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Translation as Tradition: Reimagining Indian Textuality Across Languages and Eras

Dipti Ranjan Maharana
Associate Professor, Ravenshaw University

Gourika Sharma
Research Scholar, Ravenshaw University

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the history of Indian literature in the context of its translation into English, which is in itself part of the larger historical development of translation in India. It begins with the translations of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into regional tongues. This culminated in a flourishing cross-cultural and cross-linguistic literary practice. As a global lingua franca and due to the multilingual scenario in India, English provides a gateway for Indian literature to be acquainted with a wider readership. With the translation of Indian literary works into English, those not acquainted with any of the Indian languages are provided an entry into the world of Indian culture. This translates not just to geopolitical boundaries within which India's literary works deserve recognition. This paper critiques the motives of an era of colonial translation, which often worked towards imperial goals, before offering the view of the postcolonial period, which would work towards market needs and restoring India's place in the global perspective. Furthermore, initiatives like Sahitya Akademi, National Book Trust, and National Translation Mission have helped shape this image from within the country, showing how important such activities remain for fostering a global understanding of India's literature and culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

To translate in the Indian context is far more than just the exchange of words and phrases; it is a powerful and artistic endeavour. This literary concept is not new in the nearly 3,000-year-old civilisation of India; it is properly integrated into the country's identity. Translation has often bridged more than just languages. It has connected different eras, philosophies, and societies. In the culturally and linguistically rich India, with over a thousand languages spoken, the processes of translation have ensured that knowledge, literary arts, and spirituality thrive across different generations. The ancient traditions of the civilised world make it clear that translation is not merely an added extra; it is something indispensable that has occurred historically and continues to happen in terms of the collective will and consciousness of human beings.

Just like the culture of India, the historical processes of translation in India have preserved the intricate essence of the Indian translation landscape, including the emergence of metropolitan language translations of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, as well as Ashokan proclamations and other multilingual texts within India's borders. Such translations echo profound intersections of India's vernaculars. India's assortment of dialects did not pose an obstacle, as translation did exist as an innate feature of dialogue and an organic process for

cultural integration. Furthermore, the Bhakti and Sufi movements also transcended generic and regional borders, and for the universalist principles of love and worship, translation served as the channel to convey those messages. These illustrations illuminate India's social and trans-societal construct interventions through translation in a profound manner.

The colonial period marks a critical period in the history of translation in India. Earlier, there was a concentration on culture and amalgamation of styles. Translation during colonial times often bore the burden of imperialist motives. As Kothari (2003) points out, during the period of British rule, translation was used to Indianize English texts for administrative and ideological reasons. One example is the colonial undertaking of translating Sanskrit legal and literary works into English, which not only fostered new attitudes towards Indian customs but also transformed translation into a formalized scholarly discipline. At the same time, Dimock (1974) draws attention to colonial practices of translation that instituted an order of dominance among languages, placing English above Indian languages and diverting the course of India's language practices.

Even with the issues that colonisation brought, translation in India has persisted as an adaptive practice. It enables the reimagining of texts for various periods and audiences while preserving their fundamental essence. In this regard, this research posits that translation is not only a historical event but also an ongoing cultural practice that shapes contemporary India. This research aims to demonstrate how translation operates as an adaptive force in pre-modern, colonial, and post-colonial periods—simultaneously safeguarding and recontextualising history for future generations. Various types of translation serve not only as a means of expressing one language through another but also embody a culture synonymous with a country, plunging into the depths of its multicultural existence.

2. PRE-MODERN TRANSLATION PRACTICES: TRANSFORMATION AND ADAPTATION

2.1. Linguistic Negotiations in Ancient India

In ancient India, translation was more than an academic activity—it was a cultural imperative that made sense within the context of its multicultural and multilingual civilization. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, originally composed in Sanskrit, serve as striking examples of the transformative power of translation. These works transcended their inscriptive languages; they became culture-bound through their English translations, which spanned the length and breadth of India, transforming into regional vernaculars such as Tamil, Bengali, and Odia. This linguistic extension was not merely an exercise in transference but an act of remaking into which local cultural idioms and values were woven. As Gonda (1975) notes, Sanskrit served as a cohesive bond, an epicentre with which people shared a unifying culture, and at the same time, regionally altered classical texts, which were considered reinterpretations.

The Ashokan edicts (circa 3rd century BCE) epitomize the efforts of translation in governance and cultural expansion. These were Prakrit and other regional languages, which had diverse populations with different dialects; hence, this highlights the practicality of translation for communication and governance purposes. Such practices demonstrate a sense of regional and cultural diversity as well as an understanding of the need for accessible knowledge across different cultures. A source text did not bind translation during these times. Rather, it was about a core principle: perseverance of the essence of the intended message for the audience that is projected to be exposed to it.

2.2. Translation and Religious Narratives

Indian religious philosophies depended on translation on mass levels for these religions to flourish. One of the Silk Road religions, Buddhism and Jainism, serve as prime examples. Buddhist scriptures were written in Pali and Sanskrit. They were later on translated into border languages, such as Chinese, Tibetan, and Sinhala, to maximize the ease of crossing borders. Humphreys (1951) suggests that such movements of translation established a global imperial tradition of Buddhism. Similar to Jain religious texts, these employed differing dialects corresponding with set regions, highlighting the flexibility embedded in their teachings.

The emergence of the Bhakti and Sufi movements in the 14th–17th centuries also marked a new wave of poets, such as Kabir and Mirabai, who transformed the art of poetry. Josudasan (1961) comments on these movements, explaining how translation was not merely phonic but an act of devotion as they sought to represent metaphysical concepts in herculean idioms. Drawing from his works, through this movement, they strived to ensure their ideals reached the widest audience possible, which in turn united people with divergent backgrounds spiritually.

These narratives show us that ancient India had a certain level of flexibility or adaptability when it came to the practice of translation. This form of translation was not textbook-like; rather, it was deeply structural, taking into account the culture, society, and religion of that period. Ancient cultures and religions, languages, and philosophies were preserved and remained prominent in the hands of emerging societies.

3. COLONIAL ERA: TRANSLATION AS A TOOL OF EMPIRE

3.1. Institutionalizing Translation

In India, the colonial period marked a distinct change in both the approach to translation and its motives. Translations during the pre-colonial era were organic and culturally rooted, whereas, during the colonial period, translations were institutionalized and carried out for power and control. Orientalist scholars had a hand in this undertaking; they translated Indian legal, religious, and literary texts, doing so both to understand and to subdue the indigenous people. Dudley and Lang (1969) state that these translations were not endeavours of scholarly neutrality; in fact, they were very much part of the colonial undertakings aimed at British rule, which sought to justify British rule as a mission of civilization.

A pointer example of this is providing the legal text in different languages. To facilitate the British rule of India, the government used translated copies of Sanskrit legal works like Manusmriti and Vivardhanvasetu. The translated copies were usually biased and supported British ideologies while ignoring those who opposed their claims. Assimilating such translations perpetuated the British theory of restoration of ancient Indian legal ethics, which disregarded the evolutionary and adaptive constitutional law of India. Trivedi (2006a) observes that during colonial rule, translation into English was a tool of imperial control, while in postcolonial India, translation has become a way of reclaiming literary and cultural autonomy.

The contradictions of preservation and control emerged, as in many other cases, in the translation of literary texts. Abhijnanasakuntalam was translated into English by William Jones, an Orientalist who admired India's literary tradition, and his translations fueled a narrative of decline. By enshrining Indian texts as relics of a lost civilization, the British viewed them as lost remnants of a once glorious past devoid of the vibrant civilizations that still existed. These claims, as Mukherjee (1981) suggests, aid in the cultural domination of discourses about Indian culture since the British retained the ability to disregard any reality that was contrary to Indian frameworks of contemporary relevance.

3.2. Shaping Linguistic Hierarchies

The English language gained prominence in India as a result of colonial translation practices during the period. Things changed when English was made the means of communication during instruction. Operating English as the medium of instruction was formalized later when Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education was issued in the year 1835. It altered the socio-political and cultural contours of the subcontinent. The process was facilitated by translation such that British culture was better acquainted with Indian culture through British translations of Indian texts while at the same time fostering a class of Indians who fully assimilated and became Anglicized in taste, morals, intellect, and opinions.

The adoption of English as a dominant force resulted in more serious consequences for indigenous languages and their literary forms. Mukherjee's 1981 observations illustrate that the dominance of English indulged the neglect of the regional languages, and these languages were more and more looked down upon for scholarly or administrative purposes. With the shift in the language consideration also comes the disintegration of the systematic framework of knowledge circulation and pride, resulting in an inferiority complex among the speakers of indigenous languages. English became the preferred language to use as a means of modernity and civility resulting from the colonial project of translation, which was intended to restructure identity and cause dependence.

In addition, the focus placed on English translations of documents nearly always resulted in indigenous works being texted incorrectly. Out of sheer need to satisfy British taste, the authorities responsible for translations catered to their needs by changing or leaving out irrelevant material that would not be deemed fit. Not only were the source works misrepresented, but the works were also artificially homogenized and ethnocentrically interpreted in an Indian Eurocentric perception characterized by culture. For example, epic Sanskrit epics and Puranas were translated to English not only on an epic basis while devoid of meaning but also contextual meaning and cultural significance—the narrative was prose devoid of meaning to Literature Purse West.

An example of colonial control translation serves as both a tool of preservation and erasure. On the one hand, it offered Indian texts to an international audience and showcased the intellectual wealth embedded within the subcontinent, but on the other hand, it dismantled indigenous ecosystems of knowledge and order of languages that dominate and subjugate India's cultural and educational systems, inducing dominated revision and imposing cutoff.

4. POST-COLONIAL TRANSLATION AS AN IDENTITY TOOL FOR INDIA

4.1. Connecting Regional and National Narratives

In post-colonial India, translation served as an essential means of achieving national integration while accommodating the country's unparalleled multilingualism. With 22 scheduled languages and countless dialects, Indian people needed a way to understand one another cross-regionally and to facilitate cultural exchange. Translation helped close gaps in the regional literature and assisted in forming a collective national identity devoid of the erasure of local identities. Trivedi (2007) notes that in the postcolonial context, translation is often a political act involving issues of identity, representation, and power, especially when translating from 'Indian' languages into English.

The Sahitya Akademi, established in 1954, has been one of the frontrunners toward achieving this goal. The Akademi has translated many important works from one Indian language to another, thus enabling regional literary gems to be accessed beyond their linguistic confines. Tagore's Gitanjali and Premchand's Godaan are examples of works that the Akademi has made accessible to many through their translations. The Sahitya Akademi, beyond furnishing literary

translations, is awarding them for these translations, which proves their devotion toward this art and the encouragement of underestimation of India's multilingual culture.

With the establishment of the National Translation Mission (NTM) in 2008, translation became a state-sponsored institution. The NTM focuses on translating various advanced academic and technical documents to ensure the integration of non-English speakers into the higher educational systems. The enlightenment initiative reflects the post-colonial effort to revive regional vernaculars subjugated by colonialism. Dudley and Lang (1969) support the argument that such measures promote the dismantling of the colonial linguistic dominance framework, fostering equality among India's linguistically diverse populations. Staying in line with these institutional endeavours, Translation Today (TT), a journal published by the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), serves as an important venue for discussing issues of translation theory and practice. Translation Today has played a significant role in the chronicling of translation as an academic and cultural activity in India. The journal promotes the active exchange of ideas between translators, linguists, and literary and theatrical critics in relation to the impact of translation on the post-colonial identity of the country.

4.2. Creolization and Hybridization in Contemporary India

Recent years have seen the rise of new creolized forms of speech such as Hinglish, Tanglish, and Manglish—markers of the evolving culture of translation and its contemporary practice in India. These new idioms stratify English with Hindi and Tamil, and even Malayalam, along with many other regional dialects. These forms are novel, and they grow in scope and inclusivity. Dimock (1974) regards this as a part of India's legacy of linguistic translation in which a culture "translates" to "negotiate" cultures instead of without means.

Hinglish has particularly turned into a cultural staple of urban India, featuring in everything from Bollywood movies to advertisements and even on social media. It is a form of translation that seeks to balance globalism and Indianism. Mukherjee (1981) observes such creolized forms as not solely consequences of globalization but as active acts towards the construction of culture. By using a particular language, the people embrace their multilingual identity, signaling to the world their participation in the globalized society.

Translation has been important in positioning Indian literature on the global stage as world literature. The translation of R.K. Narayan, Kamala Das, and Arundhati Roy has brought Indian stories to international platforms. This global recognition has been supported by attempts to maintain cultural fidelity in translations. Unlike the colonial translations that brutally Indian texts, contemporary translations seek to fortify the truth and emotive spirit contained in the texts to ensure they are authentic and relevant to other peoples.

This is a post-colonial period, thus showing that translation still works within the dynamic local languages and cultures of India. From Sahitya Akademi and the NTM's more systematic approaches to Hinglish and other hybrids' spontaneous bottoms-up style, translation is everything that binds India's many languages together and, at the same time, gives the country a unique character in a globalized setting. This combination of old and new demonstrates the profound reality of translation as a cultural and intellectual undertaking.

5. THEORETICAL CHALLENGES AND THE NEED FOR INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORKS

Despite being a longstanding and dynamic cultural practice in India, translation remains under-theorized within its indigenous context. Scholars have frequently noted the absence of a cohesive, localized theoretical model to support the vast corpus of translation activity across

Indian languages (Mukherjee, 1981). While Western academies have long institutionalized translation studies as a discrete subfield, in India, the practice has largely been grounded in pragmatic necessity rather than in theoretical articulation. As a result, Indian translation practices are often interpreted—or misinterpreted—through Eurocentric frameworks that prioritize fidelity and equivalence, sidelining the cultural and adaptive richness of Indian translational approaches.

This theoretical gap has led to an over-reliance on Western paradigms, which are often inadequate in capturing the complexities of Indian multilingualism and cultural contexts. The binaries of "source" and "target," or "fidelity" and "adaptation," prominent in Western discourse, fail to accommodate the fluid, context-sensitive strategies employed in Indian translations. For instance, classical epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata were not merely translated but transformed—imbued with local customs, idioms, and philosophies—through processes that might be described more accurately as cultural transcreation than linguistic translation (Trivedi, 2006b). These reworkings reflect a culturally embedded sensibility that seeks to preserve emotional and philosophical resonance over textual exactitude.

Devy (1997) stresses the significance of oral traditions and argues that Indian translation has often aimed to preserve cultural memory rather than prioritize fidelity to the original. This orientation aligns more closely with indigenous literary traditions, such as bhakti poetry, where translators adapt spiritual metaphors and local vernaculars to create accessibility for diverse audiences. Trivedi (2006c) asserts that translation in the Indian context should be viewed as a cultural act deeply enmeshed with power, identity, and community memory rather than a mere linguistic exercise. These practices demand a theoretical model that moves beyond fidelity-based valuation toward a framework that recognizes the multiplicity, improvisation, and hybridity at the heart of Indian translation traditions.

Moreover, Kothari (2011a) emphasizes the importance of contextualizing translation within the lived realities of postcolonial India, where translation has served as both a bridge and a battleground for identity formation. She argues that Indian translators often translate "across asymmetries," contending not just with linguistic variation but also with class, caste, and regional hierarchies. The act of translation, then, becomes a layered negotiation—simultaneously political and poetic, national and local. This further underlines the inadequacy of Western translation models, which often assume linguistic parity and sociopolitical neutrality.

Compounding the theoretical challenge is India's unparalleled linguistic diversity. The sheer number of languages, dialects, and scripts—many of which function across oral and literary traditions—creates a translation ecology that is both intricate and expansive. As Mukherjee (1981) notes, translations in India often mediate between different isopolite cultures—oral and written, classical and vernacular, Sanskritic and regional—each with its symbolic economy. Such complexity cannot be adequately theorized within existing Western paradigms. Instead, it necessitates what Trivedi (2006d) calls a "universal" approach to translation theory, one that honours cultural specificity while resisting homogenizing tendencies.

The absence of a formally articulated indigenous theory is not merely an academic oversight—it reflects a deeper struggle to assert local epistemologies in a global knowledge system. Kothari (2011b) insists that translation theory in India must be rooted in its own intellectual traditions and historical experiences rather than imported frameworks. This is not to reject Western theories outright but to supplement and challenge them with alternative logic drawn from India's own textual and oral cultures. For example, Sanskrit aesthetics, with its emphasis on rasa (emotional essence), or medieval commentarial traditions that freely interpret and

reframe source texts, could form the conceptual bedrock of a more locally resonant translation theory.

Translation in India, then, is best understood as an act that is simultaneously creative and interpretive, ethical and experiential. It is informed not only by language but also by embodiment, community, and historical continuity. To develop a robust Indian translation theory is to validate these modes of knowing and being—modes that are often discounted in dominant academic discourse. Such a project would allow Indian scholars to reframe translation not as a derivative practice but as a generative, meaning-making act embedded in the pluralistic fabric of Indian life.

6. CONCLUSION: TRANSLATION AS A LIVING TRADITION

The translation has acted as a mechanism that bridges communication barriers—ranging from the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the religious philosophies in ancient India. India had well-adapted methods of translation to make knowledge systems, spiritual texts, and literature accessible to all groups and audiences. This is a testament to the fact that India does not treat translation as a mere transfer of words from one language to another but revolves around context, negotiation, culture, and identity.

The colonial period brought fresh new perspectives on translation that transformed it into a tool of conquest. Under British rule, translation served the dual purpose of control and preservation. Although colonial translations made Indian texts more accessible to international audiences, they were heavily biased in the use of imperialist frameworks and looked at the original works through 'Western glasses.' There was also a new form of order introduced, one where languages were placed in a strict hierarchy; English became the language of administration, education, and the region, pushing the regional tongues to the side. Even with these hurdles, the traditions of Indian languages and translation kept their identity, enabling them to shape the identity in the eyes of the colonizers and transform the face of translation in the post-colonial era.

Translation thrived to become a binding force in post-colonial India, connecting the different parts of the region and cultivating a sense of national identity. The Sahitya Akademi and the National Translation Mission are two key illustrations of this phenomenon. They have facilitated the translation of academic and literary texts to their respective languages so that the regions divided by language borders may have access to them. Other journals, such as Translation Today, have developed the area by providing services for critical debate and the analysis of local techniques and practices. There is also a wider phenomenon of translation; at the same time, this helps to assert the presence of Indian culture in the world, where works of Indian authors are heard by foreign audiences, confirming India's literary heritage.

At this moment in India, translation is still a distinct path, urging forward to modernization and new traditions. Creolized idioms like Hinglish are examples of languages using translation and evolving these days. These hybrid languages show how flexible the translation strategies in India are and how the value of India's translation has always been to embrace change.

Translation practices in India pose a particular challenge for theorizing and developing a systematization due to a lack of boundary-defined frameworks. The absence of such frameworks, however, provides space for Indian scholars to create theoretical explanations that capture the reality of the subcontinent's multilingual and multicultural complexities. Translation in India has always been deeper than a mere linguistic activity; it is an act of human connection, preservation, and transformation.

Translation still performs one of its essential functions in transforming India's rich textual heritage and facilitating intercultural communication within and outside the country. It shows how Indian culture continues to ensure the relevance of its voices, stories, and philosophies in contemporary society. Along with accepting the historical burdens and present-day difficulties, India can continue to redefine its translation as a means of celebrating diversity, bridging divides, and fostering understanding—foundations straddling the necessity of translation throughout history, but more urgently so now than ever. This paper tried to capture the numerous ways translation served India's history, its people, and the future, validating that it historically and presently remains crucial as an agent of cultural and intellectual enrichment.

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