



Historical Perspective of Literary Translation in India

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Abstract

In India, Literary Translation has a rich and complex history that has evolved the country's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. Literary Translation is not only about converting words from one language to another but a process of recreating the aesthetic, cultural, and emotional experience of a literary work. The tradition of literary translation is not new in India. Beginning from the ancient oral traditions of Vedas and the translation of religious texts, translation has played a crucial role in shaping Indian literature and languages. India has been invaded more than hundred times by foreign invaders. Every time, it has come in the contact of a new language, literature and culture. So, the translation has remained the medium to understand the language, literature and culture of these invaders. This paper explores the historical journey of literary translation from Vedic era to Modern age and also focuses on its ongoing dynamic of cultural mediation, intellectual dialogue, and identity formation. This research paper focusses to understand the Literary Translation form Indian literature into English and other Indian and foreign languages from historical Perspective.

Key Words: Literary Translation, Literature, Cultural, Aesthetic, Identity, Linguistic, Historical Perspective.

Introduction

The study of translation historically is an emerging area of research in the field of Translation Studies. History of translation gives an account of what is translated, how it is translated and how it contributes to the development of a language. Literary Translation has existed in India since the ages and has

shaped the development of modern Indian languages and literatures. India has a rich and multifaceted history of translation that has been shaped by its multilingual heritage, religious movements, and colonial encounters. Literary translation has been pivotal in the exchange of ideas, preservation of texts, and development of literary systems across centuries. The history of translation in India is significant for several

reasons and the most important reason among them is the linguistic and literary richness that have sustained here for ages. It cannot be denied that India has been a land of linguistic diversity and has distinguished literary traditions. Thus, translation has played a very important role in sustaining the linguistic and literary richness in India. Now, English is being acknowledged as an international language so it acts as a bridge between two languages or cultures. For this purpose, the government has established many agencies and institution like Sahitya Academy, National Book Trust, and National Translation Mission.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology to explore the evolution of literary translation in India. The study is descriptive in nature and aims to trace the path of translation practices from ancient to modern periods, focusing on their socio-cultural, religious, and political contexts. The research is grounded in the chronological examination of literary translation across different historical eras—Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India. Each period is studied with respect to key events, political shifts, religious movements, and literary outputs that influenced translation activities. The study is based on a wide range of secondary sources, including: Historical texts and translated works, writings and records of translators, scholars, and missionaries, academic articles and books. The methodology emphasizes key themes such as: Cultural mediation, Linguistic diversity, Political influence on translation, Role of institutions in modern literary translation. The research integrates perspectives from literary studies, cultural studies, history, and translation theory, thereby adopting an interdisciplinary approach to understand the multifaceted role of translation in India's literary and cultural evolution.

Historical Perspective of Literary Translation in India

Literary Translation in Ancient Period

The earliest traditions of translation in India can be traced in Indus Valley Civilisation when India used to trade with Mesopotamian and Sumerian people because without understanding the language of each other, trade could not be possible amongst them. In 6th century BCE, the rulers of Hakhmani dynasty of modern Iran invaded India two times and had stayed in India for years. In 3rd century BCE, Alexander of Greece invaded India and he had stayed in India for 18 months. These rulers could not survive in India without knowing the language of each other and that was possible only through translation. After Vedic period, India was divided into 16 Mahajanpads and these Mahajanpads were situated in far and distant regions and had different languages. These Mahajanpads also had the relations of rivalry, trade and matrimony. So only translation was the only path to carry all these relations.

Vedic literature and Brahmin literature like Upnishads, Purans and Aranyak were written originally in Sanskrit that was the language of elites and priests but it was translated into Prakrit and Pali languages to make these text reach common people. The famous scientist and Bodh philosopher Nagarjuna had translated scientific Sanskrit texts into Chinese language. Sanskrit classics were also translated into Arabic and Persian on a large scale. After that mathematics, astrology and Ayurveda were translated in Greek language and thus reached modern Europe. Later, Vedic literature has also been translated into Hindi also.

Jain literature was originally written in Prakrit but Jain scholars translated religious and philosophical works to promote non-violence and ethical teachings across linguistic boundaries. Buddhist literature was originally written in Pali but it was translated by Buddhist

missionaries into many Indian languages as well as foreign languages like Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese etc. during their travels. Kumārajīva translated over 300 Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Classical Chinese.

Emperor Ashoka issued edicts in multiple languages—Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic—highlighting the early recognition of linguistic diversity. Satvahana King Hala composed the famous epic 'Gatha Saptashati' originally in Prakrit language but it was translated into Sanskrit and known for many rituals of Sanskrit's religion policy.

The most translated work of ancient India was Vishnu Sharma's Panchatantra that was written in Sanskrit during Gupta dynasty. It was translated into Pahlavi language first time. After this it was translated into Arabic language with the name 'Kalilag Damnam'. Panchatantra gets the first place in terms of translation. Panchatantra was also translated in almost all literary languages in India. The Chinese Buddhist monks Fa-Hien (Fahian) and Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) also translated many Buddhist literature into Chinese. Xuanzang studied at Nalanda University in

Bihar. After returning to China, he translated dozens of texts, including the Heart Sutra, into Chinese.

Literary Translation in Medieval period

Medieval Period of Indian history spans between 8th and 16th centuries AD. After the decline of Gupta Period, India was divided into many local states. This period witnessed the rise of regional languages and the development of literary traditions in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, and others. In North and West India, Gurjar Pratihar Dynasty was divided into many Rajput states. In South, Chola, Chera and Pandyan were the chief rulers and in the east Pal and after that Sen dynasty ruled. These states had their own culture, language and administration.

After Arabic and Turki invasion, Sultanate period started in Delhi that became the center of India's political system. Their official language was Persian so the sultans began to translate the ancient Sanskrit texts into Persian and Arabian languages to benefit their people and to understand Indian heritage. In this period, the famous Arabic text *Chach-Nama* was translated into Persian by Muhammad Ali bin Abu Bakar Kufi during the reign of Nasir-ud-din Qabacha. The famous

Sanskrit texts like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Panchatantra*, *Kalhan's Rajatarangini* and *Ragdarpan* was translated into Persian language. Sikander Lodi got an ayurvedic texts translated with the name of *Farhang-I-Sikandari* and a music text with the name of *Lajjat-I-Sikandari*. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin of Kashmir commissioned Persian translations of the *Mahabharata* and *Rajatarangini*.

In 12th century, Kambar's *Tamil Ramayana* was the reinterpretation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* that incorporated local cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. In 13th century, *Jnaneshwari* by Sant Jnaneshwar was a Marathi translation and commentary on the Bhagavad Gita.

From 13th to 16th century many Bhakti Saints emphasized devotion over rituals and used vernacular languages to reach common people and translated or paraphrased religious texts into local languages. Tulsidas composed the *Ramcharitmanas* in Awadhi, a reimagining of the *Ramayana*. Kabir and Guru Nanak wrote in a blend of Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu, creating a linguistic fusion that transcended religious boundaries. Sufi saints translated and adapted Arabic and Persian mystical poetry into regional languages, blending Islamic spirituality with local traditions. The works of *Bulleh Shah* and *Amir Khusrau* are examples of this fusion.

During Emperor Akbar's reign, the *Mahabharata* was translated into Persian as the *Razmnama* by a team of Hindu and Muslim scholars. Dara Shikoh, son of Shah Jahan,

translated over 50 Upanishads into Persian, seeing them as universal texts in harmony with Islamic Sufism.

These translations weren't literal but near to literary. These were interpretive, poetic, and context-specific, helping democratize spiritual knowledge. These translations encouraged interfaith dialogue and laid foundations for syncretic Indo-Islamic culture.

Literary Translation in Modern Period

In the modern era, during British period, English became the official language of India and a new era of translation began. In the 18th century, British administrators began to study Indian languages to administer colonial rule more effectively. This gave rise to Orientalism—the Western scholarly interest in Indian literature, languages, and culture. In 1784, Sir William Jones translated *Kalidasa's Shakuntala* into English. In 1785, Charles Wilkins translated the Bhagavad Gita into English. Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Horace Hayman Wilson translated Vedic and Sanskrit texts. Christian missionaries translated the Bible into Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Malayalam. Although their primary aim was evangelization yet these translations enriched Indian languages with new vocabulary and forms of expression.

In India, Translation became a tool for cultural revival and political resistance also. Raja Ram Mohan Roy translated *Upanishads* and scriptures to emphasize rationality and reform. Other intellectuals like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Gandhi, K. Raghunatha Rao also responded by translating English texts into Indian languages.

Mahatma Gandhi translated John Ruskin's *unto This Last* into Gujarati as *Sarvodaya*. In 1912, Ravindra Nath Tagore translated his own Bengali work *Gitanjali* into English and won Nobel Prize that played a major role in bringing Indian literature to a

global audience. Sri Aurobindo translated the Bhagavad Gita and parts of the Vedas into English with philosophical commentary.

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* translated by Daisy Rockwell, won the International Booker Prize in 2022. These translations often emphasized India's classical and ancient past.

After independence, India became a linguistically pluralistic republic with 22 official languages and thousands of dialects. With this unique feature, translation became essential to governance, education, and culture. In Independent India, the new institutions were established to promote literary translation. Sahitya Academy was founded in 1954 that encourages translation among Indian languages and awards annual prizes for outstanding translations. National Book Trust was founded in 1957 that publishes affordable translations of Indian literature into regional languages and English. Kendriya Hindi Directorate and Central Institute of Indian Languages also help disseminate literature across language barriers.

Conclusion

Thus, we can say that the history of translation in India is as old as the Indian subcontinent itself. From Vedic literature to digital platforms, translation has shaped how ideas move across regions, religions, and times. Whether spreading Buddhism to China, translating Persian poetry in Mughal courts, resisting colonialism with vernacular narratives, or bringing Dalit voices to the global stage, translation has been India's lifeblood of cultural transmission.

In today's multilingual, digital India, translation continues to be a tool of empowerment, representation, and identity formation, ensuring that India's vast cultural tapestry remains connected and relevant across generations.

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