

## **Transcreating Gulzar's Poems: an Interview with J. P. Das**

--- an interview by **PALLAVI KIRAN**

Interestingly, a translation is said to be best when the translators keep themselves as unseen as possible. But is a matter of concern when the readers neither ever bother to know about the translator or the process of translation thus taken up. Therefore, to revive the interest in translator and his ways of translation more than or equal to their final product, reaching out to the translator is a must. For the readership, Jagannath Prasad Das also known as J. P. Das was interviewed in person at his residence at Hauz Khas, New Delhi on 6<sup>th</sup> January, 2017. His English translations of Gulzar's poetry is anthologised in *Autumn Moon* (1999). His work is taken up for comparison and analysis with the original for my research. Accordingly, questions were framed that popped up during the findings.

Das has been much written and interviewed earlier for his works. He has been into everything i.e. poetry, plays, short stories, novel, essays, children's poems and nonsense verse. Notable works of this Odia literary luminary are "English: Puri Paintings, Odia: Pratham Purush, Parikaarm, Desh Kaal Patra, Suryasta Purbaru." He has to his credits the highly acclaimed awards - the Saraswati Samman, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Nandikar Award, and Research and Creative Writing Fellowships - Homi Bhabha Fellow, Emeritus Fellow of the Ministry of Culture, K. K. Birla Foundation Fellowship. Translation too has been on his cards. He began translating his own work from Odia to English and later picked up more.

## **TEXT OF THE INTERVIEW**

**PK (Pallavi Kiran): Your Wikipedia page mentions about all your translated works in different languages. Can you please brief out your competence of all the languages.**

**DAS:** I have translated Swedish poet Warner Aspenstrom into Odia (through English), a collection of French poems by Catherine Clement into English (my credential to knowing French is a course I did in that language while in college).

**PK: Coming straight away to poetry translation and confining the conversation to this, I would like to ask, what according to you are the positive sides in the perception and dissemination of poetry translation?**

**DAS:** I have only translated such poetry that I liked and that perhaps explains the strange choice of Swedish, French and Urdu/Hindustani.

**PK: Autumn Moon is the first English translation of Gulzar’s poetry? How did you choose Gulzar’s poetry for translation? What tempted you the most to translate him into English and not Odiya?**

**DAS:** Reena's translations were done earlier. As a matter of fact Gulzar Saab had sent me some of her translations to me to have a look and had later introduced her to me. My translations were the outcome of my friendship with Gulzar. We became friends when we both were on the Board of The Children's Film Society of India and would often discuss

his lyrics and my poetry. I had encouraged him to write poetry besides film lyrics and he is on record saying that I made him a 'poet' from a 'lyricist'! We would exchange our latest poems by mail, and when I was slow in sending him one, which was very often, he would send me a message: 'long time, no poem'. (The other things we shared were the agenda papers during the meeting and an occasional cigarette, though we were not smokers). I wanted to translate the poems as I found them to be wonderful poems and I thought they deserved a greater readership through English. As for translation into Odia, I had already got an Odia poet to translate his collection Pukhraj into Odia, which came out around the same time as Autumn Moon

**PK: Gulzar Sir’s poems are intense and multi-layered. What were the special considerations that are necessary while translating his verses?**

**DAS:** I do not know about 'special consideration', but I tried my best to maintain the spirit of the poem - its humour, its philosophical undertones, its hard social commentary - in my translation.

**PK: A close study of your translation at the linguistic level reflects that you have translated literal meaning at times while maintaining the cultural equivalents at the other. Do you believe that the translator has the responsibility to draw attention to the ‘difference’ with the original?**

**DAS:** I believe that though the translation should read fluent and natural, it should not read like something written originally in the target language. That I think is the beauty in Tagore's translation of his own Gitanjali poems, which, though called poor translations have not 'dated' after these many years and is still the best.

**PK: Even at the linguistic and the aesthetic level, to keep intact with the ‘poetic voice’ of the poet, what were the problems that you faced? How were they sorted out? What sort of translation methodology did you employ to make the Hindustani language and its cultural nuances fit closely into the English language?**

**DAS:** I went by 'intuition', and my knowledge of Hindi as a student at Allahabad University and my living in Delhi for four decades, certainly helped. I used words and expressions that came naturally as I read the original. An Urdu-Hindi dictionary was also of great help. (And I will tell later about my collaborator.)

**PK: Poetry gets lost in translation because of the actual and the arguable linguistics and hermeneutic difficulties it presents. What according to you are the things that the international readers of Gulzar might miss?**

**DAS:** It is true of any translation of poetry. If poetry is lost in translation, it is also good poetry which survives a translation, though all the nuances of the original cannot be transferred to the new language. The culture specific ideas are difficult to convey without taking recourse to footnotes and explanations, which poetry translation should shun. Gulzar's poetry is metro-centric, if I may call it so, and would be easily understood anywhere by urban and urbane readers. The same cannot, however, be said about international readers.

**PK: Gulzar’s poetry has been translated into English by Rina Singh, Pavan Kumar Varma, Sunjoy Shekhar (lyrics) and Nirupama Dutt. Which translator, do you feel have dispensed their creative possibilities at their best? Are you convinced that the role of translators have changed over the decades?**

**DAS:** I have seen Reena's translation, which is good. I have not gone through other translations. I do not know about the role of translators over the years, but surely more of Indian literature is now getting translated and there is better awareness among Indian readers of literature in other Indian languages.

Now about the most important thing about *Autumn Moon* translation which is missing in the questionnaire: the participation of Gulzar Saab in the translation. He has paid me compliments in his introduction to the book, but it is I who should have duly acknowledged his participation, collaboration and general encouragement at every stage of the

translation. After I translated a poem, I would mail the poem to him to have final look. Sometimes I would seek clarification for a word, phrase or line. And he would explain, clarify my doubts and often suggest a better alternative. The following lines from one of his letters would show the meticulous way in which he looked at my translations and resolved my doubts – 'Qadrein' means values. 'n' in 'qadrein' is only a nasal sound and 'values' is used in relation to 'values of life'. 'Istalahein' means 'phrases' and 'proverbs'. Phrases which are left like the earthen bowls after the drink, because the shiny glasses have put them out of circulation! 'Books' I think is better than the other two titles. It could also be just 'Pages' or 'The Print'.

But finally you know better than me.

## **About the Author**

**Pallavi Kiran** is a Doctoral Research Fellow in English discipline at Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines) Dhanbad, Jharkhand (India). She is presently working on the English Translation of Gulzar’s Poetry under Dr. Md. Mojibur Rahman. She pursued her M.Phil. in English Literature under the guidance of Prof. R.K. Singh. Her area of interest includes Indian English Poetry, English Haiku, and Poetry Translations in English. She can be reached at [pallavikiran@ymail.com](mailto:pallavikiran@ymail.com).