

Translation and Multilingualism in India

"We are a world evolving in translation".
G.J.V Prasad, 2005

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Abstract

The activity of translation has become indispensable phenomenon from its marginal activity into its independent discipline. It has become a metaphor to understand cultures across nations and societies. Sharing and production of knowledge has become easily accessible in this age of globalization through translation. It has given voice to the unsayable. Undoubtedly, the history of translation is the history of civilizations. Literature from the regional authors is being recognized for the wider audience. Hence, in this age of globalization, translation acts as a bridge between the regional discourses and the issues concerned at the national and international levels. India as a multilingual and multicultural country has rich scope for translation activity. Thus, the paper aims to explore the history and journey of translation in India from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. It aims to highlight the importance of translation as a tool for communication across cultures in India. The paper also discusses how translation of regional languages can be crucial in enriching our literatures. Some of the important writers and works will come under discussion which have been translated into many regional languages in India. The paper also highlights the growing need for translation to reclaim the richness of Indian literature amid ideological discourses across nation and societies.

Key Words: Translation, Multilingualism and Cross-cultural Communication

Introduction

Translation is a very old phenomenon of human communication since the beginning of human civilization. The interaction among languages and nations is possible through the act of translation. The great writers from Greek, Latin and Italian languages like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Cicero etc., to Rabindranath Tagore (India) in the 20th century and the more recent writers of the present century like Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk have been known to us through the act of translation. “The importance of the art of translation can be grasped by the fact that if Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had not been translated into other languages, the world, except for Greece, would have been a poor place.” (Azurdah 57) Therefore, the activity of translation has made it possible to categorize literature into world literature, comparative literature, postcolonial literature etc., to create and construct myriad discourses at the broader level. The transmission of knowledge, culture, history and philosophy is easily accessible across languages and nations. As pointed out by Weissbort and Eysteinnsson “Translation is still of the utmost importance in the affairs of a world that has gone through the rapid technological development called modernization, which furthermore has enhanced international relations to the point where people feel they can legitimately talk of ‘globalization’.” (1)

In the Indian context, translation plays a significant role in understanding the cultural diversity of the country. It helps us to know the composite culture of people. Imaging different communities in the multilingual set-up is a distant dream if not translated from one language into another. The Ganga-Jamni Tahzeeb or Hindustani Tahzeeb can be only be cherished by knowing each other at the cultural, historical and religious levels. The communal harmony and brotherhood are only possible when we understand and communicate each other. The need to preserve and promote this composite culture for future generation is possible through translation. Knowing the literature, history, philosophy etc., of different communities and societies can be located and understood through translation.

Pre-colonial, Colonial and Pos-colonial Translations in India

India has a very rich tradition of translation from its antiquity. Translations from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times have shaped the Indian literature to its new horizons. These periods have witnessed some of the phenomenal translations from its ancient Sanskrit language into various regional languages. The key texts translated into regional languages in the ancient period were *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The two epic poems are crucial in fostering the religious, historical, cultural and literary base of India. Translation of these texts not only helped in enriching the Indian literature and languages but also created and constructed the various discourses around the theory and practice of translation. Even these epics have a great influence on the modern literature. As pointed out by M. Venkateshwar, “The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* began to influence the modern Indian literatures from their early mediaeval period. For centuries before that, people in all parts of India were no doubt acquainted with the stories of the epics, but direct access to the originals was confined to the learned few. So the need for their translation, or adaptation into the spoken languages of the day, was essentially felt of.” (30) Hence, the retellings and the translation of these epics into various regional languages were great impetus for the development of Indian literature in India.

During Mughal rule also translation received a great attention to understand different religious groups. They translated *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Yoga Vasishtha* for the better understanding of other religious groups in India. While highlighting the crucial phase of translations in India, Asaduddin states in his article “Translation and Indian Literature: Some Reflections”:

...in India, if we leave out the re-telling of the stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in regional languages, the first significant translations, to my knowledge, took place at the time of Emperor Akbar. In his efforts to promote understanding among religions and promote interfaith dialogue, Akbar sponsored debates among scholars of different religions and encouraged the translation of Sanskrit, Turkish and Arabic texts into Persian by setting up a *Maktabkhana* or translation bureau. Persian translation of Sanskrit texts included *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagvad-gita*, *Bhagavat Purana*, *Atharva Veda*, *Yoga Vashisht* etc.” (3)

He further lays the importance of these translations as “as a dialogue of civilizations.”

(3)

Later Prince Dara Shikoh’s, who was committed in understanding the comparative religion, also translated fifty *Upanishads* (1657) entitled as *Sirri-Akbar or Sirri Asrar* (The Great Secret) into Persian also played a significant role in understanding the comparative religion.

The activity of translation became an important tool in British rule in India. During the British rule, the Europeans translated various texts from the Indian languages particularly Sanskrit texts into English to understand the Indian history, culture and people to continue their rule in India. The establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800 played a significant role in the translation activity. The institution translated thousands of books from various languages like Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Hindi and Urdu into English. Some of the important translations from the Indian languages into English, for example, were *Shakuntala* by Sir William Jones, *Light of Asia* by Edwin Arnold, *Bhagavad Gita* by Barbara Stoler Miller, *Gita Govinda* by Lee Seigel etc. Hence, with the advent of British in India the translation activity has received a great impetus as pointed by K. Satchidanandan:

The translation scenario in India underwent a major transformation with English entering India’s linguistic scape. Three areas of translation prospered during the colonial times: translation of Indian literary texts into English; translation of English language texts (as also the European language texts available in English versions) into Indian languages and finally translation from one Indian language into another.” (4)

During colonial times, there were translations between the languages to nationalize the Indian literature to unite people. With the help of these translations, a spirit of patriotism was instilled in the minds of the people. As highlighted by Kalyani, “Many of the patriotic novels written in Bangla were translated in English and other regional languages during this time.” (108-109). For instance, Tagore’s works were largely translated into various regional languages. In this context, Satchidanandan writes: “The translation between Indian languages during the period of the freedom struggle was no more just a literary exercise; it helped in the building of a nation.” (3)

The activity of translation has reached its new venture after independence. In the post-colonial times, the translations of regional languages into English have created a huge interest in translation across languages in India. As highlighted by M. Asaduddin:

In the post-independence period we find a gradual attenuation of translation within Indian languages. The space that was open to translation between Indian regional literatures gradually shrank and English began to intervene. However, even though the postcolonial moment belonged to translation from Indian languages into English, the translation scene even in English was fairly desultory in the first three decades after independence. (12)

In this context, the role of Sahitya Akademi, Penguin Books India and Macmillan India Ltd is very significant in fostering the translation of regional literature into English. The contribution of Sahitya Akademi is undeniable in making the regional literature accessible in India and abroad. It focuses on the inter-translation of Indian languages which, on the one hand, enriches the literature of other languages within India and also bridges the cultural gap among the people. The function of Sahitya Akademi as mentioned in the Akademi Catalogue is “to work actively for the development of Indian letters and to set high literary standards, to foster and coordinate literary activities in all the Indian languages and to promote through them the cultural unity of the country.” (qtd in Kalyani, 109). One of the important contributions of Sahitya Akademi is its annual awards given to the best translations of regional languages translated into English. Later, the publication houses like Penguin Books India have also played a significant role to publish translations of regional languages into English. As highlighted by M. Asaduddin:

Among the many success stories of Penguin the most notable are the short stories and novellas of Satyajit Ray from Bengali, beginning with *Adventures of Feluda* (1988), and then running into several other volumes, Bhishm Sahni’s novel, *Tamas: Darkness* (1989) from Hindi, Classic Telugu Short Stories (1995) edited by Ranga Rao, all of which went on to become bestsellers and have registered steady sales ever since they were published. (14)

The endeavors made by Penguin had inspired other publishers like Rupa and Company, Seagull Books of Kolkata which also played a significant role in translating the regional literature into English.

Macmillan India Ltd had also taken a lead to publish fiction of Indian writers into English. They translated Indian novels from regional literature into English. In this context, M. Asaduddin highlights that, “

The most ambitious and systematic project of translating Indian novels into English was launched by Macmillan India Ltd in 1996 in a series called ‘Modern Indian Novels in English Translation.’ By now, it has published more than 100 novels. These translations are accompanied by an elaborate editorial apparatus – a scholarly introduction by a critic of the original language, a Translator’s Note and an elaborate (compensatory) glossing in footnotes. Some of these novels have already been put on the syllabi of universities in India and abroad. (14-15)

Thus, in the post-colonial era, the multilingual and multicultural nature of India has increased the demand for understanding each other’s literature and culture. It has widened the scope and status of translations of regional languages. India has 23 languages (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada, Assamese, Bangla, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmir, Konkani, Maithili, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindi, Urdu) as mentioned in the IV Schedule of Indian Constitution. It urges the need of interaction between these languages which is only possible through translations. Translating a text from one language into another unravels a new world of knowledge, people and culture. It offers us a better understanding of people and their living style. Thus, translator acts as a “cultural broker” who unlocks the new realities and experiences. (Mukherjee 125) It reveals before us a new world in the form of food, dress code, festivals, marriage system, climate differences etc. This kind of exposition develops among us the mutual respect towards other cultures. Mini Krishnan who has a long experience in translation and publishing provides a good reason why there is need of translations of Indian literature into different languages. She states “Why do I publish translations of Indian writing? Because in them lie our own histories, our sense of

identity and belonging. Because we need to breathe our native breath. Because it is our historical duty in a largely illiterate country to preserve our word worlds and slow their disappearance.” (Krishnan)

Translation in Multilingual and Multicultural Country in India

Translations in India can be crucial in safeguarding the regional literatures from the Western influences. It can be used as a resistance against the Western culture which is creating a threat to our own cultural heritage. Therefore, it is instrumental for the younger generation to make them connected to their own history, culture and identity. Moreover, the idea of India can be strengthened once we get familiar to our own literatures which reflect the identity, ethnicity and social living of the people. The need to know about other's culture gives us a feeling of brotherhood and unity in the country. It can be used as a tool in understanding the difference between the diverse cultures existing in India. The translations make them conscious about the knowledge gap which lies between the West and India.

The translation of regional languages into English and other languages in India can play a vital role in an intergroup communication. People are exposed to the varied religious texts which teach us the tolerance and religious harmony for the peaceful coexistence. The translation of religious texts into Indian languages provides us with an opportunity to understand the differences and similarities among the religions. The translations of the religious, historical and literary works like *Mahabhart*, *Ramayana*, *Bible*, *Quran* et., provide not only an interfaith understanding of religions, but also open the new ways for a comparative study of these religions as well. It enriches the literature and vocabulary of the languages that is very important for the growth and promotions of languages. This kind of effort makes the practice of religion easy and increases the understanding among the common masses in a better way.

The writers whose important works have been translated into many regional languages are Kabir, Rabindranath Tagore, Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon, Ghulam Ahmad Mehmood, Mahatma Gandhi, Munshi Prem Chand, Manto, Ismat Chughtai etc. These great giants of Indian literature would have been unknown to the world and also to Indians in particular if not

translated into regional languages and English. Translation of these writers into different languages tells a lot about the people and their culture. For example, translation of *Gitanjali* into many Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Telugu, Malayalam et., not only acquaints us about the religious dimensions of Tagore but also enrich our languages and literatures. The transference of knowledge, philosophy, history, art of different regional languages in India is only possible through translations. We are able to receive new knowledge and ideas after reading the books of other languages and cultures.

In pedagogy and academic discourse, reading literatures across languages is of utmost significance in understanding different traditions, genres and styles. The inclusion of various texts across languages will promote and preserve the regional ethos among the young generation. Students can be taught the diverse cultural differences through these translations. The process of launching new translation centers and departments in universities and other places is instrumental to widen and strengthen this discipline for future success. It is also admirable to include separate papers on translations studies like British Literature, American Literature and Indian Literature in the syllabus of Indian universities. To have the translations of our own literature will make the future generations aware about the rich tradition of our literatures in the country.

Conclusion

Thus, translations of regional literature into English and other languages in India open up the new vistas of knowledge and wisdom to readers. It offers the cultural understanding of different regions of India that creates a sense of harmony and brotherhood among the people. It not only enriches the languages linguistically and culturally but also helps to enrich literature of languages in different genres. Moreover, it resists and reclaims the past glory and legacy against the dominant languages and literatures. Therefore, the need to establish more and more translation departments will flourish and encourage the process of translation of the regional languages in future.

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