

On the Threshold of Social Changes.
The Translation into Sanskrit of *Choma's Drum*
by K. Shivaram Karanth

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Abstract

Kota Shivaram Karanth (1902–1997) was one of the most significant and influential novelists, playwrights and conservationists of 20th century Karnataka. Inspired in his early life by the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, he took part in the Indian Independence Movement and became an activist in many fields. During the most significant stage of his career, the need for major changes in society arose amongst Indian intelligentsia. Although Karanth belonged to an orthodox Brahmin community, he openly stood up against the rigidity of Brahmanism and many traditional practices. He therefore devoted a significant part of his literary output to mirroring the tragic conditions of the lowest strata of Indian society. Karanth often emphasised the injustice of the caste system and the necessity of changing the attitude towards Dalits. The paper focuses on one of his best-known novels, whose original title is *Comana duḍi*. It was first published in 1933. The novel tells the tragic story of an untouchable bonded-labourer, who struggles with many difficulties due to his social status. It not only emphasises the urge for changes in Indian society, but also openly criticises the Brahmins, and the conviction of their superior position in society. The novel was recently (2017) translated into Sanskrit. Therefore, the language which used to be reserved for the elites of Indian society and used to maintain the traditional social hierarchy is now employed to criticise them. This fact shows that the social changes are still outgoing, puts Sanskrit in the new role of a medium of reform and raises question about its position in modern Indian society.

Keywords: modern Sanskrit, translation into Sanskrit, Dalit literature, Shivaram Karanth, Kannada literature, *Choma's Drum*.

1. Introduction

Comana duḍi is one of the most classic novels in Kannada literature. It was written by Kota Shivaram Karanth and published in 1933. It was translated into Hindi and English in 1978. The film based on this novel (with a script written by Shivaram Karanth himself) was released in 1975. And yet, in 2017, a translation into Sanskrit by Anantha Padmanabha Shastry called *Comasya dhakka* was published by Manipal University Press. One may and should ask why? Both Hindi and English are more frequently spoken languages than Sanskrit. The latter, according to the 2001 census was spoken (as a mother tongue as well as a second or third language) by 0.49% percent of the Indian population. On the contrary, English and Hindi are the two official languages of the Government of India. Therefore, translating *Choma's drum* into Sanskrit to spread it further seems pointless. However, this difficult task was undertaken and completed. Hence there must have been another reason behind this enterprise. Perhaps the aim of this publication was something other than simply translating words from one language into another.

While discussing the translation of *Choma's drum* into Sanskrit, it is important to mention the author of this novel. Shivaram Karanth was a true revolutionist and activist. He showed by his own example that even people from the most rigid and orthodox communities can be progressive and open to change.

2. Kota Shivaram Karanth

Kota Shivaram Karanth is unquestionably one of the most important and influential figures in the contemporary history of Karnataka. He is frequently called *Kadala tirada Bhargava*, which means 'the Paraśurāma of the seashore'¹. The west coast of the Indian subcontinent is believed to be the creation of Paraśurāma, who threw his battle axe into the sea². Moreover, Shivaram Karanth also shaped the modern Karnataka in many ways³. Karanth was not only a novelist but a true

1. Ramacandran 2001, 2.

2. According to the version of this story from the *Mahābhārata*, the land created by Paraśurāma was the Konkan coast. The Udupi district – Karanth's homeland – belongs to this region. However, in some later texts, Kerala is claimed to be the land raised from the sea by Paraśurāma. For more information about this legend and its various versions presented in different textual sources, see Vielle 2014.

3. One would say that there is also another reason to compare Karanth with Paraśurāma. They were both Brahmins, and both did not act according to the norms for this social class.

polymath. He was also a poet, playwright, social activist, thinker, journalist, musician, and a Yakshagana⁴ artist. In total, he published an awe-inspiring number of 417 books, including 47 novels, 31 plays, 9 encyclopaedias, 13 books on arts, 2 volumes of poems and 40 books for children. Shivaram Karanth received many prestigious awards, among which the most important are the Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Academy Award, Pampa Award and the Swedish Academy Award. In 1968 he received the Padma Bhushan, the third-highest civilian award in the Republic of India, even though not long after he returned it in protest against the emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975⁵.

Shivaram Karanth was born in 1902 in Kota near Udupi in Karnataka. He came from an orthodox and traditional community of Kota Brahmins⁶. During the time of his youth, India began to change. The need arose amongst Indian intelligentsia to create an independent country and to bring about major changes in society. As a young man, he was inspired by the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi and he dropped out of college in order to fully devote himself to the Non-cooperation Movement. Despite his family's objections, Karanth was engaged in the struggle for independence of India as well as for changes in Indian society. He started to educate people about hygiene, health and the harms of superstitions, alcoholism, and prostitution. The atmosphere of those times influenced not only Karanth's activities as a social reformer, but also as a writer. He openly stood up against the discrimination against Dalits and the caste system, which is demonstrated not only in his books and articles, but also by his own example.

Shivaram Karanth's life is definitely situated in liminal space. He was not only a Brahmin who fought for the rights of Dalits, but even though he belonged to the highest social strata, he also suffered because of the caste system. In 1936 he married Leela Alva, a girl belonging to the Bunt⁷ community. The inter-caste marriage

4. Traditional South Indian form of theatre, which originated from the Udupi region in Karnataka, it combines unique music, dance, stage techniques and costumes. Dr Shivaram Karanth was one of the greatest populators of this form of theatre. Apart from many articles, he wrote two books on this subject.

5. Ranganatha Rao 2004, 5.

6. Kota Brahmins form a sub-caste concentrated mostly around Kota village, in the Udupi region in South Karnataka. They are followers of the *smarta* tradition. They consider their family deity – Ugranarasimha as their only *guru*. Despite living for many generations in a region called Tulu Nadu, where the most commonly spoken language is Tulu, they use a variant of Kannada. Cf. Abhishankar 1973, 108-110; Siraj 2012, 178-179.

7. Bunts are an Indian caste traditionally living on the south coast of Karnataka. In the north part of South Karnataka they are also known as Nadavas. Although they originate from a former military class, their traditional occupation is agriculture and they are the chief landowners in the

caused an outburst of anger in the traditional and rigid local society. Karanth and his wife were ridiculed and despised in person, as well as in the press. He even sued one of those journalists for defamation and won a case against him⁸.

3. Choma's Drum

Choma's Drum is one of the most important works by Shivaram Karanth. The book tells the story of Choma⁹ – a widowed Dalit from a Mari Holey¹⁰ caste, who lives with his four sons and a daughter in south Karnataka. He is a bonded-laborer, connected for generations to his landlord's family. He therefore needs his master's permission to work anywhere else. Although he works hard in his landlord's fields, he can barely manage to support his family. He has two passions in his life – drinking toddy, a local alcohol and playing his drum, which is the only way he can express his feelings. Choma also has a dream – to own or rent some land and to be able to work it himself. However, it is not such a simple wish as it seems to be. Local tradition forbids the members of low castes to farm land. It is believed that this would cause the soil to become barren. He keeps asking his landlord for a strip of land, but his request is constantly rejected. However, Choma still hopes to fulfil his dream and for this reason, he keeps a pair of bullocks he had found abandoned in the forest.

In order to pay his debts, Choma sends his two sons to work on a distant coffee estate. Neither returns home – one dies of cholera and the other converts to Christianity, marries a Christian girl and abandons his family. Choma therefore sends his daughter to the estate to work to help him pay his debts. The girl is abused by the owner of the plantation and one of his workers. One day, after being raped,

region. Bunts are the second class in the social hierarchy after Brahmins. They follow the *aliya-santāna* – matrilineal system of property inheritance. The community is divided into 93 clans and into 52 *balis*. Cf. Bhat 1998, 212; Siraj 2012, 179.

8. Ramacandran 2001, 15.

9. I apply the anglicised form of the hero's name, in accordance with the English title of this novel (English translation by U. L. Kalkur, 1978).

10. Mari Holey is a subdivision of the Holey community, who were considered as untouchables and the lowest class in the social hierarchy of Karnataka. The other important groups among Holeys are Pombada, Bakuda or Mundala, Koragar and Nalke – the group with the lowest position even among other Holeys. Holeys worship a village deity Mariyamma and Bhūtas. Most of them follow the *aliya-santāna* – matrilineal system of inheritance. Gurikas – the heads of the castes perform all rituals for them. During festivals, Holeys play their traditional instruments – drums called *dhudi*. Bhat 1998, 26; Siraj 2012, 182-183.

she is told that the debt is paid off and that she can return home. In the meantime, Choma loses his youngest son. The boy drowns while bathing in the river. Although there are plenty of people around, no one helps him because it is forbidden to touch an *avarṇa* man. Only one young Brahmin is ready to help him, however, he is stopped by the others. In this tragic scene, Karanth gives his readers a glimmer of hope, showing that the younger generation is willing to change cruel traditions, but is currently restrained by the elders.

Choma also considers converting to Christianity which would give him an opportunity to escape the caste system. What is more, he would receive a strip of land from the missionaries. This fact convinces him and he sets off for a church. However, on the way, he starts to hesitate. He is truly devoted to his deity Panjurli¹¹ and feels that this would be betraying him. Moreover, Choma does not want to escape from his Dalit identity, he wants to be respected and treated with dignity for who he is. He therefore returns home, but as he enters his hut, he discovers that his daughter has been having an affair with a worker from the estate. Enraged, he throws her out, chases his pair of bullocks away and locks himself inside his hut. Then he gets drunk and plays furiously on his drum till the morning, when he dies.

4. *General Remarks on Dalit Literature*

Dalit literature is an important stream of Indian writing present in most Indian languages, as well as in English. There are two approaches related to what can be called with this term. According to an earlier formulation, it was the literature concerning Dalits and their lives. The second and more recent approach restricts this term to the literature written about Dalits, by Dalits, and with Dalit consciousness¹².

Dalit literature emerged after India's independence, when education and democratic ideas, reached many strata of Indian society. Humanistic ideas, such as equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice, spread among the nation. At the same time, discriminatory and unjust rules continued to exist in Indian society. It fuelled the feelings of dissatisfaction, injustice, and pain among the lowest social strata. Numerous people, who hoped that with independence and the new constitution,

11. Panjurli is one of the most important *bhūtas* worshipped in the southern region of Karnataka. He is imagined in various forms from a raging wild boar to a princely deity riding a boar. Cf. Dallapiccola 2007, 55.

12. Limbale 2004, 19.

problems such as poverty and inequality would be solved, were disappointed. Thus, the educated Dalit youth wanted to express their anger against the established unjust social order in their literature¹³.

Dalit writers broke with Hindu culture and tradition, as closely connected to the caste system, which caused their ancestors to be deprived of power, property, and position. The fundamental purpose of Dalit authors is to inform about social injustice and inspire social transformation. Hence, numerous writers reject traditional aesthetics and think that their literature should be rather analysed from a sociological perspective. Dalit writers do not write to entertain or please the reader, but rather to inform him about the injustice and suffering and induce an urge for changes in society. A common feature of Dalit works is that they are often created based on the personal experiences of their authors. Writers stress aspects of society, which should be revolted against and rejected. They react bitterly to Sanskrit literature, especially to Hindu religious works, because they supported the caste system or portrayed the lower groups of society in a wrong way. They rarely employ religious symbols and references, and if they do, they usually deconstruct them and give them a new message and purpose¹⁴.

5. Choma's *Drum as Liminal Novel*

Not only can Karanth's life be described as situated in liminal space, but the same would apply to his novel. In actual fact, it is not clear if *Choma's drum* can be called Dalit literature: *Choma's Drum* can be regarded as an example of Dalit literature, only according to the earlier approach, above mentioned. However, the fact of translating this novel into Sanskrit places it in a more ambiguous collocation. A preface written in Sanskrit by Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya has been added to the Sanskrit translation of *Choma's drum*. He also raises the issue of the situation of Dalits and the monopolism of the Sanskrit language.

Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya is a Sanskrit scholar from Udupi, Karnataka, who has also done much work in the field of popularising Sanskrit literature and Sanskrit as a language. Apart from being a specialist in Indian philosophy, he is the author of the translations of many important Sanskrit works into Kannada. These include Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakatika* and Bhavabhūti's *Uttarāmacharita*. Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya is also the coauthor of the scripts for

13. *Ibid.* 23-25.

14. *Ibid.* 30-39.

two films, both directed by G. V. Iyer¹⁵, *Adi Shankaracharya*¹⁶ and *Madhvacharya*¹⁷. Both films concentrate on narrating the life story of two important Indian philosophers. The first of the two is noteworthy as it is the first film in Indian cinema history to be made in Sanskrit and Dr Bannanje Govindacarya is the author of its dialogues. He is therefore undoubtedly a pioneer in the popularisation of the Sanskrit language in contemporary India. It can be assumed that the project of translating Karanth's novel into Sanskrit was very close to his views and interests.

In the preface to the Sanskrit translation to *Comana duḍi*, Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya mentions the problems of the miserable situation of Dalits at the beginning of the 20th century and the importance of Karanth's book. He also praises the Sanskrit translator of *Comana duḍi*, Kokkada Anantapadmanabha Shastry and comments on the translating issues the latter had to tackle during his work. In the penultimate paragraph of the preface, Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya raises the issue of the popularisation of Sanskrit among every class of Indian society:

*gairvāṇī vāṇī brāhmaṇāṃ svam iti kecana paṇḍitamānino bhārtīyā
vibabhramuḥ / diṣṭyā seyaṃ bhāṣā samprati comasyāpi bhāṣā babhūva / yasya
kasyāpi viṣayasya jātiparicchinatayaiva parimarśo 'dhunātanānāṃ cintakānām
ajāyur āmayah / kiṃ karaṇīyam? etādṛśānāṃ rujāyā nāsty auśadham / etādṛkṣu
nikṣiptacakṣur upaniṣad evam ujjughōṣa – avidyāyāmantare vartamānāḥ
svayaṃ dhīrāḥ paṇḍitamanyamānāḥ / dandramyamānāḥ pariyaṇti mūḍhā
andhenaiva nīyamānā yathāndhāḥ //*¹⁸.

"Divine speech is Brahmins' property" – some Indians, who considered themselves as learned, said these words. Luckily now this language has become Choma's language. The consideration of any issue through the caste division is

15. Ganapathi Venkataramana Iyer (1917–2003) was an Indian director, screenwriter, actor and film producer from Karnataka, known also as 'Kannada Bheeshma'. He is best known for being the first director to make a movie in Sanskrit – *Adi Shankaracharya* (1983). In 1993 he directed his second film in Sanskrit – *Bhagavad Gita*.

16. The Sanskrit film *Adi Shankaracharya* tells the story and teachings of an 8th-century philosopher Ādi Śaṅkarācārya. It was received very well and won four awards at the 31st National Film Awards – the most notable and prestigious award ceremony in India. It received awards in the following categories: Best Film, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography and Best Audiography. The film was produced by the National Film Development Corporation of India – an institution founded to support Indian Cinema and improve its quality. It is subject to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Government of India.

17. The Kannada film *Madhavacharya* tells the history and teachings of a 13th-century Hindu philosopher Madhavācārya. It won the National Award for the Best Music Director.

18. Govindacarya 2017, VIII. This verse comes from *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1. 2. 5

a non-medical sickness of modern thinkers. But what is to be done? For this kind of people there is no cure for [their] disease: The Upanishadic “eye opener” proclaimed to them:
«Living among ignorance, considering themselves as wise and learned men, confused people run to and fro and go round, just like blind men led by a blind man»¹⁹.

These words show that Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya is clearly against any restrictions toward using and learning Sanskrit. According to him, it should not be limited to any group and even people of low origin, in terms of the caste system, like Choma, should be able to claim it as their own cultural and historical background. He offers very harsh words for those who claim their right to monopolise Sanskrit and keep the restrictions of the caste system in modern Indian society. At the same time, he admits, that there are some people who deny this to people from lower social strata.

At the end of the preface Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya expresses a hope:

*nirmatsarāṇām satām śrīmān śāstrī priyo bhavati / vidyā ca vinayaśca taṁ paras-
param spardhamānāv iva bhūṣayataḥ / abhivardhatām gīrvāṇabhāṣāpoṣaṇī
sāhityavarivasyā tasyābhikṣaṇam / abhivardhatām saṁskṛtabhārati iti śam* /²⁰.

Dear Mister Śastry is one of the unselfish and honest people. Knowledge and discipline as if competing with each other adorn him. May his devotion to literature that nourishes the Sanskrit language constantly increase. May Sanskrit speech prosper happily.

Dr. Bannanje Govindacarya emphasises that a project such as this translation is very beneficial for Sanskrit, it enriches this language and shows new possibilities for it to last and thrive in the modern world.

In the Sanskrit translation of *Comana duḍḍī*, there is also a short introduction written by its translator, Kokkada Ananta Padmanabha Shastry. In this preface, he summarises the plot of the novel and reveals some interesting facts about the project of translating it.

19. All the translations from Sanskrit are mine unless otherwise stated.

20. Govindacarya 2017, VIII.

*prāyaḥ trayastriṃśadvarṣebhyaḥ pūrvam ahaṃ śrī śivarāmakārantāt comana
duḍi kādambarīm²¹ anuvādayitum anumatiṃ prārthatavān / so 'vadat "anu-
matiṃ dāsyāmi, tāṃ kaḥ prakāṭikarīṣyati" iti / aham anuvādam kṛtavān /²².*

Perhaps thirty-three years ago I asked Mr. Shivaram Karanth for permission to translate the novel *Comana duḍi*. He said: "I will give permission to the one, who presents it". I have translated it.

Kokkada Ananta Padmanabha Shastry reveals that Shivarama Karanth knew about his intention to translate this novel. Unfortunately, he died before the translator finished his task and the author was unable to approve it himself. However, Kokkada Ananta Padmanabha Shastry pursued his intention and found a way to publish his work.

6. Translation of Choma's Drum into Sanskrit and the Dalit Identity

Sanskrit has always had a special place on the linguistic map of India. It became the language of refined and sophisticated elites, literature, religion, and science. As a "language of gods", it was closely connected to religious practices. It was a universal medium for exchanging thoughts, knowledge, and expressing emotions between speakers of different vernacular languages. Thousands of manuscripts concerning very different subjects were created in Sanskrit – a great number of them have still to be published. It also became a language of politics and as such travelled to the courts of Southeast Asia and some parts of Central Asia. From the beginning of the common era to the 14th century, inscriptions in Sanskrit were spread all over India and beyond. This so-called "public poetry" occurred in the area between Kabul and Java. These inscriptions not only had a political character, but also a poetic value and they belong to the history of Sanskrit poetry, too²³.

At the beginning of the second millennium, vernacular languages grew as literary languages and started to challenge Sanskrit in this field as well as in that of politics. However, the importance of "the language of Gods" still was and is huge. It remains the language of rituals and its literature has never ceased to be created. Modern poets' works concern many subjects which are not typical for traditional *kāvya*. Through the centuries, Sanskrit, although it was hardly anyone's mother

21. The use of the word *kādambarī* in the sense of a novel is noteworthy here.

22. Anantha Padmanabha Shastry 2017, X.

23. Pollock 1995.

tongue, was constantly developing. It interacted with other languages and literary cultures of India influencing them and, vice versa, was enriched by them. That is why Sanskrit has become an important element of culture also in South India.

Today Hindi is the most-spoken language in India. However, the efforts to make it the national language or the only official language of India have never succeeded. Each attempt to impose Hindi on the whole of India evoked large and violent protests in southern states. South Indians were and still are afraid that their culture and their role in the country would be diminished. They therefore objected even to the introduction of making the learning of Hindi compulsory in all schools in India. However, such attempts are constantly being made. The last one happened in 2019, when Bharatiya Janata Party proposed the draft education policy recommending the use of a three-language formula from the primary schools onwards. The three-language formula was adopted by the India Parliament in 1968, however, it was not introduced in Tamil Nadu. This state follows two language policy, according to which Tamil and English are compulsory taught in schools. The three-language formula project involves teaching Hindi, English and one other modern Indian language in the Hindi-speaking states. In the non-Hindi speaking states, Hindi learning was proposed to be made mandatory besides a regional language and English. The proposal of introducing it caused an instant uproar in Tamil Nadu²⁴. Therefore, there is a rather reluctant attitude towards Hindi in South India. As far as Sanskrit is concerned the situation is very different. In fact, a trend to make Sanskrit films has recently emerged in South India. Since 2015 numerous Sanskrit films have been made in India, most of them in Kerala²⁵.

Interestingly, nowadays English seems to be the modern lingua franca of India but it is the mother tongue of hardly any Indians. However, contrary to Sanskrit, it was never associated with a particular religion or caste and there were no

24. Mariappan 2020.

25. After the *Bhagavadgītā* by G. V. Iyer was released in 1993, there were no new films in Sanskrit until 2015. Then a film called *Priyamanasam* directed by Vinod Mankara based on the life of an 18th-century poet from Kerala named Unnayi Variyar was released. In 2016 the audience saw another Sanskrit film *Ishti*, which is the first Sanskrit film to deal with a social theme. It tells the story of a family of Nambudiri Brahmins and criticises their orthodox and patriarchal traditions. One year later, the film *Anurakhti* was announced as the first Sanskrit film with song and shot in 3D, and the film *Suryakantha* was advertised as the first Sanskrit film set in contemporary times. 2019 brought another Sanskrit movie: *Madhurasmitham* – the first Sanskrit film for children. It was based on the book *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography of A. P. J. Abdul Kalam* – autobiography of Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam the 11th president of India. In 2020 *Punyakoti* was made – the first animated Sanskrit film. A number of recently released films in Sanskrit, along with the variety of subjects presented in them, show that the trend of making Sanskrit films is growing.

restrictions in learning it. As Salman Rushdie noticed: «After spending quite some time in South India, I've become convinced that English is an essential language in India, not only because of its technical vocabularies and the international communication which it makes possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates»²⁶.

It must be also noted, that the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and his administration give great importance to promote and revive Sanskrit in India. The Prime Minister in his speeches often has stressed the cultural importance of this language. Ever since the BJP came to power in 2014 there has been an emphasis on learning Sanskrit at all levels of education. Special emphasis is placed on presenting it as the language of science and learning, suitable also for speaking about modern technology²⁷. In 2020 three Sanskrit universities have been upgraded to the status of central university by the Indian Parliament. What is more, Sanskrit is perceived by Hindutva activists as «a symbol for unifying Hindus around Hindutva»²⁸. It is significant, that Hindutva is not interested in Sanskrit as a medium of ancient literature, but rather considers it as a device to promote a Hindu supremacist agenda²⁹.

But there is also another “liminal factor” which should be stressed in connection with the translation of *Comana duḍi*. Sanskrit has always been a language of the religious, intellectual and political elites and never a language of the masses. The privilege to learn and speak it was determined by one's birth. Being at the very bottom of the caste system, Dalits were excluded from any chance of gaining knowledge of it and participating in its culture. They were prohibited from learning it, because it was believed that their impurity would affect and injure the power of the Sanskrit words³⁰. In practice it was limited to twice-born men (from an upper strata of society)³¹. But thanks to this translation, Dalit literature or, more precisely, a novel about Dalits aspires to the realm of Sanskrit culture. In the past such aspirations of Dalits were hardly possible.

Translating *Choma's drum* into Sanskrit, which is still regarded as the language of gods, the language of high culture and the language of elites was not motivated by a will to promote this novel. It was done rather to achieve other mostly symbolical goals. The first of these is to give Dalits the right to fully participate in

26. Rushdie 1991, 65.

27. Vajpeyi 2016, 49-50.

28. Truschke 2020, 6

29. *Ibid.*

30. Doniger 2014, 510.

31. Ramaswamy 1999, 339-381.

Indian culture and history. Sanskrit is undoubtedly an essential element in both of them. Thus, as already noticed, Sanskrit works were not greatly appreciated by Dalit writers. On the contrary, Sanskrit literature was considered as a means to legitimize the system of oppression against them. They often reject the Sanskritised culture and Hindu tradition.

Translation such novel into Sanskrit shows that every stratum of Indian society is equally entitled to use this language and there is nothing wrong when Dalits use it. In fact, giving Dalits the right to speak the language which was regarded as belonging to Brahmins has stressed that both groups should be viewed as equal.

Nowadays Dalits are allowed to learn Sanskrit, but it is still not easy for them. The autobiographical essay *The story of My 'Sanskrit'* by Kumud Pawde tells about her struggle to learn this language. Born in 1938 to a poor family of Dalit labourers inspired by Ambedkar, she was encouraged to attend school and learn Sanskrit in spite of the discrimination and humiliation she faced. Pawde managed to complete her MA studies in Sanskrit and wanted to work as a teacher. However, because of her Dalit origins, she heard many times that she could not teach Sanskrit. She remained unemployed until her inter-caste marriage, when she changed her surname³². Although she became a role model and inspiration for many, there are still cases of Dalit children who are not accepted in the Sanskrit school because of their caste³³.

As Sheldon Pollock noticed «We may unhesitatingly grant the premise that classical culture, Sanskrit for example, offers at one and the same time a record of civilization and a record of barbarism, of extraordinary inequality and other social poisons»³⁴. For centuries laws responsible for the discrimination and underprivileged situation of Dalits were based on Sanskrit texts, to which only members of upper classes had access. Deprived of the right to even learn this language, Dalits were efficiently excluded from taking part in this discourse. In the same paragraph, Pollock suggested a possible way to change this situation: «You cannot simply go around a tradition to overcome it, if that is what you wish to do; you must go through it. You only transform a dominant culture by outsmarting it»³⁵. In my opinion, translating a novel exposing the miserable situation of Dalits and the need for change into Sanskrit is exactly a way to “outsmart tradition”. The language that used to be a carrier of harmful customs and traditions, through this book became

32. Pawde 1994, 24-34.

33. Sunar 2019.

34. Pollock 2011, 39.

35. Pollock 2011, 39.

a language fighting against them. *Comana dudi's* translation stands exactly on the border between caste divisions, engaged literature and the poetic search for a new means of expression, such a characteristic feature of Sanskrit poetry.

In ancient and early medieval India Sanskrit was the language of science, religion, politics and therefore the majority of the most important works for Indian culture were written in it. Even outside India it was used in the royal courts. Thanks to Sanskrit, texts gained more importance and prestige. Therefore, the translation of *Choma's drum* into Sanskrit may be considered as giving more emphasis to this book and its message – the fight against the discrimination of Dalit. Is this needed in modern India, when the caste system is legally banished? One might think that the situation of Dalits has remarkably improved since 1933 when *Choma's drum* was published. In fact, the Indian constitution outlaws the discrimination of Dalits as well as the practise of untouchability. In 1989 another law was introduced to protect them from offence. However, recent reports show that caste discrimination in India still exists. Nowadays, discrimination against Dalits has decreased in urban regions and public sphere. While some Dalits are successfully integrated into Indian society in cities, where caste origin is less visible, the discrimination continues to persist in rural areas and private sphere. In villages, caste origin is more obvious and Dalits frequently remain excluded from local religious life, although some evidence indicates that this exclusion is decreasing³⁶.

According to the 2011–2012 survey, 27% of Indians did practise untouchability in some form. The study shows that the attitude towards Dalits does not depend on economic status. The group which is the most biased against Dalits are Brahmins. However, discrimination is less common among educated families³⁷. Thus, there is still a need to promote equality among Indians and to educate people about Dalits' rights. Even if this translation is addressed to a very small group of people, it is still a symbol showing that Dalits have a place in Indian society, history and culture.

7. Conclusions

The translating of *Choma's drum* into Sanskrit seems to really suit the values in which Shivaram Karanth believed. As a social activist he promoted the need for equal rights among all Indians. He was not scared of controversy and he did not

36. Dasgupta 2010.

37. Chishthi 2014.

let traditions and harmful superstition stop him from his work or have an impact on his personal life. *Comasya dhakka* may also be regarded as a controversial issue by some rigid conservatives. However, it is precisely because of its revolutionary character that it may have a chance to draw attention and make a difference.

The translation of *Choma's drum* into Sanskrit also makes an impact on modern Sanskrit literature. Of course, *Comasya dhakka* is not the first translation from other languages into Sanskrit. The adaptation of William Shakespeare's dramas is especially famous. However, *Comasya dhakka* still shows new possibilities for contemporary writers. The novel is not a frequent genre among Sanskrit writing just as the life of Dalits is not a common theme. This case proves that there are new opportunities, which may be explored by contemporary Sanskrit authors.

The role of Sanskrit in modern India has been changed. Although it was used as a tool to oppress Dalits, it has now been employed to promote equality among Indians. In many cases it is still not available for the whole of society, but it is no longer a privilege reserved for particular groups. *Comasya dhakka* shows that Sanskrit is nowadays in the liminal state between a language that belongs to the elites and a language available to all Indians who want to learn it and accept it as part of their own heritage.

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