In Search of Sundaram: of Cultural Translation and Literary Historiography

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Introduction

In a world increasingly turning into a flashpoint for the clash of civilizations, if religious fundamentalism can cost a translator her life, can the hallowed halls of academia be far behind? The setting, in the case of the latter, of the imminent death penalty (epistemic violence if you will) was a packed conference room in which I was to take the *viva voce* examination for my Ph.D degree. In the presentation of the research, I, who had translated select works of the Gujarati writer Sundaram (meaning "beauteous") into English, tried to position the poet's work as a precursor of Gujarati Dalit literature and the poet as the flag-bearer of Dalit-Bahujan Sahitya, something which sent the external supervisor gasping in disbelief and horror; the argument, to her, constituted an unpardonable scholarly *faux pax*. Like many others, she did not see any link between Sundaram's poetics and the Dalit literary movement which flagged off in Gujarati a good fifty years after what I called Sundaram's radical, anti-caste phase. However, I was not unprepared for the horrified reaction my (re)positioning of the canonical writer had elicited, privy as I was to the unmistakable Brahminical aura that surrounded Sundaram in Gujarati literary culture. The small, yet extremely fraught, poem by which the poet is popularly known in Gujarat even today tries to position him as an aesthete:

> I love all that's beauteous in nature.
> And all that's abeauteous,
> I'll render beauteous by loving. (Sundaram Etle 173)

In its desire to realize the principle of Shivam (Good), the poem stages an opposition between *sundar* (beauteous) and *asundar* (abeauteous/hideous), and then resolves it by "translating" the hideous into beauteous. A large part of the poem's appeal lies in the cryptic way it stages the binary of the self and the other, and then proceeds to deconstruct it from the standpoint of the self. Of course, the tool of translation/deconstruction is love, but its ambition ends up merging the other into the self and thus brings about its erasure. To the poet's credit, in his early work he committed himself to the idea of, not just seeing and recognizing, but loving the *asundar* on its own terms. But later, he failed to sustain his poetico-ideological mission of loving the hideous, and decided mid-career to cross over, along with his beauteous penname "Sundaram," from *asundar* to *sundar*. As I would argue, in the case of Sundaram, a poet from *Luhar* (ironsmith) caste,

the dynamics of the self and the other are misplaced, and their foundations fragile; further, a certain fluidity of approach and a tendency to straddle the opposites—which define Gujarati Dalit literature—have qualified, not just the poet's *oeuvre*, but his personal life. Thus, the poet's location in Gujarati literary culture has to be examined and determined on that score. However, the reigning critical discourse on the poet, in and outside the seven-hundred-page strong 1993 festschrift, *Sundaram Etle SundaramI,* has consistently depicted him as a Sadhak (a spiritual seeker), a steadfast seeker of art and spirituality, one complementing the other. Even in places where his progressive, anti-caste poetry is touched upon, it is projected as already inflected by an inherently spiritual seeking, as a mundane quest that eventually was to culminate in the exquisite desire for the absolute and the highest Truth. The poet's *volte-face* has been given a transcendental spin and justified as the ultimate human journey—a veritable levitation—from the transient, the base and the mortal to the eloquent, the perennial and the life-giving. This binary metaphysics of two worlds, so platonically conjured up in terms of the earthly and unearthly, is then superimposed on the transition in the poet's language from the demotic to the divine, from the colloquial to the canonical (read Sanskritized) and from the explicit to the evasive.

The article seeks to unpack the role of historical and ideological processes in the appropriation of a progressive, low-caste writer by the hegemonic literary culture; it also attempts to bring out how, by changing the *habitus* and the *doxa* in a dichotomous literary culture, translation can unearth the Satyam (Truth) of a writer's life, the politics of canon (re)formation and, thus, clarify literary history. It tries to highlight, in the words of Bassnett and Lefevere, "… the ways in which translation … constructs the image of writers and/or of their works … ways in which one image dislodges another, ways in which different images of the same writers and their works coexist with each other and contradict each other …" (10). Sundaram's non-linear literary career points out ruptures in the unified triad of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram,[1] and topples its Brahminical certitudes; as the poet's notions of Truth and Beauty fossilized, the ideal of Good came under an erasure. In a generic sense, Sundaram also embodies the problematic of the uneasy and unfinished project of modernity in colonial and postcolonial India; his is a classic case of cultural translation as *sur-vivre*, a strategy for survival, but of a different kind. In order to systematically address these issues, a contextual detour by way of the social history of Gujarat, the evolution of Gujarati Dalit literature and its Sundaram connection seems necessary.

Lalit vs. Dalit: What's in a Name?

In the Gujarati social sphere, the binary of the mainstream and the marginal has been poised on the axis of caste for centuries. Traditionally, Bhikhu Parekh believes, the higher castes played the role of both creator and custodian of cultural values, which are "… largely apolitical, hierarchical, tolerant, casteist, moralistic, devotional and

moderately religious. Gandhi injected into it a strong social consciousness and the spirit of equality but did not radically alter its overall framework" (par. 20). After the formation of the state in 1960, however, the long-standing upper-caste hegemony was challenged for the first time by an allied political plank namely KHAM[2] (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, and Muslim) that successfully exploited the demographic advantage to destabilize the power equations in the state. Dislodged from the power center, the aggrieved hegemonic constituency sought refuge in the conservative politics of the right-wing, which immediately constructed a Janus-faced figure of "the other" on caste and communal lines, and strove to uphold the socio-cultural *status quo* through divisive and disruptive methods. Thus, as Tambs-Lyche notes, even the anti-corruption movement of 1974, by a skewed logic, harped upon the upper-caste grievance against the "corruption of quotas" for untouchables in education and employment (112). The anti-reservation riots of the 1980s, which later took an inexplicable communal turn, were essentially an aggressive expression of the entrenched sentiments and hegemonic attitudes of an intrinsically violent feudal order that believed in keeping laborers and lower castes in their place. The caste divide witnessed concomitantly in the cultural field—in the form of the dichotomy between what came to be known as Lalit (pretty/ delectable/ elegant) and the Dalit (oppressed/ depressed/ downtrodden) literatures—was a reflection of a fractured socio-political sphere, except for the fact that, in the literary field, the monopoly of the hegemonic groups remained unchallenged for quite long.[3]

Historically, the rise of Gujarati Dalit literature as a category of expression dates to these cultural collisions between the Savarna and the Avarna constituencies.[4] As the climate of bitter antagonism created by the riots accentuated the deeply embedded question of caste in the warring groups, the first flowering of Dalit literature in Gujarati met with a deep suspicion from the Lalit literary establishment. From 1985 onwards, a cynical debate that went off in several issues of the Gujarati magazine *Chandani* about the need and usefulness of a separate category called Dalit Literature, with its own aesthetics and humanistics, brought to the fore the worst fears of mainstream scholars and the *literati*. At the *apogée* of the debate, the Dalit literary movement came up with a manifesto in the "Introduction" to the first anthology of Gujarati Dalit short stories that came out in 1987 and sealed the boundaries of the new literary category by identifying 'dalitness'—of language, locale, consciousness and experience—as its primary constituents.

However, the call for the evolution of a radical Dalit consciousness, based on self-assertion and identity politics, was simultaneously marked by a streak of self-evasion in social as well as literary domains—a phenomenon captured tersely by the popular adage *naam chhodo, gaam chhodo* [Change name, change village]. The trend of changing caste names gathered momentum in the 1960s following Ambedkar's call to migrate to urban centers that promised a certain degree of anonymity, privacy, plural culture, and social

isolation, and thus provided a cover for caste identity. During the anti-reservation riots, a number of Dalits from what was derogatorily called "creamy layer" —those who were in government services starting from a sweeper to a Member of Legislative Assembly—changed their names and/or surnames to escape institutionalized discrimination in public life.

Ironically, around the time of the advent of Dalit Panther movement in Gujarat in the mid-1970s, the Dalit poets like Neerav Patel and Dalpat Chauhan, who were closely associated with that firebrand organization, also changed their names. However, name-shedding in their cases could also have been a way of countering the disability and dispensability lower-caste names like Kachro [rubbish], Punjo [tinder], Khodo [stumpleg], etc. typically indicated.[5] Starting their literary career by contributing actively to the radical Dalit magazine *Panther* (1975), both poets went on to found and edit strident Dalit literary journals like *Akrosh* [Outrage] (1978) and *Kalo Suraj* [Black Sun] (1979), and cleared a much-needed ground for the foundation of a robust literary movement. However, as one reads their poetry, one cannot miss the ambivalence in their approach to the question of identity and an undertone of self-lacerating crisis that resists any clear sense of assimilation or abjuration. Their decision to change their names, thus, has to be seen in the context of the tension between predatory social structures and psychological pressures felt by Dalits for forging a dignified identity in the face of various labels—untouchable, depressed, harijan, etc. —foisted on them. Neerav Patel's poem "You call me dher," discussed by Gopika Jadeja, captures in moving terms the grueling crisis of identity that the process of social naming engenders:

> when you call me "dher" I am hurt
> and wish to kick you in the belly
> when you call me untouchable
> i am offended
> and wish to slap you on the face
> when you call me harijan
> i am humiliated
> and wish to spit on your back
> when you call me a member of scheduled caste
> i am insulted and monkey (sic) at you
>
> […] when you call me neerav patel
> i suspect you called me convert
> (a crow that dyed his feathers white to be called a swan)
> and wish to turn away my face
>
> when you don't call me anything
> i am annoyed that you neglected me altogether
> and wish to call you back to me. (272-3)

What makes the poem remarkable is the candid admission of the Dalit subject's oscillation between owning and disowning his caste identity and, simultaneously, inscribing a possibility to mount an anti-caste rhetoric from that grey, unstable space.

Naming has been a highly fraught terrain in Gujarat and the socio-literary history of the state has been punctuated with eruptions and agitations surrounding the damning politics of naming, shaming and taming the ostracized. For example, the simmering ire of Dalits against insulting and dehumanizing pejoratives exploded into a major agitation in 2008 when *Times of India* reported the illegality of the inclusion of *Dher na Dher Bhangi*[6] [The Lowest of the Low, the Bhangis], a play by noted Gujarati poet Umashankar Joshi, in the syllabus of the undergraduate degree in Gujarati literature offered by North Gujarat University. The play, an all-out assault on the caste system, mocked the hypocrisy and caste prejudice of Brahmins, and questioned the internal caste hierarchy among Dalits. Quite expectedly, the copies of the disputed play were burned. However, the agitators' objection zeroed in on the fact that the casteist slurs in the title and inside the play—prohibited under law—subjected Dalit students to anguish and humiliation in the classroom. In the aftermath of the controversy, the play, on the syllabus for three years, was taken off in a calculated act of appeasement, an astute sidestepping of the real issue. The merit of the agitators' argument notwithstanding, Dalit writers and scholars underscored the failure of the academic, state-funded literary institutions to highlight the larger issues of the persistence of caste and the collusive refusal of the mainstream society to create a critical discourse around it; it was as if the onus of engaging with caste rested on the heads of Dalits only, a typical Savarna syndrome which is discussed later in this article.

The overview of the history of Dalit politics in Gujarat highlights the historical fault lines in the state's social sphere as well as the issues of democratic representation and cultural citizenship faced by the Dalits in literary culture (Jadeja 296). Such a scenario was linked to and played a decisive role in the constitution of the Dalit literary manifesto, which defined Dalit literature in an outright rejection of the empathetic and social realist literature written in the Gandhian Age (1915-1945) by writers like Umashankar Joshi and Sundaram. As late as 2015, another controversy involving Sundaram's poem "Bhukhi" [Hungry] led the Gujarat police to file a First Information Report (FIR) against the publisher of his collection of children's poems titled *Rang Rang Wadaliya* [Colorful Clouds], published in 1939, and the poet's daughter.[7] Though the anti-caste law was invoked against the use of proscribed slurs in the poem, the poem's theme revolved around a hungry poor girl who waited for a feast at an upper-caste household to conclude so that she and her siblings could enjoy the leftover food on leaf-plates thrown at the dumping site. This theme of dehumanization—the idea that certain humans rank alongside or even below animals—to which Sundaram returns in his stories as well, has been explored by several Dalit writers in different Indian languages. However, I see a nuance in the manifesto-makers' position on Joshi *vis-à-vis* Sundaram. The ire of the editors towards Joshi is understandable because he was a Brahmin by birth. The fact that Sundaram is also walled out, to my mind, is not reflective of the simmering tensions between Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and

Dalits in India, especially when certain states in India, of late, have initiated policy moves to incorporate the Luhars in the Scheduled Castes (SC) category. The reason for Dalit literary movement's refusal to trace its genealogy to Sundaram lies in the self-translation of the poet from Tribuvandas Luhar to Sundaram, in the poet's overt collusion in the project of his Brahminization.[8] Historically, the tendency to switch to the privileged side in the binary of the Lalit and the Dalit—the literary counterpart of a sociological phenomenon called Sanskritization—has been recorded in a number of literary systems, and Sundaram is not an exception to this. However, it is important to examine the ways in which Sundaram executed the crossover from a firebrand low-caste writer to a docile, reclusive poet who withdrew from society—and from his commitment to transform it—and resorted to the yogic way for personal salvation; it would afford precious insights into the historical evolution of a literary system and terms of positioning a writer in a literary canon.

Sundaram vs. Sundaram

Sundaram (1908-1991), the winner of prestigious awards like *Padmabhushana* (1985) and the *Shri Narsinh Mehta Award* (1990), claims a special place in the history of Gujarati literature. Despite being an extremely versatile *littérateur* ploughing into almost all literary forms available to a creative practitioner, and being instrumental in ushering in New Poetry in Gujarati, Sundaram's *oeuvre* is informed with a continual conflict between progressive and regressive tendencies, fluctuations between the zenith and the nadir of creative excellence, and most importantly, a convictional oscillation between fiery activism and ideological naivety. As an articulate progressivist and a committed Gandhian, he engaged with socially tabooed and hitherto unacknowledged issues like caste and human sexuality in his writing, and endowed Gujarati literature with attributes of radicalism and modernity while democratizing the language of poetry. However, in the heyday of his literary career in 1945, the poet migrated to Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, never to return to Gujarat. After the publication of a collection of poems called *Yatra* [The Journey] in 1951, he wrote no major work until his death and slipped into a life of occult silence. After his death, the poet's daughter published massive volumes of his poetry corroborating Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of Purna Yoga, which professed a sublime and superior transcendental truth, but lacked the verve and vigor of his early work. What is more startling is the fact that, in his later life, the poet actually went on to disown his early poetics and politics in naively self-deceptive, even elitist ways.

Having started writing at an early age under Gandhian influence at Gujarat Vidyapith, where he was a graduate student, Sundaram broke with the literary aesthetics of the Pandit Era (1885-1915,) which insisted that only lofty elements like clouds, the moon, the stars, the lotus, the cuckoo, the sea, etc. could appropriately form the subject of poetry. His fascination with a square view of reality led

him to deem a scavenger girl, a latrine fly, bricks, a garbage dump, etc. as fitter focuses of poetry. If the social, political, and religious repression of the vast multitude of people found incisive treatment in his works, a deep fascination with the working of human sexuality received a psychoanalytical articulation in a number of his short stories. In fact, Sundaram became the first writer in Gujarati to explore the assertive and subversive dimensions of female sexuality in his stories like "Kholki" [You, jackass], "Amba Bhavani" [Mother Amba Bhavani], "Nagarika" [A woman called Nagarika] and "Maane Khole" [In the Lap of Mother]. The issues of class and caste intersected, and found gut-wrenching articulation in stories like "Min Piyasi" [Thirsty Fish], "Maja Vela nu Mrutyu" [The Demise of Maja Vela], "Pekord no Prawas" [A Ride in the Packard], "Bidio" [Bidis] etc. Not surprisingly, when the Progressive literary movement came knocking on the door of Gujarati in 1940, Sundaram welcomed it by founding the Progressive Writers' Association in Gujarat, and later brought out a literary volume titled *Sahitya ane Pragati* [*Literature and Progress*] in which "Pekord no Prawas" appeared.

What the mainstream scholarship on Sundaram missed out was the fact that, of the three "… trajectories of disposition of Dalit literature—all three strongly embedded in social existential conditions" (Judge 212), Sundaram's early work fitted, historically and thematically, into the first trajectory which constructed powerful narratives about the wretched, existential conditions of Dalits in a caste-ridden society. The narratives of the marginalized life in this trajectory aim to bring out the role of the invidious social structures and discriminatory practices in the constitution of social imagination as well as hegemonic formations like caste, class, gender, etc. They try to foreground the ambivalent ways in which the Dalit is constituted as the other of the caste Hindu self; the Dalit, conversely, represented a split "self," an embodiment of the Hindu desire for purity and a simultaneous condemnation into the object of revulsion and segregation. Among Sundaram's early works, *Koya Bhagat ni Kadvi Vani ane Garibona Gito* [The Bitter Speech of Koya Bhagat and the Songs of the Poor], published in 1933, disapproved of a hierarchical Indian society founded on the canker of caste. Written in the style of traditional bhajans, the poems blend novel ways of literary expression with an intent to achieve satiric, reformist ends. The anti-caste ethic in *Koya Bhagat…* found a powerful extension in poems from *Kavyamangala* [Auspicious Poems] (1933), and *Vasudha* [The Earth] (1939) which have telltale resonances with the poetics and politics of Gujarati Dalit literature. In a poem titled "Farewell to Hari," for example, the poet asks Lord Krishna, who has allowed caste and class to survive in Hinduism, to go back to Vaikunth.

> Russia and Turkey banished you
> Hindus pampered and put you to sleep.
> Koya Bhagat questions you
> His eyes like embers, red-hot.
> Bearing with you for ages, we're tired, fed up to boot
> What business you've here? Scoot. (*Sundaram Etle* 230) (my translation)

The fulmination against caste Hindu conservatism grows louder in another poem titled "We, the Hindus…:"

> Day in day out, we, the Hindus have
> to wash up and visit shrines,
> chant "Rama" without qualms, grant a few pices in alms
> pray and sit to steady our brains
> give at least a handful of charity grains
> go to heaven, never ever to hell
> be religious till the rocket bound there
> rings the final bell (*Sundaram Etle* 230). (my translation)

Similarly, in the poem "Bhangadi"[9] [A Bhangi Woman] from *Kavyamangala*, the poet situates sharp contrasting pictures of the privileged and the underprivileged at the intersection of caste and class, a philosophical framing quite ahead of his time:

> In Bamana village, there lived a *bhangadi*
> O a real *bhangadi*, her eyes kohl-rimmed.
> She wore green glass bangles,
> O how they jangled under her *chundadi*'s vivid sheen (*Sundaram Etle* 231). (my translation)

Exploiting the semantic play on the proper noun Bamana, the name of Umashankar Joshi's native village and a derogatory address for Brahmins, the poem described the impoverished look of a pipe-smoking Dalit woman, complete with *ghaghra* (pleated skirt)*, nathani* (nose ring), *loliyan* (earrings)*,* through an insider's gaze, and pictured her dancing in her son's wedding procession wearing a *chundadi* with which the *shethani* of the village was covered on her funeral pyre. In a similar vein, one of his earliest stories, titled "Bidis," revolves around a day in the life of a scavenger family in a *mofussil* village. One day, on their routine rag-picking trips to the village, the famished children of a Bhangi family, Chhitiyo and Fulki, are doled out a full pack of cigarettes from a condescending Thakore in the village square. Overjoyed, as they hurry back home, they are intercepted by their father Hariyo (a contemptuous corruption of Hari), a sweeper by profession, who cajoles the packet away from them with a promise to have a festive family-smoke in the evening. In the evening, however, he returns home without his job (and without the cigarettes which he had smoked away in frustration) thanks to the trickery of the scheming village head. As he beats his grumpy children, his wife Amli chides him for smoking away the children's cigarettes, to which Hariyo snaps,

> "Let it alone! Bloody smokers lusting after cigarettes! *Bhangis* by birth and…" snapped Hariyo, and got up, leaving the sentence and the meal incomplete. Amli didn't eat anything either; god knows why that day, like never before, she poured water in the *chulha*. (*Thirsty Fish* 35)

What is striking about "Bhangadi" and "Bidis" is the courage and assertiveness—characteristic of later-day Dalit textualities–with which they employ demotic language at a time when Gujarati language

was in the throes of standardization, and Gujarati literary culture was evolving along caste, ethnic, and communal lines. The use of casteist slurs in these texts foreground radical identity politics that Dalit writers were to emulate later. In another story, "Amba Bhavani," Sundaram shrewdly staged the flowering of love between a low-caste man and an upper-caste woman against the backdrop of spiraling superstition and thickening rumors in a feudal village. In these texts, just like in Dalit literature, "[…] crudity of a vocabulary that refuses to 'decorate', neutralize or camouflage its subject, along with the situations of extreme physical and psychological violence that are often depicted, result in the subversion of the values of respectability and morality that have come to be associated with classical Hindu culture and language" (Zecchini 78).

In inscribing an alternative, subversive textuality, Sundaram here uninhibitedly engages with what M.S.S. Pandian calls the explicit language of caste, unlike the upper-caste textualities where caste "masquerades as something else and makes its muted, modern appearance" (1735). Citing the example of R. K. Narayan's autobiography, Pandian attributes upper-caste silence on caste to the fear of being transported into the realm of premodernity; thus, the inscription of caste in these texts becomes an insinuation. Narayan's concurrent owning and disowning of caste in his autobiography resonates with the apathy of the upper-caste literary and political establishment of Gujarat in the context of the controversy surrounding Umashankar Joshi's play, mentioned above. Their calculated evasion and crooked collusion shift the burden of engaging with caste on the shoulders of Dalits, for whom self-definition is located explicitly in caste as a relational identity. What makes Sundaram's texts a powerful pre-cursor to Gujarati Dalit Literature in part is the poet's frontal, unqualified engagement with caste at a time when India was still a colony, anti-colonial nationalism was in its heyday and despite, or perhaps on account of, the Gandhian reformist movement, identitarian politics of caste was written off through its subsumption in the domain of sovereign anti-colonial, national culture.

An equally compelling reason for foregrounding Sundaram as a trail blazer of the Dalit literary movement in Gujarat is the ambivalence he exhibited in his radical phase towards the politics of naming. By his own admission, Sundaram decided early on, perhaps during his graduation years, to abjure his caste identity and write under a penname. The eminent Gujarati poet Suresh Dalal quotes Sundaram on the latter's struggle with pennames.

> I hit upon the word "Sundaram" after a great deal of rigorous searching. Prior to that, I had seriously tried pseudonyms like "Marichi" and "Vishwakarma"… (but) that word came to me from Gandhiji's autobiography wherein a Tamil indentured laborer comes to Gandhiji for help …The word is a part of the supreme triad of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram as such; however, to me it was a gift from a person who was beleaguered and the poorest of the poor. (*Sundaram Etle* 90)

In a context where caste had lost legitimacy in the public sphere, the reasons for a low-caste poet to opt for a penname are not difficult to surmise, some of which will be discussed in the next section. However, the poet brilliantly transforms the painful laceration at the heart of his decision by tracing the source of his penname, his literary and public identity, to a marginalized, exploited figure rather than to the supreme triad representing dominant philosophy. As discussed earlier, such ambivalence and elliptical fluidity, characterizing the politics of identity and naming, became a recurring motif in Dalit literary expressions later on. Sundaram here succinctly foregrounds an ontological option where translation of the self by the oppressor, through humiliating slurs, as well as by the oppressed, through conversion and concealment, might not necessarily bring about a translation of one's quintessential self, grounded in a superior imagination of human existence and egalitarian futures. Without being restrained by the need for rigid positioning—a different kind of strategic essentialism—a writer can critique power structures from the space of tactical ambivalence and enabling aporia, something which Sundaram undertook for more than a decade before switching sides, once and for all.

Joie de vivre and *sur-vivre*

In the field of Translation Studies, the debate on the nature and future of the phenomenon of cultural translation has been particularly intense and heated, as discussed by Harish Trivedi in his seminal article "Translating Culture vs Cultural Translation." Cultural translation, in the figurative sense—in so far as the figure is human—has been theorized sufficiently in the postcolonial academy to explicate the ontological conception of *sur-vivre*, or the condition of hybridity brought about by human migrancy to the First World from elsewhere. However, the translation of a writerly self as survival, as a retrograde political act of border-crossing, in a fraught multicultural context—the kind that Sundaram undertook—has not merited any attention in the field. In his early radical phase, Sundaram's creative output, despite his being located on the borderline of contesting identities, was unmistakably marked by a distinct sense of *joie de vivre*, an exultation in the self as the locus of hybridity that restored the irreducible, unassimilable cultural identity of the subject. Drawing on that enabling hybridity—a celebration of untranslatability within translation—Sundaram resorted to conventional and modern genres, like bhajan and short story respectively, to challenge the discourses and structure that effected the subjectification of the marginalized. He evaded caste by adopting a penname, but inscribed it powerfully in his works to expose its insidious workings. The language, for him, became a site of resistance, a way of calling out oppression, a claim for representation and a right to name. A deft negotiation with the ideals of Satyam and Sundaram enabled the poet to put them at the service of what was more significant socially, i.e., Shivam. However, subsequently Sundaram's conscious vacillation between identities and a measured negotiation

with ideologies transformed into an unequivocal evasion and outright negation of the self, and a complete disavowal of caste. Such monocultural, monochromatic cultural translation of the poet approximates to what is known as domestication in translation theory, a conformist strategy that dilutes and/or sanitizes the foreignness of the text, and aligns it with the dominant poetics and ideology in the target culture.

One can safely surmise that caste was at the center of the poet's consciousness when the corpus of non-conformist texts was written. In Gujarat, the seeds of Ambedkarite revolutionary politics, as against Gandhian satyagraha method, were sown way back in 1924 when Dalits like Dr. P. G. Solanki and Govindji Parmar were appointed by Ambedkar on the managing committee of *Bahishkrut Hitkarini Sabha* [Assembly for the Welfare of the Ostracized]. Ambedkar's visit to Ahmedabad in 1931 fired the Dalit imagination with revolutionary zeal, and mobilized them for mass movements and organized protests, undergirded by a self-assertive, combative ethic. Large-scale agitations like "Enter Temples," "Enter Hotels," and "Enter Buses," undertaken in the 1930s and 1940s, posed a radical challenge to Gandhian character of anti-caste politics within the state, though they could not completely dislodge it from its sound, cultural foundations. Charged by the sudden burst of energy and fervor for Dalit rights, it was only natural for a low-caste poet to invoke in his works issues of identity politics and talk publicly about caste without transcoding it. However, after choosing to talk about caste in an explicit language and imparting it a socio-historical specificity, Sundaram suddenly turned silent; further, in an act of sheepish approval of the dominant ideology, he explained away his reticence by pushing caste back into the domain of sovereign national culture. Thus, in an interview, conducted by Ramanlal Joshi and telecast on Ahmedabad radio in two parts on September 20 and October 18 in 1979, Sundaram resorted to politically correct language to speak of caste. When asked about his childhood memories of Gujarat, he said,

> Society in Gujarat then was stratified as per the codes of caste; every human being carried along its distinct mark as he entered the social interaction ... The social economy was unmistakably organized. Farmers tilled the land, banias did business, Brahmins carried out rituals etc.; the working classes performed their respective duties efficiently and the status of lower classes working as farmhands was quite distinctive. (*Sundaram Etle* 26)

The poet's detached, descriptive tone about the way every human being was assigned a specific fixture in the socio-economic structure and the use of a euphemistic phrase "quite distinctive" to designate the existential realities of the farmhands undisputedly amounts to a shrewd transcoding of caste. When the interviewer asked him about the current relevance of his early progressive poetry, Sundaram assumed an abrupt tone of rejection and said,

> Realism is a heavy, almost a corporal adjective that can, at best, be used in contrast to sentimental, maudlin verses of Nhanalal. The key lies in

> ensuring that the form of the poem is built satisfactorily… Progressive was a derivative term that hung in the air globally in those days. I had collaborated with my friends in that movement so as not to disappoint them. Now, as back then, we do not add anything precious in the production of a poem, simply by using that term … There is a superior awareness that exists on a plane way higher than socio-political awareness and its nature too is civil. Enough work has been done with socio-political awareness; we don't need it anymore. (*Sundaram Etle* 35)

Before moving on to interrogate exactly what could have impelled the poet to (st)utter caste in another tongue, an examination of the poet's utterances in a couple of other interviews on the issue would be worthwhile. In an interview given to Suresh Dalal in 1969, Sundaram spoke in conniving terms of the power politics on which caste fed.

> In such a society, our family was that of Luhar which people contemptuously called *Lawar*. The typicality of that society or civilization … was that, in it, nobody was addressed with a respectable title. Every single person would talk about other communities with utmost meanness. May be the air of Thakarati Sanskruti, that of the culture of Bapus, was limited to the royal courts. But the fact that the nature of everyday interaction caught on to it, in a way, seemed quite natural too because it was without the burden of culture, sophistication or spurious development. In it, people lived with natural ease. However, this all-pervasive air of contempt and disrespect really piqued me. But I kept on tolerating it with a mysterious reticence. (17)

In this circumlocutory statement, the poet confessed his disgruntlement with the caste system, though somewhat reluctantly. The phraseology of "all-pervasive air of contempt and disrespect" attests to his acute sense of disapproval of the degraded caste society, which, to him, was a gift of the casteist Culture of Thakores. However, instead of criticizing it, Sundaram indirectly tried to endorse it by stomaching these contumelies with a mysterious reticence. This is where the poet seems to have missed the mark; understandably, the Thakarati Sanskruti he confronted in his writings is kept going by the silence of the social subaltern. Years later, when Anu Purani asked him about the reason behind not writing short fiction of the robust and committed variety, the poet said that what marked the acme of his cultural translation was an endorsement of two-world theory and a validation of a stratified ontology. "You know, to write those stories I have to go down, and I don't feel like going down" (*Sundaram Etle* 711).

Translation as Reconstitution

The translator's invisibility historically has been a natural corollary of her conformist *habitus*, constituted by submissive dispositions and normative behavior. The ingrained tendencies to comply with historically constructed norms and a blind apotheosizing of dominant

literary canons, Daniel Simeoni observes, have relegated her to the status of a literary drudge, and her momentous praxis to a secondary, peripheral enterprise (06). However, as Krais and Gebauer point out, no *habitus* is a monolithic given, frozen in space and time; the fact that a translator's *habitus*, like that of any cultural practitioner, can be reconstituted through alternative sets of dispositions and radical activities has invested a translator with political agency (26). A reconstituted habitus from a disciplinary perspective aims at challenging and changing what Bourdieu has called the *doxa*, a set of orthodoxies and assumptions, specific to an epoch that go beyond ideology, much deeper into the consciousness of people. In the present case, the translator's political *habitus* led to a recontextualization of text/author and a reconfiguration of the doxa of caste through a rigorous undertaking of what Bourdieu called "scholarship with commitment" (40-45). The selection of the poet's unpopular, swept-under-the-carpet works for translation ended up challenging the language's cultural memory and the region's literary culture, which, in turn, reconstituted Sundaram's own cultural habitus. The publication of the collection of Sundaram's short fiction in English translation, titled *Thirsty Fish and Other Stories* with a critical introduction served to effectively debrahminize the poet in the regional critical discourse as well as in the national literary imagination. While the hegemonic force of the English language authenticated the poet's altered, renewed *habitus* and counterhegemonic textuality, the paratextuality deployed by the translator established Sundaram as a reigning deity in the pantheon of Dalit literature in Gujarat. It enfolded, on the one hand, a rigorous exploration of intertextuality between unacknowledged texts of the poet and those of the latter-day canonical Dalit writers as well as an analysis of striking affinities obtaining at the levels of existential concerns, identitarian dilemmas and strategic aporias. This scholarship reconstituted Sundaram as the harbinger of Gujarati Dalit-Bahujan sahitya. On the other hand, it essayed to proffer insights into the doxa part, i.e., the psychological exploration of the shift in the poet's ideological concerns.

Investigating the shift in Sundaram's poetico-ideological leanings was a matter of speculation of course, but a closer examination of the historical conditions under which this reversal took place threw up useful insights. The contention here was two-fold: (1) Sundaram gradually turned inarticulate about his "real" subaltern identity in deference to the dominant nationalist resolution which, being essentially elitist and exclusivist in character, declared caste as an invalid category in the public sphere and national politics. (2) The ideological apparatus interpellated the poet, just as it did the lower castes in general, into the subject position of the inadequate, lesser being, filled him with silence and self-hate and constrained him to undergo a process of Sanskritization. In the dyadic nature of anticolonial nationalism, the inner cultural domain, fashioned as a site of agency and sovereignty but as undifferentiated category, had exclusionary implications for Dalits, women, linguistic minorities, and members of tribal communities (Chatterjee, *Nation* 1995). As M.S.S.

Pandian reminds us, "[t]his is indeed the way the elite Indian nationalism scripted the story by working through the binaries of spiritual/material, inner/outer and valorizing the inner or spiritual as the uncolonized site of national selfhood. But it has a less triumphal implication for the subaltern classes" (1736).

Sadly enough, the interlocking discursive space cleared by the Orientalist and nationalist discourses—both owing allegiance to the rhetoric of modernity and a reformed Hinduism—became the site for constituting the Dalits as powerless and voiceless subjects who had to squat in the waiting room of history till their oppressors' ossified hearts melted and perverted mindsets normalized. The paratexts to my translations examined Gandhian discourse on caste and language as reference points, not only because Sundaram was influenced by Gandhian philosophy in his early writing, but also because the Gandhian discourse on caste, as the dominant ideology of the time and representative of the national culture (inner domain), could have cast its long shadow on Sundaram's creative sensibilities in ways more profound than one can imagine. Despite being averse to the practice of untouchability, Gandhian discourse naturalized caste by taking recourse to the rhetoric of hygiene and the eternal law of Nature that logically divided labor, which South parrots in his interview. Lindley has brought out how in the early 1920s, Gandhi held that the caste system was "a natural order of society" and that every Hindu "must follow the hereditary profession"; "prohibition of intermarriage" between people of different varnas was "necessary for a rapid evolution of the soul" (43). Even in the matter of the doctrine of untouchability, Gandhi seemed to instruct, in an unabashedly condescending tone, the harijans to stop eating beef and carrion, take daily ablutions and wear clean clothes as a necessary precondition for earning the privilege of entering temples in particular and following Hinduism in general. Not surprisingly, the echoes of Gandhian gospel, fluctuating between the conciliatory and the essentialist, were heard in the rhetoric marshalled against various entry-agitations organized by Ambedkarite Dalits in Gujarat in the 1930s and 1940s. Gandhian organizations like Majoor Mahajan and Harijan Sevak Sangh offered unsolicited advice to Dalits agitating for entering hotels in Ahmedabad, which is reminiscent of Gandhi's infamous take on the Kalaram Temple entry movement.

Despite his best intentions, Gandhi's contribution to the amelioration of the caste problem has been called into question and subjected to derisive criticism, especially in Dalit circles, on account of his role, for example, in the Poona Pact of 1932. Eminent Gujarati Dalit writer Chandu Maheria sums this mood up in his powerful autobiographical essay "That Fellow, Gandhido" by saying, "[i]n the contemporary Dalit discourse, it is a taboo to utter a few words favoring Gandhi even for a lay Dalit individual, to say nothing of Dalit activists or writers; so dominant and pervasive is the climate of Gandhi bashing among Dalits" (11) (my translation). Historically, the social reform effort, taken up by the savarna activists following the Gandhian call for the *seva* [service] of the marginalized, was rooted in a desire to

achieve the Sanskritisation of the underprivileged by an astute deployment of symbols, rituals and idiom of the Brahminical religion. As a result, the political leadership in Gujarat, that rose to power under Gandhian care and credo, evinced a Hindu traditionalist's typical ambivalence towards caste and a form of gross social conservatism, which eventually alienated a promising group of socialists in Congress whose engagement with caste was far more substantial than symptomatic, thoroughgoing than theatrical, and empowering than paternalistic (Jeffrelot 2017). Discerningly enough, Ambedkar saw through Gandhi's *sanatani* ideas and condemned them for being inegalitarian, orthodox, and diversionary.

Again, Gandhi was a competent translator himself, one who swore utmost sensitivity to the roots of words and their political implications. He was committed to the promotion of Hindustani all his life, but was also deeply suspicious of and distressed by the forms of Parsi and Muslim Gujarati, and he made a case for a Gujarati which is "… derived from Sanskrit and being its daughter, Gujarati must necessarily lean on Sanskrit—no one can question that" (507). While he appealed to the Gujarati literati and intelligentsia to use more straightforward language for easy comprehension, he asked Muslim, working-class readers of *Navjivan*, who requested him not to use difficult words, to take a keen interest and education in civilized language (Isaka 117). Suffice it to say that Gandhi's indirect, at times tacit, avowal of the high-caste politics of language supremacy served to promote and consolidate the Brahminical hold over the Gujarati literary sphere. But, the notion of the national culture, harbored by someone like Nehru, who had apparently evolved in the best intellectual traditions of secularism, modernity and scientific temper, too "… came dangerously close to the hegemonic ideological matrix of Brahminical chauvinists" (Mani 29). *The Discovery of India* presents an incontrovertible discursive proof of Nehru's endorsement of the Brahminical socio-religious system; the way it constructs the monolithic vision of Indian history and culture in an Orientalist vein, and conflates nation, culture, and religion under the umbrella of Brahminical ideology is both naïve and nefarious. He said,

> That mixture of religion and philosophy, history and tradition, custom and social structure, which in its wide fold included almost every aspect of the life of India and which might be called Brahminism or (to use a later word) Hinduism, became the symbol of nationalism. It was indeed a national religion, with its appeal to all those deep instincts, racial and cultural, which form the basis everywhere of nationalism today. (34-35)

Recognizably, the inner life of the nation under this dominant discourse, the zeitgeist if you will, was too suffused with caste-averse sentiments to make it viable for Sundaram to continue foregrounding identity politics in the explicit language of caste. In the two interview excerpts quoted above, Sundaram did not only transcode the forged and frivolous discourse of caste but virtually naturalized it as its chief custodian or an unwilling tout. Thus, the political valorization of Brahminical culture as *the* national culture constructed the lower

castes, through ideological interpellation, as "inadequate citizens-in-the-making" on the one hand and on the other "significantly delegitimized the language of caste in the domain of politics by annexing it as part of the cultural" (Pandian 1737). Even at the risk of speculation, one wonders if Sundaram's faith reversal was symptomatic of Sanskritization. It is not without significance that in the Pondicherry period of his creativity, the poet turned to writing spiritual and meditative poetry, singing paeans to Aurobindo's philosophy of Purna Yoga, so much so that Gujarati criticism started placing him in the medieval tradition of Bhakti Poetry. Whether Sundaram's ideological shift was a tactic of scaling socio-literary laddera strategy of *sur-vivre* remains to be investigated by future researchers, but my translations certainly performed a revisionary act within the Gujarati literary history; it enunciated a truth-claim that imparted Gujarati Dalit literature with a proper lineage, hoarier than that of any other Indian languages and engineered an exposé of caste-based politics gripping Gujarati literary culture. Further, the introduction of Sundaram into the postcolonial canon through English translation, became a way of questioning the stereotypical postcolonial fascination for everything precolonial. At the same time, the act of translation became an act of postcolonial resistance, an opposition to the essentialist, homogenizing narratives that attempt to delegitimize caste and the countercultures it has bred by releasing newer forms of derealization and historical amnesia in the national, social imaginary.

Notes

1. The expression which provides a philosophical definition of the Brahman (The Supreme Being) draws on discursive efforts made to that effect in various ancient Indian scriptures, which constitute Vedantic philosophy, like *Taittiriya Upanishad* (6th-5th century BCE), *Shwetashwatara Upanishad* (5th and 4th centuries BCE) and *Bhagwad Gita* (2nd century BCE). Essentially, it means the Brahman is Truth, Truth is Good, and Good is Beautiful.
2. As a theory, KHAM was formulated by Madhavsinh Solanki, a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress in Gujarat. The strategy of consolidating the marginalized groups politically yielded rich dividends to the party in the 1980s, and Solanki became the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 1980.
3. In 1989, Gujarati writer Deepak Mehta conducted a demographic survey of the names in the dictionary of writers published by Gujarati Sahitya Akademy and found that more than 99% of the writers listed there were Savarna. One has to scan the list of recipients of the annual Central Sahitya Akademy Prize in Gujarati from 1955 to 2024 to understand the scale of dominance of the upper castes in the cultural field. So far, only one Dalit writer, Mohan Parmar, has been awarded the prestigious prize, in 2011.

4. Varna, literally skin color, designates a four-fold system of social division into hierarchical categories of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, in that order. While varna identity is based on birth, there are strict, oppressive restrictions prescribed by caste as to social intercourse amongst these categories. However, anyone born into the varna, hence called Savarna, can automatically claim superiority over Dalits who are kept outside the varna and hence called Avarna. The term Savarna allows us to consider the wider nature of caste oppression. Notably, the signification of complexion, which obtains in the category of race, does not really hold in the varna system despite its denotation of skin color.
5. Though the diktats of scriptures are inviolable, a pervasive local belief that such naming supposedly spared the child from the temptation of trigger-happy Gods and ensured its survival, also explains the entrenchment of such a practice. This makes one wonder about the manifold ways in which the looming fear of precarious existence in a caste-ridden society makes people cope with subhuman life through most convoluted logics.
6. *Dhedh* is a conventional pejorative, used for a person of Dalit community engaged in the occupation of weaving. Bhangi, a vitriolic casteist slur, refers to a community at the lowest rung of the Dalit caste ladder and involved in sanitation work, including manual scavenging. Both these terms, prohibited under law, are used in this article strictly in a descriptive sense. The researcher unequivocally condemns the use of these casteist slurs.
7. After Sundaram's demise in 1991, the copyrights of his work were transferred to his daughter Sudha Sundaram. Thus, the FIR dragged her along with the publisher in the complaint.
8. I am tempted to believe that Sundaram leaned towards the far right in his later years, though I do not have any other means to make this claim except a photo in which the poet shared the stage with top leaders of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. (See Bal 2017, 33) However, as a clue, one can look into the episode in May 1977 when Morarji Desai received an unsigned memorandum for banning four history books by left-leaning scholars, which held Tilak and Aurobindo responsible for antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. At that time, the RSS too had campaigned for the withdrawal of the texts (See Jeffrelot 2017, 11)
9. The poem anticipates Neerav Patel's well-acclaimed poem "My Lord" in which the same theme has been given inferior treatment. The poem is available at https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/12101

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