Translation opens Rassundari's world

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It was a serendipitous tribute to Rassundari Devi, the woman who wrote the first full-length autobiography in Bengali, which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year.

She was feted appropriately at the International Translation Day conference headlined "Linguistic Diversity and Language Rights", organised by the International Society for Intercultural Studies and Research and Virasat Art Publication.

At the event, held on September 30 under the stewardship of Dr Sudipto Chatterjee and professor Sutanuka Ghosh Roy, I introduced the revised edition of Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)*, published, revised and annotated by Ananda Lal of Writers Workshop, and translated from Bengali by Enakshi Chatterjee.

The conjoined events of International Translation Day, bookmarked as a UNESCO initiative, and the landmark 150 years of *Amar Jiban* hit their target: translation is now considered a planetary marker of the importance of cultural exchange between communities, economies, and people.

On the panel were professor Nandini Sahu, Prabal Kumar Basu, professor Sharmila Roy, Dr Ajanta Paul, Dr Harish Mehta, Dr Sutanuka Ghosh Roy, Amita Ray, Maitreyee B. Chowdhury, and Julie Mehta. They debated how language rights were, in fact, human rights.

For instance, Mahashweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, translated by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, especially stories such as *Dropdi* and *Stanadayani*, are familiar narratives of abjection and casteism, and represent the Dalit woman powerfully.

Rassundari was self-taught and coined the remarkable word *"jitakshara"*, meaning a person who had triumphed over the written word. But it was not just the word she had triumphed over; she also triumphed despite the death of her children and the massive challenges she faced from the patriarchy.

Ananda Lal told me: "I retranslated the book because I thought, to celebrate the 150th year of its publication, we should do full justice to her historic, extremely important, prose-cum-verse work. Those who can't read Bangla need to know about a woman's life in the mid-19th century first-hand. I also annotated the book heavily because a non-Hindu wouldn't understand many of her references. In fact, many Hindus today wouldn't comprehend them either! There is a huge diasporic audience too who must have access to it."

In this context, my translation of Rabindranath Tagore's play, *The Post Office*, launched in July this year, once again propagates the universal message of death as a release from suffering, rather than death as an ending full of pain. The play, about the little boy Amal and his terminal illness, was translated and seen by children who were in Jewish ghettos in Poland, where it was often performed before they were marched into gas chambers.

The fact that this play was enacted 105 times in those ghettos is proof enough of the importance of stories that travel from one ethos to another, ensuring that translation is the tool connecting and recharging humanity no matter how far-flung or lonely they might be, into a single community consciousness.



Rassundari Devi

In India, translation allows us to understand each other's cultures on several levels. It is not just dominant languages that have access to the marginalised but also vernacular languages that connect with other vernaculars.

Writer, thespian, and international cinema artiste, Avijit Dutt, pointed out to me in an interview that the crucial importance of translation is that it prevents the death of stories. "Can you imagine how many stories would be lost if they weren't translated?"

Amar Jiban not only brings to the fore the cultural history of Bengal at a time when tumultuous forces of tradition and modernity tugged at the bit, but also kept the power of processes of knowledge barred from women. But the colonial system of epistemic freedom also inspired women to break the shackles and empower themselves through learning how to read, write, and exchange ideas.

Translation, as some scholars have said, allows marginalised communities and dominated sections of society, including women, to tell the world, in a planetary lingua franca, English, the kind of trials, tribulations, and travails they had to encounter and overcome the locked doors of knowledge.

Born in 1810, Rassundari Devi learned the alphabet at a mature age in the darkness of night under the light of an oil lamp, at the pain of torture should she be caught reading. She states that her book was first printed in 1868, but records show the date as 1876, according to Sutanaka Ghosh, professor of English at Jadavpur University, who wrote the afterword to *Amar Jiban*.

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of her work as a trailblazing account of women in the *andar mahal* or the domestic space.

Partha Chatterjee has brought out in his study of Rassundari's work how there was a dual pressure on women, with the colonial rulers wanting women to take part in public debates, and the categorical domination and corralling of women by the patriarchy.

Rassundari explains that she wrote her autobiography at the age of 88, describing her life as that of a "caged bird" who faced harsh physical labour, deprivation, and psychological trauma, which she stoically accepts as part of God's design.

She explains how the patriarchy disapproved of the education of women as she was growing up, a time when she was made to believe that learning the written word would bring misfortune to her.

The late Dr Meenakshi Mukherjee had admonished translators to remember that *anuvaad* or *bhashantar* (translation) were concepts of not just translating the meaning of words but an entire cultural ethos.

In this context, Ananda Lal's revised edition of *Amar Jiban* demonstrates the abysmal darkness in which women were segregated. The pain of such an existence finds light when it is translated into a global language like English.

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