

Translating the Poetry of Narayan Surve



The two faces of Mumbai. From the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

Narayan Surve (1926-2010) was a Marathi poet from the city of Mumbai. Initially abandoned as a child, he was brought up by a millworker, spending most of his youth drifting between the factories, streets, and mills of an ever-growing city. “I had no home, nor relatives,” he says in his poem माझे विद्यापीठ (‘My University’), “but as much of land as I could walk on, and shop sheds; the municipal footpaths were for free.”

Surve’s poetry had found its way to a burgeoning worker’s movement long before it found literary prominence in the fifties and sixties. When it did, however, it shook the Marathi literary middle class to its core. Surve’s radicalism, unsettling imagery and unending compassion for the downtrodden created a space in the canon that would ultimately be filled by Dalit poetry.

Here, I will translate six poems from Surve’s debut collection माझे विद्यापीठ (‘My University’). I have selected the poems to be representative of Surve’s poetic range—these poems span love, loss, existentialism and urbanity, while demonstrating the poet’s unmatched (and unnerving) image-making talents. These poems are:

- Mumbai (मुंबई)
- Truth (सत्य)
- It’s Getting Harder (कठीण होत आहे)
- Solace (धीर)
- Songs (गाणे –)
- This Allotted Life (बेतून दिलेले आयुष्य –)

My translational approach to Surve draws from a variety of theorists. From the outset, I knew that preserving Surve's politics would be a central concern. Here, I drew from Spivak's 'The Politics of Translation', which counsels never blunting, misrepresenting or homogenizing the politics of the author. I use *solidarity*, not *togetherness*, in my translations, a conscious choice that other translators have eschewed.

It is not just that Surve's politics are innovative—they are reified in his poetry in a peculiar way. His poetry combines the vernaculars of low-brow Marathi 'street talk' with high-brow 'poetic' language. At times (such as in *Mumbai*) he sharply contrasts these 'talks' to mirror the division of capital and labor, while at other times he uses them fluidly and interchangeably. Translating this rich texture into English is a difficult task. Here, I was guided by Riffaterre's 'Transposing Presuppositions'. Where I can (particularly in *Mumbai*) I try to translate this vernacular on a lexical level, but in other places I 'transpose presuppositions' by attempting to use the syntactical level (sentence length) to accomplish the same effect.

My overarching theory of translation was of, as Schleiermacher puts it, the only appropriate way to translate—bringing the reader to the writer. I wanted the translations to feel foreign yet familiar: to impress upon the reader the breath of fresh air that Surve was even to his native Marathi audience. As such, I do not translate images (see the 'stuffed cow' in *It's Getting Harder*), or provide footnotes unless absolutely necessary to understanding the narrative of the poem. A critic might argue that this approach leads to clunky, un-English, schoolboyish translations. But I feel assured that, in making a series of conscious choices, I have adopted an "attitude towards language that is not trivial,"¹ and have done my utmost to create an "alien likeness" for the reader.

This reader-to-writer choice is not merely an aesthetic one. Particularly where postcolonial texts like Surve's collections are concerned, the reader-to-writer choice (which Venuti calls the 'foreignization' strategy) takes on an ideological dimension. Venuti argues that 'foreignization,' by rejecting the dominant 'domestication' strategy, "could become a strategic intervention that would challenge the hegemony of English."² Although I do not necessarily think foreignization can challenge hegemony, it can certainly shake the notion of *one* 'English', displacing it in favor of *many* 'Englishes'. This is a political function I hope my translations perform—broadening the scope of English 'poetic' language via their foreignness-yet-familiarity.

I hope you enjoy these translations. I was moved, in part, to translate Surve by my experience of watching the documentary [Saacha](#) (The Loom) at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale of 2018. The film remains an invaluable snapshot of the cultural world of Mumbai's mills, and I thank Anjali

¹ Schleiermacher, 46.

² Quoted in Bassnett, 48.

Monteiro and KP Jayasankar for bringing it into being.³ I'd also like to thank my aunt Anjali Patwardhan and my friend Tanisha Tekriwal for their comments on these translations.

मुंबई

पटकूर खांद्यावर टाकून, सहयाद्री घाट उतरून
माझा बाप तुझ्या दारावर उभा राहिला श्रम घेऊन

केव्हा येई केव्हा निघून जाई, ठाऊक जन्मदात्रीला
पोक आलेल्या म्हाताऱ्या घरात एका रात्री माझा जन्म झाला

पगाराच्या दिवशी पिसाट होऊन आदळत घुसायचा घरात
आई भीतीने अंग चोरून उभी राहयची बिचारी कोपऱ्यात

मला जवळ घेई, उंच झोकी, झिंजोट्या पिंजारून हसे
केव्हा तरी माझ्याही गालावर पाच बोटांचे उमटत ठसे
आम्हांवर भारी लोभ; एक दिवसही केला नाही खाडा
हे नगरी ! तुझ्या सेवेत चुकला नाही तिसाचा पाढा.

कळू आले तेव्हापासून डबा घेऊन साच्यावर गेलो
घडवतो लोहार हातोड्या तसाच घडवला गेलो

शिकलो तार कशी लावावी बाबीण कशी भरावी धोट्यात
वेळ आलीच तर हक्कासाठी केव्हा करावी आऱ्या खात्यात

इथेच; या सागरतीरी झुंजतच त्यानेही देह ठेवला
त्याच्याच साच्यावर दमेकरी मुकादमाने मला नेमला.

उनाड पोराने कलंडावी दौत तसा हा निळा सागर
आठवून तेव्हाच्या स्मृती माझ्यातील ढसढसतो पोर
तुकतुकीत काळ्या पोटरीचे स्नायू उतरीत होते माल
फळीवर पडणाऱ्या पावलांचा पाण्यातच ऐकत होतो ताल

ऐकून अजान; फणसासारखे अंगावर फुटत काटे
भीति वाटे मुळलाची, फकीराची, पळे आठवुन घरचे रपाटे

³ In the same vein, I am indebted to TISS' [Giran Mumbai](#) project, which has collected recordings of Surve reading his own poems.

तोच मी, तेच आम्ही, ह्या तुझ्या वास्तुशिल्पाचे शिल्पकार
तुझ्या सौंदर्यात हे नगरी ! दिसोदीस घालीत असतो भर

नरकासम चाळीत राहूनच स्वच्छ करतो तुझे रस्ते
उठवले जातो कधी, दंडुकेवाळले जसे उठवतात फिरस्ते

पुन्हा उचलतो संसार थाटतो दुजा बाजूच्या खाचरात
जगत आहोत ह्या संस्कृतीच्या सडत आलेल्या वारशात

असे आम्ही लक्षावधी नारीनर दिवस असेतो वावरतो
राबता, खपता आयुष्य मेणबतीसम विझवुन घेतो.

हिंडतो तुझ्या हाटांतून, गल्लीतून चौकाचौकांतून
नागरिक म्हणून, संसारी बनून, कधी बेकार गणून

ह्या वाटा प्रकाश माळून चंद्रास्तापर्यंत मांडतात उत्सव
दुतर्फी ह्यांच्या काठांवर उभे तुझ्या दोन्ही जगांचे वैभव

हे चालले माणसांचे जथे; कोणीकडून कोणीकडे?
मीही त्यांतील एक मुशाफीर; वाट कोणीकडून कोणीकडे?

दोनच ठाऊक वाटा; त्यांतील एक कारखान्याची वाट
दुजी, 'आवळा रे तिरडी! म्हणा उडाला पंछी अनंतात!'

ह्या क्षणी मनाच्या धर्मशाळेत जमलेत सोबतीचे प्रवाशी
लिही आम्हांवर म्हणत रांग लावून उभे हृदयाच्या दाराशी

मित्रहो ! तुम्हीच मुंबईच्या घडणीतील अमृतअक्षर
माझ्यावर, ह्या शहरावर तुमचेच हरघडी संस्कार

कसे तुम्ही; काय वर्णू थोरवी ! तुम्ही पोलाद, तुम्ही अलवार
फुले टपकन पडताच; जखमा होतात हृदयावर

ही माणसे एकळलेपणात सोबत करून धीर देतात
जसे तुझ्या किनाऱ्यावरचे दिवे ताऱ्यांसोबत मिणमिणतात.

सणासुदीत फिरवतो मुलांना खांद्यावर गर्दीच्या सोहळ्यात
ताटव्यांनी फुलतो राजपथ माझीही कृष्णफुले खिदळतात

उडवीत फुगे नकळत येऊन फिरे माझेही बालपण

पुढे पिता चाले... आई मागून धावे ठेचाळत गर्दीतून

गालांतच हसतो मी; तितक्यातच मुले सवाल करतात
'बाबा – ह्या दगडाच्या भिंती पोलीस इथे पहारे का हो देतात?'

ऐकून सवाल पेटतो मी, छातीवर कोसळती सहस्र घण
गळा भरून येतो. वाटते आताच अणूसम फुटेल प्राण

सावध चालती पाय; जसे वाघुट आठवून चालावेत भोई
मुका होतो मी, सांभाळून आणतो घरी माझ्या आयुष्याची कमाई

त्या रात्री पापण्या मिटत नाहीत. काळोख कोरीत जीव जळत राहतो
चुलाण्यात फटफटावे लाकूड तसा आत्मा चरफडू लागतो.

झिजला चंदनासम बाप; मीही तसाच, अन् हे माझे कळे?
अशाच त्यांनाही उदास रात्री, सोबतीस काळोखाचे गार वेढोळे
ओसंडु पहातो आहे हृदयघट; सांग कुठे करू रिता
घडवून गेला माझा बाप तुजसम स्फूर्तिशाली कविता.

Mumbai

My father came down the Sahyadris, a quilt over his shoulder
And stood at your doorstep with nothing but his labor.

Only my mother knew when he came and went
From the decrepit, hunchbacked shack where I was born one night.

On pay-day he'd storm the house in a drunken frenzy.
My mother would huddle in a corner, cowering with fear.

He'd pull me near, swing me high, and laugh as he ruffled my hair
On occasion, my cheeks would burn with the mark of his five fingers.

He loved us, but could never stop working for a single day.
O City! In your service, he never forgot that thirty shifts means pay.

Since I can remember, I carried a lunchbox to the mill.
I was cast in the way
a blacksmith molds a hammer.

I learned to lay wires, to pass a thread through a *dhoti*
And when the time came, I learned to go on strike for my rights.

Here, by the sea, my father died,
Struggling to his last breath.
I was hired to his old loom by a wheezing foreman.

The blue sea is like an inkpot
Knocked over by a naughty child
The one in me cries as I think of those old memories.

At the dock, I'd hear the rhythm of foot-falls in the water
Where dark, muscled legs unloaded the goods.
I'd get gooseflesh hearing the muezzin's *azaan*,
Run from *fakirs* and *maulvis*, thinking of beatings back home.

It is me, it is us, builders of your grand edifice,
Who add to your beauty day after day, O City!

We, who live in hell-like slums and clean up your streets
Awoken by baton-twirling cops as they kick out the poor

I pack up my world, set it up again on the other side of the pond,
Living, always living, in this society's rotting inheritance!

This is what us millions do till the day is done—
Laboring and lessening as life's candle snuffs out.

I wander through your streets, your alleys and your roundabouts
As a citizen, as a human, sometimes as unemployed

On this road, garlands of streetlamps announce celebrations till moonset
And on either side stands the wealth of your two worlds.

Here go the throngs of people—from where, and to where?
I'm a traveller among them—from where does my road go, and to where?

I only know of two roads. One, the road to the factory,
and the second: 'Pick up his coffin! This bird has flown to the heavens!'

In this moment my fellow travelers have assembled under the roof of my mind.
'Write about us!' they say, standing at the door to my heart

Friends! You are the immortal inscription on Mumbai's making.
In every moment, you leave your mark on me and this city.

How can I describe you, you noble folk? You are steel, you are tender—
Flowers drop softly; wounding my heart.

In their desolation these people support each other in solidarity
The way the lights on your shore intertwine with the stars.

At festival-time I carry my children on my shoulders through the crowd
The streets swell with blooms, and my own four flowers giggle

As I fly balloons, my own childhood comes wandering back to me.
My father would walk ahead, my mother would stumble through the crowd behind

I laugh to myself; and in that moment my children ask a question:
'Baba—why do the police make their rounds at these stone walls?'

Scalded by this question, a thousand hammers fall on my chest
I feel a lump in my throat, my mind splitting like an atom

My feet tread gingerly; like a fisherman who's seen a tiger.
I find myself mute. Carefully bringing home my life's earnings.

Tonight I can't close my eyes. In this dark wasteland my spirit burns
and my soul fumes like a crackling stove.

My father wore out like sandalwood; so did I, are these to be my conclusions?
On a sad night like this one, with only the cold winds for company.
I watch my heart's vessel overflow; tell me, where should I empty it?
My father departed, having constructed a poem worthy of you.

सत्य

तुझे गरम ओठ : ओठावर टेकलेस तेव्हा,
तेव्हाही रात्र अशीच होती; घुमी.
पलिकडे खडखडणारे कारखाने
खोल्याखोल्यांतून अंधरले बिछाने
मुल्लाचा अखेरचा अल्लासाठी गजर
काटे ओलांडीत चालले प्रहर
भावंडांसह कोनाडा जवळ केला आईने
धुमसत, बिछान्यासह फुटपाथ गाठली बापाने.

तुझे गरम ओठ : खडीसाखर होत गेले तेव्हा
तेव्हाही रात्र अशीच होती ओढाळ.
खपत होतो घरासाठीच...
विसावत होतो शीण तुझ्या काठावर

तुझ्या खांद्यावर—
तटतटलीस उरी पोटी
तनु मोहरली गोमटी
एक कौतुक धडपडत आले; घरभरले.
हादरली चाळ टाळांनी, खेळेवाल्यांनी.
वाकलीस खणानारळांनी.

तुझे गरम ओठ : अधिकच पेटत गेले तेव्हा,
तेव्हाही अशीच एक रात्र आली नकार घेऊन
पंखांखाली बसलीस चार पिले ठेवून
कोनाडा हळहळला — कळवळला.

‘नारायणा’ — गदगदला.
‘शिंक्यावरची भाकर घे’ — पुटपुटला.
‘उद्यापासून तिलाही काम बघ बाबा.’
गांगरलो, भोवंडून स्थीर झालो.
तिच्या ओठावर ओठ टेकवून
बिछान्यासह बाहेर पडलो. त्या रात्री,
तिचे ओठ अधिकच रसाळ वाटले. अधिकच...

Truth

The night when your
Warm lips rested on mine
Was much like this one: shrouded.
Across the road, rattling factories
Crumpled bedding in every quarter
The muezzin’s last call to Allah
Hands, crossing hour after hour
Mother pulled her children into the corner as
Father sullenly took his bedding to the pavement.

The night when your
Warm lips dissolved into sugar cubes
Was much like this one: compelling.
I longed for a home.
Resting, exhausted, on your banks,
On your shoulder—
You, abdomen stretched,
Body blooming brilliantly.

A joy thundered in; filling the house.
The structure shook with bells and song.
You bent under loads of coconut and cloth.⁴

The night when your
Warm lips blazed dangerously
Then too a night much like this came, carrying negation
You sat, four whelps under your wings.
The corner groaned – anguished:

'Narayana'--it uttered.
'Take the loaf from the countertop'--it muttered.
'Tomorrow, look for a job for her too, boy.'
I felt dizzy, faint, then still.
Rested my lips on hers and
Stumbled out with my bedding. That night
Her lips felt fuller than ever. Than ever . . .

कठीण होत आहे

दररोज स्वतःला धीर देत जगणे; कठीण होत आहे
किती आवरावे आपणच आपणाला; कठीण होत आहे
भोकांड पसरणाऱ्या मनास थोपटीत झोपवून येतो
भुसा भरलेले भोत दिसूनही; थांबणे; कठीण आहे.
तडजोडीत जगावे. जगतो : दररोज कठीण होत आहे
आपले अस्तित्व असूनही नाकारणे; कठीण होत आहे
समजून समजावतो, समजावूनही नच मानलो
कोठारात काडी न पडेल, हमी देणे; कठीण होत आहे.

It's Getting Harder

To offer solace to oneself everyday
Is getting harder
How much can I help myself? Everyday,
It's getting harder
I caress to sleep this mind
That's been reduced to tears

⁴ Coconuts and cloth are traditional presents to brides and new mothers.

Having seeing the stuffed calf⁵,
To stop is getting harder.

One must live in compromise.
I do, yet everyday it's getting harder
To know of one's existence and to still reject it
Everyday is getting harder
I know this, I tell myself this, but even then I don't believe—
Guaranteeing a match won't go off in this ammunition dump
Is getting harder.

धीर

थांब ! पहाट झाली नाही
दिवे मालवून कसे चालेल?
तू थकला असशील तर
माझी देहवात पेटवून ठेव
धूसर धुक्यातील जगात
हातांत हात घेतले आपण
तू म्हणालास गोंधळेन तेव्हा,
तुझा हात हृदयावर ठेव !

असा समीप ये, आणि —
सगळे, सगळे सांगून टाक माझ्या हृदयाजवळ केसांची
झुलपे झुलवीत ठेव
बुडत्या गलबतासम
हतबल; उदासू नकोस,
किनाऱ्यावर उतरतात ओझी
तसा शीण उतरून ठेव !
असेच एकमेकां सावरीत
जगायचे आहे जगात
जेव्हा मी तडफडेन; माझा आत्मा तुझ्या कुडीत ठेव!

Solace

⁵ If a calf dies at birth, the milching cow often dries up. To keep her milching, the hide of the dead calf is stuffed and held in the cow's sight.

Wait!

It's not dawn yet

How can we afford to put out the lamps?

If you are tired

Light the wick of my body

In this smoke-colored, foggy world

We stood hand in hand

And you said 'when I stumble,

put your hand on my heart!'

Come closer, and—

Tell me, tell me everything

Tell it to that heart where

the locks of your hair dangle.

We are powerless, like a sinking ship,

But don't let it get you down—

Unload your weariness onto me

The way porters unload onto the shore!

This is how we must live in the world,

Supporting one another

And when I'm tossing in my torment

Hold my soul within your body!

गाणे –

— छानसे घरकूल नांदते गुलमोहोराखाली
केवळ काकणे किणकिणली असती.
रोजच आला असता चंद्र खिडकीत
नक्षत्रापलीकडची एक दुनिया असती.

भरल्या पोटाने अगा पाहतो जर चंद्र
आम्हीही कुणाची याद केली असती.

Songs –

—A charming house stands under the *gulmohar* tree.
Only bangles could ever tremble there
Every night the moon would've stood in the window, and
There'd have been a world beyond constellations

Had I looked at the moon on a full stomach—
Perhaps I'd have reminisced about someone too.

बेतून दिलेले आयुष्य —

बेतून दिलेले आयुष्य; जन्मलो तेव्हा —
प्रकाशही तसाच बेतलेला
बेतलेळेच बोलणे बोललो. कुरकुरत
बेतलेल्याच रस्त्याने चाललो; परतलो
बेतल्या खोलीत; बेतलेलेच जगलो
म्हणतात ! बेतलेल्याच रस्त्याने गेलात तर
स्वर्ग मिळेल. बेतलेल्याच चार खांबांत
थू

This Allotted Life

This life was allotted to me; when I was born—
Even the light was allotted.
I only spoke the allotted words. Grumbling,
I only walked the allotted roads; returning
To my allotted room; where I lived only my allotted amount
They say! If you follow your allotted path
You'll find heaven. Within these allotted four pillars,

Pfft!
