

Translating the Nation: Of Meaning and the Mythic

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Abstract: While the politics of translation has concerned itself with cultural globalisation, in heterogenous national formations it transcends the myopic conception of language alteration to collective imagination. What is at stake in such structures is that the idea of 'history' is severely contested across one national community with its inherent contradictions. The conflict between an umbrella term against individualities of particular communities poses the centrifugal forces of cultural identities. Herein, the co-ordinates of different identities for one community vis-a-vis its acceptance/ rejection by other communities interrogates what constitutes a larger sense of an umbrella community and how this identity is constructed and stabilized. From a technical sense of literary conception, this is a cause of celebration but a challenge for processes of historicization. In this paper, I look into the fiction of Sidhartha Sharma to understand the curious ordeals of translation as he explores the relationships of identity and language to mainland Indian independence struggle. In his novel, *The Grasshopper's Run*, Sharma risks a double course of translating North Eastern Tribal imagination that thrives through orality (and thus evades documentation like most native cultures) with the processes of transcription. In this endeavour, what is of importance is how meaning gets eroded and newly formed as it is transmitted across cultural barriers.

Keywords: Orality, myth, translation, transcription, nation, meaning, identity

Translation, in the academia, has been contesting the idea of symbolic and cultural transmission since its initial years of epistemological focus. A rather novel field in terms of academic chronology, its involvement in the literary and cultural epistemology has evolved from a sense of inter-cultural comprehension and involvement where the act of 'knowing' the 'othered' figure becomes significant. As true to its political implications, the newly 'autonomized' discipline runs beyond a simpler study in trans-cultural achievements and duly entangles itself in the nuances of the post-colonial lineage. To be sure, 'translation' as used in scientific branches, involves the 'transmission' of source material to the target plane without necessarily modifying or editing the constitutive components. But as social sciences and humanities fails to exclude the inexorable principles of subjectivity and identity, the nuanced grid of collective consciousness across ethnographic demarcations calls for critical attention.

Since in my paper, I tend to limit myself to the ideological plane of the Indian Republic in general and the geographical plane of the North Eastern Indian landscape in particular, a complimentary investigation of situational fluidity requires a subtler intelligibility of plural cultures. The concept of the Indian nation state, in historical time, has strived to deal with multiplicity of regional principalities that jostle, compliment and draw contrast to each other. A short ethnographic study is possibly sufficient to illuminate the cultural-linguistic similarities in adjacent topographies that gradually aggravate in the contrarian spectrum as we move further from each geographical point of reference. Here, as we may understand, the cultural medium of communication lies in the discourse that in turn is constituted by varied semiotics. The order of language that takes into account not only the arrangement of words in syntax but also issues of phonetic transcription, regional sensibilities and cultural ethos and that in short implies the very 'materiality of discourse'.¹

As most basic pedagogy on translatory problems suggest that the task of an anthropologist or linguist/translator involves greater constraints owing to various factors that transcend the simpler visibility of language alteration, the reductive view regarding 'easiness' loses steam.² And in a multilingual nation like India, this 'difference' of societal conceptions are beyond processes of condensation. With India's stratified pre-colonial-colonial-anti-colonial history, the urge for 'documentation' has emerged as the most viable source in the politics of history, of generation and re-generation against claims and counter-claims. This is instrumental to the 'logic' of this paper for what I try to look into is not just 'translation' through language but of ideas that might rupture popular understanding to what constitutes a community. Added to that, the fluid process of analysis and argumentation is more cumbersome as the text that I look at tries to connect 'oral' belief system (almost a mythic form) to this already arduous enterprise.³ Here, the idea of the 'mythic' harps back to a golden past that is recorded in divergent and conflicting faith in detailed events. The obscuration of details brings under question the veracity of the event itself and what we are left with is the 'idea' of it though the wisdom from that idea of the event remains similar across native imagination. I discuss what constitutes ethnic identity through culture/language against the national belief system and the (im)possibilities of translation between them.

The idea of nationhood has been subjected to various interpretations as a locus of contestation across ideological divides. The 'interpretations' that we talk about are not instances of just re-reading an ethos on the basis of providences or what we call objective 'facts' but a process of 'translation' from one understanding to the other. For example, while the ideas of Western nationhood have governed notions of the 'territorial', ethnic and constitutional nationalism, Asian political system has looked into the domain of cultural ethos with an overarching intent. But the fact that there cannot be only one 'language' of 'national' sentiment in vastly diversified societies make the process of semantic and symbolic translation both precious and precarious. Here, the idea of symbolic associations with common totems of 'fixedty' in meaning is different for each ethnic principality. With each regional imagination being 'fixed' but in differential politics to the other, the idea of what really can form a 'shared' cultural experience remains a conundrum. As my argument addresses the fundamental observation of what is really 'national' in a diversified nation, I look upon the problem of 'un-translability' in a territorial community not only through language but through meaning and sentiments.

The Indian subcontinent has had featured as a prominent region of study in all major anti-colonial endeavours. Given its variety of cultural, economic and ethnic identities, the landmass inarguably plays a very significant role in experimenting with identity complexes and political affinities. Its sudden and unprecedented conditions in demarcation of what constitutes self and 'us' as opposed to 'them' and 'theirs' have been elements of wild guesses in psephology and has posed thwarted attempts at behavioural politics. Such study that accounts for defining what is 'history' for one community against the other, what methods of 'historicization' is required to build societies in truth (and that without eliminating the other), and where, to borrow its substance from. Moreover, these divergences are as much as in historical belief systems as in linguistic and dialectic variances or their concomitant realities. For no probabilities can define why a community upholds linguistic association as superior over religion whereas its neighbouring population does exactly the contrarian or say where economic or caste consolidation implodes a community into class and political strifes as against an overarching and often militant nationalism is impossible without diligent and perpetual study. In short the discourse of translation is cultural, collective and specific; these border on the insider/outsider divide. For my paper, I have taken up a very curious and probably unique exercise in 'translative historicity'

that relates to the times of the Second World War and the Indian independence movement. Again, this would be through the literature of the communities that is mediated by the author-narrator. For where history writing is a game of probabilities and strategies, translating literature might be closer to shared 'truth' in the experience of a community. I look at Siddhartha Sarma's award winning and popular fiction *The Grasshopper's Run* to look at identity definitions and community imagination.

As Sarma himself speaks in the introductory note, the novel that he writes has been partly fictionalized on one of the numerous stories he came across in his visit to the land.⁴ The myth of some 'fire' and 'water', a treasured belief of the Nagas, is used as an allegory to the plot. Sarma, himself an Assamese, has built his fiction mostly in the hilly terrains of what is today's North Eastern India, weaving state capitals like Imphal (Manipur), Kohima (Nagaland) and a part of the plains like the noted towns of Dimapur (Assam) and Jorhat (Assam) at the heart of the narrative. For efforts in plot construction, the narrative briefly stretches onto Calcutta (Kolkata, West Bengal) but for purely political causes. Calcutta still retained its position as a significant city in India and the most prominent name in the landscape for eastern British India in 1944. And being one of the chief of the three British Presidencies, its function to impart missionary education in all its 'civilizational philanthropy' with Western formative ideals was undeniably powerful. Our narrative locates our protagonist by the name of Gojen as a student in one of the Calcutta missionary schools, with an Assamese birth and a more fervid North Eastern sense of association. The narrative that stretches over some smooth two hundred pages recounts a great tale of friendship between Gojen and his childhood friend, Uti who belongs to one of the Naga tribes, the Aos.

Unlike Gojen, Uti never found a chance at Western education. And with his inherent heroism staging a stiff battle against the Japanese in the very prologue of the novella, this provides the text with the very intent and direction for the latter pages. Uti's character occurs more than a few times within the present narrative that is framed after his death and that mostly through the psycho-intuitive conversations between Gojen and him. What is interesting is the idea in Gojen to relate back to his North Eastern origins despite having the privilege of a more 'tamed' but pivotal chance at British education. Gojen's projection as an 'elephant' (his name a master signifier) with his keen acumen in sensory reception and weapon-wielding sets the very tone of the narrative that challenges the notions of a community's foundational promise. The image of a wild animal against a Western system of education that, for all, talks about 'taming' civility is perhaps a microcosmic indication of the broader structure of tension in the narrative. For Gojen, his identity as a missionary student belonged to the Christian religion but not-so Christian upbringing. In that we witness a state of flux. Twice in the narration, the narrator mentions about the uneasy but settled idea of the Christian faith; Gojen's father talks about how the 'Ingraz' came in to destroy their 'stones' but "of course, we are Christians now and we shall continue to be."⁵ The idea of Christianity in a religious worldview jostles with the idea of pagan sensibilities where in the north-eastern green, every animal and plant, and rocks connoted some idea of ecological balance and 'original' system of survival.⁶

However, this tension in religious affiliation may have a greater role to play given Gojen's induction into British connections and a larger sense of alignment with the British in the struggle against the Japanese. Now, this directly takes us to the core of the narrative. Gojen's return to Jorhat, his encounters with all the variety of Naga tribes is a logical conclusion of the Prologue where Uti is murdered by the Japanese under Colonel Mori, the villain of the piece. In addition, the entire tribal village of Uti was massacred weaponless. The hills were being contested by the Imperial British and Japanese armies and are secure for our historicising impulse to that extent. However, what complicates the problem is the historical fact that the Japanese Army were working in tandem with the Indian

National Army (founded and actively guided by Subhas Chandra Bose) in men and money and enjoyed massive popular support from plain-land Indians.⁷ This draws the conversation to the nuances of identities and affiliations. Gojen's religious identity as a Christian, his cultural inclination towards Indo-Burmese traditions and the question of citizenship as an Indian complicates these tales of Indian Independence.

Gojen's understanding of his tribal lineage bestows him with the 'exclusiveness' of belonging to the Aho tribe. To him, the 'Ingraz' and the Japanese are as alien to his community as the 'Indians'. There are at least a couple of references where the tribes point to the independence struggle as a political phenomenon that would affect the 'Indians' and not them. This finds resonance through the character of Gojen as well. "*There are not many of them (Indians) with the Japoni in the hills yet. Anyway, if they think such people will help them after the Ingraz are defeated...but it is not our concern. Leave them alone.*" or "*The Indians may even get independence after this they are saying.*"⁸ Territorially, today's North-Eastern India, with all its intermittent separatist sentiments, were claimed by the Indian National Army as the frontier states of liberation in the struggle against the British.⁹ In this, the idea of 'India' is a point of contention in Sarma's work as well. His alternative view of the independence struggle locates these Naga communities who were, at best, unperturbed by the question of colonial rule and thus served as sources of counter-narratives in an otherwise engineered homogenous struggle. To them, the question of 'sovereignty' was constricted to their tribes and their land, their history recorded defeat at the hands of the British and subsequent massacres by the Japanese to whom the Indian National Army alleged its loyalty. Interestingly, throughout the narrative, undertones of proximity to the British is neutralised by the logic of the hostile Japanese invasions who 'slaughtered' tribal villages without mercy.

The tension between the Japanese and the Naga tribes does not rest on the plank of British allegiance. For them, the massacres of their tribes, the repeated incursions into the remotest of territories and perhaps, the idea of a new mode of colonisation contributed to the Nagas' unprecedented hostility with the Japanese army. Significantly, they were aware of the Indian collaborative endeavours with the Japanese. Hence, what can be roughly interpreted as the sense of 'Indianness' did not become a part of the tribal imagination; in this the ideas of legality and political praxis would strictly be 'non-modern' and steeped into community culture. In the novella, the fact that the Japanese were dismantling the underpinnings of tribal culture with 'visible violence', played a major role in the open hostility towards the Japanese-Indian collaboration. In the case of the British, the efficacies of the colonisation technique was perhaps rooted less in open violence than with a combination of epistemological violence with a greater deal of physical autonomy. The incursion and superimposition of Western Enlightenment education over native sensibilities is a violence done to break both culture and identity through discourses of epistemology and enlightenment. For the British, as both Innuk and Meren cites, the uneasiness was more conceptual and embarked upon through negotiations. Such negotiations were political, cultural and community-based. For instance, they had adopted the religion of the British but were stridently opposed to their worldview about life with the idea of 'modernity'. Again, to say that the tribes had successfully warded off the perils of cultural imperialism would be incorrect with the 'civilizing' impulses that now, slowly but steadily contested with tribal livelihood. In their native imagination, the land that they belonged to were not of the British, the Japanese or the Indians though a part of the revenue lied with the British officials. So the loss of 'sovereignty' was not a defeat for the sovereign imagination. This would be better delineated in their sense of community imagination about which I will discuss later.

The question of modernity/non-modernity is also ramified in the struggle for keeping one's formative identity unharmed while meeting the requirements of survival. For

instance, we have a glimpse of Naga warriors who take on bows and arrows that represent the conscious sense of identity that the tribes wanted to preserve. On the other hand, the idea of an uncomfortable but rather irreversible change with modern ammunition is more than copiously dealt with in the text. At least six of the seventeen chapters predominantly deal with the various kinds of rifles and cartridges, of grenades and bombs, all that signify a new dimension of warfare.¹¹ To think that wars never transpired in the remote depths of North East Indian valleys during pre-colonial times is a positive fallacy; the text talks about the warring tribes with various disputes including territories and these have been recounted more than once by the third person narrator. However, none of these wars of supremacy had routed out the ideas of co-existence or indulged in unreasoned killings and that will take us back to tribal cultural ethos.

The tribal ideas compose the largest section of the text. The provision that there can be no definite or absolute views of the times, not monolithic nor bipolar, is perhaps the greater intent weaving the work. At the centre of the narrative, we find the Naga tribes, with Ao being the chief tribe under depiction. Right from the initial pages, the narrator is particular about the uses of imagery and planes of analogies. Of course, Gojen is thus the hunter boy who takes upon himself to avenge the death of a tribe which was led by his friend Uti and his father. In the free, indirect discourse of the narrator, he is the 'elephant' who could read his circumstances better than those around him and could paint a target where the seniors across the tribes failed. Much of the narrative is about a deathless equation with Uti who being the skilled 'runner' and a tremendously agile warrior, had also been a martyr that had battled the Japanese hard before his own death. Other prominent characters across tribes like that of Meren, Imnuk, Imnukubla, the Konyak, the Angami, Shilukaba, have been offered to the readers with unmistakable affinity towards nature. To note, these tribes belong to various regions in the text. The Konyaks were Burmese for instance whereas the Aos still had their dominant settlements in Assam while the Angamis were more Kohima based. With brief and bantering mentions of the rivalry within these tribes, the collective and shared histories of their existence was mediated by nature. This undoubtedly condensed the struggle to create the insider/outsider binary in questions of colonial interests and tribal sovereignty.

This, in fact, extends the dichotomy of the 'epistemological violence' that characterised the identity of the hilly tribes. While the introductory chapter sheds light on the Western system of education, a dichotomy is raised right from the succeeding chapters regarding it and this idea perpetuates till the closure of the text. To cite some instances, if we look at Chapter 2, there is a passage where Gojen recounts his life in the hills where as opposed to British system of believing in one absolute narrative, he accepted various tales as 'truth'. "*For Gojen, who knew much fiction than his grandfather, anything that was possible might have happened, but not everything anyone said was possible. For him the truth lay in the forest, in what he saw, felt or heard. Beyond that anything was not much considering.*"¹² Or, in Chapter Eight, the narrator remarks "*These villages were familiar to him even if only vague outlines cannot be seen. He remembered practically each land, pond and creek in this area. Some parts of the hills were also familiar...*"¹³ Here, two quick things are obvious. First that this multiplicity of narratives did not mean 'anything' that was told but those that were experienced. In this legitimate binary between what we may call *theoria* in the western canon would hold lesser value to Gojen than that which was taught or the idea of *phronesis*. Similarly, the narrator invests on detailed sections on Gojen's relation to Uti's tribe, his early tribal education in the hills, the stay in the *morung* and the tales he heard from Uti's grandmother.

While commenting on Gojen's British education, Shilukaba had asked Gojen to point out the differences between British and tribal hunts. Gojen's inability to answer made him assert, "*In the hills they hunt or food. Sometimes they go out for a long while not knowing*

for certain if they will get food for their families...People like you, like the Ingraz, hunt because its fun. Specially the Ingraz: they hunt with people who scare the game out in the open, with dogs and drums. The Ingraz just sits in a comfortable place and the scared animal just runs out to be shot...I have shown many men how to hunt but they did not deserve their kills..." he said that one could make it deserving "by not making things easy, by not having bearers and dogs to do the work for you, by becoming a part of the swamps and taking as much discomfort as the birds you hunt live with. By making yourself and the birds equal."¹⁴ With repudiating the discourse on excesses, they bore with them the idea of them as legitimate bearers of the land and its nature. "The Aos are an ancient people, even in a land where ancient means really ancient and the histories of nations stretch far back through time. Ao or Aor , in their language, they say, means 'those who came before' as opposed to Mirirs or 'those who came after'..."¹⁵ Or again, Meren says in Chapter 10, "Boy, the Ingraz came here because they wanted to create protection for India. A buffer area, they call it. They came to your lands for the wood and coal and oil. The hills are under him, yes, but the hills don't belong to them, because they do not really love the hills. It is not their home. You have to belong to the land before the land belongs to you."¹⁶

Through this, the idea of superlative affiliation to the hills also occurs amongst the tribes, in the lands and through the various differences in dialects that serve as identity makers and cultural signifiers. Also significant is the fact that the Konyak and the Angami are particular individuals who play important roles in Gojen's fight to hunt down Mori, the Japanese officer who slaughtered masses. These characters are never named individually but called after the name of the tribe. This, too, insinuates at the idea of the collective against individual motives, a rather post-modern discussion. Interestingly, Mori was the pivotal figure against whom Gojen and the tribal wrath was directed, without a blind cause for Japanese massacre. This idea of debunking generalisations is perhaps far more modern than modernity has had offered through its meta-narratives. The tenets of tribal 'education' remains a case to study when Gojen extinguishes his impulse to murder Mori while taking away his dearest possession, his knife. Hence, Gojen as the native, dealt with narratives in psychological study as well.

To make the culminating point in the text is to look again at the idea of myths and legends that directly associate with the multiplicity in narratives and in turn influence the belief system in aboriginal thought. The idea of orality and story-telling is perhaps the greatest exercise in the functions of historicization that does not claim historical information through concrete particulars but rely on history as 'wisdom from the ancients.' This idea of storytelling that occurs in Walter Benjamin's opinion regarding monopoly of information as against the 'wisdom' of story-telling also ironically marks international wars as the break in community function. Our text suits his idea very well. And the grasshopper silently playing witness to the turbulence between the fire from the east and water from the west makes it the original bearer of tradition and of custom much like how Gojen creates history by his sheer force of will amid the British and the Japanese. Thus this part of Indian history is 'real' without its 'Indianness' and with a story without its records.

What concerns us here can be studied on two planes. First, the question of oral translation that runs overtly throughout the text. The Naga tribes historicize their love for the land through myths and legends, those that have never been put to documentation. Here, this is not an exceptional case of ethnic imagination if we attempt to relate to most native civilizations across the globe. Most of the effects of community association were ritualistic and language played a pivotal role in community participation. Here, if we look at the character of Gojen , we might notice that his attempts to gather strength is through the 'etymological' understanding of the names and traits of these tribes, their explication and legitimization of the sensory world around them , their understanding of tribal spirit—all through tribal articulations and a curious process of meaning formation that fell heavy on

colonial 'rationality'. This efficacy of tribal resilience is through a common semantic intent despite the use of divergent tribal languages and dialects. This also means that inter-tribal linguistic similarities/differences were bridged upon through a convergent process of meaning and sentiment catalysed by an effect of common historical situations. To that extent, the narrative is an anti-colonial statement that thrives on 'orality' and translation of the mythic against the Western impulses of documentation and their 'truth' to knowledge.

What is also interesting here is that the kind of language that Sarma himself has used. Writing in the colonial language with an attempt to 'minorize the major' in his linguistic enterprise, Sarma attempts to capture the verve and rhythm of the tribal languages, especially the Mongsen and Chungli, which has a different syntactic pattern to that of English. Following the SOV pattern as opposed to SVO in English, Sarma must have run a tough task in adopting short and energetic sentences to enter into tribal imagination. Here, we might note that the author had accessed these oral belief-systems through the stories from Naga lips which means that he had to translate linguistic sensoriness of the tribes into English and then transcribe words in text—a case of double displacement. The inability to duly translate one language into other is not a process of technical representation but a process of cultural transmission that works through the silences and statements, the overt and covert suggestions of language, gestures and expressions. Translation creates new meaning in the target language while eroding some from the source language in creating a new aperture in another cultural system. Hence meaning becomes volatile in translation as it cuts across different audiences and becomes even more cumbersome when they challenge the expectations of a national community. And here we have another crucial point to discuss.

The fact that the boundaries of us/them, the Nagas and the Indians betray the 'intent' of the community that collectively can be considered as part of a nation. Without just referring to Anderson's understanding of it, what is really 'intransmissible' here is if there can be any effective language of sentiments that can be received and understood without the biases within one community (here the Indian cultural community). In this context, variations are just not regional and linguistic but also about the collective sentiments that bind a community together. The question then is can there be a community without commonalities, specially when the fulcrum of the cultural sentiment is at stake? Translation, then, is not just technical in this regard but largely existential. It is cultural, political and polemical. The 'failures' in translating particular and contrarian histories onto a plane of co-existence is where a narrow parochial germination of attitudinal violence takes place. To all those who appropriate the term 'Indians' and distribute the label, the adverse impulses towards the INA and the insecure detachment towards the mainland anti-colonial struggle might well slip into sedition within the modern state. Where does this lead us to then? The grounds of 'intransmissibility' of values, mutual respect and the importance of the centrifugal forces within a community to keep it alive. The greater project of translation is to locate and accept not just ideas and values but alternate historical strains within a dominant History.

Notes

- ¹ Foucauldian materiality of discourse.
- ² Cultural translation theory.
- ³ Here, the idea of the 'mythic' harps back to a golden past that is recorded in divergent and conflicting faith in detailed events. The obscuration of details brings under question the veracity of the event itself and what we are left with is the 'idea' of it though the wisdom from that idea of the event remains similar across native imagination.
- ⁴ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Limited, 2009, 3.
- ⁵ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Limited, 2009, 58
- ⁶ Original here refers to the origins of narratives that native populations seek and assert to legitimize and for understanding nature and the world for what it is. Hence a greater degree of association with nature is very emblematic in such belief system.
- ⁷ For a greater understanding of the INA movement, See: Peter Ward Fay, *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle For Independence*, University Of Michigan Press, 1995
- ⁸ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Limited, 2009, 62.
- ⁹ See: Peter Ward Fay, *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle For Independence*, University Of Michigan Press, 1995.
- ¹⁰ The incursion and superimposition of Western Enlightenment education over native sensibilities is a violence done to break both culture and identity through discourses of epistemology and enlightenment.
- ¹¹ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, Ch. 3, 4, 6, 7-9, 12-14, 16.
- ¹² Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, 35.
- ¹³ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, 91.
- ¹⁴ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, 44.
- ¹⁵ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, 53.
- ¹⁶ Siddhartha Sharma, *The Grasshopper's Run*, New Delhi: Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, 109.
- ¹⁷ See: Walter Benjamin, "Introduction" to "The Story-Teller", *The Story-Teller: Tales Of Loneliness*, (New Delhi: Verso Books) 2016, 10-15.

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