

HOW TO WRITE A POEM BY SURDAS:

‘AUTHENTICITY’ IN THE TRANSMISSION AND TRANSLATION OF HINDI LITERATURE

[A TALK GIVEN HERE & THERE IN THE EARLY 2000s]

Rupert Snell

While studying and teaching Hindi literature from various periods, I find myself wondering how to bring it to new readerships — how to retell and retail it in translation. Poetry from what we used to call the medieval period, in this case from the ballpark of the 16th century, is at first sight so radically different from our own contemporary concerns that neither the ball nor the park looks remotely familiar. Yet the fashion for comparative studies brings a need for access to many different literatures through the mediation of translation. This lays a heavy responsibility on the translator, who has to define what is essential about the texts being re-written in an alien tongue: which aspects of a text must survive in the target language? Leaving the overarching issues of context and theory to braver, higher-flying souls (and incidentally hoping that the wax that attaches their wings is good-quality stuff, because God knows it’s hot up there), I prefer an artisan’s approach: to look closely at the stonework of texts, to see how poets chisel and joint and mortar their words into constructions of effective and aesthetic design.

Pre-modern Hindi literature raises more fundamental questions about authenticity, because we know surprisingly little about how texts have been transmitted over the centuries since they were written. So I want to look at two types of authenticity: first, the primary question of who wrote what, and then the secondary question of how we manipulate received texts when we translate them. I can’t claim to have found the Shangri La of authenticity, but only to have had some interesting journeys in the search for it.

I’ll begin with a self-serving anecdote. A Gujarati friend of mine in London had a music business; he publishes recordings of classical and devotional Hindustani music, and I would sometimes help him out by writing cultural notes and translations for the CD inserts. A few years ago he decided to make a set of three recordings by the bhajan-singer Purushottam Das Jalota. One of them was to be of so-called *Bhramar-gīt* or ‘bee songs’ by Surdas — 16th-century lyrics on a Krishna theme from the roughly 9th-century Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. He asked me to translate the Braj Bhasha lyrics of those seven or eight Surdas *pad*s, devotional songs, which I duly did; and somehow the beguiling rhythms and mesmerising cadences of their lines crept inside my head, and in an idle moment I found myself writing a *pad* of my own. To cut to the chase, my

apocryphal *Bhramar-gīt* (actually more *bhram* than *gīt*, but never mind) appealed to Jalota ji and found its way onto his CD, which was published with the now not-quite-accurate title *Songs of Surdas*. The accompanying booklet made the deception plain; but one reviewer, not bothering to read beyond the title of the CD, rushed into print with a gushing encomium that I have cherished ever since. With her heart on her sleeve she wrote enthusiastically about the collection as a whole; but when she came to my six-liner her prose turned positively purple and she described it as ‘the best part of the entire set of songs...with its stunning dialectics of ignorance and wisdom...highlighting the poetic genius of Surdas at its very best’.

That the ‘very best’ of Surdas should have been written on the back of an envelope during a college committee meeting half a millennium after the birth of the poet himself struck me as a fine post-colonial irony — one which highlights a significant question about the authenticity of the early canon in literatures from the medieval period. Hence the need to look at the idea of what is ‘authentic’ both in originals and in their translated versions. There could be no better place to ponder this than under the shadow of Berkeley’s magnificent bell-tower which is itself an imitation, emulation, invocation, celebration or pastiche of a Venetian original, which in turn must have echoed models extending back into earlier generations of European aesthetics.

An awareness of historical precedent and chronology could easily be dismissed as alien to pre-modern India: after all, Western perceptions of time and the individual may be an unreliable guide to the way in which culture has been perpetuated through such languages as Hindi and its extended dialect family. On the other hand, the alternatives don’t provide much comfort. In respect of authenticity, the attitudes of much Indian and especially Hindi-medium scholarship has been far too accepting of received tradition, far too quick to adopt the fantasies of the hard-working hagiographers as literal and authentic truths. The late 19th century saw the beginnings of a new mode of Hindi-medium scholarship, in which Indian critics enthusiastically picked up an objective literary historiography from Western models; but they often did so without simultaneously abandoning their earlier preference for a more pious credulity. Harish Trivedi tells a story about a Christian missionary in India who had reason to believe that one of his converts was slipping back into his familiar Hindu ways; so following a tip-off, the padre staked out a nearby Hanuman temple, and sure enough, the apostate was seen nipping in there for a surreptitious darshan on his way home from church. When accosted by the padre, he protested, “ईसाई बन गया तो ठीक है, मगर अपने धर्म को कैसे छोड़ूँगा ?” — “Surely you didn’t think that just because I became a Christian I’d give up my *religion*?”. Hindi literary historians often follow the same pattern, willingly adopting the outer trappings of an alien vision of chronological history, while happily blurring the distinction between hagiography and biography and accepting at their face value tales of miracles, implausible conversions, anachronistic encounters,

astonishing feats of scholarship by young children, and medieval lifespans of well over a hundred years. As Huw McCleod has shown in his work on Sikh hagiography, there's not even much logic in simply rejecting the unbelievable parts of a traditional biography and regarding the rest as a historical record: the equation "hagiography minus fantasy equals factual narrative" is bad mathematics and worse history.

The relevance of this to the theme of authenticity is that it's not only the hagiographies that have become distorted over time: the Hindi literary canon has grown up in parallel with the biographies of its authors, each equally rickety structure offering collateral support to the other. Hagiography abhors a vacuum, and biographical detail thickens with the years, filling gaps in the life-stories of the pious and celebrated: the further we travel from the lifetime of a subject, the more the hagiographers seem to know of him or her, and the sketchiest of references in early sources become fleshed out to a literally unbelievable degree in more modern works. Astonishingly, many of today's standard biographical approaches to medieval poets still follow these unreconstructed fairy-tales, just as Hindi scholars disregard the fact that some of their primary texts have often grown exponentially over the centuries in a way that would astonish their authors. It's true of course that the numerous *jīvan-carits* and *vārtās* and other modes of pious biography deal with interpretations of truth and reality that differ from mere factual chronology. But essentially we know very little about the actual lives of the early poets and about the circumstances in which their art was composed. Such biographical information as we do have is formulaic, name-rank-and-number stuff, giving us scant insight into the personal motivations or inclinations of individuals. What did Tulsidas's wife call him, and what did she make of his fulminations about what we would now call 'gender'? Was the sweet-voiced Surdas quite as curmudgeonly as his hagiographers make him out to be? Did Swami Haridas avoid onions and garlic like many good Vaishnavas? Where did Keshavdas stand on the political relationships between his hometown of Orcha and its surrounding kingdoms? When the couplet-master Biharilal lived in the court of Mirza Jai Singh at Amber, surrounded by the bleak Aravalli hills with their craggy backs crested with fortifications like the skeletons of dinosaurs, did he crave a sabbatical at the Mughal court, like an English academic dreaming of American campuses?

Without such contextual information we are thrown back onto the texts themselves to pick up what we can about the authentic personalities of their authors. The danger is that all poets become lumped together under deadeningly broad categories: that a term such as 'bhakta-kavi' says it all, and that mere piety becomes a or the criterion for poetic quality. In aesthetic terms the true excitement of old Hindi poetry comes from its variety and *individual* facets of brilliance, and this is a quality that we should perceive as readers and promote as teachers. A traditional Hindi couplet eulogizes the big names of the literary canon in this way:

सूर सूर तुलसी शशि उडुगण केशवदास ।
और कवि खद्योत सम इत उत करत प्रकास ॥

Sur's the sun, Tulsi the moon, Keshavdas the stars;
All other poets are as fireflies, flickering here and there.

This league table falls too easily for the slight punning potential of Sur as indicating 'sun' and gets the whole picture wrong: in fact it's surely Tulsidas who burns with a solar energy, and Surdas who brings a quieter moonlight beauty to his compositions. In my private characterisations of the major poets I think in terms of parallels with Western classical composers in a kind of aesthetic shorthand that no-one should admit to in academic circles. Since I see that you press me for details I'll give you a couple of examples: Tulsidas is Beethoven — a towering artistic figure if perhaps an awkward neighbour; Surdas is Mozart — an erratic genius, and lyricism incarnate; Nanddas is the divinely gifted if rather scholastically fastidious Haydn, and Raskhan, in his creative self-indulgence, echoes the baroque imagination of Vivaldi. But whatever inappropriate metaphors we choose in an attempt to capture the uniqueness of individual poets, we still have to face the problem of authenticity, because we still don't quite know who wrote what! Surdas provides the clearest example. His hagiography makes him a disciple of the 16th-century theologian Vallabhacharya, and claims him as a major luminary of Vallabha's sect. Faced with the awkward fact that not one of the five and a half thousand songs attributed to Surdas alludes even vaguely to his guru, the hagiographers brazen it out by telling a deathbed story in which Surdas himself makes up for this lacuna: he composes an impromptu verse in praise of "Shri Vallabha" (श्री वल्लभ नख चंद्र छटा बिनु सब जग माँझ अँधेरौ), adding that he sees no difference between Vallabha and his deity Krishna, and hence had never bothered to distinguish between them. The explanation is totally credible to the believer, but totally incredible to others, not least because "Shri Vallabha" (in its meaning "beloved consort of Shri") is a perfectly decent epithet for Vishnu/Krishna himself and need not refer to Vallabhacharya at all. If there's no real evidence for an association between Surdas and the Vallabha sect, we're in even deeper water when it comes to the *Sūrsāgar*, the massive collection of over 5000 devotional songs comprising his Collected Works. Research by Jack Hawley and Ken Bryant suggests that no more than about a fifth of these can be traced by hard evidence to anywhere close to Surdas's lifetime. The rest have been added drop by drop over the centuries, swelling an original pool of Surdas poems into an ocean whose currents and bays have been carefully moulded to reflect Vallabha's particular theological preferences.

How then are we to assess authenticity? Scholarly tradition tells us to study the manuscripts, and to reconstruct the history of a text by working out how all extant

versions fit into a family tree. Through this process we can work backwards through the manuscripts towards the holy grail of the original text. But this model was developed for written traditions, and doesn't work too neatly when texts have been composed orally and then transmitted by word of mouth as much as by pen and ink. (As Linda Hess suggests so insightfully in the context of Kabir, written recensions may be nothing more than momentary crystallizations from the swirling oral tradition.) The traditional gatekeepers to the canon have been much more subjective in their methods: if a poem sounds right, it's in; if it doesn't fit the established pattern, it's out; and many so-called 'editions' of medieval Hindi texts are based on these very subjective criteria. The natural tendency of this process is for normative pressures to define a narrower and narrower acceptable range of voice for an individual poet. For example, an erotic *savaiya* attributed to Raskhan is frowned on by an editor, because surely Raskhan would not write such steamy stuff; and a contested series of verses is finally admitted to the *Sūrsāgar* on the same grounds that my pastiche became an honorary Surdas song, namely that they all sounded like Surdas in general terms. As for the famous *Hanumān Cālisā*, the most printable, memorable, frameable, quotable devotional text in northern India, nobody can be sure if it's by Tulsidas or not: the fact that it shares an opening *caupai* with the *Ayodhyākāṇḍ* of the *Rāmcaritmānas* actually weakens the argument for the attribution, as Tulsi hardly needed to plagiarise himself in this way. For the devotee, of course, all such agonising about authenticity and authorship is utterly beyond the point: Hanuman's gloriously burning tail makes short work of the city of big-headed, ten-headed academics.

Somewhere on the map of authenticity between the distant shores of the original text and the more familiar surroundings of English translation lies an island inhabited by the commentators. This is a strange land, a place where night can be shown to be day, and nothing is quite what it seems. The commentators are a brotherhood of supremely skilled spin-doctors, often able to elucidate meaning quite brilliantly, but equally capable of subverting meanings to fit newly emerging intellectual fashions or sectarian attitudes. Narrative characters who no longer fit sectarian priorities can be air-brushed out of the picture, and others who are embarrassingly absent can be sketched in by a literary sleight of hand that would do credit to the most proficient Photoshop artist. Beyond reporting the manipulations of the commentary tradition, I won't go into details here because it's a major subject in its own right; but it's important to notice that texts are manipulated not only by the addition or exclusion of individual stanzas, but also by a process of spin, in which the contextualisation or interpretation of stanzas can be just as effective as the more drastic means of addition and subtraction.

Other aspects of the authenticity question come into play when studying modern literatures also. Modern literatures are of course closer to contemporary mother-tongue speakers than is medieval poetry, and this puts the antiquarian out of work; indeed,

since modern literature is written in modern language, speakers of modern Hindi have a big advantage over those of us who learn their language as outsiders. How authentic can a *gorā* teacher of contemporary Hindi literature really be? A few years ago a disappointed student looked at me disdainfully at the first meeting of a Hindi class and said 'I thought there'd be a *real* Hindi teacher!'. The other side of the coin is that non-Indian students of Hindi literature are sometimes disappointed to discover how deeply Indian literatures are influenced by imported norms, genres and conventions, not to mention the extent to which languages like Hindi are influenced by the hidden hand of English idiom, vocabulary, style, metaphor and even syntax, not to mention the wholesale appropriation of narratives. A few years ago a PhD candidate at Chicago who was working on the fiction of Upendranath Ashk sent me some translated short stories for comment. I was familiar with some of Ashk's work and had visited the self-styled great man at his home in Allahabad a couple of times, but one particular story was new to me. Even so, as I read it, a sense of *déjà vu* grew stronger and stronger, until it dawned on me that what I was reading was in fact a re-write of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Mann's original was reflected in Ashk's short story not only in terms of plot outline but also in many details, with his agonised writer, already recycled for the silver screen as the composer Gustav Mahler in Visconti's famous film, now translated into an Indian professor of mathematics on Chowpatti beach in Bombay. A parallel case is Jainendra Kumar's 1936 novel *Tyag-patra*, 'The resignation', which turns out to be a rather more subtly reworked version of André Gide's novel *La Porte Étroite*, translated into English as *Strait is the Gate*. It is of course true that many Hindi writers have an academic background — not to mention a thoroughgoing cultural orientation — in English literature, whose classics are much more widely studied and much better known in India than they are in England. But it is always surprising to find just how deep that influence reaches. If you go to Banaras Hindu University and look at the notebooks in which Premchand sketched the outline for his 1936 classic *Godān* — the paradigmatic Hindi novel — you will find that his planning for the novel was done in English.

I've spent some time looking at the problem of authenticity in original texts, and now I want to look at authenticity in translation, since it's through translation alone that many Indian and non-Indian readers have access to texts in Hindi and its dialects. I promise here not to inflict on you any further pastiche; after all, although we're used to the idea of modern Hindi writers being *their own translators* into English; the idea of translators making up their own originals may be slower to catch on. But in passing I can't resist referring to the contribution of one Francis William Bain (1863-1940), a teacher of classics at a British boarding school. He brought out a whole series of English 'translations from Sanskrit texts' whose titles, such as *A Digit of the Moon: a Hindoo Love Story* (1899), *A Draught of the Blue* (1905), *A Heifer of the Dawn* (1904), *An Essence of the Dusk* (1906) and *Bubbles of the Foam* (1912), were so ungainly in their formulaic deconstruction of apparent Sanskrit nominal compounds that they could

only *be* translations: but these were texts for which there had never been an original: he had dispensed with the need for an original Sanskrit altogether, and his so-called translations were in fact the products of his own fevered classicist imagination.

But back to the matter in hand. The question of what makes a translation worthwhile has been so much chewed over and theorised about that there seems little *rasa* left in the discussion. I have written elsewhere about the search for an authentic translation ‘voice’ for pre-modern Hindi literature, and have looked in some detail at translations such as A.G. Shirreff’s Scottish dialect versions of Eastern Hindi folksongs, and at Mukund Lath’s subtle modernisations of tone in his beguiling translation of the *Ardhakathanaka* of Banarsidas, supposedly the first true autobiography in an Indian language. These show how translation style is moulded by literary fashion; translations from other times are easily mocked. At a recent South Asia Studies conference, we all enjoyed laughing at the preposterously romanticising and medievalist nostalgia of Rajput myths as retold by authors of several decades ago; but it doesn’t take much self-examination to reveal the deeper implication of this laughter — it’s the smug assumption that we in the modern world are now far too perceptive and enlightened ever to be guilty of such culture-bound attitudes. But we can be sure that readers a century from now will be splitting their scholarly sides at *our* self-confident posturings. By definition, we cannot foretell what aspect of our own cultural viewpoint will cause the greatest mirth, or what will define the politically correct a century from now, but we can be certain that our intellectual fashions are very bit as ephemeral as those of any generation before or after our own. This being the case, no translation style can hope to stand the test of time, and the best that we can hope for is that we can sometimes produce some versions that might at least flower brightly during their own brief season.

An important principle for translators is to be realistic about what we, as flawed and limited individuals, can and cannot translate. I have an impressive negative CV in this respect: a list of unpublications, translations that I’ve had to abandon because of the difficulty of finding an appropriate register and metaphor in English. Among these is was a brief flirtation with the 19th-century novel *Chandrakanta*, made in response to an invitation from an Indian publisher when the TV serial took off; here I just couldn’t find the right voice, and ended up with something horribly run-of-the-mill, like a Victorian gothic potboiler. A more costly failure in terms of time was a project to translate selections from three contemporary Hindi poets whose work I admire — Manglesh Dabral, Kedarnath Singh, and Kunwar Narain; at first I was very enthusiastic about this project, but I abandoned it when it was more or less completed, because my English versions had too much Snell and too little Dabral, Singh and Narain. I felt more at home translating and abridging Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s four-volume Hindi autobiography, and that’s one that did find its way into print. There were perhaps two

main reasons for feeling at home with Bachchan — or three, if I count the astonishing sweetness and support of the author himself in his dealings with me. The first reason was that his moody, romanticising world-view was one with which I was all too quick to empathise; the second was in the character of his Hindi, which seemed to offer itself up for translation rather as a loose-skinned orange offers itself up for peeling. The easiest translation task lay in descriptions of events which had themselves taken place in an English medium, such as Bachchan's visits to England and Ireland in search of Yeats (or 'Eats' (ईट्स) as he always calls him in the Hindi): here it was a matter of restoring the narrative to its original state, of stripping off an incidental layer of Hindi to reveal the English beneath. I also had the collateral support of a pacemaker in the form of my friend Gopal Gandhi, who was simultaneously engaged in turning Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* into its Hindi incarnation as कोई अच्छा-सा लड़का; Gopal's task was the opposite of mine, often consisting of reinventing the Hindi phraseology that underlay the English-but-really-Hindi dialogues of that famously slim volume.

Now for a brief diversion on the choice of authentic titles. कोई अच्छा-सा लड़का was the outcome of a lively dinner-party at which numerous suggestions played leapfrog with each other. The first few rounds of suggestions started very literally through word-by-word translation, with various Hindi synonyms for 'suitable' forming the major crux; but as soon as the underlying Hindi expression determining the English phrase was identified, such literalism went out of the window. The Marathi translation apparently carries the title "सुमंगलम्", painfully lacking in the ironic subtext of a whole world of cultural attitudes that are invoked by the original title; I don't know how many other Indian languages Seth has yet appeared in and must check at some point. Harish Trivedi has rightly criticised the title of the Hindi version of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, आधीरात की संतानें, for its illegitimate pluralising (the title would re-translate as 'Midnight's Offsprings'). The title of Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* presented a very real problem to its translator: what kind of 'idea' was this, and for that matter what kind of 'India'? Clearly no kind of *vicār* or *khyāl* would do here, and the more layered abstractions of *parikalpanā* and words of that ilk seemed far too forced to reflect the limpid prose style that marks Khilnani's writing. I saw recently that of the various contenders for the Hindi title, the winner is....भारतनामा. The whole question of authenticity in translated titles is very vexed and deserves detailed study. Is *Godan* really 'The gift of a cow', as Roadarmel's translation has it? A *dān* is not quite a 'gift', which invokes a quite different kind of transaction — 'this Christmas, give a cow to someone you love', as some *New Yorker* advertisement might have it.

In translating Bachchan's work, and in giving it a new title which was not a translation at all, I took a lot of freedom, thankfully rewarded with the author's agreement. The four volumes of his autobiography were all published individually, separated by several years and by different titles, the first of which was क्या भूलूँ क्या याद

करूं; and considering that I was abridging the four books into a single if fat English volume, none of the titles seemed to work for English. In any case, a title such as ‘What should I forget, what should I remember?’ would be ironic in the context of an abridgment, where the question ‘What should I keep, what should I cut out’ hung over every page. After many false starts I finally chose ‘In the Afternoon of Time’, a half-line from a poem by R.L. Stevenson. Stevenson, one of many English-language authors invoked by Bachchan in his very Anglophile text, came from an extraordinary family of Scottish engineers, responsible in the early 19th century for the building of many of Scotland’s most dramatically located lighthouses. R.L., or Louis, was the first in his family to take to writing as a career — *in the afternoon of time* of his family history; and this and various other connections, not least a shared literary sensibility, made the phrase jump off the page when I read it in one of Stevenson’s autobiographical poems.

In translating Bachchan, as I said a while ago, there were passages in which the English language fitted as authentically as a familiar old glove. One such was an anecdote from his days as an English lecturer at Allahabad University in the 1940s, a passage in which my English was merely a reconstruction of that English-language context, temporarily dressed in Bachchan’s Hindi. He recalls the occupants of the Senior Common Room:

Other contemporaries ... were Mr Bhagvat Dayal and Raghupati Sahay ‘Firaq’. Mr Bhagvat Dayal had been educated in Anglo-Indian schools and in England – perhaps in Oxford – the full impact of which showed in both his pronunciation and his manner. When asked his name would say ‘B. Dial’. He was proud of being able to speak English like the English, and used to look down on people who spoke it with an Indian accent. We always shrank from talking to him because half of the English that emerged from his cigar- or pipe-clamping lips was completely beyond us; if that was the case with us teachers, God alone knows what the students must have made of it. The only person able to speak on equal terms was Firaq Sahib: ‘Mr Dayal, I’m beginning to understand your English again, I think it’s time you made another trip to England’.

Another intriguing passage was from Bachchan’s recollections of his Allahabad schooldays, when the children were made to sing a four-line hymn extended by an additional line declaring fealty to the imperial throne. This particular passage turned out to be a translator’s dream, because the quoted verse was followed by the sentence ‘The song had been composed by a person innocent of any knowledge of prosody, but nobody seemed to notice or care’. Here then was an invitation to write *bad* English poetry in the interests of authenticity of translation. The Hindi verse goes like this:

हे प्रभो आनंददाता ज्ञान हमको दीजिए,
शीघ्र सारे दुर्गणों को दूर हमसे कीजिए,
लीजिए हमको शरण में हम सदाचारी बनें
धर्मरक्षक ब्रह्मचारी वीर व्रतधारी बनें !

भगवान् हमारे जार्ज पंचम को चिरायु कीजिए ।

And here's my English, which attempts to emulate the lows of the Hindi as disparaged by Bachchan himself, while also retaining its 'AABBA' rhyme-scheme:

Oh Lord, who yields all bliss and joy, pray grant us wisdom's gift;
and all ignoble vices' burden from us swiftly lift;
Grant us refuge safe and sure, on virtue's path proceeding;
Faith-protecting, celibate, to strength and truth acceding.

Long life to George the Fifth, our king: God, kindly hear our drift.

The four volumes of Bachchan's autobiography are shot through with passages of verse by himself and others. In the Hindi, the verse blends organically with the surrounding prose register, but in translation it sits much less comfortably with the narrative. As my translation was also an abridgment I was free to cut such verses as didn't seem to work in English. But sometimes the verse was an intrinsic part of the story being told, in which case it of course had to be retained; and incidentally, because I feel strongly that English verse translations of Hindi poetry can only ever be one subjective 'version' of the original, I included all the verse originals in an appendix. In one passage, illustrative of contemporary mores and of the poetic world in which he worked, Bachchan describes his defence of his best-loved poem *Madhusālā* at a conference in Indore when someone had complained to Mahatma Gandhi that the poem promoted the consumption of alcohol.

I recited *Madhushala* to the people of Indore for the first time. The audience was enraptured, though many perhaps did not understand what this 'house of wine' was all about. Somebody had complained to Gandhiji that the Conference he was chairing was glorifying the consumption of alcohol. I was summoned to see Gandhiji one night just before a midnight meeting of the executive committee. Even people anxious to meet Gandhiji were not getting appointments, so I felt both happy and a little apprehensive at being called; if he said that I should not recite *Madhushala* or should destroy it, how would I be able to refuse? Gandhiji mentioned the complaint and asked to hear a few verses. I adopted a certain caution in my choice of *rubais*, selecting those whose symbolic meaning would be readily accessible to him:

मुसलमान औ' हिन्दू दो एक मगर उनका प्याला,
एक मगर उनका मदिरालय एक मगर उनका प्याला;
दोनों रहते एक न जब तक मंदिर-मस्जिद में जाते;
बैर बढ़ाते मंदिर-मस्जिद मेल कराती मधुशाला ।

O Muslim, Hindu – faiths are two,
But one the brimming cup you share;
And one the drinking house, and one
The wine which flows so freely there.
By mosque and temple all's divided,
All is either 'mine' or 'thine';
But feuds thus forged are all at last
Forgotten in the House of Wine.

'There's no wine-glorifying in these verses!', said Gandhiji, and with this exoneration I hurriedly took my leave.

Luckily, Bachchan's deemed my translation to be sufficiently 'authentic' (he inauthentically used the the English word in an otherwise Hindi conversation) to pass muster. With poets of pre-modern times there is no such possibility of authorial approval, and worse still, the distance to be covered between the original and the translation can be far more daunting. My current project is a translation and study of selections from the *Bihārī satsaī* — an early 17th-century anthology of couplets on the Sanskrit *saptaśati* model, i.e. some seven hundred verses on loosely connected themes. I've come at this work from various different angles and have suffered various different defeats. There are already some English translations of the whole or part of this text, notably one by the translator K.P.Bahadur, a retired but tireless I.A.S. officer devoted to working his dauntless way through the entire Hindi canon. He has already despatched the *Rasik-priyā* of Keshavdas, a selection from Mira, the entire works of Tulsidas, a set of folk songs, and indeed the complete *Bihārī satsaī*, in an edition published in India by Penguin Books. My reason for wanting to set up a counter voice to that of Bahadur is that his translations tend to reduce all his authors to a single voice, a lowest common denominator of English free verse which concentrates on explaining the mere 'narrative' of the poetry with scant interest in its literary character. Such narrative is often important, and some of his translations work well enough. But they lack subtlety and individuality of voice. Another translation is an unpublished one by Barron Holland, done as part of a proficient PhD thesis from the University of California in 1969. Holland's translations follow very closely the interpretations of the best-known 20th-century commentary on the *Satsaī*, the *Bihārī ratnākar* of Jagannathdas 'Ratnakar'. But as a translator, Holland too is a little ... flat.

I should say something about Biharilal himself, because only those who have had a Hindi-medium education are likely to have encountered him face to face. When I gave

a seminar on the *Bihārī satsaī* at the Sahitya Akademi some years ago, one member of the audience was disappointed to find that my subject had nothing to do with Bihar (and Biharilal still less to do with Lallu Yadav), and another had come hoping to hear something about Satya Sai Baba. So a few words of general introduction may not go amiss.

Biharilal wrote his *Satsaī* in the first half of the 17th century, while living at Amer in Rajasthan under the patronage of Mirza Raja Jai Singh, (to be distinguished from the later Sawai Jai Singh, builder of Jaipur). Today's inhabitants of the crumbling little town beneath the fort point to a locked, modern building that stands on the site of Bihari's house; it lies close to the magnificent step-well known as Panna Mia, an inverted pyramid of stone and air that scoops the most amazing rhythmic patterns out of God's earth. But Bihari's poetic world is one of the imagination and has little apparent connection to the specifics of his environment. Even that handful of couplets which praise the military might of his patron Jai Singh, mirrored in the sheesh-mahal of the Amer palace, don't quite seem to engage with real-world portraiture: compared to the unforced brilliance of his couplets on freer themes, these pedestrian verses seem the work of a duty-bound laureate who knows where his next roti is coming from. But when given the freedom of a normal poetic range, Bihari's imagination is itself an ample canvas: in his hands the short, rhyme-stopped doha couplet becomes a superbly fluid and flexible medium. Not for him the trite certainties of the dohas of lesser poets, whose bumper-sticker aphorisms open and close an argument within a few complacent syllables.

A major problem in translating Bihari's Braj Bhasha poetry into English is a mismatch in the lexical resources of the two languages. Like all Sanskritic languages, Braj is rich in synonyms for items such as parts of the body, and for everyday items such as water, milk, stone, and so forth; and of the various synonyms for a particular word, some will often be reserved for poetic contexts, and will thus be unsullied by mundane associations. Let's take a single example. Of the many synonyms for 'eye' bequeathed to Braj by the Sanskritic tradition, the *Satsaī* includes such words as *naina/nayana*, *dr̥ga*, *locana* and *ākha/ākhiyā* (not to mention a further set of words for 'glance', the arrows from the eyebrow's bow). Each word differs subtly from the others in its implications, and each suits different metrical and/or alliterative patterns; in fact Bihari's scribes even differentiate between bisyllabic and trisyllabic spellings for *naina/nayana* according to the word's position in the line. The word *naina* has a poetic register that protects it from the banality of everyday usage: it seems unlikely that even Biharilal when the Rajasthani wind blew a grain of desert sand into his eye, would have used the word *naina* while directing his wife's little finger to the trouble-spot – he would probably have used a word like preferred the more everyday *ākha* or some other derivative of Sanskrit *akṣi*. In vain one searches for an English word that might preserve

such fine distinctions of register. Even the thesaurus gets us nowhere, for Roget's suggestions under the headword of 'eye' fall rapidly into either technical/physiological or comic/slang categories: 'eyeball, iris, pupil, white, cornea, retina, optic nerve; optics, orbs, sparklers, peepers; saucer eyes, goggle e[yes]', all worse than useless for romantic poetry where eyes are not physiological artifacts but weapons in love's arsenal.

This is just one of the issues that confront the would-be translator at every turn. Now I'd like to look at some specific verses and the translation possibilities that they suggest. First, here's a doha — number 628 in the Ramkumari Mishra edition I'm using — which raises the question of how to translate a trope which, in typical *rīti* fashion, subverts the very conventionality of this highly rhetorical style.

बारौ बलि तो दृगनु पर अलि खंजन मृग मीन ।
आधी डीठि चितौनि जिहि कियै लाल आधीन ॥ ६२८ ॥

A wholly literal translation will leave the English reader in the dark; but as a basis for discussion, here's Holland's version (which, incidentally, appears to read *aṃjana*, collyrium, for *khaṃjana*, wagtail):

I dedicate, if you please, collyrium, the deer, fish and bee,
To those eyes that subdued Lāl with a half-looking glance.

The fact that the 'bees, wagtail, deer and fish' are all objects of comparison for the eyes is part of the 'given' of the verse; a Hindi reader will know very well that the heroine's eyes are dark like the bumble-bee, restless like the eponymous flickering movements of the wagtail, large and delicate like the eyes of the deer, and tapering like the shape of the darting fish. The point of this particular variety of simile is that this heroine's eyes transcend the descriptive power of all such conventional comparisons. The crux on which the couplet rests is the alliterative play on the syllables *ādhī* with which the second line begins and ends, contrasting so satisfyingly the effortless, half-opened glance (*ādhī ḍīṭha*) of the heroine with the utterly helpless (*ādhīna*) victim; this is the feature that injects originality and interest into an otherwise conventional verse.

The poet throws the four objects of comparison into the second quarter-verse, as if to say that although comprising four individual items, the little list can be quickly dispensed with; by so doing he emphasises the rhetorical downgrading of the objects of comparison. Holland's translation certainly achieves the task of showing what the doha 'means', and he has honoured the doha construction as a couplet; but he makes no attempt to go further than this in reproducing any other elements of the original poem. Bahadur attempts a partial gloss of the objects of comparison within his translation, and for good measure adds a contextualising preface:

What the companion said to her

Upon my word, dear girl,
your ravishing eyes
dark as black bees
put to shame
those of the fish
the deer
and the wagtail,
for they can bewitch your lover
with just one glance!

Disregarding the false correspondence alleged here between the eyes of the heroine and ‘those of’ the fish and wagtail (after all, which heroine would like to hear it suggested that her eyes were round, bulbous and tiny?), one finds that the focus of the verse here has shifted to the *objects of comparison* themselves; this is ironic, given that the whole point here is to transcend such stock poetic imagery.

Many other details of the translations could be discussed if time allowed: not least the legitimacy of generalising Lāl as ‘the lover’, and the register of the verb ‘bewitch’ — two choices that erode any possibility of seeing a *bhakti* context here. An alternative and arguably more effective appropriation of freedom would be to admit the fact that the *upamānas* are problematic, if not meaningless, for an English reader, and to sweep them all up under a superordinate expression. This restores the main rhetorical emphasis of the translated couplet to its real subject, the eyes of the heroine. So I timidly venture the following:

I’d offer all the similies the poet tries
for these your eyes, whose peeping glance
so perfectly can darling Lal entrance.

A similar type of simile appears in dohā 211, where a botanical comparison has replaced zoological ones.

जंघ जुगल लोइन निरै करै मनौ बिधि मैन ।
केलि तरुनु दुखु दैन ए केलि कला सुख दैन ॥२११ ॥

Holland translates:

It is as if Madan-formed Brahmā made the pair of legs pure grace,
Pain-giving to the plantain tree, joy-giving to the youth in play.

The heroine’s wondrous thighs are attributed to the hand of Kāmdev, god of love, deputising in Brahmā’s role as creator; they cause pain (i.e. envy) to the *keli taru* or ‘plantain trees’ with whose trunks they are conventionally compared, while being a source of joy in *keli taruna* ‘youthful love-sport’. Again the couplet is constructed with

¹ Ratnākar edition: तरुन

amazing economy and integration. Alliterative connections link *jaṃga jugala, nirai karai, manau...maina* and so forth in the first line, anticipating the main feature of the couplet, the play on the phrase *keli taruna* in its two distinctive senses. The poet's decision of when to be prolix and when to be brief depends on form as much as content: *jugala* is semantically redundant after *jaṃgha* —paired thighs, two thighs — representing little more than a memory of the OIA dual (the precise *number* of the heroine's thighs being never really in doubt), but adds alliteration, while on the other hand the compound *bidhi maina* is so richly encoded with information as to require the following laborious end-note from Bahadur (p. 378):

Kāma is here spoken of as Brahmā the Creator...This is because as the god of love, Kāma's work is only to make people fall in love. Creation is really the job of Brahmā (one of the gods of the Hindu Trinity).

While there is substance in the first-line conceit of the thighs being made by Kāmedev using only 'loveliness' (*loina < lāvaṇya*) as his raw materials, it is without doubt the *keli taruna* play of second line that provides the climax of the couplet. Of these two ideas, the first may be translated with relative ease, while the second can only be hinted at in English. Holland's version again demonstrates the limitations of a doggedly 'faithful', but aesthetically inauthentic, adherence to the original. The phrase 'Madan-formed Brahmā' for *bidhi maina* seems to be an Englishing of the Ratnākara commentary's *madan-rūpī brahmā* and means little in English. The 'pair of legs' phrasing has all the grace of a pair of sneakers, the sensual specificity of the 'thigh' having been sacrificed to no purpose. English readers are left to make what they will of the 'plantain' reference. The juxtapositioning of 'pain' and 'plantain' is a legitimate evocation of Bihārī's alliteration; but the wording 'youth in play' does not convey the nature of *keli* as it is commonly understood in the erotic context of the original. Bahadur's paraphrase is more explicit throughout:

What her companion said to him

It seems Creator Kāma
fashioned her thighs
from the essence of pure beauty—
thighs which outvie [sic]
the plantain tree trunk
and give her lover
great pleasure
in love-making.

Neither translator has tried to suggest the punning *keli-taruna*. Bahadur deconstructs the pun, a technique which works well as a key to the Hindi, but clearly loses all of the rhetorical impact of the play itself and is really more of a commentary than a translation. In my version, I have use the same technique as before, supplanting the plantain image with an abstract reference to its function as a simile; likewise the cohesion of the untranslatable pun is represented by the parallel between the words

‘scourge’ and ‘urgent’, the weakness of this parallel being bolstered by line-initial positions. The Kāmdev/Brahmā allusion has been dropped altogether in favour of a culturally neutral personification of ‘Love’. The lightweight *manau* and its conjunctive function have been dropped in this translation, which emulates the ellipsis of the original’s second line by having no verb at all.

Her thighs – sheer loveliness,
Love’s handiwork;
scourge of similes,
urgent joy in the art of dalliance.

Punning was as natural to Bihārī verse as it was to his English contemporaries. Translating the pun is a hit-and-miss process, and the best that can usually be hoped for is the invention of one word-play by way of substitution for another. For example, *dohā* 324 plays the word *hāsī* as meaning ‘smile/laugh’ against the meaning *hā-sī*, ‘like a yes’:

जदपि नाहिं नाहीं नहीं बदन लगी जक जाति ।
तदपि भौह हाँसी भरिनु हाँसीयै ठहराति ॥ ३२४ ॥

Bihārī, ever playful, uses three different spellings of the word for ‘no’, in a way which in translation would be possible only through dialect, or through appropriation of European Community equivalents — ‘*Non! Nein! No!*’. The effect becomes absurd. Slightly more plausible is the punning parallel between the opening words in the second couplet of this translation:

Although her lips reiterate
a constant “No Sir! No!”,
She smiles with rakish eyebrow – ah,
she’s miles from meaning so.

Dohā 463 portrays a rather more advanced romantic situation.

दीप उजरे हूँ पतिहि हरत बसन रति काज ।
रही लपटि छबि की छटनु नैकौ छुटी न लाज ॥ ४६३ ॥

As Bahadur has it:

What one of her companions said to another

When he undressed her
in the lamp’s light
to make love,
he was so dazzled
by her body’s splendour
that his eyes could not see
her nakedness,
and her shame was preserved!

Bihārī's *rati kāja* is semantically redundant, since the husband's motives are clear enough: without being told, we understand that he was not planning to remove his ladylove's clothes in order to send them to the dhobi. Rhyme with *lāja* is the heart of the matter, and here a rhymed translation can be attempted:

Her raiment was removed by husband's hand
Yet modesty maintained its slender life;
For even in the lamp's revealing glow
Her body's lustre clothed this lovely wife.

A very affecting verse of Bihari's is one describing the heroine's bashfulness when close to the man she loves — this is number 705:

कैबाँ आवतु इहि गली रहौ चलाइ चलै न ।
दरसन की साधै रहै सूधे होहिं न नैन ॥ ७०५ ॥

Here Bihārī artfully withholds the syntactic and semantic key to the couplet until the very last moment. The narrative crux, a conflict between the eyes' shyness and their desires, is highlighted by the parallelism of *sādhai* (*sādha* with emphatic suffix *-i*) with *sūdhe*. While the use of 'eye' imagery as synecdoche is by no means unique to Bihārī, it is used by him here with immense subtlety.

Bahadur provides his usual useful paraphrase, well fleshed-out with contextualising information.

What the shy girl told her confidante

My lover often passes
through this lane
but though I long for his sight
I can't see him;
for whenever my yearning glance
speeds on to him
bashfulness gets in the way
and stops it from reaching!

The translation works well initially: 'lane' is a sound choice for *galī*, alliterating nicely with 'lover' and 'long'; 'yearning glance' is effective, if a touch oxymoronic. But the last couplet is a disappointment, for the late introduction of a new subject, 'bashfulness', disturbs the pattern in which the eyes and their longing have predominated. The *idea* of bashfulness lies securely in Bihārī's intended meaning, but making it explicit robs the conceit of its careful focus, just as surely as the final exclamation mark impales the side of subtlety. Likewise, the too-colloquial register of 'gets in the way' is stylistically crude; and the wording 'stops it from reaching' works only in Indian English. A more concise rendering, keeping more or less within the

terms of the original, can therefore be attempted, with an effort to maintain the *dohā*'s alliterative harmonies:

Many a time he walks this way:
but though I try to look at him
my eyes, too prim, will not obey.
My longing's in its prime.

But the prescription of formal conservatism is no panacea. Some couplets are so densely packed with meaning and allusion that they overflow even the quatrain form in translation. Poem 624 describes an agonised parting scene in which the lovers spend the whole day in saying goodbye, or rather in failing to, so that by evening the departing lover has still not left the courtyard.

मिलि चलि चलि मिलि मिलि चलत आँगन अथयौ भानु ।
भयौ मुहूरत भोर कै पौरी प्रथम मिलानु ॥ ६२४ ॥

The minimalist formula of the first quarter defies *poetic* translation, but is quite closely rendered by Holland's economical and literal version:

Departing, embracing, departing — with embracing in the *āṅgan* the sun set,
And the first encampment of the auspicious day became the gate.

Though the 'auspiciousness' is wrongly allocated to the 'day' rather than the 'moment' of departure, Holland's translation sets out the basic terms of the conceit. The wrong attribution of 'auspiciousness' is itself telling, since the allusion has its full significance only within an Indian system of astrology. Bahadur, accordingly, is more explicit:

What one of her companions said to another
The auspicious time
for him to go
was in the morning,
but he could not tear himself
from his beloved,
and he stopped
to bid her farewell
again and again
till the day passed
ere he reached his doorstep!

Here the *muhūrata* idea is restored, but Bahadur's ten-plus-one lines find no room for pathos. The prosaic 'could not tear himself / from his beloved' sacrifices the pathetic vacillation of the lovers as they try unsuccessfully to part: Holland's 'departing, embracing, departing', however clumsy, handles this better.

Perhaps a real act of cultural substitution is required to convey the verse in English. 'Auspiciousness' is a largely alien concept in English, with limited poetic potential. If

the translator's aim is what we might call 'Indological', then the case for treating the 'auspicious' reference on its own terms is a strong one; but if the aim is rather to preserve the fundamental poetry then it can be substituted with phrasing more suggestive of the lovesickness portrayed in the original. My very free version takes the liberty of establishing lover and beloved by their speech, and of personifying the courtyard and the sun, while the early morning is marked in a naturalistic voice rather than a metaphysical one.

“Adieu, adieu!” “Not yet!” —
with heart a-heaving
a dew-dawned courtyard saw the lover leaving.
By then the setting sun announced, “It’s late”;
and first day’s journey ended at the gate.

This version values pathos over ethos. Only partially does it manage to convey Bihari's skilful manipulation of time; for as Holland's literal translation shows, the original gives us the narrative in flashback — the sun has set by the end of line one, and only in the second line do we come to know that a journey is being described here, and that the journey started at dawn. Through this device Bihari makes the reader share the lovers' own experience of the day passing so fast as to be unnoticed. The embellishment of my English version removes it far from its Indian points of reference: not only is the *muhūrt* idea dispensed with, the naturalistic description has made the dawn a dewy one for the sake of the play 'adieu/ a dew', but admittedly this is unlikely in the Indian context where, for maximal agony, tearful partings are supposed to happen at the beginning of the rainy season. Meteorologists will presumably join Indologists in condemning the translation.

These are the kinds of factors that I bear in mind as I struggle with translating the Bihari Satsai. I'll conclude with a few more hostages to fortune, some more couplets from my work-in-progress translations from the *Satsai*, offered here with minimal comment. Borrowing a little authenticity from the doyen of modern commentators Jagannath Das Ratnakar, whose modern Hindi commentary he eponymously styled *Bihārī Ratnākār*, I labour at my translation under the working title '*Bihārī Rūpāntar*'. These are some examples from the 300 or so that I have translated so far. In each case I am trying to preserve some kind of authentic voice, although this may not entail a literal 'faithfulness' to the wording of the original, since faithfulness and authenticity are not the same thing at all. I put a high price on conciseness and structure, which may at times be reflected in terms of end-rhyme and internal rhyme and assonance.

Doha 120 takes issue with the conventional metaphor 'lotus eyes', which at the time of parting cause the desperate beloved's heart to burn with lovesickness:

कहत सबै कबि कमल सैं मो मत नैन पषानु ।
नतरकु कत इन बिय लगत उपजतु बिरह कृसानु ॥ १२० ॥

The poets say, "Soft lilies are her eyes";
My mind a stonier metaphor supplies.
It strikes me that an adamant gaze
alone could kindle lovesick parting's blaze.

Dohā 131 describes a hero who fancies the prospect of *viparīti rati* or 'inverted lovemaking', both of these terms being nice euphemisms for that physical situation in which the missionary position is abandoned in favour of putting the female into the ascendant. For all its raunchiness, the whole of the couplet, with its soft dental and labial sounds, speaks of delicacy and tentativeness.

बिनती रति बिपरीत की करी परसि पिय पाइ ।
हँसि अनबोलैं ही दियौ ऊतरु दियो बताइ ॥ १३१ ॥

Her lover gently touched her foot,
that she might sit astride him;
She smiled, and as she doused the lamp
she silently replied him.

The second line features the homonyms *diyau* 'gave' and *diyo* 'lamp'. The final word, *batāi*, is simultaneously for *butā*- 'to extinguish' (some manuscripts have such a reading) and for 'indicate'; this playful ambiguity suggests an ambivalence in the heroine who, while certainly willing to go along with her lover's request, prefers to do it in the dark and either puts out the light herself or motions for him to do it.

Dohā 296 is a narrative couplet that rests on the stereotypical meanness of the father-in-law (*sasura*). With his eye on domestic economy, he has appointed the dainty-handed or *thurahathī* young bride to the task of family alms-giving (*kana daibau* 'to give grain'); but he overlooked the fact that her daintiness was as charming to the world as it was (potentially) economical to him. Thus the couplet praises her grace while mocking both his miserliness and his failure to perceive true beauty.

कन दैबौ सौँप्यौ ससुर बहू थुरहथी जानि ।
रूप रहचटै लागि लग्यौ माँगन सबु जगु आनि ॥ २९६ ॥

Her tiny hands seemed perfect
for the frugal gift of alms;
But now the world's a-begging
for a chance to see her charms.

Sometimes it's hard to draw a line between the character of a human lover and some kind of divine epiphany. In 424, the heroine awakes to find her lover come and gone, and the door still secured from the inside.

देखों जागती वैसियै साँकर लगी कपाट ।
कित है आवतु जात भजि को जानै किहि बाट ॥ ४२४ ॥

Awake, I find the door still chained:
Who knows then whence he comes, and leaves?
How's this explained?

The commentator's answer to the heroine's question is that she had merely dreamt of her lover's visit. But to spell out this inference so literally is to rob a sublime couplet of its multivalence: the indeterminate quality of the 'he' allows it to be read in a spiritual or devotional context. Line two features no less than three interrogatives: *kita* 'whence/whither', *ko jāne* 'who knows?' *kihi bāṭa* 'by what path?'; this 'where? who? how?' phrasing delightfully suggests the mystified puzzlement of the love-struck heroine (or the bemused devotee, sporadically aware of God's imminence).

Dohā 431 is self-explanatory:

कहै यहै सुश्रुत सुमृति यहै सयानो लोगु ।
तीनि दबावत निसँकही पातकु राजा रोगु ॥ ४३१ ॥

Scripture opines, wise folk agree:
oppressors of the weak are three –
kings, sickness, sins.

Dohā 512 packs three rhetorical questions into a single line:

कहा कुसुम को कौमुदी कितक आरसी ज्योति ।
जाकी उजराई लखैं आँखि ऊजरी होति ॥ ५१२ ॥

Something about this couplet suggests that a more archaic presentation, reminding us of Bihari's alignment with the poets of Elisabethan England, might work here:

What is a flowerre, a moonlit Nighte,
the Brightness of a Glass?
The Lustre of her Loveliness
Doth all these Things surpass.

Another way of stressing the heroine's beauty is to say that it is indistinguishable from things that epitomise these qualities. Even a rose petal is invisible against her skin:

बरन बासु सुकुमारता सब बिधि रही समाइ ।
पँखुरी लगी गुलाब की गाल न जानी जात ॥ ६९४ ॥

Alike in fragrance, hue, and tenderness
the petal of a rose
alights upon her lovely cheek
— and no-one knows.

With a change of mood, doha 551 wryly narrates love's unfaithfulness and underlines the naive simplicity of the cuckolded husband. When he goes away on a journey he unwittingly leaves his household in the care of his wife's lover, the man next door. Biharilal adds a further twist of irony by a cruel juxtaposing of the words *parosi* and *nāha* — neighbour and husband.

चलत देत आभारु सुनि उही परोसिहिं नाह ।
लसी तमाँसे की दगनु हाँसी आँसुनु माँह ॥ ५५१ ॥

A husband, bound for far and distant lands,
to neighbour's tender care entrusts his house;
See how a certain joyous knowing smile
shines through the tears of loving, trusted spouse.

Faithlessness rears its head again in 569, where the heroine caustically tells her lover to go back to the woman whose name he inadvertently takes in his sleep.

मेरें हूँ लागैं गरें लगी जीभ जिहिं नाइ ।
सोई लै उर लाइयै लाल लागियतु पाइ ॥ ५६९ ॥

Take in your arms the one, dear Sir,
whose name is hung upon your tongue
when you confer on me your charms.

Dohā 188 shows us that faithfulness isn't necessarily triangular: not content with two-timing, the lover is a three-timer. This discovery brings his wife a whole cocktail of emotions: she's angry to find him on the town again, but glad to find that even her rival is being cheated on:

बालमु बारैं सौति कै सुनि परनारि बिहारि ।
भो रसु अनरसु रिस रली रीझ खीज इकबार ॥ १८८ ॥

Though billed today for a rival's bed,
he chose to lie with a third instead.
Then angry glee and gladful grieving
gripped his wife at his deceiving.

In dohā 17, similar battle of internal feelings besets the woman who has the chance to go to see her own parents in her parental home, but can hardly bear on the other hand to be aware from her husband. She's put in the position of Duryodhana, who was cursed to die at the moment in which joy and sorrow coincided in his heart.

पिय बिछुरन कौ दुसह दुखु हरखु जात प्यौसार ।
दुरजोधन लौं देखियति तजत प्राण इहि बार ॥ १७ ॥

A visit home! Of course, she's overjoyed,
though leaving *him* implies this joy's alloyed
With parting's grief home's happiness allies,
and thus, just as Duryodhan did, she dies.

Finally, in 580, the heroine is told not to fear the darkness that descends when the moon sets as she goes to the tryst, but to light the way by revealing her own face, which has all the moon's brightness.

छपै छपाकरु छिति छवै तम ससहरि न संभार ।
हंसति हंसति चलि ससिमुखी मुख तैं आँचर टारि ॥ ५८० ॥

The moonlight melts away
and darkness daubs the earth.
Fear not, but smile,
walk on apace,
moving the mantle
from your moon-bright face.

In the long run, this talk has turned out to have very little to do with Surdas. My point, nonetheless, is the need to try to preserve the singularity of literary voices in the family of languages that we call Hindi, and the need, as I see it, to try to translate poetry with some kind of distinctness of poetic voice. Braj Bhasha poetry has an astonishing degree of universality despite its extreme contextual specificity; it has a strongly humanistic tone despite being strongly religious; and it is highly sophisticated despite its rusticity and spontaneity. In short, it deserves to be known and loved. If a poem is vibrant and alive and its translation dead and moribund, then authenticity has died even before we consider the detail of the content. Translation is nearly always a process of failure, but it is also unrivalled as a successful tool of analysis, since it makes us see new things in the text on the table, and hence in ourselves.