







## Module 6: Cultural turn in translation

### Lecture 22: Publication of Translations in India

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## Introduction

We have seen the unequal relations between languages and how they influence translation. This also gets reflected in the way they are published and read, and the enthusiasm with which they are promoted by established publishing houses. The example of India will help us to focus on the crucial issues of translation and its dissemination. What appears to be commercial data actually indicates the undercurrents of cultural and literary power.

Translations are undertaken and published on a large scale in India today. Translation workshops and conferences are common and many universities have translation studies as part of their syllabi. There are publishing houses like Katha that are conscientiously bringing out translations which are representative of the multiple linguistic groups in India. They are also getting read by a major part of the population. Still, it remains a fact that the dominant language is English and that all the translation is being done from an Indian language into English. The publication statistics reveal an interesting story of unequal relationships among languages and the aspirations of relatively minor languages of India.

The publication data of translations indicate the status and power of languages, and the socio-cultural politics behind this literary and linguistic activity.

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## History of English publication in India

The first printing press to be established in India was in 1706 in Tranquebar by the Protestant missionary Bartholomew Ziegenbalg. But printing activity was not done on an organized scale till the establishment of the Serampore Mission Press in 1800 by the British Baptist Mission. The first printing activity was that of translations of the Bible into different Indian languages. In fact, the first book to be published by the Serampore press was the New Testament in Bengali. In 1804 the first printed prose work in Bengali, *History of King Pritapadityu* written by Ram Basu was published by the Press. Very soon the press published the Bible in most other Indian languages besides Armenian and Burmese. This was gradually followed by other Indian presses that began publication in Indian languages.

The monopoly of English publication was with the British. After independence, this trend continued, and changed only in the 1980s.

However the monopoly of English language printing was with the British. The British presses of Macmillan started functioning in 1903, Longman in 1906 and Oxford University Press in 1912. The best known Indian presses were Rajpal and Sons, M. N. Roy's Renaissance Publications and Gandhiji's Navjivan Press. Popular Prakashan was started in 1928. English books were printed and distributed only by the British companies till 1947. In the 1950s the Sahitya Akademi and the National Book Trust were set up to bring reading to the masses, with the printing of books at affordable prices. The private presses set up in the 60s were Asia Publishing House, and P. Lal's Writer's Workshop. Vikas publishing house was also functional around this time. However, the publication of English books by these publishing houses was still meager, and translations were much less. But the scene changed with the eighties. There was a spurt in the number of publishing houses which published Indian writing in English and also quality translations. Permanent Black, Ravi Dayal, IndiaInk, Kali for Women, Rupa, Katha etc are prominent names.

## History of Translation Publication

As has been already pointed out, translations were the first works to be published in British India. After independence, the publication of literary works in English did not increase, because the readership was felt to be too limited to make it a commercially viable enterprise. Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust were the major publishers of translations in their bid to promote the unity of the country despite its linguistic diversity. The Akademi's translation efforts gathered momentum in the 1980s with the organization of translation workshops across the country from 1986 onwards. It has created a directory of translators and in 1996 set up a centre for translation that is also a research centre. The few private publishing houses like Jaico, Hind Pocket Books, and Sangam books had sporadically published a few translations, like Premchand's *Godan's* English translation (Jaico), and Bhishm Sahni's *Tamas* (as *Kites will Fly* by Vikas).

The translations that are published in India are mostly into English and not between two regional languages.

The publication of translations picked up in the latter half of the eighties, perhaps as a development parallel to the growth of Indian writing in English. The establishment of Katha in 1989 on a non-profit basis was a major factor in bringing about an interest in good quality translations. Kathavilasam, its branch, was established with the intention of bringing lesser known works of Indian literature to readers through quality translations. In course of time the major publishing houses like Macmillan India, Orient Longman, and Oxford University Press started publishing translations. Macmillan has a series called Modern Indian Novels in Translation. Penguin India which started publishing in 1985 in the country, publishes translations on a limited scale. Their most successful translation has been Satyajit Ray's Feluda stories. Oxford University Press also publishes translations, but they are relatively few.

However, most of these translations are into English and not from one Indian language to another. Translations form a meager part of the total publication work undertaken by a regional language publisher. DC Books in Kerala seems to be a notable exception. They bring out Malayalam translations of most of the current literary masterpieces from around the world. In fact, Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Malayalam translation sells more than a Malayalam language author himself. But even here the translations are mainly from non-Indian languages and not from other regional languages.

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## Readership

One of the main questions that the English translations for Indian works have to face is the question of readership. This is a strange situation from the translator's point of view – consider the case of a translator who translates from Hindi to English for an Indian publishing house. If her readers are Hindi speakers who are more fluent in English, the source text culture and receptor culture are the same. But if the readership includes people who are non-Hindi speakers in India, there might be culture-specific references that need explanation. Even then, the larger rubric of Indianness is adequate to tide over differences. However the situation is complicated by the fact that the book might have readers outside India who are not at all familiar with the milieu that has been depicted. The translator's strategy becomes a difficult choice here. The strategy being adopted increasingly by Indian English writers, of using native terms and phrases without translating them, is one way. But to what extent can this be used in a translation when you are trying to recapture somebody else's style and diction? If the translator uses too many glosses and footnotes, the Indian reader will be bored. She will lose her non-Indian readers if she does not explain most of the terms. So it is a tightrope-walk for the translator who has to be careful not to tilt the balance one way or the other.

The reader of English translations in India belongs to the same culture as the source text. But India has so much of cultural and linguistic diversity that the translator is forced to explain culture-specific terms.

Who are the readers that the publishing houses target? Katha's Geetha Dharmarajan says that they have the “common reader who is already in the habit of reading” in mind (105). Their target readers seem to be more in India than elsewhere, considering the fact that it is based only in India. But multi-national publishers like Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Penguin also look to readers abroad. The identification of the readership influences the choice of titles to be published. Rita Kothari quotes Penguin's then Marketing Manager Zamir Ansari as saying that “translations from Urdu sell very well, anything related to the experience of Partition” (107). Since book publishing is a commercial venture, the question of which title or theme sells, would naturally influence the selection of works for translation.

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## Selection of works for translation

All of the translation ventures mentioned above are from Indian languages into English which ensures them a national, if not international, readership. Naturally the Indian language writers are eager to get their works translated into English. But very often the reality does not match up to their desires. Texts of certain languages get translated more while some others hardly get any representation. Rita Kothari's interviews with the major publishing house representatives show that very often the choice of text for translation depends on a variety of factors, of which the least important is the literary quality of that particular text. Availability of good translators who are equally proficient in English and the regional language is a major problem. The publishing house needs to have editors who can evaluate the quality of the translation against the original, which is also difficult. Some languages, like Bengali and Marathi, are known for their rich literary tradition and translations from these languages have better visibility, while languages like Konkani or Sindhi cannot compete with languages like Marathi or Bengali. Kothari observes that Penguin India, Rupa-Harper Collins and Ravi Dayal “restrict themselves to only well-known authors from widely accepted languages” (64). Oxford University Press has translations from Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada, while very little from Kashmiri or Manipuri.

Not all languages are translated; some languages like Bengali and Marathi are translated more. Ideology also plays a role in selection of works for translation.

This is not true of publishing houses like Katha or Sahitya Akademi which are not governed by the profit motive. Kothari points out that Katha can afford to publish relatively obscure languages as they specialize in short fiction; one or two pieces in an anthology is not going to impact the sales of the book like an entire novel. Sahitya Akademi has specifically taken up publishing from relatively unknown literatures, with a view to encouraging marginalized literatures. They now have anthologies of short stories from Dogri, Assamese, Nicobarese and other tribal languages. However, the major drawback of these translations is their quality, a factor on which the private firms are unwilling to compromise.

Ideology is another aspect that plays a role in the choice of texts for publication. Navayana Publishing House established by S. Anand and Ravikumar in 2003 focuses on caste issues. They use English translations to “take forward debates on issues related to society, culture, literature, history and politics that the mainstream does not wish to address” (qtd in Kothari 65). Navayana has given importance to dalit literature and non-fiction in translation. It is not as if other publishing houses have not brought out dalit literature. Bama's *Karukku* was translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom and first published by

Macmillan. Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* , translated from Marathi by Santhosh Bhoomkar was published by Oxford University Press.

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## Importance of genres

Genres also play a significant role in the selection of titles for translation. Fiction is unsurprisingly the most popular choice. While Macmillan concentrates on novels, Katha focuses only on short stories. Macmillan's Mini Krishnan who was the main figure behind the translation project explains that the aim of the Modern Novels in Translation project was to “show as authentic a picture as possible of the different strata of Indian society” (qtd in Kothari 65). Geeta Dharmarajan of Katha believes that “at the beginning of everything is the story” (qtd in Kothari 65). What get neglected are the genres of poetry, autobiography, travelogues, literary criticism, and non-fiction in general. There are few translations of academic studies or other scholarly treatises. The few that have been translated are ones that have an ideological slant. For instance, Kancha Ilaiah's trenchant pro-dalit treatises like *Buffalo Nationalism* and *Why I am not a Hindu* have had Malayalam, if not other Indian language translations. Translations of drama are also relatively few. Calcutta's Seagull Books specifically seeks to address this gap in translation publication; they have a series titled New Playwrights of India. Oxford University Press has brought out the collected plays of Vijay Tendulkar and also the plays of Girish Karnad. In the case of poetry, there are poets who undertake translations themselves or for other fellow-poets. A. K. Ramanujan was instrumental in getting the ancient Sangam poets known to the English-speaking world. Only the Sahitya Akademi undertakes translations of what are seen as ‘unprofitable’ genres like biographies or other academic works.

Fiction – the novel and short story – is the most translated genre, while non-fiction is very rarely translated.

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## Commercial Feasibility

Now we come to the crucial question of whether translations sell in the literary marketplace. We have to distinguish between two markets here – the ILET or Indian Literature in English Translation and the translations between two Indian languages. Publishing houses that sell English translations almost unanimously say that translations are not a commercially viable proposition. In fact, Macmillan's Mini Krishnan says that the whole translation project was funded by an outside body called A. R. Educational Trust. Penguin India's major success story was Satyajit Ray's *Feluda* stories, but even that sold only 2000 copies which, according to Zamir Ansari, is a meager figure (qtd in Kothari 107). Translations become commercial successes only if they get to be prescribed as text books in colleges and universities either in India or abroad. Oxford University Press published Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* which became a text book in an American university. So did their translation of U. R. Anantamurthy's *Samskara*. Even then, its editor Rukun Advani says that “in commercial terms it is a very small number [the sales figure of 2000 copies] and it does not make a very fruitful business—which is why not many people want to invest in this kind of activity” (qtd in Kothari 109). Translations of classics sell among students and academics, according to the editor of Rupa-Harper Collins.

The majority of Indian publishers maintain that publication of translations is not a profitable enterprise.

The prospect of translations between Indian languages is even bleaker. As a representative case let us take the case of Bengali. Supriya Sarkar points out that the Bengali translations of sleazy English books have brisk sales, but the same cannot be said of classics. The Bengali translations of classics are often of low quality and distort the original to such an extent that they are almost unrecognizable. Bengali translations from other Indian languages are practically nonexistent (*"Making of Indian Literature"*, 230). Badal Basu concurs on this point; he also says that there are very few readers for the Bengali translations of books from other languages, Indian or non-Indian. He cites the “depressing” sales figures for the Bengali translation of Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Sha Mon Aat Guntha* to illustrate his point. DC Books which regularly publishes Malayalam translations, also have relatively few translations from other Indian languages. Penguin India which has ventured into regional language publication, has launched a few titles in Hindi, Marathi and Malayalam translations but has not turned to it in a big way.

## Module 6: Cultural turn in translation

## Lecture 22: Publication of Translations in India

**English as Unifying Language**

All these publication details ironically show a reality that we Indians have to face – English is effectively the link language that ‘unifies’ India. The translation scene in India is vibrant today, but it is only the English translation that is booming. Regional languages that do not get translated into English seem to be suffering for that. Kothari cites the example of Gujarati. Indira Goswami, the Assamese writer was given the Jnanpeth Award in 2001. Rajendra Shah, a prominent Gujarati writer was short-listed for the award. The Gujarati literary world felt that the award eluded Shah because his works had not been translated into English and was generally unknown at the national level. Goswami, on the other hand, had several English translations which made her a prominent name in the national literary scene. Paradoxically, it is felt that to be recognized as a writer at the national level, you have to be translated into English and not Hindi. While Hindi translations might fetch some recognition in the north of India, to be appreciated across the country we still need English in India today. So in that sense, the governmental initiative, especially through the Sahitya Akademi, to unify the country through translations has misfired. The country is knit together through translations, but through the medium of a foreign language. This unfortunately is not because of literary reasons, but because of commercial reasons like salability and visibility. So the translation publication scenario in India today gives us cause to rejoice and despair at the same time.

Translations knit the country together, but through a foreign language. They are not strengthening our regional languages, but emphasizing the prestige of English in India.

**Assignments**

1. Why do some languages and texts get more prominence in translation in India?
2. How many translations of other Indian languages have you read in your mother-tongue? Evaluate the reasons thereof and arrive at an understanding of the cultural politics behind this.

**References**

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