

3.3.3 Some Memories of the Sondhi Translation Society, etc.

My elder brother Sajjad (who was only $1\frac{1}{3}$ years older to me but 4 years ahead at school – since Father had taught him at home for several years) had been at the Government College Lahore 3-4 years ahead of me. Amongst other things, he had been the Secretary of GCL's Sondhi Translation Society. When I arrived at GCL, he passed on the mantle to me (from, I think, my 3rd year – i.e. year 1 of my B.A.). Sajjad had been involved in the translation of Gogol's Government Inspector (from English into Urdu), which they had then also staged at the GCL as a play. Also, Cox and Box?

I became specially interested in translating Chekhov's short stories into Urdu. Not knowing Russian, I did it from the English of Constance Garnett, of which the college library had a complete set (also English translations of Dostoevsky, Turgenev, etc., - all of which I read avidly and made some unfinished translations from). I translated 6 or 7 short stories of Chekhov (amongst them, the Sleepy Head, A First Class Passenger...) I also translated one or two plays of Bernard Shaw (How he lied to her husband?; Candida) and Katherine Mansfield (The Black Hat). Eventually, I became quite good at the art of translation – and several of my Urdu translations were published in very prestigious national literary magazines (Makhzan, Al-Hamra...), whose Editors (e.g. the renowned Hamid Ali Khan – a younger brother of Maulana Zafar Ali Khan and (probably the elder) brother of Mr Hamed Ahmed Khan (later Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University) – gave me high praise for such high standards and elegant translations at the age of 19-20.

My translation skills and technique were greatly influenced and honed by some very able professors at the College. Two outstanding ones amongst these were Syed Nazir Ahmed Shah – a zoologist and later a Principal of GCL – and Khwaja Manzoor Hosain (mentioned above: Professor of English; also supervisor of the College magazine, *The Ravi* – of which I was the Joint Editor, Urdu section) – who also became a Principal of GCL later on. Here is how the whole process proceeded.

There was a loose group of 10-12 students (usually B.A. or M.A. class) who attended the Society (Sondhi Translation Society, STS for short.) Khwaja Sahib or Professor Nazir or myself would invite one of the members to do a translation of some particular piece (usually a short story or a play in English, or some other piece of prose – say a Greek classical story; I don't remember any poetry translations: although I privately translated several poems of Keats – especially the 40 stanzas of 'St. Agnes' Eve' – and Shelley and Wordsworth). He was given about a month to make the translation. (Meetings were usually once-a-month; but sometimes every 2 weeks.) All members would sit in chairs on either side of a long rectangular table, with the Professor(s) at the head of the table. We would endeavour to have 5 or 6 copies of the English book to be shared amongst the 10-12 members. As there were no Xeroxing/photocopying facilities those days (1948-51), I would prepare carbon copies of the translations – so that each member could minutely follow the translation as it was read out by the translator. The main requirements of a good translation had been explained to all the members over the months. These were: 1. The translation must be faithful – as far as possible. 2. At the same time, it must be in idiomatic Urdu, follow the Urdu stylistic rules – and not be stiff or artificial-sounding or obviously un-natural and aping the foreign language. 3. The translation must be correct grammatically as well as lexicographically.

After a short introduction and welcome by the chairman, the translator would clearly, slowly and deliberately start reading out his rendition. Interruption was fully permissible –

and indeed encouraged. “Excuse me” – someone would interject – “I don’t think that is idiomatic Urdu. I feel a better rendering would be to say...” Or, the chairman might remark, “That, I am afraid, is not the correct meaning of the English word or expression...” I still remember when in one of Chekhov’s short stories, Constance Garnett had used the word ‘unprepossessing’ – which I had never come across before, and did not bother to look up in the dictionary. Hence my Urdu translation was the literal rendering of ‘one who did not have prior ownership’ – instead of ‘unattractive-looking’, etc. Khwaja Sahib put me right. Similarly the expression ‘he was born on the wrong side of the blanket’ – which I had translated literally; instead of that ‘he had been born out of wedlock’.

The whole text was meticulously followed by the audience – and much advice/suggestions were offered by them to the translator. All of us learnt a lot from these sessions over the years. Some of those attending, later became famous literary figures of Pakistan. These included Ishfaq Ahmed – a great short-story writer and playwright; Saleem Gilanni – later a Director-General of Radio Pakistan, and a good poet; Muzaffar Ali Sayyed – a leading critic of Urdu (and English); Haneef Ramay – later the Editor of *Naya Savera* (New Dawn) and finally the Chief Minister of Punjab. The humble writer of these lines also became a noteworthy translator of English and Persian prose as well as poetry. Oh, and another notable member of the group was Bazlé Haq Mahmood – son of a famous former Professor of Farsi at GCL, Qazi Fazlé Haq. B.H.M. published some outstanding translations of Persian short stories (and novelettes?) into Urdu. (He was a good friend of mine, Editor of the Urdu section of the *Ravi*, and (I think) secretary of the Majlis-i Iqbal. Alas he died young, apparently from drug addiction, while I was in England). And finally, there was my other good friend, Inam-ul Haq (later on an Additional Secretary in the Federal Government of Pakistan – an outstanding amateur horticulturist). He translated and published the entire *Anna Karenina* of Tolstoy’s (from English).

I later wrote a humorous piece on the activities of an imaginary secretary of the College’s Translation Society – based on my own experience. How the secretary would try to collar a small (barely sufficient) number of potential audience- members for the meeting; then discover that the designated room was booked and the key was with a hard-to-locate person in the servants’ quarters of the college; then clear all the cigarette butts, etc., lying all over the floor and re-arrange all the chairs; in the meantime half the potential audience had absconded; the translator himself would turn up 1 ½ hours late, with the last 2 pages of the translation still not finished, etc., etc. But I must say, all this early training came in very handy when I ran several societies (Pakistan; Islamic; Curry Club) at Cambridge, and even as a Faculty member at Birmingham University and as Chairman of Iqbal Academy (UK). The hurdles and disarrays remained the same everywhere. One had to take care of every item of organization personally, and in good time.

I cannot resist describing that unique character – Professor Dr Nazir Ahmed (a product, I think, of Imperial College London – or possibly Oxford/Cambridge). He was totally *sui generis*. Although steeped in European culture – during the 1960’s, when I was the Director of the Atomic Energy Centre Lahore, he would come to our Gulberg house to listen to European classical music for hours (Beethoven’s symphonies would transport him) and he would go through Inge’s art books on Picasso and Breughel and Modigliani – yet he always dressed in Punjabi village clothes, and looked like a Sufi or a mendicant. He had very thick, luscious black hair, parted in the middle, thick lips, thick eyebrows, a long Indian tunic, scorpion’s-tail leather footwear (‘khasas’), Punjabi shalwar – and in winter draped in perhaps a Kashmiri blanket (‘dhussa’) – a tall, slim, dark but handsome man. He often spoke Punjabi (perhaps Seraiki of Jhang/Bahawalpur region – and looked like a college peon or servant. (They say, when he became the Principal of GCL, once the Police came to the imposing Principal’s office. Professor Nazir Ahmed happened to be standing just outside his office, under the tall colonnaded-porch. The police-wallahs mistook him for the peon – and said, please inform the Principal Sahib that we wish to speak to him. “It is myself – at your disposal gentlemen” – they were startled to be told to their infinite embarrassment.)

Professor Nazir Ahmed was a very informal (and democratic) man. Years later, in the 1960’s, I had occasion once to attend a committee meeting of the Board of Translation of Official English (دفتری زبان، ترجمہ بورڈ) – Government of the Punjab – being held in the Punjab Secretariat. The Secretary of the Board was Professor Qayyum Nazar (my former Urdu lecturer at GCL), plus a couple of other officials, sitting very properly and stiffly in their upright chairs. I was amused to see, stretched out full-length on a long sofa (*chaise longue*) – i.e. lying there sideways, with his head resting on his elbow and shoulders, none other than the redoubtable Professor Nazir Ahmed: who would raise this head from time to time and offer an Urdu word or expression or terminology as a possible equivalent of some English term or appellation. I was greatly influenced by this esoteric Sufi *dervish*. (He helped Professor Victor Kiernan in his translation of some poems of Iqbal; and also published an annotated compendium of the *kafis* (metaphysical poems) by Mian Muhammed Bakhsh and others.)