

## Unexpected Bridges

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First published:

In Other Words: The Journal for Literary Translators, Winter 2013, Issue 42

When I was first asked to join Pop-up's Bangla Fusion, I refused. The project involved working with a group of Bangla-speaking primary school children and their parents to create a bilingual English-Bangla animation film based on a Bangla story or stories. My role was to be that of facilitator and translator, which meant several sessions with the children and their parents to first generate or create a story, and then to translate it into English; my deliverables were to be two scripts, one in Bangla (to be used as voiceover) and the other in English (for the subtitles). It was an exciting project, but, as I said, my initial response was to turn it down - because I speak the form of Bangla that is spoken in Kolkata, India, whereas the children and the parents I would be working with spoke Sylheti, a little-known Bangla dialect spoken mainly in the Sylhet region of northeastern Bangladesh. Friends who were familiar with the dialect told me it was close to Assamese in sound, that it was recognizable as Bangla and I should have no trouble following it. But I had never heard Sylheti, and I knew that even if I did understand it when I heard it, there was no way that I would be able to run a workshop, leave alone write a script, in that language,

Well, suggested Pop-Up, how about we give you a partner who is comfortable with the language? He takes care of the Bangla script, while you work on the English, and you run the workshop sessions together? That was an offer I could not refuse, and so I joined the team as translator, along with storyteller and actor, Rezaul Kabir.

Now as it turned out, Rez did not speak Sylheti either, but a third version of Bangla, that spoken in Dhaka, across the border from Kolkata. So here we were, Rez and I, in a unique position - each with our own brand of Bangla, about to go into a workshop with people who, as far as we knew, spoke quite a different version of the language altogether and nothing else! So it was with some trepidation that I walked into the primary school that we were to work with.

The children ran in in a bunch, enthusiastic and cheerful, straight after lunch and a session on the playground. The mothers trickled in one by one, slowly and more sedately, curious and apprehensive, not sure what to expect. Much to my relief, the mothers all understood and spoke both my West Bengali Bangla and Rez's Dhakai Bangla. In fact, the mothers insisted that even though they spoke Sylheti at home, the workshop be conducted in 'shuddho' or 'pure' Bangla, that is, the Bangla spoken in West Bengal. One mother even went so far as to say that she made her son listen to the Bangla news from India rather than Bangladesh, in the hope that he would pick up the

'better' Bangla. I realized that fluency in West Bengali Bangla was perceived to be tied to success – as was fluency in English.

My experience with South Asian, first generation immigrant families has shown that usually parents retain their own language and rarely become fluent or comfortable in English unless they move to the UK with some prior knowledge of the language. However, regardless of their own level of comfort with it, they encourage their children to pick up English. Once they start school, the children become fluent in English very quickly and, in many cases, lose the ability to speak their home language by the time they are in Year 3 or 4. This creates a unique situation with parents, particularly the mothers, speaking to the children in their language of origin, and the children, replying in English; pressed to speak in their mother tongue, the children often refuse, or say that they cannot.

The parents (all mums at the workshop, no dads) and children we were working with were no different. With the exception of one mother, who had grown up in Canada/the UK, the mums were easier with Bangla than English; the children, who had now been in school a few years, preferred English, while their pre-school siblings (one of whom was very exuberantly and enthusiastically present throughout the sessions!) spoke only Bangla.

Rez and I began the workshop with the laudable intention of running it bilingually, but we all know where good intentions lead, and sure enough, within a very short time the sessions were being run by the children, and in English! The mums were quite content that that English should be the language used, especially since Rez's quick translation asides to them made sure that they remained clued in.

Since language is often a primary medium for the transmission or transmigration of culture in immigrant populations, and given that the children had 'discarded' their language of origin in a manner of speaking, it came as no surprise that the only stories they came up with were those relating to Western television programmes and cartoon shows. Given that one of our project objectives was to encourage bilingualism, and with it a recognition and appreciation of the home culture, we decided to nudge the workshop eastwards through the magical nonsense verses and stories of the Bengali poet, Sukumar Ray.

Though Ray died almost a century ago, his writings, in original Bangla as well as in a modern English translation, continue to captivate children even today. The children in our workshop were immediately drawn to his creations, especially the strange and peculiar hybrid animals of his poems, the storkoise, the whalephant, and most of all the super-beast, made up of bits and pieces of various animals including a cuckoo, an elephant, a kangaroo, and a lion. The children were soon making up their own hybrid animals in the workshop: we had a bearosaur, a birdino, a monkasaur and that most mysterious and mischievous animal we came to know as dmfblap. As we worked and

talked and watched, a story began to grow. Interestingly, despite the greater importance given to English by both parents and children, the story that emerged from the children was Bengali in style and context, and its main character, the Old Granny or Budhi Dadi, very much a character drawn from Bangla folk literature. Perhaps there is a whole research project hiding in there of cultural memory hardwired into our psyches, memory that we cannot eliminate totally and which surfaces if given the right triggers?

One of the objectives of the workshop was to facilitate greater communication between parents and children, whether in their home language or in English or both. Initially, the mums were anxious, and tried to push their children towards the 'right' response or reaction; the children, fortunately, were having none of that and came up with their own individual, and often rather gory, ideas for the story. As the story progressed, and the participants became drawn into the process of imagination and creation, the interaction between the children and their mothers improved so that by the third session, each parent-child pair was working as a unit, with both individuals contributing as equal partners (though I suspect that the mums collaborated behind our backs and managed to convince the children to edit out the more violent parts of their story!)

Finally, we had a story, and very soon, with the children's help, a script as well, both in English. Now came the matter of translation – which version of Bangla should we use? Kolkata Bangla? Dhakai Bangla? Sylheti? The problem was a knotty one, and so we turned to the real experts amongst us, the mums - why not ask *them* to translate the script into Bangla? Thus began our 'translation in collaboration' (or should I say 'transloration', in keeping with our story and its hybrid animal stars?).

It was an involved process, this transloration. We decided to work one at a time with each of the four mums, so that each would have the space to make her own contribution to the process. Rez would read out part of the script, while I scribbled furiously to keep up as the mum translated aloud, first haltingly, and then with increasing speed and confidence. A couple of the mums lost patience with my speed as a scribe (and I do admit it wasn't always fast enough!) and taking the pen from my hand, wrote out their translation themselves. Each woman brought her own context to the translation – so while one translated in almost literary West Bengali Bangla, another chose to use the language she spoke at home with the children, with a Sylheti twist now and then and even a few words of English thrown in.

This was a novel experience for me. As a literary translator, used to working armed with dictionaries and references, I watched with growing humility the facility and ease with which the mothers turned the English film script into a neat and polished piece of Bangla translation. Not only was their translation accurate, it was also vibrant, alive and very much in keeping with the quirky imagination and wacky humour of the story.

Meanwhile, the children had been busy working with the illustrations team to create the images for animation. With the story and filmscript ready, and the illustrations taking

rapid and glorious shape, the film crew moved in: it was time to record the voiceovers. And here we faced another question: who would do the voiceovers? We wanted the children's voices in the film, but the children could barely speak Bangla. Would they manage the voiceovers? They were sure they could.

As a first step, I wrote out the Bangla in Roman script for, needless to say, the children did not know the Bangla script, and could not read it. This, as anyone who has ever tried to capture the sounds of an Indic language via the Roman script without the help of diacritics knows, was a challenge in itself. I could not depend on the 'popular' spelling conventions used so creatively these days since the children needed the Bangla words spelt out exactly as they were to be pronounced. The only factors in our favour at that point were the enthusiasm of the children, and the fact that even though they did not speak it, they were familiar with the sounds of Bangla.

It was a slow and laborious process, recording the voiceovers in Bangla. Rez and I took each child through his or her lines, and rehearsed them over and over again till the child was confident enough to record; each child had to give three or four 'takes' before the words were clear enough, and the lines expressive enough.

Finally, it was all done – the story, the English and Bangla scripts, the recording, and of course, the wonderful illustrations. The animators took over, and as if by magic, the weeks of storytelling and listening, of creating, illustrating, translating, transcribing and rehearsing were distilled into an animated film.

As I watched the completed film on YouTube, I was filled with a sense of elation and of achievement. We had faced some unique challenges in this project – the multiplicity of Bangla versions, the almost complete absence of spoken Bangla amongst the participating children, and most of all, working with a growing, living story rather than a fixed, well-edited literary text. The entire project had taken eight workshop sessions, spread out over some three months, and innumerable hours of preparation by the creative facilitators, our team of translators, storytellers, illustrators, and film and animation experts. There were moments when we had craved more time to work with the children, more time to polish and refine, but looking back now after a period of several months, I begin to feel that eight sessions were just about right. It kept everybody, the facilitators, the children, and their parents, absorbed and involved. The final outcome, the short animated film, *Granny's Monster Machines*, is funny, fun and engaging, and the deep sense of accomplishment felt by the participating children and their parents in its creation and completion has more than satisfied the project objectives of encouraging bilingualism.