

UNIT 1

Survey of the History, Growth and Role of Translation in India



1.1 Warm Up

INDIA

Language Atlas

5 language **families**

14 major writing **systems**

400 spoken **languages**

1000s of **dialects**

While India is a single entity politically, culturally it is subcontinental in nature. Our country is so complex and so diverse that it is impossible for anyone to make generalizations. India has a vast and elaborate past and has lived with pluralism for centuries. The history of India is based on linkages with not one civilization but three—Hindu, Islamic, and Christian—all traditional societies in which religion is the centre of daily community life. What can knit India together—Translation?

1.2 Translation and You

From your family to your work spot, life is about communication at different levels.

We live in a world of continuous communication in different languages—from manuals that accompany gadgets to films from different countries, medicines, and bestsellers. All these are made possible only by the act of translation. If anyone were to be hostile to the idea of translation s/he would be ignoring the deep human need to share thoughts and feelings. Translation is the natural extension of anything verbal and valuable that we wish to communicate and it crosses three bridges—personal, linguistic, and cultural.)

1.3 The Word and the World

Language is like a city. To build this city, every human brings a stone. The beauty and durability of *vak*, *logos*, the word is what sets us apart from the rest of all creation. Language gives form to the store of human experience. It makes possible the stupendously vast memory bank of humankind—libraries of books going back hundreds of years; uncounted collections of documents and scripts; journals, diaries, letters, and reports, personal and official, that lie stored in both public and private collections. Words make up a book, a poem, a short story, a long story, a play, or a novel. They invite you to enter a city filled with secrets that then become your secrets and enrich your understanding of life.

1.4 Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to

- Explain the historical instances that brought about translation
- Describe the two-way movement of translating Indian texts to the world and global texts into India

1.5 Linguistic Movements and Influences on the Subcontinent

Before the Europeans arrived, education in India was confined to certain castes and classes. Universal education was two centuries away. Even many rich and upper middle classes (especially women) could not read or write much. Besides, ours was largely a strong and vibrant oral culture. Music and literature were in the form of songs and poems which moved from one language/region to another, informally and easily. They were modified and enlarged according to the narrator's wish. That is why there are so many versions of the *Bhagavata* stories and retellings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Each is slightly different, with the major characters showing some regional peculiarities and preferences. The *Kathasaritsagara*, the *Jataka* and *Hitopadesa* are also narratives that inspired the spread of hybrid stories. The clever wife, the foolish priest, and the greedy merchant are figures that appear in the lore of every region. This process of re-composition has always been our tradition.

characters

Pause and Proceed

1. List the influences on Indian civilization.

2. We have many versions of the same epics because

- (a) we lost earlier and older versions
- (b) we got bored with older tellings
- (c) stories and songs were passed on orally and modified by narrators

1.5.1 Translation for Communication and Transmission

ARABIC AND PERSIAN IN INDIA

While the conquering Turks, who established the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century, ushered in a new era of political domination, they also enriched the region culturally when they introduced Arabic and Persian. India 'nativized' both and produced a hybrid language from it, namely Urdu. What is less well known is that, thanks to the Arab traders on the Konkan coast and Malabar, and penetration into Chola land (the modern-day Tamil Nadu), there were brands of Tamilized Arabic and mixes of Malayalam and Tulu with Arabic, in South India, long before the thirteenth century.

THE MUGHALS

Under the Mughals, when Persian became the court language, Sanskrit and Hindu literature along with Buddhist and Jain began to retreat. Just as many centuries before, Alexander the Great had persuaded the scholars of conquered countries to translate their scrolls for his huge library in Alexandria, the Mughal emperor Akbar set up a translation bureau in India in the sixteenth century. He was genuinely interested in making Indian thought available in Persian. His goal was to promote harmony between the two major religious systems of the day and he wanted his nobles to understand the Hindu population that they ruled. The first translation of the *Ramayana* came from a Maulvi named Badayuni (1580). Akbar also arranged for the *Mahabharata*, the *Yoga Vasistha*, the *Harivamsa*, and the *Bhagavata* to be translated. So it was through Persian that the West first

4 Wordscapes

became acquainted with the language and sacred literature of the Hindus. His great-grandson Dara Shikoh went on to translate the Vedas and some major Upanishadas, all of which were discovered in Persian-Latin translation by German scholars. The wisdom of the East was made available through translations prepared by a Mughal prince.

Pause and Proceed

1. What do you understand by the term "hybrid language?"

2. Why did Akbar set up a translation bureau?

3. Match the following:

Dara Shikoh	—	Tamil Nadu
Hybrid language	—	Urdu
Chola kingdom	—	Vedas
Badayuni	—	Alexandria
Alexander	—	Ramayana

1.5.2 Translation for Commercial Purposes

EUROPEAN TRADERS

Ancient literary texts of Mesopotamia, Greece, Persia, Alexandria, Egypt, the Roman Empire—all show us the world-market of goods and culture that moved between India and those parts of the globe. But on 20th May 1498 when Vasco da Gama sailed into the port of Calicut, he changed the course of history. The year 1583 brought the first British traders who gradually overcame, in turn, first the Portuguese and then the French to become the sole European traders in India. They came not as scholars or travellers, but as merchants and as such were not at all interested in the culture or religion of the country. If the Europeans studied any language here, it was Persian because it was the court language and because they had to conduct trade with Mughal outposts.

Sanskrit → Persian → English
(Indians did it) *Engl.*

The role of people who knew two languages became crucial. Such a person was known as a 'dwibhashi', that is, a speaker of two languages.

Pause and Proceed

1. dwibhashi: one who speaks two languages :: dwivedi: _____

1.5.3 Translation and Governance

EARLY BRITISH TRANSLATIONS

For the first hundred years, translations of Indian texts into English were prepared by Englishmen in collaboration with Indians. Why did they undertake such translations? British scholars urged their government to discover, collect, and translate information about the land the East India Company was controlling. In documents dated 1783 and 1788, they referred to the hidden value of 'the ancient works of the Hindoos.' The Governor-General Warren Hastings (in office from 1772 to 1785) felt that Hindus should be governed by Hindu laws. He had the lawbooks (*Dharmashastras*) translated from Sanskrit into Persian by Indians.

Then Englishmen translated the Persian versions into English. The final texts were very difficult to appreciate, the reader having to wrestle with a knotty mixture of the language of the original text, the in-between mosaic, and the final target-language renderings. The first translation brought into being in this fashion, using a 'broker-language' (Persian) between Sanskrit and English, was a legal text *Vivadarnavasetu* (across the sea of litigation), which appeared under the name 'A Code of the Gentoo Laws' (1776) and was translated by Nathaniel Halhed. The first complete translation of an Indian work into English was the *Bhagavad Gita* by Charles Wilkins. The year was 1784 and the Asiatic Society of Bengal published the book.

Yes, the British administrators translated Indian books into English but side by side they brought English language education into India. Slowly, English gained more importance than the other languages.

Pause and Proceed

1. Why is Persian known as the 'broker language'?

Adhikar...

2. 'A Code of Gentoo Laws' is the translation of _____
3. The first complete translation of an Indian work into English was
 - (a) *Jataka* tales
 - (b) poems of Meera Bai
 - (c) *Bhagavad Gita*

1.5.4 Religious and Literary Translations

THE BIBLE IN INDIAN LANGUAGES

Probably the most linguistically influential translations have been those of the Bible which were religious in purpose and literary in practice. No text has been more widely translated, printed or circulated—St. Jerome in Rome, Martin Luther in Germany, Wycliffe and Tyndale in England.

Missionary activities and translations of the Bible into different Indian languages led to the preparation of dictionaries and the establishment of printing presses. Missionaries made a study of Indian culture, philosophy, and languages in order to develop methods to preach the Gospels. Some of the names you need to remember are Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), an Italian, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719), a German Protestant who did not bother about evangelism but studied Indian medicine, and Heinrich Roth (1620–68), who developed the first Sanskrit grammar in Latin in the seventeenth century. All of these were transferred into English. The first Western-style dictionary in Kannada was developed by William Carey in 1817, a Serampore missionary and a polyglot. With these tools came the spread of journals, magazines, and newspapers in local languages. These languages, in which the missionaries carried on their evangelism, began to grow towards print-media and book production as we know it today. More and more people became literate. This, in turn, generated a middleclass readership that wanted to read something other than stories and poems about gods and goddesses; they wanted to read about people like themselves. So, forms and models found in English literature were quickly adapted by Indian writers during the nineteenth century. In this manner, English, a language that had no geographical base in India, became one of the mediums of our intellectual exchanges and the means by which we began to communicate with the outside world.

As you already know, the King James Version of Bible strongly influenced English literary output and is, apart from the Oxford English Dictionary, seen as the biggest influence in Anglophone writing traditions. Those influences extended to our languages when Indians began translating English writers into our languages.

TRANSLATIONS CAN GIVE NEW INTERPRETATIONS

John Bunyan's famous allegory "The Pilgrim's Progress" was translated into Malayalam by Herman Gundert, a colonial missionary who worked in Kerala in the nineteenth century. In Gundert's Malayalam translation of the book, the hero Christian, as he traverses through the valley of blood, bones, ashes and dead men, comes across 'rakshasas' he had not met in the English version.

Pause and Proceed

1. Who is a polyglot? List five words that begin with the prefix 'poly-'.

2. What is the difference between a dictionary and a thesaurus?

3. Who am I?

(a) I came as an evangelist but studied Indian medicine. _____

Adusha Kottalil *Dr. Hermann Gundert*

(b) I developed Sanskrit grammar in Latin. _____

Heinrich Roth

(c) I compiled the first Kannada dictionary. _____

William Carey

1.5.5 Translation and Knowledge Society

THE KNOWLEDGE EMPIRE OF BAGHDAD

Students of History will certainly know what happened in the 7th century AD, after the Muslim conquests in the Mediterranean region. Armies, merchants, traders in rare manuscripts and jewellery, all sorts of people including lone travellers contributed to the movement of texts among cities and people. The world owes much to the Caliphs

of Baghdad who created in that city a single linguistic roof—wonderful and cosmopolitan—bringing together a rainbow of cultures. Every one of these groups—Syrians, Greeks, Persians, Jews, Hindus and Armenians—produced translators into Arabic. Under the Abbasid Caliphs, the culture was one that valued knowledge without bothering about where it came from. So translation proved to have tremendous “fertilizing” power. Students of science will be interested to learn that the great medical centre in Khuzistan (Persia) was established for the study of medicine, based on the translated curriculum of the Alexandrian schools. Aristotelian logic, the nature of the universe, cosmology and astronomy, were all created out of an alloy of Arabic-Greek-Persian-Indian minds. In turn, these hybrid creations were translated into Latin.

What is really impressive is that all these knowledge transfers were directly supported and sponsored by the rulers. Students of mathematics will be interested to learn that one of the earliest commissioned translations was Ptolemy’s “Syntaxis”, which was rendered into Pahlavi in the 3rd century AD when the original was just a hundred years old.

Due to the support of the later Umayyad and early Abbasid Caliphs, Arabic became the language of both religious and secular intellectualism throughout the empire. So, Arabic rapidly replaced Syriac and Greek as the language of government, civil authority, taxation and trade. Anyone who is studying commerce and finance systems will know how important it is to deal in a particular language which is understood by administrators and bankers.

Pause and Proceed

1. A rainbow of cultures in Baghdad included-

Syrians, Greeks, Persians, Jews, Hindus & Armenians.

1.6 Translation and Globalization

1.6.1 Translating India for the World

William Jones (1746–1794) was the first British scholar to see that India had a literary culture worth studying; thereafter the spreading outward of Indian literature to the rest of the subcontinent and beyond

was unstoppable. The brisk practice of translation that William Jones, Charles Wilkins, and the Orientalists began at that time, opened up a new area of scholarship which came to be called Indology. It even became fashionable for the English in India to learn about India! But after 1857, when Indian Uprising failed, Indology went into a decline because the British government took over the administration from the English East India Company and began to suppress all things Indian. The British Raj had begun. In terms of politics, it lasted only ninety years. But its cultural influence can still be seen in Indian society, educational institutions, social behaviour and much else.

Pause and Proceed

1. Find out the meanings of the following words in a dictionary.

Indology _____

Orientalists _____

Uprising _____

2. The 1857 Indian Uprising is better known as _____ .

1.6.2 Into and out of India

Around the time that William Jones' writings about India were being admired, the translated Upanishadas that Dara Shikoh had commissioned (in the 1650s) and which Duperron had worked on in the year 1800–01, caught the attention of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. At exactly this time a young poet and philosopher named Friedrich von Schlegel, who was studying Sanskrit under an Englishman in Paris, was so moved by what he learnt that on his return to Germany he published "On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians" (1808). A.L. Basham says that it was like the discovery of classical literature that had influenced learning some centuries before; but it was a greater shock than the Renaissance because the 'new' texts came from a land which had, until that time, been considered primitive and pagan, even outlandish. In keeping with our finest syncretic traditions, the first person who tried to build a bridge between two entirely different, even hostile traditions was a Mughal prince. And it is worth remembering Schopenhauer's words when he read the first public unveiling of the grandeur of Indian philosophy—"That incomparable book

stirs the spirit to the very depths of the soul. In the whole world, there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death.'

Pause and Proceed

1. Why did Indian writings shock the western world?

2. Give the antonyms of:

outlandish × _____ ; hostile × _____

3. Renaissance means _____ .

4. What do you understand by the term 'syncretic'?

5. Describe in your own words Schopenhauer's reaction to the *Upanishadas*.

6. Dara Shikoh was

- (a) a general
- (b) a poet
- (c) a prince

A curious coincidence

It must be remembered that the Arabic versions of scientific and mathematical productions were very often done by second-hand transmissions. That is, they were translated from Syriac and Pahlavi texts that were themselves translations of earlier works in Greek and Sanskrit. What is equally interesting is that the majority of translators were neither Muslims nor Arabs. Those who translated the natural sciences into Arabic (between the 7th and the 10th centuries AD) were

people for whom Arabic was a second language. Non-native speakers and writers established prose scholarship, history, astronomy and science in Arabic. Exactly like the non-native speakers of English in India are translating Indian texts and Indian writers into English for a world readership.

1.7 India and Translation: Multiple Translations

Since language is continually changing and developing, it is possible to see the same work translated by more than one person. This is the nature of translations. They are never final. Many works are (re)translated over and over again to make their language contemporary. Religious literature is a prime example, as also famous works that are perennial favourites. The reason they continue to be perennial favourites is that they are freshly translated in every ten years or so. Why? Because in the great debate between hegemonic global cultures, predominantly Western, and nationalism, we must ascertain that local knowledge, local genius, and local achievement are given their due importance. If we do not read and position our writers, it would be a cultural failure on our part, like allowing our heritage buildings to be destroyed or permitting our crafts to vanish. Here are three versions of the same incident taken from three different translations of *Mahabharata*: Karna's entry into the royal competition arranged to showcase the skills of the Kuru princes in the use of weapons.

Sample A

At the close of day, there came suddenly from the entrance of the arena a sound, loud and compelling like thunder—the sound made by the slapping of mighty arms in challenge. All eyes turned in that direction. They saw a godlike youth from whom light and power seemed to emanate. He looked proudly around him, cast a negligent salute to Drona and Kripa, and strode up to Arjuna. The brothers, all unaware, by the bitter irony of fate, their common blood, faced one another, for it was Karna. (C. Rajagopalachari, 1957)

Sample B

Next came large-eyed Karna, palm-tree tall, the hero with natural skin-armour and shining earrings, who strode in like a walking cliff. Casually he bowed to Drona and Kripa. He performed the same feats with equal brilliance, while Arjuna watched in growing chagrin and anger. (P. Lal, 1979)

Sample C

Karna entered the arena like a golden lion, wearing the earrings with which he was born, and the golden armour bearing the sun-wheel upon the breastplate, and in deep, red-gold, the lines of falling sunlight over his back. Splendid as the sun and handsome as the moon, he bowed his head very slightly to Drona, like a tall golden palm tree nodding in a gentle breeze. (William Buck, 1986)

* Note:

Rajagopalchari's was a narration for children.

Lal's is a condensed prose version, not a translation.

Buck's version is a retelling in his own words.

Yet all three come under the broad heading of Translation.

Pause and Proceed

Compare the three translations in terms of:

1. adjectives used to describe the physical appearance of Karna
2. words used to announce his entry into the arena
3. the way Karna greets the elders

Hint: Depending on the words used by each translator, we can interpret Karna's character differently.

1.8 Recap

1. **Remember** some of the important aspects of the history and growth of translation
2. **Understand** some social, cultural and political factors of how and why translations happen
3. **Think** about the links between language, literature, society and how information is transferred
4. **Create** models of translation to express ourselves

1.9 Activities

1. Colonial education brought with it the establishment of English studies in India. Given below is the pattern of marks awarded for the Indian Civil Service examinations in the middle of the nineteenth century—English and English history—1500; Greek and Latin—1500; Mathematics—1250; Natural Sciences—500; Logic and Philosophy—500; French, German, Italian, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic—375 each. Thus, great importance was accorded to English studies. Compare this with the pattern of marks awarded in the UPSC examinations today. You are in for surprises!!!
2. Take a world map and mark the places where Tamil is used.
3. We often say love is universal. Even the word we use to describe 'love' in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Hindi are the same—*ishq*. Find five common words used in different languages to mean the same thing/idea.

1.10 Practise to Perfect

1. Discuss the contribution of the Caliphs to the growth of scientific education in the Arabic world. (200 Words)
