

Hootum in Translation

Subhendu Sarkar

Though quite a few sketches dealing with social themes had been written in Bangla since 1821 with the publication of "Babur Upakhyān" in *Samachar Darpan*, Kaliprasanna Sinha (1840-1870)'s collection, *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* (first published in c.1861 as *Hootum Pyanchar Kalikatar Naksha*) remains possibly the best account of nineteenth-century life in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Delineating characters from many walks of urban life, Sinha presented a vivid picture of contemporary Calcutta vibrating with festivals and other forms of public and private entertainment. But the main reason why the *book is still relished by the Bengalis is because it is a veritable sourcebook of the socio-economic life in Calcutta under the rule of the British East India Company and the first years after the Queen's Proclamation (1.11.1858). Of course, Sinha did not spare to attack some of his well-known contemporaries for their lapses in moral conduct but his primary aim was to provide an insight into the social types, both traditional and emerging, in the changing context of the foreign rule and thereby bring about reform (as mentioned in the Introduction to the revised edition of 1862 and reiterated in 1868). What makes the work even more palatable is its use of low-style Bangla—essentially colloquial, urban and idiomatic—steeped in irony. Besides, Sinha's keen observation, penchant for details and occasional poetic expressions make *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* a classic of Bangla literature.

No doubt, interest in colonial and postcolonial studies has resulted in translations of a considerable number of nineteenth-century Bangla works of literature into English. But these translations have been confined largely to the genres of poetry and novel dealing with mythological and/or historical themes, written in a heavily Sanskritized Bangla. Focus of the translators on the writings on contemporary society is conspicuously absent. It is to fill up this gap that Swarup Roy took up the daunting task of translating *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha*.

The principal problem of rendering such a text into English (or for that matter, any other language) is to find out ways of negotiating with its style and expressions. And it must be acknowledged, on the whole, that Roy has done a commendable job. His overall approach has been, as he himself mentions in the Preface, "to achieve equipollence rather than equivalence. I have, therefore, sometimes been a traitor to the 'letter' to be faithful to the 'spirit'." This is also evident in Roy's choice of the title, keeping in mind Hootum's penetrating observations of the ways of life in contemporary Calcutta. Such a procedure, in fact, is the most effective method of translation and has been endorsed by eminent translator-scholars like E V Rieu and George Steiner.

It is natural that a Bangla-knowing person would prefer Sinha in the original but one feels that a non-Bengali-English-knowing reader has not much to lose from Roy's translation. He rightly captures the world of Hootum—replete with irony, humour, colloquialisms, idioms and slang. In case of idioms and slangy terms, Roy prefers equivalent target language (TL) words. Thus there are expressions like 'coughing up money', 'given up the ghost', 'dog-tired', 'slaphappy' and 'junkies'. By splitting otherwise long sentences into short ones,

Roy manages to maintain the tempo of Hootum's style besides making it a convenient reading for the modern readers. It must be noted that readers, both scholarly and general, can enjoy the translation. The translator has provided annotations to historical personages (for example, Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshabchandra Sen, Debendranath Thakur, David Hare), mythological (for example, Surpanakha, Hanuman, Radha, Kartikeya), historical (for example, Regulation VIII of 1819, Suppression of Press Act of 1857, The British Indian Association) and literary (for example, *Vidyasundar*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *Nildarpan*) references and other contemporary local practices like *Shong*, *Kobigan* and *Akh dai songs*. Several culture-specific source language (SL) words, which, according to Roy, are not to be found in the tenth edition of COD, have been explained in the Glossary.

Like any translated text, Roy's is also not entirely flawless. One remains guessing why the past-tense form is chosen in rendering several SL sentences written in the present tense. Besides, there are occasional omissions (for example, the epigraph to the first sketch, "Calcutta's Charak Festival") for which there at least should have been explanations. Notwithstanding such slips, the translation, on the whole, is praiseworthy and, therefore, should enjoy a wide readership. □□□

*THE OBSERVANT OWL.

Hootum's Vignettes of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta, by Kaliprasanna Sinha. Trans. Swarup Roy. New Delhi: Black Kite, 2008. pp. xx + 196. Rs.295.