

Interventions

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Translating Mantra: Opportunities and impossibilities in the translation of *Saundarya Laharī* – Wave of Beauty

by

**Mani Rao*

Abstract: A tantric hymn in praise of the feminine divine and describing her aniconic form (the *Śrīyantra*) as well as physical form, *Saundarya Lahari* is a complex and coded “*mālā-mantra*.” Believed to be composed by Ādi Saṅkara (ca. Eighth century CE), this hymn in one hundred (or one hundred and three) stanzas is reputed for its mystical and magical effects. Over the centuries, it has become a tradition in itself with over thirty-five commentaries propounding esoteric meanings, encoded seed-syllables (*bījākśaras*) and other mantras within the verses, explaining the tantric cosmology and prescribing ritual procedures to accompany the hymn. The chanting of *Saundarya Lahari* is popular in contemporary India as a devotional practice.

As a mystical sound formula, mantras are typically considered untranslatable. In a mantra, sound is privileged over meaning. Its sounds and their combinations are believed to result in specific, intended effects, and the meaning of words (if any) are regarded peripheral— more useful as aids to concentration, directed will (*saṃkalpa*) or memorization, and for the production of devotional emotions (*bhava*) in the chanter. There are multiple manuals and handbooks in many languages (including English) and which include translations of the verses *as well as* commentaries and religious prescriptions. These have created as if an impenetrable fortress around the hymn for the general reader who may be a chanter or even heritage learner, rather than a tantric initiate.

My own study of the hymn took the form of memorization, repetition, and translation as a way to form a personal bond with it. How to attempt an inter-semiotic translation, catch the meaning - albeit outer meaning - while including an expressive rhythm and maybe even the governing syllables of some of the verses? How to reproduce the syntax of Sanskrit with primary clauses often linked to multiple secondary clauses and yet maintain clarity? How to draw attention to connotations? The concepts in *Saundarya Lahari* are quintessentially Indian – and one needs to formulate a strategy for terms from tantra and yoga like “kuṇḍalini” or “cakra,” descriptive concepts like “maṇḍivīpa,” and references like “tāṇḍava.” Mythological references have a backstory—and while translations may have to weighed down with footnotes, might it also be possible to aim for coherence without footnotes? My paper is about working with these questions and problems; I will share examples from my drawing board using the source-text, interlinear translation, my assumptions and the resulting translation.

Keywords: *mantra, kundalini, Śakti, beauty*

Saundarya Laharī is a devotional hymn to the primordial goddess, Śakti. In common parlance, the word *śakti* refers to “power”. In the form of the primordial Goddess, Śakti is the power of the divine feminine and creative principle that is present in and embodied by all creation, she is present in human beings both male and female. *Saundarya Laharī* describes Śakti’s physical form and her aniconic form – the *Śrīyantra*. *Śrīyantra* is a diagram of nine interlocking triangles that create forty-three triangles. In ritual worship, the worshipper’s contemplation moves from the outer perimeter of the yantra to the centre. In *Saundarya Laharī*, the goddess’s physical form is described from head to toe and becomes a methodology for contemplation.

“Saundarya” means beauty, and “laharī” is that which has waves - and this may be why some translate the word as “flood”, “tide”, or even “ocean”. That which has waves is also a big wave, and *Saundarya Laharī* is one ginormous wave. Therefore, my title is in the singular (“Wave of Beauty”) – and recognizes the unity of these one hundred stanzas— of singular beauty.

Believed to have been composed by Ādi Saṅkara (ca. Eighth century CE), this hymn in one hundred (or one hundred and three) stanzas is reputed for its mystical and magical effects. *Saundarya Lahari* is a complex and coded *mantra*, a revelation and sound formula. Over the centuries, it has become a tradition in itself with over thirty-five commentaries propounding esoteric meanings, encoded mantras and *bījākśaras*. The chanting of *Saundarya Lahari* is

popular in contemporary India as a devotional practice, and typically a part of the learning for those who practice a tantra – a doctrine and a mode of worship – called “Śrīvidyā”.

Thus: *tantra, mantra, yantra*. Śrīyantra, Śrīvidyā. Not including all the other terms that begin to crowd my notebook of untranslatability.

Translating Terminology

Terms, I have found, are *the* most challenging part of working with religious-philosophical texts. A term is a word or phrase that describes a thing or concept connected with a particular type of language or an area of study. Terms have specific contexts. How to differentiate “citta”, “manas”, “buddhi” (especially if one is translating this line: “mano-buddhi-ahaṃkāra cittāni nāham”)? If “jñāna” is knowledge, what is *vijñāna*? “Svabhāva” and “guṇa” may both be translated as “qualities” and are used interchangeably in common parlance, but *guṇa* is also a specific term in Indian thought that refers to one of the three guṇas constituting *prakṛti* (“Nature”). I tend to turn to the commonsensical wisdom of Ludwig Wittgenstein -- so commonsensical that I believe it needs no footnote citation beyond this attribution -- “the meaning of a word is in its use”. The only way to be certain about how to translate when familiarity is with the context or area studies that helps recognize how a term is being used. Common terms in Sanskrit may have varied usages in tantric terminology, and one needs to be cautious about Hindu tantra vs Buddhist tantra. (*Saundarya Lahari* is a part of Hindu tantra). Urging scholars to think better about exact connotations of tantric terms, Agehananda Bharati writes:

“The best example is Sanskrit *mudrā*, which means ‘the female adept’ in the Buddhist tantric lore, and ‘parched kidney beans’ and other spiced grains in the Hindu Śākta tradition; quite apart from the many tantric and non-tantric passages, Hindu and Buddhist, where *mudrā* means a ritualistic or iconographic gesture. (41)¹

Nevertheless, relying on usage does not help with the translation of more technical terms such as “mantra”, “Śrīyantra”, “yoni”, “parabrahman”, and entire concepts contained in a word like “Mahāmāyā”. In spite of a few centuries of translation between Sanskrit and English, there are still no solutions defined for the task. Bharati surmises that the fault is in elitism of source and target cultures.

“ ... traditional western philosophers who excluded Indian thought from their study as below philosophical dignity and whose attitude was reciprocated by the orientalist brand

of counter-arrogance: that western philosophy was lacking the spiritual insight which could help it tackle the esoteric problems of Asian thought. (42)ⁱⁱ

Problems like these call for a much larger and collective effort, somewhat like the rigorous project taken on by Tibetan Buddhists translating Sanskrit texts. Coming back to my drawing board -- if I translate a term too simplistically, I could be guilty of (or just accused of) appropriation. And if I do not translate a term at all, of elitism, or foreignization? Then there is the twisted compromise of *translationese* such as hyphenated words and distorted English in an attempt to be literal. Discussing the problem in the essay “Making Sanskritic or Making Strange? How should we translate classical Hindu texts?”, WJ Johnson writes:

[...] There are arguments about deliberately disorientating the English reader to preserve the 'otherness' of the other culture and so avoid orientalist appropriations. There is also the hope that you can inject interesting new idioms into English prosody by adopting this method. But, in all such cases, it seems to me that you end up with something more strange than Sanskritic. In fact, such strategies deny the possibility of equivalence and through their deliberate 'otherness' recommend departure from it.ⁱⁱⁱ

I concur with Johnson. Additionally, I also choose to display the beauty and include the resonance of some of the terms in *Saundarya Lahari*, and for this I often incorporate the Sanskrit term into my translation. I consider my role to be that of bridging, to help the reader become familiar with the context through the reading of the poem. It is contextually that we learn the usage of words. Further, my search is also for a vocabulary that fits the pace and flow of a poem translation. I need to translate the line within the flow of the poem. Here is how I translated *mudrā*:

4.

Except you

the droves of gods do *mudrās*
(mystic hand-signals)^{iv}

abhaya mudrā to make fearless
varada mudrā to give boons

I explain more in the endnote to this stanza: A *mudrā* is a natural sign, i.e., an expression of reality; thus, a smile is a *mudrā* of happiness. There are several *mudrās* in Indian aesthetics. Gods tend to be in postures of protective *mudrās* such as *abhaya* (be fearless) and *varada* (ready to grant a boon). Thus, the gloss is integrated into the translation and the endnote presents a

deeper explanation. The translated stanza mentions the term and its meaning, and even within the flow of the reading, becomes a quick lesson on two specific mudrās. The reader now knows that the abhaya mudrā means “to make fearless” and varada mudrā means “to give boons.” I use parenthesis where my voice interrupts the flow, and no parenthesis for what I consider just the complete translation. Instead of “fear-not mudrā” and “boon-granting mudrā”, I weave it into the line.

Here is another example.

100.*

Like waving light to the sun
with the light of a flame
nīrājanam

Like offering water from a moonstone
to the moon, source of nectar
arghyam

Like trying to satiate the ocean
with its own water
tarpanam

O Mother

These words of praise
Saundarya Laharī

are
your
words

I retain the Sanskrit terms and they punctuate the lines in such a way that the translation seems like a homage to the ritual. Meanwhile, the reader has also learned what is *nīrājanam*, *arghyam* and *tarpanam*.

I thought that my translation would speak to general readers who may not have a background of the philosophical ideas of tantra. I supposed them to be heritage learners – either Indian themselves or interested in Indian ideas. The book-translation would also be a learning tool for first encounters with *Saundarya Laharī* or its meaning.

Interestingly, even though *Saundarya Laharī* is considered a mantra, the word “mantra” is not mentioned once in the poem. Nor Śrīyantra. It is I who include the words Śrīyantra and *yoni* in parenthesis in verse 19, when I explain “bindu”.

19.

O Śiva's queen

He who meditates
on your subtle form

Your face as bindu
(the centre dot in Śrīyantra)

Your breasts below that
(forming a triangle)

Below that, Śiva's
other half

(the inverted triangle
of yoni)

I assume that the reader has read the introduction. The endnote, which is simple, elaborates: 'Yoni' means the female generative organ, or womb/source. 'The inverted triangle of yoni' refers to the upside-down triangular form. But even if a reader has not turned to the endnotes, they get a contextual understanding of a yoni.

Are names, terms? Sometimes. There are numerous names in the poem. Names of gods: Śiva, Śakti Viṣṇu, Rudra, Kāma, Rati, Indra. Names of trees: Kadamba, Aśoka. Names of places: Kailāśa, Maṇidvīpa. One of the joys of Indian languages is how names explain themselves. They may describe an action or attitude and contain an entire story — when Śakti is called Caṇḍī it immediately conjures her victory over demonic Caṇḍa. "How a character got a name" is a story template in itself, and this is why characters have multiple names. When understood literally, Maṇidvīpa is the *dvīpa* (island) of maṇi (gems) — which it is, except there is more to it — and *kāma* is the name of the god of love but also means desire, and one does not know which came first. Names can have footnotes, if felt necessary. Some names also have scope for double-entendre: the place called Viśāla also means expansive, and the place called Kalyāṇī also means auspicious.

I do not translate names even when they can be translated. In particular, within the context of mantras, I align with the idea in Indian thought that names are sonic forms of physical matter. Names, thus, are like mantras, and they are mantras. (More about mantras in the next section). They evoke the presence of the person who is being named. In such a poem as *Saundarya Laharī*, where the sounds and resonances create the effect, the presence of the original names in my translation has proved orchestral, carrying the aura of the hymn and

creating an acoustic surround. Of course, I do not translate Śiva or Śakti— the introduction and the entire poem explains who or what they are. But notice how both names begin with the same syllable Ś, followed by different vowels. Translating *Saundarya Laharī* calls for an awareness at multiple levels—context, stanza, line, word as well as syllables.

Some names seem sudden, without a backdrop of known usage, like when the poet calls Śakti “Trilokī” in stanza 19. While this literally means “she who is of three worlds (lokās)” it must also refer to the concept of “tripurā” (three cities), and yet really feels like an endearment, a “pet-name.” But I did not translate the name as “goddess of three worlds” because it was used like a name. Instead, the role as a “cosmic personality” was important in the line.

makes Trilokī dizzy,
the cosmic woman

whose breasts are
the sun and moon

By now, my goals may be obvious; nevertheless, let me spell them out before proceeding to the next section. 1) I am producing a poem translation, not a commentary. 2) My reader is the general reader who may not have a background of the philosophical ideas of tantra. 3) Most of my readers are Indian or interested in Indian ideas. They are heritage learners. The book-translation would also be a learning tool for first encounters with *Saundarya Laharī* or its meaning, after which readers may (or may not) move on to commentaries.

A little digression on commentaries. Sanskrit texts which are in the form of *sūtrās* are typically understood with the help of a commentary (*bhāṣya*). Sūtrās are aphoristic, terse, and may even seem like fragments of notes or sound-bytes of conversations between erudite scholars. While there are various definitions of the functions of a commentary, in general, it includes word breaks (*padachheda*), word meanings (*padārthokti*), grammatical analysis (*vigraha*), sentence construction (*vākya-yojanā*), and even responses to reader’s potential objections and confusions (*ākṣepa-samādhāna*).

Commentaries are highly “nested” –i.e., often, there are commentaries on commentaries. This is not always an indication of the impenetrability of a source text; it could also be how one commentator associates themselves with previous commentators – a declaration of lineage. The more valued a text is, the more the commentaries, and even arguments between commentators. *Saundarya Laharī* has over thirty-five commentaries just in

Sanskrit, and which perform all these functions, *and* explain references to tantric concepts, and plumb deeper meanings (*gūḍārtha*).

The Problem of Mantra and Meaning

Mantras are codified sounds, sound formulae, clusters of syllables or words and lines uttered aloud or silently during religious rituals or contemplative practice. They are revelations—natural sound forms intuited by seers/rishis in meditative states. A mantra’s sound has effects and results that manifest in the material world. The meaning of words, if any, in a mantra are regarded peripheral—more useful as aids to concentration, directed will (*samkalpa*) or memorization, and for the production of devotional intensity (*bhāva*). Mantras are typically considered and meaningful in ways that are not discursive. In short, untranslatable. But: If mantras have no discursive meanings, why do commentaries exist?

The meaning of mantras is vehemently defended in vedic hermeneutics and scholastic debates dated back to second century CE. Śabara-bhāṣya, is a commentary on Jaimini’s *Mīmāṃsā-sūtrās* of fourth century BCE. In *Nirukta* 1.15-1.16, etymologist Yāskācāryā of first century CE asserts that *śṛti* (revelations, “scriptures”) has meaning because it uses the same words as ordinary language. Seventeenth century CE scholar and seer Bhāskararāya, regarded as the most significant commentator on *Saundaryā Laharī*, writes about ritualists who do not understand the meaning of mantras they perform as donkeys with sandalwood loads on their back, oblivious to the value of what they carry. He also likens not knowing meanings of mantras to offering oblations into a pile of ash. Backed by such powerful friends in the history of religious thought, a translator can breathe free when working with mantras at the level of discursive meaning.

Saundaryā Laharī has a descriptive narrative, and many stanzas include a conceit, and detail within that conceit to lend it realism. From stanza 42 to 91, the poet describes the perfect, beautiful physical form of the Goddess. A number of correspondences are established – her eyes are reminiscent of fish, her breasts are the sun and the moon, navel like a still whirlpool, and so on – helping connect Śakti to all of nature. Therefore, translation is entirely possible and wholly valid *for the discursive, narrative level of the hymn*. How to integrate other depths then becomes the challenge.

The Problem of Invisible Mantras

The complexity of *Saundaryā Laharī* is the various levels of mantras. One, the stanza is a mantra; two, there are mantras represented by code-words; and three, mantras embedded within the words and lines. That is, there may be a sensible meaning at the level of word – but not at the level of the line. According to fifth century CE language philosopher Bhartṛhari, meaning gathers with sentences, or lines, and bursts like a spore (*sphoṭa*). Thus, when we see a series of words that seem to have no relationship with each other and do not add up to any sense, we know it is a list, or it is a code.

And how do we know the code?. We do not. We rely on adepts. The commentators of *Saundaryā Laharī* are regarded as tantric adepts who decipher the meaning and assert what is meant, and this is accepted by others— it is a convention. There is also a tradition called “mantroddhara” where an adept or seer may extract mantras from mantras. These may also vary from commentator to commentator. After all, different seers have different visions (smile). According to commentator Kaivalyāśrama, the very first verse/mantra indicates the mantras ‘prasāda’, ‘anuttarā’, ‘mātrkā’, ‘vāgvādinī’, ‘śaivapañcākṣarī’ and ‘pāsāḍi-traiākṣarī’. Other commentators have extracted other mantras. When there are multiple truths, whom does one choose? None. I *do not go* to the level of embedded mantras except for the primary mantra considered Śrīvidyā, the heart of the entire teaching and the mantra that, upon fruition, confers liberation. This is stanza 32, it is “top-secret” – and now you too have this information.

32.

śivaḥ śaktiḥ kāmaḥ kṣitiratha raviḥ śītakiraṇaḥ
smaro haṃsaḥ śakrastadanu ca parāmāraharayaḥ

amī hr̥llekhābhīstisṛbhiravasāneṣu ghaṭitā
bhajante varṇāste tava janani nāmāvayavatām

The series of nouns in the first two lines refer to Śiva, Śakti, Kāma (the god of love), Earth, Sun, Cool-rays (moon), Smara (another name for Kāma the god of love), Swan (or realized being), Śakra (Indra), Brahma, Māra (Kāma again) and Śiva. Commentaries do not argue about the references. These “words” are codes for these syllables: Ka E Ī La - Ha Sa Ka Ha La - Sa Ka La. Further, the stanza tells us that these three sets are linked by the syllable hr̥m̐.

This gives us the fifteen-syllabic mantra: Ka E Ī La Hrīm Ha Sa Ka Ha La Hrīm Sa Ka La Hrīm. Add the syllable śrīm and you have the other top-secret mantra, the śoḍaśī or sixteen-syllabic mantra. Here is my translation that shows the derivation.

32.

Mother,

Linked by three hrīm

These decoded syllables
formulate the parts
of your name

Ka E Ī La Hrīm Ha Sa Ka Ha La Hrīm Sa Ka La Hrīm

Ka from Shiva
E from Shakti
Ī from Love
La from Earth

Hrīm

and

Ha from Sun
Sa from Moon
Ka from Love
Ha from swan, a realized being
La from Indra, chief of the Gods
Hrīm

and again

Sa from Brahma
Ka from Love
La from Vishnu
Hrīm

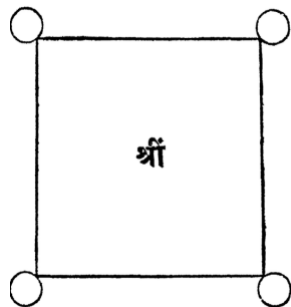
This stanza is not a translation of the words but of their import, as accepted in the tradition. I show how these syllables are derived by spelling out the equivalences.

Now, some may argue that one must never do a mantra without initiation, and one must not even utter it. But we are in the era of YouTube and digital information. If I do not include it in my translation, the reader can quite as easily type in “pancadaśī mantra” on the internet and find out what it is and listen to the mantra being chanted online. Two, if it is so that mantras do not work without initiation, there is nothing to fear. Instead, I say what it is, and reiterate in

the introduction and other lectures that it is futile to do it without initiation. At the end of the day, information is not the same as knowledge.

Translating Invisibles

There are multiple manuals and handbooks in many languages (including English) and which include translations of the verses as well as commentaries and religious prescriptions. Each mantra is associated with a yantra and a syllable that must be repeated a specific number of times. For instance, stanza 1 is associated with *śrīm*, which must be drawn on a plate and repeated a thousand times daily, for twelve days.



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Stanza No.	Yantra with Bija to be inscribed on	Number of days to be worshipped	Number per diem of repetition of stanza
1	(a) Designed in coloured flour, with a ghee lamp in front	12	1,000
	(b) Gold plate; worship facing the east	12	1,000
2	Gold plate; worship facing the north	55	1,000
3	(a) Gold plate; worship facing north-east	54	2,000
	(b) do.	15	1,000

Did I carry the syllable over into my translation? How do I prove it, and how does anyone disprove it? If I make such a claim, it would be unfalsifiable. How to evaluate if what we are told is invisible is invisibly present? You can only judge for yourself.

Only when with her can he stir
Śakti, she's Śiva's power

Even Śiva who's a god

only prevails
when paired with her

Then how can I
Mere I

Never did a good deed
Meritless I, how

dare I even

bow to you

even praise you

You whom even the gods

Śiva Viṣṇu Brahmā

adore

Whereas I can offer no evidence that I have embedded secret syllables into my translation (smile), I can point out the visible and tangible elements that work towards particular resonances. One of them is how I try to move the connotations into the translation. Here is an example. Stanza 2:

Even a fleck

Even a fleck of a speck of
dust from your feet

pollen dust from
your lotus feet

Here is the Sanskrit line: *tanīyāṃsaṃ-pāṃsum-tava-caraṇa-pañkeruha-bhavaṃ*. Here is a word-by-word meaning: slenderest – pollen-dust – your – feet – lotus (i.e., hair on/of dirt) – as if. The word “caraṇa” (foot, feet) belongs to both words before and after the: “tava-caraṇa” (your feet) and carana-pañkeruha (feet-lotuses). The word for lotus is pañkeruha which literally means that which grows in the dirt. The comparison in the line is between Śakti’s feet and lotuses, and between dust and pollen. Of course there is dust on feet, but these are not regular feet— they are like lotuses, untouched by the dirt they stand in. The movement of the translation teases out the double-entendre and “shows off” the clever set-up of the Sanskrit original.

Another instance of a double-entendre is stanza 22. The word “Bhavāni” is an address meaning “O Goddess!”, and it is also a verb in the first person. “Bhavāni tvam” can mean “I must become you.” Here is the Sanskrit line: *bhavāni tvam dāse mayi vitara dṛṣṭim sakaruṇāmiti stotuṃ vāñchan kathayati bhavāni tvamiti yaḥ. tadaiva tvam ...* Here is my translation, which explains the humour.

22.*

Even before he
who wants to praise says:

‘O Bhavānī extend

a compassionate look
at your servant’

you hear the first part:

‘*Bhavāni tvam...*’
‘May I be you...’

Another device I use is the tripartite division within stanzas, and this is true of most of the stanzas. Such a structure carries the idea, or aura, of the concept of three. The particular goddess that *Saundaryā Laharī* adores is Lalita Tripurasundarī, where Tripura-Sundarī means “beauty of three cities.” The word “pura” (cities) has been interpreted in numerous ways, among which one notes how the goddess equals the trinity of male deities (Brahma, Viṣṇu, Śiva), or how “Tripura” refers to the three states of consciousness: waking, dream and deep sleep (*jāgrat, svapna and suśupti*).

Finally, I did not even attempt to replicate the metre. *Saundaryā Laharī* is in Śikharīṇī meter, a line of seventeen syllables where the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, and sixth, the twelfth, the thirteenth and the seventeenth syllables of a foot (*pāda*) are heavy (*guru*), while the rest of the syllables are light (*laghu*). More than the copying the metre, I chose to focus on the fact that the poem flows without pause. Similarly, my translation must flow—not just within the stanza, but across the entire one hundred verses. There are multiple waves within my composition, and they add up to the big wave.

My methodology was to first read the mantra, and the commentaries, and do japa – repetitive utterance - of the mantra. It was only when I could perceive its vibrance within or with my body, that I took pen to paper for translation. It was as simple as it was visceral. Is it even possible that the gods only understand Sanskrit. Mantras are not only in Sanskrit. What transports the seeker and creates a connection with the energy of the deity – in any language - is a mantra. It is translatable. As the very last verse reminds us:

O Mother

These words of praise

Saundarya Laharī
are your words

Notes:

ⁱ Bharati, Aghananda. [1965] *The Tantric Tradition*. NY: Anchor Books, 1970.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson W.J. “Making Sanskrit or Making Strange? How should we translate classical Hindu texts?” p.65-75. In *Translation and Religion- Holy Untranslatable?* Edited by Lynne Long. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2005.

^{iv} (So sorry if “signal” reminds you of traffic signals, but mudrās do work like traffic signals too! What with giant billboards of political personalities blessing commuters with abhaya mudrās...).

***Mani Rao** is a poet, academic and translator. She is the author of ten poetry books. Her translations from Sanskrit to English include *Bhagavad Gita*, *Kalidasa for the 21st Century Reader* and *Saundarya Lahari*. She has conducted an immersive fieldwork among tantric communities in Andhra-Tengana for *Living Mantra: Mantra, Deity and Visionary Experience*. Mani has a doctoral degree in Religious Studies and an MFA in Creative Writing.