



## **Bhashya: The Creative Possibilities in Translation**

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Translation, as we know it today is a product of colonial interaction. The early years of British Raj were marked by translations from classical Indian languages into English and from English into modern Indian languages. The translations from English into Indian languages were aimed at ‘educating, reforming the Natives’ and creating a class of ‘brown sahibs’ to run the empire. The spread of Christianity and proselytizing were also main motives behind the surge in translations during colonial times.

The translations from classical Indian languages, mainly Sanskrit and Pali as also Persian were a result of colonial policies. These translations enabled the colonial powers to consolidate their empires, helped them in codifying existing laws and creating new ones. These translations provided a great boost to the study of humanities in European universities. New disciplines like Comparative Philology, Linguistics, Archaeology and Indology benefitted immensely due to the translations from classical Oriental languages.

The translation tradition in Europe is mainly associated with the Renaissance and the end of Dark Ages. The translations of classical Greek texts from Arabic sowed the seeds of enlightenment, which eventually culminated into the Renaissance. Around the same time or a little later, there were translations of the Bible from classical languages like Greek, Aramaic and Latin into European languages like German, French and English.

Since the Bible was ‘the God’s word’ the focus of these translations was usually on recreating the form without ‘distortions’ into the European languages. ‘Fidelity’ of the translation has occupied a central place in all the early European debates about translation. The word and its content are two separate things. The word, as a material for constructing a text, is flexible, malleable and it can change its meaning depending upon the context and semantic surrounding. The excessive focus on recreation of the form gave rise to clichés like ‘Translators are Traitors’ or ‘Translation is like a wife; either beautiful or faithful’



The Western theories on translation focus on the text as a linguistic entity. So they generally involve decoding the forms of the Source Text by way of analytical grammar and semiotics, then accessing the content and on the basis of comparative grammar, selecting equivalents and re-encoding the text in Target language. Eugene Nida (1974) has proposed the theory of Dynamic Equivalence, which incorporates the three phases of translation mentioned above. Nida has used the concepts of ‘Deep Structure’ and ‘Surface Structure’ proposed by linguist Noam Chomsky as a basis to the grammatical analysis involved in the process of Decoding.

The Russian linguists like Komissarov (1980) or Fyodorov (1958), specializing in translational linguistics look at translation as a special type of interlingual communication, where the communication begins in one language and ends in another language. So the main focus of these linguists is on comparing the grammar systems of two languages involved in the communication. This could be termed as an analytical or structural approach to translation. This approach is of tremendous help to the translators, who want to study the craft of translation. Structural analysis and decoding of the Source Text enables the translator to understand the text better, it especially helps in understanding the content of the whole text as one unit better. The earlier focus on form forced the translators to process smaller units of the text, namely the words while translating. Whereas the analytical approach mentioned here processes bigger units, namely phrases and sentences, thereby making the translations more reader friendly in the Target Language.

Some linguists have classified the translations on the basis of the length of the unit processed while translating into ‘close translations’ and ‘distant translations’. Close translations are those translations that process smaller units such as words while translating. Distant translations are those translations that process bigger units, namely sentences and phrases while translating. Translations can also be classified as ‘decoding’ translations or those translations that try to answer the question ‘What is being said in the Original?’ and ‘re-encoding’ translations or those translations that try to answer the question ‘How it can be said in the Target Language?’ (For an elaboration of this, see Kelkar (1985))



The decision to adopt either close or distant method or decoding or re-encoding method varies from translator to translator, on the basis of the type of text to be translated, the functions that the text fulfils and also depends upon the intended recipient of the translation. The approach mentioned above has its limitations in that it deals with just the first half of the translation activity.

The term 'Translation' indicates two things. One is the interlingual, intellectual activity carried out by the translator and the other is the text that comes into being as a result of the activity of the translator. The resulting text stops being just a linguistic entity. It becomes a cultural entity and takes its place in the larger socio-cultural life of the recipients of the translated text. The Analytical approach provides precious little to evaluate and locate the cultural entity in the broader socio-cultural perspective from the point of view of the target language.

In the 1970s and 1980s translation theories based on hermeneutics attempted to locate the translated texts in the socio-cultural ethos of the target language. Itamar Even-Zohar (2000) tried to determine the position of translated literature within the literary polysystem. The behaviour of a translator and other individuals connected with it, like the publisher etc. is also reviewed. The role of a translator assumes greater importance here

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If we take a look at the Indian tradition, we find a third way to look at the translation process. It is fundamentally different from the analytical approach or the socio-cultural approach to translation. In Indian tradition we come across '*Bhashya*'. The tradition of *Bhashya* goes back to the *Vedic* period. *Bhashya* is an explanation of knowledge available in the form of *Sutras*. *Bhashya* can be termed as gloss or paraphrase. In this sense *Bhashya* is a type of intralingual translation. The source texts, like the *Vedic* hymns or the *Sutras* from the *Upanishads* were in Sanskrit and the *Bhashyas* explaining them were also in Sanskrit.

The Indian literary tradition was predominantly oral. So this form of intralingual translation 'explaining' the source texts became a dominant genre. The source text would be in oral form



and the *Bhashya* gloss would also be in oral form. So probably with every new re-telling of the *Bhashya*, it acquired a new life, incorporating references current at the time of re-telling. It also expanded the hermeneutic possibilities of the source text. Several *Bhashyas* of one and the same source text could come into being. This in turn enriched the cultural-literary tradition.

We come across another variety of *Bhashyas* in medieval India. When there was a shift from *Margi* to *Desi* traditions, almost all the *Desi* languages recreated iconic texts from Sanskrit. More than the philosophical texts, texts like *Ramayana* or *Bhagvat* were recreated into regional languages. The *Dnyaneshwari* written by XIIth century saint poet Dnyaneshwar is a *Bhashya* on *Bhagvadgeeta*. This *Bhashya* is faithful as well as beautiful. It is more than a simple translation. It is also an interpretation of *Bhagvadgeeta*. It propagates the philosophy of *Advait Vedanta* and it upholds human dignity and equality. Though Dnyaneshwar had to face a tremendous lot of resistance from the orthodoxy, his interpretation of *Bhagvadgeeta* was not branded as ‘unfaithful’. It was not said to be ‘distorting’ the original text namely *Bhagvadgeeta*.

The complicated relationship shared by the form and the content was probably understood better by the Indians. As remarked earlier, word which forms a basic unit of text, is changeable, fluid and dependent on several factors outside the text as far as expression of the meaning goes. So, how does one determine the ‘correctness’ of translation? In the medieval Europe, it was the Church, which determined the ‘faithfulness’ of the translation. In India interpretative *Bhashyas* were used to challenge the orthodoxy, as a tool to fight the injustice of the caste system. This is remarkable if we take a look at the European tradition. The translators in medieval Europe, who wrote ‘unfaithful’ translations or translations not acceptable to the Church, in short, had to lose their lives. In India the orthodoxy did not brand Dnyaneshwar’s *Dnyaneshwari* as ‘unfaithful’ but it had problems with Dnyaneshwar’s authority to interpret *Bhagvadgeeta*.

The *Bhashya* tradition maintained the position of ‘faithful as well as beautiful’. The *Bhashya* is not unfaithful to the content of the original text. Everything that is present in the original,



even as a germ, finds expression and elaboration in the *Bhashya*. In fact it pushes the limits of the original, making it broader and more relevant. By recreating the original in the target language, *Bhashya* gives it a new lease of life. The *Bhashyakar* was never bound just to the form. He understood that form is but a way to access the content. Recreating the form may not achieve the same results content wise. So he created new forms, equally beautiful, to express the same content. While recreating the original, the *Bhashyakar* also created templates of literary genres, which were later emulated by others. These recreations occupied a very important place in the literary polysystem (to use Itamar Even Zohar's term), of the target language.

The role of *Bhashyakar* in Indian tradition is greater than that of a simple translator. *Bhashyakar* is a philosopher, visionary and Teacher. He completely understands the aims and objectives of the source text. He knows why he has to import this cultural entity into the target language. He emphasizes certain points in the source text, while leaving some other aspects untouched. He has clarity of purpose when he undertakes such a selective approach. He is sensitive to the needs of the target audience/recipient and he wants to groom, to educate the target audience. In order to achieve this set of goals *Bhashyakar* goes beyond the form. He doesn't stop at the analytical level. He aims at the 'equivalence' in the aesthetic satisfaction experienced by the audience of the original text and the audience of the target text.

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In this part of the essay, we shall compare and analyze *Valmiki Ramayana* and its recreation in Marathi '*Bhavartha Ramayana*' by the sixteenth century saint poet Eknath. Eknath does not call his *Ramayana* as *Bhashya*. As we have seen earlier, traditionally *Bhashya* refers to gloss or explanation. Eknath calls his *Ramayana* as *Bhavartha Ramayana* or that *Ramayana*, which explains the essence of *Ramayana*.

The analytical approach to translation we discussed earlier, presupposes a definite text, connected with a specific time frame and which is authored by a single individual who can claim some kind of authorship over it. The texts like *Ramayana* are like complex living



entities. They cannot be ascribed to a single author. The boundaries of the text are also fluid, undergoing change.

The text of *Ramayana* is ascribed to sage Valmiki but it was not as if the story of *Ramayana* was his own. Valmiki heard the story of Rama from Narada. Upon the query from Sanat, Sujat and other sages, Who is an ideal of manhood? Whose integrity is irreproachable? Narada narrated the story of Rama. Having heard the story, Valmiki returns to his *ashram*. While bathing in the river Tamasa, he sees a hunter bring down a male bird from a mating pair. The death of the bird aroused Valmiki's piety and the first '*shloka*' of *Ramayana* was born. It was in *anushtubh* meter. It could be sung with accompaniment of the lyre. Valmiki's disciples started reciting it and Valmiki was agonizing over his creation, wanting to compose more but not sure about the theme. At that moment Lord Brahma appeared and advised Valmiki to recite the same story of *Rama*, which he heard from Narada. Not just that, but Lord Brahma also blessed Valmiki, saying that 'whatever you write will turn out to be true and as long as the story of *Ramayana* is recited, you'll remain immortal'.

This story of the origins of *Ramayana* has come into *Valmiki Ramayana*. So Valmiki can be said to be the compiler of *Ramayana* stories. Probably his unique contribution to the *Ramayana* story was the form; the *anushtubh* meter. The story of *Ramayana* remained flexible even after it was associated with the name of Valmiki. The protagonists in *Ramayana* have told the story again and again in *Ramayana*. It is agreed upon, that the story has to be told and retold and it is also agreed upon, that each narrator will tell the story his way. The researchers trying to establish the oldest *Ramayana* agree that the parts of *Ramayana* containing the childhood of Rama and chapters describing the later life of the protagonists after the defeat of Ravana and Rama's return to Ayodhya were probably not there in Valmiki's version.

When Eknath recreated *Ramayan* in Marathi, he probably had other *Ramayanas* of Sanskrit literary poly system before him. That might have included even plays like *Mahavircharitam* and *Uttarramcharit*. He also must have been acquainted to the *Ramayana* in *Jain* tradition as also the *Ramayana* in folklore and oral tradition. So disregarding these multiple versions and



sticking to the form of the version ascribed to Valmiki would have been doing injustice to the original text. The aims and objectives of Valmiki and Eknath in creating the text and the translation respectively, were the same; to create an ideal of manhood, to set an example for men to follow.

Just as the aims and objectives of the original and the recreation were the same, the creative anxiety experienced by the creator and re-creator was also the same. Valmiki's *Ramayana* describes the process of immergence of *Ramayana* at detail. Eknath, at the beginning of his *Bhavartha Ramayana* describes his inability to not recreate *Ramayana* in Marathi. He describes his position as follows:

*Karu jata phukat goshti, tyan maji ramakatha uthi,  
Rame puravili pathi, khilili drshti Ramayani.  
Aisiyata na kari mhanata, Ram chadhe meepanache matha,  
Maga to apuliya nijasatta, vadavi katha balatkare.  
Maga nijale asata jan, Ram thapati apana,  
Mahne uthi kari Ramayana, tethe mee kon na karavaya.*

(Even when engaged in trivia, I see the story of Ramayana, Ram is with me at all times, my eyes see nothing but Ramayana. If I refuse, Ram overcomes my ego and using all his might makes me repeat his story. When I am asleep, Ram taps me on the head, 'wake up and write', he says, so who am I to disobey? Tr. By the author)

It is Lord Brahma in the original, who insists that Valmiki write the story of *Rama*. While in case of the recreation, Rama himself insists that Eknath write *Ramayana*. There is no strict adherence to the text in this type of recreation, a thing which the Western tradition might find abhorrent, but this part no doubt recreates the moment of inspiration, the writer's anxiety and the entire process of the birth of a text with the same effectiveness as the original. The *Bhashyakar* has felt the same creative urge as the writer of the original, a thing which a mere translator might not be able to experience.

Valmiki's *Ramayan* is an excellent example of lyrical poetry. It displays all the characteristics typical of poetry like metric composition, evocative imagery and metaphor. The difficulties in translating poetry of this type are innumerable. Translations of poetry that afford the same kind of aesthetic satisfaction to the recipient of the target text are well nigh



impossible. The meter of *Valmiki Ramayana* is *anushtubh*, a meter of four lines. Eknath while composing *Bhavartha Ramayana* has used a meter popular in Marathi, *Owi*. *Owi* consists of three and half lines, but it is capable of the same lyrical expressiveness as the *anushtubh* in original. Just as the metric composition of the original was easy to remember and could be recited well with the accompaniment of lyre, the *Owi* too can be recited well.

The nature in *Valmiki Ramayana* is almost a living, breathing thing, which participates in the drama unfolding. Some of the stanzas of *Valmiki Ramayana* that describe nature are an epitome of lyrical poetry. This is especially true of the stanzas that describe the onset of monsoon. Seeta is abducted by Ravana, Rama and Laxmana arrive at Pampa lake in search of her. They meet Sugreeva here. Sugreeva attains the throne of Kishkindha with the help of Rama and promises to search for Seeta. But the monsoon begins and Sugreeva asks Rama to put the search campaign on hold till the monsoons are over. The monsoons in India are a season of love, a season of regeneration. The poignancy of Rama's separation from Seeta, his impatience at the forced inaction, his worry for Seeta's safety and also his appreciation of the beauty of the nature find expression in these stanzas. This part in the original that can serve as an example of best of lyrical poetry is not there in the recreation. *Bhavartha Ramayana* touches upon the factual content, the arrival of Rama and Laxmana in Pampa, Sugreeva's ascension to throne, his promise of help and advice to wait the monsoon out is present in the recreation but the evocative picture of nature, that lyrical poetry which offers aesthetic satisfaction to the recipient of the original are absent. So should this be listed as a shortcoming on the part of Eknath? It is a difficult question to answer.

But Eknath gives similar aesthetic pleasure to the recipient of the target text while describing 'Kausalya's pregnancy'. This part is relatively unimportant in *Valmiki Ramayana*. In *Bhavartha Ramayana* it is a part that offers tremendous aesthetic pleasure and also makes Eknath's philosophy, the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* accessible to the recipient. The contradiction in the birth of Brahman, which is beyond life and death is beautifully described by Eknath. King Dasharatha searches for pregnant Kausalya and is unable to find her. He has to leave Para, Pashyanti, Madhyama and Vaikhari behind, he has to break the chains of words, overcome the rampant Dvaita, leave aside the Trigunas, have faith in his Guru and





with Vivek or that wisdom which can distinguish and discern he is able to see Kausalya in the land of *Advaita*.

Should this be termed as ‘distortion’ of the original? Again, it’s a difficult question to answer. But Eknath seems to be following the tradition of later *Ramayanas* which deem Rama as incarnation of God. They accord him divine status. They differ from *Valmiki Ramayana* on this point. But I doubt whether this could be termed as distortion. It can be termed as value addition, since *Valmiki Ramayana* suggests divine element in *Rama* but in *Valmiki Ramayana* Rama himself is unaware of his divinity. Eknath is able to permeate his recreation with the *Advaita-Vedanta* philosophy by according divine status to Rama.

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Any type of translation is also an act of interpretation. By picking out a text from a literary system for translation, translator is already guilty of ‘value addition’. Translation in this sense is based on hermeneutics. If we take a look at the *Bhashyas*, we are reminded of Schleiermacher’s opinion that, in a hermeneutic process Interpreter can understand the writer better than the writer himself. *Bhashya* also validates what Gadamer (2006) said about the role of tradition in the process of interpretation.

*Bhashya* goes a step beyond a mere translation. It enriches the literary system of the target language and at the same time gives a new lease of life to the source text. *Bhashya* plays a major role in the cultural acquisition of the source text.

The tradition of recreating source texts in similar fashion is alive in Marathi. One is reminded of Sane Guruji (1899-1950) who had several such recreations to his credit: *Nadi Shevti Sagaralach Milel* (Faust), *Teen Mule* (Silas Mariner), *Dukkhi* (Les Miserables), *Phulacha Prayog* (The Black Tulip) to name a few. It is also interesting to note that these titles have attained iconic status in Marathi Literature and are immensely popular even today.

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