

TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL DIMENSION IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Translation studies, as an academic field, is relatively young and still defining its scope. This is largely because conveying cultural elements through literary translation is a complex process that draws upon many layers of human experience, such as history, social structures, religious beliefs, traditional practices, and everyday life. In recent years, translation has gained renewed prominence within English studies in India. This rising interest is closely linked to the country's post-colonial mindset, which encourages a critical reassessment of Western literary dominance. Today, English functions as a major medium for translation in India, serving as an important linguistic bridge across diverse cultures and languages.

Key Words: *translation studies, English studies, literary translation, culture, territory.*

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Introduction:

This article discusses the importance of translation in India, a country known for its vast cultural, ethnic, and linguistic variety. With 22 official languages, 15 different scripts, hundreds of mother tongues, and numerous dialects, India depends on translation to remain culturally connected and to preserve its long and rich heritage. Translation studies, though a relatively new academic discipline in India, is still expanding because translating cultural experiences such as history, religion, customs, social behaviour, and daily life is a highly complex task.

In recent times, translation has gained new attention within English studies in India. This renewed interest is linked to the post-colonial shift in thinking and the desire to move beyond the unquestioned dominance of Western literary traditions. Today, English functions as a major language for translation work in India. As Khubchandani points out, English is no longer simply a colonial tool—it now serves as a connecting link among India's many languages, bringing together linguistic communities that may otherwise remain distant.

The Indian Outlook on Translation:

Before analysing translation within India, it is useful to understand what translation itself involves. Translation deals with words, and words are expressions of ideas and experiences. Therefore, every act of communication can be viewed as a kind of translation. Human knowledge would be difficult to share without language, and translation allows this exchange to happen across cultures.

In Hindi, the word for translation is *Anuvaad*. It comes from the Sanskrit term *Anuvaadeh*, which means “to repeat” or “to restate” something for the purpose of clarity (Apte). The root “*vaad*” refers to a statement, while “*anu*” means “after” or “following.”

Translation usually proceeds through several steps:

- Moving from the source language to the target language,
- Transliteration,
- Transcreation,
- Transfer,
- Restructuring.

Transliteration offers a word-for-word version of the source text, focusing on immediate meaning. *Transcreation* gives the translator freedom to reshape the text creatively while preserving its basic message. During the *transfer* stage, the translator mentally carries the meaning from one language to another, and in *restructuring*, the text is adapted so that it reads smoothly and appropriately in the target culture. A translation is considered successful when it creates a similar effect on the target audience as the original produced on its readers.

Evolution and Development of Translation in India:

Translation has existed in India for many centuries, often practiced informally without being labeled as such (Mukherjee). Critics like Khubchandani even trace its origins to mythological figures such as Narad, known for travelling between worlds to deliver messages, and to Buddha, who communicated teachings across different regions.

Sujeet Mukherjee notes that early translation activities were primarily from Sanskrit considered the “master language” into modern Indian languages like Hindi, Bangla, and Gujarati. Unlike

the Western context, where translation first developed through biblical interpretations, India’s earliest translations cantered on epics and poetic works such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavad Gita*.

Before the nineteenth century, Indian literature consisted largely of translations, retellings, adaptations, and reinterpretations. These included texts on medicine, astronomy, architecture, metallurgy, ship-building, travel, religion, philosophy, and poetics, translated from languages like Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Persian, and Arabic. Such efforts enriched India’s intellectual traditions.

Many classical writers were multilingual. Kalidasa used both Sanskrit and Prakrit in *Shakuntala*. Poets like Kabir, Meerabai, Guru Nanak, and Namdev composed in more than one language. Stories also travelled

internationally; for example, *Panchatantra* tales gradually reached Europe and reappeared as Aesop’s Fables.

During the Mughal era, Persian became the main language of translation, and Emperor Akbar encouraged large-scale translations of Indian epics into Persian. Later, with the arrival of the British, scholars began translating Indian texts into English. Charles Wilkins translated the *Bhagavad Gita* into English in 1785.

Despite English gaining importance, Indian languages continued to maintain their own strong literary traditions. During the freedom struggle, translation became a tool to assert India’s cultural identity. Works by writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Premchand were translated across regions. Indian scholars also

translated European works into Sanskrit and several regional languages, helping Indian readers engage with world literature.

Writers and translators like A.K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, and Sujit Mukherjee further strengthened translation as a way of expressing regional identities and cultural diversity.

The Post-Colonial Phase :

After independence, scholars began to rethink the relationship between original texts and their translations. A major milestone was Rabindranath Tagore’s self-translation of *Gitanjali* from Bengali to English, which won him the Nobel Prize in 1913. Even today, many Indian writers prefer English translation to gain national and global visibility.

Sir William Jones’s earlier translation of *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* reflects orientalist interest in India’s classical heritage. At the same time, Indian translators used translation to promote unity among linguistic communities and to support the nationalist movement. P. Lal introduced the concept of *transcreation*, encouraging translators to recreate the text creatively

yet faithfully (Das). This approach influenced important translations of Indian epics, including those by R.K. Narayan and C. Rajagopalachari.

As translation became more widespread, people recognized its ability to maintain cultural unity while preserving linguistic diversity. Translations began to flow not only from Indian languages into English but also between Indian languages themselves.

From the 1980s onward, globalization encouraged interaction between cultures, leading to greater demand for translated books. Publishers such as Penguin, Macmillan, and Katha began supporting translation projects. Events like international book fairs further increased interest in Indian literature.

Translation studies also expanded into multiple branches:

- **Literary Translation**
- **Knowledge Translation** (textbooks and academic disciplines)
- **Cultural Translation Discursive Translation** (spoken vs. written forms)
- **Media Translation** (news, cinema, radio, television)

While Western scholarship often approaches translation through theories like structuralism, deconstruction, or gender studies, the Indian tradition views translation more practically as a daily cultural necessity. In a diverse country like India, translation helps bridge social conflicts, support cultural exchange, and highlight unity amidst diversity.

Recent Trends in Translation Studies:

In the last thirty years, India has witnessed major advances in translation theory, paralleling global developments. Prominent thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Harish Trivedi have reshaped discussions on translation through post-colonial and interdisciplinary perspectives. Spivak's translations of Derrida and Mahasweta Devi reflect her belief in the cultural and political power of language.

Tejaswini Niranjana and Rita Kothari are also influential figures. Niranjana argues that translation should question and destabilize the source text to expose deeper cultural tensions. Other scholars emphasize the extreme difficulty of translation, suggesting that rewriting a text might sometimes be easier than translating it.

Andre Lefevere offered one of the earliest systemic views of translation, arguing that translations are shaped by factors such as ideology, power relations, and literary expectations. According to him, translation is not just a linguistic activity—it is a cultural act that influences how communities preserve and redefine their identities.

By the late twentieth century, translation studies had gained academic recognition. With the rise of a global English-speaking readership, translation became an important area of cultural exchange and communication. What was once considered secondary work began to be viewed as a central, creative, and intellectual activity.

Conclusion:

Translation has consistently played an essential role in shaping India's literary and cultural life. It has enabled people across regions, languages, and communities to connect with one another. Concepts such as "Indian literature," "Indian culture," and "Indian philosophy" owe much to the long tradition of translation.

Translation has enriched Indian literature by making world classics from Shakespeare and Dante to Tolstoy, Neruda, García Márquez, and Coetzee available to Indian readers. At the same time, it has empowered marginalized groups by giving them a platform to express their experiences.

As J.B. Casagrande notes, translation is ultimately an act of translating cultures, not just languages. It is therefore a deeply cross-cultural process.

In modern times, initiatives like the *Anusaarana* project at IIT Kanpur, which uses Human-Aided

Machine Translation, show how technology is expanding access to knowledge across languages. Although translation theory has developed greatly, challenges remain especially the difficulty of capturing the tone, emotion, and intentions of the original writer. Still, translation today stands at a promising intersection of language, culture, identity, and communication, and continues to grow as a dynamic field.

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