

# **TRANSLATION –INDIAN TRADITION**

## **From Beginning till 1750**

### **Salient Points:**

- 1. Translation in India has to be understood in the context of the fact that India is a multi-lingual country with many languages spoken. The role of translation becomes very significant here as it is the home to people speaking 22 recognized languages and hundreds of mother tongues and dialects. Every day in business and office communication, English along with a vernacular language is used to communicate with others.**
- 2. The chronology of translation in India reveals that translation process was initiated, activated and accelerated when contacts were established with inhabitants of foreign regions whether through invasions (as in the case of Greeks, Turks, Moghuls and others) or by seekers of knowledge (as in the case of the Chinese travelers) or for religious purposes (for spreading Buddhism or Christianity ).**
- 3. Translation till 1750 was mainly towards other languages from Sanskrit.**
- 4. After independence the need for an organized, cohesive and coordinated translation system was felt and steps were taken in that direction.**

### **Introduction:**

- With the evolution of human society, as we became more anxious to know about the thoughts and feelings of people in distant places we started using two sets of symbols and codes to transfer the thoughts and ideas of people speaking a different language to our own language. This gave rise to translation as we see and use it today.
- Translation is the communication of the meaning of a text in a source language (SL) into a comprehensive version of target language (TL) without causing any loss to the original message.

- The story of translation goes back to the third millennium BC. The Babylon of Hammurabi's day (2100 B.C.) was a polyglot city, and much of the official business of the empire was made possible by writers who translated edicts into various languages.
- The languages currently spoken in India may be categorized into two main groups. About 70% of the population, mainly in the northern part, speak Indo-European languages derived directly from Sanskrit, such as Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, and Nepali. Sinhalese, spoken in Sri Lanka, also belongs to this group. Another 20%, mainly in the south, speak Dravidian languages: Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The rest speak Austric languages (mainly the scattered tribal people), Tibeto-Burman languages (in the north-east), and Dardic languages (in the north-west). Urdu, the main language of Pakistan, is closely related to Hindi, but has adopted many Persian and Arabic words and uses the Arabic script. The main non-indigenous language, English, is used alongside their mother tongue by most educated people.
- In the Ancient Period between 2500-800 BC the oldest linguistic evidence is to be found in the characters inscribed on steatite seals found in the Indus valley in the north-west. These are said to date from 2500-1500 BC, but unfortunately the script has not yet been deciphered.
- The Aryans, settled in the northern part of India spoke Sanskrit, an Indo-European language, and they subsequently collected together their poetry under the name Rigveda or 'hymns of wisdom. Even after the development of vernacular languages, the Vedic texts were considered so sacred that only commentaries written in Sanskrit are found until late medieval times, and there were certainly no translations until the Western scholars gained access to them in the nineteenth century.

### **Ancient Period**

- In the fourth century, in 326 BC, Alexander the Great of Macedon reached the Indus. The Greek chronicler Megasthenes was the ambassador of Seleucus, Alexander's successor, at the Mauryan court. Though only fragments of his work survive, he is often quoted by later authors. Among the earliest recorded translations are probably the names of places and rulers. The capital of Gandhara was known as Takshashila to the Indians and Taxila to the Greeks. Greek sources give Poros as the name of the Indian king Puru. The Greek historian

Plutarch uses the Greek version, Sandracottos, for the name of the Indian emperor Chandragupta.

- From about 250 BC onwards, Buddhist missions were sent south and west, and with notable success to Ceylon. Buddhist texts, which were written in vernacular languages, also began to be written in Sanskrit. So translation became an important part of the transmission of the Buddha's teachings.
- Two of the most important source texts for subsequent translation history are the Hindu Epics, were the Mahabharata (c. 300 BC to 300 AD) The Ramayana (c. 200 BC to 200 AD). These were consolidated during the period from 100 A D to 1000A D.
- Later still, translation mainly proceeded from Sanskrit into other languages. For example, the medieval Bhakti or devotional movement not only composed original material in vernacular languages, but also translated many devotional poems, as well as the Epics and Puranas, from Sanskrit into local languages. There were also adaptations of the Epics and Puranas into Dravidian languages.
- Another literary genre particularly important to translation history is the fable. This becomes popular with the Pali Jatakas (stories of the Buddha's past lives) and often involves talking animals. One collection of animal fables in particular, the *Panchatantra*, the 'Five Treatises', has an astonishing translation history. It was first translated from Sanskrit into Pahlavi in the sixth century AD, a Syriac translation followed in c. 570 AD, and an Arabic translation in the eighth century. The eleventh century saw new translations in Syrian, Arabic, and Persian (as the story of 'Kalia Daman'), and a Greek translation from the Syrian which was used for a Hebrew version. A Latin version from this period is also known, and the stories gradually spread throughout Europe in all its major languages during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1570 the first English version appears, called 'The Morall Philosophie of Doni' after the name of the Italian translator. The fables of La Fontaine are explicitly acknowledged as based on the stories of 'Pilpay', the name by which their reputed Indian narrator Vidyapati was known in Europe. Other stories of Indian origin, including some of the Sindbad stories, are to be found in the Arabian Nights.
- Medical texts were also translated during the period 100 AD to 1000 AD. Sanskrit treatises were translated first into Pali, and later into Bengali and Nepali. Outside India, translations are known in Korean, Khotanese, Tibetan, Mongolian, Chinese, and Arabic.

- The university of Nalanda in the north-east of India was particularly renowned for training translators from the fourth century AD onwards. Kumarajiva went to China in 401 AD and translated the Life of Nagarjuna (a major Buddhist philosopher) into Chinese, and one of his pupils Fa-hsien came to India soon afterwards (405-411 AD) to collect more texts. Jinagupta translated thirty-seven Sanskrit works into Chinese. Paramartha went to China in the fifth century and translated the Life of Vasubandhu (an earlier authority on Yoga at Nalanda). The Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Hsuan Tsang and I Tsing came to India in the seventh century and studied at Nalanda. Hsuan Tsang is said to have translated over thirty major Buddhist volumes, and I Tsing took several hundred texts back to China. Subhakara Simha went to China in the eighth century, and Dharma Deva (960-1000 AD) is credited with translating 118 Buddhist texts into Chinese. 8,000 Indian texts, many in translation, are preserved in the Sung-pao collection, and relate to Buddhism, Hinduism, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. Among the earliest printed books in China are books in Sanskrit, printed from wooden blocks, a technique probably taken from Tibet.
- Tibetan culture was totally oral until the arrival of Buddhism. The alphabet was initially created solely for the purpose of receiving Buddhist texts in Sanskrit. The Nalanda scholars Arya Deva, Silabhadra, and Dharmapala went to Tibet, and their works were translated into Tibetan.
- The cooperation between Indian, Tibetan and Chinese scholars is evident in the Mahavyutpatti, a Sanskrit-Tibetan-Chinese dictionary of Buddhist technical terms which dates from the ninth or tenth century.
- Long after Buddhism went to China, it passed to Japan in the form of Zen. In the turbulent times from the eleventh century onwards, Buddhist monks took Sanskrit manuscripts to Nepal, Tibet, or China, and many of those texts now survive only in their translated versions
- Strong links between India and Persia existed since the sixth century BC. These links were broken and then resumed in the sixth century AD. Later, the Persian traditions were infused by Islam and they re-entered India through the Sufi mystics. Baghdad showed great interest in Indian ideas: Khalif al-Mansur's translation bureau worked on Sanskrit texts in astronomy, medicine, and mathematics (notably Aryabhata's fifth century Sanskrit treatise), introducing the numeral system of Indian origin into Europe as well as various

other Indian algebraic, geometrical, and astronomical concepts. The Khalifs Harun-al-Rashid and al-Mamun continued the translation work into the ninth century AD, but it ceased thereafter as Baghdad declined.

### **The Medieval Period (c. 1000 AD - 1750 AD)**

- During the period of the Delhi Sultanate, in 1357 AD, after a visit to a library in Kangra, Sultan Firoz Shah ordered the translation of Sanskrit manuscripts on Hinduism into Persian and Arabic.
- In the South, Sanskrit works, especially the Epics and Puranas, continued to be adapted into Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi.
- Kannada Puranas were composed by Vishnu worshippers as well as by Virashaivas, and the Sanskrit Bhagavata Purana was translated into Kannada in the sixteenth century. Since then, most of the other major Puranas have been translated into Kannada. Hastimalla's Adi Purana is a Jain text in Kannada prose, but each of its sections begins with a Sanskrit verse identical with the opening verses of Jinasena's Sanskrit version.
- A Tamil version of the Bhagavata Purana, the Bagavadam, was translated into French at an early date. Telugu versions of the Puranas date back to the thirteenth century. A translation of the Bhagavata Purana by Bhakta Kavi Potana (1450-1500) is also mentioned.
- The Bhagavad Gita was rendered in Marathi by Jnanadeva (1291 AD).
- During the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal period, Hindu nobles and ministers used Persian at court, and many Hindus wrote books in Persian. Muslim scholars translated Sanskrit texts into Persian.
- Babur's memoirs were translated from Turki into Persian and thence into English.
- Religion was a major spur to translation. Sanskrit Puranas have been discovered in Persian translations. One version of the Bhagavata Purana was reputedly translated at Akbar's express command.
- Dara Shukoh, son of Shah Jahan, heard of the Upanishads in Kashmir in 1640, and had about fifty of them translated from Sanskrit into Persian by 1657. These were later translated into Latin by Anquetil Duperron and published in Paris in 1802. The theologian

Shah Wali-Ullah (1703-62) took the revolutionary step of translating the Koran into Persian.

- Science also gave rise to translation activities: Sawai Jai Singh of Jaipur, mathematician, astronomer, and builder of several observatories, had some classical Greek texts on mathematics (including Euclid) translated into Sanskrit, as well as more recent European works on trigonometry and logarithms, and Arabic texts on astronomy.

**Sources:**

**CIT-01-Unit-01**-Meaning, Nature and Scope of Translation. Documents/ Translation/CIT-01-Unit-01 Translation. pdf .

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**(E content developed by Dr Stuti Prasad, Dept of English, Patna University)**