

*Raag Darbari* by Shrilal Shukla, trans. Gillian Wright, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992.

Shrilal Shukla's Hindi novel *Raag Darbari* was published to great acclaim in 1968. It has since been translated into some fifteen Indian languages and has been adapted for television, also picking up a Sahitya Akademi award in 1970. The novel's success derives from its no-punches-pulled descriptions of village politics in the 1950s in the Rae Bareilly district of Uttar Pradesh, and from its energetically iconoclastic tone. In a comment reported in the translator's introduction, Shukla himself describes this approach as the antithesis of contemporary Hindi writing on rural life, which 'either emphasized misery and exploitation or presented an idyllic rustic picture'. Shukla's fictional village of Shivpalganj does indeed seem to be on a different planet from the villages of Premchand, Renu and other novelists given to the bucolic ideal; far from idyllic, Shivpalganj is the scene of open machination, denigration, and defecation; it is peopled by a cast of characters headed by Vaidyaji, the Machiavellian don of the village scene, aided and abetted by a motley group including his elder son Badri the Wrestler (who has real balls, as revealed both by the plot and by the inadequate folds of his loincloth) and his nephew Rangnath, a student of Indology whose six-month recuperative home-visit to Shivpalganj marks out the time-scale of the novel.

The introduction to Gillian Wright's very welcome translation of *Raag Darbari* tells us that the novel has its origins in a series of anecdotes themselves based on Shukla's own experiences of U.P. village life, especially those from a period spent in government service in rural areas of the state. The resulting episodic narrative is held together by a satirical tone, sustained very skilfully through descriptions of the antics of a wonderfully varied and often grotesque group of characters. No section of society is safe from Shukla's barbs: an author whose definition of an Indian is 'someone who can track down a paan and a pissing-place wherever he may be' is unlikely to be warned off any sacred cows, far less mere humans. The novel scuds along at a brisk rate of knots, finding humour and folly in every context from the eschatological to the scatological; what keeps the narrative afloat, apart from its headlong pace, is Shukla's eye for linguistic register, whose wide-ranging variety on the one hand gives each character and event an entirely appropriate place in the socio-cultural scheme of things, and on the other sets an almost impossible task for the English translator. Gillian Wright's version, though far from perfect (there are numerous blemishes in the detail of comprehension and translation), has met

this challenge with skill and wit, and has added to the still very short list of modern Hindi works readable in English.

Shukla's writing draws on a linguistic continuum reaching from the prestigiously Sanskritic at one extreme to the earthily vernacular at the other; various points on the continuum comprise such vital idiolects as the college Principal's racy Awadhi, the drunken lisps of the decrepit Jognath, and the occasional brave venture into English (or its local sub-variant) by officials such as the slogan-writers of anti-malaria campaigns. The translator has somehow to transmit something of the flavour of these different voices, since it is through the dialogue more than the narrative itself that the sounds, sights and smells of Shivpalganj reach the reader's senses. Conscious of this fact, Wright rashly substitutes a regional English voice for the Principal's Awadhi: she makes him speak in a B-movie version of northern English, bizarrely mixed with Hindi vocatives: '*Bhaiya*, if tha' goest on like this tha' canst forget Vice Principal. Next year I'll damn well see thee out on the street, with no job!' (p. 23). Aye, and trouble at mill too, no doubt. To be fair, this is the least convincing of Wright's narrative voices and is not typical of the book as a whole; elsewhere, the whippets are kept indoors and she manages a much happier rendering, with a less ambitious but at least safer selection of speech patterns.

Much of the comedy of this novel derives from cultural incongruities of a type familiar everywhere in (especially non-metropolitan) India, these incongruities themselves being expressed through contrasts between various linguistic registers. Thus when Badri the Wrestler reveals himself rather too fundamentally (in the scene referred to above), the Hindi strikes an ironically lofty Sanskritic tone: '*[unke] aṇḍakoṣ brahmāṇḍ mē pradarsit ho rahe the'* , 'his scrotum was displayed for the scrutiny of the universe at large'; the play on *aṇḍakoṣ* and *brahmāṇḍ* is admittedly elusive, but Wright's flat 'testicles... displayed to the world' (p. 239) makes little of the nicely rounded irony. Similarly, Shukla targets the literary pretentiousness of 'fine writing' generally when he describes a villager after a mugging as 'suffering from self-pity [*ātma-dayā* ], acerbity [*ākroś* ] and several other literary characteristics'; but Gillian Wright has inexplicably omitted this line (p. 236). Her blue pencil has also struck through a delightfully unexpected metaphor when Shukla describes college teacher Khanna Master — the very archetype of parochialism — 'suddenly sitting up with knees bent and chest thrust forward in a pose made famous by the late Marilyn Monroe'.

Elsewhere too, in an alarming aspect of Wright's translation technique, the English version compresses or omits whole sections of narrative. Chapter

twenty-nine contains a key passage in which Vaidyaji's authority is challenged by his younger son Ruppen. A strong reaction to such insolence is naturally expected; but Vaidyaji 'did not bellow with the cry of a film hero's father; nor did he issue a statement as would a leader who, hearing that a commission was to investigate accusations of his corruption, insists that a universal definition of "corruption" be agreed before proceedings can continue; nor did he laugh the contemptuous laugh of a writer who, secure in the great wealth which follows the listing of his books on college syllabi, reads a critical review. None of these things did he do when he heard such a strong challenge to his behaviour. He did not even do what came most naturally to a man of his profession: he did not say "*He Ram!*".' Wright's translation cuts this passage down to the single last sentence, emasculating the irony of the whole episode. Other such cuts include nearly two whole pages from the opening of chapter six, and a passage from chapter five which memorably describes the pious toady Sanichar arriving inside Vaidyaji's house 'in a single monkey-like bound which confirmed the Darwinian theory of evolution'. Nowhere are these cuts admitted to or explained (there is no note to suggest that Shukla himself has approved them); some examples remove inter-textual references which would be obscure to the reader without a knowledge of Hindi literature (as on p. 295, where a paragraph alluding ironically to the novelist Jainendra Kumar falls to the cutting-room floor); others may reflect a consciousness that the incessantly ironic tone of the novel, unleavened by the original Hindi's variety of register, can make for heavy reading. Despite the often felicitous touch of Wright's translation, and the usefulness of at last having a readable translation of this important novel, it has to be said that her English version is like Sanichar's underwear in having 'holes in some important places'.

Rupert Snell