Telugu literature in multilingual Mauritius

Rajwantee DALLIAH

Lecturer, Department of Telugu Studies,
School of Indian Studies, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius

Résumé : Immigration et globalisation ont conduit à l'émergence du multilinguisme à l'île Maurice. Les langues indiennes ont un impact important sur ce multilinguisme de Maurice concernant près de 49 % de la population totale. Bien que le télougou puisse être considéré comme une langue minoritaire, si on se fonde sur le nombre de locuteurs, de nombreuses organisations gouvernementales et socio-culturelles s'efforcent à promouvoir la langue et la littérature telugu dans le répertoire linguistique de la population. La littérature mauricienne en télougou compte déjà quelques récits, des poèmes et un large corpus de chants religieux et de pièces dramatiques. Cette étude examine le statut actuel du télougou et de la littérature dans le multilinguisme de l'île Maurice et propose un aperçu sur le telugu comme langue littéraire émergente.

Mots-clés : Littérature télougou, multilinguisme, langue ancestrale, langue littéraire émergente.

1 Telugu in Mauritian Multilingualism

The Republic of Mauritius is a multi-ethnic and multilingual island in the Indian Ocean. According to Miles (2000), multilingualism in Mauritius reflects the historical and pluralistic profile of the island-nation. The French and British colonization of Mauritius led to the emergence of a "four-part harmony" of Mauritian languages (*ibid.*) with: "Kreol as the uncontested lingua franca; French as the inherited language of social and cultural prestige; English as the language of education, law, public administration and to a [small] degree commerce; and the panoply of Indian languages" (*ibid.*, 2000: 217).

The importation of Indian immigrants after the abolition of slavery led to the prevalence of Indian languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati and Bhojpuri, considered as markers of identity and commonly known as *ancestral languages* (Rajah-Carrim, 2007: 52) along with other Mauritian languages. They are connected to ethnicity and religion, while Mauritian Kreol remains the mother-tongue of the majority: "Except for a small segment of the population using Bhojpuri in the

home, few Mauritians speak the language of their forefathers any longer other than in religious practices. Yet the majority still associate their historical and cultural identity with that language" (Sauzier-Uchida: 103).

The specific nature of Mauritian cultural policy, however, gives scope for the learning of ancestral languages in the school system, and also supports in different ways cultural life in the languages.

Telugu like other'ancestral languages' is retained today as a second language taught in schools (in the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors) while it is no longer in active use for everyday communication, a natural outcome of more than 150 years of migration history. Outside of school there is a limited scope for the use of both the written and spoken language, with the exception of certain cultural contexts. While the Telugu community is considered as a sub-minority ethnic group (2 % of the population), it has a very rich network of community institutions which promote cultural life, often supported by the state.

2 Literature in Telugu teaching

Telugu children are exposed to canonical literary works in Telugu (from the homeland) from primary level, in the form of rhymes, songs and poems such as those of the great saint-poet Vemana and Baddena's *Sumati Satakam,* further encouraged by recitation competitions and examinations organised by various socio-cultural institutions such as the Telugu Speaking Union (TSU), the Krishnadevaraya Trust and the Mauritius Telugu Maha Sabha (MTMS). At the Higher School Certificate level, ending with Telugu examinations of the Cambridge International A Level (*Mauritius Examinations Syndicate*), the paper on Texts, out of a total of 4 papers, carries a weightage of 35 %, indicating the importance attached to literature. At the tertiary level, students are exposed to poetic works, short stories and novels from the different eras so as to develop critical appreciation. It is to be noted however that at all the levels, no place has been given as yet to local literary productions.

3 Literary creation in Telugu: some very specific genres

Mauritian literature consists of multiple literatures which bear testimony to its multilingualism. However, not all languages in use in the island are literary languages. While Mauritian Hindi and Urdu literatures are quite substantial (both fiction and non-fiction), along with those in English and French, other minority languages such as Telugu, Tamil and Marathi have a limited literary sphere.

Mauritian Telugu literary activity originated with the composition of *kirtanas* and *bhajanas* (devotional songs) meant to be circulated socially in religious places such as temples and private pujas. The first audio cassette comprising of Telugu songs composed by Satyakam Appiah on the occasion of *Ugadi* (the Telugu New Year) was released in 1980. He later founded the Shri Venkateshwara Bhaktula Sangham in 1985, which has contributed tremendously to the literary field through the regular composition of *kirtanas*. More than fifty recorded discs have been produced, with printed versions in both Telugu and Latin scripts so as to help people learn the songs.

Published in : Isabelle Cros et Anne Godard (dir.), *Ecrire entre les langues. Littérature, traduction, enseignement*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN: 9782813004642, doi: 10.17184/eac.9782813004642

Satyakam Appiah has to his credit more than ten literary publications, including the first local compilation of poetry'*Pushpanjali*' (1977), followed by *Bhaktyanjali – Kavita Sankalanam* (2002). Other local writers such as G. Reddy Luthmoodoo have also published poetry and others have composed (or translated) poems, mostly free verse published on social media in recent times.

Another literary genre dominant in Mauritian Telugu is drama. The setting up of the Telugu Drama Committee (under the aegis of the then Ministry of Arts and Culture) in 1976, contributed immensely through the writing and performing of plays. The National Drama Festival is an annual competition organised by the Ministry to promote plays in ten languages:

> "The Ministry of Arts and Culture gives all kind of financial and infrastructure support to encourage the participants. … Over the last two decades, Telugu drama festival has been very active and each year nearly 15-20 drama groups participate with enthusiasm" (Bhaskar, 2015: 5).

The Telugu Drama Committee has in its archives more than a hundred plays written by famous local authors such as Rajendra Musselaya, Soobiraj Avala Gurraya, Devraj Bangarigadu, Narainsamy Chellan, Rajendra Appalsawmy and others.

The mission of the President's Fund for Creative Writing (PFCW) under the aegis of the Ministry of Arts and Cultural Heritage, is to promote, propagate and preserve the creative writings in all languages written and spoken in Mauritius by providing incentives to emerging writers. Along with the formation of the TSU in 2009 for the promotion of Telugu language, literature and culture, this has contributed to the promotion of the literary form of the language. TSU organises, along with PFCW, activities and workshops both to equip upcoming writers and poets and to promote literary works, as well as competitions for children to encourage creativity. It has published local Telugu stories and essays written by the winners, and has also encouraged the writing and delivery of slam poetry in Telugu.

4 Conclusion

From the foregoing, it may be concluded that the Mauritian Telugu literary field is an emerging one. The teaching of Telugu literature in formal study equips students with the linguistic prerequisites and literary knowledge to create their own works. However, the relatively small number of people who are literate in the language makes for a limited readership and a low chance of publishing. Most of the writers of the plays and free verse are predominantly from the teaching profession. The state-commanded literary form of drama does not enable social diffusion of the created texts beyond their performance, as they are the property of the Ministry. The locally generated works which have a preeminent place in the Telugu literary field are religious compositions and these have the most robust social circulation.

There has not yet been any study of these literary genres of Mauritian Telugu. An interesting aspect is that it is subject to considerable linguistic interference from the other dominant languages in the island, which is visible in discourses, writings of

Published in : Isabelle Cros et Anne Godard (dir.), *Ecrire entre les langues. Littérature, traduction, enseignement*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN: 9782813004642, doi: 10.17184/eac.9782813004642

students, the use of kinship terms and so on. A compilation of the Telugu plays written for competition, could provide a corpus for study that could greatly help in studying written Mauritian Telugu and in gauging the quality and grandeur of local Telugu literary creation.

While drama and these devotional compositions remain the leading genres of expression in Telugu, they also exist in the other Indian languages since they share a common origin. They may also share common themes, styles and forms[1]. However, an analysis of these similarities and differences calls for further in-depth study.

In addition, several studies have proved that there is mother-tongue interference (either positive or negative) on second/foreign language learning. In this case, there are various instances in the dramas which show that other languages have seeped into Telugu and this has led to the emergence of multilingualism not only in the language but within the Telugu literature[2]. In other words, Mauritian Telugu writing is distinct in so much that it is shaped to some extent by thoughts in Mauritian Kreol.

Though much emphasis is laid on the creation end, literary life also involves diffusion and activities around literary works, such as poetic recitals and other literary programmes. Certain institutions in Mauritius do organise competitions and programmes providing opportunity for exposing creations through live performances and even recorded television programmes. These can largely contribute to developing and expanding the scope for Telugu literary production and circulation in Mauritius, in a context where demographic factors are leading to a decline in the population of Telugu speakers.

References

Bhaskar, T.L.S. (2015), *Telugu Language in Mauritius*. Available at: https://mauritiantelugu.wordpress.com/2015/06/16/18/ [Accessed on: 13.09.2021, 11:58]

Buddhaprasad, Mandali, *Mauritius loo Telugu Tejamu*, Videshandhra SevaaKendra, Hyderabad, 1990.

Mauritius examinations syndicate Website – Available from: http://mes.intnet.mu/English/Documents/Examinations/Secondary/CIE\%20Syllabus\%20and\%20Support\%20Materials/2018/pdf/8680_y20-22_sy.pdf [Accessed on 12.07.2021; 11:35)

Miles, William F.S (2000). "The Politics of Language Equilibrium in a Multilingual Society: Mauritius", *Comparative Politics,* vol. 32 (2), p. 215-230.

Rajah-carrim, Aaliya (2007), "Mauritian Creole and Language Attitudes in the Education System of Multiethnic and Multilingual Mauritius", *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,* vol. 28 (1), p. 51-71. Available from: http://www.africanafrican.com/folder12/african\%20african\%20american2/haiti/carrim_multilingual_20073.pdf [Accessed on: 26.02.2015, 13:15]

Sankoff, Gillian (2001), "Linguistic Outcomes of Language Contact" *In* P. Trudgill, J. Chambers & N. Schilling-Estes, eds., *Handbook of Sociolinguistics.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 638-668. DOI: 10.1002/9780470756591.ch25 Available from: www.ling.upenn.edu/ gillian/Interlang.doc.pdf [Accessed on 31.05.2016, 10:19]

[1] Since both the Tamils and Telugus came from South India and share some common practices, some similarities may be established with regard to the religious literary forms in both the languages in terms of poetic inspiration and the object of worship.

[2] "*kāni enduku manuṣyulu janmincāru mari konta kalam tarvāta vāḷḷu ā lōkānni viḍichi peṭṭāli*" (But why are people born and then after some time they have to leave that world?) (influence of Mauritian Kreol and English) (extract from the play 'Yamalokam' written in 2011 by Jeetendra Raghaven).

Published in : Isabelle Cros et Anne Godard (dir.), *Ecrire entre les langues. Littérature, traduction, enseignement*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN: 9782813004642, doi: 10.17184/eac.9782813004642

Sauzier-Uchida, Emi (no date), "Language Choice in Multilingual Mauritius" in *National Unity and Socioeconomic Advancement*, p. 99-130.

Zyngier, Sonia (1994), "Literature in the EFL Classroom: Making a Comeback", *Poetics and Linguistics Association.* Available from: http://www.pala.ac.uk/uploads/2/5/1/0/25105678/paper06.pdf [Accessed on 13.09.2021, 14:42]

Published in : Isabelle Cros et Anne Godard (dir.), *Ecrire entre les langues. Littérature, traduction, enseignement*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813004642, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813004642