

Delving into a translator's journey of translating marginalised voices of Bengal: An insightful discussion with V. Ramaswamy

Bidisha Pal and Mojibur Rahman

Volume 68, Number 2, August 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109347ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109347ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Pal, B. & Rahman, M. (2023). Delving into a translator's journey of translating marginalised voices of Bengal: An insightful discussion with V. Ramaswamy. *Meta*, 68(2), 473–485. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109347ar>

Article abstract

This interview discussion is the outcome of a virtual meeting partially along with email correspondence. In this interview discussion with Bidisha Pal and Md. Mojibur Rahman, translator V. Ramaswamy focuses on the journey of his translation and tryst with the marginalised Dalit voice(s) in Bengal. He speaks about the writings that propel him to choose translating and to carry voice(s) beyond the Bengal arena, thus dissolving language barriers. The deliberate choice to translate various pieces representing various time periods acts as a witness to his existence as an independent translator. According to him, translation is also a source of healing to deal with a tragic past and the complications that life often presents to him. He shares his experience translating Subimal Mishra, the powerful poet who speaks for marginalised people. Ramaswamy, as he states in the interview, makes a vow to translate Mishra's whole writing career. He talks about translating Manoranjan Byapari, a Bengali Dalit prize-winning author and political persona who has also championed the Dalit cause in Bengal, Adhir Biswas, the story-writer and publisher of a publishing house in Kolkata Gangchil that publishes writings by those literary personas who do not fall, as such, into the category of the mainstream, Bangladeshi writer Shahidul Zahir whose revolutionary voice and zeal reverberate in the literary world of Bangladesh, as well as Ansaruddin, a writer and farmer by profession whose works Ramaswamy is currently translating. Despite not being a part of the literary world as such, Ramaswamy has built an intense connection with literature and has gradually become part of the world. For him, translation is something that has to remain faithful to the source text especially if people are doing literary translation.

Delving into a translator's journey of translating marginalised voices of Bengal: An insightful discussion with V. Ramaswamy

BIDISHA PAL
bidisha.p@srmap.edu.in

MD. MOJIBUR RAHMAN
mrahmanelt@iitism.ac.in

RÉSUMÉ

Cette entrevue est le résultat d'une réunion virtuelle accompagnée d'une correspondance par courrier électronique. Dans cette entrevue par Bidisha Pal et Md. Mojibur Rahman, le traducteur V. Ramaswamy se concentre sur le parcours de sa pratique de traduction et son rendez-vous avec la ou les voix marginalisées des Dalits au Bengale. Il parle des écrits qu'il choisit de traduire à choisir la traduction afin de porter la ou les voix au-delà de l'arène du Bengale, surmontant ainsi les barrières linguistiques. Le choix délibéré de traduire diverses œuvres représentant différentes époques témoigne de son indépendance comme traducteur. Selon lui, la traduction est aussi une source de guérison face à un passé tragique et aux complications que la vie lui a réservées. Il partage son expérience de traduction de Subimal Mishra, le puissant poète qui parle au nom des personnes marginalisées. Ramaswamy, comme il le déclare dans l'entrevue, fait le vœu de traduire toute la carrière d'écrivain de Mishra. Il parle de la traduction de divers autres auteurs : Manoranjan Byapari, un auteur bengali Dalit lauréat de plusieurs prix et personnalité politique qui a également défendu la cause des Dalit au Bengale ; Adhir Biswas, scénariste et éditeur d'une maison d'édition à Kolkata Gangchil qui publie les écrits de ces auteurs littéraires qu'on ne classe pas, en tant que tels, dans la catégorie du courant dominant ; l'écrivain bangladais Shahidul Zahir dont la voix et le zèle révolutionnaires se répercutent dans le monde littéraire du Bangladesh ; ainsi que Ansaruddin, écrivain et agriculteur de profession dont Ramaswamy traduit actuellement les œuvres. Bien qu'il ne fasse pas partie du monde littéraire en tant que tel, Ramaswamy a construit un lien intense avec la littérature et est progressivement devenu partie intégrante du monde. Pour lui, la traduction est quelque chose qui doit rester fidèle au texte source, surtout si l'on fait de la traduction littéraire.

ABSTRACT

This interview discussion is the outcome of a virtual meeting partially along with email correspondence. In this interview discussion with Bidisha Pal and Md. Mojibur Rahman, translator V. Ramaswamy focuses on the journey of his translation and tryst with the marginalised Dalit voice(s) in Bengal. He speaks about the writings that propel him to choose translating and to carry voice(s) beyond the Bengal arena, thus dissolving language barriers. The deliberate choice to translate various pieces representing various time periods acts as a witness to his existence as an independent translator. According to him, translation is also a source of healing to deal with a tragic past and the complications that life often presents to him. He shares his experience translating Subimal Mishra, the powerful poet who speaks for marginalised people. Ramaswamy, as he states in the interview, makes a vow to translate Mishra's whole writing career. He talks about translating Manoranjan Byapari, a Bengali Dalit prize-winning author and political persona who has

also championed the Dalit cause in Bengal, Adhir Biswas, the story-writer and publisher of a publishing house in Kolkata Gangchil that publishes writings by those literary personas who do not fall, as such, into the category of the mainstream, Bangladeshi writer Shahidul Zahir whose revolutionary voice and zeal reverberate in the literary world of Bangladesh, as well as Ansaruddin, a writer and farmer by profession whose works Ramaswamy is currently translating. Despite not being a part of the literary world as such, Ramaswamy has built an intense connection with literature and has gradually become part of the world. For him, translation is something that has to remain faithful to the source text especially if people are doing literary translation.

RESUMEN

Esta entrevista es el resultado de una reunión virtual y la correspondencia por correo electrónico. En esta entrevista con Bidisha Pal y Md. Mojibur Rahman, el traductor V. Ramaswamy se centra en el recorrido de su práctica de traducción y su encuentro con las voces dalit marginadas en Bengala. Habla sobre los escritos que eligió traducir con miras a llevar voces más allá del ámbito bengalí, superando así las barreras del idioma. La elección deliberada de traducir varias obras que representan distintas épocas atestigua su independencia como traductor. Según él, la traducción es también una fuente de curación para afrontar un pasado trágico y las complicaciones que a menudo le han presentado la vida. Comparte su experiencia traduciendo a Subimal Mishra, el poderoso poeta que habla en nombre de las personas marginadas. Ramaswamy, como afirma en la entrevista, se compromete a traducir toda la carrera literaria de Mishra. Habla igualmente acerca de otros escritores: a Manoranjan Byapari, un autor y personaje político dalit bengalí ganador de un premio que también ha defendido la causa dalit en Bengala; Adhir Biswas, escritor de cuentos y editor de una editorial en Kolkata Gangchil que publica escritos de esos personajes literarios que no entran, como tales, en la categoría de la corriente principal; el escritor bangladés Shahidul Zahir, cuya voz y celo revolucionarios resuenan en el mundo literario de Bangladesh; así como Ansaruddin, escritor y agricultor de profesión cuyas obras Ramaswamy está traduciendo actualmente. A pesar de no ser parte del mundo literario como tal, Ramaswamy ha construido una intensa conexión con la literatura y poco a poco se ha convertido en parte del mundo. Para él, la traducción es algo que debe permanecer fiel al texto original, especialmente si se trata de traducción literaria.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS/PALABRAS CLAVE

traduction littéraire, choix, voyage, fidélité, voix marginalisée(s)

literary translation, choice, journey, faithfulness, marginalised voice(s)

traducción literaria, elección, viaje, fidelidad, voz(ces) marginada(s)

1. Introduction

Venkateswar Ramaswamy (*hereafter*, V. Ramaswamy) (alias Rama Sangye) is an independent translator who translates by choice. He has undertaken the literary translation of voices from the margins after two decades of social activism and grassroots organising with the labouring poor in his city, Kolkata. He has translated quite a lot. He ventures around Bengal literature, especially texts that bring out the marginalised voice(s) of various time periods and phases. He has translated quite a few pieces by writers such as Subimal Mishra, Manoranjan Byapari, Adhir Biswas, Shahidul Zahir and Ansaruddin. The journey his translation career has taken was, at first, propelled by his friend. He has now been translating for a decade and is part of the world of literary translation. Some of his translated books were published by Harper Collins,

UK. For his translation of Subimal Mishra, he was selected for the Sangam House Writer Residency. Translation for Ramaswamy is also a source of healing that helps him deal with a tragic past that involves the death of his son. He is not a translator by profession, nor bound by any contract. He translates for the sake of translation. Some of his important recent works are *The Runaway Boy* (2020) and *The Nemesis* (2023), which are parts of the *Chandal Jiban* trilogy, a novel series written by the Dalit Bengali author Manoranjan Byapari in Bengali. Another important work is *Memories of Arrival: A Voice from the Margins* (2021), which comprises the 4-part memoir by another Bengali Dalit author, Adhir Biswas. In addition, he has also translated the following books: *The Golden Gandhi Statue from America: Early Stories* (2010), *Wild Animals Prohibited: Stories/Anti-stories* (2018) and *This Could Have Become Ramayan Chamar's Tale: Two Anti-Novels* (2019), all by Subimal Misra, as well as *Life and Political Reality: Two Novellas* (2022), by Shahidul Zahir (with Shahroza Nahrin). He runs a small family business that acts as a source of income and which gives him ample opportunity to indulge in translation. For him, this is a form of self-indulgence. A common thread that connects the thematic resonance of the writers he translates is marginality and the marginalised voice(s) which he believes he delivers into the mainstream through the necessary act of translation. He has been recently working on pieces by Shahidul Zahir and Ansaruddin to offer people overseas access to the voice of Bangladesh.

2. Interview

Bidisha Pal (BP): Why do you translate? When did you start translating?

V. Ramaswamy (VR): I started translating almost by accident after a casual conversation with a friend. In hindsight, I like to think that it was just mindless talk and somewhat boastful and presumptuous. Subsequently, I learnt how presumptuous it was because I started my translation with Subimal Mishra. Subimal Mishra was a writer who was quite different from any other writer and his use of the Bengali language is not anything to be messed with. So, for somebody who has never read any Bengali literature (and I still haven't read enough), it would appear quite challenging. However, my connection to literature was through English, so everything I read was in English. I knew the Bengali language, but I had never engaged with any of its literature. I thought I could translate and it was a very presumptuous of me to think that I could translate his writing. Somebody mentioned his name and I said, "OK, I'll translate it." This idea might have remained just talk, but it didn't. My friend kept prodding me, so I started translating. This was the beginning of my translation journey. It was casual, but translation is not a casual thing you see. It is a serious business and it is difficult when taken seriously. And if you are translating serious stuff, you require patience and must possess a very good sense of quality. So, at the same time anybody can translate anything, but for the translation to stand on its own two feet and have literary merit, it does not happen accidentally. It requires effort and whoever is doing it has to be implicit within himself about all the different kinds of capability which one can take for granted, such as command of the English language. Sitting in India with a command of the language means a lot of things. It likely means that you are from or in a certain socio-economic class, for instance,

you have had a certain type of education or have had other similar opportunities. In any case, my translation was a casual one, but it was undertaken seriously and when I had finished one book, I was interested enough in the author to translate another one. Then I was selected for a three-week writer's residency, the Sangam House Writer Residency, in 2011. I think that the opportunity to spend an entire day writing in a beautiful environment was the starting point in my translation journey. I got seriously into translation and I am now doing it by choice, not by accident. I was somewhat familiar with what translation, especially literary translation, was, as well as with the author Subimal Mishra. So, I decided to continue with Subimal Mishra and I took on a long-term project to translate several volumes of his short stories. After that, I committed myself to translation.

In 2015, I was translating Subimal Mishra's third book. A couple of years later, my son tragically passed away so I was in grief. It was very easy to sink into depression and be subject to depressive episodes. Then, for the first time, I fell into depression. Luckily, I managed to overcome it and I went back home and sat down to the Subimal Mishra translation project. From that point on, translation became a way for me to deal with this sad episode of my life and a way of shutting out everything, focusing and concentrating on a very specific thing which had a tangible output in the form of a book. So, this would be the third stage of the journey if you ask why I translate. I would say it was a way of dealing with my life. Then, maybe a year or two or sometime in the last year or two, there's been a transcendence to yet another level. Currently, my translation projects are a very deep translation of several authors of different varieties of writing from West Bengal and Bangladesh. I have a huge pile of projects to do piled up on my desk. I am slowly working my way through them and I feel really motivated to do them because I feel that this is my calling, this is what I am here to do, this is my "work." I am fortunate in that I have the financial means that allow me to pursue these passion projects. I have a small family business which provides me with an income. So now I can focus on translation, which provides me with pleasure and joy. It is no longer a question of seeking out a living but rather a form of indulgence.

I am now doing what makes me happy and I am dedicating myself fully to it. I try to ensure, to the best of my ability, that the output is something of quality and that the person and the translator I am today is better than back in 2005. There has been a big transformation. Seeing this transformation makes me think, all the more, how presumptuous and ignorant I was when I first started translating. I hope that this answers these two questions.

Md. Mojibur Rahman (MMR): What do you mostly focus on in your translations?

VR: It was completely by chance that I started translating Subimal Mishra. But then I decided to go further, by translating four other books by him. I decided that I would select several works of short fiction that he wrote during his 45-year writing career, short stories which he called "anti-stories," to be published in four volumes. The first volume came out in 2010, the second in 2015, the third in 2019 and the fourth should be coming out soon. The manuscript has already been submitted to the publisher. I was fortunate in that Harper Collins accepted to publish the first volume of Subimal's anti-stories, then the second volume, then the third and finally the fourth. So, this Subimal project continued until 2015. I completed all the translations, going deeper

and deeper into them. I focused exclusively on Subimal Mishra and I had reasons to justify Subimal Mishra as Subimal Mishra. His name has become a hallmark of Bengali writing, in the small Bengali magazine publishing world, in Bengali counter-culture and in the parallel Bengali stream of literature. Apart from being a writer, he was a towering intellect and thinker of our times, influencing a large number of people across various disciplines, writing, film-making, theatre, painting, as well as artists and other people in various walks of life who encountered his writings. He has had a big impact on many people. His work has defined their politics and their aesthetics. It has defined their thinking on literature, cinema, society and so on. In short, that is what Subimal Mishra is and what his writing and his short stories are. When one thinks of them, one thinks of their importance and value. I was trying to convey Subimal Mishra and his thinking across the language barrier into English, and thus to a wider world of people in the literary realm. I have always found him to be very contemporary. His writings have great relevance for our times and so on. This is what I was focusing on. I was nearing the end of my Subimal Mishra project. Three volumes were completed and the fourth volume was well advanced. Then I started thinking of what I would do next, after Subimal Mishra. And then, via *Facebook*, I learnt of Manoranjan Byapari. That was in 2015. I was able to contact him, meet him, speak to him and so forth. I heard about his autobiography in Bangla *Itibritte Chandal Jiban (Interrogating My Chandal Life)*, so I thought I might translate it. I asked him and he said that it was already being translated by Sipra Mukherjee and that Stree-Samya was going to bring it out. But he wanted to work with me, so he gave me a novel to translate, *Chandal Jiban (Life of a Chandal)*. The story appeared in a magazine in two parts (published in 2008 and 2009), so he sent me off-prints of each part bound together in a single volume, forming a single novel. I began translating the book in 2016. Now, when I think back to translating Manoranjan Byapari's work after having several years of translating Subimal Mishra's work, I see and feel a huge difference between them. They are poles apart in many ways, yet I feel that one common description could be applied to both, that, in my mind, there was a common feature: both represent voices from the margins. Subimal was a writer who deliberately chose to live on the margins and not occupy the main or centre stream of the writing world and the writing life, opting rather for a life on the margins. I could elaborate more, but I think that this is an apt description.

Manoranjan Byapari is from the margins in a more literary sense, especially in terms of his social-economic background. So, these voices from the margins became a kind of label and then, increasingly, I began to take this perspective seriously, as a meaningful kind of stream to follow. If you asked me what I would mostly focus on in my translations, it would be voices from the margins.

BP: What do you enjoy the most in translation?

VR: I don't know how to answer the question especially when I was translating Manoranjan Byapari. I completed translating Subimal Mishra's short stories as well as two novellas. It was a helpful training for the transition to translating a novel. The novel Byapari gave me was immense. It was two joined off-prints. I think it consists of 222 pages in Bangla. After I completed this, he told me that in fact, it did not finish there. There were two more parts. The third part was very, very slim, almost like

a short story, while the fourth part was long, but not as long as the first two. So, this project eventually became three books in English. You could not have the whole thing in a single volume so it became the *Chandal Jiban Trilogy*. The first part has already come out. It is called *The Runaway Boy*. The second part is coming out in a couple of months and the title of this part is *The Nemesis*. I shall start working on the third part shortly and that will also come out next year. So, when I was working on *Chandal Jiban (Life of a Chandal)*, the strongest impression it left on me was the labour involved. It was just sheer arduous labour. You have to go through the whole long thing and if you want to do it justice, you have to read each word and sentence and, in that sense, I always try to respect the author or rather I choose such authors whom I respect. That means that every word in the sentence is of value to me. I can't disregard any word without a reason, so it is just sheer labour, but as I told you a year or two ago, I have reached a different level of engagement with my translations so it is now a form of pleasure for me. I think I might decide between not translating exceptionally long works because of that labour involved. Shorter works can become pure pleasure and enjoyment especially if you are fortunate to translate an author whom you love. In Subimal Mishra's case, I was not able to love him as a reader because I am not competent nor knowledgeable in the Bangla language and its literature to fully engage with a writer of such a nature and stature. Nevertheless, I happened to become his translator and I think I have done a reasonably good job. I was conscientious and I was thankful that the output was not that bad and that it was well received. To translate Byapari again was a choice I made. I thought I should translate it. He gave me the text to translate so I felt bound to do it. So, I completed it despite some difficult struggles and circumstances.

Then I happened to learn of the Bangladeshi writer Shahidul Zahir. From the moment I started reading his writing, I was hooked. I love his writing. I have been reading world literature translated into English from an early age. So, with literature. My love for Shahidul Zahir came from my reading background. I never studied literature, so I know nothing about literary criticism or anything. I just read and enjoyed what I was reading. I loved Shahidul Zahir's work and then, fortunately, I got consent from his copyright holder (the author died in 2008) to translate it. 2021 is the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh and so I thought that translating Zahir, especially his first book, would be my way of marking this anniversary and paying tribute to the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. This first book was the novella *Jiban O Rajnaitik Bastobota* or *Life and Political Reality*. It is one of the finest works of literature on Bangladesh's independence in 1971. I am just restating what others have said. It was an honour for me to be able to translate his work. Translating Shahidul Zahir was a pleasure for me and it was also the urge to share his genius with readers in English outside Bangla. At this stage, the thing I mostly focus on is the translation itself, translating the prose of a writer that I love to read and of whom I feel I am the kindred spirit. People are eagerly waiting to read the translation, which will come out on the Bangladesh's 50th anniversary. I took on a Bangladeshi co-translator for the first book. She is now studying at McGill University, in Canada, writing her Master's thesis on Shahidul Zahir and introducing the author and his work to her university and faculty which have never heard of him. So, she is instigating a small revolution via Shahidul Zahir. Through my translation, I have been living within the literary world in a certain way and have become part of the discourse, the news and so forth.

MMR: You translated some important Bengali Dalit literary pieces. What propelled your choice?

VR: I got into translating Byapari just because I read about him on *Facebook* and about his book *Itibritte Chandal Jiban (Interrogating My Chandal Life)*. It received a prize from the Bangla Academy, West Bengal. At this point, you could say that I was still in the early days of my translation journey. My understanding of translation then is not what it is now. For instance, the sheer bulk of the labour I could have avoided if I knew then what I know now, if I had thought about it more thoroughly. That was one and then another important work that I translated was by Adhir Biswas in January, 2016. Before that Byapari provided me with a copy of his book when I asked him about translating his autobiography. Then, subsequently, he gave me his novel and that novel was a kind of autobiographical novel. He wrote it before the autobiography. The autobiography is a kind of rehashing of the whole thing into a summarised form. Some publishers told him that it could be published whereas *Chandal Jiban (Life of a Chandal)* was too long. My translation came out at the end of last year, a year ago. So that was how it happened and because I had started doing the translation, I saw it through to the finish. The third part is still remaining and I will complete that shortly. So that was how it happened.

Adhir Biswas gave me his book after that. It was not solicited. I went to meet him for some other matter and he gave me two books, *Allar Jomite Pa (Footsteps on the Land of God)* and *Udvastu Ponjika (Calendar of Refugees)*. I just thought that they were two separate books. The following year, I asked a friend of mine who had read *Allar Jomite Pa (Footsteps on the land of God)* about it. He said it was an important work and you should translate it. So, I took the idea more seriously and then, in 2018, or two and a half years later, I started translating it, finishing it that later that year. Then I discovered that there was a second book titled *Udvastu Ponjika (Calendar of Refugees)*. After that, I discovered a third one called *Chalo India! (Let's Go to India!)* and then when I finished that, there was a fourth one called *Gorchumuk (Gorchumuk)*. They are a kind of four-part set of refugee memories. I started translating them in 2018 and I only finished the last one in late 2019. I completed the whole manuscript around August of last year. This final one will be published by Stree-Samya and Sage later this month or next month. So, that was very much out of choice. Together these four parts constitute a whole volume. Each work is a slim work, but putting them together creates a substantial book. I was drawn in by the time I finished the first one and I was committed to the project. I was a part of the world he was writing about, that is his childhood and his early life, and I identify with that very much. There was a kind of dialogue happening within me while translating some parts. That was another important Dalit literary work.

I am currently translating a writer by the name of Ansaruddin. He is a farmer, a marginal farmer and a writer who has been writing for more than thirty years. He is a privileged boy from a farming household and although his family had a lot of land, his father remains mostly absent from home as he is a *yatra*¹ actor. Consequently, Ansaruddin was raised by his mother in his *mama bari* or maternal house. His mother was a member of the maternal house with an absent husband and a child and she had to take up the role of a maidservant while her son had to do all the harsher jobs for the household. So, in this way, he had to grow up with little means. He went

to college, graduated and continued his farming life. But he still loved reading, he read a lot and then, at the age of thirty, he started writing stories. I am translating a non-fiction work of his called *Goi Geramer Panchali* or *Oral Narrative Songs of a Village*, which is a kind of an ethnographic account of his life, but not in the dry language of sociology and anthropology, more so in the literary form. It was a kind of ethnography in literature or literary ethnography about the rural Muslim milieu of West Bengal. I (for the last 25 years and more, especially after the demolitions of the Babri Masjid mosque) made a decision and choice to engage with my fellow Indians who are Muslims. I felt the need to include them in my life. I set up a grassroots organisation in a Muslim *vasti* or “small settlements,” that is the jute workers’ *vasti* in Howrah, something I initiated 25 years ago so the Muslim question in West Bengal was a subject I was very close to. So, as a translator translating a writer describing the rural Muslim milieu, this was a subject close to my heart. One learns so much from translating authors like him. So, do all these things answer your question—“what propelled your choice?” A writer can be an independent person who decides what to write. I am an independent translator and am not bound to anything but to my whims and fancy, so I decide whom I should translate. I will continue to translate entirely independently, not only thinking about the merit and value of that work but also remembering my relationship to that work. It is my independent choice as a person living in Kolkata who engages with the Bengali-speaking world. It is the decision I have made.

MMR: Do you believe in following the source text blindly while translating?

VR: It is not appropriate to use the word “blindly,” I should say. A better choice would be “faithfully.” “Blindly” is negative while “faithfully” is a positive word. I said I used to decide earlier what I should translate and I would commit myself to it and put in the work. Hence, the writers I choose are those whose writings I respect. I respect each word they write, but what I have done so far may change the future. What I have tried to do so far is to translate as if the original writer was writing in English. Somebody reading the translation would say that it is the same in English, word for word. But in English, it can’t be word by word, you have to move around the writer’s voice. When a writer chooses to write a particular word, it implies a choice and I have to be the agent to transport his choice into the English language as well. But having said that, what one writes is not just the words but the impact that the words make. Something can be conveyed tragically, something in a humorous way, something ironically, sarcastically, funnily or angrily. The spirit underlying everything has to come out as well. So yes, I believe in faithfulness to the original in the choices I make. The authors and the translators made me think that faithfulness is important. Take, for instance, Shahidul Zahir. Everything is reflected in his own language and his works are so finely sculpted that they reflect true perfection. Hence, you are left with no choice but to follow each word and that is not easy. Some sentences within the original novel took me a very long time to understand what it meant in *Bangla* or “Bengali.” It was a very high-flown or difficult level of *Bangla* consisting of a very nuanced thought that the author was trying to express. The words lead you towards the thought and you need to understand it, but you can be staring at the words for long before you fully understand, if you can understand. I only understood the meaning of a sentence after a long reflexion. It was a Eureka moment for me. Hence, faithfulness is important. I

am doing literary translation and that means you have to see the author's final work as being sculpted with words and sentences. They are the basic tools and components of translation.

BP: What are some of your favourite translated works, which you have enjoyed translating?

VR: I have always decided by myself what I wanted to translate and each work is chosen because I believe it is significant, as literature, and from the viewpoint of the humanities, social sciences and social awareness in general. The work on each book has its flavour, each one being rich in different ways. For instance, translating some of the works of Subimal Misra was a magical experience. I have not translated many books. It is only in the last 2-to-3 years that I have oriented myself towards bringing out one book after another.

But perhaps I could say that translating Shahidul Zahir has been special because he is the first Bengali writer I translated. I read his prose purely for the enjoyment of reading it. I was mesmerised from the moment I started reading him. I asked Shahroza Nahrin, from Dhaka, to join me in translating Shahidul Zahir's novella *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota (Life and Political Reality)* and we also completed Zahir's other novella, *Abu Ibrahim Mrityu* or *The Death of Abu Ibrahim*. The translation collaboration was a very positive experience. It became clear to me that "being two translators is better than being one" when it comes to translation.

MMR: What is your opinion regarding the readership of translations of Dalit literature?

VR: Dalit voices are being unleashed on a caste society, just as the name Ambedkar is now widely and continuously heard and Dalit students are now starting to enter the hallways of hallowed institutions. One cannot over-emphasise that Dalit literature is of value to Dalit readers, but it could be of value to other readers as well, in terms of education and awareness of critical self-enquiry and correction. But caste consciousness and caste conduct are not so easy to change. The world outside India is also now becoming aware of India's caste reality and, in turn, that could enable those readers to see the means and ways in which exclusion and oppression work in these environments. Honestly, I don't know anything about the readership of translations of Dalit literature, other than some reviews that I have read in different papers and websites. With a growing number of books translated into English from Indian languages now coming out in India, ever more Indian literary works are available to an international audience and a market is being created for translated works where none existed before. Dalit voices form an important part of this trend.

MMR: Why did the thought of translating Bengali Dalit literature occur to you?

VR: I devoted myself to translating voices from the margins, so it is somewhat natural that I would translate Dalit literature. Once I began, it has been an education for me, to intimately "know" the caste system in ways my life circumstances entirely precluded.

MMR: What particular feature do you intend to bring forth while translating Bengali Dalit literary works?

VR: I simply try to understand every sentence, every sequence of sentences and then I seek to convey the same in English. There is nothing I can “bring,” that I can convey. I can only strive for exactitude while ensuring that it reads well in English.

BP: Tell us about your recent work *Memories of Arrival: A Voice from the Margins*.

VR: I met the author, Adhir Biswas, in early 2016 and he gave me a copy of *Allahr Jomite Paa (Footsteps on the Land of God)* and *Udbastu Ponjika (Calendar of Refugees)* to read. Since he knew I was a translator—I was translating Subimal Misra into English and he was re-publishing Misra’s work—I suppose that there was an expectation on his part that I might translate his writings. The following year, I asked my friend Mrinal Bose (who knows Adhir Biswas before both of them left East Pakistan for India in the late-60s) about *Allahr Jomite Paa (Footsteps on the Land of God)*. Mrinal has always been something of an adviser to me in my translation work given that I am not at all a part of the Bengali literature world. He highly recommended the work, so I finally began translating it in 2018. As it turned out, that was only the first part of a 4-volume series of refugee memories, so I translated all the books, one after another, completing the manuscript in 2020. Meanwhile, I had proposed the book to Mandira Sen of Stree-Samya and her positive response served to push me to completion.

I began translating *Allahr Jomite Paa (Footsteps on the Land of God)* in Kolkata in 2018 and I completed the preliminary translation at a friend’s house in Germany at the end of the year. In 2019, I was doing a residency in South Korea, where I completed the first version of the translation of *Udbastu Ponjika (Calendar of Refugees)* and *Chalo India! (Let’s Go to India!)*, the next two parts of the series. The final part, *Gorchumuk*, was completed during a short holiday in Benares later in 2019. I completed the final manuscript while home-bound in 2020. So, it has been quite an itinerant process!

The books touched me in various ways. For instance, the author attended college in Calcutta just a few years before I did. Like him, I too frequented cinema halls and stood in the queue for the cheapest tickets. But our lives and circumstances could not have been more different. Again, as a translator, it was a new experience working with the author’s writing style, a syntax that is brief and almost cryptic, storytelling in small bits. Also, the text assumes an “embedded-ness” on the part of the Bengali reader. So, making the translation reasonably transparent to a “non-embedded” reader was also something I had to pay attention to, while not “spoon-feeding” the reader.

While I was translating the four books, and especially because of the nature of the text I was translating, Adhir and I grew close. During the lockdown in 2020, I urged him to write about his experience of lockdown and my translation of his essay was published in a leading on-line magazine. Perhaps no reader of his books has read them as closely as I have as the translator. I was like an apparatus, sensing and taking in the author’s barring of self and conveying the same in English. I had to register within myself the poignancy and pathos, or the natural *joie de vivre*, that suffused the narration. So, it was as if I was the destined reader, but in turn, I was an agent of

translation. That made me feel a deep bond with the author. I grieved with him for the sufferings and sorrows of his destitute family and I sent him text messages sharing my feelings. He replied, saying he was overwhelmed.

As I said, each translation work is an experience, a journey, in itself. So, it was with *Memories of Arrival*.

BP: When will *The Nemesis* be published? Tell us something about it.

VR: *The Nemesis* is expected to come out in February, 2022. It is the second part of the *Chandal Jibon* trilogy of the semi-autobiographical novels by Manoranjan Byapari. I began translating that trilogy in 2016, during a fellowship in Wales, UK, and I completed the first version of the first two parts in 2018. A publisher was found in 2020 and I completed the manuscripts of the first two parts the same year. *The Runaway Boy*, the first part of the trilogy, came out in December, 2020. *The Nemesis* is the story of a Dalit refugee youth caught in the maelstrom of political violence in the early seventies.

BP: Tell us about the translation process of *The Runway Boy*.

VR: I spoke earlier about *The Runaway Boy*. On my request, in early 2016, the author gave me the offprints of two of his publications, the first of the trilogy titled *Chandal Jibon*, to translate. With his consent, I applied for the inaugural Literature Across Frontiers—Charles Wallace India Trust fellowship in creative writing and translation, proposing *Chandal Jibon (Life of a Chandal)*. I was selected and I began translating it in September that year. As I began translating, I recalled various other great works of literature I had read—in translation—which elevated me, as a reader, to perceive the epic canvas on which a tale was being told and get a sense of the author's genius of vision and imagination. I wanted my translation to produce such a moment of illumination in readers.

In the three months of my fellowship in Wales, I completed the preliminary translation of about 170,000 words of the text. I returned to Kolkata after that and it took me eight months to complete the remaining 50,000 words. And then the author informed me that there were two more parts, which I later received from him. I saw *Chandal Jibon (Life of a Chandal)* as something that could be a “world book,” like, say, *Dr Zhivago*, or *Grapes of Wrath* or *Momed My Hawk*. In this way, I reached out to Shruti Debi, a literary agent, to take it on.

I took a break and as I resumed my work, in early-2018, towards completing the manuscript, Shruti Debi told me that it was too long for a single book and it should be broken up into two. So that meant that, with the further parts that the author gave me, it would be three books, or a trilogy. I then completed the first part titled “The Runaway Boy,” and sent my manuscript to Shruti Debi.

Translating *Chandal Jibon (Life of a Chandal)* was a new experience in my translation journey because it was so long. That meant a long period of quiet, unremitting labour—of writing, by hand. I wouldn't have been able to do it without the Literature Across Frontiers fellowship.

I requested that my friend Sandip Bandopadhyay read the manuscript of *The Runaway Boy*. He had read the original work in Bangla. He gave me the feedback that it was exactly what the author had written. It was the author's voice in English.

So, *The Runaway Boy* was an inspired work on my part. And my role was not just as a translator, but also as a kind of editor because the manuscript was a massive Bangla text. I structured it into a section-chapter-book-volume. In 2020, Westland Books agreed to publish the *Chandal Jibon* trilogy. *The Runaway Boy* came out at the end of the year.

MMR: How is the translation of Dalit literature distinct from other literature since you translate quite a diversified range of literary pieces from India as well as from Bangladesh?

VR: Whether the work is Dalit literature or something else, a translation has to stand on its own feet, as something that draws and engages the reader. When it comes to Dalit literature, there is a “historical new” in that it is a hitherto silenced voice that exposes and explicates “caste,” a system of exploitation and oppression that a vast section of mainstream society is unbothered by. There is raw power in the voice. There is pain, there is rage, there is a burning thirst for dignity and justice. As a translator, as I said earlier, I have to be like an apparatus, or a sponge, that fully soaks up everything in the original text to then convey it the same way in English. But such “soaking up” is called for in other kinds of texts as well—in fact wherever the victims of power speak out. A translator must be a kind of highly sensitive apparatus, to whom the human soul speaks through the words of the text.

BP and MMR: What are you translating currently?

VR: I am close to completion of *Goi Geramer Panchali (Old Narrative Songs of a Village)*, a non-fiction book, by Ansaruddin. Labani Jangi, an artist and Ph.D. scholar at CSSSC, is my co-translator. The author is a marginal farmer in the Nadia district (West Bengal). Labani is from a nearby village. The book (non-fiction) is like an ethnographical account, in literary garb, of rural Muslim life and milieu in West Bengal.

And I have begun translating *Mukher Dike Dekhi (I Look at the Face)*, a novel by Shahidul Zahir. I loved the novel when I read it in 2019, so I decided to translate it. It was the first novel I had read in Bangla. I thought it put *Midnight's Children* to shame!

BP and MMR: Thank you so much for this wonderful conversation! We learnt so many things.

VR: Thanks for your patience and it was my pleasure to talk to you.

NOTE

1. *Yatra* or *Jatra* is referred to as an open-air performance that is held at a specific period of time in a specific place in Bengali villages and includes some rituals containing songs, dialogues and dances.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Published translations by Venkateswar Ramaswamy

MISRA, Subimala (2010): *The Golden Gandhi Statue from America: Early Stories*. New York: Harper Perennial

MISRA, Subimala (2018): *Wild Animals Prohibited: Stories/Anti-stories*. Noida: Harper Perennial.

MISRA, Subimala (2019): *This Could Have Become Ramayan Chamar's Tale: Two Anti-Novels*. New York: Harper Perennial.

BISWAS, Adhir (2021): *Memories of Arrival: A Voice from the Margins*. New Delhi: Sage.

BYAPARI, Manoranjan (2020): *The Runaway Boy*. Chennai: Eka.

ZAHIR, Shahidul (2022): *Life and Political Reality: Two Novellas*. Gurugram: Harper Collins.

BYAPARI, Manoranjan (2023): *The Nemesis*. Chennai: Eka.