

Towards an Indian Theory of Translation

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What is the reason that a multilingual country with a 5000 years old civilization did not care to develop a well-founded translation theory or even discuss, if not elaborately, at least concisely, the nature, function and principles of translation. Bhadriraju Krishnamurti (1) points out that India is a linguistic area and, based on the same analogy, I might say that India is also a translation area. Being polyglots, we use more than one language while speaking or even thinking. But, the big question is why there is no single critical text specifying the art of science or translation parallel to Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* (4th Century BC Sanskrit Grammarian, Panini's book of grammar known as *Ashtadhyayi* meaning eight chapters) (2) or Tholkappiyar's *Tolkappiyam* (Tholkappiyar (3rd Century BC) wrote the most ancient Tamil grammar named *Tolkappiyam* on Tamil Language, (An ancient work of 3rd Cen. BC on the grammar of Tamil Language in Classical India and attributed to sage Tholkappiyar) (3) or Bharata's *Natyashastra* (An ancient Indian treatise on the performing arts, encompassing theatre, dance and music written by sage Bharata between 200 BC and 200 AD). (4) One can presume that in the Indian context an exclusive attitude with regard to language (Sanskrit) and privilege of the speakers and their master narrative was responsible for this lacuna. To a greater extent, one would be correct in this assumption, as Suniti Kumar Chatterji has shown.

Polyglottism in ancient India, as Chatterji has noted, was responsible for the development of 'translating consciousness'. Vatsyayana's term *lokopichanuvada* or 'translatibility' suggests how far back we can trace India's theorizing on translation.

Chatterji in his book *Indo Aryan and Hindi* (5) has proved that a good deal of Sanskrit literature, particularly the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, are based on a translation substratum from the literatures of Indo-Aryan languages which include the languages of Aryans, miscegenated Aryans, non-Aryans, and foreign speakers, in particular settled groups who spoke Greek and old Persian. When Sanskrit attained a pan-Indian prestige status, its speakers became reluctant to disclose the translated character of this literary substratum.

We may be able to explain this oversight or occlusion theoretically by turning to the Russian formalists, Crawford, who were of the opinion that in every literary tradition there is not one but several literary schools and that they exist in literature simultaneously. (6) Only one of them, however, represents the canonized crest. Sanskrit, in due course, achieved this status. The others existed obscurely. The superior position played down any role of translation from these languages into Sanskrit. With the passage of time, Sanskrit speakers came to hold the artistic creation in the Indian *bhashas* in contempt.

A prime example of this process can be seen in a legend that is usually associated with Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha*. Gunadhya, a poet of high merit and deep perception, wrote this book of stories in Paishachi language, a dialect once spoken in North-Western India in Kashmir. When Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* in Paishachi language was written in 7–8 century A.D., Sanskrit was still the language of power, scholarship and arrogance. When Gunadhya presented the manuscript to scholars they rejected it outright since it was not written in Sanskrit. In response to this humiliating insult, Gunadhya took the extreme step of burning the manuscript.

The legend goes on to relate that Somadeva, a distinguished scholar of Sanskrit, was able to rescue one-seventh of the manuscript by persuading Gunadhya not to burn the complete work. This portion (2400 slokas) of the recovered manuscript was translated into Sanskrit by Somadeva as the *Kathasaritsagara*. Later on Kshemendra, another very distinguished scholar of Sanskrit also translated the extant manuscript (in 7500 Sanskrit verses:sloka) as the *Brihatkathamajari*. In fact, Somadeva's work was the first book translated into Sanskrit from any other Indian languages. There exist other translations available in Sanskrit from Pali Buddhist texts, but in general Sanskrit language held an elitist approach to literature. Other languages were simply not translated into Sanskrit.

Although Sanskrit scholars and writers did not care to translate from *bhasha* (regional languages) literature into Sanskrit, they were quite concerned about the issue of translation in the multilingual society in which they lived. Faced with linguistic divergence, they were forced to investigate different aspects of language, learning, and teaching. They wished to distinguish universals from common notions in the various languages and chart the distances between them. They also had to deal with the complex relationship between words and meaning, language representation, and logic. All these issues still have relevance for our understanding of ancient Indian linguistics and help in creating a viable theory for translations today.

There are scattered insights and oblique hints given in different texts, such as the *Aitereya* or *Gopatha Brahmana*, (large number of Brahmana texts were written between about 1000-600 B.C. to explain the Vedic texts, rites and customs) (7 & 8); Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, (Fourth Century BC, Sanskrit Grammarian Panini's book known as *Ashtadhyayi* meaning eight chapters); Yaska's *Nirukta*, (Yaska, an early Sanskrit

Grammarians, who succeeded Panini (6th or 5th Cen. B.C), wrote his book of etymology of Vedic words known as *Nirukta*.) (9 & 10); Kayyat's *tika* (commentary) on Mahabhasyakar's commentary on Panini, (Kayyata (11th Cen. A.D.) wrote his commentary named *Pradipa* on Mahabhasya, the great commentary on Panini's grammar attributed to Patanjali (2nd Cen. B.C.) (11); Kulluka Bhatta's *tika* on Bhartrihari and the *Manusmriti*, (Kulluka Bhatta's (1260 A.D.) commentary, *Manavartha Muktavali* on Manusmriti) (12) and Vatsyayana's *bhasya*; (Vatsyayan's (1st Cen. B.C.) commentary along with the commentary *Varttika* by Uddyotakar on Gautama's Nyayadarshana, the book of logic) (13& 14); as well as the actual principles observed by the practitioners of literary translation in almost all the Indian languages stretching over several centuries that can be pieced together to develop an Indian theory of translation.

Here I must admit that I have little knowledge of 700 to 800 years of the common era's *bhasha* tradition and also the explicative discussion in the Prakrit and Apabhramsa of Jain aesthetics about which, D. R. Nagaraja, A.K. Ramanujan's successor at Chicago, gave a brilliant exposition in a seminar many years back in Bangalore.(15)

While piecing together what has been said about translation in a variety of texts, one can realize that in the Indian context the term for translation is *anuvad* , and it signifies the repetition of what is enjoined by a Vedic text with a different wording. But repetition is not understood as a literal word-by word rendering of the original from source to target language. In the Indian context, the reader is never a passive receiver of a text in which its truth is enshrined.

The theories of *rasa* and *dhvani* suggest that a text is recoded by the individual consciousness of its receiver so that he/she may have multiple aesthetic experiences and hence a text is not perceived as an object that should produce a single invariant reading.

Unlike the western approach to tradition, any deviation on the part of the reader-translator is not a transgression in Indian translation. The Indian translator always has the freedom to interpret the text though he does not disturb the core of the piece and it always remains constant what André Lefevere points out as the ‘invariant core’ of a translated text. (16)

One of the greatest advances in twentieth-century Western literary study is that theoreticians like Roland Barthes saw the role of the literary work as that of making the reader not so much a ‘consumer’ but as a ‘producer’ of the text. (17) Julia Kristeva’s notion of ‘intertextuality’ was also profoundly significant because the very acceptance of all the texts that precede and surround a work allows the reader-translator to interpret, clarify, and translate. (18)The ancient Indian view that translation is nothing but repetition also suggests that translation is primarily clarification or interpretation that is obtained by repetitive utterances. To an Indian society, steeped in an oral literary tradition of *smṛiti* and *shruti*, differing versions become the norm rather than an exception. The method of producing an authentic and ‘pure’ text, as practiced in Europe particularly during the colonial period was an alien notion for Indians. To the Indian mind, translation is rebirth where *atman*, the text’s soul or invariant core remains constant while other aspects take on a new form.

Moreover, in addition to analyzing the notion of repetition (*vidhivihitatasyanuvachanuvadah*:to repeat in words according to rules is translation), the *Gopatha Brahmana* reflects on the doctrine of the purposefulness of translation (*saprayojanamano vadah*:translation is always with a purpose) in Sanskrit poetics and the fact that it cannot be simply explained by the utility theory of supply and demand. (Translation problems are more aesthetic than a purely linguistic and functional. Therefore *prayojana* should be understood as aesthetic delight

(*sakalaprayanamaulibhutaanandam* : the ultimate objective of literature is a state of blissfulness) according to Mammata, (11Cen. A.D. Sanskrit rhetorician) because literary translation is not just a replication of a text in another verbal space and period. Rather a translated text raises the question of how translation functions as an aesthetic activity. (19)

The essence of translation lies in the preservation of meaning across two different languages. This notion leads us to the central issue of equivalence in translation. In the Madhava's *Jaiminiya Nyaya Mala-Vistara* (17th Cen.A.D.), it is said that the revelation of meaning is translation (*jatasyakathanamanuvadah*, 1.4.6) and therefore equivalence here does not mean a search for sameness. (20) Even Shakespeare (1564-1616) in his play 'A Midsummer Nights' Dream' did not accept the theory of sameness for translation. The play is of common men, kings, queens, and fairies with magical power. One of them, Puck turned the head of Bottom, a weaver, into that of a donkey to satisfy the Oberon's desire to play a joke on his wife Titania. Bottom's friends were all very scared and themselves to be haunted by some evil spirit. One of his friends Snout, called out, 'O Bottom, thou art changed! His friend Quince went a step further and retorted, 'Bless thee, Bless thee! Thou art translated'. In other words, for Shakespeare, translation denotes a complete transformation of the original.

An adequate translation is semantically, pragmatically and dynamically equivalent because a translator is confronted with the range of interpretabilities and his task is to analyze consciously the superstructure of content based on a complex fabric of language. Revelation of meaning depends upon etymology (*yoga*), Interpretation is based on conventionally established usage (*rudhi*), which is always stronger than the *yoga*.

Translation, therefore, is not verbatim reproduction, but an imaginative recreation and retelling in the target language. (21)

Indian theoreticians understood that the literal meaning of an utterance is only a part of its total meaning and that those who try to analyze literal meaning may completely lose sight of its real or inner significance. More than literal meaning, however, the ancients looked for a text's inner significance which is rooted in the context of the verbal art. It determines the 'literariness' of the artifact and, without this knowledge, a translation is never successful. Both the verbal and cultural contexts, therefore, facilitate the recoding of the text by the reader-translator for the purpose of emancipating *artha* (meaning) from material reality. (22) Kayyat and even Tholkappiyar (3rd Cen. BC) refer to *pramanaantar* or the contextual meaning that occurs when transferred translation becomes a reality.

In contrast, the Buddhist logicians talked about mental or conceptual images, which do not have their counterpart in the objective world, as conceived by Mimamsa and Nyaya philosophers. They refused to believe there are any real connections between words and external objects. *Netti-prakaranam*, a Buddhist guidebook for commentators, emphasizes the context theory of language and investigates the structure and play of a text's word fabric.(23)

In the famous Tamil grammar, the *Tholkappiyam* context plays an important role in resolving problems of meaning. Bhartrihari (5th cen. AD) identifies four types of context factors that are significant for understanding verbal art: (24)

- a) *sansarga* (two things known to be related, e.g.*savatsadhenu*,
- b) *viprayoga* (relation between two things disappears, e.g.*avatsadhenu*)

c) *sahacharya*, (e.g. Rama laxmana, here Rama is not designated Parusharama or Balarama. The compound here identifies Rama as the brother of Laxmana)

d) *Virodhita* (*ahinakula*: opposition or a hostile relation, e.g. snake and mongoose).

Besides *anubachanam* (the notion of repetition), *saprayojanam* (purposefulness of a text/aesthetic delight), *jatasyakathanam* (revelation of meaning is not a search for sameness), and *pramanantaram* (contextual meaning) as explained above,

Ayyappa Panikar (1996) introduces other useful concepts prevalent in medieval Indian translations of Sanskrit classics that in fact, reveal everything worth knowing regarding Sanskrit theorize on translation. These concepts include *anukriti*, *arthakriya*, *vyaktivivekam*, and *ullurai*. (25)

- i) *Anukriti* is an imitation of the original. One can imitate only what one is not. The product of imitation is not the same text, but a similar text
- ii) *Arthakriya* involves placing emphasis on the manifold ways in which meanings are enacted in different texts. It focuses on the creation of meaning, addition, omission, displacement, and expansion
- iii) *Vyaktivivekam* denotes the rendering of meaning as it is inferred by the reader or its interpretation as based on *anumana* or the inference potential of a given passage
- iv) *Ullurai* is a Dravidian term that primarily means inner speech, not the heard melody but the one unheard or the speech within. In a literary text, *ullurai* plays a crucial role.

These concepts confirm the existence of a distinctive Indian theory of translation that underlines the creative freedom enjoyed by medieval Indian reader-translators to produce

viable, fully localized translations with a visible absence of anxiety on their part regarding authenticity.

These initial translators attended to their jobs with little inhibitions. They rarely maintained a word-for-word, line-for-line discipline. Their categories were nothing akin to the TL and the SL or the mother tongue and the other tongue. The poet/writers executing *bhasha* renderings of Sanskrit texts treated both languages as their own. They had a sense of possession with respect to the Sanskrit heritage. In fact, the whole medieval *bhakti* (devotional) movement of poetry in India sought to translate the language of spirituality from Sanskrit to the language of the people and liberate the scriptures from the monopoly of a restricted class of people. They saw to it that their translations became a means of re-organizing society. No Western theory can compete with the total magnitude of this traditional activity in India.

Let us take, for example, the case of Jnaneswara, a distinguished poet of medieval Marathi devotional poetry (13 Cen. A.D.). His *bhavarthadipika* (popularly known as the *Jnaneswari*) was free translation of the Bhagavad Gita. (26) Within the scope of this work, this great philosopher and poet subsumes the knowledge of the *Nath* tradition in order to wed it to the *bhakti* movement. The original text, the *Gita*, is a set of dialogues, between Saunaka and rishis in the Nimisha forest, between Sanjaya and Dritarashtra, and between Krishna and Arjuna. In translating it, Jnanadeva adds two more levels of dialogic tension: the first involves the oral level of the conversation between the poet and his guru Nivrittinath and the second, the lexical level of dictation given by the poet to his scholiast Satchidananda. In adding these levels, the poet endows the oral component with legitimacy as a form of literature as valid as the written word. He thereby underlines that

the Jnaneswari *Gita* is more a *suta* (to be sung in another language) text than a *mantra* text (Sanskrit verse). Devy has shown that contained in these subversions and shifts, we find the seeds of an emerging and very complex Indian theory of translation. (27) W.B. Quine could apply, in this case, the thesis of indeterminacy of translation and cast his aspersions on this kind of a theoretical formulation, but the Indian theoreticians would say that, there is no reason to be skeptical and fastidious about exactness and accuracy. (28)

It is obvious that medieval India did not believe in literal translation even though Indian writers were familiar with the concept of a verbatim translation, known as the *chhaya* (shadow) of Prakrit text into Sanskrit that is frequently found in Sanskrit drama. Indians preferred adaptation to *verbatim* translation. The *Tolkappiyam* mentions that *vali* (i.e. an adapted work) can be of four kinds: abridged, expanded, abridged, and expanded, or translated in accordance with the Tamil traditions. Kamban (11Cen. A.D. Tamil poet and author of *Ramaavataram*, popularly known as *Kambanramayanam*, the Tamil version of Valmiki's Ramayana) belongs to this school of translation. He did not go in for literal paraphrasing, but creating a living translation. It reminds us of Fitzgerald, the English translator of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, who once said, 'I shall anytime prefer a living sparrow than a stuffed eagle' (quoted in a letter by Fitzgerald to E.B. Cowell, 27 April, 1959). Translated texts are both word-bound and world-bound. The tradition of translation in medieval India was world-bound but not word-bound.

But where should one set the limits for creative freedom? When does a version become subversion? When does a deviation lead to distortion? One can cite counter-texts like *Ravanayana* or *Meghnadbadhkavya* (epic in Bengali language of 19th Cen. related

with the story of Ramayana by Michel Madhusudan Dutt) or feminist versions of *Ramayana* in Bengali (Padmavati's *Ramayana*) and other languages or parodies of *Mahabharata* like 'The Great Indian Novel' by Shashi Tharoor. (29) They are certainly not translations in the orthodox or ordinary sense of the term. But they exhibit intertextuality—each work provokes us to think of the other texts.

The West, in contrast, has always been obsessed with the anxiety of authenticity. Perhaps, it began with the attempts to translate the Bible into the different languages of the world that this question of authenticity became so significant. According to G. N. Devy, the European literary tradition reared on Christian metaphysics has always alluded to translation as a 'perpetual exile' a move away from the origins and an effort is to re-situate one's own origin. In the West, translation is feared as an intrusion of the 'other'. Sometimes this intrusion is desirable because it helps define one's identity. The King James Bible and Martin Luther's Bible translation proved excellent examples of how quests for identity often 'translate into acts of literary defiance.(30)

European literary historiography is, in fact, steeped in a tradition that has always been suspicious of 'the other', the Europeans feared foreign culture entering in their lives through translation. Inversely, India possesses an amazing capacity to assimilate alien cultures. Its acceptance of Vedantic oneness has always paved the way for obliterating difference between *swa* and *para*, the self and the other.(31)

In the modern period, translation in the West has been studied from a variety of perspectives: the discourse analysis of Paul Valéry, (32) the Cultural Studies approach of George Steiner, (33) theoretical linguistics of Catford, (34) psycho-analysis of Andrew Benjamin, (35) structuralism of Jakobson, (36) the deconstruction of Derrida, (37) gender

studies of Lori Chamberlin (38) and, of course, post-colonial discourse analysis of Lawrence Venuti. (39) **The influence** Venuti has exerted on translation studies – not least postcolonial translation by his advocacy of *foreignizing* as against *domesticating* translation at any cost is a part of postcolonial discourse. All these approaches consider translation as a complicated linguistic and literary act, whereas in India it tends to be viewed as an inevitable way of life and the focus has been more on the pragmatic aspects of translation.(40)

Among post-structuralist thinkers, Jacques Derrida, in particular, questioned the absolute position that a literary text occupied in traditional critical discourse and argued that each new instance of reading the text is a different occasion to experience the absence of meaning. Derrida, thus, granted translation the status of literature, since the translator, like a creative writer, signifies meaning as an independent presence and develops a more dynamic theory between the relationship of meaning and language.(41)

Bhartrihari's exposition of the *sphota* theory almost anticipates Derrida. The Indian poet maintained that the relation between *nada* (phonetic manifestation) and *sphota* (semantic realization) resembles that of the reflection of the sun in the flowing water. The reflection of a steady object can acquire the movements of a water current (Vakyapadiyam, *Brahmakandam (chapter1)*, pp. 48–50, 1965).(42) No reflection is possible unless there is a substance to contain it. Yet the reflection in itself and by itself is nothing. Meaning exists in language not as a positive presence but as an absence which reflects its independent presence.(43)

I suspect that this view was very much prevalent in India and contributed unconsciously to the construction of a theory of translation. In modern times, such an

understanding was endorsed by Sri Aurobindo (1949) who held that a translator is not necessarily bound to the original; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is generally done.(44)

However, the Indian view is reader oriented; it does not neglect the basic desire of a reader to approach translation in order to understand and enjoy the original and not to make new creation out of it. One reads translation primarily in order to come out from one's own cultural prison and create a vantage point from which one can observe, understand, and enjoy the happenings of another culture. (45)

In India today, plurilingual authors, writing in the language of the ex-colonizer or in the various Indian *bhashas* are challenging and redefining many accepted notions in translation theory. We can no longer merely limit ourselves to the conventional notion of linguistic equivalence or ideas of loss and gain, which have long been a staple of translation theory. We can no longer do this because of the extensive use of different *upabhashas* by Indian writers such as Kambar, Debesh Roy, Krishna Sobti and others, and the creation of a new language by Dalit writers, and the use of tribal languages in multilingual contexts. These are the languages of the 'in between' they occupy an intermediary space and challenge conventional notions of translation by seeking to create new models for translation theory. Once these developments are seen and accepted as a part of a historic process, only then can we be able to analyze and explain the Dalit and *grammin* literary heterodoxy and translate it. (46) In the process, we should be able to create an Indian translation theory and add new insights to it and affirm the importance of a moral and radical deconstructive path.

I started my paper with a story of Gunadhya's *Vrihatkatha* and I now end it with another story narrated by Alexander Dow, who translated Farishta's *History of Hindostan* (1792) from Persian into English and also commented on the difficulties of translating from Sanskrit into English both for himself and the Mughal emperors.(47) Dow tells the legendary tale of the great scholar Faizi , one of the nine jewels of the Mughal Emperor, Akbar, who had changed his name and travelled to Varanasi to study the Vedas under a learned Brahmin with the ultimate intention of translating them into Persian. Faizi acquired the necessary knowledge of Sanskrit after ten years of study; but he also felt passionately in love with the daughter of his guru. The Brahmin was delighted to have his daughter married to his disciple; but when the repentant young man revealed the deception to his guru, the Brahmin ordered him to stop at once his learning in the Vedas. He also forewarned him not to translate the knowledge he had acquired. As the legend goes, Faizi returned home with a wife but no translations. In comparison to Faizi in the sixteenth century and Dow in the eighteenth century, our situation in the twenty-first century of translating Sanskrit or *bhasha* texts into English or another Indian *bhasha* is far less problematic and considerably more propitious. With the increase in translation activities, the development of an Indian theory of translation now becomes plausible.

Such a theory would not reject the pragmatic approach of sameness in translation, but would go a step further toward emotionally reconstructing a verbal art into a different language. In the process, if the text looked metaphorically like a golden chain with a pendant but in its recreation in another language, if it lost its chain but not the pendant, and if the pendant looked attractive then we should not hesitate to say to the translator, 'Congratulations, you have nailed it'. In this context, I will conclude with a couplet from

Iqbal, (1935- 2003) one of the most distinguished Urdu poets, which is so apt for our understanding of Indian translation consciousness:

“Transcend your reason because though it is a glow, It is not your destination

It can only the path to the destination show.”(48)

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word for word equation was not the ideal to be aimed at, and in fact he once wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy: "a translator is not necessarily bound to the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is very often done". But it should be equally clear that, if 'literalness' should not mean dullness, flatness or deadness ("turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness"), equally 'freedom' should not mean a sheerly tangential escape into regions altogether new. A literary (literary not literal) translation is no students' crib, but neither should it involve a Bottom-like transmogrification! Good translations like Dryden's Virgil and Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam are equally poems by virtue of their finish and their essential fidelity to their originals: *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series (On Poetry and Literature), 1949, P.208 and

Cf. George Sampson: "Dryden's Virgil is literally Dryden's Virgil ...Its readers were already familiar with Virgil's Virgil, and wanted to know how a great English poet would treat that familiar story."

45. Jennifer Varney, Deconstruction and Translation: Positions, Pertinence and the Empowerment of the Translator, *Journal of Language & Translation* 9-1 March 2008, 113-131
46. Choudhuri Indra Nath, The Plurality of Languages and literature in translation: The Post Colonial Context, *Meta Journal de traducteurs Meta/Translations*, 1997
47. Alexander Dow, English translation of Farishta's History of Hindostan, London, John Murrey, 1792
48. Iqbal, Allama Baal-e-Jibreel, 1935, English Translation by Kuldeep Salil, *The Best of Iqbal*, Rajpal, Delhi, 2003