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The Role of Translation in Preserving and Promoting Indigenous Languages and Cultures: A Case Study of Regional Indian Literature

Abstract

In a globalized world where cultural exchange often jeopardizes the survival of minority languages, there has been growing recognition of the role of translation in preserving and promoting indigenous languages and cultures. This paper attempts to look at the critically important role that translation assumes in ensuring the preservation of indigenous languages by adopting regional Indian literature as its focus. The present study will carry out a case study of texts in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Odia and Khasi, as well as investigation into how translation can serve as an interface for local cultural stories to reach the global audience at large. It also looked to understand how translators have difficulties translating in linguistic nuances and idioms and oral traditions. It has also dealt with the ethical issues while transferring indigenous works and the power play involved in the translation act. Arguing by citing illustrations from Indian literature, it hypothesizes that translation forms the essential role performed not only as a 'preserve' of indigenous culture but also as an encouragement to inter-cultural dialogue and understanding. It appeals lastly for a more consciously respectful approach at translation, foregrounding the preservation of culture over engagement with the world literary community.

Keywords: Translation, Indigenous languages, Cultural preservation, Regional Indian literature, Intercultural dialogue

Introduction

Globalization has strongly affected the indigenous languages and cultures such that the eradication of these languages is promoted. However, the trend serves as an inducement for cultural exchange

globally regarding the products and services, but it does place the minor languages and indigenous ways of life at the risk of survival. The major forms of languages and cultures overshadow the minor indigenous languages with which they bury them underground, and this eventually places them out of existence. Translation has created, what has been described as a sensitive and sympathetic atmosphere, but what literally appears to be a counter-currency in this respect, namely, a bridge that crosses the geographical fences and cultures for the improvement of the world's indigenous languages and cultures. It lets them get included in the world's dialogue with their very own visions and integrate as a legitimate part of the world's cultural tapestry.

This paper explores the role of translation in the preservation and promotion of regional Indian literature and indigenous languages and cultures. Here, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Odia and Khasi are among some of the very important indigenous languages representing their specific cultural heritage. Even through translated texts in these case studies, it underlines the intricacy and ethical consideration with the translation of indigenous literature. Lingual subtleties, cultural idioms as well as oral traditions make it complex as translation has to address the authenticity of the work. Hence, the transfer of this aspect relies on both linguistic and cultural sensibility.

In addition to this above argument, the paper proceeds to see how the translation serves towards the cause of preservations of culture and also contributes to intercultural dialogue. Since the translated indigenous literature unlocks cultures to a broader audience, it therefore contributes toward the preservation of these languages and respects the understandings across the cultural lines. Ultimately, this study proves that translation could be a crucial instrument of safeguarding indigenous languages, consequently ensuring continued vitality in a globalized world. Such a study underlines consciousness needed and respect shown in translation in translating with cultural values at the core but, at the same time, animating a cosmopolitan, open literary market.

The Importance of indigenous languages and cultures.

Apart from being a means of communication, native languages are forms of expression regarding the worldview, history, customs, and traditions of indigenous communities. According to Anderson, "language is the repository of a community's traditions, myths, and rituals, thus making it a vehicle for the preservation of a cultural identity"¹. In India, which boasts an affluent diversity of languages and cultures, indigenous languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, Odia, Khasi, and the many others play a vital role as the main element in the identity of different ethnic and tribal groups. Other such influences are, however, throwing up the specter of language extinction owing to the influence of other more widely spoken languages like Hindi, English, and regional languages.

In many ways, the loss of an indigenous language leads to the destruction of shared cultural practices and knowledge systems. "Languages are a vital repository of humanity's cultural diversity. When a language dies, so too does the knowledge and culture embedded in it,"² warns the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. With this understanding comes the need to identify ways of preserving these languages and by extension, the cultures that accompany them.

Thus, translation comes to the center of the objective of salvaging and promoting indigenous languages and cultures. Translation becomes a way in which to bridge cultures and let the indigenous narratives be transmitted into global systems; it also assists in the preservation of these cultural forms. However, translation is not without difficulty. The process of translation is more complicated if one is trying to say something of its subtle and very sensitive expressions. Therefore, deeply appreciating the function of translation in culture preservation requires understanding the uniqueness of translating indigenous literature

as well as the different challenges and opportunities.

Challenges in Translating Indigenous Literature

No doubt, among the biggest challenges that come along with translation is the retention of the linguistic and cultural connotations embedded in indigenous texts; idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and vocabulary often unique to a specific cultural context dominate indigenous languages. Such elements not only require linguistic expertise but also a profound knowledge of the country's cultural landscape that the text will spring from. According to Venuti, "translation cannot be a neutral process because power dynamics and prevailing cultural assumptions determine the act of translating in the very first instance, not to mention the translator's personal bias"³. With Indigenous literature, these factors are intensified because the translator must consider the power of relations holding between the minority culture and the dominant culture of the target language.

One example is translation from Maithili literature. Maithili is a language with a very long, rich literary tradition involving folk songs, religious texts, and classical poetry and one spoken by millions of people in Bihar and Nepal. Many Maithili words and phrases simply do not have an easy, direct equivalent in Hindi or in English and would be almost impossible to translate directly. Thus, as Sinha notes, "Translators often face the challenge of finding an equivalent term or expression that can fully capture the emotional and cultural significance of the original Maithili word"⁴. This is so because, like other indigenous languages, Maithili is very closely associated with the culture's history and identity. Translators must, therefore, walk a delicate tightrope, ensuring that the translated text respects the cultural and historical context in which it was produced.

Cultural loss is another challenge that translators of indigenous literature face. Most indigenous narratives, especially oral traditions, rely on the close relationship between the narrators and the land as well as nature and local customs. In translating these documents into a more widely spoken language such as English or Hindi, they easily lose their cultural specificity. As Munday puts it, "when a text is translated into a dominant language, there is a danger of erasing the specific cultural markers that make it unique"⁵. In this regard, the translation process may unintentionally weaken the indigenous culture.

Translation of oral traditions to written forms is also another challenge; the reason being that the indigenous have oral traditions rather than written ones, especially in folk songs, myths, legends, and so forth. Translating oral texts is a different process compared to translating written texts. These oral traditions are very performance-oriented, and their effects are transmitted through rhythm, intonation, etc., apart from the verbal content. As Baruah explains, "Oral traditions in indigenous communities are not merely about words—they are about performance, context, and communal participation"⁶. Translators need to find a way of recreating that performative style while keeping the cultural authenticity attached to it.

Case Study: Translating Maithili Literature

In the case of Maithili, for instance. It is a language spoken predominantly in Bihar, India, but also in parts of Nepal. Maithili has an outstanding literary tradition, hundreds of years old, which spans not only written genres but also oral ones. Oral Maithili literature is virtually impossible to translate because it heavily relies on the social and cultural life of the Maithil community.

For example, Maithili folk song tradition is highly replete with imagery and metaphors and emotional depth. Many of them are in a particular rhythm and rhyme, and it is quite impossible to give in translation. Many of them—Sinha cites—exhibit layers of meanings shaped through community beliefs and religious views, social experience and history. This generally means that the translation into English or Hindi will often demand a

critical choice from the translator: literal versus emotive authenticity. Sometimes, the translator may have to sacrifice the specific content of the original message for the general import of the song.

Perhaps it is in the translation of the Maithili epic, Vidyapati (The Tale of the Exile), where the epic goes into the story of a royal family and its trials and tribulations of love, power, and betrayal. This translates much of the metaphors of the local Maithili culture, such as references to local deities, festivals, and agricultural practices – and so much more, requiring not only linguistic competence but also cultural knowledge. As Nirmala claims, “A translator must be aware of the cultural setting of the source text to grasp the meaning behind such metaphors and symbols”⁷. For example, Vidyapati’s novel translated references of local godhoods besides festivals which involved much more complicated work since these words did not have readymade counterparts either in English or Hindi.

Case Study: Translating Bhojpuri Literature

The Bhojpuri region of northern India has a rich oral tradition, replete with myths, legends, and stories passed down through the ages. These are therefore imbued deeply with the worldview of the Bhojpuri-to-wit, spiritual and cultural relationships between community and nature. Local gods, folklore and terrains often figure in Bhojpuri myths. The question is how one translates these myths into English or Hindi; since these cultural terms do not have equivalents in the target language, translation becomes, in a way, a challenge.

For example, the Bhojpuri tale of *Bhagwati Mai* is a central narrative about how this people came into being and how they related to the land. This tale abounds with religious topological nomenclature of sacred groves, rivers, and hills applicable to the Bhojpuri community. Moreover, translation of this tale in English calls for a translator not only to represent the subjectivity of the story but also succeeds in expressing the meaning and elements of these places in terms of spirituality and environmentalism. It requires a subtle balance between fidelity towards the source and accessibility to the target audience, while translating these myths into a culturally far language from the Bhojpuri community.

Ethics of Translation

Many issues are raised when talking about the translation of indigenous literature. To begin with, power dynamics between the translator and the indigenous community are multi-fariously flawed. As Venuti states: “Translation is never a neutral act; it is shaped by power relations, cultural hegemony, and the ideological stance of the translator”⁸. It is even more exacerbated in indigenous literature, as such attitudes create problems because the translator most often happens to be a member of a dominant culture; most often he or she may not understand or appreciate the indigenous worldview as it is. Thus, there is a likelihood that the very process of translation feeds stereotypes or even misrepresents the indigenous culture.

On the ethical aspect, ownership is another contentious issue of argument. Most of the time, most indigenous communities have several issues with outsiders translating their literature because they fear that this literary work would be misappropriated or exploited. According to Nirmala, “There is a growing movement among indigenous communities to reclaim their narratives and control the translation process”⁹. Such a movement needs more cooperation from translators with the indigenous communities so that the translation process is more respectful and culturally sensitive.

In this respect, a translator is an intermediary in the case of cross-cultural communication, also bearing respect towards the integrity of the indigenous community. To put it in the words of Munday, “The translator should behave like a cultural mediator, ensuring that the voice of the indigenous community is preserved and respected in the translated text”¹⁰.

The Role of Translation in the Promotion of Indigenous Cultures

Despite the challenges highlighted above, translation will play a key role in the promotion and revitalization

of these cultures. Notably, translation will not only bring indigenous languages and the associated cultural practices before the global world but also send that message across better and hence create awareness and a better understanding of the communities involved. Translators in translating indigenous texts have the chance to connect cultures and even bring different cultures to mutual respect and appreciation. Said sums up the translation as “a means of cultural exchange that lets different cultures enter into a discussion with each other, thereby opening wider the scope of cultural understanding”.¹¹

The translation of indigenous literature can also be a practice of cultural preservation. Translation of the literature of indigenous languages into widely spoken languages such as Hindi, English, or French helps in saving the language and its knowledge from extinction. Several indigenous languages have vanished into nothingness, and their literature remains there only as a source of knowledge that should not be lost. For example, Maithili, Odia, or Bhojpuri translations would allow the outside world to get familiarized with their rich oral and written traditions, thus increased appreciation coupled with better efforts in their preservation and promotion.

An Immediate example that comes to mind is the translation of the Maithili short story collection *Ekta Akash* by Shefalika Verma. English translations bring the stories on an international level, allowing non-Maithili speakers also to associate with the cultural depth of the Maithil community. Translating these texts into English serves as a medium for communicating the wisdom, folklore, and moral teachings encapsulated in Maithili culture—a step contributing to the safeguarding of the language.

Translation further makes the voices of indigenous authors a platform to tell their stories and to erase stereotypes, claim their cultural identity. What is very important, though, is that the process of translation cannot be presented as a one-way transfer from one language to another but rather as being collaborative and reciprocal. This means that through the collaboration of indigenous authors and translators, on the one hand, and indigenous communities, on the other, the text may be accessed by a more extended audience while retaining the seminal parts of the original text. That way, a process empowers indigenous communities, giving them ownership over their stories and telling them on their own terms.

For example, Bhojpuri literature has translated the traditional stories of sacred relationships between Bhojpuri people and nature. Thus, it introduces valuable ecological knowledge to the larger community. Such stories—often a part of everyday rituals and practices—can be very meaningful in speaking of sustainability and conservation. This assumes acute significance amid the present climate crisis as indigenous groups have much-needed ecological information that can aid efforts toward wider global sustainability.

Conclusion: Moving to the Future of Translation for Indigenous Language Preservation

Translation has become an integral part of preserving and promoting indigenous languages and cultures. As represented in this paper, though the bar is indeed high so far as the nuances of language, cultural specificity, and ethics are concerned, translation, of course, represents a way of bridging cultures and preventing loss of indigenous traditions and indigenous knowledge to future generations. Case studies from Maithili, Bhojpuri, and other regional Indian languages only serve to elaborate upon all the evidence that exists for the proposition of translation as an instrument for cultural preservation, intercultural dialogue, and greater indigenous attention in a global world.

Indeed, the attitude with which a translator does his work can guarantee the ethical and effective translation of indigenous literature. This should come with sensitiveness towards the culture to be translated and an in-depth understanding of it. The collaboration between the native peoples and the translators will, without doubt, engender translations that will successfully convey the nuances of the original texts, with the integrity of the culture intactly preserved. Promotion of translation into more indigenous languages – the mother

tongues of the native groups themselves-will, of course, contribute to their identity with, and pride in, cultural heritage.

It can, after all be a force for good, becoming in effect a “bridge of cultures, safeguarding endangered languages, promoting indigenous knowledge and practice.” Only by growing global awareness of the importance of indigenous languages and cultures will translation play a more important role in preserving this very important diversity of human expression and thought. Indeed, as Said reminds us, “Through translation we engage with the world in a way that expands our understanding of it, making the unfamiliar familiar and the distant close”. Therefore, this process of translation continues to be a valid means through which indigenous languages and cultures can be continued long beyond the end.

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