

CHAPTER-28

Translation from Sanskrit as a source of knowledge production in the Asiatic society of Bengal and the two cases of the Sanskrit renaissance

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ABSTRACT

The Asiatic Society of Bengal is one of the oldest British-established learning institutions in India. Historically, it has contributed in the knowledge production on Indian history through Sanskrit translations, a project often discursively framed as sparking a "Sanskrit renaissance". Sir William Jones envisioned it as a hub for Asian studies, using translation as a key tool. From the lens of 19th-century British Orientalism, scholars systematically studied Sanskrit to classify and control Indian knowledge systems, embedding this within colonial dominance. They portrayed Sanskrit as a relic of a decayed yet once-great civilization, positioning themselves as its restorers to legitimize rule. This paper examines two cases of "Sanskrit renaissance." The first is the colonial project led by Orientalists like H.T. Colebrooke, Horace Hayman Wilson, William Jones, Fitzedward Hall, and E.B. Cowell, who translated key texts such as the Bhagavad Gita (1785) and Abhijnanasakuntalam (1789), imposing a modern historical perspective on Sanskrit literature. They assumed India—and Sanskrit—possessed vast literature but no indigenous historiographical tradition, akin to its prolonged history without formal history-writing. The second case critiques this narrative. Radhavallabh Tripathi, in "Decolonizing the History of Sanskrit Literature," argues the 19th century was mislabeled a "renaissance" or "new awakening," as Westerners retrofitted their historical concepts onto Sanskrit, ignoring its organic continuity. Sheldon Pollock further criticizes British philology as politically motivated, cataloging Sanskrit as a "classical" language in terminal decline. This framing justified colonial intervention by creating loyal native intermediaries educated in Sanskrit classics.

1 Introduction

In his Third Anniversary Discourse (1786), Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, established his fondness for Sanskrit and affirmed that

"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either." (Jones, 1786, p.2).

One of the oldest institutions of learning in India, the Asiatic Society emerged as a pivotal colonial research center that contributed substantially to the study of Indian history and is known for paving the way for its "renaissance," as asserted by the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. "The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, is the oldest institution of learning in India and has made a seminal contribution in the revival of Indian history and heralding its renaissance." (Asiatic Society, n.d.). The Society played a key role in the production of knowledge about India, and its inquiry into the Sanskrit language became a source and a method for understanding religion/people/culture. This intent was evident in the works of Orientalists such as Henry Thomas Colebrook, who was one of the prominent Sanskrit researchers, and his method of studying contemporary Indian society included observation of the present life,

seeking the origin of the rites, rituals, and customs in the ancient texts, and examining how far they corroborate it. In the book *Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*, Om Prakash Kejriwal demonstrates this method and asserts that

“What was more significant was Colebrooke’s method of studying contemporary Indian society, namely by seeking the origins of the customs, rites and rituals in the ancient texts, and assessing how far contemporary behaviour conformed to them.” (Kejariwal, 1988, p. 79).

What unfolded as part of this inquiry was a translation corpus in the quarterly journal of the Asiatic Society, cataloging of translations in it, setting up of the museum, collection of manuscripts, coins, etc. It also became one of the sites of legitimizing British stewardship over the decaying past/heritage and the present life in which the colonized were unfit to administer and sustain themselves. The act of searching the past was marked by the Oriental dualism of veneration and superciliousness. Vasudha Dalmiya in her work *Hindu Pasts: Women, Religion. History* opines that

“Apart from the laurels that Great Britain would acquire in mediating this knowledge to the rest of the civilized world, more pragmatic concerns motivated the interest in the city at this early stage of colonization. The knowledge not only of the science, but also of the religion of the Hindus, was needed in order to govern the country effectively.” (Dalmiya, 2017, p.47).

The Sanskrit translations published in the series of Bibliotheca Indica, the Sanskrit translations in the journal, and the multiple instances of administrative roles played by Sanskrit translators reveal that the knowledge production by the Asiatic Society of Bengal was embedded with colonial power, and Sanskrit became a site that was lost, powerless, and therefore needed British intervention to be restored. This paper talks about two cases of “renaissance”, the first is the colonial project led by Orientalists such as H.T. Colebrooke, Horace Hayman Wilson, William Jones, Fitzedward Hall, E.B. Cowell, etc., who imposed a modern historical perspective in the translation of Sanskrit literature with the assumption of the absence of any historiographical tradition in it. They assumed it to be a language and literature without a “formal history”. The first case posits the production of translations in the Asiatic Society of Bengal as the revival of Sanskrit, and the second unmasks the historiographical and epistemological violence existing in the former approach and challenges the narratives and assumptions of the first case. Drawing postcolonial lenses from various postcolonial critics such as Radhaballabh Tripathi, Bernard. S. Cohn, Sheldon Pollock, the paper establishes translation as a tool for colonial conquest and control.

Case one: The translations in the Asiatic Society of Bengal as the revival of Sanskrit and the institutionalization of Knowledge

“The Bound of investigations will be the geographic limits of Asia, and within these limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by man or produced by nature” – Sir William Jones

With the above declaration by Sir William Jones in a meeting held at the Grand Jury Hall of the Supreme Court in the year 1784, began the journey of the Royal Asiatic Society. According to the history of the Asiatic Society, Jones arrived in India with the dream of establishing a center for Asian Studies, including everything within the limits of the continent of Asia, for which translation was a primary tool. The memorandum for the plan of study by Jones included “the laws of the Hindus and Mahomedans; the history of the ancient world; proofs and illustrations of scripture; traditions concerning the deluge; modern politics and geography of Hindusthan; Arithmetic and Geometry and mixed sciences of Asiaticks; Medicine, Chemistry, Surgery and Anatomy of the Indians; natural products of India; poetry, rhetoric and morality

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of Asia; music of the Eastern nations; the best accounts of Tibet and Kashmir; trade, manufactures, agriculture and commerce of India: Mughal constitution, Marhatta constitution etc". ('History of the Asiatic Society', n.d.)

The Third Anniversary Discourse, a presidential address to the Asiatic Society of Bengal on February 2, 1786, was about the culture and history of the Hindus, which was later published in 1788. All of this set the ground for the translation project under the aegis of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Some of the famous contributions of the Asiatic Society during the first thirty years are as follows: William Jones's Third Annual Discourse in 1788 on Indo-European Language and Culture; Charles Wilkins's 'A Royal Grant of Land on a Copper Plate' in 1788; S. Davis's 'On Astronomical Calculations of the Hindus' in 1795; H. T. Colebrooke's 'On the Duties of a Faithful Hindu Widow' in 1795; J. Duncan's 'Discovery of Two Urns in the Vicinity of Benares' in 1797; H. T. Colebrooke's 'On the Vedas' in 1805; J. Malcolm's 'Sketch of the Sikhs' in 1810; F. Wilford's 'On the Ancients Geography of India' in 1815 and E. Strachey's 'On Early History of Algebra' in 1816. Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1833) translated the *Bhagavad Gita* into English in 1785, deciphered several Sanskrit inscriptions, published a translation of *Hitopadesa* (1787), and a Grammar of the Sanskrit Language. Sir William Jones translated Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* (1789), Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* (1789), and *Manusamhita* (1794) and edited *Ritusamhara* (1792). Jones also translated a Persian work, *Laila Majnu*. The works initiated by Wilkins and Jones were continued by Colebrooke (1765-1837) and Wilson (1784-1860). Colebrooke was the President of the Society from 1806 to 1815 and contributed nineteen papers to the Transactions of the Society. He published an English translation of Jagannath Tarkapanchanan's celebrated work on Hindu law, the *Vivadabhangarnava*, under the title Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions (1798). He also published a critical edition of the Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakosha* (1808). Wilson was Secretary to the Asiatic Society from 1811 to 1833 and published Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* (1813) and translated the eighteen principal puranas into English. He also published an edition of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (1825). Sir John Shore (1751-1834), who succeeded William Jones as President of the Society in 1794, published an abridged English translation of the *Yoga Vasistha* from a Persian version and contributed six papers to the Asiatick Researches. Most of the works by the Society are research-based and research-oriented, and the journals and Bibliotheca Indica published by it consist of a series of several hundred Oriental texts in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Tibetan, and other Asian languages, both in original and translation.

These translations, which mostly had Sanskrit as their source, have earned the Society a rare reputation among scholars all over the world. Its monographs were supplemented by several new series, such as Public Lectures, Monthly Bulletins, Seminar Proceedings, Memorial Lectures, and Memoirs, and they were in demand in England as well. I would like to present two instances that give a picture and proof of how the production and distribution of knowledge about India was happening through the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

"The List of Subscribers in India remains in numbers much the same as before; but the demand for the work in England increases daily, and much of the new matter it contains is greedily transferred to the pages of European literary and scientific periodicals of wide and established circulation. The Editor says thus much by way of information to his numerous correspondents throughout India, who have not the opportunity of perusing the home journals, and who lose sight of their own labours the moment they have entrusted them to his pages." (James Prinsep, 1835, p. v)

"The learned world will at any rate rejoice that our Hindustani, Bengali, Marhatti, Tibetan, and Sanserit Dic- tionaries have passed into permanent existence." (James Prinsep, 1835, p.

viii)

Both instances from the preface reveal how knowledge was produced, disseminated, and concretized by the British. The translations in the Royal Asiatic Society Journals and their dissemination were one of the means of knowing that the power of the imperial state did not lie only in the use of coercive mechanisms, but also in the formation of the narratives and shaping of the discourses of linguistics, philosophy, history, anthropology, literary interpretation, etc., for which translation was a tool. This idea is reiterated by Guri Vishawanathan in her book *Masques of Conquest*, where she highlights the purpose behind research and studies on India. She states

“It was an official policy partly out of expediency and caution and partly out of an emergent political sense that an efficient Indian administration rested on an understanding of Indian Culture. Warren Hastings, governor-general from 1774-1785 that British administrators and merchants in India were not sufficiently responsive to Indian languages and Indian traditions” (Viswanathan, 1989, p. 25).

The motive was to bridge the gap between the ruler and the ruled, as so far the rulers and the ruled have not been able to penetrate into the character and culture of each other. The aim of Orientalism ranged from the “initiation of the West to the vast literary treasures of the East to the reintroduction of the natives to their own cultural heritage, represented by the Orientalists as being buried under the debris of foreign conquests and depredations. The interests, however, were far from being scholarly as argued by historians like David Kopf. Warren Hastings understood the driving force of Orientalism to be the doctrine that “every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state: it is the gain of humanity” (Viswanathan, 1989, p.36).

Translation is one of the sites where the colonial subject is formed, and what one needs to enquire here is the narrative formation and representation of the colonized, which Tejaswini Niranjana puts it as the “creation of the conceptual economy”. The translation and the representation depend on the “western philosophical notion of reality, representation and knowledge”. A formation of a certain kind of subject happens in these translations, which often ignores or altogether does not mention the violence and atrocities inflicted on them, which shapes their history and forms the subject. This kind of power assumption and representation by the colonizers reduces the status of the colonized to what Said called “objects without history”. On the same line, Bernard S. Cohn in his work *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* points out the fallacy of meaning-making in the learning of Sanskrit, its history, and Indian languages by the English; for them, the meaning was attributed to the word, a phrase, an object, which could be determined and translated, and may have a synonym or direct reference in their language. This was not the method of meaning-making among Indians; for example, the chanting of a mantra by a Brahman during a sacrifice would carry a different meaning because of the effect of the sound or of hearing it. This understanding and method of meaning-making did not find its way in the European sense, thereby leading to epistemological violence. Similarly, the Orientalist researchers ignored the production of Sanskrit texts and the historical traditions embedded in them.

Case Two: Contestations and assertions

In his essay, *Decolonizing the History of Sanskrit Literature* by Radhavllabh Tripathi makes the case that Westerners used their own concept for writing the History of Sanskrit literature. He calls the 19th century an “era of renaissance and new awakening in the intellectual and social

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life of India”. The westerners started looking at the history of Sanskrit literature with a modern historical perspective after the publication of the English translation of the Gita in 1785 and the publication of the English translation of *Abhigyanashakuntalam* by Sir William Jones in 1789. The premise for this misleading idea of history was that just as India had a prolonged history but no tradition of history writing, similar was the case of Sanskrit, which has the treasure of literature but lacks a history of its own literature. To trace and write this absent history, Westerners began giving it a chronological order, starting from the Rig Veda to the 12th century A.D.

Tripathi counters this presupposed and biased claim of the absence of a history of Sanskrit literature and illustrates how there has been an indigenous tradition of literary history in Sanskrit existing in India. He opines that the idea that none of the poets, masters of literary theory, wrote the history of Sanskrit literature should be reexamined. A book titled History of Sanskrit Literature may not have existed till the 19th C but it is not true that Sanskrit literary writers, beginning from Kalidas to Panditraja Jagannanth, were unaware of the history of their own literature. The writings of these writers often explicitly and implicitly mentioned other Sanskrit writers of their time, and before this, Tripathi calls the indigenous literary tradition of Sanskrit. He states that

“when Kalidasa in the prelude to his *Raghuvamsa* says that he already has an opinion for the conception of this epic through the gateway of speech (poems) made by the *purvasurins*- the great authors of yore, he was well aware of the series of earlier works on the dynasty of Raghu which were available to him (apart from great epic of Valmiki). He also presents his own assessment of Valmiki as a poet by calling him poet of pathos (*Karunika-Kavi*). He also refers to Bharatamuni and was fully acquainted with the system of dramaturgy and stage-craft as envisaged in Bharata’s *Natyasastra*. Thus an awareness of the history of Sanskrit literature is embedded in the creative mind of Kalidasa.” (Tripathi, 2024, p.118).

The essay gives examples of authors like Bana, Rajshekhar, and Dhanapala who have explicitly talked about the literary history of Sanskrit. He further mentions that Bana in his *Harscarita*, a historical narrative in prose has given “resume of the tradition of Sanskrit literature which formed the background of his own writings” Rajshekhar (Tripathi, 2024: 119) (10th Century A.D.) according to Tripathi can be credited with writing a concise form of history and his 37 verses are cited in the *Suktimuktavali* an anthology of Sanskrit poetry compiled by Jalhana in 13th century A.D. In his verses, Rajshekhar has talked about 37 poets who flourished before the 10th century, which also included women poets. The 23 out of 37 poets mentioned by him do not find any mention in the existing history books on Sanskrit literature primarily because either the work is lost or the model of history writing followed by Rajshekhar, or the indigenous tradition of literary history of Sanskrit remains unexplored.

Tripathi goes on to give a history of histories of Sanskrit literature which included accounts by western scholars such as *History of Sanskrit literature* (1860) by Max Muller, *Indiens Literature und Culture* (1887) by L.V. Sheoder in German, *History of Indian Literature* by Weber (1878), *Geshishteder Indischen Literatur* in three volumes by M. Winternitz, *History of Sanskrit Literature* (1928) by A.B. Keith. The task of the Indian scholars was limited only to the appreciation of this mass of work; however, some attempted to translate a few of these works. The History of Sanskrit Literature and Sanskrit Drama appeared in Hindi translation. Prior to this, the English translation of the three volumes of History by M. Winternitz was taken up by Calcutta University. The two volumes were translated under his supervision; however, he passed away before the third volume could be translated. S.N. Dasgupta, an eminent philosopher, was entrusted with the translation of this volume, which deals with *Ramayan*,

Mahabharat, and *Kavya*. However, Dasgupta intuited that it would be better to plan another work dealing with the subject that constitutes the third volume of Winternitz's work. This intervention resulted in the first publication of the *History of Sanskrit Literature* compiled solely by Indian Scholars Dasgupta in collaboration with S.K. De. The volume, however, could not escape the biases of Westerners and is marred by some of the Western notions that neglect the historical sensibility envisaged in Sanskrit Literature.

In his essay, Tripathi points out the problems of reorganizing the history of Sanskrit literature by bringing in the example of error of judgement, inaccuracies, a generalized framework for categorization, and an unsympathetic attitude in understanding Sanskrit literature. For instance, the western categorization of 'lyric poetry' cannot be applied to the Sanskrit poems or to any of the genres in the Sanskrit poetic tradition. The tradition defines the *Gitagovinda* of Jaydev as *Ragakavya Uparupakas* (minor forms of drama); however, it is categorized as lyric poetry in the history books. There are also problems with the categorization of histories of Sanskrit Literature; the division of the Vedic period and Classical period is full of investigative fallacies, such as the dating of the Vedic period and the assumption that there was a growth of Sanskrit literature at a certain point with the composition of the great epics, the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana*, followed by an era of decadence. Tripathi remarks that an indigenous tradition and tool of assessment and investigation of Sanskrit literature has existed in India, which was completely ignored by Westerners as well as many Indian historians, including De and Dasgupta (Tripathi, 2024, p.139). One interesting observation made by Tripathi is that Westerners were more interested in the exploration of medieval literature as it gave them an opportunity to understand ancient civilization and learn about the development of languages. According to Tripathi, they ignored the pre-modern and medieval Sanskrit literature because they had the vernacular sources to provide knowledge about India in the said period, and it was in the interest of the British to highlight that whatever was ancient in Sanskrit and suppress its flourishing of creativity in the medieval, pre-modern, and modern periods. For example, someone like Keith would not want the Western readers to know that translation of Shakespeare was happening in Sanskrit and periodicals were in publication and new genres were being formulated. Sanskrit's ancientness and all great things being composed in ancient times suited the colonial enterprise. Calling attention to the lacunae and missing links, Tripathi points out that whatever of Sanskrit literature is available is perhaps less than what is lost. One of the links, which is the intertextuality in the Sanskrit literature, is often ignored, the mention of many composers, literary theorists, and mention of different works by different theorists, for example, the three plays of *Visakhadatta* are known to the literary theorists such as Bhoja, Abhinavagupta, Mammata, Dhannajaya, Dhanika, and others. There has also been deliberate non-inclusion/selection of many works in the histories by Westerners. Apart from this, 'delinks' have also been a result of discoveries of texts and authors post the publication of the histories of Sanskrit literature, for example, Cakrapani-vijyaa-mahakavya of Laksmidhara, a contemporary of Bhoj in the 10th century, was discovered after the histories of Keith, Winternitz, De, and many authors had already been published (Tripathi, 2024, p.134).

One of the serious questions that Tripathi raises is how the colonizers viewed Sanskrit as a dead language and had no connection with life and the Indian milieu. This is a stereotype which the scholars could not do away with; however Tripathi challenges this stereotype and opines that when A.B. Keith and M. Winternitz were writing the history of Sanskrit literature, the "creativity in Sanskrit was breathing with new efflorescence and revived vigor" (Tripathi, 2024: 137) and the histories written by Westerners included constructs based on the fragments and discontinuities of traditions. He talks about the "historical consciousness in Sanskrit

literature,” which has been different from the Western “runs in the influx of the traditions of the time and history lives in racial memories through Akhyanas and Upakhyanas.” Tripathi also points out that, contrary to the colonizer’s view of Indian society and Sanskrit literature, which they found static and unchangeable, Sanskrit literature was part of the lifestyles and living, such as that of Bhavbhuti, whose study suggests how he used a form of Sanskrit which was spoken in day-to-day life in his family.

Similarly, in *Sanskrit Poetics in the Postcolonial Space; Beyond the Canon*, Sreenath V.S. opines that the Sastra tradition in the realm of *Kavya* can be traced back to the 7th century, lasting till around the beginning of colonialism in the 17th century. *Kavyasastra* played a vital role in defining the form and shape of literature in what Sheldon Pollock calls “Sanskrit cosmopolis”. Sreenath states that:

“Though the direct influence of Sanskrit poetics upon literary productions in the former ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’ waned over the subsequent centuries due to Western literary influences, it continued to endure in the discussions of native critics both as a high watermark of India’s contribution to literary criticism and as a powerful nativist instrument to decolonise Indian critics” (V.S, 2023, p.1).

He divides the Sanskrit *kavyasastra* tradition from its beginning in the 7th century to date into four phases, namely ‘the early phase’ (7th–12th century), ‘the medieval phase’ (13th–17th century), ‘the reconstructionist and the disseminationist phase’ (17th century–1984), and ‘the revivalist phase’ (1984–to date). What is to be noted here is that some of the mentioned phases coincided with the colonial period, the scholars continued to produce treatises in Sanskrit poetics, and there were productions of moral-legal texts. Additionally, the scholarship (panditayi) in the Sanskrit scholarly tradition continued to flourish during this period, according to the work of Sreenath.

Conclusion

The insights into both the cases about the “renaissance” of Sanskrit and its history reveal that the Asiatic Society of Bengal’s translations produced knowledge about Sanskrit at epistemic cost, and it was a Colonial “renaissance” which masked control. Their approach was marked by a philological, administrative, and ideological control. Philologically, the European frameworks that were used to categorize, translate, and produce knowledge favoured certain texts and marginalized the rest. Administratively, the works of translation, the research involved in it, and the production of a knowledge system aided the governance by giving access to the history and culture of the communities. Ideologically, the translations became a tool to reinforce colonial hegemony by creating a narrative of the colonizer’s participation in the revival of the lost texts. The claims, assertions, and interventions by postcolonial scholars such as Radha Ballabh Tripathi, Sreenath V.S., and others can be viewed as a reclaim of agency to redefine Sanskrit’s history. It compels one to rethink Sanskrit and gives a direction in which Sanskrit’s legacy can be reshaped and contested.

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