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Translation as a ‘Superhuman’ Feat: A Metrical *Mahābhārata* in Malayalam

Abstract Koṭuññallūr Kuññikkuṭṭan Tampurān (1864–1913) completed a verse translation of the *Mahābhārata* in just 874 days, reproducing the exact metres of the original text. This unique work is superior in literary merit to the earlier fourteenth- and fifteenth-century attempts to translate the *Mahābhārata* within Kerala’s musical song tradition known as *pāṭṭu*. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, when scholarly translations rather than free adaptations had become the norm, the author sought to produce an accurate mirror image of the original Sanskrit text in Malayalam, rather than a loose retelling in verse. Unlike Tuñcatt Eḷuttacchan, who employed a lucid *mañipravāla* hybrid tilted towards Malayalam and enriched with Sanskrit vocabulary, Tampurān used a more colloquial form of Malayalam, which made his expression lively and accessible to common readers. The work also differs from the monumental English rendering by K.M. Ganguli (*The Mahābhārata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*), which does not preserve the metrical structure of the original. Even more remarkable is the fact that Tampurān’s translation was produced extempore, shedding light on the literary culture that prevailed in nineteenth-century Kerala. This paper investigates both the cultural and aesthetic significance of this extraordinary translation project.

Keywords *Mahābhārata*, translation, Malayalam, Kuññikkuṭṭan Tampurān, metre, literary culture

1 Introduction

The present paper focuses on the cultural and aesthetic aspects of a remarkable translation of the *Mahābhārata*, the great epic of India from the original Sanskrit into Malayalam, a regional language of South India. It was composed by a versatile poet, the legendary Kuññikkuṭṭan Tampurān (1864–1913) (hereafter called Tampurān) who belonged to the royal family of Koṭuññallūr in central Kerala. The author got an iconic stature in Kerala thanks to this work which many people consider as a super human feat.

The fact that it took just 874 days for him to complete this elegant verse translation is itself amazing. It may be recalled that the *Mahābhārata*, which consists of more than one hundred thousand verses is in length about eight times as the ‘*Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together’ (Macdonell 1990: 237) and by far the greatest epic poem humanity has ever produced and normally, it should take several years for a person to



complete the task of translating such a huge work. The speed with which he accomplished this is a feat unparalleled in any language and defies notions of translation as a slow and deliberate process, in which the translator has to struggle negotiating two different languages often using the trial and error method. To compound the matter, Tampurān had decided to render the text into verse form. All this he executed in an amazing manner, devoting a portion of his time every day, without compromising his routine jobs and even frequent travel.

The translation is done in a very lucid style and has made it possible for readers who have no access to the original text to experience the tone and tenor of the original text in their own language. The translation departs from other renderings in Malayalam and other languages in that the author, apart from giving shape to a work of high literary quality, consistently used the exact metres of the original text. It is no wonder that the translation has become a classic in Malayalam superseding other renderings of the epic. Understandably, almost a superhuman aura has been associated with the personality of the author due to this work.

2 The background

It needs to be asserted, though, that Tampurān was more than equal to his task. He was a prodigy who seems to have shown his amazing skill to compose poetry instantly even from his early childhood. Called *drutakavanam* in Malayalam, this type of feat has been compared to the concept of ‘lispings in numbers’ by a literary historian remembering Alexander Pope, who famously said ‘I lisp’d in numbers, for the numbers came’ (Leelavathy 2002: 135).

There are numerous literary anecdotes narrated by his biographers who highlight his quick-wittedness and gift to compose verses extempore (Ramavarma 1992: 30). He continued this practice throughout his life and used verse as a vehicle of expression in even conversations and letter writing. Literary historians locate him in what is described as *Koṭuññallūrkalari*, a centre of learning which flourished in the royal palace of Koṭuññallūr of central Kerala, around nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The galaxy of poets who flourished here came to be known under the rubrics of *Veṅmaṇi prasthānam*, a literary movement initiated by Veṅmaṇi Achan Nampūtiri, who was the father of the translator himself and a poet of no mean order. This movement was a continuation of the old *maṇipravāla* (mixture of pearl and coral metaphorically signifying the admixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit) tradition of Sanskrit-Malayalam hybrid literature characterised by Sanskrit meters and alliteration.¹ Instant compositions became something like a norm celebrated by these talented poets. But in contradistinction to the heavily sanskritised *maṇipravāla* tradition of

¹ As a consequence of Sanskritisation, a distinct stream of literature called *maṇipravāla* emerged which was a harmonious blend of Sanskrit and the local language as distinct from the old *pāṭṭu* stream which employed only Tamil phonemes and which employed alliterative devices of *monai* (repetition of the first syllable in both hemistiches) and *etukai* (repetition of the second syllable in all the quatrains) and *antādi* (beginning of the next verse with the last word of the previous verse).

the past, the poets of *Veṅmaṇi* school preferred a colloquial and lucid style with the preponderance of Malayalam.

Tampurān showed his proficiency in translation when quite young in age. Just as he composed verses extempore, he found pleasure in accepting the challenges of friends to compose translation of Sanskrit verses instantaneously. Apart from the translation of the *Mahābhārata*, his works include the Malayalam rendering of *Bhāgavata* (up to the fourth Skandha), *Hariścandropākhyāna*, (1928) *Vikramorvaṣīya*, *Śukasandeśa*, *Kokilasandeśa*, *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, *Candrikāvīthi*, *Śankarācāryacarita*, *Lakṣmīśahāya* and *Kādambarikathāsāra*. Interestingly, though he did not know much the English language, with the help of some friends proficient in English, he studied Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello* and translated them into Malayalam.

3 *Mahābhārata*: earlier adaptations

Mahābhārata has exercised irresistible charm over the minds of the people of Kerala as is vouchsafed by the innumerable retellings of the work. It has a long history of oral and written transmission, adaptation, retelling and dramatization. It has been a sourcebook for many a representation in classical and folk traditions. The influence of *Mahābhārata* in Kerala can be seen both in literature written here in both Sanskrit and Malayalam.

The Malayalam interface with *Mahābhārata* was heralded by *Bhāṣābhagavadgītā*, *Kaṇṇaśśabhārata* and *Bhāratamāla* written by poets of a group collectively known as Niraṇam poets of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Among the Niraṇam poets, it was Mādhava Paṇikkar who has the credit for translating the *Bhagavadgītā* for the first time anywhere in the world (Leelavathy 2002: 57). He has condensed the seven hundred verses of the *Bhagavadgītā* into 320 songs. Śāṅkara, another Niraṇam poet condensed the entire *Mahābhārata* into 1363 verses in his *Bhāratamālā*. Rāma, yet another author belonging to the Niraṇam group wrote *Kannaśśabhārata*, along with other devotional works like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhāgavata* and *Śivarātrimāhātmya*. These three adaptations in *pāṭṭu* tradition of Malayalam literature represent a quantum leap in the language in that they profusely use Sanskrit words without any inhibition, a trait which is absent in earlier *pāṭṭu* works like the *Rāmācarita* (Krishna Pillai 1958: 110). They are composed in a musical meter later called *Taraṅgiṇi* which has four lines having two halves having sixteen prosodial syllabic measures (*mātrās*). They are characterised by devotional fervour and aim at securing cessation of sins through the retelling of divine stories for the composers and securing final emancipation for the reader (Krishna Pillai 1958: 113).

Another example of the epic retelling is the *Bhāratagāthā* of little literary value, ascribed, most probably baselessly, to the illustrious poet Ceruśseri Nampūtiri. The devotional fervour seen in Niraṇam poets reaches its climax in the *Bhāṣābhārata*, authored by Tuñcatt Eḷuttachan who has made remarkable success in evoking the grandeur of the epic armed with an enchanting poetic style and the rhythmic cadence of indigenous metrical structure of Malayalam. Tuñcatt Eḷuttachan came to

be venerated as even the father of the Malayalam language based on his epic translation projects, especially on his *Adhyatmarāmāyaṇa* which became immensely popular all over Kerala. However, many critics reckon his *Bhāṣābhārata* as somewhat superior in literary qualities in comparison with the former though it somehow missed the same popularity.

4 The paradigmatic shift in the history of the translation

These earlier attempts of fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to translate the *Mahābhārata* were in the musical song tradition of Kerala, called *pāṭṭu*. The translation work undertaken by Tampurān departs from them on several counts. Firstly, the author was writing in the beginning of the twentieth century where scholarly translations rather than free adaptations became the norm. Unlike in the case of earlier works triggered off by a devotional zeal, his ideal was something like an intellectual conquest aimed at making an accurate and faithful mirror image of the original in Malayalam language. Continuing with the earlier tradition of rendering *Mahābhārata* in loose songs of flexible structure was definitely ruled out in such an exciting challenge. It is true that like his predecessors, he also definitely venerated the text as a sacred scripture. But while his predecessors saw the epics as the stories for the glorification of their favourite deities, his quest was of more of a linguistic nature rather than of a religious one. It was because of his insistence on the faithful rendering of the original that he was not satisfied with anything short of retaining the original Sanskrit meters used in the epic. This was indeed a paradigmatic shift in the history of the translation of the epic in Malayalam language. The poet was attempting something no other predecessor had dared to attempt. He aimed at making an exact replica of the epic in his mother tongue, retaining the textual and metrical structure of the original. He also did not interpolate any didactic or devotional portions based on his personal faith into the body of the epic. He did not want to tamper with the text by editing out or abridging any portion. He wanted to retain the original flavour of the epic as far as he could and miraculously succeeded in his almost impossible task.

5 Earlier attempts of the author

Tampurān's engagement with *Mahābhārata* has a long history. Earlier, in 1892 there was an attempt for 'team translation' of the epic involving about a dozen poets who were supposed to contribute the translation of their assigned portion. The translation was to be done using Dravidian meters following *Kilippāṭṭu* style in which Tuñcatt Eḷuttacchan had rendered *Mahābhārata*. The portions assigned to Kuññikkuṭṭan Tampurān were the *Āraṇyaparvan*, *Śalyaparvan* and *Śāntiparvan* excluding the *Mokṣadharmā* portion. It is recorded by his biographer that Tampurān had completed his assignment, but due to the laziness of the other poets, the project could never be completed (Ramavarma 1992: 201).

Another attempt for team translation was initiated by Kaṭattanāṭṭ Udayavarman Tampurān. This project was to translate *Bhāratamañjarī* of Kṣemendra. This time, the assigned translation of *Droṇaparvan* completed by Kuññikkūṭṭan Tampurān was partly being serialised in a publication until the demise of Udayavarman Tampurān in 1907.

It was this engagement with the *Mahābhārata* which triggered off the desire in Tampurān to attempt a task hitherto not attempted by anybody: to translate the entire *Mahābhārata* into Malayalam using the same meters of the original. It is true that a similar project was already undertaken by K.M. Ganguli, whose mammoth *The Mahābhārata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa Translated into English Prose* was published between 1883 and 1896 (Ganguli 2017), but it was in English prose addressed to the urban English knowing elite of India. The translator did not have to retain the metrical structure of the original. The earlier Malayalam versions of the *Mahābhārata* already mentioned were abridgements mostly using Dravidian meters the loose structure which gave a lot of expressive freedom to the translator.

6 The task and its magnitude

Thus, the task undertook by Tampurān was daunting: he had to cover the entire *Mahābhārata* in his scheme and to see that the flavour of the original text including its metrical structure is not lost in the translation. An inflexional language like Sanskrit can condense expressions to an amazing degree, and usually, it is difficult for a language like Malayalam which has an agglutinating structure to keep pace with the narration in the original which is necessary for a translation using the same metre. The translator was also not certain about the time necessary to complete the task he was to undertake or whether he could complete it at all. He compared his state of mind to that of Hanumān, the character in *Rāmāyaṇa*, who was about to leap into the air to cross the ocean, mounting the mountain Mandara, in his search for Sītā in Laṅkā. But he did take the plunge after seeking divine help visiting his temple (Ramavarma 1992: 204).

7 The process

It is interesting that an 'epic' aura surrounds accounts prevalent in Kerala about the method of Tampurān's translation. Somebody would recite each verse aloud and on hearing it he would instantaneously recite its translation aloud. A scribe nearby would take it down. Since he was a frequent traveller, the venues and scribes also had to change accordingly. The generic name for the scribe was Gaṇapati, recollecting the story that it was Lord Gaṇapati, the elephant faced god, who wrote down the entire *Mahābhārata* when Vyāsa the author composed and recited the original text. Biographers have recorded that in one respect, the scribes of Kuññikkūṭṭan Tampurān were lagging behind Lord Gaṇapati. Such was the speed with which Gaṇapati wrote the recited text that Vyāsa found it difficult to keep pace with him. Therefore, he

insisted that Gaṇapati should write down the verses only after understanding their meaning. When even this stipulation did not work, Vyāsa started making his verses as obscure as possible to gain some breathing space. But in the case of Tampurān, it was the scribe who found it difficult to keep pace with the translator as verse after verse flowed from him spontaneously the moment it was recited (Ramavarma 1992: 207). All this was done in the morning every day. The scribe was supposed to prepare the fair copy and to get it corrected by the author in the evening. But this plan was never executed, since in the evening, Tampurān would be busy playing *Caturanga*, the Indian chess or be engaged in small talk with his friends. He did not like to be disturbed and would summarily dismiss the scribe with the remark that no scrutiny would be necessary. Initially, he decided to translate fifty verses every day after taking his daily ablutions and worship in the morning, between 7 am and 9 am. However, he had to increase the number of verses to 100 soon on realising the inadequacy of the daily quota.

The translation work was done in the Malayalam Era 1079 which is equivalent to CE 7 May 1904, and completed on 1082 Kanni¹² which is equivalent to CE 28 September 1906.² Tampurān obviously had no opportunity to consult the critical edition of the text of BORI which appeared later, in 1927–1966. There is no mention of the source book in translation, and we have to infer that he was following the manuscript tradition of Kerala which is somewhat larger than the critical edition.

8 The translation: lucidity and perspicuity

The verses which spontaneously sprang from the face of the translator were lucid, simple and perspicuous so that one could grasp the meaning at the very instance of hearing. In metrical structure, syntax and vocabulary, the translation was as close to the original as possible. A few instances will suffice to drive the point.

klaibyam māśma gamaḥ pārtha naitad tvayyupapadyate
ḥṣudram ḥṛdayadaurbalyam tyaktvottoṣṭha parantapa || (Mahābhārata 6.26.3 [Bhagavadgītā 2.3])

klibatvam elkolā pārtha ninakkokkillat oṭṭume
tucchamiccittadaurbalyam viṭṭelkkuka parantapa

Here, while the translator has retained *ḥṛdayadaurbalyam*, *pārtha* and *parantapa* and slightly modified *klaibyam* as *klibatvam*, all the other ideas are conveyed in conversational Malayalam, and the verse as a whole has retained the flavour of the target language.

² These dates were recorded in what is called ‘Kali chronogram’ an algebraic method of representing numerals using letters. See for details Ramavarma (1992: 203–216).

*sulabhāḥ puruṣāḥ rājan satatam priyavādinaḥ
apriyasya ca tathyasya vaktā śrotā ca durlabhaḥ* | (*Mahābhārata* 2.87.16)

*āḷereyuṅṭām rājāve nityam seva paraññiṭān
seva viṭṭu hitam colvon kelkkuvānum curukkamām*

Here the translator has completely abandoned the vocabulary of the source language except the word *rājan*, and using colloquial expressions, hit the nail on its head to convey the gist of a proverbial statement.

*yā niśa sarvabhūtānām tasyām jāgarti samyamī
yasmin jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśā paśyato muneḥ
evarkkum rātriyām neram uṇarnniṭunnu samyamī
kānum munikku niśayaiñnellārum uṇarunnatil*

This is a verse cited by the poetician Ānandavardhana in his *Dhvanyāloka* to illustrate suggestive poetry using metaphorical expressions. The suggested sense that an ascetic is indifferent to the ways of the world is beautifully conveyed in the translation.

*atīkrāntasukhāḥ kālāḥ pratyupasthitadāruṇāḥ
śvaḥ śvaḥ pāpīyadivasāḥ pṛthivī gatayauvanā* || (*Mahābhārata* 6 ||1.128.6)

This again is a verse cited by Ānandavardhana in his *Dhvanyāloka* to illustrate suggestive poetry. The verse, put in the mouth of Sage Vyāsa contains a lot of metaphorical expressions and their beauty is not at all lost in the translation:

*kaḷiñṇu saukhyam kālattin paḷakkam bahudāruṇam
nāle nāleppāpādinam ūḷikko kettu yauvanam* || (*Mahābhārata* I.119.6)

All these verses are in Śloka meter, with four quarters of eight syllables each. Let us take another example using the slightly longer meter *Indiavajra*, which has four quarters with eleven syllables.

*tarko'pratiṣṭho śrutayo vibhinnāḥ naiko munir yasya vacaḥ pramāṇam
dharmasya tatvam nihitam guhāyām mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ* || (*Mahābhārata* [*Vana-*
parva] 3. 313.11)

The translation of this verse has a story behind it. Kuññikkuṭṭan Tampurān was always open to suggestions for the improvement of the quality of his translation as is evident from the corrections he made in his translation of the verse. In the opinion of V.K. Ramamenon, the scribe, the translation done by Kuññikkuṭṭan Tampurān was not very elegant, and he pointed out that this verse was already translated by

Tampurān himself earlier in a better way. Hearing the comment, Tampurān abandoned the new version and consented to retain his own earlier translation which runs as follows:

*tarkam nilakkum marayokke vere
maharṣimārkkulla mataññal vere
guhakkakam veppitu dharmatatvam
mahājanam pom vaḷi tanne māgam*

9 The elegance of the translation: three factors

As indicated early, the amazing ease with which Tampurān could do such renderings can be attributed to three factors. One was his capacity for instant poetry for which he had won the title *sarasadrutakavikulakirīṭamaṇi*- the crest jewel of quick-witted extempore poets. The other factors were his deep erudition in the source language Sanskrit on one hand and the absolute mastery over Malayalam, the target language, on the other. It was unusual in Kerala that a scholar poet erudite in Sanskrit would meticulously eschew heavily sanskritised style and to prefer simple Malayalam language in his writings. The Kotuññallūr Kalari to which he belonged always showed a partiality for simple Malayalam over the sanskritised one. Tampurān once had even gone to the extent of experimenting with a poetic style totally devoid of Sanskrit. Once he declared his preferred style thus:

Our recourse is the language accepted by [Tuñcatt] Eḷuttacchan. This clever man [i.e. myself] will not utter a single word which is not agreeable to all people.³

This was written under the belief that linguistic style perfected by Tuñcatt Eḷuttacchan, the archetypal figure in Malayalam poetry was the language of the common people. Tampurān seems to have reached this conclusion based on the practice of common people daily reading the works of Tuñcatt Eḷuttacchan. Actually, Tuñcatt Eḷuttacchan used a lucid Mañipravāḷa hybrid tilted towards Malayalam with profuse inputs from Sanskrit. However, a close perusal of Tampurān's work would indicate that he used a more colloquial and less formal form of Malayalam in his translation which makes his expression lively. In this, he did not have any inhibition that the epic grandeur of the style is to be maintained vigorously. Of course, it is true that his style has a fair share of simple Sanskrit in its vocabulary and rarely he had to use some obscure Sanskrit words. But these are exceptional cases. A frequent traveller who would mix freely with the local populace, he had thorough knowledge of the dialectical nuances of Malayalam. His uninhibited preference for the ordinary colloquial Malayalam is seen throughout in his translation of *Mahābhārata*. This makes the work easily accessible to ordinary people who do not have the tools to

³ Quoted by Ramavarma (1992: 113).

decode the original text. However, it may be due to what could be perceived as a flippant attitude that some literary highbrows made fun of the work which was drawing unprecedented approbation all over Kerala. It is on record that even his family members, the scholars of Koṭuññallūr royal palace initially used to ridicule the translation as a 'commoner's pudding' (*cettippāyasam*), probably alluding to its simplicity and unpretentious style. But soon the ridicule gave way to awe and respect (Ramavarma 1992: 212).

Another important stipulation Tampurān made in translation was never to give up the syntactical features of Malayalam. He once wrote: 'In order to create elegance in the sentence, one should always adhere to a sentence style which is appropriate to Malayalam' (Ramavarma 1992: 112). While this is largely true in his translation, Tampurān had to tackle the problem of declensional agreement in ordinary expressions frequently. While Malayalam does not have this agreement rule, Sanskrit follows the norm that the adjectives should have the same case, gender and number as that of the noun. Tampurān freely flouted the Malayalam rule and followed the Sanskrit syntax piling up adjectives in the same case as that of the qualified noun, treating them as individual nouns.

10 Reception

There was a huge reception waiting for the work when it was completed. It was decided to publish it in monthly instalments in some journal. The *Malayālamānorama*, a prominent Malayalam newspaper lauded the work as a work to be respected by all Malayalam speaking people and appealed people to extend all support for the venture. A.R. Rajarajavarma, creating a furore in literary circles, suggested that the work is far more superior to the *Bhāṣabharata* of Tuñcat Eḷuttacchan, which he described as 'having no tail or corner'. When there was some protest against the comments on Eḷuttacchan, widely venerated as the father of Malayalam, he clarified that he did not mean any disrespect to him; he was comparing the syntactical restrictions in Sanskrit meter followed by Tampurān to the flexible structure of Dravidian meters in Eḷuttacchan's translation (Ramavarma 1992: 220). Kerala Varma Valiya Koyil Tampurān, the veteran figure in Malayalam literature described the attempt as 'amazing' and called him 'Keralavyāsa', the Vyāsa belonging to Kerala (Ramavarma 1992: 223).

Joseph Mundasseri, a famous critic has recorded that scholars from North India found the attempt of a single person to translate *Mahābhārata* in its entirety as amazing (Ramavarma 1992: 212). Many a Keralite liked to believe that behind such a feat, there was some divine hand; Tampurān had unshakeable faith the Goddess of the Koṭuññallūr shrine and he started his herculean task after making an offering to the deity. Literary historians like Ullur Paramesvara Iyer also shared such a belief and portrayed him as an avatar of god. Kuttikrishna Marar, a famous critic, citing the superhuman speed of the translation process, defended the idea that the feat of the translator is divine (Marar 1964: 32–37). However, rational critics like Kuttippuzha


Krishna Pillai maintain that by making Tampurān a god, people are actually denying him greatness due to him as a human being.⁴

But all of the critics are unison in upholding the greatness of the amazing translation.

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⁴ Quoted by Ramavarma (1992: 3).