

When poetry transcends languages

A two-year-long initiative with 51 poets translating each others' work will culminate in a festival celebrating text

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Rarely has German poetry been translated into regional Indian languages such as Mizo, Odia, Kashmiri and Marathi. And fewer are opportunities to experience what comes about after poets from South Asia and Germany translate each others' work. The reinterpretation of their cultural contexts is fascinating to say the least. About two years ago, the Goethe-Institut in the city took on such an initiative and set out to transcend the boundaries of language and culture in poetry.

In October 2014, the German cultural institute initiated the Poets Translating Poets project in collaboration with sister organisations in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. An invitation was extended to 51 poets, including 17 Germans, who spoke over 20 languages. With no particular selection process, the participants' presence was requested through common connections and word of mouth. In the last year-and-a-half, contemporary poetry from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka has been translated into German by well-known poets, and vice versa. The culmination of this project, in the form of a poetry festival, will take place across Mumbai in November.

The exercise has seen poets rediscover their own language and simultaneously



UNIQUE EXCHANGE: (From left) Tom Schultz, Sridala Swami, Vidya Pingle (translator) and Jeet Thayil.
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resonate with poetry from a foreign language. "Usually, translators with a command of the source and native language translate poems while sitting at their desk in solitude," says Dr. Martin Wälde, the director of the Goethe-Institut in Mumbai. "But these translations are a result of an elaborate process of understanding and questioning, involving week-long encounters."

These 51 poets met across nine locations in India, Ban-

gladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Each participant presented three or four of their works: ones they felt could be just as meaningful to the poet translating the text. But what's noteworthy is that none of the South Asian poets knew German, nor did the European counterparts understand the language they were translating from.

The result of the project would have been gobbledygook, if not for the presence of interlinear translators who

played a crucial link between the poets. They provided literal, word-to-word translation of the original texts, while resisting the urge to provide an interpretation of the poem. "They were like much needed mid-wives in the process," says Dr. Wälde. After the requisite linguistic-hermeneutical assistance, the poets took over to translate ideas, traditions and cultures. Over long conversations, the poets packaged the texts to be relevant to their local culture

and understanding.

"What is sure and inevitable about the translation is some kind of loss of poem," says Harish Meenashru, a Gujarati writer and translator, who enjoyed a long career in the banking sector while being well-known as a postmodern poet. "I try to overcome problems by exploring all handy resources to minimise the cultural and linguistic distance as also to arrest the loss in translation." After circumventing the loss in translation, the biggest feat for the poets was to replicate the mood, flow and meaning of the original piece.

"In one culture, certain themes may be considered important," says Lalnunsanga Ralte, popularly known as Sanga Says in Shillong. He worked with German poets Judith Zander and Christian Filips and translated poems into Mizo, while his English poems were translated into German. "It may be considered old fashioned for another. Where one may consider certain images and metaphors as new and contemporary, they may be considered commonplace and trivial for another." As part of discussion with his German counterparts, the north-east Indian poet focused on socio-political situations and the literary scenario in his region. "I think this would have ensured that the essence of my poem is retained," says Sanga.

For Sridala Swami, author of two collections of poetry, *A Reluctant Survivor* (2007) and *Escape Artist* (2014), translation was a completely new ballgame. While working on the pieces of German poets Sylvia Geist and Tom Schulz, Swami found that often, there were idiomatic equivalents in English that worked quite well. "There were several discussions about the choice of a particular phrase and how, or if, it changed the poem," says Swami, who translated poems in English during the project. "I don't think it's possible to ensure that nothing is lost; but if the poem gains something with resonance in another cultural context, perhaps it's a good thing regardless."

Once the translation process was over, the South Asian poets faced the task of trusting their German counterparts with their own work.

"At the outset, I read out an original poem to the translator to give them a taste of phonetics of my language, to let them experience the sound, rhythm and rhymes," recounts Meenashru, who worked with German poets Thomas Kunst and Ulrike Draesner.

These translations can now be accessed on the Poets Translating Poets website. "Germans are highly curious about India and its culture, while in India, regional literature is under treat. This initiative aims to cater to both these causes," says Dr. Wälde.