

## **The Role of Translation in a multilingual society**

Knitting India: Through Translation

Indra Nath Choudhuri

India is a multilingual and multicultural country and has been in the forefront of translation for many many centuries. This being the reason it is known to be a linguistic as well as a translation area. We use more than one language while speaking or even thinking. This trait of polyglottism, says Suniti Kumar Chatterjee was responsible in the development of ‘translating consciousness’ among the Indians. Vatsyayana’s phrase ‘lokepichanuvada’ which means ‘translatability’ explains the historical length of existence of India’s translating consciousness.

But when I say India which India, which nation do I mean?

We have an age old idea of India which is the continuing India with its pluralistic structure of a multilingual, multicultural, multiracial and multi-religious society. It is an integrative framework of a nation displaying a unity in diversity. The real tradition of India is to work for an adjustment of races, acknowledge the dual differences between them and yet seek some basis of unity.

The idea of other India was initially created by the British Imperial rule for the development of a homogenous, unified India in order to perpetuate the colonial rule.

This is the ‘imagined India’ that the Western -oriented English educated class still nurtures even after independence with their overriding interest to construct a modern India and an identity by

itself on the western civilizational lines.

In the last few years the process is vigourously pursued by the players of the global consumer culture who by appropriating, and co-opting all our cultural diversities are bent on creating an analogous, homogenized and monolithic Indian culture with the help of mostly American inputs.

Surprisingly Translation, *Anuvada*, has been an inextricable part of these two India.

The modernists tried to construct an ‘imagined’ modern nation by deploying different kind of discourses from the West – philosophy, historiography, education and literature — to perpetuate the western civilizational values for the development of a modern Indian nation and rapidly westernize the Indian mind. It translated all and sundry works of English literature to place England and the West well above the colonized cultures.

But at the same time translation activity from English into other Indian languages growing in huge proportion facilitated enormously the fashioning of the Bhashas. There is no doubt that British colonialism and its new present day avatars created a desire for rapid westernization but in the process shaping of the identities of modern India languages became a reality. Though it will be a travesty of truth if one denies the role played by Indian writers in shaping and growing a tradition of Indian languages.

During the freedom movement the magnitude and frequency of translations from Sanskrit into different Indian languages by the other multicultural and multilingual India could be explained as the assertion of the indigenous literary tradition against rapid westernization. These translations also became a means of

liberating the scriptures from the monopoly of a restricted class of people and also reorganizing the society.

At the same time inter-lingual translations especially from different Indian languages into Hindi commenced in a big way. Translation into Hindi that time was considered to be a national act and also a part of anti-colonial struggle.

The fervour for substituting an Indian language for imperial English was built on nationalist aspirations. Mahatma Gandhi clearly saw that English could under no circumstances be the national language of India, and that it would have to be replaced by Hindustani, if the movement was to evoke the support of the masses. Learning Hindi/Hindustani became a nationalist act, and it became the target language for the largest number of translation from different Indian Languages and thus acted as a binding force for national integration.

By the end of the First World War, the Indian cultural scene was changing very rapidly. A large number of Indian soldiers had returned home after getting an exposure to European Culture other than the British. The newly instituted Nobel Prizes seem to have afforded non-English writers a level of visibility and circulation which they otherwise might not have achieved. The Indian regard for the Nobel Prize was considerably reinforced after Tagore received the prize in 1913 for his book 'Gitanjali', which a translation done by him of his Bengali songs in English. As a result Indian translators began to go beyond in order to reach out to works from other languages. Premchand translated into Urdu two Nobel Prize winners, Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck and English writer John Galsworthy. It now seemed to be part of a new

sprit of literary independence to welcome, through translation non-English writers into the Indian languages. It was during that time Mahatma Gandhi had entered the political scene in India creating a new national awareness.

A result of these changes was that Indian translators turned now not only to European literature but to literature in other Indian languages. The translators interested in ‘nationalising’ literature in modern Indian languages were more concerned about the unity of the country. That is how, during the three decades of the Gandhian freedom struggle inter-lingual exchange within Indian languages multiplied. Tagore, Bankim Chandra and Sharada Chandra Chattajee’s works were translated into all Indian languages. So were the works of Premchand, K.M. Munshi, V.S. Khandekar, Subramaniam Bharati and others. In a multilingual community like ours the age-old tradition is that of linkage and during the freedom movement we came to realize that translation is the most effective way of linking diverse languages. It became one of the most potent means of providing us a fresh view about the oneness, unity and commonality as well as the wonderful diversities, which indicate the expansive richness of the culture of the continuing perennial India.

Inter-lingual translation into different bhashas as an inseparable part of the discourse of nationalism owes its origin surprisingly also to the English-educated Indians and the concept of an ‘imagined’ nation that transcends linguistic divisions emerged as complementary notions. As a result in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in all the Indian languages one can

find a unified approach emerging because of this idea of India and translations were done for the promotion either of the colonial hegemony or for dramatization of a certain kind of resistance against colonialism of which the best examples are original or inter-lingual translated novels, a new genre borrowed from the West. Unlike the western novel, which had for its dominant theme the rapture between individual and society, the Indian novel-authored by the newly educated class dealt on the recasting of social identity in the confrontation with a colonizing power. Translation here acts as a part of anti-colonial struggle.

This is the unique feature of that India which creates the concept of an 'imagined' nation, which stands at the conjuncture of English-which provides modern knowledge-and helps in the growth of modern Indian bhasas and which recasts this knowledge into regional forms. However, translation activity in these languages creates a sub-system of language which affects the natural growth of language and the prose style in modern Indian languages and as a result the prose style in modern Indian languages acquired an inevitable tenor and tone of translation language.

The struggle against colonialism created a longing for national unity to develop and foster the feeling of community by strengthening the composite culture and languages of India and not by neglecting them and revive the continuing India of many religions, many races, many languages and many cultures. Literature and its translations in various Indian languages created a space for the emergence of the idea of national identity and turned the literary voice into the voice of enlightenment.

In fact, it was a continuation of what was started in the medieval time by the translator-writers like Tulasi, Jnandev, Krittivasa and others who rendered the original Sanskrit texts into their languages without any inhibitions as they rarely maintained a word-for-word, line-for-line discipline. The poets and writers who attempted a trans-created rendering of Sanskrit texts into Indian languages treated both the languages as their 'own' languages. They had a sense of possession in respect of the Sanskrit heritage. But in translating Sanskrit texts they sought to liberate the scriptures, as said earlier, from the monopoly of a restricted class of people. Hence, these translations became a means of liberating and reorganizing the society.

Translation of the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee or his essay 'Krishna Charita' and 'Liberty' of John Stuart Mill into Hindi by Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi and many other texts from English to Indian languages acted as catalyst for the development of the idea of India by subverting the western notion of nationalism.

The myopic Euro-centric view that anything worthy of emulation originated in Greece was challenged and the orient list's authority to speak of India was contested. In fact, the first significant challenge to orientalist India came with the rise of nationalism based on India's age-old pluralistic cultural tradition. Being pluralistic, it welcomed the idea to obtain new elements of contemporary civilization for the nation to define its place and role in a fast-changing world. To fulfill this end many Indian intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed that science was culture

and that it should be taught in the bhasas, in Indian languages.

The translation of science was to serve to articulate a counter colonial political stance, and became a way to oppose the cultural and intellectual erosion, which had taken place under colonial rule. In 1843, a vernacular translation society was set up at the Delhi College, Delhi. Its task was to translate books from English into regional languages. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan expressed the need for translation on massive scale and said:

“Those who are bent on improving and bettering India must remember that the only way of encompassing this is by having the whole of Arts and Sciences translated into their own languages. I should like to have this written in gigantic letters on the Himalayas for the remembrance of future generation.”

Tagore introduced the study of science in Viswa Bharati the university formed by him. The Bihar Science Society, which was founded in 1868 by Maulana Imdad Ali, and other organizations in different part of the country, started translating books on a wide range of scientific subjects, and it served as a force for national unity and for developing national consciousness.

Translation in general asserted itself as an act of resistance to the imperialist process. But we all know that this could not be sustained and during colonial times English as the medium of instruction was introduced in all the universities to promote the hegemony of colonial powers which became a barrier in the path of the civilizational creativity of the vast majority of Indians.

To fully comprehend and appreciate the function of translations in post-independence India, it is imperative that we accept translation as a socio-political necessity in the context of cultural pluralism and the multilingual situation in India. We need not emphasize that multilingualism is an all-pervading element in the Indian atmosphere, affecting every aspect of the country's life. From the Western point of view, a multiplicity of languages, regions and races is regarded as leading to fragmentation, even though, in fact, such multiplicity gives importance to every part of the whole. It is rather the monolithic structures that may create fragmentation of life, of man and of knowledge undermining the unity of living.

Nehru was extremely sure of his assertion that languages by themselves are not a destructive factor. He created the National Academy of letters for developing the concepts of Indian literature as one literature, by allowing all the languages to grow together, and by extensive use of translation. He was of the firm opinion that the growth of bhāṣas did not tend at all towards disunity. But this unity of Indian literature emerges only when one understands it in the pluralistic context or in the context of cultural diversity. Indian literature demonstrates unity through acknowledgement of differences and this becomes possible because there is a pan-Indian thinking underlying the civilization unity that we have in spite of the subaltern and protestant elements in the Indian civilizational life and hence unity and diversity, concurrence and protest are found together at every level of our existence. The unity of literary expressions, despite, their linguistic varieties like Kalidasa's famous play 'Shakuntala' written in Sanskrit,

Saursheni, Maharastri and Magadhi Prakrits, indicates that a literary text could be produced in a complex multilingual situation, where different languages did not drive people into exclusive groups, but could encourage people to interact with one another, and to transcend linguistic barriers. Experience shows that it is not the recognition, but the non-recognition of languages that has led to divisive movements. Translation is accepted as one of the ways of reconciling the interests of various groups.

In the post-Independence era we still find two India are present sometime confronting each other or acting as complimentary notions knitting two India into a civilizational whole.

We still find translation from the various Indian languages into English, whether done by foreigners or by Indian themselves have attained a hegemonic ascendancy. In this post-colonial phase most Indian writers seem to vie with each other to get their works translated into English. The number of such translations from Indian languages into English has been constantly growing getting translated into English has at present become a kind of status symbol for the average writer in Indian languages.

The use of English as a 'meta narrative', the idea that only English is a solution for our complex language problem is false. The politics of link language has allowed English to gain in strength more than Hindi or other languages as a job-selection language, and as language of power and control. Other languages, including the second link language Hindi, are institutionally constrained and negatively treated in public domains. All of this

has created a crisis relating to the preservation of multilinguality in this post-colonial era, because colonialism still survives in a new avatara in an altered form.

It is necessary to point out that while nation-states, national ideologies and government policies may require the use of a single common language, such as English or Hindi, for administrative and political reasons, the centralizing language of the ‘imagined’ India can neither be representative of a multilingual ethos and a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities nor expressive of peoples’ creativity and vitality.

The homogenizing force of a single dominant or master language aiming at presenting the heterogeneous character of ancient, medieval and contemporary India is not feasible and can easily be contested. The time has come now to ‘reconstruct’ the meta-narrative and justify the other narratives for political and social justice. Only then the continuing India with its civilizational complexity is in a position to knit herself as one India with its diversity of cultural practices through several means and one of them is multilingual translation exercise.

Already an urge for self-assertion is quite conspicuous which in a large measure accounts for the multilingual translation boom from one Indian bhasa to another bhasa. Greater mobility among castes and sub-castes in different parts of the country has made the enlarging of the language of that area a reality, displacing English language elites by regional language elites, who represent for the most part, the cast aspirations of non-Brahmins, and also the hegemonic role of English, which is a barrier to civilizational

creativity for the vast majority of Indians.

The rapid use of bilingualism-Hindi English, Bengali-English and like this-in the contemporary times is providing opportunities to subvert hierarchies, and contesting all forms of domination in a multilingual society to create mutual interdependence and inter signification between languages.

A similar urge for self-assertion is also quite visible among the large number of Indians who have taken upon themselves to translate works of Indian literature, both ancient and modern into English to show primarily to the world that such works do exist with all their rich variety. A.K. Ramanujan, probably the most outstanding Indian translator of the last four-five decades, set an example of using English for not creating the universalist mode of supremacy of the elite Indian literature of world class but as a counter-force of resistance working to produce original forms of the local variety like Tamil Bhakti poetry, Kannada Virasaiva Vacanas to present the other tradition of the people with its abounding diversity.

Now the interest of Indian translators is to explore ways in which the English language can be stretched to contain 'authentic Indian ex-pression.' At the same time, there is an attempt to view the English language as one of the Indian languages. It is for this reason that many Indian writing in English have also taken to translating from Indian languages. Thus, the 'imagined' Indian nation in its new post-colonial form is projecting the continuing India to the world outside and also to the people of India and in this way the two India are coming close to each other as

complementary nations and domesticating the work either into pan Indian or into a universalist mode for identifying a plurality of linguistic ex-pressions and cultural experience and also for understanding the remarkable unity underlying them.