










Module 1: Introduction to the practice of translation

Lecture 2: History of Translation in India

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Introduction

India offers a unique problem when it comes to literature and literary language. It is difficult to trace the origin of something like Indian literature because of the multiplicity of traditions that we have in India. There is no specific origin we can go back to and the longer we go back into the past, the more difficult it becomes to pinpoint the life and times of authors. Moreover, each part of India has a different history from that of the other parts of India. So it is practically impossible to give a comprehensive history of the literature of India. Naturally this makes it difficult to trace the history of translations also in India.

It is difficult to trace the origin of Indian translation tradition because Indian literature encompasses multiple literatures in various regional languages.

Although we do not have definitive information about dates of composition or identity of authors, we do certainly know that numerous works on various disciplines were produced in ancient India. The earliest texts that we know of are the Vedas which are believed to have been composed around 1500 BC. One of the earliest literary texts is the *Natyashastra* believed to have been written by Bharata any time between 400 BC and 400 CE. The religious epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were significant influences. Believed to have been composed by Valmiki and Vyasa respectively, these epics were orally passed on from one generation to another till they were recorded in writing, but it is difficult to pinpoint the actual dates of composition.

The language used for all these works was Sanskrit which was the language of the educated upper class. It can be compared somewhat to Latin which was the language used for scholarly works in the west; Latin too was the language of the educated minority.

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Translation Activity

Only literary genre that the age knew was that of drama. The only language used was Sanskrit but this was not the only one used on stage. A play was usually composed in a variety of dialects – upper caste men and ascetics spoke Sanskrit. Women spoke Prakrit and other inferior characters spoke a variety of dialects like Magadhi, Pali and Sauraseni. So while you were watching a play, you had to do simultaneous translation in some sense. But there is little written evidence of translation as an on going activity in those days. We can only infer from the works of those days. For instance, there are many similarities between Bharata's *Natyashastra* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. Can we see them as coincidence or could they have been influenced by each other? If there is mutual influence, there must have been a translation: how else could they understand each other?



There are other textual similarities. The medieval Italian Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* is very much like *Arthashastra*, the ancient Indian statesman Kautilya's work on statecraft. Without a translation, Machiavelli could never have understood Kautilya. Alexander the Great's general Megasthenes was the ambassador to Pataliputra and he even wrote a book on India called *Indica*. He had to be bilingual to make himself understood in Pataliputra.

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South India

In the meantime, there were happenings in other parts of India besides the Gangetic belt. Sanskrit was not the only language used everywhere. For example, the prominent South Indian language in those days was Tamil. Like *Natyashastra* in Sanskrit, there is *Tolkappiyam*, the major work on Dravidian aesthetics in Tamil, written by Tolkappiyar. The work unsurprisingly has parallels with *Natyashastra*. Once again we have no records of translations, but how do we explain the coincidence? The ancient Tamil body of literature called Sangam literature shows influences of the Sanskrit epics, again pointing to some form of cultural contact.

The Bhakti movement which is perhaps the earliest pan-Indian movement originated in South India. It began around the 6th century CE among the Vaishnava Alvars in Tamil Nadu in South India. They were mendicants or poet saints who advocated a life of complete dedication to God. In a way this movement was also a localised reaction against the hegemony of upper castes in Hinduism. Hinduism at that time was degraded by rigid caste structures and notions of untouchability. Knowledge and power were the privileges of an elite minority. The Bhakti movement tried to bring God down to the masses, eliminating the middle men in the path to salvation. They sang in the language of the common man in an idiom that even the illiterate peasant could understand. The emphasis was on bhakti or simple devotion as opposed to elaborate rites and rituals of existing Hinduism. The major works were composed in the local language as opposed to Sanskrit. This movement slowly spread to other parts of India, making it a pan-Indian reality by the 18th century.



How did the movement manage to spread to other parts of India in those days when there were no sophisticated means of communication? The bhakti poet-saints were wandering minstrels, spreading their message wherever they went. Their influence must have spread through translations. Since much of Bhakti literature was transmitted orally, we cannot speak for sure about translations. But it is otherwise difficult to explain the conceptual similarities we find in Nammalvar of Tamil Nadu and Chaitanya of Bengal.

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The Epics

The common thread that we find in almost all the works in ancient India are the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *Ramayana* which is the older of the two was written in Sanskrit and believed to have been committed to writing in 300 CE. Even at a very early stage it was translated into almost all existing Indian languages. In fact, its influence is not confined to just India but all of Southeast Asia. Valmiki's text which is now considered the authentic one, is believed to be but one of the many *Ramayanas* that deal with the same story line. So the translations of the epic are also like free retellings. One other aspect could be that the concept of fidelity to the original was absent in India also, like the ancient west. Since literature was mainly orally transmitted, the idea of accuracy in conveying the literary work to another language could not be sustained. These retellings were often influenced by the world view of the group that was doing the translation/adaptation. The Indian historian Romila Thapar notes: "The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning." (qtd in Richman, 4).

The epics had many versions, depending on the group that was retelling them. These retellings helped in standardizing regional languages.

Like translations of the Bible, the *Ramayana* translations also had the effect of enriching and standardizing regional languages that were still in the formative stage. Some of them are Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* in Hindi, Kamban's *Ramavataram* in Tamil, Ezhuthachchan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam* in Malayalam, and Krittivasa's *Ramayana* in Bengali. The language of these regional variations is the common man's language as opposed to Sanskrit which could be understood only by a few. The same is true of the other great epic the *Mahabharata* also .

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Medieval India

The power and prestige of Sanskrit declined in the medieval times. Numerous foreign invasions also brought with it different cultural and linguistic influences. Persian had an important place as a courtly language and the language of scholarship under the Mughal rulers. The Mughal courts had scholars who were also translators. Baburnama, autobiography of Babur written in Chagatay, was translated into Persian by Humayun's minister Bairam Khan. But it was Akbar the Great's rule that marked the highpoint of culture. He commissioned translations of Sanskrit works into Persian. The *Mahabharata* was translated into Persian during Akbar's time. His great-grandson Dara Shikoh continued the efforts. Dara translated the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-gita into Persian.



The significant result of such cultural mixing was that most people became bilingual or skilled in two languages or even more. It also gave rise to new languages—for instance, Persian interacted with the local language to give rise to Urdu. There were many writers who were fluent enough to be able to write in two languages. Mirza Ghalib, the famous writer of ghazals, is one such example.

Translations from other works had the effect of introducing new genres to India. For example, translations from Persian brought in new genres like *masnavi*, *qasida* and importantly, the *ghazal*. They were Indianised to suit the local readers' tastes. Many Indian texts reached the west through Persian translations. As is the case with most texts, there are no accurate written records about these which makes tracking them down difficult. But we can say without hesitation that translations helped to make Indian culture what it is today, a happy blending of multiple cultural influences. Bilingualism is a common Indian trait even today.

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Colonization

The advent of the British marks a significant turning point in India's cultural history as well. This became all the more apparent when the British Government took over the complete administration of India in the 19th century. The British tried to colonize India intellectually as well as politically. This was a slow process which went on for many years in different phases. They initially attempted to establish that the English language and literature were superior to all the Indian languages and literature put together. Many European texts were translated into the local Indian languages.



But it was also important for the British to know the local language as matters of administration had to be in Indian languages. They had to know India well to govern it better. So there was also a reverse movement of translation from India to England. However, what got translated were ancient Sanskrit works. They claimed that they had 'discovered' the priceless Sanskrit literature for the entire world to enjoy. Sir William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society, translated *Abhijnanasakuntalam* into English in 1789. Charles Wilkins, official translator of Persian and Bengali to the Commissioner of Revenue, was the first to translate the *Bhagavad-gita* into English in 1784. These translations had official blessings as they were undertaken with the specific purpose of helping the British to know India better.

The period after the First War of Indian Independence in 1857 marks another phase in the cultural conquest because it is at this time that the Queen directly took over power of the Indian administration. This also brought in specific language policies. English became the language of administration and it was promoted among the Indians. In this respect, Macaulay's "*Minute on Indian Education*" of 1837 is very important. It called for the cultivation of a class of people "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." This resulted in educated Indians acquiring English proficiency. There were large scale efforts to translate English books into Indian languages and promote English literature. Many obscure 18th and 19th century English novels found their way to Indian languages.

One of the other aims of the British empire was evangelization or spread of Christianity. The Bible was translated into local languages with this aim. The impact was two-fold: Christianity reached the locals and it strengthened the vernacular languages. The Serampore Mission Press (1800) enlisted Indian experts in different languages to translate the Bible. But these translations radically changed the concept of

translation in India. It first brought in the concept of printing to what was predominantly an oral tradition till then. The Indian tradition of translation was a free adaptation of source material and was really retelling rather than accurate translations. But the Bible changed all of that. It emphasized the need for accurate 'word for word' translation; fidelity in translation became a concern for the first time, because it was felt that the word of God had to be conveyed accurately and with no distortions.

The Bible translations strengthened the vernacular languages. Like the English Bible, vernacular versions had simple language that could be understood by the lay person. It also enriched the vocabulary by bringing in idioms and imagery to illustrate its concepts. The British also contributed to the local languages by bringing out systematic books on grammar and compiling dictionaries. The credit of compiling the first dictionary in most Indian languages goes to some European or the other.

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Rise of Indian nationalism

Parallel to the rise of English and western ideas, the spirit of nationalism was growing in India. Indians benefited from the ideas and knowledge they got from the west and put it to good use to eradicate many of the evils existing in the society of those days. Translations from English to Indian languages and vice versa began to increase. But translations were also acts of resistance as they had the aim of fostering the spirit of nationalism. One example is Dinbandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* written in 1859, translated by Rev. James Long in 1861. It was an exhortation to protest against the exploitation of the indigo workers in Bengal. The play was banned and James Long was prosecuted for having aided in the translation of the play.



Another consequence of the numerous translations was the introduction of the genre of the novel in India. Although there are people who say that India had the novel before the British (they point to *Banabhatta's Kadambari* as evidence), the novel is believed to be a British legacy. The first Indian novels in the 19th century were inspired by English novels, but were Indian in spirit as they discussed socio-political problems relevant to India. They were also motivated by English education to remove social ills and fostered the nationalistic spirit. Very often these novels got translated into other Indian languages resulting in a bonding between far-flung areas of India. For instance, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* was translated into English and other Indian languages within a few years of its publication in 1882. This novel, which contained our national song *Vande Mataram*, was one of the works that inspired nationalists all over the country.

Translations often inspired writers in other languages to write novels. The earliest novels in Hindi were translations of Bengali novels, like Gadadhar Singh's translation of Romesh Chandra Dutt's *Bangabijeta* and Bankim's *Durgeshnandini*. These were done under the supervision of the noted Hindi writer Bharatendu Harishchandra. By the end of the century Kishorilal Goswami wrote a novel, which was according to him 'under the influence of Bengali'. Sometimes the indigenous novel got promoted by British officers. An example is *Indulekha* the first Malayalam novel (1888) which was translated into English by a British officer W. Dumergue.

The Christian influence was felt in the early novels also, besides in the Bible translations. Some of the early novels were written by British women with a view to promoting the Christian way of life. Hannah Catherine Mullens wrote *Phulmoni-O-Karunar Bibaran* in Bengali in 1852. Mrs. Collins, the wife of a missionary living in Kerala, wrote *The Slayer Slain* in 1866; this was translated into Malayalam in 1877.

These novels had the purpose of educating the native women about the advantages of Christianity. They were also the first novels to speak of the marginalized sections of Indian society.

If most of these translations did not have a direct political motive, there were other translations that were done by Indians to undermine the colonial power. The translation of *Anandamath* by Aurobindo is a case in point.

He undertook this translation to inspire the militant nationalists of Bengal in the first decade of the 20th century. He even founded a journal called *Bande Mataram*. Many others like Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi (1830 – 1931) sought inspiration from other languages like French and German. He translated Victor Hugo's *Ninety-three* into Hindi as *Balidaan*. He believed it his duty to translate works that would instill patriotism in his countrymen. He modified these works to suit his countrymen's tastes and his translations were more or less like free adaptations of the original text. Premchand (1880 – 1936) the famous Hindi-Urdu writer, translated Anatole France's *Thais*. Like Vidyarthi, he was motivated by ideological reasons. Translations like these, with the specific purpose of introducing revolutionary ideas to Indian readers, were being undertaken in different parts of India. These were more like adaptations with no thought for fidelity to the original. They played a silent but influential role in enhancing the patriotic spirit among Indians.

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Independent India

This picture changed when the country gained her freedom. As the need changed, so did the finished product. The diversity of the new nation necessitated emphasis on essential unity which would overlook linguistic and religious differences. Translations also had the social responsibility to foster this spirit of unity. An example of such work is Satpal's translation of Aurobindo's *Savitri* into Urdu.



Interlingual translations at the local level were promoted to bring different languages together and there were institutional endeavours to do this. The Sahitya Akademi established in 1954, publishes translations from regional languages into English and other regional languages. Besides the officially accepted languages, it has facilitated translations from tribal languages and dialects like Garo and Bhili. The National Book Trust founded in 1957 had the 'Adan Pradan' series in which classics in Indian languages were translated into English and other Indian languages. These have undoubtedly helped to bring different the literatures of different regions together and help to develop the idea that *Indian Literature*, the Sahitya Akademi journal, has as its motto: 'Indian Literature is one though written in many languages'.

Efforts by individual translators cannot be discounted either. The noted postcolonial critic and translator Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak has been instrumental in bringing the noted Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi to international notice through her translations. Similarly the noted Kannada poet A. K. Ramanujan through his translations rediscovered the pleasure of ancient Sangam literature for the world at large. These translations can be termed 'promotional translations' that helped to focus the world's attention on a classical heritage or a particular writer.

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Issues in India

The translation tradition is very strong in India at present. Prominent publishing houses have entire series on translation from Indian languages into English. Macmillan and Katha are significant examples. Translation Studies as a discipline is part of the curriculum in many prominent Indian universities.

Translation in India has the tradition of appropriation and recreation. For instance, what is the term for translation in an Indian language? In Sanskrit the term is ‘anuvad’, meaning ‘to say after’ while in some other Indian languages the words are terms ‘bhashantar’ (change from one language to another), ‘roopantar’, or ‘tarzuma’ (change from one code to another in terms of external form or language). In a way they reflect the issues in the translation field today in India. What is translation? Is it just change from one language to another or a more radical alteration where the form itself is changed? In this context, how relevant are the concepts of fidelity to the SL? Today the debates in translation also centre on the power dynamics between languages. Why is it that most Indian texts get translated into English and not other Indian languages?

These are questions that cannot be answered simplistically. They reflect the complexities that surround the issue of translation in a multilingual country like India.

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Assignments

1. What are the multiple strands that go into the history of translation in India?
2. Attempt to catalogue the translations that have gone into the making of the literature of your mother-tongue.

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