

Echoes Across Language: Preserving Voice and Musicality in Indian Vernacular Poetry Translation

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Abstract

Indian vernacular poetry embodies a rich interplay of voice, musicality, and cultural symbolism shaped by diverse linguistic tradition and oral performance practices. Translating such poetry presents significant challenges, particularly in preserving the poet's voice and the rhythmic structures that carry emotional and aesthetic meaning. This paper examines the complexities of translating Indian vernacular poetry, focusing on how voice and musicality are negotiated, transformed or lost in translation. The study analyzes the works of the great poets such as Kabir, Subramaniya Bharathiyar, Rabindranath Tagore, A.K. Ramanujan, and Kamala Das drawing on translation theory, post-colonial perspectives, and Indian aesthetic traditions. The paper argues that translation is not the process of replication but a creative negotiation that must balance accessibility with cultural fidelity. It proposes strategies for preserving voice and musicality through adaptive rhythm, selective retention of vernacular elements, and paratextual support. By foregrounding the sonic and cultural dimensions of poetry, translators can create resonant English versions that echo the spirit of the original.

Keywords: Vernacular, Indian Poetry, Voice, Musicality, Literature, Cultural Translation.

India's multilingual literary landscape offers a vast body of poetry rooted in regional languages such as Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Malayalam. These poetic traditions are shaped by oral performance, musical recitation, and culturally embedded symbolism. When translated into English, such poetry enters the global literary space but also confirms structural and aesthetic differences between languages. Translation serves as a bridge across linguistic boundaries, enabling wider readership and cross-cultural dialogue. However, it also risks erasing linguistic textures and cultural nuances that define vernacular poetry. Among the most challenging elements to preserve are voice-the poet's distinctive tone and socio-cultural identity- and musicality, the rhythmic and sonic qualities that carry emotional resonance. This paper explores the various sections such

as understanding voice and musicality in poetry, exploration of Indian poetry works, challenges and strategies of preserving voice and musicality in translating Indian poetry into English. It argues that translation should be understood as a creative negotiation rather than literal transfer, requiring culturally sensitive strategies that honour the original's aesthetic integrity.

In vernacular poetry, voice not only signifies personal expression but also represents social identity, regional dialect, and cultural perspectives. Poetic voice can convey markers of caste, gender viewpoints, devotional fervour, or political dissent. For instance, Kabir's mystic poetry uses everyday language to contest religious authority, while Subramaniya Bharathiyar's nationalist poems communicate revolutionary zeal through accessible and melodically rich Tamil. However, translating these voices into standardized English can lead to a loss of the socio-linguistic nuances that are integral to their meaning.

Musicality in Indian poetry emerges from elements such as meter, rhyme, repetition, and oral performance traditions. Many poems are crafted for singing or chanting, with rhythm enhancing emotional resonance. Forms like doha, bhajans, and keerthans depend on rhythmic symmetry and sound patterns, which play a significant role in Rasa, the aesthetic experience central to Indian poetry. English, with its distinct phonetic structure, often struggles to replicate these musical patterns, posing a significant challenge for translators.

Musicality is not merely an ornamental feature of Indian literature; it is crucial to the works' significance throughout much of the tradition. Many foundational texts were intended for oral recitation—Rigveda hymns were performed by priests, the Ramayana was narrated as katha, and Bhakti verses by Kabir and Mirabai were set to ragas in both temple and court settings.

Classical Sanskrit prosody recognized over thirty primary meters, each associated with specific emotional themes. For example, the anushtubh meter, which is prevalent in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, has an eight-syllable rhythm, while the shardula-vikridita and mandakranta meters convey erotic and elegiac tones, respectively. Tamil prosody (yappu) is equally complex, distinguishing among various metrical forms such as aciriyam, kali, and vanci, each associated with specific literary genres. In Urdu and Hindi poetry, forms like the ghazal and nazm employ rhyme and radif (a recurring phrase or word) as structural and emotional devices. The radif functions as a refrain that accumulates meaning with each repetition, and translating a ghazal without this component or merely replacing it with rhyme alters the fundamental structure of the poem.

Indian poetry boasts a wealth of diverse voices and rhythmic traditions that encapsulate the cultural, spiritual, and emotional experiences of its people. The concept of voice in poetry pertains to the distinct tone, viewpoint, and identity of the poet, while musicality encompasses the rhythm, melody, sound patterns, and lyrical qualities of the language. The works of Kabir, Subramania Bharati, A.K. Ramanujan, Rabindranath Tagore, and Kamala Das exemplify how poetic voice and musicality result in profound emotional and philosophical expressions.

Kabir's poetry is grounded in spirituality, simplicity, and oral traditions. His voice serves as that of a spiritual reformer and mystic, challenging religious hypocrisy and advocating for a universal God. His dohas, or short couplets, carry considerable philosophical weight. The musicality of Kabir's poetry arises from the rhythmic structure of the doha form, alongside repetition and straightforward language. Often sung at devotional gatherings, these verses possess a strong musical and performative essence, making them easy to remember and recite. Kabir's poetic voice is direct, bold, and inquisitive, employing everyday imagery such as weaving, water, and nature to communicate with common people. This straight forwardness enhances both the emotional resonance and the rhythmic quality of his work. The fusion of spiritual insight with lyrical rhythm renders Kabir's poetry both timeless and impactful.

Subramania Bharati's poetry is characterized by its passionate voice and dynamic musical rhythm. His creative expression embodies nationalism, social change, and the quest for human freedom, resonating strongly during India's fight for independence. His poems convey a tone of courage, hope, and empowerment. Musicality holds significant importance in Bharati's works. Many poems feature strong rhythmic patterns and song-like formats, making them conducive to singing. Utilizing traditional Tamil poetic meters with innovative rhythms, he creates a compelling musical experience. His poetic pieces, including patriotic songs and devotional lyrics, illustrate how rhythm and repetition amplify emotional depth. Bharati's bold, inspiring, and expressive voice transforms poetry into a revolutionary anthem.

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry offers a distinct poetic voice, marked by introspection, reflection, and intellectual depth. His work delves into themes of memory, identity, family dynamics, and cultural heritage. In contrast to traditional lyrical poetry, Ramanujan's musicality is gentle and understated, employing natural speech rhythms, soft repetitions, and carefully selected sounds, creating an unobtrusive musical flow. Ramanujan's poetry merges Indian cultural motifs with contemporary literary techniques. His voice navigates personal experiences alongside broader cultural reflections. The musicality in his works emerges from a balance of sound, pause, and rhythm, producing a contemplative and meditative tone.

Rabindranath Tagore's poetry intertwines music and spirituality, expressing themes of humanism, devotion, nature, and universal love. His work illustrates a harmonious connection between the individual's soul and the divine. Musicality is integral to Tagore's poetic style; many of his poems form part of Rabindra Sangeet, songs written by Tagore. The lyrical quality, rhythm, and melody contribute to the rich musicality of his poetry. Tagore employs repetition, flowing rhythms, and imagery from nature to cultivate a soothing musical effect. His poetic voice is gentle, philosophical, and imbued with deep emotion, transforming poetry into a spiritual song linking the human spirit with the divine.

Kamala Das's poetry introduces a strikingly bold and personal voice within Indian English literature. Her confessional style allows her to candidly explore themes like love, loneliness, identity, and womanhood. Kamala's voice is intimate, emotional, and audacious, breaking traditional norms to express the innermost desires of women candidly. The musicality in Kamala Das's poetry often arises from free verse, emotional rhythms, and the repetition of words and phrases. Rather than adhering to strict meter, her rhythm flows naturally, mirroring feelings and thoughts, yielding a spontaneous and expressive musical quality. The combination of her emotionally charged voice and rhythmic expression renders her poetry profoundly impactful, turning personal experiences into significant poetic discourse.

The works of these poets highlight the richness and diversity inherent in Indian poetic traditions. Each poet delivers a distinct voice shaped by their cultural, spiritual, and personal influences. Kabir's mystic and rhythmic voice, Bharati's revolutionary and vibrant tone, Ramanujan's reflective and understated cadence, Tagore's spiritual and lyrical harmony, and Kamala Das's deeply personal and intense expression all contribute to a tapestry of musicality that ranges from devotional rhythms and patriotic anthems to introspective and confessional free verse.

Together, these poets illustrate how voice and musicality are vital components of poetry, enhancing its emotional depth and artistic richness. Their work continues to resonate, showing that poetry transcends mere written expression; it embodies a living form of musical art. Regional dialects convey social and cultural identity. English translations tend to neutralise dialect variation, creating a uniform voice. For instance, the earthy idiom of rural Hindi or the urban slang of Marathi Dalit poetry loses its socio-political resonance when rendered into formal English. Bhakti poetry often employs intimate, gendered language to express devotion. Translating such expressions into

English may dilute emotional intensity. The devotional voice in Tamil and Vaishnava traditions use metaphors of bridal mysticism that lack direct equivalents in English may dilute emotional intensity. The translator's Mediation functions as a co-creator, shaping tone, register, and ideological positioning. This mediation can amplify or diminish the poet's original voice.

Indian poetry often uses sound to evoke meaning. Repetition and phonetic patterns reinforce emotional tone. As an example, Bengali poetry frequently employs soft consonants and vowel harmony to create lyrical flow, a feature difficult to replicate in English. Nature sounds, rainfall, temple bells, and folk instruments form part of poetic musicality. Translating these elements requires cultural contextualization. In Indian aesthetics, sound contributes to the evocation of *Rasa*. The rhythm of a devotional chant intensifies spiritual experience. The English translations may convey semantic content but struggle to evoke equivalent emotional resonance.

Traditional poetic forms such as *shloka*, *doha*, *ghazal*, and *vachana* depend on specific meters and structural rules that lack direct parallels in English or many other languages. The *doha*, for example, is a couplet where the first line usually presents a question or issue, and the second line provides an answer, following a pattern of alternating eleven and thirteen syllables. Creating an English *doha* that maintains this rhythmic and argumentative style while effectively conveying its meaning is an exceptionally challenging endeavor.

Numerous modern Indian literary works are inherently multilingual, often incorporating a mix of English and regional languages or featuring Sanskrit and Persian loanwords that carry particular ideological significance. These internal translations and linguistic shifts are intentional artistic techniques seen in the 'Hinglish' of some contemporary urban literature and present distinctive challenges for translators, who must determine how to represent this linguistic diversity in their translations.

A translator's gender, caste, regional background, and linguistic proficiency significantly influence their translation work. For example, translations of Dalit literature by upper-caste individuals have faced criticism for smoothing over linguistically significant roughness. Similarly, feminist scholars have noted that male translators of women's literature often tend to normalize subversive stylistic choices, this also follows up for poetry. Tagore's English translations of his Bengali poetry, particularly *Gitanjali* (1912), are among the most renowned and extensively discussed examples of self-translation in global literature. The original Bengali poems in *Gitanjali* feature intricate and diverse metrical patterns, some inspired by Sanskrit traditions and others by the Baul folk music of Bengal which is imbued with rich references to both the Vaishnava devotional tradition and Tagore's personal philosophical ideas. Bengali poems which have been translated to English by himself illustrate the transformative nature of translation. His English versions often simplify imagery and rhythm to reach global audiences, demonstrating the trade-offs between accessibility and lyricality.

Tagore's English translations notably diminished the poetic qualities of the originals: he eliminated the meter, condensed several poems into single pieces, and modified the spiritual address from a specific Hindu deity to a more universal 'Lord' to appeal to an Edwardian English Christian audience. Though this resulted in a text of considerable beauty, it markedly altered the original voice. Following this, William Radice and other translators have created English versions that seek to reconnect with the metrical and cultural intricacies of the Bengali originals, highlighting the considerable literary and cultural distinction between Tagore's Bengali works and his English translations.

A.K. Ramanujan's translations *Speaking of Siva* (1973), *Poems of Love and War* (1985), and *The Interior Landscape* (1967) are highly esteemed as exemplary literary translations from Indian languages. As a scholar and poet proficient in both English and Kannada, Ramanujan infused his translations with a unique blend of philological precision and artistic insight. When translating the

Vachanas of the Virashaiva saints and the Sangam akam poems, he encountered the challenge of maintaining both the original form such as the akam system of landscape imagery and the succinct devotional fervour of the vachana and their auditory qualities. To address this, he opted for free verse with intentional line breaks, using enjambment to evoke a sense of momentum that mirrors the rhythmic quality of the originals. His incorporation of vibrant, concrete imagery preserved the sensory immediacy of the Tamil and Kannada texts while retaining their distinctiveness.

English poetry of Kamala Das appeals to a broader, more global audience, utilizing the personal and straightforward nature of confessional poetry. When translating her Malayalam fiction into English, translators must address not only the language barriers but also the contrasting ideologies of her two literary identities. Those who have attempted to apply the style of her English poetry to her Malayalam prose have faced criticism for merging two distinct voices. This highlights the fact that an author can express different voices in various languages, and translation should be aware of this complexity. Kabir's dohas combine rhythmic symmetry with colloquial expression. English translations focus more on preserving meaning and lose oral intonation and performative energy.

The poetry of Subramania Bharati unites rhythm with political fervour. Translations frequently render his songs into free verse, diminishing their musical force. The poem "Achamillai Achamillai" expresses the courage, bravery, and resistance against the oppression which is translated as "No Fear, No Fear" Instead of aiming for a literal translation, translators focused on maintaining the literary impact utilizing dynamic or functional equivalence in *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964) by Eugene Nida. Their goal is to evoke a response in the target audience that is comparable to that of the original readers. This often necessitates creative transposition substituting a Tamil cultural reference with one that resonates similarly for the target audience, while also including a note to acknowledge the original reference.

In translating metrically intricate poetry, translators have adopted various prosodic techniques. These include using stress-based English meters to mirror the syllabic patterns of Sanskrit or Tamil poetry, employing free verse that incorporates rhythmic breaks reflecting the original's breathing patterns, and maintaining syntactic parallelism and anaphora as alternatives to rhyme. A.K. Ramanujan's translations of Sangam poetry and Bhakti saints illustrate this practice; he emphasizes rhythm through line length and syntactic repetition instead of relying on rhyme.

Lawrence Venuti's (1998) notion of foreignization which involves keeping the cultural and linguistic distinctions of the source text rather than conforming them to target language norms has significantly influenced translators of Indian literature. By preserving essential cultural terms (raga, dharma, rasa) in their original forms, sometimes with explanations, translators indicate to readers that they are engaging with a distinctly different literary realm. This method counters the 'sanctioned ignorance' that often results from smoothly domesticated translations, as noted by Gayatri Spivak (1993).

Translators often enhance their works with introductions, afterwords, and notes that provide context for the cultural and literary background of the original pieces. Ramanujan's introductions to his collections serve as scholarly essays, preparing readers for the linguistic and cultural differences present in the original poems. This paratextual support can help preserve cultural detail without disrupting the reading flow. Footnotes, glossaries, and translator's notes can provide cultural context without disrupting poetic flow. Notable translations of Indian literature have frequently resulted from collaboration between a native speaker of the source language and a proficient literary writer in the target language. An example of this collaborative approach is the work between Girish Karnad and his English translators, blending linguistic accuracy with literary flair, although it raises questions regarding which voice ultimately dominates the translation. Rather than replicating the

original meter, translators can create equivalent rhythmic patterns that evoke similar emotional effects. Selective retention of key terms (eg., bhakti, maya, raga) preserves cultural specificity and sonic texture. For Example: Kabir's dohas translated by Aravind Krishna Mehrotra. In many translations of Kabir's Hindi couplets (dohas), terms like Maya and Rama are retained. In "Bijak", Kabir writes, "Maya dies not,/ The mind dies not;/ The body keeps on dying." (lines1-3) Here, the word maya is often left untranslated instead of being simplified to illusion, because it carries layered philosophical meanings in Bhakthi and Vedantic traditions. Similarly, Rama is kept rather than translated as God, maintaining both devotional and cultural resonance.

Hybrid translations that blend English with vernacular elements reflect linguistic diversity and resist homogenization. For example: Kamala Das - Translation of her poems from Malayalam retains kinship and cultural terms. Kamala Das writes in her collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), "An Introduction" poem stated, "I am the sinner, / I am the saint. I am the beloved and the betrayed./ Call me Ammu if you love me." Names and intimate address forms are kept untranslated, preserving cultural intimacy in the above lines. (lines 55-57)

Translation should be viewed as an interpretive act that balances fidelity and transformation. Attempting exact replication may be less effective than recreating emotional and sonic resonance. Translators must consider the ethical implications of representing marginalized voices. Preserving linguistic diversity helps resist cultural erasure. Greater attention to sound and performance can enrich translation practices, encouraging approaches that foreground musicality. Bharathi writes in *Songs to Kannamma*, "Little Parrot, my kannama, / Treasure-house of my wealth, / My life's companion, kannamma, / My sweetest life."

Bharathi illustrates the difficulty of translating Tamil lyrical poetry into English, cultural meaning of the word Kannamma, loss of musical rhythm. The metaphorical meaning of the word Parrot (Kili) which symbolises sweetness, innocence, and beauty but in english calling someone a parrot may sound unusual or even more humours which is called cultural symbolism weakens. The emotional intensity tends to sound simpler in English and less emotionally intense than the original. The linguistic compactness where Tamil allows rich meaning in short phrases, while English may require longer explanations which changes the poetic brevity.

Translating Indian vernacular poetry in English involves complex negotiations of voice and musicality shaped by linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic differences. While translation expands global access, it often standardizes diverse voices and diminishes sonic richness. Recognizing translation as a creative and ethical practice enables strategies that preserve cultural specificity and emotional resonance. Through adaptive rhythm, retention of vernacular elements, and paratextual support, translators can produce English versions that echo the spirit of the original. Ultimately, preserving voice and musicality ensures that the echoes of India's poetic traditions continue to resonate across languages.

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