

## ENTREVISTA COM GEETA DHARMARAJAN, KATHA

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Índia: uma infinidade de línguas e dialetos, uma infinidade de traduções. O inglês é a língua das universidades, dos negócios e do governo, mas somente uma minoria de 5% fala inglês com alguma fluência. Hindi é a língua franca do norte da Índia, e tem parentesco com outras línguas como bengali, gujarati e rajasthani, mas não com as do sul, as línguas dravídicas como Tamil, Malayalam e Kannada. O contato entre o falante de hindi do Norte e o falante de tamil do Sul ocorre em inglês. Esta entrevista descreve o trabalho da Katha, uma organização não-governamental que desenvolve atividades educacionais em que a tradução é a fundamental.

Tell me a little about the founding of Katha

Katha was started by me in 1988. The first idea was to do something for children, a kind of health and environment magazine for children, which would also have a translation activity. I started working on these ideas in 1988. In 1989 the children's magazine was published, and I had a small amount of money, and with that the society was registered in September

1989. The idea was that we needed ways in which we could reach out to children who came from non-literate families, who were the first ones in their family to go to school. But when we started sending the magazine out to these children, we found that many of them were dropping out of school, they were not very happy in school. There were various reasons for that, and many of them never even got into school. So the whole idea of the magazine shifted from being a magazine for children in school to children who were out of school but attached to various learning programmes being run by voluntary agencies. At the same time, the other work on translation was happening. In fact I was the only person in Katha at that point. I was working on collecting stories, working with people in different languages, writing letters to them.

Translation was central right from the beginning?

From the beginning, yes, translation and children's literature, children's empowerment was central to the work of Katha.

This was connected with learning English?

Not at all. It was not connected with English. In fact, the very first translation that was published by Katha, the first book, was supposed to be in one of our languages, Tamil, and English. From the beginning the effort was to get it into as many Indian languages as possible, into the *bashas*, the Indian languages other than English. Only 5% of the population speaks English, and there's only 10% of that English speaking audience that buys and reads literature in English, but still, English is spoken in all India, it's something pan-Indian. So it was possible for us to go into English, and as we did not find any money to go into Tamil, we stayed

with English. But that was a constraint which was of economics rather than a desire.

You began publishing the Katha volumes of translated short stories quite soon after you began?

I started work on it in 1989, and our first volume came out in 1991, with stories from 1989 and 1990, and it has been published every year since then.

And these were not specifically not directed at children?

Not at all. They were the best stories that were being written in India. We had nominating editors in each language, who were respected in their languages, scholars, critics, writers themselves. They read as many as a hundred journals that were being published in their own language, and they nominated three stories to Katha. We translated about 50 or 60 stories that came to us every year, and from them we choose about 14 or 15 stories. It's an annual search for excellence through the country.

You seem to tend to prioritize fluent, readable translations?

We have been working very hard on this, to make the translations fluent and readable. We believe that a translation cannot just stick to the word. It has to go beyond the word and carry some of the imagination and creativity of the original. When you read an original you say, "I want to translate this, I want more people to read it!", and you want that same feeling to be there in the translation. All of our books take about a year to edit and bring out, and the process is very complicated, complex and

long. We normally have a rough translation made of story to see how suitable it is. Then, once we like what is there, the story that is hidden in the rough translation, because it's normally it's people who are just trying their hand at translation just make a rough translation for us. Please understand that we don't have too much money. So mainly it's students or people who are very interested and have skills in two languages who do a rough translation. Then, after we look at it, we either go back to the same person or to somebody else – we prefer to go to somebody else - to get a final translation. Once it comes to us, we have a resource person in that language. None of us can speak all the languages from which we translate, so we have resource people for all of the languages. They compare the original with the translation and tell us where the translator seems to have misunderstood the story or gone away from the story, has not got the right nuance. We try to work towards a very nuanced text, and that takes many stages, and it goes back and forth, and we reach a point when the final translation, after it has been edited in-house, is sent back to the nominating editor, the writer and the translator, and they put in their comments and send it back. These comments are then incorporated, and finally we have a text we think is readable and is close to the original.

Some of the translations don't seem to convey information about specific Indian communities; they seem to be outside a specific cultural background.

It may be because the stories are set in urban areas, where there is a very homogenized kind of society, or it may be a problem with the first translation. There may have been a kind of flattening that happened there, and so it comes to us. What we have tried to do at Katha is to keep, for instance, primary kinship terms in the original language. We try

to keep words like *paisa*, which we would not translate into porridge, as *paisa* has a very specific meaning and taste. This gives the flavour of the regional languages and culture.

It seems that you place translation as central to Indian culture and literature?

Translation activities go back at least three or four thousand years. The *Ramanan* and the *Maharabata* have been translated over and over again into many of our Indian languages, but I must say that there is a difference in the way it was translated. In India ownership is not the main thing. We take a story and we own it and then we rewrite it. We have two words, *anwar*, close to our idea of translation, and *rupanta*, a very free recreation of a story. Even today you will find many people who believe that if you read a story ten times, you take it in, then you give it to your reader in your language in the way you want to. So the presentation is not a word-to-word or line-to-line equivalence. It is a story which comes from the heart of a writer, and then is taken into the heart of a translator, and comes from the heart of a translator. We have problems with that. *Katha* does not do a *rupanta*; we don't do an *anwar*, a literal word-for-word translation, nor are we doing a very free translation. We believe that a writer must be brought close to the reader, and the reader must be brought close to the writer, which means that you need a middle way. And what *Katha* is trying to reach is a point which could be a perfect middle way between the reader and the writer, so that both of them are travelling a little distance, both are trying to understand each other, and there are enough signposts that the writer provides for the reader, and the reader is willing to read the signposts and move ahead.

And you've also been working with oral literature.

We have been working with oral literature from 1994 on. We started by collecting some stories from six different languages. We were so excited by the stories and the riddles and the puzzles and the poems, the narratives and the songs. Some of the songs came from women who were not literate, who had gone on long pilgrimages and who sent back their experiences in the form of songs. When you hear these songs, you are taken to another world altogether. About three years ago, we began an award for oral literatures, and this year we have started the Katha resource centre for oral literatures, a memory bank where we are collecting stories, poems, riddles, songs that people remember.

And so translation is central to the work you carry out with children?

It is quite central. We are looking at translation and education, the story and education. In the making of civil society, then here in India at least, the story becomes very central to our way of learning. We are not looking at education being divorced from life and living itself. We live our lives in different ways, and we want to live it as well as we can. And in fact the story is a very vicarious way of looking at life. It's a way of learning, and acquiring interpersonal skills, communication skills, leadership. There's a lot of learning that you can get from a story. And that's what we do with our children. The Indian story doesn't come in just one but many languages. Therefore this whole process of translation comes in. We do a lot of work with teachers, some who teach working children, others in formal government schools and others in higher education. We have found that the way you translate a story in a classroom will not always be a language translation. You're translating it into action, body language,

through your eye and face movement, how you express yourself. We've been looking at various ways in which dance and theatre come into education. This is something that has also excited people outside India, and now we have interns coming from the University of London, Texas at Austin and in the future from Chicago. So we see the Indian way of teaching and communicating using various tools of translation, becoming more important.

I read your book on educating poor rural women, telling them they shouldn't have children before they're 18, in the latest edition 21! There's another area that interested me – small business administration. What exactly is that?

We work with working children, and they can only read in Hindi. Many schools in Indian only teach in English, and they're very expensive. If you look around the country, you will find that there are many small businesses, micro-level businesses, small shops with a turnover of 20,000 rupees (US\$500) a year, not much money at all. All of them are looking at ways in which their businesses can grow. They want some amount of e-commerce, to use their computers to make their accounts, and they don't have people who can do that for them, as they can't pay high salaries. Our young students, 16 and 17 years-old, who have been with us since they were small, are being trained and taking their diplomas in Small Business Management, helping to make small businesses grow. We have also started the Katha Information Technology and e-commerce School, which is again looking at IT and e-commerce for small businesses.

Isn't there ever any resentment from government schools that you are taking over what they're doing?

We don't take over what they're doing. We started off with the story and said that there are many ways in which the story can be used, whether you're teaching sociology or psychology or language or history of maths, and when we went in with our techniques, our pedagogy, the schools were interested, so we work with teachers to increase their presence in the classroom. We are helping to develop new tools for classroom use, new pedagogies, new teaching and learning material. So we are working with the teachers to make them more effective, so there is no resentment. In fact, they welcomed Katha's intervention in their work.

And how is Katha financed?

Katha's books are self-supporting. Our books have sold well, and now we have our own marketing division, which sells our books, which are available all over the country.

Do you get government grants?

We do not get government grants for our books. We get government grants for the working children's programme. We get grants from the Federal Government of India and we also get it from the State Government, which has also given us a building, and they pay for the utilities. The funding for that programme comes from various sources, including the government, and corporate businesses. We have academic centres in some five or six universities, which work through the affiliated Colleges of Education. We are starting a media initiative in storytelling in 2001. I believe that we have forgotten to tell a story to our children and grandchildren, and the dependence on television is becoming excessively high. We believe that it is possible to reclaim the traditions which we had



in storytelling. So we are bringing in traditional and modern storytellers, looking at films, and want actors to come in and help parents and grandparents to tell the story properly to their own children. We're looking at the creation of the moral and value basis of civil society.

You also have a course for businessmen?

It's called Lead, to build leadership. We have a one-year course and shorter courses which look at leadership qualities through the story: interpersonal skills, how you manage a rumour in your office, stories going around about a person, then it builds up, and then you have bomb on your hands. So how do you diffuse that? How do manage difficult situations? We do that through the story.

Geeta Dharmarajan, thank you very much.

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