiethnic nature of Indian society. The earliest writings on translation in India emerged during the rise of print capitalism and Vishnu Shastri Chiploonkar's in Marathi in 1874 can be seen as one of the earliest attempts to intellectually confront the issue of translation.

**Index Terms:** translation, translatability, linguistic, authentic.

The area of Translation Studies has for long remained an important area of inter-cultural inquiry, with its focus on the representation and recognition of the many different languages and cultures that constitute our world. The translation of a work from one culture to another, as many would argue, not only makes that work accessible to a new culture but also helps to mend the fracture between the two cultures. As an area of interdisciplinary focus, the area of translation studies is confronted by new and perhaps more pertinent issues and challenges which underscore questions of interpretation, authenticity and the translatability of a work. What does it mean to translate? What is an authentic translation? Translation is not merely linguistic conversion or transformation between languages but it involves accommodation in scope of culture, politics, aesthetics, and many other factors. Moreover, it is inevitable in practice if the translation is to maintain the source message's essence, impact, and effect. A translation is like a woman: if it is faithful, it is not beautiful; if it is beautiful, it is not faithful. That is to say if you want to be faithful to the text while translating, you are bound to lose the beauty of the translated text and if you try to maintain the beauty of

the translated text, you are sure to be unfaithful to the original text.

Faithfulness was once considered the iron rule in translation process but over the years when we take a closer look, accommodation, or adaptation, is found in most published translations and it has become a necessity too since keeping in view the averse cultural / lingual / geographical / historical / political diversifications and backgrounds of various languages and their literatures, accommodation, if not compromising, is almost obligatory.

This paper concentrates on six of the acclaimed plays of Satish Alekar translated by renowned translators like Gauri Deshpande, Urmila Bhardikar, Alok Bhalla, Jayant Dhupkar, Pramod Kale, Shanta Gokhale and Priya Adarkar.

This paper will be invaluable to students and researchers of Modern Indian Theatre, Indian Literature in translation and Cultural Studies. In Alekar's *Mahanirvaan* translated as *The Dread Departure* in English, the male protagonist Nana fulfills his dead father's post-death plea to be cremated in the crematorium and to keep his father properly hidden and maintained till the mission is accomplished. In the process, as the new generation plays the rules of the new dispensation and implicates and involves their elders in the manoeuvres and machinations. The inter-generation divide is blurred and ultimately effaced, establishing disorder as the new order. Alekar's dramatic strategy is fully fleshed out in the *The Dread Departure* and comprises of a musical- liturgical mode—cracked and disrupted and re-installed, as it passes through two different kinds of *keertans*, the more traditional style given to the dead Bhaurao and the more modern style to the mourners, to Bhaurao's old crematorium. The play is replete with *bhajans* and songs referring to Pandurang, (Lord Vitthal), Sant Eknath and Namdeo

and the translated hymns sound strange and bizarre in English. It is also likely to estrange and create cultural barriers for the foreign audience and those who are divorced from Maharashtrian folk culture and traditions.

*Call on Him and hurry on,*

*Pandurang, Pandurang!*

All your knowledge and your art

All in vain, if you know not,

*Pandurang Pandurang!*

*All the sages and all saints,*

*Ek Nath, Namdev and all the rest*

*Found their rest with Pandurang Pandurang!*

*(Act I, The Dread Departure)*

The play makes itself linguistically accessible to a foreign audience but is likely to perplex the audience through references like “tenth day ritual of making rice balls to attract the crow”, thirteenth day rituals for the feast ‘for all those who shouldered the bier’, significance of Pilgrimage to Pandharpur, the traditional funeral pyre, etc. Certain Marathi phrases, expressions and terminologies cannot be literally translated in English. Thus they sound uncanny and unfamiliar to the readers familiar with the target language. The ludicrous mingled with the serious also fails to leave any impact on our minds in the English translation.

Alekar’s play *Mahapoor* translated in English as *Deluge* by Urmila Bhirdikar, follows a comic strip mode with the young Govinda (Gondya) conjuring up images and situations born out of the emotional pressures and stifled desires that haunt him. The play is translated exceptionally well without destroying the meaning. However, the dialogues refrain from leaving an indelible impression on our minds. The humour is totally lost in the translated version. Gondya playing a series of games, insulting the neighbour, father and mother in love in the days of Ashramite Swadeshi and culminating in raping and spoiling the prospective marriage of a girl next door sounds hysterically funny in the original and conforms to the characteristics of the theatre of absurd. The translated version fails to bewilder the audience. Bhirdikar has definitely made a sincere endeavour to translate Alekar’s power packed and super bold Marathi dialogues in English, however, they fail to impress the audience who have read the original play. *Mahapoor* is replete with allusions from Hindu mythology which are likely to create

barriers for the foreigners and Non – Hindus. Words like “Raje” ,”Daji Kaka” “Ashadh” , “Satyanarayan Puja”, dichotomy between “Bhrama” and “Maya” are left untranslatable by Bhirdikar and songs like “Kadam kadam badhayejaa” and “Chalo Dilli Pukaarke” have not been translated too. The foreign audience is like to feel alienated because of the regional words and mythological terms left as it is by the translator. Also references to Sant Pandurang Sadashiv, Shyamchi Aai, Vithoba, Rakhumai, Pundalika and other popular genre of erotic songs in Maharashtra. People who are familiar with the Marathi songs are bound to get disappointed to read the play in translation.

*The Terrorist* translated in English as *Atirekee* by Alok Bhalla and Jayant Dhupkar is interesting and engaging too. Authority assumes a more sinister and discreet aspect in *Atirekee* more in the political paradigm of the late eighties and nineties. Set once again in a petit bourgeois neighbourhood, the play conjures up a community pinning its hopes on finding access to a faceless centre of power and authority, no longer associated with either the official state and its legal instrumentality or the underworld as such, but defined as a secret army with its own training system, penetration into the order of normal social life, and reign of terror sanctified by religion and perpetrated by a pack of morons. In a brilliant feat of mockery, with a streak of the prophetic, when one recalls that it was written before 9 / 11 World Trade Centre attacks and its aftermaths, Alekar reverses the anti sociality of terrorism into socialization. It is a Satire used to amend vices by correction. Once again in this brilliantly written play, Alekar makes use of untranslatable mythological words like “Angara”, “antarpal”, “Bhasmasur”, ,Bhupali, “Divya - Divya”, Gauri Pooja, Jaltarang, Narsimha, Sharamasa phalya, Shravani Somvar and prayers like “Shantakaram Bhujagashayanam, Padmanabham, Suresham”. The latter being one of the shlokas sung in praise of Lord Vishnu. These expressions lead to a major communication breakdown for an audience totally divorced from Sanskrit shlokas, mythology and Marathi culture. Marathi words like “Sasuji”(Mother in law) and “ishshya” (expression of shyness) have also been left untouched by Bhalla and Dhupkar to retain the regional touch however, the purpose of reaching out

to an alien audience does not get fulfilled due to linguistic barriers.

Alekar's play *Pidhijaat* (Dynasts) eschews the real-surreal comic dynamics of the plays discussed so far to focus on the rampant corruption, particularly at the upper echelons of the political parties to the left and the Right alike, with sharp directness that is quite a departure for the playwright. There are very few allusions in the play. The extract from B.S. Mardhekar's Marathi poem has been wonderfully translated by Pramod Kale.

*"Twisting my neck the barber said,  
Don't move Sahib, don't move  
Stretching the tape across my chest  
The tailor said thirty inches, only thirty inches.  
Stuffing my foot into shoe, the barber said  
Use it, use it, make it loose  
Use it, use it, make it loose".*  
(Act II, Dynasts)

Robert Frost once said, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Translating poetry has never been so simple. This is a sufficient evidence of the difficulty involved in translation of poetry because poetry is fundamentally valuable for its aesthetic value, therefore, aesthetic accommodation becomes an art instead of a basic requirement. A good poetry translator with a good measure of accommodation and adequate knowledge of aesthetic traditions of different cultures and languages can be better appreciated by the target reader and can achieve the required effect. This is the reason why we appreciate Pramod Kale's translation of Mardhekar's poetry.

*Mickey and Memsahib* and *Begum Barve* are both about marginalized men desperately holding on to dreams that ultimately elude them. The Professor in *Mickey and Memsahib*, surrendering abjectly to his domineering wife's rule and slowly losing its bearings, pins his hopes on the success of his experiments with his mouse and breaks down under the blow of Mickey's killing. In *Mickey and Memsahib*, the wife is invested with signs of divinity to heighten the nameless Professor's victimization and humiliation. The Professor probably needs a Goddess (devi) to justify and come to terms with his cowardice and submissions.

The literal translation of the Marathi songs sound absolutely ridiculous in Priya Adarkar's version of Alekar's play.

There is a scene where the Professor picks up the water pot and goes into the wings. He fills the water and goes into the opposite wings walking about and singing.

*Fill, fill, fill – Fill the water pot,  
Empty the water over Memsahib's block,  
Scold- scold- scold.  
Here's an umbrella.  
Here is a boat.  
Why are you shouting?  
Fit to burst your throat.*  
(Act I, Mickey and the Memsahib)

In another one,  
*The water in the coconut  
Is there by the grace of god  
Look what I got –  
A beautiful piece of nut  
The coconut got smashed,  
And out the water splashed!  
Couldn't get another coconut  
And the water couldn't stay  
In my cupped palms.*  
(Act I, Mickey and the Memsahib)

All the songs show that the lyrics are not effortless or spontaneous. They sound incongruous and consist of unexpected elements; outrageously or whimsically strange and odd. The word "Bhondla" is likely to create a barrier for the foreign audience and people alien to Maharashtrian culture. And the translation of the 'Bhondla' songs "Ek Limbu pelu bai, 2 limbu pelu" has been ridiculously translated as "Let's toss a lemon, let's toss two".

Let's toss two lemons, let's toss three."  
Then there are references to Indian delicacies like Suji, Halwa, Khaman Dhokla, Mohan Thaal, Raghavdas, etc which would be Latin and Greek to the audience. Then the invocatory hymn to Goddess Durga has also has been left untranslated by Priya Adarkar. It's very difficult to translate the entire invocatory

*Durge Durghata Bhaari,  
Tuza vin Sansari,  
Anath naathe ambe,  
Karuna Vistaari,  
Vaari Vaari Janma maranate vaari  
Jay Devi Jay Devi  
Jay Mahishasuramardini.*

It is possible to paraphrase the invocatory. However, one would not be able to observe fidelity to the lyrics

while doing so. May be that is the reason why Adarkar leaves it as it is. Even though the play is partly accessible to the foreign audience, they are not likely to delve into the deeper meanings of the text.

*Begum Barve* embodies the Sangeet Natak theatricality in her performance. In his unusual dramaturgy, the strength of the Theatre Academy's production of *Begum Barve* lies in the charm that it exudes with *Barve*, played by Chandrakant Kale, relishing his performance with its elaborate artistry and musical richness; and with Jawdekar and Bawdekar succumbing to it till Shyamrao, played by phenomenal actor Mohan Agashe, demolishes it. For Marathi speakers, the songs from Sangeet Natak classics carry other associations that may be lost on viewers from other linguistic cultures. For the latter, the unfamiliarity with the conventions adds to the sheer magic of theatrical idiom so complete in itself which invites an alien audience to sink into it, and even as it grows over the viewers, the shock gathers its strength from it. Shanta Gokhale, who has translated this Alekar classic in English has done complete justice to the translation. However, as a translator, she has limitations as it's not easy to familiarize the foreign audience with Sangeet Natak songs and Marathi folk culture. Gokhale has left the word "Sutradhaar" as it is. Once again the play is overloaded with allusions, terms and expressions relevant only to Marathi audience familiar with folklore. There are references to mythological figures like Lord Kapardikeshwar, Subhadra (heroine of the play *Sangeet Saubhadra*), Vasundhara (heroine of the play *Sangeet Punyaprabhav*), *Sharada* (play by Govind Ballal Deval, Sudhakar (Hero of a popular Marathi play *Ekach Pyala* by Gadkari, which was first staged by Gandharva Mandli., Ghanshyam, the villain of another Gadkari play, *Bhavbandhan*), Bakasura, a demon mentioned in *Mahabharata*, *Sangeet Swayamvar* by Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, Shishupaal, once again a character from *Mahabharata*, Sarangnayana (Subhadra's sister) and Vallari, a friend of Sharada. There are references to *Manapaman* and *Sangeet Saunshayakallol*, a play by Govind Ballal Deval. It is definitely not an easy play to translate. There are no English equivalents for the words "Chivda" a Marathi snack item and "Dohaale." Dohaale is happily translated in English as pregnancy cravings. However, the Marathi word is specifically used for women who are in the family way, while the

English word "cravings" is not necessarily used for pregnant women.

There are a few songs used by Alekar in *Begum Barve* and the English translation is full of affectation and false display of feelings.

*Zani soad ahankar priye,*

*Yeyi majha samipa*

*Vrutha samaya davadishi ka?*

*Ka rasik jana shinavi lavita ha vilamba*

Translation: My love, forsake your vanity, and hasten to me

Why waste time without reason?

Why torture thus our patrons?

Forsake your vanity and hurry!

Govind Ballal Deval's tune based on 'baat haar keeje janaab se' has been used by Alekar too.

*Moortimant bhiti ubhi majhasamora rahili*

*Vatata duje Sudamo majha disela dyas sthali*

*Dakhawaweasea mala tata neta tyajhyakade*

*Rakshasa ruchel ka pahawaya jasa bali*

Translation: *Before me stands the very incarnation of fear,*

*The fear that I shall see another Sudam there,*

*Where my father is about to take me!*

*Would even a moment desire*

*Such a sacrifice to see?*

The English translation is appropriate but fails to touch the soul.

The English translation of the song "Prabhuleela gamate hee" is also not an easy endeavour for the translator and refrains from leaving an indelible impression on our minds.

*Mama atma gamala ha*

*Nakarta nakarat hrudaya talamalata*

*Bhetaya jya deha*

*Ekachi vela jari maja bhetala*

*Jeeva kasa vasha zala*

*Bhav duja milala*

*Watey ransakha aala paratuni geha!*

Translation: *Lost my soul, I don't know how*

*My heart yearns to meet him*

*Met him only once and now*

*All strangeness gone*

*My soulmate comes.*

The following song used by Alekar in *Begum Barve* is taken from *Sangeet Swayamvar* and is rich with

aesthetic and expressive value, however it is absent in translation.

*Narawara krushnaman ghetase janma  
Bhagya udele hey shikawi sukarma  
Bahuta nrupati tey aaley geley  
Pari manila yaduvara zala mantra mahan*

Translation: *When a man like Krishna is born,  
Fortune smiles, he teaches only good,  
Many kings were born and died;  
Krishna alone became a prayer in my heart!*  
(Act I, Begum Barve)

The following lavani translated in English poses socio-cultural barriers.

*Wad jao kunala sharan  
Karil jo haran santkatanche  
Aga sakhaye, mee dharin charan tyache  
Bahu aapt bandhu bandhava, prarthile kathuni  
dukkha maniche  
Te hoy viphal saache  
Mam taat janani maatra tee  
Baghuni kashati, haal iche  
Na chalechi kaahi tyaanche  
Je kar joduni majpudhe naachale gat have  
yagavaanche  
Pratikul hoti saache*

Aesthetic values or poetic truth in a song are conveyed in word order and sounds, as well as in cognitive sense (logic). And these aesthetic values have no independent meaning, but they are correlative with the various types of meaning in the text. Hence, if the translator destroys the word choice, word order, and the sounds, he impairs and distorts the beauty of the original poem. Thus, the English translation is devoid of delicacy, gentleness and sensitivity.

Translation: *To whom shall I surrender!  
To him who overcomes troubles without fear.  
I shall fall at his feet.  
Oh yes, I shall fall at his feet, dear Sakhi.  
Many are the friends I've told my troubles to  
But in vain dear Sakhi,  
It has been in vain.  
My beloved parents, though  
Suffer to see my sufferings.  
They are powerless to do ought, dear Sakhi.  
They are powerless to do ought!  
For those of the Yadav clan*

*Who danced before me with folded hands  
Stand against me now, dear Sakhi,  
Stand against me now!  
(Act I, Begum Barve)*

The following stanza is taken from *Sangeet Manpaman* written by Khadilkar.

*Vinay heen wadataa naatha, naahi mee bolat aata  
Ranruchiraa reete, naa shobhe premaa tee  
Waimnayawati mee kaantaa naatha –*

Translation: My Lord, I'll not talk to you,  
You are too brazen.

The ways of the battlefield  
In love will not do  
I am a modest maiden  
My Lord, I'll not talk to you.  
(Act II, Begum Barve)

The English translation of the Manapaman song is very well done, still not close to the original.

*Prabhu aji gamala, mani toshalaa  
Kope bahu maazaa, to prabhurajaa  
Aataa haasla, mani toshalaa  
Mrutachi pari hote naath, te poorn zaale  
Pari Vachansudhene tyaasi jeevant kele  
Amrut madhur shabda tyaa punha aikanyaate  
Shravani sakal maazi shakti ekatra hote.*

Translation: *My Lord is happy, contented I mind  
My Lord is often displeased, but today  
He smiles and is contented in mind,  
Lord, my heart was dead and then  
Your words put life in it again,  
Now all my strength is in my ears  
To hear those honey-sweet words again.  
(Act II, Begum Barve)*

The English translation will always be one of the weightiest and worthiest undertakings, however not as lofty as the original.

The following song is once again taken from *Ekach Pyala*, a Marathi song sung by women, "vida ghya na ho narayana"

*Ghaas ghe re taanhyaa baala govindaa gopaalaa  
Bharavi yashodamaai saawalaa nandbaala ghei  
Ghei kondaa kani trailokyaachaa dhani  
Widuragaharichaa pahilaa wahilaa ghaas  
Pohe moothbhari khsheeraabdheechyaa hari  
Maitra sudaamjichaa aalaa dusaraa ghaas  
Thaali ekyaa dethi ghyaawi jagajethi*

*Draupadimaichaa aalaa tisaraa ghaas  
Uralaaya ushtawali phalaacchya vanmali  
Shabari bhillinicha ghyaa ho chawatha ghaas  
Taaku ovaloon mukhachandrawaroon  
Govindagrajaacha uralaa suralaa ghaas*

Translation: *(Eat my little one, eat O Gopal,  
Govinda,*

*Mother Yashoda feeds you! Eat O son of Nanda!  
The Lord of the Universe eats bran and broken rice!  
Here's the first mouthful from Vidura's house.  
A fistful of rice flakes for Hari, Lord of the ocean of  
milk*

*And the second mouthful from friend Sudama.  
Eat O Lord of the world this dot of spinach,  
The third mouthful from mother Draupadi.  
Now the last morsels eat O Vanamali,  
Here's the fourth mouthful from Shabari the Bhil.  
I wave before your moon face and cast away  
This last mouthful from Govindraj!*

*(Act II, Begum Barve)*

Then the following verse is taken from R Ganesh  
Gadkari's *Punyaprabhav*.

*Nija baalaa re gaate gaane aai..kari aataa jo jo gaai  
Do dwasaachi hee dniyechi wasati....saarakhicha  
asati nasati*

*Tuja aisaa haa baala naoo nawasaacha...haatacha  
ki re jaayachaa*

*Runanubandhanachya tutalya aataa gaathi  
maga...kuthlyaa bheti gaathi!*

*Sleep, my little one, sleep, mother sings a lullaby  
Being and non being is all the same in this short life,  
Nine promises I made to keep you alive,  
The bonds of past lives, snapped, cannot be rejoined.*

*(Act II, Begum Barve)*

The following song used by Alekar in *Begum Barve*  
is a pregnancy song sung on the auspicious occasion  
of Baby Shower Ceremony.

*Pahilya ga mahinyalaa / kalaa laagalyaa dehaalaa  
Rang piwalaa jaahaalaa / sakhe tuzaa  
Mukhachandra mlaan zaalaa / shina jaanawoo  
laagalaa*

*Phal laagale weleelaa / sakhe tujhya  
Nako bai khaoo phar / jaagu nako raatri phaar  
Tujhya kushichaa aakaara / japa tyaalaa  
Karvo dohaala jevana / baisa baai zopalyaata  
Sakhya sange bagichyaata / jaai sukhe.*

Translation: It is the first month. The body aches

Your colour has turned pale, dear friend.  
Your moon face is wan, you begin to feel fatigued.  
Fruits hang heavy on your creeper, dear friend!  
Don't eat too much! No late nights now.  
Keep yourself in good shape, dear friend.  
It is your seventh month dinner. You sit on the swing.  
Go happily into the garden with your beloved.  
*(Act II, Begum Barve)*

The English translation of the pregnancy song is an  
unhindered one, but it is difficult for a foreign  
audience to relate to it.

Translating the following song from Govind Ballal's  
play must have been an arduous task too.

*Chinmaya sakala hrudaya, sadaaya de yaa govindaa,  
Wara waradaa, kalimalawilaaya  
Wishyapipaasa peditasa,  
Nissaaraa ,samsaara mrugneerasama  
Bhulalo mee pari phasalo,  
Wismaralo tava bhajani laagaaya,  
Kaamdhaasha hi wiwashaa, mannasha,  
Sarasave, tatpaashi saapadalo,  
Ye dhwaawoni yaatuni sodawani maja ghyayaa  
Saukhya sadaa nawaa jyaa thaayi,  
Taapaachaa, paapaachan lesh nase,  
Shaanti wase, ne yewani, tyaa sthaani,  
Sukhabhavani dasaa maa.*

Translation: *Spirit of the Universe, have pity on me.*

*O granter of boons, destroyer of sins.  
Deceived by the mirage of worldly life  
Did I forget to pray to thee.*

*The lure of wealth and flesh mesmerized me  
Trapping me in its tempting coils.  
Hasten to free me. O my Lord!*

*Take me, your servant, to such a place  
Where there is no sin, nor worldly worries,  
Where all is peace and tranquility.*

*(Act II, Begum Barve)*

Without translation Alekar's world would be limited  
to the borders of his own country. The translators are  
his most important ally. They have introduced him to  
the world. The English translation might have  
destroyed the aesthetic value of his plays however, it  
has made the Non - Marathi audience navigate  
through the thickets of his Literature. As José  
Saramago says "Writers make national literature,  
while translators make universal literature." The  
research paper could be concluded with Dr. Samuel

Johnson's thoughts about translation: "When languages are formed upon different principles, it is impossible that the same modes of expression should always be elegant in both. While they run together, the closest translation may be considered as the best; but when they divaricate, each must take its natural course. Where correspondence cannot be obtained, it is necessary to be content with something equivalent." (Johnson, Lives of Poets)

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