



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

TRANSLATION AND CULTURE: THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

As a discipline, Translation studies is comparatively new and is still in the process of mapping its territory because the mode of transmitting cultural elements through literary translation is a complicated task encompassing compendium of experiences: including history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. In recent times, there seems to be a sudden upsurge of interest for translation in English studies in India perhaps due to the impact of decolonization in our outlook and rejection of the uncritical acceptance of literature in dominant western languages. English is now admittedly a vast reservoir of translation in India.

Key Words: Territory, English studies, literary translation, culture.

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INTRODUCTION

My article analyzes the role of translation from the Indian perspective, which is a nation of ethnic and cultural diversity and where people speak multi-languages. Without translation, India with its 22 languages, 15 different scripts, hundreds of mother-tongues and thousands of dialects would have remained a mono cultural world, deprived of its rich and diverse ancient heritage. As a discipline, Translation studies is comparatively new and is still in the process of mapping its territory because the mode of transmitting cultural elements through literary translation is a complicated task encompassing compendium of experiences: including history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. In recent times, there seems to be a sudden upsurge of interest for translation in English studies in India perhaps due to the impact of decolonization in our outlook and rejection of the uncritical acceptance of literature in dominant western languages. English is now admittedly a vast reservoir of translation in India. Khubchandani aptly remarks that the “filter language” is no longer a colonial language but it has become a conduit to link India’s heterogeneous linguistic world in all its interrelatedness and estrangement.

The India Perspective

Before coming to deal with translation studies in the Indian perspective, it is necessary to understand the realm of translation: its processes, practices and new developments. Translation is related to words and words are nothing but a translation of ideas or experiences. In this sense, every act of communication is an act of translation. In the absence of words there would be no world and there would be no sharing of knowledge; translation facilitates this process of communication. “Anuvaad” is the accepted equivalent of the English word, “translation”, in Hindi. It is derived from the Sanskrit word “Anuvaadeh” which means “Repetition” in normal use, repetition in order to support, exemplify or explain; explanatory repetition or mentioning of already said talk ‘message’. (Apte 41-42). Etymologically the word “Anuvaad” is a combination

of the root word “Vaad” meaning a statement or argument, and the prefix “Anu” meaning “after following” (Apte 35). The process of translation runs through different stages, initiating from the ‘source language’ to ‘target language’- transliteration and transcreation. Transliteration or literal translation is word to word, phrase to phrase or sentence to sentence carrying over the target text to the source text. The aim of such translation is to reproduce meanings of the source text and the immediate effect it has on the readers of another culture in whose language the text is to be translated. Transcreation on the other hand means a partial or complete freedom to the translator in dealing with the source text. The translator renders the Source Text in a recreated form in the Target Language. Another step in translation is ‘Transfer’: the stage in which the analyzed material is transferred in the mind of the translator from the Source Text to Target Text. The final stage is the “restructuring” of the transferred material. When translation produces the same effect as on the original audience – then translation can be considered equivalent to the Source Text.

### **Evolution and growth**

It is believed that the practice of translation in India has been prevailing “without a name or style” (Mukherjee 25). Mr. Khubchandani, the critic considers “Narad” a character from Hindu mythology as the first example of “an interpreter in intercultural setting” (46). He also refers to another religious figure i.e. Buddha who delivered messages. Sujeet Mukherjee believes that translation in India derived from the master language Sanskrit to other modern languages (bhaashaas) like Hindi, Bangla, and Gujarati etc. Unlike the west where translation originated from the biblical works, the source languages texts in India were not religious scriptures like the Vedas but myths and famous poetic works like the “*Ramayana*” “*Mahabharata*” and the “*Srimad Bhagavat Gita*” (Mukherjee 25-26). Up to the nineteenth century our literature consisted only of translations, adaptations, interpretations and retellings of literary works as well as knowledge-texts: discourses on medicine, astronomy, metallurgy, travel, ship-building, architecture, philosophy, religion and poetics from Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Persian and Arabic. These kept our cultural scene vibrant and enriched our awareness of the world for long. Most of our ancient writers were multilingual: Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* has Sanskrit and Prakrit; poets like Vidyapati, Kabir, Meerabai, Guru Nanak, Namdev and others composed their songs and poems in more than one language. It is only through the medium of translation that the stories of *Panchatantra* went westward to reappear in form of Aesop's Fables and the stories of different countries and languages could be adapted and abridged easily. Examples are the stories of Hans Christian Anderson from English to Indian regional languages.

If we look back at history then it is observed that during the Mughal period in India, the focus of translation shifted from Sanskrit to “Persian”, the “ruler's language” (Mukherjee 26). Emperor Akbar patronized Persian and got translated the great epics like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and many other works into Persian. After the coming of the East India Company in India, translation of Indian languages to European languages became popular. Charles Wilkins in 1785 translated the “*Bhagavat Gita*” first time into English directly from Sanskrit. However despite the invasion of English, Indian languages had their own individual identities and rich literary traditions though no great initiative was taken by the British for promoting translation activity among the Indian languages. The freedom movement and the nationalistic temper resulted in translation of Bankim Chandra in Bengali and Premchand in Hindi. Numerous European texts were also translated into Sanskrit, Bengali and other local languages. Translation during this period was more an expression of cultural identity and assertion of the native self. The major authors of this period like A.K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Sujit Mukherjee approached translation from the regional / local and democratic outlook towards culture and nation.

### **The post-colonial temper**

In the post-colonial period, the need was felt to reconstruct and rediscover various new perspectives on the relationship between source and target texts. It was during this period that we witnessed Tagore translating his own poems “*Gitanjali*” from Bengali to English which is thought of as a landmark in the history of Indian literature in English translation and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913. The reasons that prompted Tagore to translate into English seem to be valid even today for the regional Indian writer – to be known at the national level you have to be translated into English rather than any other Indian language. It

seemed to embody the spirit of India. . The activity of English translation begun by Sir William Jones with his *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, was also an attempt to 'discover' India's ancient cultural roots and showcase them to the west. This was an orientalist enterprise. Indian translators also employed translation as a tool to knit the country with concepts of nationalism and the nation.

Translation became very popular in the post-independence period and translation theorist P. Lal conceived of a new translation method which he termed as "transcreation" meaning, "recreating a Source Language text in the target language, taking absolute liberty with it and yet being fidel with it". (Das 62) Transcreation in form of translation were made of famous epical works like 'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharata' by R. K. Narayan and Chakravarti Rajagopalchari respectively. People realized that translation of literary works from one Indian language into as many or most of all other Indian languages will achieve the target of the Indian audience and promote unity while preserving diversity. There were translations made from one Indian language to another, as well as, translations from Indian languages into English. Take for instance, A. K. Ramanujam's translation of his English poem 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' in contemporary language. The spurt in the activity of translation into English was an indicator of a larger socio-cultural phenomenon which is understood as globalization.

The India government in 1980s took the initiative towards the development and preservation of languages and literatures in India by instituting "Sahitya Academy", an Indian government organization. The wave of Globalization broke down the artificial barriers between languages and cultures, obliterated boundaries between the real and the imagined, between the orient and the occident. In recent years, not only the number of translation has increased but there is more focus in publishing and marketing translation. The scene today is that Macmillan, Penguin and Katha are but a prominent few publishing houses which publish quality translations in English.

In translation studies there are different areas of language transfer like literary, scientific, technical translation et and. translation takes various forms such as; Literary translation that translates foreign literature into Indian languages, Indian literature into foreign languages and Indian literature in one language into other Indian languages. The mentoring tool of such translation is the Dictionary .The recent spate of literary festivals all over the world and the recent book fairs organized across the globe at Frankfurt, Paris, London, Bologna, Abu Dhabi etc have contributed to this rising fascination. The Government of India has also recently responded to this new interest by launching a new mission, Indian Literature Abroad (ILA). Big Indian publishing concerns like Penguin, Macmillan, Orient Longman, Oxford University Press, Harper-Collins, etc as well as smaller houses are encouraging translations of literary and discursive works in a big way. Knowledge Translation is another form that translates textbooks and classical works in areas like sociology, history, geography, geology, medicine, chemistry, physics, mathematics, linguistics and political science into the Indian languages. This helps to render accessible current and cutting-edge knowledge, to the rural poor and the backward sections of the society. In the domain of Cultural Translation the receptor's culture attains centrality and translational strategies are accordingly used. Like Emperor Akbar translated Persian texts into European culture through the medium of Latin that received the central focus.

In Discursive translation the written part of the spoken and spoken part of the written are taken into consideration. The famous autobiographies are the best examples. Media translation encompasses print, electronic, visual and auditory media like the newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema etc.

The major difference between translation practice in the West and in India is that in the West, translation is considered a complicated linguistic and literary act, while in India it is an inevitable way of life. In the West, translation is critically scrutinized by different theories of Structuralism, Deconstruction Psycho-analysis Gender, post-colonial discourse etc .In contrast; the focus in India is on the realistic aspect of the process of translation. Keeping In perspective the Indian tradition of multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism, translation has been a major tool for negotiating social tensions, language-conflicts, social transitions and cultural experience for understanding the remarkable unity underlying them.

### **Recent trend**

In the last thirty years similar to the west, translation theories have also developed in India and in this context two renowned theorists worth mentioning are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Harish Trivedi. Spivak translated Jacques Derrida from French and Mahashweta Devi from Bengali into English. She explicitly “outlined a post-culturalist conception of language use” (Venuti, 1990s, 338). Trivedi looks at translation as a post-colonial experiment which is interdisciplinary in nature. Besides Spivak and Trivedi, there are other translators of whom Tejaswini Niranjana and Rita Kothari are of international acclaim. Niranjana like a post-colonist believes that the translated text should disrupt the text to show “the contemporary difficulty ... in modes of cultural exchange” (Noor 607; Viswanatha and Simon 173). Reviewing the translation tradition in India, translation theorists have realized that translation is an uphill task and “it is probably much easier to rewrite the text in the other language than to translate it” (Woolsey, 166).

Translation is no longer thought of as a linguistic activity done in isolation, but as the product of a broader cultural context that encompass plural belief system. Andre Lefebvre was one of the first theorists to adopt this stance. According to him, “Translation needs to be studied in connection with power and patronage, ideology and poetics, with emphasis on the various attempts to shore up or undermine an existing ideology or an existing poetics” (10). He adds that it has to be studied in terms of the language and text that are being translated, besides the questions of why, how and who translates. He goes on: “Seen in this way translation can be studied as one of the strategies, cultures develop to deal with what lies outside their boundaries and to maintain their own character while doing so – the kind of strategy that ultimately belongs to the realm of change and survival, not in dictionaries and grammars” (10). In the globalized phase of 1980s, with the expansion of market, a class of readers emerged from the middle class who were comfortable in English language. The discipline of translation studies was started being taken seriously and the interest for its theory and practice grew steadily. Once perceived as a marginal activity translation studies thus emerged as a global art of human exchange and in 1990s it became an increased practice all over the world.

### **Conclusion**

As a medium, translation has played a key role in understanding, analyzing and dissecting the socio-political aspects of Indian literature. It has helped to knit India together as a nation throughout her history linking lands and communities together. Ideas and concepts like 'Indian literature', 'Indian culture', 'Indian philosophy' and 'Indian knowledge systems' are the outcomes of translation. Undoubtedly translation has been a mirror and has led to the promotion and enrichment of indigenous literature by translating masterpieces of great masters of world literature as Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidasa and Bhasa or more contemporary writers: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beckett, Lorca, Eliot and Thomas Mann to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Orhan Pamuk, J. M. Coetzee, Pablo Neruda, Octavia Paz and others. These exchanges also have created new movements and trends. Translation has enabled the weaker sections of the society to be heard. Thus translation contributes to the empowerment of the marginalized sections like the poor women dalits, tribals, minorities disabled and others. J.B.Casagrande has aptly observed: “In effect, one does not translate languages, one translates culture ...” In fact Translation has become a cross-cultural event. In recent times in India, an “inter-language” is being developed at the IIT, Kanpur in the name of “Anusaarana” which allows a reader who knows one language to have a direct access to the text in another language through Human Aided Machine Translation (HAMT). Although contemporary translation theory has evolved a long way since its beginnings, it now stands on the threshold of a very exciting new phase of language, literary discourse and identity. It has taken a cultural turn. However as a discipline, translation study still has its own problems. The greater problem lies in catching the right mood, tone, intention, feeling and sense of the original writer.

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