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UNDERSTANDING TRANSLATION OF INDIAN LITERATURE INTO ENGLISH DURING  
COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ERA: A SOCIO-HISTORICO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The present proposal is an attempt to understand the translation of Indian literature into English during the colonial and postcolonial era particularly in socio-political and historical contexts. India has long tradition of translating the texts from one to another language. It begins with the translation of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* from Sanskrit to local Indian languages. Translation has always been a significant part of Indian Literature. It plays a noteworthy role in the understanding, analyzing and examining the socio-political aspect of Indian literature in colonial and postcolonial era. Doubtlessly, English is the language of global market and also well accepted in the multinational country like India, therefore Indian literature translated into English has its unique place. Besides, in order to accelerate the interest in translation, many agencies and institution like Sahitya Academy, National Book Trust, and National Translation Mission have been established for this purpose.

The translation of India literatures into English language is a vital transformation for providing a space for sharing the Indian literature with not knowing Indian languages readers. By using the tool of translation, Indian rich literary traditions has been relocated and reasserted in world literature scenario. Besides, an attempt is made to comprehend the colonial designs behind the translation of that era and similarly the compulsions (market) of the postcolonial era are to be discussed.

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The present proposal is an attempt to understand the translation of Indian literature into English during the colonial and postcolonial era particularly in socio-political and historical contexts. Even though colonial and postcolonial eras have their own historical and socio-political specificities, various aspects related to translation of Indian Literature into English can be seen in continuation. As John McLeod, Professor of Postcolonial and Diasporic Literatures University of Leeds England, has pointed out in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, "Postcolonialism recognises both historical continuity and change. It acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still with us today even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonization (33)". At the same time, an attempt will be

made to comprehend the colonial designs behind the translation during that era alongside compulsions (say from the viewpoint of market) of the postcolonial era have to be unravelled.

In colonial period, English was the language of colonizers, therefore it had the hegemonic status in India. In the present scenario, also, English is the language of global market and also well accepted in the multilingual country like India, therefore Indian literature translated into English has its unique place because of the colonial past and the politics of the supremacy of English. Besides, in order to accelerate the interest in translation, many agencies and institutions like Sahitya Academy, National Book Trust, some publication houses and National Translation Mission have been established for this purpose. They have been engaged in the promotion of Indian books to the wider readership as part of their mandate. Sahitya Academy has established four centers for translation at Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Delhi and Santiniketan. These centers have translated Indian books into English in collaboration with the National Book Trust.

Translation has always been a significant part of Indian Literature. It begins with the translation of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from Sanskrit to local Indian languages that are easily understood by the people in medieval times. In the Indian tradition there is an exalted notion of translators. Tulsidas, Krittivas, Pampa or Kamban who translated great epics are regarded as great poets. This is in keeping with our multilingual and multicultural set up which allow translation to evolve freely as a creative activity and not to be tied down by theories. The translator, on the other hand, is a reader and co-author at the same time.

But the significant translations took place at the time of Emperor Akbar. In his effort to promote understanding among religions and promote interfaith dialogue, Akbar sponsored debates among scholars of different religions and encouraged the translation of Sanskrit, Turkish, and Arabic text into Persian. Persian translation of Sanskrit texts including *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavat Gita*, *Bhagavat Puran*, *Athrava Veda* etc. had taken place in this era. Prince Dara Shikoh's (1615-1659) interest in comparative understanding of Hinduism and Islam encouraged him to take assistance from the *Pundits* of Banaras with a Persian translation of *Upanishda* was completed in 1657 with the title *Sirri Akabar* or *Sirri Asrar* (*The Great Secret*). This text was translated into English by Nathaniel Halhead (1751-1830) and into French and Latin by Anquetil Duperron (1731-1805). His own work, *Majmua Al-bahrain* written in 1654-55, was translated into English by Mahfuzul Haq in 1929.

Harish Trivedi divided Indian literature translated into English into four categories in the article..... as following:

- a) Indological phase: This phase consists of the literature written in Sanskrit or Pali in ancient and medieval era and it is translated into English.
- b) Neo-Orientalist or Post Orientalist phase: It includes the *Bhakti Kaal* texts translated into English.
- c) National Allegory (Fredrich Jameson): In this phase, the translation of the realistic writers like Munshi Prem Chand is occurred.
- d) Internationalism/Universalism: Modernist writers are being translated into English

Similarly, G.N. Devy (120) divides history of translation into four parts in his book *In Another Tongue: Essays on English Literature*:

- a) The Colonial Phase (1776-1910)
- b) The Revivalist Phase (1876-1950)
- c) The Nationalist Phase (1902-1929)
- d) The Formalist Phase (1912 onwards)

The great moment for translation in India came in 1750 during colonial period under the guidance of Warren Hastings who was the Governor of Bengal. He encouraged the young officers and merchants to understand Indian languages and cultures in order to be successful in Commerce and trade. Charles Wilkins published a Sanskrit grammar in 1779. He is considered as the first Englishman to learn Sanskrit. He translated *The Bhagwat Geeta* in 1785, and this is the first Sanskrit text available in English through translation. John Marshal translated *Sama Veda* from Bengali to English and the *Bhagwat Purana* from Persian to English. He played a great role in establishing printing in Indian languages. William Jones (1764-94) founded the Asiatic

Society of Bengal in 1784 to understand Indian culture and he translated Kalidas' *Sacontala* (1789) the *GeetaGovind* (1792) the *Manusmriti* (1794), and the *Hitopadesha* into English during this period. This text was widely appreciated by the western readership. William Jones is believed to be the founder of Indology. John Gilchrist along with his colleagues translated simple Urdu works like *Gulistan*, *Dastan Amir Hamza*, *Qissa Alif Laila o Laila*. These translations were being done in order to make British officers familiar with the Indian culture, who came to India to rule the country. Omar Khayam was one of the most famous and beloved Persian poets of the middle ages. The most famous translation of the *Robaiyat* from Persian into English was undertaken in 1859 by Edward J. Fitzgerald. Prof. Max Muller (1823-1900) edited and translated fifty one volume of *The Sacred Books of the East* which enclosed translations by various scholars from different locations and backgrounds.

All the translations of the above said texts include perceptive, astute forewords and appendices. These commentaries clearly indicate that almost all the translations by the colonizers of this era were designed to construct, propagate and perpetuate hegemonic ethnographic agenda of the promotion of the superiority of their race. By adding the western cultural status to the works translated, they intended to colonize the Orient and control the native. It was the part of an approach to understand colonized people by asserting the superiority of colonizers' cultural and literary canons. Edward Said rightly observes in his well known book *Orientalism*, "Orientalism is not mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts" (12). The primary aim was to provide necessary cultural information to colonial officers in order to manage and rule natives. Bassnett and Trivedi also indicate the similar notion about the motif of colonial translations, "colonialism and translation went hand in hand" (3). According to Tejaswini Niranjana translation had to serve "to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning" (12).

Mahasweta Sengupta in her essay "Translation as Manipulation" recognizes this potential:

While choosing texts for rewriting, the dominant power appropriates only those texts that conform to the pre-existing discursive parameters of its linguistic networks. These texts are then rewritten largely according to a certain pattern that denudes them of their complexity and variety; they are presented as specimens of a culture that is simple, natural, and in the case of India other worldly or spiritual as well. (159)

Such a rendition clearly justifies the colonizer's 'civilizing mission', through which the inherent superiority of the colonizer's culture is established. Translation involves distortion, subversion, manipulation and appropriation.

One can easily sense the intention of the colonizer scholars like James Mills and Macaulay in the discipline of history, culture and literature. Tejaswini Niranjana cited James Mill in her book *Siting Translation* that "India must discard his Indianness in order to become civilized (58)". Lefevere quotes Rubaiyat translator Edward Fitzgerald's comment in his letter to his friend E.B. Cowell in 1851: "It is amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persian who....are not poets enough to frighten one from such excursions and who really do want a little art to shape them" (3-4). Iran B. Hussani Jewett also points "Fitzgerald's British arrogance his belief of his inherent English superiority" permitted him to assume that his insufficient familiarity with Persian would be enough for his translation project. Further, she asserts that, "enabled Fitzgerald to compose his masterpiece in his own ways" (143).

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772 –1833), known as the morning star of Indian Renaissance, was greatly influenced by the liberal outlook of the colonizers. He translated *Upanishads* into English in 1830s, similarly Indian translators like Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) translated Indian classic texts like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata and the Rigveda* in English. Pali Jatkas was translated into English by TW Rhys David in six volumes from 1877 to 1896. Bankim's novels, *Anandamath* (1882) in particular, were translated into most of

the major Indian languages. The Punjabi legend of *Heer-Ranjha* (*Heer*) written by Waris Shah (1722-1798) was translated into English under the title of *Waris Shah: The Adventures of Hir and Ranjha* by Charles Frederick Usborne (1874 -1919).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) translated the poems of Kabir. He understands the hegemonic status of English and translates his own poems in *Gitanjali* from Bengali to English. He got Nobel Prize for this anthology in 1913. Sri Aurobindo translated *Gita* in the colonial era and *Vidyapati* in 1956. It can be noted that many Indian scholars and translators helped the western translators but they are not mentioned seriously in these translated texts. In the post-colonial period, the need is felt to reconstruct, rethink and rediscover various new perspectives on the relationship between source and target texts. Bassnett argues, “Both original and translation are now viewed as equal products of the creativity of writer and translator....it is up to the writer to fix words in an ideal unchangeable form and it is the task of the translator to liberate those words from the confines of their source language and allow them to live again in the language into which they are translated” (5). The Translation from one Indian language to another Indian language was very rare just after the Independence. However, even though the postcolonial moment belonged to translation from Indian languages into English, the translation scene even in English was fairly desultory in the first three decades after independence.

Aside from the Akademi, some significant translations during this period were those sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO is an organization of the United Nations and its Collection of Representative Works is a translation project that has been executed from 1948 to about 2005. The purpose of the project was to translate masterpieces of world literature into English and French. Foremost among them are: Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's Bengali novel *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* (1968, trs. T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji), known world-wide for its film version by Satyajit Ray; Manik Bandopadhyay's Bengali novel, *The Puppet's Tale* (1968, tr. S.L. Ghosh); Munshi Premchand's Hindi novel, *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow* (1968, tr. Gordon Roadermal) and Aziz Ahmad's Urdu novel, *The Shore and the Wave* (1971, tr. Ralph Russell). Dalip Chitre, AK Ramanujan, R.Parthasarthy, and Arun Kolatkar translated their own works in English.

In the globalised capitalistic phase during 80s, market/business emerged as one of the forceful sectors in this neocolonial era. With the expansion of education, a class of readers emerged from middle class who were comfortable in English language. Consequently, many publishing houses start translation projects for instance, the birth of Penguin Books India in the mid-1980s marked a significant moment in the history of Indian literature in English translation. When it began publishing Indian authors in English translation, mainly fiction, translated fiction attained a kind of visibility it never enjoyed earlier. Among the many success stories of Penguin the most notable are the short stories and novellas of Satyajit Ray from Bengali, beginning with *Adventures of Feluda* (1988), and then running into several other volumes, Bhisham Sahni's novel, *Tamas: Darkness* (1989) from Hindi, *Classic Telugu Short Stories* (1995) edited by Ranga Rao, all of which went on to become bestsellers and have registered steady sales ever since they were published. Penguin's foray into translation and their growing clout actuated others like Rupa & Company (which later tied up with Harper Collins) of Delhi, Seagull Books of Kolkata to expand their corpus in translation. Rupa's three-volume *Stories About the Partition of India* (Alok Bhalla (ed) 1997) which showcased 63 short stories in English translation from 9 Indian languages and became an instant bestseller, as it came out bang on the occasion of the completion of fifty years of India's partition, a tragic event that changed the complexion of the Indian sub-continent forever. Seagull Books, Kolkata has been running a project of translating the entire corpus – including short stories and novels -- of Mahasweta Devi, of which nearly twenty volumes have come out so far.

The most ambitious and systematic project of translating Indian novels into English was launched by Macmillan India Ltd in 1996 in a series called 'Modern Indian Novels in English Translation.' By now, it has published more than 100 novels. These translations are accompanied by an elaborate editorial apparatus – a scholarly introduction by a critic of the original language, a Translator's Note and an elaborate (compensatory) glossing in footnotes. Some of these novels have already been put on the syllabi of universities in India and

abroad. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, literary critic, scholar and Professor at Columbia University, has translated a number of stories by Mahasweta Devi (b1926). She provides translator's analysis and notes to every story. She claims that her translations are not only for the western audience, she writes in her 'Translator's Preface to Imaginary Maps' that she caters to both, her words, "This book is going to be published in both India and the United States. As such it faces in two directions, encounters two readerships with a strong exchange in various enclaves. As a translator and a commentator, I must imagine them as I write. Indeed, much of what I write will be produced by these two-faced imaginings, even as it will no doubt produce the difference, yet once again" (xvii - xviii).

The fiction of Gurdial Singh (b 1933) who is a Jananpeeth Awardee Punjabi writer has been translated into English by Rana Nayar, Pushpinder Syal and Ajmer Rode. Rana Nayar points out the reasons for his inclination towards translation from Punjabi to English, "Every time I thought about English, I found it hard to shed this consciousness of it being a historical burden, a legacy of the colonial rule and hegemony. With time, it became increasingly difficult to shake off this burden, as it slowly became an inseparable part of my professional responsibilities, even my breath and being. So, translation seemed to be the only natural way out of his bind, the only way of harnessing professional knowledge of English in service of my own knowledge and culture-Punjabi" (ix). Harish Trivedi translated the poems of well known Hindi writer Kedarnath(1934). Omparakash Valmiki's (1950 -2013) autobiography *Joothan* (1997) was translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee and Balbir Madhopuri's (b1955) autobiography *Chhangai Rukh (Against the Night)* by Tripti Jain in 2010. The works of Lal Singh Dil (1943 – 2007) are translated by Nirupma Dutt. Rajasthani writer Vijaydan Detha's works have been translated into English. The Painful experiences of Dalit writers in their autobiographies reach to wider readership through translation. The translation of these autobiographies in English provides a new idiom to English language.

Translation plays a noteworthy role in the understanding, analyzing and examining the socio-political aspect of Indian literature in colonial and postcolonial era. The translation of Indian literatures into English language is a vital transformation for providing a wider space for sharing the Indian literature with not knowing Indian languages readers. It is a well established fact that translation skips the barriers and brings people closer. With the emergence of Globalization, Privatization and Liberalization, the world has become a kind of village. The distances have been reduced rapidly due to easily accessible Information Technology. Being social creatures, it is significant to know about the cultures of the cosmos. Besides, in the multilingual and multicultural country like India, the rich cultures of entire India can be comprehended with the help of translation. By using the tool of translation, Indian rich literary traditions have been relocated and reasserted in the world literature scenario. The Internet, new technologies, machine translation and the emergence of a worldwide, multi-million dollar translation industry have dramatically altered the complex relationship between translators, language and power. In the recent times, the studies, discussions and debates at the world level have been emerging rapidly, in the words of Susan Bassnett:

The 1980s was a decade of consolidation for the fledging discipline known as Translation Studies. Having emerged onto the world stage in the late 1970s, the subject began to be taken seriously, and was no longer seen as an unscientific field of inquiry and secondary importance. Throughout the 1980s interest in the theory and practice of translation grew steadily. Then 1990s, Translation Studies finally came into its own, for this proved to be the decade of its global expansion. Once perceived as a marginal activity, translation began to be seen as a fundamental act of human exchange. Today, interest in the field of translation is taking place alongside an increase in its practice all over the world. (1)

The absence of any dialogue among translators about their craft and the lack of any tradition of documentation of problems encountered by individual translators meant that they worked in a kind of vacuum, depending mainly on their instincts and their own resources. However, the institutions like National Book Trust and Bhartya Anuvad Parishad, University Publications and Central Institute of Indian Languages are playing significant role in breaching the barriers and creative dialogue through translation. And more recently,

with the help of National Translation Mission under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India, there is a kind of boom in translation. Translation is at the centre of the intellectual climate of the time. Any lsm may begin or end but the translation goes on. Translation is the representation of Indian plurality. In the recreation of texts in different languages, spaces, situations, are also created memories, newer paradigms, ideologies, politics, always subject to further translations. Translation need not always be the act of negotiation with or intervening into a text to re-create and rewrite it in a different language. It could be manifest as a cultural enterprise with social bearing, such flexibility in the usage helps to locate the idea of translation at the level of social commitment.

On the basis of the discussion, it can be concluded that British translators of Indian writings into English in the colonial era were highly conscious about their economic interests, their so called civilizing mission, their culture superiority, and the motif of the spreading Christianity. In the post colonial era the translators are deeply aware of the market compulsions of their translation works. Their translations can be seen as postcolonial reclaiming of India's history, culture and politics. They are also well familiar with the hegemonic status of English within India and abroad and at the same time they attempt to become counter-hegemonic in relation to the West. But it is also true that the translators keep Western and Indian elite target readership in mind consciously or unconsciously when they make choice to translate into English. In the end, it can be said that translators have granted significant contribution not only to Indian literature but also to literature as a whole providing an alternative perspective to the representation of the third world in the literature.

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#### A brief bio of Author

**Sushil Kumar (Dr)** is working as an Assistant Professor (English) at Punjabi University Campus Talwandi Sabo, Punjab India. He did PhD on the novels of Shashi Tharoor. He has more than 10 year teaching experience. He presented a paper at Shu Te University, Taiwan in 2009 and received Certificate of Appreciation. He had participated in many workshops and Conferences on Translation. He wrote a book Anuvad Da Samvad (Discourse on Translation in Punjabi. This book is prescribed in BA Honours Syllabus of University of Delhi. His book Rereading of Gurdial Singh's Fiction, is a collection of translation of some articles on Gurdial Singh (Jananpeeth Awardee Punjabi Writer). He translated short stories of Pakistani writer Bushra Ejaz in Snake and Shadow (2009). Now, he is working on translation of some articles from English to Punjabi.