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## BOOKS

### RIVER OF WORDS AT KCC INCLUDED A CONVERSATION ON ALL THINGS TRANSLATION WITH BOOKER-WINNER DEEPA BHASTHI, BEYOND THE WORLD OF HEART LAMP

The Kolkata Centre for Creativity's day-long River of Words festival, organised by the Antonym Council of Global Arts and Literature (ACGAL) in collaboration with the Institute of Language Studies and Research (ILSR), brought together writers, translators and scholars on November 30 for a series of conversations on language, literature and the politics of storytelling. One of the most anticipated sessions of the day featured writer and translator Deepa Bhasti in conversation with Chaiti Mitra, wherein questions of multilingualism, translation, cultural memory, and English itself took centre stage through a discussion anchored by Bhasti's English translation of Kannada writer Banu Mushtaq's short stories, *Heart Lamp*.

Bhasti began by tracing her relationship with books back to a childhood spent in the mountains, where reading was not a cultivated habit so much as a necessity. "There was absolutely nothing to do except read books," she said, recalling a home stacked with Soviet-era publications, inherited from a grandfather who had fought for India's independence before becoming a communist leader. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Pushkin filled her shelves long before she understood that what she was reading were translations at all. "It took me a very long time to realise that all the books I read back then were in translation," she said. "What I wanted was not so much the story as to be amidst words, amidst language."

That early immersion, she suggested, made translation feel less like a separate discipline and more like a natural extension of writing. "I don't see translation as a different category," Bhasti said. "It is still working with language. Translation for me is just one of the ways in which I choose to express myself." Growing up multilingual in Karnataka — where she pointed out, hearing 10 languages in a town of 40,000 is unremarkable — meant constant, instinctive acts of translation. Quoting Jhumpa Lahiri, she noted, "We are all born translators."

A turning point in her practice came with her translation of Kodagama Gowramma, one of the earliest feminist voices in Kannada, whose work Bhasti encountered during the writer's birth centenary. Translating Gowramma, who died tragically at 27, also marked a personal return to Kannada. Having been educated in English-medium institutions, Bhasti described a growing sense of loss as Kannada became "a very functional language". Translation, she said, reversed that estrangement. "I began to remember words I had not spoken for decades... It felt like going back



Deepa Bhasti in conversation with Chaiti Mitra at KCC on November 30

home to Kannada."

That sense of home — and of linguistic intimacy — shaped *Heart Lamp*, a carefully curated selection of 12 stories by Banu Mushtaq drawn from six Kannada collections. Bhasti spoke about choosing stories across age groups and stages of womanhood, resisting repetition in favour of range. "It was a very conscious decision to choose from across various stages of womanhood," she said. Although Mushtaq offered suggestions, Bhasti had a largely free hand, excluding stories that relied too heavily on local folk knowledge. "Without knowing the original folk story, it would just read as a mediocre story," she explained, stressing that the decision had nothing to do with catering to Western readers.

Translating Mushtaq, whose cultural and religious milieu differs significantly from Bhasti's own, required sustained immersion rather than superficial research.

Bhasti described reading widely, from literary texts to popular romance, listening to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Ali Sethi, and binge-watching Pakistani television dramas. "I like to call it research and work," she laughed.

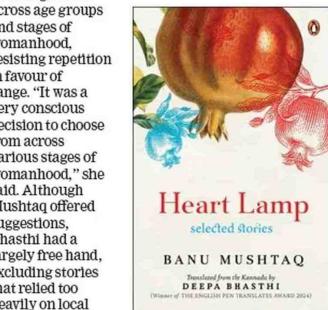
These everyday narratives, she argued, offered access to social worlds largely absent from Indian English fiction. "Our popular culture is usually upper-caste, upper-middle-class, urbanised," she said. "We don't have access to these particularly significant experiences."

Much of the discussion centred on the politics of English and editorial control. Bhasti spoke about resisting "proper English" in favour of what she called translating "with an accent". Words like *ante* in Kannada — flexible, tonal, resistant to neat equivalence — were deliberately allowed to unsettle English syntax. "Language is not meant to behave," she said. This approach found rare support in her

UK editor at And Other Stories, Tara Tobler. "She was willing to be educated," Bhasti said, crediting their year-long editorial dialogue with helping her articulate choices she had previously made instinctively.

Her resistance extended to refusing italics and glossaries for Indian words. "Why would you deprive the reader of the challenge of finding out?" she asked. Recalling her own first encounter with terms like *jollo* rice in African literature, she argued that not knowing everything immediately does not diminish reading pleasure. "It's like listening to music — you don't need to know the technicalities to enjoy it." Translating *Anmit Jaan* simply as "mother", she said, would erase emotional texture. "You can translate *Anmit* as mother, but what do you do with *Jaan*?"

Bhasti was equally unsparing about structural inequities within publishing, from the historical invisibility of translators to a North Indian dominance that flattens linguistic diversity. "Why would I write *palu* when in Kannada it is *sravu*?" she asked, pointing out how even pan-Indian translations often default to Hindi terms. She recounted an almost surreal editorial dispute over translating "four-five days".



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"The editor was worried a reader might think it meant 45 days," she said dryly. "I still have nothing to say to that."

The same resistance was meted out to defining "hot-hot samosas" as simply "hot samosas". "Indians never eat hot samosas. We always eat 'hot-hot samosas'. That's just who we are, as people," Bhasti smiled.

The conversation also touched on ambition, prizes and the pressures facing young writers. Bhasti recalled a student who aspired to become the youngest winner of the Booker Prize. "Nothing good has ever come out of a creative act aimed only at winning a prize," she said, careful to frame her critique not as gatekeeping but as a reminder of the rigour creative work demands.

The session ended with the conviction that the most exciting literature in India today is emerging through translation. As English continues to be decolonised, slowly and unevenly, across curricula and classrooms, Bhasti argued for texts that carry the rhythms, relationships and temporalities of Indian languages into English without apology. "Time is not linear in our stories," she said. "That flexibility is something we must retain."

*Subhalakshmi Dey*