



Contemporary Rajbanshi Literature, Translation and Challenges

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Abstract: In the last few decades, Rajbanshi writings have grown exponentially. Rajbanshi writings have expanded in several genres like poetry, prose, short stories, novels, and plays. In addition to these genres, other forms of writings typical to the Rajbanshi culture have also taken shape. This essay is an attempt to understand the current standing of contemporary Rajbanshi writings, the subject of translating Rajbanshi writings, and the possible challenges that translators might encounter in the process of translating these writings. This essay has been divided into four sections. The first section tries to define Rajbanshi literature and attempts to gauge the scope of this genre of writing. The second section provides an overview of the Rajbanshi writings that are being produced. The third section deals with the translation of Rajbanshi writings, their significance, and the possible challenges of translating Rajbanshi literature, and the last section is a translation of a Rajbanshi short story.

Keywords: *Rajbanshi, Bhawaiyaa gaan, faisha*

So far, Rajbanshi literature and Culture have always been a source of anthropological, socio-economic, political, historical, and ethnological concern. Additionally, the Rajbanshi language itself has been a subject of curiosity, where linguists have attempted to understand the place of this language in the larger scheme of Indian languages. However, Rajbanshi writings are yet to become a source of literary interest. The only literary engagement with Rajbanshi literature can be seen in the study of *Bhawaiyaa gaan*. This paper is an attempt to bring Rajbanshi literature into focus and hopes to engage with this field of literature along with the subject of translation.

Rajbanshi Literature

What do we refer to as Rajbanshi literature? The answer to this question may seem very simple. One might simply say that Rajbanshi literature is the body of literature that exists in the Rajbanshi language. However, the definition of Rajbanshi literature requires further clarification and understanding. Several questions arise in this respect. For example, what do

we mean by “Rajbanshi Literature”? What are the categories that make Rajbanshi literature the body of literature we have come to understand? And more importantly, what is it that makes Rajbanshi literature “Rajbanshi”?

Clearly, the body of literature written in the Rajbanshi language can be categorised as Rajbanshi literature. However, such a definition for Rajbanshi literature limits the scope of what we learn to understand and categorise as “Rajbanshi literature.” If this limits our understanding and scope of Rajbanshi literature, then how do we develop an understanding of what is and what is not “Rajbanshi literature”? To understand this, it is important to take into consideration who the Rajbanshi writer is. Does a Rajbanshi writer become a Rajbanshi writer only when they write in this language? Most Rajbanshi writers have had their education in a medium of instruction other than Rajbanshi. Rajbanshi is still not a scheduled language therefore it is only understandable that it is still not used as a medium of instruction, which is currently changing through the efforts of Rajbanshi Bhasha Academy. There has been an ongoing interest in setting up schools where the medium of instruction is Rajbanshi in five districts in Bengal – Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, and South Dinajpur.

Rajbanshi writers have been trained in a medium other than Rajbanshi. Despite this training, they have successfully retained their language (mostly in the spoken form). The retention of this language is a testament to the culture in which the writer has grown. The writer does not (or more specifically “cannot”) separate themselves from the language and culture. Therefore, the writer carries this culture with them despite their training in other mediums of instruction. Such writers often write in languages other than Rajbanshi. However, the subject matter of their writing is very much rooted in their experiences as Rajbanshi subjects who have grown within the Rajbanshi culture and who experience their reality as Rajbanshi subjects. Upendra Nath Barman’s short story “Akashbani Tower” is an ideal example of such an instance. This story, about a *Bhawaiyaa* singer Mahadev and his wife Kamala, depicts the livelihood of a Rajbanshi artist, his art, and his struggles. While the narrator of the story speaks in Bangla, the dialogues are written in Rajbanshi. The author writes the story in Bangla, the language which has been the medium of instruction, but the subject of the story is what we might come to understand as “Rajbanshi.” Aside from the depiction of the life of a Rajbanshi artist, set in a Rajbanshi village, the writing of the dialogues in the Rajbanshi language itself points towards the very “Rajbanshi” essence of the story. Similarly, in another story, titled “Hridrog,” he depicts the life of a Rajbanshi sweet maker and upholds the condition of many

Rajbanshi households which struggle to make peace with their familiar old lives in villages and their newer lives in towns and cities. These stories, written in Bangla, deal with characters who are Rajbanshi, speak the Rajbanshi language, and more importantly, bring out the contemporary reality of Rajbanshi lives. Such subject matters make these stories “Rajbanshi” despite having been written in a different language. Therefore, it can be argued that the literature comprising of the experiences of the Rajbanshi writer and resulting from these experiences, written in languages other than Rajbanshi are very much “Rajbanshi” in essence. The spirit of these writings very much holds on to the spirit of the Rajbanshi culture and language.

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that writing in the Rajbanshi language is political. As much as writing in this language is a way of self-expression, it is equally an attempt to solidify the existence, use, and practice of the Rajbanshi language and a conscious attempt to revive the language from its gradual erasure. At the same time, it is also a conscious effort of preserving the culture of which the language is a product. Therefore, categorising Rajbanshi literature as the body of literature written in the Rajbanshi language should take precedence in this case. However, this should not limit us from realising the scope of Rajbanshi literature. Keeping this in mind, in this paper, I refer to the literature written in the Rajbanshi language in the Bengali script as Rajbanshi literature.

Contemporary Rajbanshi Literature

As mentioned in the previous section, the importance of the language becomes significant in what we come to understand as Rajbanshi literature. It is because the purpose of a language is more than merely acting as a tool of communication. It is a carrier of history and culture. It allows for an authentic expression of the self, which becomes difficult for people to achieve in any other language. Moreover, the use of language is also a politically conscious act. It is an act of expressing and asserting one’s identity. The primary motivation governing the writing of Rajbanshi literature comes from such a unique position. The aim of writing in the Rajbanshi language exceeds the aim of self-expression. Writing in this language is always a conscious attempt to establish the use of the Rajbanshi language. The agenda is always to understand the language and its use as a means of trying to understand the history, culture, tradition, and contemporary reality of Rajbanshi lives. The aim of establishing the presence of the Rajbanshi language along with the Rajbanshi culture takes precedence in the writing of Rajbanshi literature. And this is something that the readers of Rajbanshi literature also need to keep in mind.

Much like other indigenous cultures, Rajbanshi culture has also been considered synonymous with folk culture and has an oral tradition. Rajbanshi folk culture is well established and has been recognised as worthy of historical and cultural interest. *Bhawaiyaa gaan* remains one of the most celebrated aspects of Rajbanshi culture and has been celebrated for its cultural and literary value. Similarly, folk tales and myths from the Rajbanshi culture have been a source of anthropological interest. However, there is a tendency to look at cultures with strong folk roots as a thing of the past instead of an evolving and dynamic culture. In such a scenario, contemporary Rajbanshi Literature reflects the dynamic nature of the Rajbanshi culture and becomes an important source in our understanding of the various aspects of this culture.

While the origin of Rajbanshi Literature can be traced back to the folk literatures, the beginnings of “modern” Rajbanshi literature is unclear. Jyotirmoy Pradhani considers Panchanan Barma’s writings as the beginning of “modern” Rajbanshi writings. However, the most significant moment in the history of Rajbanshi literature according to him were the monthly poets’ meet in Gauripur, Assam during the mid-nineties. He writes:

In the mid-nineties there used to be poets’ meets every month in one of the Sundays at Gauripur in Assam, where poets coming mostly from Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal and from the undivided Goalpara districts of Assam (Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Goalpara) used to read out their poems written in Rajbanshi. The poets were, however, little tentative, also a bit hesitant, as fluency of the written form of their spoken language, in most cases, was yet to flourish. The poets from Bengal were used to writing in Bengali than in Rajbanshi and in case of the Assam poets, when it came to writing, Assamese was the natural option. The meets, nevertheless, turned out to be a gathering of young and old poets, some of who already made a name as poets in Rajbanshi and some other just entered into the arena of writing in Rajbanshi language with much enthusiasm and passion. (Pradhani 2021)

Therefore, there is no clear “origin” of when and where the “modern” Rajbanshi Literature started to take shape. However, it is very clear that Rajbanshi writers were eager to express their thoughts in their mother tongue, despite the uncertainty of the language in terms of both script and vocabulary. However, it is important to note that, the very fact that there was no fixed convention on spellings or scripts, gave a certain kind of freedom to writers both in terms of language and content. They not only used the language in their own way by spelling the words phonetically in their own language, but the writers were also free from the conventions of other “mainstream” literature, and therefore, their writings were also unique in nature. Therefore, their writings differed starkly from the literature written in the Assamese or Bengali language.

The only thing that the writers borrowed from the languages that they had been trained in was the scripts, the rest of the things were completely their own creations.

While poetry is the most common form of Rajbanshi literature, there is an abundance of other forms of writing. There are several short stories, novels, and plays. Apart from these, there are also other forms of writing which are typical to the Rajbanshi language and culture like the *faisha*. The *faisha* is a form of writing which is unique to the Rajbanshi language. It is a form of Rajbanshi literature which is centred around a figure, usually an eccentric character, who is the storyteller and may or may not be the protagonist of the story. The story is narrated by a third-person narrator but, the figure of the storyteller is distinct. The narrator and the storyteller are two separate figures and rarely merge in the story. The storyteller has an audience, who are usually children, and the audience is also shown to interact with the storytelling figure. Upendra Nath Barman has been known to write this form and some of them include – “Jontor Montor”, “Paka Koshal”, and “Dhekiyar Fool.”

Due to its very nature, *Bhawaiyaa gaan* may be the point of origin of Rajbanshi poetry and well known *Bhawaiyaa* singers like Abbas Uddin, Pratima Barua Pandey, and Surendranath Basunia are celebrated for popularising this genre of music. While one cannot deny the literary importance of the *Bhawaiyaa gaan*, I would like to refrain from viewing them as poetry. *Bhawaiyaa gaan* is a separate art form which has its own historical and cultural significance not only as an essential part of the Rajbanshi culture but also as a folk tradition. Therefore, one cannot do justice to *Bhawaiyaa gaan* by treating them as poetry. While it must be kept in mind that Rajbanshi culture, like many other indigenous cultures, has strong oral traditions and this genre has had a significant effect on Rajbanshi literature, it has to be read separately from other forms of Rajbanshi literature. Jyotirmoy Pradhani considers the origin of the “modern Rajbanshi poetry” in the writings of Panchanan Barma and says that modern Rajbanshi poetry rose from a deep sense of agony in contrast to the “dominant mood of romantic ease and anxiety and the mystic melancholy of their folk songs.” He writes:

Chronologically the beginning of the modern Rajbanshi Poetry has an old history. It dates back to the early twentieth century with the pioneers like Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma whose collection of poems *Dangdhari mao* can be considered as one of the first published anthologies of, what we can call “Modern Rajbanshi Poetry”. This birth of modern Rajbanshi poetry seemed to have been a palpable linguistic manifestation of a deep sense of agony in contrast to the deep sense of agony in sharp contrast to the dominant mood of romantic ease and anxiety and the mystic melancholy of their folk songs- the songs popularised by Abbas Uddin, Surendranath Basunia, Pratima Barua Pandey, Alauddin Sarkar, Biren Ray, Abdul Jabbar *et al.* (Pradhani 2021)

While it is true early Rajbanshi writing rose from a deep sense of agony, it is also important to remember that this deep sense of agony was reflected in these writings because the primary motivation for writing during that time was an essential need for the upliftment of the Rajbanshi community through social reformation. Therefore, the poems of Panchanan Barma have a certain moral and ethical standpoint and position themselves as didactic pieces of writing. His notable works like “Nadim Paramaniker Pantha”, “Jagannathi Bilai”, and “Nata Manik Bandha Kanta”, are all didactic in nature and aim at the upliftment and social reformation of the Rajbanshi community.

Contemporary Rajbanshi writing has surpassed this point where there was an essential “need” for some sort of direction towards social reformation. Contemporary Rajbanshi writings have now become diverse in nature. These have often been considered as a part of the larger body of Dalit Literature in Bengal on the grounds that these writings are written by those that have been neglected and deprived from education. While this is true, it is also important to note that the motivation behind the writing of contemporary Rajbanshi writing is not always a depiction of oppression and deprivation. Rajbanshi writing is most importantly, as mentioned previously, born out of the desire to preserve a culture, through the preservation of a language. Therefore, most writings go beyond the enumeration of oppression and deprivation. Contemporary Rajbanshi writings are a blend of a nostalgic reminiscing of the past and the realities of the present lives. These writings reflect on the dual mindset of the writers who navigate their lives through the experiences of their Rajbanshi upbringing and the world that they were “trained” to fit into. Their experiences of the two worlds, give them a unique perspective which in turn also makes their writings unique in nature.

Rajbanshi Literary journals have played a major role in popularising Rajbanshi literature. The monthly Rajbanshi Journal, *Dagor*, is a manifestation of this very desire of Rajbanshi writers to promote the use of the Rajbanshi language and present an opportunity for people to acknowledge the Rajbanshi language and the rich tradition to which it bears testament. The motto of this journal “Bhasha Bottile Jaati Botte”, which translates as “A Community lives as long as the language lives”, aligns with the very aim to establish the presence of the Rajbanshi language with the larger aim to retain the cultural aspects of the community. The name of the journal itself, which translates as “The Road”, signifies the journal’s aim to popularise the literature written in the Rajbanshi language with the hope that it will also lead to the proliferation of Rajbanshi culture. Some other notable Rajbanshi Journals

include *Puli*- a bilingual Journal which publishes texts in both Bengali and Rajbanshi, *Ujaani*, *Chitol Gang*, and the Children's Journal *Shoyda*. The initiative of a Children's Journal is a significant step in popularising the reading of Rajbanshi literature. Edited by Ranjit Sarkar, the collection of stories and poems in this journal is targeted towards children and aims to build up a readership among children. Moreover, introducing children to Rajbanshi writings also ensures greater participation in the efforts of preserving and popularising Rajbanshi literature. Apart from its aim at increasing readership, *Soyda* is also a reminiscence of the past. The name "soyda" directly translates to "snack", however, it is not merely a snack— there is a certain amount of nostalgia and affection attached to this word, and therefore, in a way, this journal is also a product of an earning for a nostalgic and affectionate childhood that has been left behind.

Translating Rajbanshi writings and its challenges

Being at a very early stage of its development, the translation of Rajbanshi writing is still in its nascent state. So far, there has been only one comprehensive translation of Rajbanshi poems into English, titled *This Land, This people (Rajbanshi Poems in Translation)* by Jyotirmoy Prodhani and. Prodip Acharya. It is an anthology of Rajbanshi poems translated into English. This collection not only provides a collection of Rajbanshi poems translated into English but also sets a bar for the expectations one might place on translated texts and translators. He writes:

Translation is not an exercise of repeating the original lexicons with mechanical replacement with the nearest equivalent, rather, translating is a reading, an affectionate and intimate reading that is, and when this reading is loudly imagined against a different linguistic horizon, it turns, quite plausibly, into translation, tangibly accessible either in graphemes or as an auditory experience carrying the intonations, emotions, passion and feelings generated by the act of the actual reading that took place in the beginning in silence. In the process it is not the word that is translated, rather it is the history, the emotional terrain, its geography that find their relocation in a new linguistic landscape. Translation is a quite conversation between a text and a translator, an honourable negotiation fundamentally predicted upon mutual respect and deep affection without which retelling at best can still take place but translation proper can never take off. (Pradhani: "Introduction", 2021)

Aside from poetry, there are a lot of other forms of writings in the Rajbanshi language which needs to get translated to reach a larger audience. While *This Land, This People* has garnered the attention of many, there is still a wide variety of writing including novels, short stories, and drama which would benefit from the attention that any translation brings. Moreover, translating Rajbanshi Literature also brings into focus the unique experiences that are brought into existence by Rajbanshi writers. As discussed previously, most Rajbanshi writers are first-

generation learners who have the experiences of their own Rajbanshi culture and the culture that they are introduced to and made to acclimatise with throughout their life. This forms a sort of what we might say a “diasporic mindset” where they have the knowledge of both worlds and find themselves in a position where they navigate through the duality of culture and learn to negotiate between the two. Therefore, translating these writings gives the world an opportunity to understand these unique set of experiences and understand the Rajbanshi culture in newer and different ways.

Having said that, it is also important to keep in mind the Challenges that one might encounter in the process of translating Rajbanshi writings. The first challenge that translators may expect to encounter is the language itself. The Rajbanshi language (more specifically, the language in written form) is still at a very early stage. There are different dialects and different words for different objects depending on the area to which the people belong. Therefore, spellings and word meanings differ wildly. Given these circumstances, the Rajbanshi language still does not have a standard form. If we think about it, Rajbanshi language does not even have a single script. The Rajbanshis in Nepal write in the Devanagari script, while in India, they write in the Bengali and Assamese script. But of course, there are many languages which are written in different scripts, but the standardisation of the language is necessary for it to flourish. This issue is being addressed by the journal *Dagor* which has been notably trying to establish a standard Rajbanshi language by standardising the spellings of Rajbanshi words in its every issue. The next challenge is perhaps quite common, and something that translators face while translating any language. This is the issue of “untranslatable” words. Rajbanshi has a fair share of “untranslatable” words. For example, the word “Deuniya” has several meanings attached to it at the same time. It refers to a person who takes upper hand. Someone who is not really skilled at what they do but is filled with enthusiasm. Now this word is sensitive, yet not a slang. But can be used as an insult. Moreover, the Rajbanshi language is saturated with idioms whose translations become quite difficult. Such factors make translating the Rajbanshi language and the culture associated with it somewhat difficult to translate. The last challenge that translators might encounter does not have to do with either the language or the culture but on whether it is right to translate Rajbanshi language. Is it right to translate a language which is itself trying to solidify its presence? Wouldn't it be more useful if more people were encouraged to learn and acquaint themselves with the Rajbanshi culture and language? But at the same time Is not translation also a way of acquainting people with the Rajbanshi culture? There is, perhaps, no right answer to this.

Therefore, despite the challenges of translating Rajbanshi literature, the cultural importance of translation cannot be overlooked. Through this paper, I have tried to provide an overview of contemporary Rajbanshi writings and the issue of translation. Keeping this in mind, I have attempted a translation of a short story from the Rajbanshi children's journal *Soyda* as an instance of what one might expect from Rajbanshi stories in translation. The story that has been translated below is the story is titled "Kali Thakurer Puja" by Shailen Das.

Kali Puja (A Rajbanshi short story by Shailen Das, translated by me)

Nataru's maternal grandfather is an extremely miserly man. It is not that he doesn't have enough land or money to survive. Yet, he prays to Goddess Kali all the time and says, "Maa, please let me win one lakh rupees in a lottery. I'll offer you Puja with a new idol and a pair of goats."

While on one hand Goddess Kali is pleased with the man's prayers three times a day, on the other hand, his prayers have also become irksome.

His dedication elates her. But his miserly nature makes her suspicious. She wonders, "He is such a close-fisted man! I can't trust him enough to offer me a pair of goats in the puja." His relentless nagging tires her.

One fine day, she appeared in his dreams and said, "Look child, if I let you win one lakh rupees in the lottery, will you promise to dedicate two goats as offering?"

Nataru's grandfather promptly replied, "I am a man of my word, Maa. I can't stand people who can't keep their word. If you still have doubts, why don't you keep the money for a new idol and a pair of goats and give me the rest? Just tell me the number of the ticket!"

He kept asking her to grant his wishes in his dreams and Goddess Kali continued to give him excuses and raise her suspicions, "Are you sure? Will you really offer Puja? What if you don't..."

Finally, after a few days, she revealed a six-digit number in his dream- 234321. After tirelessly searching for it for two whole weeks, he bought the ticket with this number. And he really did win one lakh rupees!

He was overjoyed to win the prize. He started buying more land, more cows, leasing out ponds, and investing his money to yield more money. Eventually, he spent all his prize money. In the meantime, he forgot to offer the pair of goats he had promised to Goddess Kali.

After six months, Goddess Kali appeared in his dream and said, “So, what happened to the pair of goats?”

Nataru’s grandfather tearfully said, “Maa, I have no more money left. I have spent all of them. I will offer you a pair of pigeons instead this month. Will that work for you?”

Maa Kali agreed on a pair of pigeons.

Six more months passed by and yet there is no sign of pigeons. Goddess Kali appeared in his dreams once again and this time he laid down on the floor clinging to her feet, “Forgive me Maa, I have no money in my hands at this moment, I can’t offer you a pair of pigeons. I will offer a pair of dragonflies instead.

Goddess Kali agreed to that once again.

Another six months passed by and there was still no dragon fly to be seen.

Goddess Kali appeared in his dreams once again. She was furious this time. With flaming anger and bloodshot eyes, she said, “My blood is boiling! I can’t wait any longer!!Where are my pair of dragonflies?”

This time, Nataru’s grandfather was equally angry and cried, “There are so many dragon flies flying around! Why can’t you just catch two for yourself!”

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