

Translation as Cultural Preservation: Representing Bhumij Identity through Folk Songs

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ABSTRACT

Folk songs constitute an important form of intangible cultural heritage through which communities preserve collective memory, cultural values, beliefs, ecological knowledge, social practices, and emotional experiences. Among the Bhumij community, folk songs have traditionally been transmitted through oral performance and are closely associated with everyday life, agriculture, nature, worship, festivals, marriage, love, labour, family relationships, and community practices. However, changing patterns of education, occupation, migration, language use, and contemporary social life have created challenges for the continuity of oral traditions. In this context, documentation and translation can contribute to the preservation and wider recognition of indigenous cultural expressions. The present study examines selected Bhumij folk songs as repositories of cultural memory and explores the role of English translation in representing Bhumij cultural identity. The study follows a qualitative, descriptive, interpretive, and analytical methodology. Primary data were collected through field visits to Patasahanipur village in Udala Block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, along with informal conversations and telephonic interactions with singers, elders, and knowledgeable members of the community. The songs were documented, transcribed,

verified, and subsequently translated into English. Particular attention is given to culture-specific expressions, indigenous concepts, religious and ritual references, ecological imagery, repetition, rhythm, emotion, symbolism, and performance contexts. The study argues that transcription and translation are complementary stages in the documentation of Bhumij folk songs. Transcription provides a written representation of the source-language form, while translation makes the cultural and linguistic content accessible to readers beyond the immediate speech community. The study also identifies several challenges in translation, including the absence of direct equivalence, culture-specific vocabulary, oral variation, contextual meanings, rhythm, repetition, musicality, and performance. It concludes that translation can contribute to the documentation and preservation of Bhumij oral heritage, while the living oral tradition remains essential to its continued cultural transmission.

Keywords: *Bhumij, folk songs, oral tradition, cultural preservation, translation, transcription, cultural identity, Mayurbhanj, Odisha.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Oral traditions are a valuable way for communities to transmit and maintain collective memory, social practices, cultural

values and norms, and knowledge. In community settings, where the knowledge is orally passed down from one generation to the next, songs, stories, rituals, as well as other oral forms of knowledge have a major role in sustaining cultural continuity. The importance of folk songs lies in the combination of language, music, rhythm, emotion, cultural memory and social experience that they link. They are not merely forming of entertainment but are closely connected with the everyday lives of communities. Folk songs tell of people's relationships with nature, agriculture, religion, family, love, labour, festivals, rituals and community life. The Bhumij folk song is an important component of an oral culture. They embody various facets of the Bhumij way of life and serve as vehicles for cultural learning and recollection. The songs can be related to agricultural activities, worship, festivals, marriage, love and separation, labour, family relationships, social practices and everyday life. The songs are also oral and thus open to cultural change. Contemporary modernization, shift of occupation, migration, education, contact with other languages, shift in religious practices, media, and the lack of involvement of the younger generation may impact the continuity of traditional oral forms. (Bascom) As a result, documentation of these songs comes into play as a means of preserving their linguistic and cultural content. Another way in which such cultural expressions can be made available to a wider audience is through translation. But it is not a mere word-for-word translation of the folk songs from one language to another. Folk songs include expressions, ideas, and concepts specific to a culture, religious references, images of the environment (ecological), symbols, repetition, rhythm, and emotional connotations that are often tied closely to a cultural context. The present study thus investigates the connection of translation and preservation of culture by using selected Bhumij folk songs. It emphasizes the documentation, transcription, translation and cultural interpretation of

some of the songs and explores how the cultural identity of Bhumij is represented in these oral expressions. (Susan)

2. Bhumij Folk Songs as Oral Cultural Heritage

The bhumij folk songs are closely related to the experiences of the community. Their oral transmission enables the transmission of cultural knowledge and collective memory from one generation to the next. The songs are from various aspects of cultural life such as:

- agriculture;
- nature;
- worship;
- festivals;
- rituals;
- love and marriage;
- family relationships;
- labour;
- social relationships;
- emotional experiences; and
- community values.

The songs thus serve as cultural memory. They contribute to the maintenance of a part of the faith, practice, knowledge, emotions and community memory of the Bhumij people. Variations will arise in both word and pronunciation, sequence or performance in these songs as a result of their being passed down orally. Different communities-singers will remember or perform a song in a different way. This is an inherent trait of the oral tradition, which must be recognized when documenting and translating it. Bhumij folk song is therefore a linguistic text, as well as an oral and cultural product of a certain social and performative context. (Bauman)

3. Bhumij Identity and Cultural Representation

Memories, custom, beliefs, relationship, practice, rituals, language, and lived experience are all forms of expression that are integral to the Bhumij cultural identity. One way in which these elements can be represented and remembered is through folk songs. The songs chosen speak of many

aspects of the cultural identity of the Bhumij. A relationship between the community and the environment is created through nature and agriculture. References to religion and ritual are cultural beliefs and practices. Family-Community relationships are examples of social values and relationships between people. Love, separation, labour and emotion reveal personal and group emotions. The songs have a special connection to nature. Natural environments can be references to not only physical space but also to lived experiences of community, emotion, culture and livelihood. Also, the religious and ritual expressions have significance, which is linked with the cultural context of the Bhumij community. Not all of these expressions are necessarily equivalent in English. Thus, their translation needs to be considered with regard to their contextual and cultural implications. (Finnegan) This is the way Bhumij folk songs can be perceived as a cultural archive in oral form. They maintain cultural activities through language, music, memory, repetition and performance.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To collect and transcribe selected Bhumij folk songs from oral performances and remembered versions so that their linguistic form can be preserved before translation.
2. To translate selected Bhumij folk songs into English while maintaining their cultural, emotional, symbolic, and contextual significance.
3. To examine the representation of Bhumij cultural identity through folk songs, particularly through themes of nature, agriculture, religion, ritual, community, family, love, labour, and social values.
4. To identify the linguistic and cultural challenges involved in translating Bhumij folk songs into English, particularly in relation to culture-specific expressions, contextual meanings, oral variation, rhythm, repetition, and symbolism.
5. To contribute to the documentation and wider academic recognition of Bhumij

oral heritage and explore English translation as a means of making Bhumij cultural expression accessible beyond the immediate speech community without erasing its indigenous identity.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research Design

Qualitative description, interpretation and analysis research methodology are used in the present study. A qualitative approach is used because the use of oral cultural expressions is the main focus of the study and the meanings of the expressions are to be interpreted in the context of their social and cultural background, and not quantified. The researching technique is fieldwork, oral history collection, participant interaction, observation, transcription, translation and cultural analysis. The researcher regards the folk song as a language text and as a cultural act. In addition to the words of songs, attention is therefore given to the contexts in which they are sung, to their singers, when they are sung, to what meaning(s) they give to their listeners, and to the way they are sung.

5.2. Area of the Study

The fieldwork of the study has been carried out in Patasahanipur village in Udala Block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha and interactions regarding the cultural context that has surrounded the study area. The area was chosen because it offers an essential background for the examination of the Bhumij oral traditions and how they are being passed on within the community, by singers, elders and oral memory.

5.3. Sources of Data

The main sources of the study are selected Bhumij folk songs collected from Bhumij oral tradition, field interaction, singers, elderly people, women performers and other knowledgeable people who know the traditional Bhumij songs. Explanations of situations that were observed during performance and by the community members were also regarded as important primary

materials. Secondary sources are books, ethnographic studies, government publications, research articles, studies on tribal oral literature, folklore, studies on tribal translations, indigenous literature and linguistic materials.

5.4. Fieldwork and Data Collection

The Village of Patasahanipur was visited on the field to know what the contexts are for recalling and singing the Bhumij folk songs. During field work the singers, social context, performance conditions, community activities, variations of songs and culturally relevant vocabulary were all explored. Singers, elders and community informants were interviewed informally to understand the cultural meaning of the songs, ritual associations, community association, traditional context, symbolism, and context of performance. Clarification of lines, pronunciation, indigenous terms, variants, titles, and contexts, was also obtained via telephonic means as a secondary method.

6. Transcription before Translation

Transcription is considered a crucial initial step of the translation process. The process may be represented as:

Oral performance, Listening/recording, Transcription, Verification, Translation, Cultural analysis

Transcription and translation are not considered to be the same process. Translation conveys meaning of the source-language song in another language, while transcription is the written version of the source-language song. The study is carried out with a sense of importance, not just transliteration, because it is to keep the linguistic form of the orally transmitted song before translating it into English. The transcribed versions are validated using existing recordings, field notes, listening and dialogue with community members, when needed. This process helps to minimize error, and gives a more solid foundation for the source language in translation.

6. Translation Procedure

In the present study, the process of translating the Bhumij folk songs is systematic in which oral performance of the folk song is first documented and transcribed, and it is carefully interpreted and translated into English. The songs are orally performed and culturally based, so the process of translation is not viewed as merely substituting words for words. The process focuses on the linguistic shape of the original song as well as its cultural, contextual, affective and symbolic value.

The translation process goes through the following steps:

7.1 Collection of the Songs

The first step is the collection of selected Bhumij folk songs from the oral performance and remembered versions. Songs were gathered in the process of engaging with knowledge community members, women performers, and elders. Where relevant, the context for remembering or performing the songs was also taken into account.

7.2 Documentation of the Oral Material

The songs were collected and recorded as oral cultural artefacts. The performance, the singer, the social context, the culturally meaningful expressions of performance, and the differences in remembered forms were attended to. As supporting materials, field notes and available recordings were used to be transcribed and translated later.

7.3 Transcription of the Song in the Source Language

The next step in transcription is to write the text. The song that is sung orally is translated into a written depiction of the source language song. Transcription is separated from translation because the purpose of transcribing is to maintain the linguistic characteristics of the spoken expression which precedes its meaning in English.

7.4 Verification of the transcribed versions

The transcribed text is then checked by re-listening, field notes, recordings and

discussion with singers, elders and others in the community. If clarification is needed, including pronunciation, indigenous terms, individual lines, variants, titles and cultural contexts, the telephone is used. Understanding of variation in oral songs does not automatically assume that it is the wrong thing, but rather is recognized during the process of verification.

7.5 Identification of Culture-Specific Words and Expressions

Words and expressions that are culture specific will be highlighted after they are transcribed. These can be tied to native ideas, social norms, native experiences, religion, nature, agriculture, etc. These are analyzed thoroughly as one English word may not always convey the full implication of the Bhumij word.

7.6 Understanding Cultural and Contextual Meaning

The cultural and contextual meaning is taken into account prior to translation into English. The interpretation of an expression is based on the cultural context in which it is used. Field interaction, community conversations, observations, explanations, etc., provide clues regarding local references, traditional practices, symbolism, agricultural activities, ritual associations, and other culturally important aspects.

7.7 Translation into English

The source text is transcribed and verified, and culturally understood, before being translated into English. The translation is not intended to be a word-for-word transliteration of the original song, but rather a representation of the meaning and culture of the song. The English version thus strives to be "faithful" to the original version and comprehensible to the readers who are not members of the Bhumij speech community.

7.8 Treatment of Culture-Specific Terms

When no word-for-word equivalents in English exist or cannot be used, the meaning of the original expression in the culture is prioritized. The culture-specific term cannot be replaced with a word that looks like the English equivalent because it does not serve the same function or purpose. Contextual explanation is used when required to help make sense of cultural significance of the expression without denying its native nature.

7.9 Preserve imagery, symbolism, repetition, rhythm and emotion

The translation also takes into account the literary and performative aspects of the songs. The use of nature imagery, references to agriculture, symbolism, repetition, rhythm, emotional expression and other important features remain as far as possible. They are all significant as they help shape the poetic form, cultural significance and performance of the song.

7.10 Comparative Checking of the Source and Translated Versions

Then the English version is compared to the written source version. This comparative examination will help you determine omissions, changes in meaning, the use or replacement of inappropriate words, or the loss of significant cultural references. The aim is to keep the English version in line with the original song and its cultural context.

7.11 Final Revision and Verification

The last step is to edit and proofread the English version. A translation is compared to the transcription in the field and the cultural data collected. Special focus is placed on the accuracy of the culture-specific expression, meaning, imagery, symbolism, repetition, rhythm, and emotional expression. The final is then not only a grammatically correct, 'standard' English text, but a culturally nuanced representation of the source song.

Song 1: Aainsa Berry and the Time of Sowing

Original Text

ଆଁଙ୍କ ଆଳ ଯ' ଇସିନ ଜାନା

ବାବା ହେର ସମାଏ ହିଜୁଃ ଯାନା

ଜେଟେଃ ରେଏଁ ରାଃ ଯାଦା

ବାବାହେରେ ବାବୁ ସେଟେରଜାନା ।

English Transcription

Aankola jo ecine jana

Baba her somaye hijuh jana

Jeteh reon raa jada

Babaher babu seterjana.

English Translation

The Aainsa berry ripens red,
A sign upon the field is spread;
Now comes the time, my little boy,
To sow paddy seeds with joy.
The jetho insect calls again,
Its voice is carried by the rain;
Oh, my boy, the earth is green,
It is time to sow the paddy grain.

The song talks about the traditional agricultural life of the Bhumij people. The ripening of Ainsaa berry and the chirping of Jetho insect indicates the beginning of the rainy season and paddy sowing season. The song captures the love of the Bhumij people for nature, agriculture and the seasons. It's also an example of the old-fashioned way of passing down agricultural information from parents to kids. (Singh)

The first attention in the translation of the song is paid to the form of the source language, that is, the form that is obtained by transcribing the language. The culturally relevant references to the Aainsa berry, the Jetho insect, the rainy season, the field and paddy sowing are then interpreted in the context of agriculture and the environment. The translation thus doesn't aim at substituting each source-language expression with an English one in a mechanical way. Rather it conveys the agricultural meaning

and cultural context of these references. (Singh)

The translation takes into account the image, repetition, rhythm and emotional expression of the song. The direction to the child and the reference to the changing natural environment add to the cultural and emotional aspect of the song. If there is no direct English translation of the meaning of the indigenous reference, the cultural context will be considered when translating. So, this is not meant to be grammatically correct English, but rather to capture as much as possible the cultural meaning of the source song. (Harekrushna Behera and Patra)

8. Translation and Cultural Preservation

Translation can play an important role in preserving Bhumij folk songs by transforming the cultural content of folk songs into written form of English language. It is particularly important to record a tradition if it is passed on orally, as the degree

of security of the oral transmission decreases through the generations. Documentation through recording, transcription and translation can then be provided for these traditions.

At the same time, translation is not meant to be a literal reproduction of the oral tradition, as it is alive. At the same time, translation cannot be a literal reproduction of the oral tradition as it is alive. The spoken and musical text as well as the context of the original performance cannot be exactly reproduced in a written translation. Thus, translation must be considered as a means to documentation and wider access and not as an alternative to oral communication.

Translation activities should also be wary of culture-specific expressions which should be retained so as to maintain the essence of the culture. In the case of expressions which do not translate into English or which are difficult to translate, the culture of the original text must be preserved in the translation and with the contextual explanation. (Harekrushna Behera and Patra)

9. Challenges in Translating Bhumij Folk Songs

9.1 Lack of Direct Equivalence

One issue that arises with this is that there are no direct equivalents between the source language and English. One culturally-specific word can have meanings that cannot be fully captured in one English word.

9.2 Culture-Specific Expressions

Ritual, religious and agricultural terms, social practices, kinship terms, local cultural experiences and other such terms may not have a direct translation in English.

9.3 Context-Dependent Meaning

Certain expressions have meaning based on their cultural and social context. Not understanding the context can lead to incomplete or wrong interpretation of the translation.

9.4 Oral Variation

Variations in words, pronunciation, lines, expression, or all four are possible in

different singers or remembered versions. This variation is not necessarily to be considered a textual error, but should be recognized.

9.5 Rhythm and Repetition

Folk songs have meaning and perform through rhythm, repetition, musicality and refrains. The translation of these elements to English may be difficult.

9.6 Symbolism and Imagery

Images from nature and culturally specific imagery can have a meaning in addition to their literal meaning. Their translation needs to be understood in terms of meaning, symbolism and context.

9.7 Performance

The context of folk song performance is also related to the meaning of a folk song. A literal translation can therefore not be a full representation of all the nuances of the original oral expression.

10. Findings

1. The Bhumij folk songs can be used as means to preserve the cultural memory.
2. The songs reflect various aspects of the Bhumij identity such as religion, nature, agriculture, community, labour, family, emotion, and social values.
3. Fieldwork is essential as sometimes the meaning of an oral song can only be grasped through the whole song itself, not from the fragments of it.
4. The written representation of the source-language song is an integral part of the process before translation, which is called transcription.
5. The songs are translated into other languages, beyond the Bhumij language community, thus enhancing the visibility of the academic/linguistic culture.
6. There are instances when words that are unique to a culture cannot be successfully translated by direct equivalence.
7. Religious, ritual, ecological and culturally embedded expressions require a contextual explanation.

8. Oral variation is acceptable and not a text error.
9. Folk songs have meaning through rhythm, repetition, musicality and performance.
10. Translation can be a way to preserve cultures but not the living oral tradition.

11. CONCLUSION

The Bhumij folk songs are one of the essential components of the oral tradition of the indigenous people. They share collective memories, social values, spiritual beliefs, ecological knowledge, emotional experiences and cultural practices with language, music, repetition, and performance. The study also shows how the documentation and translation of Bhumij folk songs can help to preserve and make folk songs known across the country. Before they are translated into English, the songs are transcribed into a written form for access to the source-language community and then translated into English for access to other members of the speech community. Meanwhile, translation of Bhumij folk songs poses a number of problems with language and culture. Not everything in a culture-specific expression or meaning can be translated directly into English, and certain words have different meanings in oral forms, depending on the rhythm, repetition, musicality, symbolism, or performance. These are the elements that need to be taken into consideration when translating.

Thus, transcription and translation have been taken as complementary steps in the documentation of Bhumij folk songs in the study. Transcription maintains the linguistic structure of the spoken expression; translation ensures greater access. Translation, however, is a form of representation of the oral tradition and cannot be a substitute for the living tradition of transmission of Bhumij folk songs.

Therefore, translation may be used as a tool of cultural preservation in recording Bhumij folk songs and presenting their cultural expressions without losing their indigenous identity and cultural values.

Declaration by Authors

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