



Research Paper

## Translation Analysis and Assessment: An Oral Poetry of the Totola Rabhas

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**Abstract:**

*In a country like India where countless dialects as vibrant as any of our developed languages exist, translation studies have a vast role as the web of knowledge and information existent among the oral communities would remain underground or turn extinct.*

*The present study is an analysis and assessment of an oral poetry of the Totola Rabhas aimed at examining and explaining the continuities and changes in oral poetry traditions with an assimilation motif. The growing impact of globalization and modernization has brought about changes in oral poetry traditions. The Totola Rabhas have been living in close contact with other communities having different linguistic structure and way of life. Their social life and customs have gained a mixed colour due to the non-native environment they have been exposed to. The analysis of the various songs prevalent among the Totola Rabhas are a living proof to their assimilation and innate identity though linguistically they have failed to keep a separate identity. This gives light to an excellent cultural synthesis prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. It is of utmost importance to document the oral traditions so that at least in future generations, we know our contours through the documented perspectives.*

**Keywords:** Translation studies, Folklore, Oral Poetry, Totola Rabhas.

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India is a multilingual nation and the need for translation studies is all the more important in order to bring people belonging to different linguistic group closer. Translation is both a science and an art through which we can bridge the distances of culture and geography. In a country like India where countless dialects as vibrant as any of our developed languages exist, translation studies have a vast role as the web of knowledge and information existent among the oral communities would remain underground or turn extinct. Here, translation refers to the rendering of a literary work from one language into another, thus, matching phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic equivalents. However, the translation of oral literature, be it poetry or narratives would initially involve transcription in the source text (ST) and then translation into the target text (TT).

The present study is an analysis and assessment of an oral poetry of the Totola Rabhas of Assam. It is sometimes argued that even if fiction or drama may be amendable to rendition in another language, any attempt to translate poetry will be an act of vandalism, an aesthetic impertinence (Varshney, 2008). It is a challenge to a translator of poetry and this gets reflected in the words of John Middleton Synge: "A Translation is not translation unless it will give you the music of poem along with the words." American poet Robert Frost famously remarked, "Poetry is what is lost in translation". This is so because form and content in poetry cannot be separated. Content is highly language-bound and this is what makes poetic translation of poetry more difficult than the other types of translations.

However, it is a humble attempt to translate and analyze an oral poetry of the Totola Rabhas. Pragmatic translation problems arose as situations in ST and TT differ to a great extent. Cultural translation problem was confronted due to differences in 'conventions (norms) and habits' (Schjoldager 2008: 175) between the ST culture and the TT culture. Linguistic translation problems and Text-Specific translation problems were also encountered. However, more of Oblique Translation methods using sense for sense procedure were used to get close to the ST.

Oral poetries are byproducts of the thought-process of past human rationality that is handed down from generation to generations through word of mouth. Unlike other literary creations and compositions, socio-historical value of folksongs is more than their literary value and they have intensely human attitude towards life (Gupta 1964; Joshi 1982).

It also includes any poetry that is performed live. In many cultures, oral poetry is identical with or overlaps with song. For instance, oral poetry, as interpreted by Ruth Finnegan as a broad subject which ranges from American folksongs, Eskimo lyrics, and modern popular songs to medieval oral literature, the heroic poems of Homer, and recent epic compositions in Asia and the Pacific. According to Ruth Finnegan (1977), there is much to learn from concentration on the oral side of poetry. In particular, the element of performance, or oral presentation, is of obvious and leading significance in oral poetry.

The Totola Rabhas are a branch of the Rabhas who belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and form a part of the great Bodo family which includes besides the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the Garos, the Lalungs, the Dimasas, the Hill Tippera, the Hajongs, the Mech, and others. Linguistically, they fall under the Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Sino-Tibetan family of language. The Rabhas have been Hinduised through the process of conversion. They are divided into nine groups of which the Patis form a majority. Apart from Rongdani and Maitori Rabhas, the Pati and Totla Rabhas, have almost dissolved themselves amidst either the Assamese or the Bodos. They are scattered in parts of lower Assam, Kamrup district, Goalpara district, parts of West Bengal and Meghalaya. There is no distinct information about the actual origin of the Rabhas as scholars have divergent opinions regarding their place of origin. According to Major A. Playfair, the Rabhas had migrated from the Tibetan regions to the Garo-Hills and afterwards spread throughout the state of Assam. Gait wrote in his 'Census Report of Assam' (1891), about the origin of the Rabhas:

"There seems to be good idea of uncertainty as to who these people really are. In lower Assam, it is asserted that they are an off-shoot of the Garos, while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kachari on the road to Hinduism".

Dalton (1872) states, "The Rabhas and the Hajongs of the Goalpara District are also branches of the Kachari race and connected with the Garos."

The sad part of this little-known tribe is that they are scattered mostly in small groups among other tribes and communities and have lost most of their cultural identities including their own language, culture and traditional dress. Bora (2013) says that the Rabhas maybe different from the Bodos but their ways and culture are almost the same.

The Totola Rabhas are a community that has never lived in isolation. Therefore, cultural assimilation in case of the Totola Rabhas is not a new phenomenon. As the Totola Rabhas have lived in close interaction with neighbouring ethnic communities, their culture displays a remarkable hybridity. Therefore, inter-cultural communication and inter-cultural translations form an important part of the present study. The oral poetry will be analysed from functional points of view, and interpreted within the context of living vernacular culture.

The Totola Rabhas have a very rich tradition of folklore, which has not at all been explored. They are passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth and in the long run they have undergone a drastic change due to assimilation with people of other communities. This assimilation has enriched and added to the already existing folklore of the Rabhas, thus "revealing the thought processes, the hopes and fears, ideas and primitive philosophies of our remote ancestors, as well as the sudden or gradual changes in all these things affected by the changing conditions of material life" (Hole, 1944-45). Folklore, today, is considered as a social process in which transmission, mobility, continuity, change, function and diffusion are common and natural things. Folklore then is a group centered social communicative process (Ben-Amos, 1982).

From the cultural point of view, the Rabhas have a very rich and glorious heritage. They have their own songs, music, dance, musical instruments and performances for various occasions, such as, cultivation, fishing, hunting, marriage, etc. In most of the cases they have lived side by side members of other communities. Therefore, it is seen that they have acquired the characteristics of other communities, be it linguistically or culturally. However, they have managed to retain their folklore to a great extent. It is through the songs that their thought process and way of life gets reflected.

Love poetry or song has been present since ages in all communities. Though the folk are illiterate they have their own way of expressing love and this has been handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. The Totola Rabhas too are not behind in romance. They are indeed natural poets in the real sense of the term.

It's almost common in Totola Rabha folk songs or poetry to use repetitive words. This helps in retaining the song to memory.

The following folksong reflects the worldview of the Totola Rabhas and their perspective about their life, nature, aspirations, aesthetic sense and also their sense of poetic expression through simile, metaphors, etc. The song is sung in praise of a girl from *Majikusi*. *Majikusi* is a village in the district of Darrang in Assam. The narrator has fallen in love with the beautiful girl but the girl is lured away by someone and that too with his

melodious note of flute. The speaker uses simple repetitive words and imagery to intensify his feelings of pangs as a result of his unrequited love. He uses nature as a background to convey his emotional states. The poem is full of archaic words in a dialect form of Assamese, developed as a result of inter cultural communication. The Totola Rabhas have developed their own way of expressing emotions. There is a simple and straightforward representation of rural life which also highlights the simplicity in the life of the Totola Rabha folk. An attempt has been made to translate the source text (ST) into a Target Text (TT), in this case, English, not with an aim to create a new poetry but to express the meaning underlying it.

*O Majikusir ghisiri  
Tore nam je komoli  
Hayo hai hito jiya mor  
Posonda jai.  
Komoliye nomoli  
Deha nohoi tiyahor jali  
Hayo hai hito jiya mor  
Posondo jai.*

(O beauty of *Majikusi*  
Softy is thy name.  
Hai o hai, that daughter  
Is the one I choose  
The soft one, the lovable one  
Your body, unlike the cucumber's thorned surface  
Hai o hai, that daughter  
Is the one I choose.)

In the above translation, some words have been condensed to bring out the effect of love. The words 'hai o hai' have been retained to give the original feel. Through the lines, the beauty of the girl from *Majikusi* gets highlighted. Her body seems to be the opposite of a cucumber's thorned surface. So, he names her 'Softy'. The universal concept of love is touched upon. The lines 1, 2, 5 and 6 in the ST follow the same rhyming scheme and the lines 3 and 4 are repeated in the lines 7 and 8. The use of alliteration is also seen in the words 'Hai o Hai Hito'.

*O hate jole muthi kharu  
Kane jole muni keru  
Hayo hai hito jiya  
Mor posondo jai*

(O the bangled hand  
O the ringed ear  
Hai o hai, that daughter  
Is the one I choose.)

The lines praise the beauty of the girl. The speaker praises her ringed ear and bangled hand. The speaker has repeated the lines 'hai o hai hito jiya, Mor posondo jai' to point out the particular girl whom he loves. The first two lines follow the same rhyming scheme in ST.

*Tuliliti bahito  
Kone bojala  
Anba laga jiyato  
Kone bhulala*

(Who has played?  
The Melodious flute  
With that, who has lured.  
The daughter I was supposed to marry.)

A melancholic note is seen in the above lines that questions as to who has lured the girl he was supposed to marry and that too with the melodious note of a flute. Here, opaque translation method is used to

clarify the meaning. Here, lines 1 and 3, 2 and 4 are in the same rhyming schemes in ST. The use of assonance is also seen in the line ‘*Anba Laga Jiyato*’ where the vowel sound of ‘a’ is dominant.

*Kaur kande keleng keseng*  
*Gasor uporot*  
*Halor goru bisi dilong*  
*Monor dhikarot*

(The crow crows  
On tree tops  
The buffaloes, I sold  
In mental woe.)

The sad condition of the singer is highlighted through the ‘unceremonious’ visit of the crows atop a tree and this gives a hint of the superstitious belief among the rural folk. It is a folk belief that a crow crows when some misfortune has taken place or is about to take place. Alliteration is used in the line ‘*Kaur kande keleng keleng*’ to bring an effect of bad omen. Onomatopoeia is also used in ‘*keleng keleng*’ to denote the crowing of crows. The buffaloes are the most prized possession of a villager and the height of sadness is expressed in the selling of these very buffaloes due to utter sadness caused by the elopement of his love. Lines 2 and 4 are in the same rhyming scheme.

*Khori katong uronge doronge*  
*Jhirange gasor tolot*  
*Gasore tolote siumori gathilong*  
*Diba napalong ghisirir golot.*

(Here, there, logs I cut  
Below trees, do I rest,  
Below trees, the garland made  
Present her but failed.)

The melancholic lover expresses his perils of love by engaging in hard work and toil. He was so infatuated in love that he started making garlands for her much before he could actually express his feelings. His disappointment is one of despair as his love is gone forever. Imagery is used here to present the helpless condition of the speaker. His choice of nature as a background is a major feature. Here, the translator has made use of substitution to create the same effect as the ST.

*Aatiya jhalalong, safa tati birilong*  
*Kodulai pelalong lai*  
*Laire majoti lafa hak gujila*  
*Singotaje randhuta nai.*

(I have fenced my plot  
I have planted lettuce  
But there is none  
To pluck and to cook.)

The lover now feels the absence of the girl when his plot is filled with vegetables as there is none to pluck and cook. This itself is a traditional way of expressing love among the cultivators. Rural setting is seen to be used as a background to intensify the pangs of love. The second and fourth lines in the ST follow the same rhyming scheme.

*Upai gel upore, mone gel bhitore*  
*Mone gel oiranor maje*  
*Oiranor majote, ghuri paki ahongte*  
*Teu nakhai bonoriya baghe.*

(Hopes have died  
Mind has gone aloft)

I wander among the woods  
Even tigers seem to overlook)

The poet is so forsaken that even the tigers seem to ignore him in the forest. Here, displacement is used by the translator for the sake of beauty. Here all the lines follow the same rhyming scheme. The speaker plunges into the woods out of grief to get consolation and later realize the presence of tigers who seem to ignore him just as the saying goes, 'Tigers don't feast on wounded preys.' So also, the heartbroken lover is wounded deep within and is left alone even in the woods.

*Bor jharor tiya sorai*  
*Akakh dhaki uri jai*  
*Sai mane nedekha hoi*  
*Soku pani matit pore*  
*Aagor kotha monot pore*  
*Monot porileu pabolo nai.*

(The parrot of the woods  
Fly away into the sky  
Disappears as one surveys  
Tears fall to the ground  
The past I recollect  
She's nowhere to be found)

The grief-stricken poet now watches the parrot fly into the sky and beyond. Tears seem to fall to the ground as the past keeps coming back but in vain.

*Nodi nodi uti jai, hagara pohuto*  
*Boit uti jhokorai kan*  
*Ki kopal, hadhilon*  
*Ghisirir napalong mon.*

(The deer drifts in the river  
Shakes its ears in the bank  
What fate do I hold?  
Failed even to win her heart.)

Here, the poet compares his life to that of a drifting deer who manages to get to the shore. But moans at his inability to win the heart of his love. Unrequited love seems to be the theme of the lines.

*Hori oi hori!*  
*Gamsa gel siri*  
*Kon dina pam moi*  
*Tor nisina tiri.*

(Rabha, 2015)

(Lord O Lord!  
*Gamosa*<sup>1</sup> has been torn  
When shall I find,  
A mate like you?)

He then calls out to God saying there is none to provide him with a loin cloth, *gamosa*. It is traditional for a wife to weave *gamosas* for the husband. But here, there is none. So, the speaker wonders as to when he shall get a mate like the girl of *Majikusi*. Here, the trust on God and the belief that God will provide with a wife gets highlighted. The speaker calls out to God for help as he is in need of a spouse.

The above poem translated from Totola Rabha is a lyrical poem dwelling on the pangs of unrequited love on the part of a peasant boy. He falls in love with a girl from *Majikusi* whom he describes to be one so slender and soft. He uses metaphorical comparison but with an opposite effect when he refers to the body of the girl to be unlike the rough surface of the cucumber. His love story seems to be one of sadness when the girl of

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<sup>1</sup> A loin cloth

his dreams is lured by the romantic tune of flute. The words used by the speaker of course creates a hilarious situation in the midst of sadness for he says-

*'Anba laga jiyato  
Kune bhulala'*

The lines express a feeling of despair. The speaker says, 'Who has lured the girl I was supposed to marry?' And that too with just the notes of a flute.

Nature seems to realize his sadness when he describes a crow spreading his melancholic message. He, instead of doing anything daring to bring back the girl, inflicts himself with agony when he sells his buffaloes out of bitterness. He has prepared a garland of flowers but to no use as the girl of his dreams is has flown away. His utter helpless condition gets highlighted when he says,

*'Oiranor majote, ghuri paki ahongte  
Teu nakhai bonoriya baghe'*

The speaker wanders among the woods in utter sadness, but even the tigers seem to overlook. Such was the condition of the speaker. He again compares his condition to be worse than that of a drifting deer who has every hope of swimming to the shore. But for him, there is no hope left as his dreams have been shattered.

The oral poetry that has been analyzed manages to touch the bitterness of unrequited love through the use of poetic techniques such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, metaphor, couplet, rhyming schemes, etc. Thus, we see that oral Poetry of Totola Rabhas are rich in form and content.

It reflects the worldview of the Totla Rabhas and their perspective about their life, nature, aspirations, aesthetic sense and also their sense of poetic expression through simile, metaphors, etc. The song is also an epistemic resource capturing the complexities of gender where the importance of a wife gets highlighted.

The source and target texts were analyzed at extra linguistic level. Regarding extra linguistic level, the two texts were examined in terms of coherence and implicature under the headings of grammar and poetics. The translator had to use opaque translation due to the pragmatic, linguistic and cultural translation problem. In many cases, he has shifted at different levels which are led to the change of effect in the TT. The poet has keenly used alliterations, onomatopoeia and metaphors intending to show his pitiable condition, and interestingly, the translator, following the speaker, have successfully conveyed them to the TT. To sum up, a translator's success arises from his literary expertise, background knowledge, and cultural knowledge which are dominant features in the extra textual analysis of oral poetry.

Newmark (1988) believes "the translation of poetry is the field where most emphasis is normally put on the creation of a new independent poem, and where literal translation is usually condemned" (p.70). So, an attempt was made to translate the poem while dwelling on the meaning of the ST.

The oral poetry of the Totola Rabhas is indeed unique in their own nature. They are a living tradition passed down from generations orally. Thus, it is of utmost importance that the language of this oral community gets connected to the languages of other oral communities through translation.

And to end the discussion, let us reflect the words of Ruth Finnegan (1977), "To ignore the existence of this huge wealth of oral poetry throughout the world in the present as well as the past, is to miss one of the great sources and products of man's imaginative and reflecting and dramatic faculties – of those things which mark him out as a human and a social animal."

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