

Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry

ANUSHIYA SIVANARAYANAN

FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, I have been involved in a project to translate Tamil Dalit literature into English. (*Dalit* is the collective term for the “untouchable” castes of India.) Even though I am bilingual and worked as a translator of essays and technical reports during my graduate-student days in India, before I began this project, I had almost no experience in translating Tamil poetry. Initially, I had planned on getting a professional translator to do the work involved and actually spent a whole summer in India meeting prospective writers and translators who expressed an interest in my proposed book. All the men I met were professors of English in city colleges who had translated Tamil Dalit writing before. Except for one, none of them were of Dalit origin, but then, neither am I. In fact, one of the initial reasons I felt uneasy about even trying to translate Tamil Dalit poetry was my uncomfortable awareness that I was attempting to take on the task of interpreting and illuminating voices of a culture that had for centuries been silenced by those belonging to my caste groups and class.

My early apprehensions were exacerbated by my search for translators from Tamil to English, as most of the men I met (and they were all men) made it clear that they too felt inadequate translating poetry, especially the slash-and-burn protest rhetoric of most modern Tamil Dalit poetry. The poetical form was a strange new animal that none of them had ever tried to tame before, or so the argument went, and the consensus was that essays, short stories, novel excerpts, and even plays by Dalits were translatable, but not poetry. I should clarify that Dalit literature is an entirely new genre within Tamil literature, and Tamil scholars—many of them non-Dalit—find themselves scrambling trying to find a new poetics for this emergent literature.

The political and personal ramifications involved in identifying with the writings of a hitherto despised caste of people added to my difficulty in finding competent Tamil-

to-English translators of poetry. Clearly, translating poetry from one culture to another involves being sensitive to cultural registers. In the Tamil poems of N. T. Rajkumar (some of which appear in this selection), the references to the regional folk religion require not simply an understanding of the various names of the mother goddesses he lists but an easy sense of comfort within the folk culture described—rather like wearing a cotton sari as if it is part of one’s skin and not a costume.

Rajkumar is one of the more popular Dalit poets and has been published in both mainstream Tamil literary publications as well as Dalit publications. In a recent interview with me, he admitted that his choice of subject in the poems translated here—in which he details the ancient injustices done to Dalit women and draws connections to the present—was deliberate, personal, and ultimately political. “I belong to the *Kanniya* caste: people traditionally associated

with magic and exorcism within rural Tamil culture. My earliest memories are of searching for herbs in the forest, and of walking behind my father, carrying the materials needed for ceremonies.” He delights in his intimate knowledge of the ways these Dalit women, who have all died violently, have been made into deities. “Our gods are jungle gods,” Rajkumar argues.

Their stories and even their statues are now being tamed to make them fit mainstream Hinduism, especially now, with the Hindutva movement aggressively taking over our local temples. These men find the statues of our gods too wild, in some elemental fashion, as if their very mode of address goes against the patriarchal bent of the Hindu scriptures. So our goddess statues, with their *Kali*-like, dark-stone images have been covered in sandalwood paste—as if by turning the black stone into yellow, the narratives could also be changed. The Hindu fundamentalists went so far as to even break off the tusklike teeth of one of the mother goddesses. There is nothing gentle or passive about our gods. Make no mistake, they are all ghosts.



Savi Savarkar, *Expressions of the Untouchable I (series)*, 1991

In my translations of Rajkumar's poems, I chose to leave the original names of the folk goddesses intact, even though it is possible to translate the names into English. I was wary of making literal translations of poetry that show nothing but a kind of narrow, professional efficiency on the part of the translator.

So, I asked myself, as I began translating the Tamil into an English that I hoped would provide the reader with the same richness of the source text, dare I speak for the subaltern? Would I be able to deal with my limitations and restrictions—the result of a particular kind of upbringing, of my gender-, class-, and caste-based subjectivities, and of a carefully constructed cosmopolitan identity—and enter into the world of the modern Tamil Dalit poet? Are such boundary crossings possible or even desirable? Would I be able to translate not simply the words but also the passion, the visceral anger, the sarcasm, the truths of a different people who, I have been taught, are unlike my own? In identifying and exploring the differences in Dalit and non-Dalit situations, what sort of insights would I get into my own selfhood? Is such self-consciousness and self-reflection necessary in translating the words of another? Would I find the fissures and contradictions of my so-called mainstream Indian (and diaspora) culture magnified or diminished as I translate the poetry of the Dalits, who claim to define themselves over and against the same normalized culture to which I belong?

Finally, a year later, I sat down with several poems and began working the words, painstakingly stumbling through a language that assumed new forms in the hands of the Dalit poets, evoking a beauty that was elusive and at the same time strangely familiar. To my surprise, I found the diction, nomenclature, and references of the Dalit poems tapping into my memories, making connections with other, half-buried texts that I had classified, cataloged, and forgotten in another life. The architecture of the poems at times reminded me of sights I had seen somewhere else, rather like going to a place you had never been to before and recognizing it from a movie you saw as a child. I read the poems with the intention to translate in the forefront of my mind; but even as I strove to wrestle with the meanings of individual words, their combined effect, and my own choices in picking and choosing the stress points of the poem, I kept feeling that many of the forms and subject treatments echoed other poems I had encountered in a different context.

For instance, I was looking through a collection of Tamil folk songs (the poems most closely identified with Dalit

culture in the traditional sense), when I came across a particular verse from the *Raja and Rani Dance*, the most popular of all Tamil folk musicals. The song is an introduction, and it plays as a welcome song, a common feature in all Tamil folk musicals.

Wonderful betel leaves—these
betel leaves are from Verahanoor—I
bought these betel leaves—but if
they aren't enough for you,
Don't leave me sad, Sir
Don't stand there
All mad, Sir.'

I had heard these very words, in a similar construction with the same raw, folksy beat, in a popular song by Ilaiyaraaja (a Dalit musician, poet, and composer) from a 1980s Tamil movie. The story is set in a village, and the hero sings about betel leaves, incorporating the same sly humor and the conversational, immediate, and dialogic elements of tradi-

tional Tamil folk songs. Once I made the connection between the Dalit poetry I was reading and the compositions of Ilaiyaraaja, many elements about the form and function of the poems fell into place. Rather like hearing a classical piece from Beethoven in a Disney cartoon, I realized that through Ilaiyaraaja, who is renowned for placing working-class lyrics dealing with rural life at the center of Tamil popular music, I already had an education of sorts in folk composition that would be invaluable in my efforts to

translate modern Tamil Dalit poetry.

It is important to understand that the vernacular or colloquial Tamil of the spoken language is very different from the rhythms and vocabularies of classical high Tamil, which is defined as a legacy of the ancient poets and is the Tamil taught in schools, spoken in public forums, and used within mainstream Tamil culture. *Sangam vallartha Thamizh*, or "the Tamil that has been developed by the ancient Tamil Academy," is a common rhetorical argument of the poets and critics seeking to categorize classical Tamil as a rarefied and exclusive discourse similar to Sanskrit. Written Tamil follows the same rigid rules of grammar of classical Tamil called Senthamil or Standard Tamil. Working-class themes, wordplays, improvisations, and the recognizable "looseness" of rural Tamil compositions have no place in the lexicons of Standard Tamil. And as folk art in rural Tamil Nadu is traditionally performed by men and women belonging to the Dalit castes, the differences between Standard Tamil and the colloquial Tamil of folk lyric is understood in terms of



Savi Savarkar, *Brahman Showing the Way*, painting on glass, 1989

high and low culture. “‘We sing whatever comes to our mouth,’ remarked one folk singer when he was asked how songs are composed.”² Such a blatant disregard for the predefined formulations of classical Tamil, and the resultant unexpectedness of the spoken language, serves to marginalize the folk-art form. Within the rigid hierarchy of Indian cultural formations—in which the factors of caste, religion, gender, class, and region determine the identity and placement of individuals—the cultural compositions of those regarded as low or untouchable also assume the same characteristics.

Therefore, folk poetry is often shrugged off as a subculture, and, in many instances, it is actively kept in the margins because of its class and caste origins. The riffs of “*thanthana thana*” (similar to the bebopping of Charlie Parker’s jazz), heard only among the poor, usually “untouchable” working classes of rural South India, became an integral part of the Tamil lyrical heritage, mostly through the compositions of Ilaiyaraja.³

Now, as I translate Tamil Dalit poetry into English, I am struck again and again by how familiar I find the rhythms and even the subject matter of the poems. Many of the modern Dalit poems written in the past decade or so are protest poems, describing the ancient oppressions of the Dalit castes and their exclusions from the official discourses, especially the religious discourses, as illustrated by N. T. Rajkumar’s poems. For the most part, modern Tamil Dalit poems resist the formulaic structures of classical poetry, rejecting the religious motifs and cultural motivations of what I would call the *Bharathiyar* mode. Let me explain. The standard Tamil poetry of the past century or so has been deeply dependent on the poetry of the most famous of Tamil poets of the twentieth century, Subramaniya Bharathiyar. A compatriot of Gandhi, Bharathiyar single-handedly modernized Tamil poetry to reflect the aspirations of the colonial Indian who was seeking to be free of the British presence on Indian soil. Like the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (who wrote the Nobel Prize-winning collection *Gitanjali* and translated it into English), Bharathiyar also combined nationalistic and religious themes in his poetry. For those educated in traditional Tamil, a close familiarity with the poetry of Bharathiyar is a given. Even today, in Tamil-speaking regions in India and the Tamil diaspora, the poetry of Bharathiyar is revered as the standard-bearer of both culture and language.

Significantly, the modern Tamil Dalit poetry I am translating owes very little to the legacy of the ancients or to modern Bharathiyar. Instead, it traces its genealogy from the alternative tradition of Tamil folk culture. This folk poetry, the base of *koothu* or folk drama, is ubiquitous in Tamil-speaking South Indian villages. Even though the rural com-



Savi Savarkar, *Devadasis*, etching and aquatint, 1991

munity as a whole actively participates in the folk culture, claiming it as a subset of Tamil culture, the *koothu* as a public spectacle has been most clearly identified with Dalit castes. The other forms of folk poetry (work songs, mostly) are also found, for the most part, in Dalit communities. As the Dalit castes in the villages are most often the landless labor, the work songs too become closely interwoven with Dalit life stories.

My translations of Rajkumar’s poetry are similar to folk poetry in terms of language and form. For his subject, however, Rajkumar chooses the marginalized narratives of local folk deities. The *koothu* typically deals with stories

drawn from the Hindu *Puranas* and mainstream cultural and religious narratives. As Rajkumar admits, his poetry not only defines a particular kind of Dalit identity—one that goes against the traditional descriptions given to Dalits historically—but it is also a way of denying the fundamentalist Hindu agenda of current Indian politics. The goddesses of Kolangottu, Isaki, and Mudipuram Devi are not part of the Hindu pantheon, he claims—“They are spirit gods.” **WLT**

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¹ K. A. Guneseckheran, *Dalit Kalai Kalacharam* (Chennai: Ragas, 1999), 16.

² James Theophilus Appavoo, *Folklore for Change* (Madurai, India: TTS, 1986), 18.

³ For a scholarly analysis of Ilaiyaraja’s oeuvre, see Pirem-Ramesh, *Ilaiyaraja: Isaiyin Thathuvamum Alagiyalum* (Ilaiyaraja: The philosophy and aesthetics of music; Chennai: Sembulam, 1998).

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SAVI SAVARKAR is a Dalit painter and printmaker, born in Nagpur, Maharashtra, in 1961, working and teaching today in New Delhi. He is unquestionably the visual artist in India best known as a Dalit activist. There are other Dalits exhibiting in India’s international gallery world, but Savarkar is the only one with an international reputation whose work is outspokenly political in its subject matter and intention. Like most of the best Dalit literature, Savarkar’s art is an expressionist cry for recognition of the inhuman treatment suffered by Dalits and, as in the works here, most particularly by women.

Editorial note: Special thanks to GARY MICHAEL TARTAKOV, Professor of Art and Design at Iowa State University, for bringing Savarkar to our attention and for his assistance in providing the artwork for this feature. For more on contemporary Dalit artists, see *The Colours of Liberation* (Dalit Resource Centre, 2000).

Five Tamil Dalit Poems

N. T. RAJKUMAR

என்.டி.ராஜ்குமார்



1

For the family
to gain religious merit
in the next life,
they fed the poor full of rice.
Then, when the girl from Kollathi
began to wash the dishes
in the back lot,
she was forced into intercourse.
After feeding on her
the Brahmin promised to come
in his next life, too.
She killed herself and
now comes
as the goddess of Kollangottu,
screaming for human sacrifice.

Lusting after women and gold,
he married the dancer with lies of love
then stoned her to death
amid the thorns
of the cactus fields.
You are my witnesses, she cried
to the cacti as she died.
The dark-blue goddess of the cactus fields
demands blood-filled rice,
transmogrifies into the midnight
goddess Isaki.

2

If anyone not of our own
happens to read this manuscript:
Heads will roll
hearts will beat to death
brains will curdle.
All that one has learned
will be lost.
Now,
I have placed curses
on my own words.

3

Oh, you devil,
I have caught you at last
and nailed you to the *neem* tree.
But on another night
while I was deep in sleep
you cracked the tree open
and came out
to play the magical witchery:
You licked the live blood
and laughed softly.
I called upon the mantras
in your name, in mine,
in the name of the One
who created both of us
to imprison you
in me.
Today, my love,
you are my angel.

4

Dancing cobra eyes
twist into the body
striking at the corner
of the soul
asleep, sticking one's tongue out
on those full-moon nights

Drunk with the saliva
sucked from the dripping mouth,
my poisonous poetry
scattered like
fragrant flowers.
Frightened
to smell them alone
you bring to your aid
those soaring birds of prey.
Denying Siva this time,
standing on the power of the
god of anger,

I tease the kites.
Ask them, are you well?
You fly away,
disappear in the distance
like a dot.

I cannot touch
the shadow of your wing.
I will be born
again and again.
As a devil,
a ghost,
as Kali,
and Isaki.
As the vengeful furies
I will terrorize you and follow you—

5

She sated my hunger
you satisfied my lust
I'd grown up
like a water buffalo
but I am her baby
I want a child unlike me
the burning fire that you
put out with your body
my dearest wife
Put down your raised fist
I am breathless
Just give me the word
and I will kill my mother
with poisoned rice.

என்.டி.ராஜ்குமார்

*Translations from the Tamil
By Anushiya Sivanarayanan*

Editorial note: Selections from twelve poems by N. T. Rajkumar, "Panirendhu Kavithaigal," *Dalit* 4 (1998): 76–81.