

# The Creative Launcher

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## Historiography of Translation in India: Issues and Approaches

**Dr. Sunil Sagar**  
Assistant Professor  
Marwadi University,  
Rajkot, Gujarat

### Abstract

Historiography of Translation is a vital exercise for a deeper understanding of the way translation evolved in a given time period, the way translators functioned, the kind of conditions of translation prevailed and the way individuals and agencies influenced the process of translation. It not only serves to illuminate the gaps in history but also seeks to explain the historical context. It throws new light on not merely the translation of a particular author but also its reception in a given culture. It stands at the intersection of languages, cultures and worldviews. Therefore, it is necessary to approach it in a suitable way and enrich ourselves with the insights derived from it with humility.

**Keywords-** *Historiography, Colonization, Patronage, Bibliography, Translation*

History is a maze in which there are many uncharted terrains that await rigorous inquiry. As an intercultural construct, history of translation qualifies in varied ways for the same. As a culture, India disseminated its traditions of knowledge through translation. From its earliest stages, translation served as the medium of carrying across the diversity of ideas and cultural traditions. A pursuit in history is quite challenging even when it deals with one given culture or language. An endeavor which entails multiple cultural contexts and languages could offer the sternest possible challenge in historiography. Historiography of translation in a multilingual, multi-cultural context is an exercise rife with its fair share of complexities. However, if it is carried out in a painstakingly meticulous and rigorous manner, such an exercise could throw up new insights on the historical context of the given time period in history and enlighten us about the practice, role and significance of translation in India.

From Sanskrit and other languages, modern Indian languages that developed later translated freely and creatively to render the core cultural texts accessible to the masses. Moreover, these texts were re-translated again and again from time to time which led to multiple interpretations and renderings. Apart from core cultural texts, Sanskrit literature was also prolifically translated. Kalidas' plays have been translated several times in different

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modern Indian languages. The interaction and engagement among the modern Indian languages through translation could also lead to interesting insights. For instance, how Tagore's works were translated in modern Indian languages could be interesting to study from the point of view of chronology and simultaneous translations in different languages. It would be quite fruitful to unearth how Aurobindo's works were approached by different translators in modern Indian languages. The question to be asked is which modern Indian language translated Aurobindo or Tagore first and why. In addition, it deserves to be explored how the translators decided to translate certain texts in a certain sequence.

The colonial encounter was marked by cultural transactions preceded and at times, defined by translations. The 19<sup>th</sup> century history of India is as much a history of cultural transfer that occurred through translation. Colonization and empire writing back were marked by an interesting relationship with translation. This is why knowledge texts, literary works and texts with socio-politico-cultural agendas came down to the masses in multiple translations. Ushering in the texts written in English through translation in modern Indian languages was observed during this period. The colonial encounter was equally an exercise in translation. India did not get introduced to Shakespeare in English as much as it was the translations/adaptations in local languages and performances in these languages. How these translations occurred and the way translators went about translating Shakespeare and other English playwrights, writers and poets form the very crux of the history of colonial, cultural encounter as well as the translation historiography.

However, translation is no longer perceived to being an innocent act of cultural transfer. In fact, it must be considered that 'every stage of its production, circulation and reception, by its historical moment' (Venuti, 03). Translation is influenced and shaped by a variety of factors. The first and foremost is the individual called translator who was hitherto deemed a passive agent of intercultural transfer. Historically, translators have played their role in the way translations are shaped, altered and even manipulated. A translator is, all said and done, a human being armed with the element of choice and his choices could shape translations in different shades of meaning. Therefore, it is imperative to study the 'intellectual biography' of the translator (D'hulst, 399). In addition, every time period in history has certain agencies which influence translator choices, production and reception of translation. In the earlier time periods, it was the Lords, the Kings and other influential individuals and later on the publishing houses emerged to share this space of subtle but significant power. It is interesting to study how certain texts are chosen for translation at a certain time period in history and certain texts do not get translated at all. The process of selection of texts is not always carried out by translators alone. At times, translators make a deliberate choice in favour of certain texts which, according to them, are likely to receive the

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financial and intellectual patronage. The way of these translations are done is also at times determined by the taste of patrons, translation scholars and prevailing poetics of the age.

History of translation in India would serve as a potential site for exploration of the historical context, power relations between agencies such as patrons, scholars and subtle interventions by translators. It would be interesting to study the contribution and role of patrons in the context of how they shaped the translations of knowledge texts like the epics, *The Bhagvad Gita*, the writers of classics such as Kalidas, Shakespeare and the texts that were imbued with the agenda of reform and decolonization in India. History is witness to the fact that translation is rarely pursued for its own sake. Patrons seem to have used it as a tool either to educate or reform. What got translated and what did not depended a great deal on how the patrons acted and their inclinations. It led to an interesting sequence in terms of the translation of texts. The role of individual patrons and other agencies which influenced translation need to be investigated objectively in order to help us arrive at some amount of clarity regarding the historical context in general and the context of translation in particular.

### **Issues in Approaching Historiography of Translation**

There are various issues that surround translation history in India. These issues have led to a limited understanding of translation in its historical context. Unless these issues are approached and addressed adequately, it would not be possible to arrive at any approaches to explore the historiography of translation in India.

### **Adverse Impact of Colonization on Cultural Practices**

Colonial encounter led to a sweeping erasure of history per se and resulted into an erosion of identity as to what we stood for and how we thought and acted in history. Languages, literatures and cultural practices suffered most due to this colonial experience. Colonial powers led to a situation wherein we were forced into a disconnect with our own languages and an oblivion, a part which still exists, was created about the rich literary and cultural history.

It not only erased a certain cultural history but also led to a mindless worship of all things Western. A colonized mindset led to a belief that the best was thought and conceptualized in the West. Translation was affected by this in no small measure. Rather than engaging with either the older languages such as Sanskrit or modern Indian languages, the focus shifted towards the English education and English literature in a singular way. While there were awakened minds such as Gandhi who constantly kept the vigil and warned us against aping the West, it resulted into largely a colonial cleansing of cultural traditions.

To some extent, the issue is that the colonial mindset still seems to exist in some or the other form. We are no longer able to appreciate the fact that India had a rich tradition of translation. Moreover, it is hard for us to believe that India had its own definition, function and practice of translation, unlike the West that restricted translation in the mould of

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faithfulness to the 'original'. Tackling the colonial encounter and investigating into the labyrinth of history searching for translation history is a challenge in its own right. The first and foremost condition for a translation historiographer is to come out of the spell of colonization and approach history in an open-minded way. One can rest assured that it is a tall order and very few pass this litmus test!

### **Inadequate Bibliography and Incomplete Literary Historiography**

How can one locate the list of translations of Shakespeare in any modern Indian language? One cannot as such a complete and comprehensive list does not exist. A bibliography that contains systematic documentation of translations carried out so far does not exist. A non-existent bibliography is not an issue in itself. The issue is that all historical research depends fundamentally on setting chronology, sequence and time line. Translation is no different and it is unfortunate that such a bibliography either at the national level or regional level does not seem to exist. In the absence of such a bibliography, whatever we do or say in the name of translation history would amount to erroneous and misleading as we have not taken into account all the historical details.

Majority of the details that we have regarding how translation was approached seem to lie in the books on literary historiography in different modern Indian languages scattered all over the country. When one reads the volumes of literary history of a particular language one is well-versed in, it is hard to miss the kind of step-motherly treatment translation receives in the literary historiography. It would be easy to spot that details regarding translated texts are relegated in the later and perhaps last sections of a time period and dealt with superficially. There are several gaps and inadequate details which define the treatment translation receives in these volumes. At times, literary historiographer does not bother to cite all the details and just makes a passing reference to the important work of translation and leaves the rest to our imagination.

In addition, it is a well-known fact that literary historiography is incomplete also because there are several details which have not been either included due to apathy and inertia or these details are lying hidden in archival documents. A case in point is the first ever translation of Shakespeare's play in any modern Indian language. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* was translated for the first time in any Indian language- Gujarati - and performed at Surat, Gujarat in 1852. This was the first ever translation but the text is said to be no longer extant. The interesting case study is how the literary historiography in the form of seven volumes of *History of Gujarati Literature* misses the major and most important details. The literary historiographer does not cite the name of the theatre group that performed or the name of the translator. It requires a fair bit of research into other reference books to exhume the name of the translator. It was a man called Dinshaw Talyarkhan who had translated the Shakespearean play into Gujarati. The fact that he translated it for

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performance and that his contribution is of historic nature has inspired no literary historiographer to investigate further to unearth new details about the translator or the text. It is due to the inadequate documentation and historiography that it is nearly impossible to state with authority anything about the translation history that surrounds this historical context.

The same is true regarding numerous texts, translators and the compelling factors which led to translations in a particular direction in a said time period. It is little known how these translations occurred. It is buried in the pages of some archival documents as to the life and learning individuals who translated these seminal texts. Unless we read between the lines in these literary history books and exhume relevant documents from alternate sources, it would not be possible to establish the role of patrons and the way they influenced and shaped the translation discourse and practice in India. It is an uncharted terrain replete with new discoveries and finds which can illuminate the deeper recesses of history as far as translation is concerned and lend a new perspective on the established facts. To start with, new finds will lead us to rework the chronology of the translations and the work and contribution of different translators in a given time period. An alteration of chronology, any average historian will tell us, is as good as re-writing of history.

### **Lack of Research in Translation History**

History is a collective and collaborative endeavor. A single individual or a handful of individuals cannot accomplish the task of exploring translation history which is daunting and enormous, to say the least. In the case of India, it becomes even more unnerving for there are a number of languages and cultural traditions which one cannot study and document by stray efforts. A systematic endeavor in the direction of translation history is predicated on how departments of English and modern Indian languages at different universities in India approach the task.

Unfortunately, the research culture at universities celebrates research in certain areas but does not do enough for promoting research in the important area of historiography of translation. For instance, if one looks up the titles of PhD dissertations in the last 5-10 years at any university, one would notice a clear vacuum of research in translation history. For some or the other reason, translation history is not a preferred area of research and hence, not many research scholars work on it. In guiding research scholars, it must be borne in mind that they would work in the area of translation history only if they get initiated into it at the postgraduate, M. Phil. or Ph. D. levels. Therefore, certain apathy towards translation history has led to a scenario wherein it is difficult to build upon existing research and makes it imperative for the researcher to start from scratch. In the API driven research culture, who would wish to enter into an area which could consume years of excavation before anything fruitful turns up? Translation history requires to be promoted at the level of university departments as translation studies will evolve only if we uncover new insights through

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historiography of translation. It works in the favour of the researcher also because it is an unexplored area and can yield rich dividends later leading to academic accolades and enduring reputation. If a university department can make concerted efforts, it might be possible to see publications which can throw new light on the reception and translation of all major literary texts and authors in literary history in the next 10 years' time!

### Approaches

#### The Western Practices

The West was quick to appreciate the significance of the complexities of translation and the need for rigorous historiography. Hence, the translation scholars and practitioners in the West, unlike India, deemed it imperative to study the historical context of the translations carried out in different time periods, analyzed the translator choices and practices in order to assess the role of translators in shaping the process of translation and the influence exerted by other agencies and forces upon the translations. This also led to a lot of reflection, deliberation and soul searching with respect to translation history and how it could help us understand things better.

In *Translation/History/Culture*, Bassnett and Lefeverestate that translation is rewriting of the original and reflected upon the issues of translation and translation history in General Editors' Preface:

Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulative processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us towards a greater awareness of the world in which we live (p.xi.).

Several similar insights can be cited here but the important thing to bear in mind is the possibility of manipulation and the politics of translation which affected translations. For instance, if one studies the translator choices, it can lead to new insights on the politics of translation and the influence of other agencies. A case in point is the much maligned translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. It was later discovered that certain portions were either edited or omitted. One might naturally conclude that it was a sloppy translation work and it was the translator who was responsible. However, a study revealed that it was the publisher who prevailed upon the translator to translate it in a particular way!

Similarly, Bible translations were also analyzed by different scholars and experts and led to a lot of fresh interpretations. Feminist translators even attempted feminist retranslations of Bible! Gendered translation is one of the important areas of work in translation



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historiography. There are several such instances and practices which could be used to arrive at how we can approach historiography of translation in India.

In sum and substance, these are some of the ways in historiography of translation can be explored:

### **Chronology and Bibliography**

A lifetime of work in this area may not be enough but it would be a great help for the researchers in future. Research could be carried out to set the chronology of translation right and a bibliography of translations could be prepared. However, it must be borne in mind that resorting to only the conventional sources such as books on literary history may not suffice. A lot of archival research will be required to verify and enrich the existing information pertaining to the chronology of translations in India. The colonial records prepared by the British in the form of annual reports of publications, gazettes, periodic reports, catalogues etc could help us identify the chronology of certain translations and provide new details of translations not yet recorded in literary history or anywhere else. Specific projects by the British such as Oriental Translation Committee could be revisited to see if it could offer new details about translations carried out during the colonial period.

If we access the archival documents mentioned above and enrich the existing information regarding the translations done so far, it would be a first step towards establishing the chronology of translations and its historiography. It could give us a list of translations carried out in different time periods in history. For future researchers, it would be a ready-reference to take the historiographical work in the area of translation further and carry out a deeper study of a focused area.

### **Knowledge Texts**

As mentioned earlier, the West has done its fair bit of work in studying Bible translations. Central texts of this kind in Indian context can also be studied from the point of view of translations. It would be interesting to study how knowledge texts such as *Ramayana* or *The Gita* were translated in different time periods, different languages by different translators. It will shed new light on how these texts came down to us through translations in modern Indian languages. The historiography would most likely substantiate our long-standing thesis that India freely translated even its culturally significant texts. So many translations done in so many different ways, if analyzed adequately, could lead to stronger evidence in this regard. It can also help us understand the translation history better if we could study translations of a knowledge text in a particular modern Indian language since the early stages of the said language up to the present day. It would provide us a historical sense of how translation evolved in a particular language through this exercise. A comparative study of how a particular text was translated in different languages could also be taken up.

### **Major Authors**

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It is also possible to study how translations were carried out with respect to the major authors. Since 2016 marked the death anniversary of Shakespeare, one can resort a study of how Shakespeare's plays were translated in a particular language over a period of time. Multiple translations of the same text could also be studied in detail. Major translators of Shakespeare could be compared in terms of their choices and practices. A chronology of these translations could also be interesting and yield new insights. For instance, why is it that it was *The Taming of the Shrew* happens to be the first Shakespearean play to be translated in any modern Indian language? Why was it that *Hamlet* which is hailed as one of the greatest plays in the world was not the preferred choice of the translators? Why was it that *The Merchant of Venice* found favor with every major translator in different modern Indian languages? These questions can lead to new discoveries and provide fresh interpretations of the history which is sort of taken for granted.

A similar exercise could be undertaken for Tagore, Aurobindo, Kalidas etc. For instance, it would be fascinating to study as to Tagore's texts were translated for the first time in which Indian language and/or multiple times. A translation history of Marathi/Gujarati engagement or a Bengali/Hindi interaction could be immensely helpful in understanding the way modern Indian language interacted and evolved. A systematic, comparative and analytical study based on translation historiography of various major authors in Indian context could be enriching for our sense of history.

### Patronage and Influences

If it is our concern to study what gets translated and what does not in a given time period, we must focus on individuals who facilitated the publication of translations. Like creative works, it is not easy to find a publisher who would readily agree to publish the translation. The translator may be interested in translation per se but his/her preferred texts for translation may not be accepted by the publisher. On the other hand, patrons in the form of influential and wealthy individuals may have a certain inclination towards certain authors, texts, genres leading them to get these works translated. The translator may or may not have any say in the selection of texts or the style of translation dictated by the patron. This would also go on to explain the sequence and chronology of translations as they occur in history.

A case study from Gujarat might help in this context. Narbheshankar Pranjivan Dave was the first to provide first ever proper translations of 5 of Shakespeare's plays into Gujarati during 1898 to 1917. Translation history mandates that we learn more about the translator's life and learning and his/her choices. In this case, there is little explanation available in the literary history books as to how these translations occurred. It is interesting that among these five plays, *Julius Caesar* was the first one to be undertaken for translation in 1898 and *Hamlet* was the last one to be translated and published in 1917. The curious case of choosing not to start the translation series of 5 plays with *Hamlet* which is arguably the finest

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Shakespearean play and making it the last one in the series calls for some fresh investigation. It is only when one takes into account the patronage that one begins to understand this instance better. Only a deeper study revealed that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bhavnagar, a princely state, invested a significant part of its effort in translation as it integrated art, literature and translation into their holistic vision of development and social reform. This could explain why there was this kind of sequence of translation as it was not the translator but the State which made the choices. A 'Shakespeare Series' comprising translations of five of Shakespeare's plays was a state-sponsored project aimed at social reform. The translator aptly dedicates it to His Highness Maharaja Sir Bhavsinhji Gohil and remarks that social reform is not possible without elevation of literature to a higher social plane. Various translations of Sanskrit and English texts by Bhavnagar State were an endeavor in this direction. The narrative of reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be incomplete without the insights into history of translation of the time period in question. It would also shed light on the invisible figure in history- the translator- with all his/her inadequacies, idiosyncrasies and politics. All of this put together would offer new insights with respect to the historical context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujarat.

Similar investigation requires to be done in the case of other translation projects carried out in history in different modern Indian languages. This would lead to several fresh interpretations of how translations occurred in the way they did in History.

The influence of translation scholars of the given time period could also lend a different perspective to translation historiography. The translator prefaces bear testimony to how a certain influential writer/translator scholar motivated and guided the translation of certain texts. The translator also acknowledges the influence even in the way he/she translated the text. This would also go a long way in explaining why certain kind of translations occurred in certain time periods or only certain authors' texts were translated in a certain sequence.

### **Theoretical Approaches for Translation Historiography**

Various literary theories and approaches could be used to study various time periods in terms of translation historiography. For instance, a feminist investigation into the translation historiography would most certainly serve to reveal biases and prejudices which have hitherto gone unnoticed. Even a feminist study of cultural texts could prove fruitful in the way translators approached these texts and projected a certain worldview. A feminist study of women translators, their role and contribution in the translation history could serve to complete the historiography of translation as we know it.

Minority discourse can also benefit from the study of how Dalit texts were approached. An investigation into which Dalit texts got translated or which ones got neglected and why could steer the discourse in a new direction. How publishers approached

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the translation of these texts and whether or not they discriminated could add to our understanding of how marginalization could operate at the level of translation as well.

A post-colonial study of translations and how translators grappled with colonization, how they celebrated or resisted it could be worthy of an engrossing account of colonial encounter. A post-colonial study of post-independence translations can also help track the remnants of colonial traces even after the acquisition of political freedom and nationhood. It would be interesting to place translators in history vis-à-vis forces of colonization. A translation history that divulges how translation was used as a tool of colonization or decolonization could alter the way we perceive 19<sup>th</sup> century history of colonial encounter.

## Conclusion

Historiography of translation is a multi-faceted construct and it tracks the individual inclinations, condition of translation, patronage and influences which shaped translation in a set historical context. What it reveals tends to radically alter the perspective that we may have held dear towards the historical context. In a pluralistic society with thousands of years of cultural traditions, translation is not an occasional occurrence but a way of life and hence that which we take for granted might be the thing worthy of a closer investigation and deeper analysis. At present, we hardly know how much has been translated. A pursuit in the direction of translation historiography will reveal how much has been translated and more importantly how and why. As Anthony Pym says, the biggest historical question, at the end of the day, is why! Translation historiography is the only surest way to answer the many whys that we have harbored for far too long...

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