



Translation in India: Theories, policies and practices

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“Without translation, we would be living in provinces bordering on silence”, said George Steiner, highlighting the essential role of translation in bridging worlds, cultures, and imaginations. Sri Aurobindo (n.d.), one of India’s most revered philosophers and poets, similarly recognised translation as more than a mechanical task. He viewed it as an act of cultural and intellectual re-creation—one that enables texts to transcend linguistic boundaries and acquire new meaning in different contexts (Pattarkine, 2023). In a country as linguistically diverse as India, where 1,369 mother tongues—including 22 scheduled languages, 99 non-scheduled languages, innumerable dialects, sociolects, and minor languages—coexist (Census of India, 2011), translation becomes even more significant. It is not merely a bridge between languages but a dynamic force that sustains the circulation of ideas, stories, and knowledge across India’s vast cultural and linguistic landscapes. This special issue of *Cadernos de Tradução, Translation in India: Theories, Policies, and Practices*, explores the various dimensions of translation within the Indian context—its historical trajectories, contemporary applications, and its role in shaping discourses on identity, power, and cultural exchange.

While translation is often framed as a technical or linguistic process, scholars have long debated its broader cultural and ideological implications. For instance, Lawrence Venuti has argued that translation is often treated as an invisible process in monolingual societies, particularly in English-speaking cultures, where it primarily serves as a bridge to access foreign texts. He critiques this domestication approach and advocates for ‘foreignization’, a strategy that preserves the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the source text (Venuti, 1995). Kaloh Vid (2016) illustrates this dynamic through an analysis of three Russian-English translations of Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita*—Glenny (1967), Pevear and Volokhonsky (1997), and Aplin (2008). She points out that Glenny’s translation significantly minimised the foreignness of Bulgakov’s narrative to a greater extent than the more contemporary translations, offering a fluent and undisturbed reading experience for the English-speaking audience but at the cost of erasing much of the original’s cultural essence. In contrast, Pevear and Volokhonsky, as well as Aplin, incorporated foreignising elements that preserved the source text’s cultural specificity.

These debates on translation strategy—whether to assimilate a text into the target culture or to retain its foreignness—are particularly relevant in multilingual societies like India, where translation is not merely a linguistic bridge but an essential aspect of daily life. Choudhuri (1997) reinforces this point by stating that while translation practice in the West is often considered “a complicated linguistic and literary act,” in India, it is “an inevitable way of life” (p. 30).

Unlike in monolingual contexts, translation in India operates not only across languages but also within them, mediating interactions between regional dialects, registers, and sociolects. In such multilingual societies, translation is not an exception but the norm—a practice embedded in everyday communication that sustains social and cultural cohesion. These perspectives challenge the monolingual bias in translation studies and highlight the unique role of translation in sustaining linguistic and cultural diversity.

Rather than being viewed as a challenge, multilingualism, as Pattanayak (1981) argues, has never been “problem” (p. xv) but a resource that enriches societies and promotes cultural pluralism. India’s linguistic diversity has historically necessitated translation as a means of cultural preservation, intellectual exchange, and political negotiation. From ancient times, translation has been an intrinsic part of Indian scholarship and literary production. The transmission of Sanskrit texts into Prakrit and Pali in the Vedic period and the adaptation of literature from Classical languages of India such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Sanskrit, Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali across different linguistic regions in various languages (Indian and non-Indian) all attest to the longstanding tradition of translation as an agent of knowledge-sharing and cultural continuity. The numerous retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in various languages, forms, and mediums can be seen as acts of ‘transcreation’—a term introduced by P. Lal (1972, as cited in Mund, 2019, p. 122).

Between the 12th and 18th centuries, translation played a particularly dynamic role in shaping intertextual relationships among Indian languages. As Mund (2019) notes, *bhashas* (languages) thrived on *adaan-pradaan* (give-and-take), where texts were translated directly or mediated through languages like Pali, Sanskrit, Paisachi, or Persian (p. 122). Translation thus functioned as the primary means of literary and intellectual exchange, promoting linguistic interconnectivity and shared cultural consciousness.

More recently, scholars increasingly recognise that multilingualism is not an exception but the norm, with translation playing a central role in sustaining communication across languages. Meylaerts (2013) argues that translation is not merely a process of transferring meaning between distinct monolingual realities but is deeply embedded within multilingual societies. This perspective reframes translation as an inherent function of multilingualism rather than a compensatory mechanism for linguistic diversity. In India, where linguistic plurality shapes everyday life, translation is an ongoing necessity rather than an occasional intervention. The country’s history demonstrates that translation is not merely a modern phenomenon but a long-established cultural practice—one that continues to shape India’s literary, political, and intellectual traditions.

Yet, translation in India has never been a neutral or apolitical act. It has long been entangled with questions of power, identity, and cultural negotiation. During the colonial period, translation was wielded both as a tool of control and a means of resistance. British administrators and Orientalists undertook extensive translations of Indian texts, often reinterpreting them through a

Eurocentric lens to assert colonial authority and justify governance over a diverse populace. As reflected in several chapters of his work, Bernard Cohn (1996) argues that the British colonial project relied on translation not only to understand Indian languages but also to shape legal, administrative, and cultural policies. Cohn demonstrates how translation was a central tool in the production of colonial knowledge, enabling the British to categorise, govern, and control Indian society. Through the translation of legal texts, religious scriptures, and cultural practices, the colonial state reinterpreted Indian traditions to serve its own interests, reinforcing its authority and justifying its rule.

However, translation was not merely a top-down process; Indian intellectuals, reformers, and freedom fighters engaged in counter-translations, reclaiming their cultural and literary traditions as acts of resistance. Eminent figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy translated and reinterpreted Indian scriptures to challenge regressive social practices and advocate for reform. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, through his translations and original works, infused nationalist sentiment into Indian literature, inspiring the freedom struggle. Subramania Bharati, the Tamil poet and nationalist, used translation and creative writing to awaken a sense of pride in Indian languages and cultures. Mahatma Gandhi, meanwhile, emphasised the importance of translating ideas of nonviolence and self-reliance into Indian languages to mobilise the masses. Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore translated his own works and those of others to bridge linguistic divides and cultivate a pan-Indian cultural identity. These efforts were not merely literary but deeply political, as they sought to unify linguistic communities, reinforce Indian knowledge systems, and challenge colonial narratives. Translation thus became a powerful tool in the hands of Indian nationalists, enabling them to reclaim their heritage and assert their identity in the face of colonial domination.

Even in the postcolonial era, translation continues to reflect asymmetries of power. Western languages, particularly English, dominate academic and literary translations, creating an imbalance where Indian texts are far more frequently translated into European languages than vice versa. This echoes what Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) describe as a one-way transaction, in which texts are translated into European languages primarily for European consumption rather than as part of a reciprocal exchange. Such disparities raise crucial questions about agency, accessibility, and the representation of non-Western literary traditions in translation.

At the same time, translation in contemporary India has become a tool of resistance and empowerment, bringing marginalised voices into mainstream discourse. The growing translation of Dalit literature, tribal folktales, and women's writings into dominant languages not only expands literary horizons but also challenges entrenched socio-political structures. More than a linguistic exercise, translation is an act of interpretation and creativity—one that carries voices, perspectives, and lived experiences across linguistic and cultural boundaries. A good translation does not merely relay information; it captures the essence of the original, preserving its tone, emotions, and cultural depth. In a pluricultural society like India, this ethical dimension of translation is particularly significant, as it serves to reclaim narratives, challenge dominant discourses, and amplify voices that have long been silenced.

Recognising the importance of translation in India's complex linguistic landscape, I had the opportunity to engage in scholarly discussions on this theme during my academic visit to the

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC) in 2022. As a Visiting Professor from the UNESCO Chair on Language Policies for Multilingualism, I delivered a lecture on *Translation Studies and Linguistics in Multilingual India*, which led to stimulating exchanges with faculty and students at UFSC. These discussions paved the way for Andréia Guerini to invite me to serve as Guest Editor for a special issue of *Cadernos de Tradução* on key aspects of translation in India. In 2024, I submitted a proposal for this issue in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair on Language Policies for Multilingualism, and I am delighted to present *Translation in India: Theories, policies, and practices* as Volume 45, Special Issue 1.

This collection brings together a diverse range of contributions that examine the historical, cultural and applied dimensions of translation in the Indian context. The articles featured in this issue are thematically grouped to reflect the diverse yet interconnected dimensions of translation in India. The first two articles explore the historical evolution of translation, its role in knowledge transmission across cultures, and its function as a research methodology. In a country where translation plays an instrumental role in shaping intellectual traditions—whether through the adaptation of Buddhist texts in China or the preservation of ancient Indian manuscripts—understanding translation's historical trajectories is crucial to recognising its continuing significance in contemporary discourse.

Following this, four articles focus on how translation negotiates cultural meaning, identity, and heritage, highlighting the challenges of translating regional literature, interlingual adaptations, and the impact of translation on social critique and gender representation. These studies illustrate how translation serves both as a means of cultural preservation and as a site of transformation, ensuring that local narratives reach global audiences while retaining their unique linguistic and cultural essence. The next two contributions shift attention to the role of translation in film and television adaptations, and science communication, emphasising its function in shaping public narratives and knowledge dissemination. The growing presence of translation in media demonstrates how language adaptation strategies, including translationalism and subtitling, shape audience engagement and comprehension. The final article examines how translation contributes to linguistic documentation and influences language standardisation.

Together, these nine articles offer a comprehensive examination of translation's role in mediating linguistic and cultural exchanges, preserving historical narratives, and shaping literary, media, and sociopolitical discourses. The following discussion provides a closer look at each contribution, outlining the key arguments and insights that shape this special issue.

The historical significance of translation in India is evident in monumental projects that have shaped knowledge transmission across centuries. One such example is the large-scale Buddhist translation movement, which facilitated the transfer of Sanskrit texts into Chinese and played a pivotal role in shaping China's intellectual and linguistic landscape. In his article, *Translating India: The Buddhist project and the Chinese translation school*, presented in Portuguese, Júlio Jatobá examines this cross-cultural exchange, analysing the translation of Buddhist texts—including sutras, vinaya, and sastras—from Sanskrit into Chinese. This extensive translation effort, often referred to as the “Buddhist project” (Cheung, 2014), spanned nearly a millennium, from the mid-2nd century to the early 12th century, and was instrumental in the formation of the “Chinese translation school.” Jatoba's study situates this movement within the broader context of India-China relations

in the 2nd century, illustrating how linguistic and philosophical exchanges between the two civilisations shaped early translation discourse. By examining the contributions of key translators such as An Shigao, Daoan, Zhi Qian, Paramārtha, and Kumārajīva, the article explores debates on fidelity, domestication, and terminology standardisation in Buddhist translation. The influx of Indian philosophical concepts, transmitted through translation, influenced classical Chinese literary forms and vocabulary, introducing new metaphysical and epistemological frameworks. This study offers critical insights into how these large-scale translation efforts shaped China's early language policies and set the foundation for future translation practices (Jatobá, 2025).

Manuscripts—handwritten compositions on materials such as paper, bark, cloth, or palm leaves—serve as invaluable records of human knowledge, often dating back centuries and holding immense historical, linguistic, and cultural significance. In her article, *Translating ancient Indian manuscripts into English: Translation as a research methodology*, Sanjana Rajan describes how translating ancient Indian manuscripts serves as a vital tool for preserving historical knowledge and advancing academic research. Beyond its function as a preservation tool, translation is positioned as a research methodology that bridges past and present, offering insights into ancient Indian philosophy, culture, and thought systems. Engaging with these texts through translation facilitates interdisciplinary research and contributes to the decolonisation of knowledge by amplifying marginalised voices and challenging Eurocentric perspectives. The study emphasises the urgent need for scholars to undertake systematic translation efforts, as India houses over 10 million manuscripts—two-thirds of them in Sanskrit—that remain untranslated and at risk of deterioration. By centring translation within academic research, scholars can promote a more inclusive and globally relevant knowledge production framework (Rajan, 2025).

The role of translation in literary and cultural transmission is a central theme in this special issue, with several studies demonstrating how translation not only preserves cultural heritage but also reconfigures it in new contexts. Throughout history, translation has acted as a bridge not only between Indian languages but also between India, the wider Indo-European world, and other linguistic and cultural traditions across the globe. A notable example of this is the French translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, rendered via English (Charles Wilkins) by Foucher d'Obsoville, as discussed in Castaing (2005, as cited in Verma, 2019).

In this issue, Cielo G. Festino, in her article, *Translation and social action: The case of Munshi Premchand's literary works in Goa*, examines how Goan writer and freedom fighter Evárgio Jorge (1925–1978) translated Munshi Premchand's short stories into Portuguese. These translations appeared in the Goan newspaper *O Herald/Herald* during the region's transition from Portuguese colonial rule (1510–1961) to integration into the Indian Union. Festino (2025) argues that Jorge's choice to translate Premchand—whose works critically portray social injustices such as caste oppression, peasant exploitation, gender inequality, and communalism—was not incidental. Rather, it reflected Jorge's effort to prompt his fellow Goans to critically examine their evolving socio-political realities under Indian governance. By engaging with Premchand's literary critique of Indian society, Jorge's translations served as a cautionary intervention, urging Goans to remain vigilant about the promises and challenges of their postcolonial identity.

Building on the theme of translation as both a transformative and complex process, in her article, *Translation of a translation: How accurate can it be? The difficult process of translating Saadat*

Hasan Manto's short-stories in Spanish, Tania Molina examines the challenges posed by indirect translation, where a text is translated through an intermediary language rather than directly from the source. Focusing on Manto's Urdu short stories, Molina Concha (2025) explores the difficulties of translating them into Spanish via English, highlighting the linguistic and cultural distortions that arise in the process. The study underscores how idiomatic expressions, historical references, and socio-political critiques embedded in Manto's writing risk being altered or lost when filtered through multiple linguistic layers. Drawing on Pym's (2010) insights into translation as a process of cumulative transfer, the article reflects on how each act of translation builds upon previous versions, shaping the final text in unintended ways. Molina also raises critical questions about the role of footnotes in compensating for cultural gaps and ensuring that key contextual elements remain accessible to the target audience. By sharing her own experience of translating Manto's works into Spanish for university students in Argentina—despite not having direct access to the original Urdu content—she illustrates the complex negotiations required to balance accuracy, readability, and cultural fidelity in literary translation.

Casegrande (1954, as cited in Wagle, 2004) highlights the intrinsic connection between language and culture by asserting that one does not translate language but one translates cultures. This idea is central to the article *Cultural transmission and semantic loss in the English translation of V. J. James's Nireeswaran*, by Ammu Ashok and Udaya Narayana Singh which investigates how translation impacts the transmission of cultural meaning in literary texts. By comparing the original Malayalam novel *Nireeswaran* with its English translation, the study examines the nuances preserved or lost in the translation process, particularly in terms of linguistic expression, philosophical depth, and regional cultural elements. Translating material culture, such as food and clothing, requires more than linguistic accuracy—it demands an understanding of cultural connotations and historical context. While strategies like borrowing and naturalisation help retain authenticity, they can create gaps for readers unfamiliar with the source culture. To address this, the study suggests using glossing, footnotes, or contextual embedding to enhance accessibility without compromising the source text's integrity. Ultimately, the translation of material culture demonstrates the broader role of translation as a mediator of cultural knowledge, balancing fidelity to the source with comprehensibility for the audience (Ashok & Singh, 2025).

Addressing the politics of translation, Umesh Kumar, in his article *Translating violence in India: Literary representations and the cartography of gender-based violence*, examines the challenges of translating depictions of gender-based violence (GBV) in Hindi literature, with a particular focus on narratives surrounding honor killings. These texts, deeply rooted in the intersections of caste, gender, and sexual violence, confront dominant societal structures and often remain marginalised or controversial. By analyzing key passages from contemporary Hindi fiction that depict the complexities of violence and oppression, Kumar (2025) highlights the ethical and linguistic dilemmas translators face when working with such politically charged narratives. The study explores how strategies such as omission, attenuation, or adaptation are employed to navigate cultural sensitivities and align with the socio-political expectations of the target readership.

In an era where media plays a dominant role in shaping public discourse, translation in audiovisual and journalistic contexts has become increasingly significant. Tariq Khan, in his article *Remakes as translation: A case study of the Indian remake of the Mind Your Language series*, explores

how audiovisual translation extends beyond linguistic equivalence to encompass cultural adaptation. By analysing *Zabaan Sambhal Ke*, the Hindi remake of the British sitcom *Mind Your Language*, the study explores how linguistic humour, cultural references, and social dynamics are recontextualised for Indian audiences. The article highlights how the remake negotiates linguistic diversity within India's multilingual setting, transforming the original's humour—rooted in misunderstandings between non-native English speakers—into a localised exploration of Hindi and regional language interactions. By framing remakes as an audiovisual translation, the study also reflects on how entertainment media navigates the complexities of linguistic representation and audience reception in a globalised world. This research sheds light on the broader role of translation in adapting cultural content while retaining its entertainment value for diverse audiences (Khan, 2025).

Scientific knowledge is deeply embedded in modern society, yet its communication often requires translation to ensure accessibility for diverse linguistic communities. In India, where multiple languages coexist, translating scientific discourse presents unique challenges, particularly in bridging the gap between technical terminology and everyday language. Shivangi Priya and Narayan Kumar Choudhary, in their article, *Science communication in Indian languages: A case study of scientific reporting through translation*, examine how translation mediates knowledge dissemination in India. The study explores the complexities of translating scientific registers, jargon, and technical terminology into Indian languages, highlighting the crucial role of translation in making scientific discoveries comprehensible to the public. The authors discuss the linguistic and conceptual challenges faced by translators and science journalists, particularly when translating Western scientific developments into Indian languages while maintaining accuracy and cultural relevance. Given the rapidly evolving nature of scientific discourse—whether in reporting pandemics or space missions—translation strategies must balance precision with accessibility. The article also reflects on policy implications, emphasising the need for standardised multilingual scientific glossaries and institutional frameworks to improve science communication in India. By addressing the broader role of translation in fostering scientific literacy, the study underscores the importance of accurate and culturally sensitive translations in shaping public engagement with science (Priya & Choudhary, 2025).

Last but not least, translation plays a fundamental role in shaping how languages are recorded, understood, and transmitted across generations. It serves as both a tool for linguistic preservation and a mechanism that can influence language standardisation and identity. Dripta Piplai (Mondal), Abhijith N. Arjunan and Suma Chisti in their article, *Translation, standard language ideology and the erosion of regional linguistic practices: The Rajbanshi example*, explore the role of translation in linguistic documentation and its impact on language standardisation. The study critically explores how historical and contemporary linguistic documentation efforts have framed Rajbanshi in relation to dominant languages, often reinforcing its classification as a dialect rather than an independent language. By analysing colonial and postcolonial approaches to translation in linguistic surveys, the authors highlight how translation choices—ranging from lexical selection to structural adaptation—have shaped Rajbanshi's linguistic identity. The study also examines recent efforts to standardise Rajbanshi and their implications for language policy and community identity. Ultimately, the article challenges prevailing translation-based documentation methodologies and

advocates for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to recording linguistic diversity (Piplai (Mondal) et al., 2025).

In conclusion, the articles in this special issue illustrate the broad and multifaceted role of translation in India. From historical translation movements and literary adaptations to media discourse and scientific communication, the articles collectively highlight how translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a dynamic force shaping cultural, social, and technological landscapes. The studies presented here reinforce the idea that translation in India is deeply intertwined with multilingual realities, policy decisions, and identity negotiations, rather than existing as an isolated academic or literary practice.

Several contributions in this issue focus on the role of translation in cultural transmission, whether through the adaptation of literary texts, the preservation of folklore, or the negotiation of linguistic hierarchies. The examination of historical translation projects, such as Buddhist sutra translations and the documentation of regional languages, sheds light on how translation has long been a vehicle for shaping intellectual traditions. At the same time, studies on media translation, and the challenges of translating gender-based violence narratives emphasise how translation remains a site of negotiation, where linguistic choices reflect broader socio-political dynamics.

Beyond its impact on literature and media, translation also plays a crucial role in knowledge production and dissemination. The discussion on scientific translation highlights the challenges of making specialised knowledge accessible in multiple Indian languages. Similarly, translation in journalism demonstrates how language contact and code-switching influence public discourse. These studies collectively bring out the urgent need for systematic translation policies, both in knowledge dissemination and in preserving the linguistic diversity of India.

While this issue examines translation practices across various disciplines and briefly engages with theories and policies, several important areas remain to be explored. Theoretical perspectives, particularly those rooted in Indian traditions, deserve greater attention to deepen our understanding of indigenous approaches to translation studies. Likewise, fields such as legal translation, translation in education, translation in the arts (music, dance, and theatre), and community translation merit further scholarly inquiry. The increasing influence of translation in society, alongside the rise of machine translation and AI-driven language technologies, also requires critical reflection. Moreover, the professionalisation of translation calls for a closer examination of translator training, industry standards, and the socio-economic realities of translation work. As digital translation tools continue to evolve and reshape multilingual communication, a sequel to this special issue could further explore the intersection of translation and technology, the professionalisation of translation, and policy-driven initiatives shaping translation practices in India.

Translation in India is not merely about rendering texts from one language to another; it is an act of cultural negotiation, identity assertion, and knowledge creation. As the linguistic landscape of the country continues to evolve, translation will remain central to shaping communication, preserving heritage, and nurturing cross-cultural understanding. The discussions initiated in this volume mark an important step in re-examining the role of translation in contemporary India, but they are far from the final word—there remains much more to be explored in the journey ahead.

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