TRANSLATION IN ASSAMESE LITERATURE

Translation in common parlance, means changing something that is written or spoken from one language to another language in other words ‘to ferry’ to bring across from source to the target language. In recent times several theories have been proposed about the purpose, outcome of translations. Even attempts have been made to project translation work as literary work of its own genre. An analytical study of this will show that these theories depend on the significance the author gives to the effect of the translation work on the culture, on the language, or on the belief of the target language.

Translation in Assamese literature can be traced back to Madhava Kandali’s translation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana* in the fourteenth century C.E. Although religious in character it was secular in spirit. Its purpose was entertainment. Adhering to the original text by Valmiki, Madhava Kandali tried to paint the stories with local colours which transmuted his translation to a creative work. The pre-Vaishnavite poets such as Kavitratna Saraswati, Hema Saraswati, Rudra Kandali, Harihar Vipra through their translated works contributed towards an enrichment of Assamese literature. Their translated works included stories culled from the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The earliest venture into Assamese translation was motivated by religion. The inclusion of folk elements made their work more accessible. This realization motivated Sankaradeva to create the dramas and other compositions where folk elements were incorporated to convey his message of Bhakti. The message being based on the *Bhagavata*, the core book of Vaishnavism in Assam.

With the spread of Christianity to various parts of the world aided by the printing invention, the *Bible* was made available in various languages. The *Bible* being a sacred book, the initial translators were reverential in their approach. They were obliged to be as much as possible literal. The American Baptist missionaries Nathan Brown and O. T. Cutter set a printing press in Sibsagar, which accelerated the pace of exchanging and preserving knowledge. In the course of this study it is stated that translation works have,
in certain cases preserved or revived a language. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the works of Christian missionaries did a yeoman service for the Assamese language. Their effort in the translation of the Bible, other religious books and the great task of bringing out an Assamese dictionary Asamiya Abhidan in 1867 resulted in preserving and protecting the language from being eventually replaced by Bengali that could have diminished its standing. The redemption of the Assamese language came at the hands of the American Baptist missionaries.

The printing press and the Arunodoi played a significant role in the history of Assamese literature. It was through the translated works published in the Arunodoi that western literature paved its way and marked the beginning of a new literary trend in Assamese poetry. But the real absorption of the form and spirit of English poetry began in the age of “Jonāki”. Lyric poetry was predominant during this age. Religious, spiritual and moral themes of the age of “Arunodoi” was replaced by the emotions and passions of the common people, the relation between man and nature. The language was the language of every day speech. The poets of this age such as Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, Hemchandra Goswami, Lakshminath Bezbaroa were the exponents of Assamese romantic poetry. Ananda Chandra Agarwalla’s translations which were published during this age contributed towards the enrichment of Assamese literature. The literary trend started in JDnāki attained its maturity in Bānhi. Many of Jatindranath Dowerah’s translations were published in Bānhi. His translation of the Rubaiyat from Omar Khayyam is another cherished treasure of our literature. The articles published in the Āvāhan during the late thirties of this century made the poets and artist alike retreat from the world of romantic dreams to that of cold facts. Viewed from the perspective of poetry the poetry of this age can be regarded as the last stage of romantic poetry. Some of the significant poets of this age are Durgeswar Sarma, Dimbeswar Neog, Parvatiprasad Baruva and others. Modern Assamese poetry which was initiated in the age of Āvāhan achieves its glory in the age of Ramdhenu. The articles published in the Ramdhenu about the German poet Rilke, French poet Rimbaud, English poet Eliot and others broadened the horizon of Assamese poets and writers and created an ambience for a new kind of
literature. The poets of this age Ajit Baruah, Navakanta Barua, Bireswar Baruah and others laid great emphasis on translation. They were influenced by and in turn made their readers familiar with the English and European poets of the time.

Historically, it can be reckoned that translation discourse revolved around prescribing certain models of translation right from the earliest statement of the famed Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) Roman orator, politician and philosopher and St. Jerome, and has centred on the perennial debate over literal (word-for-word) over free translation (sense-for-sense) translation. The 1800s is characterized by the missionary era of Bible translation. Just as in the Christian period translation was purely liturgical, similarly in the fourteenth and fifteenth century in Assamese literature the translation of the religious texts and epics provided a potent impetus for propagating religion. The missionaries tried to make the Bible accessible to the people in the local languages. But “word-for-word” translation especially where philosophical, theological or liturgical matter was concerned was an arduous task. The Indian literary tradition is full of rendering of Sanskrit texts into regional languages and the most frequently targeted texts were the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa and the *Ramayana* of Valmiki. The remarkable aspects of these translations is that they were meant to cater to the tastes of the target language. Because of this aspect we find several renderings of *Mahabharata* of Vyasa and *Ramayana* of Valmiki and some of them differ considerably from the original.

In the late seventeenth century John Dryden’s concept of “paraphrase” or “sense-for-sense” translation influenced later poets such as Pope, Coleridge and others. In a lecture entitled *On Different Methods of Translating* the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher followed Dryden. Schleiermacher along with F.W. Newman, Carlyle and William Morris proposed the use of a separate sub-language to be used in translated literature. Translation helps the target language reader become the equal of what Schleiermacher called the better reader of the original. Through a deliberately contrived foreignness in the target language text the reader is inducted into the difficult realm of the foreign. Whereas Mathew Arnold emphasized the translation to
be committed to the source language. At the end of the 1930’s as propounded by the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset, and others translation is regarded as a literary genre apart. During the 1940-50s translation is dominated by the fundamental issue of translatability. Williard Van Orman Quine in his essay *Meaning and Translation* addresses the question about a basic semantic indeterminacy. The single achievement of Roman Jakobson’s widely cited essay *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* has introduced a semiotic reflection on translatability. Related theoretical stance is the Polysystem theory proposed by Itamar Even Zohar which considers translation literature a system in itself. They emphasized the importance of translation work in the study of literature and the evolution of culture. Almost at the same time George Steiner in his book *After Babel* proposed that language is not instrumental in communicating meaning, but restructuring it. The predominance of equivalence (equivalent items in specific ST – TT pairs and contexts) and functionalism may overshadow the autonomy of translation in the discourse of the 1960’s and 70’s. In these discourses meaning is accorded a priority over form. In 1963 George Mounin argues that by shaping the universal to a local situation the literature on equivalence helps to fathom translation. A translation theory perpetually rests on conjectures about language use and for centuries this has fallen into two large categories: instrumental and hermeneutic. In the 1990s Susan Bassnett in *Translation Studies*, voiced the common theoretical assumption of the period which hold there is relative autonomy in translation works. Generalization of different theories have to take into account the absorbing capacity of the target language and even culture. Eugene Nida had this in mind when in his book *Principles Of Correspondence* he spoke of functional equivalence. The response created by a translated text in a reader in today’s culture should be ‘essentially like’ the response of the ‘original receptors.’ To assess different theories it is also necessary to look at the source and receptor languages and cultures. Theories dealing with related languages and cultures have a perspective different from theories dealing with unrelated languages and cultures. Every translation whether literary, faithful or imaginative have to encounter losses, gains and changes. This is applicable in the translated works of the translators of the Vaishnava age in Assamese literature. Ram Saraswati’s Assamese version of the *Ramayana* is not a literal translation.
of the original. Besides lengthy elaboration of the original episodes and descriptions like the early translators Ram Saraswati freely introduced incidents and stories which are not in the original text. Although Madhava Kandali translated from Valmiki’s *Ramayana* way back in the fourteenth century he made the translator visible by incorporating into his translation not only an inventory of birds and the flora of the region but in his colophoms (bhonitas) he describes his role as a translator and dwells critically on the nature of the translation. But he also asserts his fidelity to the original content of the story and invites his readers and listeners to blame him if they find any discrepancy with the original. As stated by Navakanta Barua in *Folkways in Literature: An Aesthetic Imperative* neither Sankardeva nor his disciples wrote anything about rasa or alankara theories. The basic tenets can be culled from diverse comments strewn here and there. Krishna Kanta Handiqui in his article “Anubādar Kathā” emphasizes the social benefits of translations. It develops languages, creates national literatures and inspires literary movements. He underlines the pragmatics of translation than the dictates of theory.

Thoughts and its expressions are always intimately linked to the social and cultural contexts in which they are created. Gideon Toury’s emphasis on cultural forces shaping the literary output as expounded in his essay *A Rationale for Descriptive Translation Studies* is relevant and logical. The translator conveys the thoughts and feelings of someone else which is contoured on an environment and culture which might be totally divergent from his own culture and environment. Language being a part of culture the issues of language are inextricably linked with issues of culture. The cultural significance of translation undermine certain norms to be acquired by the translator because the rhetoric diverge from one culture to another. After the second world war cultural determinants were more visible and even the translator was looked at as an agent of bridging the gulf between different cultures. The translator is expected to discard the familiar with the unfamiliar, the dissimilar with the similar in source and target cultures. When a translator bridges this gap the response of the readers of the translation would be similar as the readers of the original text. Thus Dimbeswar Neog could accomplish the same kind of response as the readers of the original text in his translation of
Wordsworth’s *We are Seven* as Āmi Sāt Bhāi Bhanī. The names John and Jane in the original poem are replaced by Assamese names Rahilā and Sarukan thus creating a greater impetus and making it accessible to the target language reader. In his translation of Wordsworth’s *The Daffodils* as Sariyah Ḍīrā Dimbeswar Neog discards the daffodils unacquainted to the target language readers and supplants with the more familiar mustard blossoms. Marlowe’s *A Passionate Shepherd to his Love* translated by Anandachandra Baruah as Garakhīyār Prem the lover welcomes his beloved to a life of love where they will spend their days playing the flute and listening to Bihu songs. The title of the poem in Assamese itself connotes the love of an Assamese cowboy. Thus the ineffable love that is expressed in the original poem is echoed in the translated poem by Ananda Chandra Baruah by imploring the garakhiya (cowherd) tender his lady love to listen to the playing of the flute. This reflects a subtle and intimate picture of the cultural and social life of the Assamese garakhiya (cowherd) rooted deeply in the ethos of the native soil. Jatindranath Dowerah in his translation of Fitzgerald’s *From the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* could ingress into Assamese literature the perception of a poet from an alien culture in a way that interwined with the intricacy of Assamese culture and impinged upon the readers a feeling that it was the intrinsic product of their own culture. In Durgeswar Sarma’s Sādarī a translation of Wordsworth’s *Lucy Poems* the alien particularity of the violet in the source language is domiciled in the Assamese poem by a more generalized phul banariyā (wild flower). In his translation of the poems of Shelley Parvatiprasad Baruva responded personally to the demands of the source text without really taking into considerations theoretical underpinning. The translation of the poets posit the fact that in their translations by using images from the target culture they were successful in making the readers of the translations respond to it both emotively and cognitively in a manner essentially similar to the ways in which the original readers responded. Since the target language reader will receive with ease the communication here an appropriation of a foreign text for domestic purposes was taken care of. The translations reveal that the translators sought in their own language expressions that reproduce as much as possible the efficacy of the original thus invoking the English poem to a mass audience in another culture.
The translation works of some of the poet’s analysed in the study shows that they were moved to translate those poems that were in synchronization with their own emotions. In the process they greatly enriched the Assamese language and brought out the fact that the environmental diversity did not stand in the way in generating the same mental and emotional stirrings in another culture, in another language. For instance the melancholy inherent in Jatindranath Dowerah enabled him to translate Shelley’s poems with such grace and vigour that it could be mistaken for an original composition. In his Apon Sur a translation of Shelley’s To a Skylark the lines “our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” translated as “hanhā kandā jagatar riti cirantan biśādat ulāhar gān” his response to Shelley may be due to a kind of affinity in their emotional response to the situation Jatindranath Dowerah’s translation of Fitzgerald’s translation of Rubaiyat Of Omar Khayyam reflects Dowerah being influenced by Omar’s philosophy. Jatindranath Dowerah and Omar Khayyam as poets at times shared the same believes on fate and destiny. The resonance of Omar’s believe in a kind of destiny can also be discovered in Dowerah. A deep touch of melancholy and a brooding sadness are the characteristics of his poems. The poems of Shelley which Dowerah translated reflected the melancholy that leave their imprint in the composition of both these poets. The sadness that the Russian poet Turgenev and Jatindranath Dowerah shared as poets encouraged him to translate Turgenev’s Poems in Prose as Kathā Kabitā. The melancholic strain depicted in Gray’s Elegy: the churchyard, the tombs pointing to the transience of life, the twilight of the close of the day, solitude, solemnity, the melodious atmospheric description in which all the details are subdued to the total effect, could stir the poetic, imagination of Jatindranath Dowerah to act through images at once subtle and potent in his poem Ekhani Gānvar Mariśālir Ocarat. Ananda Chandra Agarwalla’s own poetic compositions were burdened with moral bearings and whether it be considered as a quality or a flaw no other Assamese poet could supersede him in this respect. This particular attribute of his poetry must have motivated him to translate H. W. Longfellow’s poem A Psalm of Life as Jīvan Sangīt and he could capture the essence of the original poem ie.the transience of human life in a way which makes it difficult to recognize it as a translated poem. The romantic poets were keenly conscious of the
chasm between the transient, commonsense world of appearances and the eternal infinite realm of ideal truth and beauty, which can be perceived by means of the imagination. The new conception of the imagination as a creative, transforming force, central to the artistic process encouraged the development of the lyric. Appreciating the creativity of an artist Durgeswar Sarma in a precise way in his Gīt Āru Chabi was successful in transcreating the whole idea of the original poem by Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi that how trivial things of life which might escape the notice of an ordinary person can be transformed into something artistic. Just as Wordsworth by reminiscing the sight of the daffodils in the poem The Daffodils feels happy whether he is in a pensive or in a vacant mood the same therapeutic effect is also projected in the translated poem Sariyah Ḍarā by Dimbeswar Neog. Ananda Chandra Baruah’s translation of A. C. Swinburne’s poem A Match as Mil the projection of the same simplicity of diction, lyricism of feeling, the same contrast of leaf and flower as apparent in the original poem makes it difficult to differentiate from the original poem. Parvatiprasad Baruva’s adherence to the romantic mode of the English romantic poets and their alienation from the madding crowd are informed at the same time by a social awareness. With the ease of translation that he was capable of and the subjective affinities with some of his own poems his translated poems are from Shelley, Byron and Hafiz.

The enrichment of the Assamese language by the translated works of the above mentioned poets was the natural outcome of their grounding in their own culture and language. They were greatly influenced by the Western Romantic Movement. Romantic response is very subjective and individualistic. Although they were translating from a non cognate language, human nature being the same, subjective and individualistic inspiration cannot be exclusive and the modern Assamese poets discussed above have proved the point. The attempt to evaluate these poets within the perspectives of the recent advances in translation theories brings out the difficulties these poets faced owing to the cultural, social and lingual differences. This work to some extent, brought out the greatness of these poets who could overcome these constraints. The primary motive of the poet’s in translating poetical works into Assamese language, seems to have been not to enrich the
Assamese language, though it was a natural outcome, nor even to transplant the cultural and religious content, which naturally followed but to bring to the people the emotions and inspirations they themselves felt. Translation work can come to its own only when constraints, to a great extent, are overcome. The poets we have dwelt with in these pages, have proved the adaptability and the richness of the Assamese language. They were gifted with a more propitious talent which enabled them to keep the spirit without moving away from the letter.