

# Translation-Transdiscipline?

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## Part one

**T**he note, 'Translation: a new paradigm', circulated by the editorial board of this journal as an introduction to the inaugural issue has been profoundly thought-provoking. Along with the bird's-eye view of the terrain, it agonizes about an 'epistemological crisis' confronting the discipline of translation studies, laments the impasse within, and looks towards 'startlingly new' ways of defining translation. It candidly confesses to articulating the anxiety of scholars and practitioners of the discipline in 'single nation states and linguistic limits'. This qualification is both timely and appropriate and may be among the factors that lie at the root of the crisis. One is therefore, also tempted to add—and *scholarship which has been conditioned by the cultures of teleology and linearity within Judeo-Christian world-views*. As praxis, the very definition of translation has been cast in the monotheistic vocabulary of Source (Original) and Target

(Derivative) and this has functioned as the normative, *only way* of defining translation, instead of being one way to define it. Thus, anxieties may also be linked to those about 'authenticity' of the translation, with the Bible as the paradigmatic 'original text'. Hector Avalos, in his insightful and informative work, *The End of Biblical Studies* (2007), has demonstrated how the Judeo-Christian notions of the Bible, both as an original text and its so-called equivalent in translations, are built upon fallacious notions and self perceptions which are exercises in concealment and erasures, undertaken with the end of manipulation for the retention and reproductions of power and control by insistence on the relevance of the Bible to our times. Even if we were to lay aside this indictment, the fact remains that

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translation activity organized around the Bible ironically, is almost always extra-textual, and often layered with the motive of translating both ontology and epistemes of large sections of the world's peoples. Yet translation theory generated around this activity has precluded ways of considering the act of translation as a creative, transformative, or interpretative act, along with the attendant trauma, anguish and violence, the internal turmoil and churning that are associated with them.

The print-centricity of translation within the critical canons of translation studies has led to translation being conceptualized as a linearized activity. This has remained the dominant discourse of translation, its universal given and has been accepted as such. There has been little reflection in translation studies on how pre-literacy, pre-print cultural crossovers may have taken place, especially within geographical areas of great linguistic diversity. Nor has there been any real challenge to the centrality of the printed text in translation studies and its assumption of literacy as a prerequisite for the activity of translation, setting aside historical and empirical evidence of other modes of communication practiced for centuries across the globe. The worlds lying outside the Judeo-Christian cultures no longer consent to be contained by a monotheistic framework. Cultural transactions there are heterogeneous, and worldviews disparate and non-normative. The notion of 'original' in translation studies is inextricably linked to the idea of ownership and this creates particular problems in cultures of memory where ownership is indeterminate and texts are produced in their articulation. The text then belongs to the entire community and once articulated is set free by the owner to be reiterated across various media. Here the formation of cultural memory is a function of multiple "free-flowing" texts and not of a single text bound and contained by its covers. Formulating translation as a *transdiscipline* may liberate the discipline from its practitioners. The idea of translation as a linear operation needs to be interrogated. Even the word 'translation' must be reviewed to consider that interlingual translation may just be one of several translational practices. Its dominance in defining all acts of translation must be examined and challenged.

Eurocentric paradigms in translation studies have privileged the written text, till in an ironical reversal, the fixity of such written texts has come to be questioned by its most perceptive intellectuals. The infantilization of both sound (speech) and gesture, primordial and persistent acts of communication, have been relegated to a primitive stage of development within the dominant teleological narratives. Surrounded by preliterate cultural forms that have textured our lives, marvelling at the enormous circulation of cultural capital of unlettered masses, we from South Asia have to remind ourselves that literacy may not be the cultural universal for contemplation, reflection, and articulation. It is however not enough merely to state this. Co-opted as we are by that dominant narrative, we have to begin to rethink ourselves—epistemologically, philosophically, and culturally. It is the text in cultural memory or the cultural narrative that undermines the notion of linearity for us. The intertext here becomes fundamental and forces us to acknowledge that the validity of adaptation of oral narratives of indeterminate origin cannot be subject to notions of equivalence.

In any case, it is difficult for us in South Asia to find ourselves in an intellectual cul-de-sac just yet with translation. In India, there are 22 officially recognized languages, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* 2011 lists 438 living ones. The linguistic diversity and cultural geography make for a potent combination that impacts the process of creation and the

preservation of knowledge and its narration. However, languages are also dying with each generation resulting in epistemological losses. Asymmetrical education across generations and the primacy of the English language have resulted in a situation where in most language communities, the generation that speaks, reads, and writes the native language is rarely proficient in English and the generation that is so, is lamentably ignorant of the former, often as a result of historical, social and economic, and educational compulsions. This is true of most of India's regions. It remains to be seen whether the Indian diaspora, under threat to its minority status has preserved its mother tongue among its new generation. However, even if it were to be so, the dissemination of cultural knowledge across translation in print, requires a disciplinary rigour and academic interest which may not be available in those who may have bridged the linguistic divide. The crisis of the humanities has hit language learning particularly hard. The advantage that an education in English accords the average Indian has also increasingly privileged learning in the Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses and interest and engagement with languages and their literatures as such is rare. For it to be combined with translation or cultural studies is even rarer. Translation and translation studies comprise a special interest group often limited to academia and disciplines like social anthropology, history, and of course, literature. It is in this scenario that we have to view and review these. The massive effort of translating scientific texts that Europe undertook to disseminate scientific knowledge and education has no parallel in India. English, like German and French elsewhere, has been the key to all higher education in India, which translates into lucrative or reasonably remunerative careers, even within the country, now more than ever. The national educational agenda factors in translation as a tool to open up the world of knowledge of a specialized kind to native vernacular speakers. A National Translation Mission was recommended by the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and was ambitiously designed to meet specific educational objectives. Universities with departments specializing in translation were invited to make the roadmap. The NKC also recommended and mapped the project to recuperate indigenous knowledge systems. Enormous potential remains to be tapped there, and translation's role will be pivotal in codifying these systems. Translation is also a political and economic compulsion today for India. With the formation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), translation is also on the regional agenda as countries grappling with languages and cultures of the region strive to promote cultural understanding and economic co-operation. With so many permutations and combinations of the communicative contexts, the potential of translation studies is far from exhausted.

Translation as we will see is a vigorous activity in the region. In a rapidly globalizing world, large swathes of geographical and mental landscapes in India stay cocooned in a time warp while others translate and are translated, transformed, and transmitted. In a nation/region of storytellers, oral and written narratives are recovered by scholars, scribes, and performers to be translated. However, gaps have to be bridged between dialects and standard languages, and those languages which are spoken but do not have a script. Then there is the presence, since ancient times, of vigorous oral traditions as well as rigorous traditions of writing for dissemination of knowledge and these continue to be recuperated and translated by native and foreign scholars. For the Indian subcontinent, the world has always been intercultural and cultural exchange has long been a mode of being. Five definitive moments can

be identified for our purposes. The first is the translation of Buddhist texts and their travel to the Far East. The second is the encounter with Islam and the great cultural energy that encounter produced. The third is the colonial experience, which culminated in the organization of the nation state along linguistic lines. The fourth, in the post-independence era of nation-building which marked a spurt in regional translation activity, was promoted by state patronage. The latest in this trajectory is the contemporary conditions of globalisation in which the pragmatics of globalisation, translation, and interpretation hold the key to information, economics, and commerce on a global scale. Predating these identifiable epochs is a continuum stretching back into the era of maritime and overland activity of trade and commerce, a 'globalisation' with its own set of markers. For a region of such linguistic diversity where since ancient times translation has been axiomatic, a given of the great commercial and social networks of trade routes and vast movements of populations, it seems an activity so innocuous and unselfconscious that there is no reflection on it till we come to the translation activity undertaken with the advent of Buddhism. In the encounter with the world of Islam, we also see the operation of translation as metaphor, as two world views come into contact. Different historical epochs have thrown up their particular problematic. Scholars of the region are still negotiating these epochs in translation and translation studies.

In this, I would like to draw attention to two interesting projects around translation, which throw up methodologies whose analysis may produce fresh insights into the activity of translation. The first of these is a recent development in the attempt to bring in narratives from the margins into the mainstream. Here, the disempowered, even illiterate narratives are codified into translated texts and printed or performed for further dissemination by mediators, usually ethnographers and storytellers. This raises complex questions of motives and linguistic negotiations, and also involves obvious issues of power and privilege. However, these texts importantly contribute to the inclusion of those voices, silenced and unheard for centuries, in the narrative of the nation. The second one involves showcasing literature from diverse regions of India, for the non-English speaking world. The dearth of requisite linguistic competencies here can only be resolved through collaborative translation, wherein it is expected that the move would be from the original source text directly into the target language by native speakers as translators working with language pairs. However, that rarely happens. Only texts that have been translated into English are chosen for translation by publishing houses, as these are already accessible to publishers who would want to evaluate the translations in order to assess their marketability. The mediating role of the English language in determining the selection of texts for translation, and in the context of the methodologies that evolve around the task of translating from the original into the target language along with the political configurations that are generated in these linguistic/communicative contexts as translation events, would be an interesting area for translation studies to examine.

## Part two

**W**hat people are doing with texts and why, should continue to be a central concern in translation studies. In my ongoing research on translation in the cultural milieu of pre-colonial Bengal (1204–1756), I confront the problem of recon-

caling the massive cultural knowledge in circulation with the fact of mass illiteracy. Literacy is displaced as the cultural universal for creative and intellectual articulation and reflection by the primacy of the oral tradition. Yet the culture of orality does not presuppose either the absence of the written or the lack of a literate tradition. The strategies of dispersion of a text across orality and memory are not arbitrary but thought through, and actually enter the domain of the performative, in their emphasis on phonology rather than semantics, in their kinship with music and rhythm, and in their adaptability for visual display. They intersect with clearly defined audiences. Indeed, the arena of performance is an overlap, an encounter, of the oral and the written text. It is also the space that produces a new text. This new text is a translation. Both the medium and the entry of a text in different systems of signs, that is, in extra-textual communicative modes, are fundamental to the study of the ways in which both oral and written texts travel, how they are circulated, disseminated, received, reiterated, and reinvented. The absence of the notion of authorial control liberates the text, to be interpreted both medially and intersemiotically. Michael Cronin (2002) has demonstrated how interpretation is embedded in culture, location, and subjectivity and how translation studies as a discipline governed by Eurocentric principles of domination, national literatures, pure languages, the chirographic, the typographic, racial, and cultural subordination have underestimated the business of interpretation as a cultural practice.

As a cultural practice, then, translation needs to be viewed in the specific contexts of what people are doing with texts. My findings in Bengal suggest that cultural articulation in pre-colonial times, both erudite and folk, is oriented towards performance and mediated by an acute sense of an audience: through ritual, recitation, song, dance, puppets, paintings, and other modes of folk expression. Performance and its dynamics in the social space, especially in pre-literacy, pre-print mass cultures constitute and produce legitimate and viable texts as well as methodologies of translation. Further, these methodologies constitute a paradigm shift from the Eurocentric modes of regarding translation within the parameters of source texts and target languages, in terms of the 'original' and its equivalent in the 'translated'. It is possible to redefine the notion of 'original text' in specific cultural milieus, though the larger question of whether there is one at all often remains unanswered. Can we retrieve translational strategies in oral cultures? May 'adaptation' for performance function as a translational strategy? Further explorations are required.

The performative involves 'staging' the text even if not always as theatre. An episode from the Ramayana—like Rama's renunciation of his claim to the throne and readiness to be exiled for fourteen years, the insistence of Sita his wife and his brother Lakshmana to accompany him, and the journey of the young trio into the forest—is not only the stuff of drama, cast into plaintive songs of parting, set to predetermined melodies suited to the mood of separation, but is transferred on to the canvas as a pictorial story, worked into the stilted movements of puppets to be performed by puppeteers by vocation, woven into the sarees that drape the women of Bengal, or into backdrops of stage settings as props to be carried around by the *nautankis* or travelling performers. It is possible to think of translation in the region of medieval Bengal both historically and synchronously. There is the presence of languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, Bangla, Mythil, Oriya, Persian, Urdu, their creoles, and a host of local dialects, always an exasperating business for translators and language chauvinists. There is also translation within single language pairs, for instance,

Sanskrit and Bangla or Persian and Bangla, an erudite activity. Interestingly, we also find not just the linearity of textual transference but also the polyphony of intermedial transference, interpretations, and intersemiotic transpositions, rewritings whose significance can be comprehended in the total communicative context, including those who are involved in the encoding of the message and choosing the medium. In pre-modern Bengal, we find the same text in different media and discourses. Seriation in these orally transmitted texts is manifest in the fact that the same source text, often just the kernel of a story and not a written one at all—in fact probably not a written one more often than not—can be seen to underlie its various translations in a polyphonic rather than in a linearized schema.

It is premature I think, to pronounce Jakobson's formulations (1971) as too reductive as the 'Translation: a new paradigm' discussed above does. Jakobson elaborated the process of translation through the concept of transposition, intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic. Eco (2001) extended it to include the interpretative. These models provide entry points to study how translation operates as cultural practice in pre-literacy environments dominated by sound, speech, gesture, colour, and so on. Intersemiotic translation is complex to evaluate, and layered, because it involves not only interpretation of a text across a different sign system but also its insertion into the tradition and material practices of the sign system it enters or that which appropriates it. This also invests it with a political dimension where we may see the play of the dynamics of power relations.

### Part three

**E**thnographic studies might just hold the key to opening new vistas and thinking about translation in new/different ways. In India, the caste structure of society, the division into *jatis* and *upajatis*, largely occupational groups and subgroups, and their encounter with texts, both oral and written, is fundamental to the understanding of translation as cultural practice. The existing social stratification has been crucial to the development of cultural practices that are linked to occupation and economic conditions, more often than erudition and literacy, a situation in which impoverished and illiterate peoples actually produce the text by providing the supporting infrastructure and human resources to realize it in the performative. The material conditions within which the passage, interpretation, and reception of texts take place must be examined to arrive at translational strategies. In this regard, the communicative context is also important, because strict social sanctions apply to determine the texts which may be handled, by whom, for whom, and for what purpose. Built into the communicative context is thus an instinctive and cultural sense of an audience. Also built into it is the possibility of the disempowered to subvert the meanings of texts by interpreting them according to their location and worldviews.

Even written texts are subjected to orality and its corollary, aurality. Who receives the text determines how it is to be uttered. It must be understood that there are dedicated social castes engaged in writing-centred activities and who occupy the top end of the caste hierarchy. This 'division of labour' enables two traditions of translation activity: one which deals with identified written texts and negotiates with a world of expanding borders with multiple languages and cultural texts. I call this, unexceptionally, the erudite tradition and

the other, the folk or popular tradition, which is largely intralingual, extra-textual, and intersemiotic. Canonical texts were meant to be performed, through recitation, song, dance, puppets, and other modes of folk practices which clustered around caste occupations, particularly of the 'nimnakoti', or the lower castes. The *Namasudras*, a lower caste of Bengal include the castes of *Gope* (writers), *Sutradhar* (storytellers), *Gayans* (singers), *Bayen* (percussionists), the caste of *Teli* who cure leather and also make musical instruments, *Patua* (painters and pictorial storytellers), and *Nat* (magicians/actors), practically constituting the production team of a performance. These occupation groups may be Hindus or Muslims and draw upon a common heritage of the oral tradition and shared cultural codes. The occupational diversity and division of labour, the presence of many *jatis*, and within them of religious groupings means that a text could find diverse articulations within its locale, as well as travel with itinerant performing troupes across discrete linguistic and cultural regions. A text in pre-modern Bengal therefore, may be thought of as translated and re-translated as many times as the number of performances, and edited/adapted for its audience and for the occasion on which it was performed. This permitted the text the cultural crossovers that translation allows, and it also reinvented itself in various languages. This process produced dynamism within the act of translation that carried the text through the many linguistic and cultural regions it travelled in this trajectory. And texts did travel, from the deserts of Arabia to the forests of Bengal and back.

One keeps coming back to the question of the definition of translation. Can it be limited by the consideration only of the printed word, written texts, and the transaction between the two language systems employed? Oral traditions challenge this delimiting. Practice refutes this notion. Words and texts have always interplayed with music, dance, painting, pottery, textile, and so on, with an entire range of media in various modes to produce signifying systems, another language, resulting in transfer of texts. It seems that the biggest challenge facing the discipline today is to find ways to reduce the gap between translation theory and practice. It is to place translation where it truly belongs, in the world of communication, of entertainment, of knowledge and information, deployed for a variety of purposes, targeting specific audiences. Translation studies as a discipline should be reckoning with that and accounting for it.

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