









## Module 5: Postcolonial Translation

### Lecture 15: Post-colonial Translation

#### The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  Translation in India
-  Pre-colonial Translation
-  Translation under the Mughals
-  Colonialism and Translation
-  Translation and Subversion
-  Translation after Independence
-  Language Politics

 **Previous**    **Next** 

## Module 5: Postcolonial Translation

### Lecture 15: Post-colonial Translation

#### Introduction

The term post-colonial is perhaps wrong for this lecture because what is intended is not the ideological aspect of the movement called postcolonialism. Here the term is a temporal marker and refers to the period that came after colonization in India. It deals with the translation activity in India from colonization to the present, and this lecture is an entry point into the ideologically nuanced term of postcolonialism. The broad rubric of postcolonialism is applicable to vast areas of land other than India, which were once colonized by non-natives and became free at various stages in the 20th century. But in this lecture we will be looking only at India as a representative case.



◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Translation in India

The history of translation in India – more in terms of the trends in translation than what was translated – can be seen to fall into three broad areas, which are pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial translation. This is a periodization that most theorists in the area agree upon, though the names given to each of these periods might vary. As the names indicate, these periods span an uneven distribution of centuries. The pre-colonial period would encompass the years from antiquity to the 18th century, the colonial period from 18th century to the 20th century (1947 to be exact) and post-colonial from 1947 onwards. The cut-off date for pre-colonial period is fixed as 1757, because that is the year of the Battle of Plassey which helped the British to consolidate their power in India and become an imperialist force with its policies of expansion. Avadhesh Kumar Singh sub-divides this period into two – from antiquity to 1100 and from 1100 to 1757. Of these, the first marks a period in which Sanskrit was the major language, and the second the time in which foreign languages like Persian and other Indian languages grew and flourished. A brief overview of translation in the pre-colonial period will help us to better situate the translation done during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

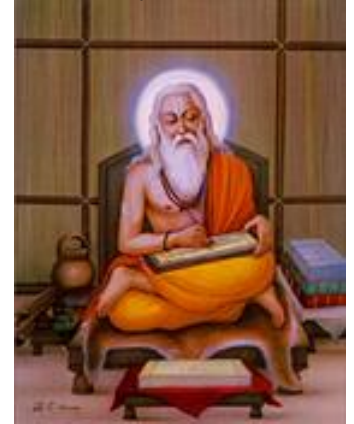
The history of translation in India falls into three broad temporal categories:

- Pre-colonial
- Colonial
- Post-colonial

◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Pre-colonial Translation

It has already been pointed out that multilingualism, or the simultaneous co-existence of multiple languages in ordinary speech or a literary text was quite common. So, translation if done, must have been from Sanskrit to languages like Prakrit. Avadhesh Kumar Singh points out that although there were no major translations as such, the *bhashya* (commentary on sacred texts), *tika* (sub-commentary) and *anvyaya* (explanation of meaning or interpretation) written in those days were much like translation activity. Gopinathan states that the translations done during this period were called '*chhaya*' or 'translation as shadow of the original text' ("Translation, Transcreation and Culture": 1). However this does not only imply that the translation is a shadow of the original and matches it exactly, but also that just as the shadow can differ from the object, depending on the intensity and angle of light falling on it, the translation can also differ depending on the translator and his/her interpretation of it.



The concept of creating a new text out of the old is very much evident in the numerous Indian language versions of the epics. The Bhakti poets, by transferring vedic and other scriptural knowledge from Sanskrit into the language of the common man, can also be thought of as translators in this sense. Avadhesh Kumar Singh thinks of this period from 1100 – 1700 as the time of *lokbhashikaran*, a term he uses to denote this activity of the knowledge in Sanskrit being passed on to '*lokbhasha*' or the languages of ordinary people ("Translation in/and Hindi Literature": 3). It was also the period of the translation of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* into the Indian languages. Tulsidas's Hindi *Ramcharitmanas*, Kamba's Tamil *Ramayana*, Ezhuthachchan's Malayalam *Adhyatma Ramayanam*, Sarala Das's Oriya *Sarala Mahabharata* etc were all composed during this period. It has to be again noted that all these were transcreations, which were written specifically for a particular region and culture. Naturally these were translations done in the Indian oral tradition where not much effort went into maintaining equivalence.

## Translation under the Mughals

The establishment of Mughal rule in Delhi saw the entry of Persian and the gradual waning of Sanskrit influence. Even before that the noted traveler and writer Alberuni translated Sanskrit classics into Arabic. It is said that Akbar maintained a translator's bureau (maktab khana) in his court, with the primary intention of bridging the divide between the Hindus and Muslims of his kingdom. The texts that were translated were Hindu religious works in Sanskrit. This apparently helped the Muslims understand the Hindus better and paved the way for more inter-religious cooperation. The texts that were translated included the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Yoga-vashishta*. Dara Shikoh was a scholar himself and was interested in the philosophy of the Upanishads. His translation was to understand Hindu philosophy better and enquire if there were common meeting grounds for Islamic and Hindu philosophies. Firozeshah Tughluk commissioned translations of Sanskrit religious works into Persian, like many other rulers before and after him. These translations were done with the specific purpose of understanding another religion and to explore possible ways of better cooperation with another faith. These can also be thought of as political acts rather than mere linguistic exercises.



◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Module 5: Postcolonial Translation

## Lecture 15: Post-colonial Translation

**Colonialism and Translation**

This period also needs to be demarcated into two – from 1757 till 1857 (the year of the First War of Indian Independence) and post-1857 (the period in which the British Empire gained the upper hand over the East India Company). After 1757, the East India Company was interested in consolidating the power it had established in India. The establishment of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata in 1784 by Sir William Jones marks a significant point of this phase. This is the Orientalist phase when the British showed a remarkable interest in the ancient Sanskrit classics and other non-literary texts. We see a flurry of translation activity that included translations of texts as diverse as *Abhinjanasakuntalam* and *Manusmriti*. This cannot be seen as an innocent intellectual exercise. This was the best way to know the colonized people and their ways, and knowing was a way of controlling. It has been pointed out by G. N. Devy how these Indologists focused only on the ancient Sanskrit texts and ignored the wealth of literature or other knowledge produced in medieval India. He maintains that this was a deliberate ploy to emphasize that the country they had colonized had a splendid past, but that it had degenerated subsequently to become a region steeped in superstition and other forms of ignorance. On the other hand, many European works including the Bible were translated into Indian languages. This was a form of cultural colonization that resulted in crushing native languages and literatures.

Ironically, these translations also helped in the making of the nationalist consciousness among Indians. India of those days did have her share of social problems like the oppression of women and the injustice of the caste system. European literature translated into Indian languages brought in a new way of thought to India, forcing intellectuals to rethink many aspects of social life. This paved the way for throwing out many rites and customs that had come to be accepted as part of Indian culture. Rabindranath Tagore has mentioned this liberating aspect of western thought that was transplanted on Indian soil. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy were influenced by western thought to work for the uplift of his countrymen and forge the nationalist consciousness. The colonizer's language and culture were appropriated by the natives and used to hone the political awareness of a still passive populace. Perhaps the best example of this is Sri Aurobindo. He had a typically Anglophile childhood, having done his schooling in the exclusive public schools of England and fed with very British aspirations. But his education and exposure to non-Indian thought coupled with experiences in India convinced him of the need to fight the British in India. The latter half of the 19th

Translations from English into the Indian languages helped in instilling feelings of nationalism in Indians. Western thought helped to create a fresh perspective which succeeded in giving new life to social customs and mores.

century and early 20th century, marked as it is by an increasingly violent nationalist movement in Bengal (some of it spearheaded by Aurobindo) is also the period when he did a lot of his translations of Indian literature. He translated Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* and was primarily responsible for the popularization of the slogan 'Vande Mataram'.

◀◀ Previous   Next ▶▶

## Translation and Subversion

This change in the tone and tenor of translations into Indian languages paralleled the growth and momentum of the nationalist movement for Indian independence. This is a change that we see after 1857. Translation was seen as a political act of defiance. These were translations of works that carried the militant nationalist ideal, and very often they were from one Indian language to another. We have already seen the translation activity of Premchand and Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi who translated works with a clear call for revolution and political self-confidence. Deenbandhu Mitra's Bengali play *Neel Darpan* written in 1858 was translated into English as *The Indigo-planting Mirror*. It was an open call for revolt against British injustice and the translation was meant to rouse the elite intellectuals of Bengal. Perhaps it did serve this purpose, for it motivated Girish Chandra Ghosh to establish the first theatre company in Bengal. The English translation was banned and Rev. James Long, who had allegedly translated the play, was prosecuted for this. Indian language translations of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* propagated the call to arms in favour of Mother India. Vande Mataram became the rallying cry for nationalists around the country, thanks to translations. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee became a household name in most Indian homes because he was widely translated. There are critics who consider him the most pervasive cultural influence in India of those times.

Translations played a crucial role in propagating the ideals of nationalism all over the country. It helped to unite the people on a common platform.

Mahatma Gandhi who was a Gujarati could reach out to the people at large, only through translations. His thoughts and philosophy were an integral part of his politics on nationalism. They could influence the freedom movement for Indian independence only because it trickled down to the people at the grassroots level. This was made possible only through translations into various Indian languages done by faceless people who took this as a mission. Thus the role played by translations in the building of the nation was crucial.



## Translation after Independence

The translation activity that we see in India after independence is also related to the nation and the consciousness of the unity of the nation. The country had so much of diversity that it was necessary to emphasize the unity despite the diversity. The linguistic and cultural divides among the people were downplayed and there were institutional endeavours to promote unity through translations. The Sahitya Akademi and its journal *Indian Literature* with its slogan of 'Indian Literature is one though written in many languages', was one such. It had the *Adan Pradan* scheme under which numerous Indian language works were translated into other Indian languages. There was also the UNESCO project of translation which encouraged translation into English. Some of the works translated were Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's Bengali novel *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* (1968, trs. T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji), Shridhar Pendse's Marathi novel, *Wild Bapu of Garambi* (1968, tr. Ian Raeside), Thakhazi Sivasankara Pillai's Malayalam novel, *Chemmeen* (1962, tr. Narayana Menon) and Premchand's Hindi novel, *Godan: The Gift of a Cow* (1968, tr. Gordon Roadermal). These were published as UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. Today all major publishing houses like Penguin, Macmillan, and Rupa are encouraging translations of Indian works into English.

Translation in independent India emphasizes the unity of the country despite its diversity.

Translation also became a major factor in the empowerment of the marginalized sections of society, especially the dalits and women. These voices that had till then been confined to their respective regions despite the power of their writing, were brought to national and international attention through translations. It is ironic that we still need the colonizer's language to make them heard, but we should also note that there are no compromises made to pander to the target readership. Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*, R. R. Borade's Marathi novel *Fall* (tr. Sudhakar Marathe), Bama's Tamil *Karukku* (tr. Lakshmi Holmstrom) are examples. The English translations are carefully done, taking care not to tone down the savagely truthful narratives, with its raw and powerful language.

## Module 5: Postcolonial Translation

## Lecture 15: Post-colonial Translation

**Language Politics**

This does not mean that the fact that translation of Indian works was largely into English is not controversial. It has been interpreted variously as indication of our servile attitude to English, or the lack of a common language that links India together. Mahasweta Devi's works translated by Gayatri Spivak is a representative case. Devi highlights the condition of the tribals and other subaltern groups of Bengal through her stories which were translated by Spivak. Much more than translate, what Spivak did was to discuss the politics of translation, and theorize postcoloniality in general. Her international reputation as an intellectual also got Devi the world's attention as well. Who is the Mahasweta Devi who is known to the world outside India? Is she a construct of Gayatri Spivak? Harish Trivedi notes that when Devi won the Jnanpeth in 1996 and acknowledged the role played by translations in getting her wider acceptance in the country, she expressed gratitude, not to Spivak who had translated into English, but to Arvind Kumar the director of National Book Trust who had facilitated the translation into Hindi and other Indian languages (11).

English is the link language connecting the various parts of India, and most of the translation activity is from Indian languages into English.

This issue is very much open to discussion. Which language would you choose in India today to ensure that an author gets the attention s/he deserves? The answer is English. It still is the only 'Indian' language understood in all corners of India, by readers who constitute a minuscule of the total population. Ironically, the translation activity across Indian languages seems to have declined since the British Raj. Today we do not have an Indian author who is popular in all Indian languages, like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. Despite Hindi being the official language, English continues to be the language in power because it is the language of power. It is a marker of social and cultural prestige as well. This asymmetry in the relationship between English and Indian languages is reflected in translations also.

Today the translation scene in India looks good as major publishing houses are encouraging the publication of translations. The Macmillan project of translation of Indian novels, the Katha series etc are indicators that translations into English are proliferating and selling well. Asaduddin points out that this should not be a cause for worry because according to him: "As a link language, English has an important role to play and translation into English can certainly foster the growth of a holistic view of Indian literature. It would also help dispel the impression one frequently encounters while travelling abroad that Indian literature is what gets written in English." There is also the argument that this is the Empire writing

back in English (like other Indian writing in English), but the truth is that most of it does not reach the former colonizers. Then for whom are these translations? Shanta Ramakrishna observes that this is perhaps a good time for us to introspect and ask a few questions: “By whom and, especially, for whom are translations done in India ? The average monolingual reader? The academic bilingual reader? The colonial reader? The postcolonial reader? How does a translator create an audience?” (98). Honest answers to these questions would go a long way in helping us to re-situate ourselves with respect to our mother-tongues and cultures.

## Assignments

1. What are the changes that you can detect in the Indian translation scene as you move from the pre-colonial days to the present?
2. How did translations help in the building of the nation?
3. What is the politics of language that is behind translation in India today?

## References

Asaduddin, M. “Translation and Indian Literature: Some Reflections”, *Translation Today*. <<http://www.anukriti.net/tt5/article1/page1.asp>>

Gopinathan, G. “Translation, Transcreation and Culture: The Evolving Theories of Translation in Hindi and Other Modern Indian Languages”.  
<<http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/satranslations/Gopin.pdf>>

Ramakrishna, Shanta. “Cultural Transmission through Translation: An Indian Perspective”, *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*.  
Eds. Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre. 2000. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002:  
85 – 100

Singh, Avadhesh Kumar. “Translation in/and Hindi Literature”, *Translation Today*.  
<http://www.anukriti.net/tt5/article1/page1.asp>>

Trivedi, Harish and Susan Bassnett. Eds. “Introduction”, *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1999: 1- 18