

TRANSLATION: SAFEGUARDING INDIGENOUS HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

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Abstract:

*This paper examines the significant role of translation in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge systems, folklore, oral epics, ecological wisdom, and cultural identity within India's context of extraordinary diversity in linguistic and culture. In India's cultural landscape there is a great blend of human heritage, which encompasses amazing linguistic diversity. Our heritage encompasses more than 700 distinct tribal and indigenous languages, alongside those uncountable oral traditions, both of which function fundamentally as the living vessels used for preserving ancestral knowledge and important traditional values. Nevertheless, this heritage currently confronts a silent and serious problem; numerous languages amongst these groups, such as Gondi and Santhali, now exist under a great, looming threat of complete extinction. This particular threat is caused by the intrusion of several powerful external pressures, which include the widespread effects of globalization, patterns of urban migration, and the forceful dominance exerted by major languages. The seriousness of this situation becomes highlighted by the verifiable fact that UNESCO has officially listed more than 197 different Indian languages as being endangered, highlighting the extremely urgent necessity for cultural intervention. Within this difficult context, the vital process of translation effectively transforms itself into a genuinely significant cultural act. Translation is clearly far more than merely a simple linguistic transfer; instead, it actively serves as an absolutely necessary safeguard specifically designed both to rescue and consequently to transmit deep human knowledge. The stated main purpose of this particular protective endeavour is fundamentally to ensure the guaranteed survival and ultimate revitalization of essential community wisdom. Through the practice of translating, various scholars and diverse community members are effectively securing valuable indigenous knowledge systems, historical folklore, detailed oral epics, critical ecological wisdom (such as specific knowledge of medicinal plants and principles of forest ecology), in addition to foundational cultural identity. **Keywords:** Translation, Indigenous Languages, Oral Epics, Cultural Identity, Linguistic Preservation, Tribal Narratives, Endangered Languages.*

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Introduction:

Translation Studies is an emerging discipline of research and profession in the twenty-first century, it has flourished as a new field drawing ideas from anthropology, philosophy, literature, linguistics, and many other fields. Historically, both written and spoken translations have played a significant role in inter-human communication. The word 'translation' itself derives from a Latin term meaning 'to bring or carry across'. This traditional function of translation gains great significance within culturally and linguistically diverse nations like India. India has more than 700 tribal and indigenous languages alongside

numerous oral traditions. These indigenous languages are important because they serve as vital carriers of ancestral knowledge and traditional values. However, this rich legacy is facing serious threats. Many of these languages, such as Gondi, Santhali, Warli, Bhili, Koya, and Bodo, face significant extinction pressures arising primarily from globalization, urban migration, and the dominance of major languages. There is a great need of preservation of these Indian languages. In this demanding context, translation does a very crucial cultural act. Translation is very essential to preserve and transmit indigenous knowledge systems, folklore, oral epics, ecological wisdom, and cultural identity.

The indigenous oral literature includes abstract cultural elements such as mythological tales, heroic epics, spiritual beliefs, and ecological wisdom which translation allows surviving beyond the confines of the oral medium alone. This vital shift from the spoken word to written and digital forms resists cultural erosion and strengthens collective identity. In this paper it is argued that translation, when executed responsibly and sensitively, not only safeguards marginalized voices but at the same time it enhances national cultural consciousness and achieves global literary recognition, thereby fulfilling its role in protecting indigenous heritage and identity.

Literature review: Scholarly work states that translation exploring indigenous heritage in India is fundamentally a cultural, ethical, and political practice required for protecting India's indigenous heritage and identity. This research views translation as central to protecting endangered knowledge systems, rather than merely a linguistic transfer.

- ❖ Devy, Ganesh N., editor. *The Being of Bhasha: A General Introduction*. (2013). He advocates for translation as a crucial tool for reviving linguistic dignity and ensuring visibility for marginalized speech communities, emphasizing that practice must be ethical and community-rooted.
- ❖ Devi, Mahasweta. *Imaginary Maps*. (1995). She demonstrates that translated oral histories function as political testimony, acting as a critical bridge between subaltern voices and national discourse.
- ❖ Elwin, Verrier. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1964). He talked about the importance of recognizing tribal epistemologies, preserving myths and folklore despite later critiques regarding outsider ethnographic bias.
- ❖ Munda, Ram Dayal. *Adi-Dharam: Religious Beliefs of the Adivasis of India: An Outline of Religious Reconstruction with Special Reference to the Jharkhand Region* (2000). He utilizes translation for

cultural self-representation, pride, and revival.

- ❖ *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, (2023) International bodies like UNESCO stress the urgency of linguistic conservation, framing documentation and translation as ethical imperatives for knowledge preservation given India's high count of endangered languages.

Methodology: This research adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology to examine the role of translation in preserving indigenous languages and oral traditions in India. The study investigates translation not simply as a linguistic activity, but as a cultural, socio-political, and ethical practice required for safeguarding endangered indigenous knowledge systems. The research follows an analytical and descriptive design, focusing on interpretation and evaluation of existing translation initiatives related to tribal oral heritage. The study employs secondary sources, such as books, scholarly articles, ethnographic records, archival materials, and digital repositories, to assess translation efforts and their impact on cultural survival.

Analysis: This study confirms that translation helps save and pass on India's many native spoken traditions. This role is vital because of the country's diverse people and languages. In areas with many different groups, several tribal languages, used by communities like the Gonds, Santals, Warlis, and Bhil Adivasis, have no written forms. Therefore, their shared memory, which holds history, social rules, deep nature knowledge, and beliefs, exists only in weak oral stories. The main way translation protects these stories is by changing short oral tales into lasting records, such as easy written papers, sound or video files, and digital storage. This makes sure they continue for all generations. This careful work directly stops people forgetting culture by making intangible memory into real, recorded history. Plus, this step is a strong guard against language loss. UNESCO reports show many

tribal languages quickly vanish. Translation slows this threat by recording oral stories, common sayings, and myths. It also publishes books in two or three languages and builds required digital archives. Specific efforts, like recordings kept by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, also save unique performance styles, such as Pandavani, popularised by figures like Teejan Bai. This ensures these distinct cultural forms join general understanding and are not forgotten. Beyond just saving, translation improves passing knowledge down by building important mental connections.

Indigenous knowledge is recognized as a sophisticated system deeply interwoven with spiritual beliefs, community ethics, and the natural environment. Traditional narratives, such as the Gondi, Lingo, Pen narrative and the Santali, Baha, Parab songs, function as crucial repositories of ancestral history and specialized ecological wisdom. For younger generations, who often receive their formal education in dominant mainstream languages, translation is the primary means through which they can reconnect meaningfully with their complex ancestral roots and traditional knowledge systems. Through effective multilingual translation, these foundational cultural narratives retain their status as ‘living traditions’ rather than being relegated to detached, static status as ‘museum artifacts’. Moreover, the act of translation is intrinsically political and cultural, serving to reclaim the dignity and historical narrative of communities that have historically faced significant marginalisation. The efforts of major scholars, activists, and institutions are central to this revivalist movement. The extensive documentation work spearheaded by figures like Ganesh Devy, Mahasweta Devi, Ram Dayal Munda, and Verrier Elwin has been instrumental in codifying tribal languages and oral memories.

Devy's People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) represents a monumental institutional effort designed specifically to democratize linguistic preservation by

actively engaging community custodians and storytellers in the process. By framing translation and language rights as a matter of dignity and social justice, Devy's work offers a blueprint for addressing the global crisis of language endangerment, especially for cultures that have experienced colonial or alien domination.

Mahasweta Devi is a highly acclaimed writer, journalist and activist who write primarily in Bengali. She has lived and worked with the tribals for the last several decades, representing their cause through both her writing and fiction. Devi's stories map the experiences of the tribal and tribal life under decolonization. Verrier Elwin is known for his extensive study of tribal. Some of his main writings are focussed on tribal life and identity. Elwin gathered numerous facts on the tribal life in Central India, their myths, poems and stories that appeared in vivid depiction in his fascinating monographs. Elwin contributed to our knowledge of India's aboriginal populations. His monographs on such tribes as Baigas, Muria Gonds, Bondos and Saoras will be valued for a long time. *Adi-Dharam* is a book written by Ram Dayal Munda who was an anthropologist, folklorist, linguist, and academician. He was awarded Padmashri in 2010 for his immense contribution to Art in Jharkhand. This book is documentation of the religious beliefs of Adivasi of India especially in the Munda tribal community of Jharkhand, published in 2000. Through this book, Ram Dayal Munda tried to make a collection of festivals rituals, narratives, and prayers of Sarhul, Karma, and Sohorai festivals.

These powerful translation efforts are necessary steps for raising pride in indigenous identity. They also actively support the ideas of linguistic democracy within the wider country. But how good and real the translation is depends on knowing and managing the special problems of translating indigenous oral heritage. Oral traditions are very rich and complex.

They often use specific tone, rhythm, and ritualistic chants. These features are extremely hard to accurately copy into a fixed written document. Oral traditions are full of culturally specific metaphors and specific ecological words. These words carry heavy meaning. This makes them easily distorted if they are simply translated word-for-word. There is also the chance of someone taking the content or the loss of the true tribal voice if the process is not carefully managed. To keep cultural integrity and get the best results, experts conclude that documentation work must use ethical, community-centered translation methods. These necessary safety steps must include using detailed explanations and notes. Crucially, they require collaborative translation models. These models deeply involve native speakers and community translators during the entire process. Ultimately, the scholarly goal of saving language needs a careful balance. This means ensuring accuracy to the original material while maintaining high cultural and ethical sensitivity toward the communities whose heritage is being recorded. This commitment ensures translation documents not only words but truly shares the spirit and wisdom within India's endangered oral heritage. Translation sustains culture, yet experts admit major challenges exist. These include losing the oral feel, misinterpreting the culture, and things being untranslatable, requiring practices sensitive to context.

Conclusion: Translation plays an essential and mighty role in protecting India's diverse local languages. By putting spoken history into written and digital forms, translation offers a strong way to fight cultural loss, strengthen identity, and share key local knowledge globally. Beyond simply saving things, translation works as a powerful way to restart identity. When local languages reach print and school settings, young local people become proud of their heritage. This is shown,

for example, by schools in areas like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha that add spoken tribal stories into their books to encourage learning in the mother-tongue. Thus, the action of translation is also understood as a powerful force for social fairness and better culture, effectively saving overlooked voices. However, how well translation works and its honesty depend on careful and moral practice. Translation needs to stay community-focused to actively stop unfair use or changing the original meaning. Done with this care, translation is more than just moving words. It becomes a powerful act of better literature, saving culture, and achieving social fairness.

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