

## Do You Understand Me?: The Culture of Translation in India

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India's cultures of translation date back to pre-colonial times that had witnessed several kinds of literary translation, though our ancients may not claim that they were doing translations. This is perhaps natural to multilingual cultures where poets (Kabir, Mira, Nanak, Vidyapati) easily moved from one language to another without even being aware of it; and translators did not fear being executed for deviations as in the West (remember the fate of Etienne Dolet, the 16<sup>th</sup> century French translator of Plato?). We do not even have a proper word for translation in the Indian languages, so we have, at different times, borrowed *anuvad* ("speaking after") from Sanskrit and *tarjuma* (explication or paraphrase) from Arabic or created words like *rupantar* (Bengali), *bhashantar* (Hindi) *mozhi paharppu* (Tamil) or *paribhasha* (interpretation), *vivartanam* (one specific appearance of a phenomenon) and *mozhimattam* (changing the tongue) (all Malayalam).

Our predecessors used texts as take-off points and freely retold and resituated them, as was done in the case of the many *Ramayanas*, *Mahabharatas* and *Bhagavatas* in different languages. A reassuring example from early pre-colonial days, probably 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE, pointed out by Sujit Mukherjee in *Translation as Recovery*, are the Jataka stories, first collected in Pali, forming the tenth book of *Khuddanikaya* and later developed in Sanskrit, mixing prose and verse, as full-fledged narratives. A later example is that of Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* (4-5th Centuries, CE), a voluminous cycle of stories originally composed in a Prakrit speech, almost dismissively named Paishachi. Even when the original text was lost, the stories were preserved in three Sanskrit texts, two Prakrit abridgements and one Tamil fragment. Both the examples do not satisfy the modern criteria of translation, but embody the choice as well as the compulsion behind the rebirth of texts in another language, which apply to translation in general. These were all in a sense acts of appropriation which were academic acts as they required competence in another language and also free enterprise

as the translator left the mark of his/her imagination and creativity on the product.

This tendency to transform texts from older languages like Prakrit, Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil or Persian continued almost to the end of pre-colonial period. I will not deny here the chances of many of these stories themselves originating in smaller tribal languages and dialects, a possibility that demands clearer proof. Texts from more recent – "modern" – Indian languages were an exception during the period, the well-known examples being *Padmabati*, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Bangla work adapted from *Padumavat*, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Hindi work by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, by the poet-soldier Alaol. Another example is a minor work narrating the tragic tale of Madhavanala, a musician, and Kamakandala, a dancer, that has several versions in Sanskrit and Hindi besides in Marathi and Gujarati. Alam, a court-poet of Aurangzeb, based his Hindi version on a Sanskrit version by Jodh, a poet in Akbar's court. Alam admits how he has composed parts and has also borrowed from other Hindi versions as well as Sanskrit. "*Kachhu apni, kachhu prakrit chorol/ Yathashakti kari akshar jodo*" (Some mine, some stolen from Prakrit, putting letters together as well as I can) he says, laughing at four strong Western individualist ideas: absolute originality, faithful translation, the author's moral right and the publisher's copyright.

Most of the pre-colonial translations however, were what Gianfranco Folena would call "vertical translations" where "the source language has prestige and value which transcends that of the target language". The translator here often feels humbled by the superior power of the original, forcing, for example, Jnaneswar who translated *Bhagavat Geeta* into Marathi, to compare himself to a tiny "*titibha*" bird trying to sound the ocean's depth. "Horizontal translation" on the other hand is what happens "between languages of a similar structure and strong cultural affinity" (Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Power and the Case of Horizontal Translation", *Translating Power*). Apparently, there is no hierarchy here: the languages are considered

equal. This is what happens between modern Indian languages, though even here translation into a less-known or recognized language, like Bhili or Santhali, Garo or Gammit, may involve a power-relationship. Sisirkumar Das (*History of Indian Literature: Western Impact, Indian Response*) observes that there were only a handful of translations from one Indian language into another at the beginning of the nineteenth century, produced mainly to meet the demands of pedagogy. There were plenty of translations from Bengali into many other Indian languages. Tulsi Das' *Ramcharit Manas* found an Urdu translation and the first Marathi novel, *Yamunaparyatan*, got translated into Kannada. Sisirkumar Das also notes that geographically contiguous literatures got translated into one another more often, like Kannada into Marathi or Marathi into Gujarati; he also says that South Indian languages got translated more into one another than into the languages of the North. But this is not always true, as for example, Malayalam has more works translated from Bengali and Hindi than from Kannada, Tamil and Telugu.

The translation scene in India underwent a major transformation with English joining India's linguistic landscape. Three areas of translation prospered during the colonial times: translation of Indian literary texts into English; translation of English language texts as also the European language texts available in English versions into Indian languages; and translation from one Indian language into another. Tejaswini Niranjana, in *Siting Translation*, has studied the working of the colonial ideology in the translations done during the period. Translations of texts like *Bhagavat Gita*, *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra* were mainly meant to help the rulers understand the Hindu ethos and practices while old literary texts like *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, besides being excellent literature, also satisfied their orientalist mindset with its concept of the wild, exotic East and its coy, vulnerable and beautiful women (see Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, where she contrasts Kalidasa's frail heroine with the brave and independent Sakuntala of *Mahabharata*) in the West. If first the translations were made by Western scholars like William Jones, by the late nineteenth century, Indian scholars like Romesh Chandra Dutt (*Lays of Ancient India* -1894, *Mahabharata*-1899, *Ramayana* -1902) also joined the effort, sometimes with the noble intention of correcting Western perceptions of Indian texts. This is a living tradition, as we realize from the practices of P. Lal, A. K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Velcheru Narayana Rao, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arshia Sattar, H. S. Shivaprakash, Ranjit Hoskote, Vijay Nambisan, Bibek Debroy and several other poets and scholars. The translation between Indian languages during the period of the freedom struggle was no more just a literary exercise, it helped in the building

of a nation. These translations during the late colonial period and the early years of independence were not profit-oriented; dedicated translators came up in many languages making a Tagore, a Sarat Chandra Chatterjee or a Premchand household names across the country.

Translation came to be institutionalized in independent India as a consequence of the State's perception that emotional integration of India is possible only through arts, and literature had a major role to play here. The idea of translation thus got linked all the more to the idea of the Nation. If nation, as Benedict Anderson says, is an "imagined community", literature plays a role in creating and sustaining that community. India's linguistic economy underwent a change after 1947 and mother-tongues were perceived to be the chief markers of identity and carriers of tradition. Inter-language translation continues to be one of the chief activities of the Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust, two public institutions created in the times of Jawaharlal Nehru's liberal and forward-looking regime. Now we also have other national projects like the National Translation Mission, meant to translate knowledge-texts from English into Indian languages (and hopefully vice-versa), and Indian Literature Abroad, meant to make significant Indian literary texts available in foreign languages.

Inter-language translations have played a major role in creating movements across linguistic territories. Horizontal translations of patriotic as well as social-reformist works during the Independence Movement played a role in shaping our national consciousness. The same is also true of Progressive literature, where translations of the likes of Premchand, Manto, Krishan Chander, Amrita Pritam, Jayakantan and Thakazhi played a pivotal role, encouraging an egalitarian ethos. It happened again during the Modernist movement – I remember how the works of Mardhekar, Muktibodh, Gopalakrishna Adiga, Nakulan, Dilip Chitre, Anantamurthy, Nirmal Verma and others got translated into Malayalam during the nineteen-sixties. It is happening again now, contributing to Dalit and Feminist literary movements in many languages. The translations of Marathi Dalit writings have been crucial in the creation of a similar body of literature in other languages like Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi or Gujarati, though later many of these languages discovered the existence of earlier works. Translations have also played a role in the creation of genres in languages where they had not originally existed.

Let me conclude, pointing to certain challenges faced by inter-language translation in India:

One: Globalisation and the cultural amnesia it imposes on countries like ours are leading to the marginalization of this important activity. We are becoming more and more monolingual at least in terms of linguistic competence

whereas inter-language translation requires competence in at least two Indian languages including some knowledge of the regional cultures and literary traditions that inform the texts. Two: Despite the level playing field supposed to be available for inter-language translators, the field in reality is not always that. For example, Meenakshi Mukherjee, speaking of her experience of translating Alka Saraogi's Hindi novels into Bangla, points out how Bangla resists translations from other Indian languages, including Hindi, even while translations from Bangla are plentifully available in Hindi and other Indian languages. Three: Literary translation is mostly confined to certain genres like the novel. This choice is dictated more by commercial interest than social or aesthetic concern as in some languages poetry, drama, discursive prose or short story may be doing better than novel as a genre. This creates gaps and unevenness in our understanding of other literatures. Four: Truly contemporary works rarely get translated as it takes time for a new work written in an Indian language, unlike one written in English, to gain national notice. Only works produced by certain movements sometimes get translated as they often appear in academic curricula or are politically relevant. Five: There is a dearth of competent translators in each language from many other languages. To take the case

of Malayalam, direct translations into Malayalam happen only from Hindi, Bangla, Marathi, Tamil and Kannada. Even here, except in the case of Hindi, it is often one or two translators who do the job and they are often without followers. Our universities are doing next to nothing to create or upgrade skills in languages other than the mother tongues. This means we keep falling back on mediated, indirect translations, mostly using English versions (at times Hindi versions) which may be far removed from the original and may well erase cultural markers. Six: There are very few journals in languages which promote inter-language translations, and publishers in many languages too are indifferent to them, not to speak of the lack of quality editing. Seven: Whatever little translation happens here is also accidental, hardly schematic. The result again is unevenness of impressions. There are few impact/reception studies on the original works to ensure their reception in another language.

We need to understand translation as an attempt to retrieve our peoples' histories, often lost or distorted because of colonial interventions; to resituate their pasts and reassess their presents; and to grasp their modes of imagination and creativity. And this, no doubt, is best done in the peoples' own languages.