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Essay by Mira Desai

Why I Translate

The same genes that pushed my grandfather to seek an education for his sons survive in a new avatar. He, a British-era licensed medical practitioner, grasped at learning as a means of finding a better life outside the village. I, city-bred and privileged, meandered through hobbies until I surprised myself with a commitment to writing—and found my outlet in an unexpected place.

I come from a family of readers, not writers. My late father, an out-and-out numbers man, was so fond of reading that even in his eighties, he peered at blurred and hazy text past his thick glasses and magnifying lens, slanting the page just so for sunshine to brighten it. He attempted to write his memoirs, but aiming for perfection in his first draft, he was unwilling to let the words rip free, to be pared and sharpened later.

He showed me a page or two. The word picture of a lad running with the rim of a cycle, mimicking the roar of a bus, has stayed with me. These unwritten stories—tales of three village boys on rented ramshackle bicycles, singing as they rode to a riverside farm for a picnic with peanuts and stolen mangoes—remain only as faint memories.



In the school I went to, being literary meant being asked to write on fancy, marbled paper that would be placed with much reverence on the notice board. I was never asked. I realize now that those classmates were children of prominent school benefactors, but I didn't connect the dots back then.

Writing in college meant scribbling chemical formulae on the wall in a desperate effort to remember the arcane. Four years of pharmacy school went by in a blur, and the text that I remember now seems like squiggles from Indus Valley script.

A decade went by. In 2003, I found myself grounded, one foot swathed in plaster after a fall. Somewhere during those hours of post-TV tedium, listening to the neighborhood maids bickering and the background traffic, I had my “Eureka!” moment: I could translate.

I could take fine work from a master writing in a lesser-known language, and clothe the words in a language the world would understand. Yes, I could: from my own language, Gujarati—one of the many Indian languages—into English. As a student who'd schooled in English, my exposure to Gujarati spanned three years of “The horse jumped over the wall” variety. But it could be done.

The first few stories, translated from back issues of a literary magazine, taught me the craft. I'd write in longhand, my handwriting sloping upwards as I covered reams of paper. I'd write and rewrite, draft after draft, until the story was polished and, to my mind, near perfection. Then I'd type it out—and repeat with a fresh story.

When I revisit this work now, some of it seems unfinished, with lines and phrases that could use tweaking. I can spot

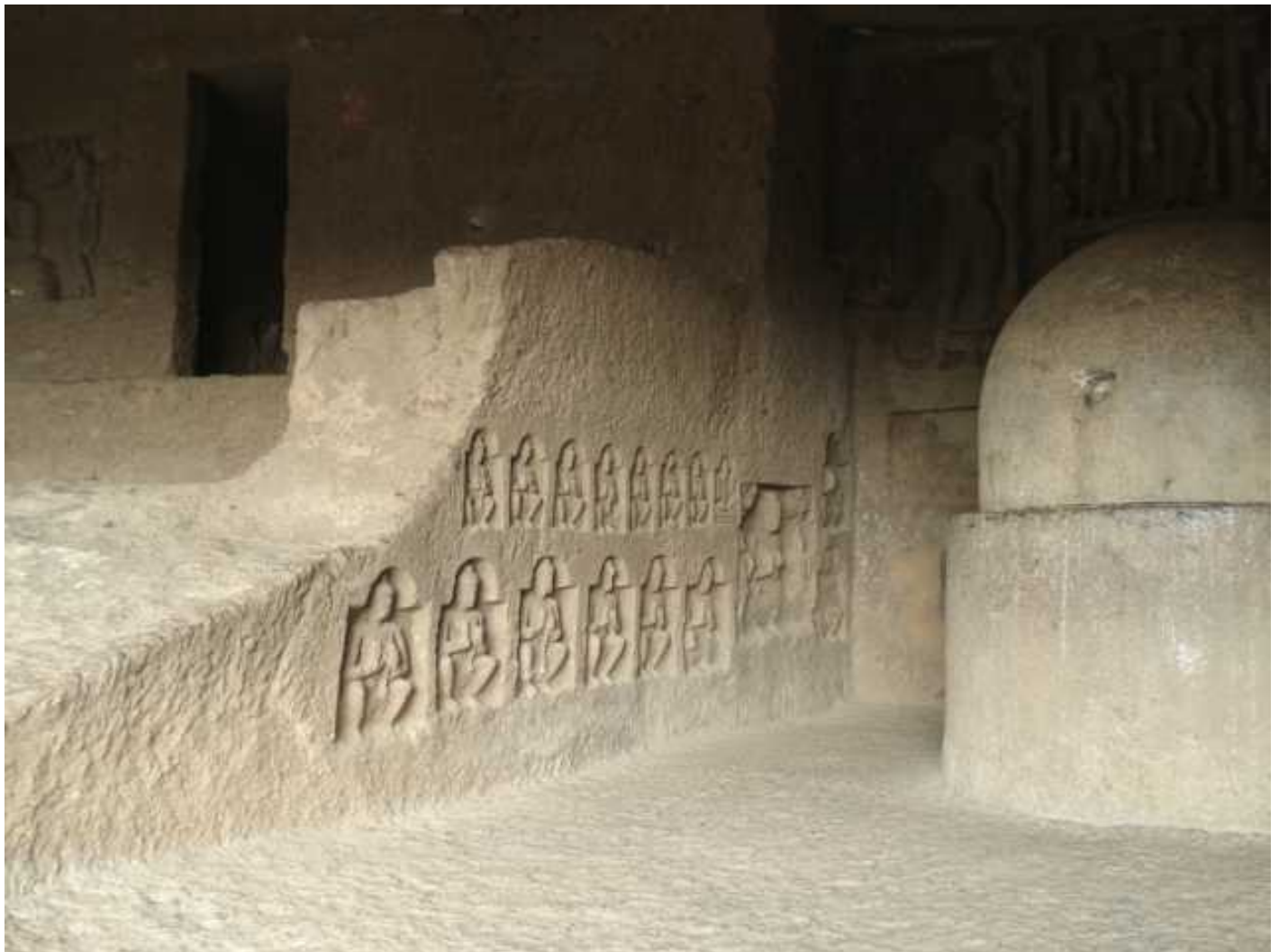
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sections where my own interpretation colored the author's words. Papa, my "instant dictionary," had roared with laughter at some of the foibles. Because I was city-bred, the dialect of the villages was at times a mystery. He'd patiently listen through each corrected version and sometimes call to suggest a new word in the middle of my workday. Yes, there were many versions, but I did not give up.

I spent three years after the stories were translated collecting lists of publishers, sending out queries and sample chapters in twine-wrapped packages, and wondering with increasing despondency why no one replied. I lacked the knowledge that magazines are more accepting of experimental work and unfamiliar authors, and when I finally did realize this, it became my holy grail.

The first inkling that I was on the right track arrived from rather lofty quarters: a submission to *Indian Literature*, the publication of India's National Academy of Letters—and an acceptance! Then, a tremulous submission to the translation magazine *Calque*—I recall gaping at the source languages represented—and a quick response, with three pieces accepted. I had hit pay dirt, figuratively speaking, since most of this earned no fee. In due course, more acceptances trickled in.



Translating is an exacting craft—balancing words in two languages, doing justice to both. Tempo, pace, and line structure are very different across the languages, as are social mores, nuances of meaning, assumptions of behavior that have cultural moorings, and sometimes unstated back stories that draw upon local texts.

With every acceptance, I find a new respect for my craft. But a deep self-doubt—partly cultural, partly upbringing, partly nature—is very much a part of my mental makeup. Each time I submit work to a new publication, I need to remind

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myself that this is good work in the original and that I've worked hard on the translation. I remember those three years of school-level Gujarati, think of the well-respected magazines that have already published my work, and get on with it.

Over time, I've learned to politely remind an editor that a response is due or to disagree with a correction. My temerity is the first sign of a mindset change: a slowly increasing confidence, a realization that my words are fine, just different from the original since they draw upon a different social subtext.

I scroll down the Excel file I've titled "Sublist," a documentation of cussed persistence, with rare acceptances marked in a cheery fluorescent blue. With every accepted submission that I highlight, I salute the grandparent. His spirit survives.

Art Information

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Mira Desai lives, writes, and works in Mumbai, India. Her translations of Gujarati stories have been featured in *Indian Literature*, *Calque*, *91st Meridian*, *Words Without Borders*, and the *Massachusetts Review*. She also writes short fiction and creative nonfiction. She's a member of the Internet Writing Workshop and works a day job in pharmaceuticals.

Photo of Mira Desai by Ashesh and Sejal Jani.

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