

English Translation of Sanskrit Classics and its Relevance

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Abstract:

Sanskrit, often referred to as the "language of the Gods," has been a source of profound wisdom, literature, and philosophy for centuries. The treasure trove of Sanskrit classics encompasses epic narratives, spiritual scriptures, intricate treatises, and poetic verses. The translation of Sanskrit classics into English has also played a pivotal role in making this ancient wisdom accessible to a global audience. This article delves into the significance of translating Sanskrit classics into English and its enduring relevance.

Keywords: Sanskrit Classics, translation studies, interdisciplinary process, relevance.

Introduction

Sanskrit, often referred to as the "language of the Gods," has been a source of profound wisdom, literature, and philosophy for centuries. The treasure trove of Sanskrit classics encompasses epic narratives, spiritual scriptures, intricate treatises, and poetic verses. At the same time, translation, often referred to as the art of rendering meaning from one language into another, holds a profound and multifaceted importance in the realm of human communication, cultural exchange, and the dissemination of knowledge. The translation of Sanskrit classics into English has also played a pivotal role in making this ancient wisdom accessible to a global audience. This article delves into the significance of translating Sanskrit classics into English and its enduring relevance.

To begin with, it becomes essential to explore the multifaceted significance of translation in fostering understanding, preserving heritage, and fostering global interconnectedness. What is translation? Translation is the art of conveying the essence of a text originally composed in one language into another. The term "translation" finds its roots in the Latin words 'trans,' signifying 'across,' and 'ferre,' which means 'to carry' or 'to bring.' In Greek, translation is referred to as 'Metaphrasis,' which can be understood as 'speaking across.' This concept has endowed the English language with two distinct terms: 'metaphrasis,' denoting a 'literal' or 'word-for-word translation,' and 'paraphrase,' which involves expressing the content using different words (derived from the Greek 'paraphrasis'). However, in the Indian context, a noteworthy observation arises: there exists no native term in any Indian language that mirrors the exact essence of the word 'translation.' From Sanskrit, we have adopted 'anuvad,' a term denoting 'speaking after,' while from Arabic, the term 'tarjuma' was embraced. The latter term, 'tarjuma,' aligns more closely with the notions of explication and paraphrasing. This linguistic divergence highlights the intricacies of expressing the multifaceted

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concept of translation within diverse cultural and linguistic frameworks. More recent borrowings are 'rupantaran' in Bangla or 'vivartanam' in Malyalam or 'Bhasyantar' in Hindi 'That we don't have a widely accepted Indian word for translation suggests that the concept itself was not familiar to us.' (Mukerjee, 2004, p.45)

Instead, in India, our literary tradition has been intertwined with the practice of literary translation over an extended span. Over the past millennium, our poets, playwrights, and storytellers have adeptly extracted inspiration from diverse sources to craft poems, plays, and stories in their native languages. Harry Aveling states here, 'translation' is when a source text, both verbal and nonverbal has, for certain purpose been used as the model for the production of a text in the target culture. (Aveling, 2010, p.5) Quite often the source language has been Sanskrit and the most frequently targeted texts were Mahabharata and Ramayana. The reason being we admire a literary text in one language and we use it as a take off point and compose a similar text in another language. P. Lal's adoption of the term 'translation' to characterize this creative process seems particularly fitting in such a scenario, further validated by its endorsement in advanced learner dictionaries. Teena Ann Mathew and Dr. Shiva Chaudhary believe that 'In general, the translation is classified into three such as intralingual, inter-lingual and inter-semiotic. The intra-lingual performs translation for identical language, then the translation from one language to another is known as inter-lingual and the third type is to make translation for two different systems as verbal and non-verbal, which is defined as inter-semiotic.' (Mathew and Chaudhary, 2021, p.212)

Translation transcends the confines of a mere interdisciplinary process; it unfolds as a multifaceted endeavour that extends beyond the act of substituting source language content with its target language counterpart. It is more complex than replacing the source language text with the target language text and includes cultural and educational nuances that can shape the opinion and attitude of the recipients. The advent of English and its growing ascendancy changed the translation scene as never before as in "... the 21st century as the great age of translation" as an unprecedented number of individuals crossing the globe because of vastly different circumstances encounter, other language, other cultural framework and other belief systems, rendering this an historical moment what translation is an increasingly human condition." (Bassnett et al, 1999) The colonial times have been our most productive period where the literary translation is concerned. Atleast three areas of translation grow and prospered: firstly, the translation of Indian texts into English; secondly, the translation of English texts into various Indian languages; and thirdly, the translation of distinct Indian works into diverse regional languages. While each of these trajectories bore distinct characteristics, their cumulative result constituted a remarkable enhancement of our literary culture.

Starting in the eighteenth century, a novel form of translation endeavour began in India. Sir William Jones stood among the pioneering figures, and following his rendition of Kalidasa's "Saccantala" in 1789, a cascade of early texts from Sanskrit, Tamil, and Pali found expression in the English language. It is of paramount significance to note that without the translation of Indian literary texts into English, their status as noteworthy works might not have been solidified.

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, Indians too embarked upon a journey of enriching this

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tradition, with notable figures such as Ramesh Chandra Duttt, A.K Ramanujam, and P.Lal making significant contributions. P.Lal's enduring dedication to the Mahabharata and Sanskrit texts, as well as Velchuri Narayan Rao's contemporary interpretation of vintage Telugu poetry into English, stand as particularly remarkable instances in this regard.

With the emergence of English, the contextual role of translation in India underwent significant transformation. Renowned people like Warren Hastings, who held the position of governor from 1772 to 1785, introduced a notable shift. Hastings believed in governing Hindus according to Hindu laws and, consequently, commissioned the translation of Dharmashastras, considered the legal texts, from Sanskrit into Persian by Indian scholars, followed by translation from Persian into English by Europeans. In a parallel vein, Charles Williams accomplished a groundbreaking feat by directly translating the Bhagavad Gita from Sanskrit into English in 1785, while William Jones similarly undertook the translation of "Saccantala" in 1789. Jones presented his breakthrough findings to the Arabic Society in 1786, asserting that "Sanskrit belonged to the Indo-European family of languages from which were born many European languages.' (Mukerjee, 2004, p.34)

Translation thus became the foundation on which a new discipline such as comparative philosophy could be established in the 19th century. Simultaneously, it unveiled a fresh realm within the ambit of Indology. And the worldwide recognition of such enterprise culminated in Rabindernath Tagore's winning an International award for literature in 1913. Herein to quote Reeta Agnihotri, 'The role of Translation in literature is vital and pivotal because the importance and flavor of classic works can be reached to a number of readers by means of translation only. If Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali would not have translated into English. Could Tagore have received Nobel Prize in 1913? Obviously, no. The role of translation is always great and grandeur.' (Agnihotri. 2013, p.313)

A closer examination of the value of translation reveals its ability to resurrect literary texts that may not have been entirely lost but had been somewhat overlooked. For instance, works like "Beowulf," "The Owl and the Nightingale," "The Canterbury Tales," and even "The Testament," crafted in earlier iterations of the English language, are now accessible in a contemporary version of the same language. While these renderings might not fit the conventional type of translation, they have provided modern readers a pathway to engage with ancient literature in a more accessible form.

Through the ages and even today translation played major role in the spread of information and knowledge not only this, it has played an important role in the spread of world religion and world literature. Role of the translator is of a mediator between culture rather than merely supplanting one form of word from another, the translator has the capacity to enhance our understanding of development of issues and indigenous cultures by mediating ideas across cultural and national boundaries. Translator therefore can be said to develop language and literature, sharpen aesthetic sensibilities, broaden our horizon and give us a view of the diversity of world cultures. In essence, the translator serves as a catalyst for the evolution of language and literature, honing aesthetic sensibilities and expanding horizons. In the process, they unveil the kaleidoscope of world cultures, amplifying our understanding of the intricate diversities that define humanity's myriad expressions.

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Besides the translation of diverse texts in itself is significant to bridge cross cultural gaps and enrich knowledge system of coming generations.

Relevance of Translation of Sanskrit Classics

Sanskrit classics, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and the Mahabharata, hold timeless wisdom and insights into the human condition. These texts provide a deep understanding of metaphysics, ethics, spirituality, and the nature of reality. By translating these works into English, scholars have ensured the preservation of this ancient wisdom for future generations, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. This preservation is crucial as it allows people from diverse backgrounds to engage with the profound ideas and teachings of the past.

The translation of Sanskrit classics into English facilitates cultural exchange and enhances global understanding. It opens up the rich tapestry of Indian culture and philosophy to an international audience, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and mutual appreciation. As readers delve into the translated texts, they gain insights into the historical, social, and philosophical contexts of ancient India, promoting a more nuanced perspective on Indian civilization and its contributions to humanity.

The English translations act as a bridge between the traditions of the East and the West. They enable readers from Western cultures to access the profound teachings of Eastern philosophy without the need for mastering Sanskrit. This exchange of ideas enriches both sides, allowing for the integration of diverse perspectives and promoting a more holistic understanding of the human experience. The translated texts encourage dialogue between Eastern spiritual practices and Western philosophical traditions, fostering a deeper exploration of human existence.

The availability of Sanskrit classics in English greatly enhances academic study and research. Scholars and researchers around the world can engage with these texts, analyze their nuances, and contribute to the understanding of their meanings. The translations provide a foundation upon which further studies in linguistics, philosophy, religious studies, and literature can be built. This academic engagement not only advances knowledge but also encourages critical thinking and the exploration of different interpretations.

For individuals seeking personal growth, introspection, and spiritual enlightenment, the English translations of Sanskrit classics serve as invaluable resources. Works like the Bhagavad Gita offer guidance on navigating life's challenges, fostering inner peace, and understanding one's purpose. Readers can draw from the timeless wisdom of these texts to find solace, inspiration, and a deeper connection to their own spiritual journey.

The eloquent beauty of Sanskrit poetry and prose has influenced literature and the arts across the globe. English translations of Sanskrit classics introduce readers to intricate literary techniques, metaphorical language, and profound symbolism. This influence extends to various artistic forms, including literature, music, dance, and visual arts. The translated classics serve as a source of creative

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inspiration for artists who wish to imbue their work with the depth and richness of ancient Indian thought.

Many Sanskrit classics offer ethical and moral guidance that is relevant across time and cultures. The teachings of compassion, duty, and selflessness found in these texts have universal applicability. By translating these teachings into English, individuals from different backgrounds can access principles that guide virtuous living and contribute to the betterment of society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the English translation of Sanskrit classics holds profound significance in today's interconnected world. It acts as a bridge between cultures, preserves ancient wisdom, fosters academic inquiry, and provides personal enrichment. The relevance of these translations lies in their ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage with the timeless teachings and insights that Sanskrit classics offer. As we continue to explore the depths of human understanding, these translations will undoubtedly remain a beacon of enlightenment and inspiration for generations to come.

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