Guest Editorial

While composing *Kubalayaswa Carita* in Prakrit, Biswanath Kaviraj, the eminent poet and aesthetician in the court of fourteenth-century Odia king Gajapati Narasimha Dev IV, calls himself 'Astadasa-bhasa-barabilasini-bhujanga', that is 'a philanderer who cohabits with eighteen prostitutes like a serpent entering several holes'[1]. 'Prostitutes' here denotes the various languages with which the poet-aesthetician is capable of negotiating. This characterization is a left-handed compliment to his multilingualism and dexterity in composing verse-narratives in several languages. In fact, before composing the above-mentioned work in Prakrit, Kaviraj had fully established himself as an influential poet and aesthetician in Sanskrit. This flaunting of multilingualism, especially by an accomplished Sanskrit poet, must have sounded unusual to his contemporaries. It was not the norm in the Odisha of those times for court poets to write poetry in languages other than Sanskrit.

Language use reflected caste and class not only in Odisha but more or less in all of India in ancient and medieval times[2]. Although the society was multilingual through and through, the elite class of Brahmins used Sanskrit, the so-called "deba bhasa" (the language of the Gods), in intellectual, creative and aesthetic discourses. Jainism's use of Prakrit and Buddhism's use of Pali to disseminate their respective religious ideologies could not usurp the position of Sanskrit. Some of the Buddhist philosophers, such as Asvaghosa, who like Kaviraj were Sanskrit scholars, wrote in languages other than Sanskrit, but in order for their work to receive intellectual and aesthetic legitimacy approval had to come from the Sanskrit scholars, who largely monopolized power/knowledge.

This hierarchy was sustained for a long period of time against the obviously multilingual nature of Indian society. Both scholars and the common people used several spoken languages (access to Sanskrit, however, was denied to the latter) and a few had already developed literary languages apart from Sanskrit, such as Prakrit, Pali and Paishachi. Indeed, Prakrit had a fully codified

grammar by the time Kaviraj was writing. A facility in multiple languages was useful in trade, in missionary activities and in maintaining diplomatic relations with various principalities. Multilingualism was almost a necessary part of the daily life of the common folk. They had to negotiate with several languages through acts of translation, so much so that G.N. Devy calls the Indian consciousness, although in a different context, a "translating consciousness".[3]

This translating consciousness was in many ways necessary for survival in a multilingual society like India. The multilingual nature of the society and widespread translational activity, however, did not mean there existed an ideal republic of languages in which one language met another out of pure choice and desire, uncontaminated by equations of power and ideological interpellation. As was indicated earlier, for a long period of time Sanskrit dominated power/knowledge. This was possible because of the dominance in the secular and sacred domains of the Brahminical caste, whose members were conversant with the language. Since the nature of a hegemonic structure is to replicate itself, the Brahminical supremacy was maintained both by ideological and coercive apparatuses of the states during various periods. In this context, the emergence of Prakrit and Pali as alternative discourses of power/knowledge can be seen as self-assertion by competing castes in the social spectrum. Prakrit consolidated itself around the religious ideology of Jainism, while Pali did so around Buddhism, both of which challenged Brahminical orthodoxy. Although language loyalties did not incite violence to the extent witnessed in medieval Europe, an asymmetrical relationship governed Indian multilingualism and translatory practices. While access to certain languages was the privilege of the elites, translatory practices constituted challenges to hegemonic structures. Often, translation was a tool in the democratization of the episteme.[4]

From the above discussion, it should be clear that multilingualism and translatory practice have been a contested territory in which power and ideological equations governing caste,

ethnic, religious and political relationships have played a great part. But what baffles the contemporary historians of translation studies in India is that, despite the fact that relationships between languages have been a crucial social fact, there is an absolute dearth of theoretical reflections upon translatory practices in the Indian episteme. Since Sanskrit was a dominant language for quite some time it would be natural to expect that Sanskrit should have developed some theory and methodology of translation. But for several reasons[5] Sanskrit fell short of such an expectation. At least two reasons should be elaborated here. The first relates to the concept of 'untranslatability' and the second to the perception of translation as a subsidiary activity. Aestheticians like Rajasekhara – the Sanskrit aesthetician who was the most competent to develop a theory of translation – rigidly subscribed to the view that languages are culture-specific and themes and emotions that can be expressed in one language could not be replicated in another. His concept of 'harana' echoes the western notion of translation as 'betrayal' or 'plagiarism', and has a pejorative connotation. In fact, the Sanskrit term for translation – 'anubada', which means the reiteration of what is already known, accords a subsidiary importance to translation activity. Right from the second century C.E. Kumarujiva, the first translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese seems to have shaped the attitude that dominated the entire Indian episteme:

> …translation is just like chewing food that is to be fed to others. If one cannot chew the food oneself, one has to be given food that has been already chewed. Such food however is bound to be poorer in taste and flavour than the original.[6]

Clearly, both of these reasons are a product of the cultural elitism that was the hallmark of the dominant thinking of these times. Thus, although translational activity was rampant, there was hardly any endotropic translation into Sanskrit.[7] Translations were either done by outsiders, who took an interest in Indian culture and tried to appropriate knowledge that was available in Sanskrit, or by religious missionaries or tradesmen, who used it to disseminate religious ideas or for business purposes.[8]

During the Bhakti period in medieval India, when the saint-poets used vernaculars to bridge the gap between religious and spiritual texts and the common folk, many of them were subjected to various forms of violence, such as verbal disparagement and banishment from the elite community of intellectuals. These saint-poets took upon themselves the task of translating – often freely without a concern for verisimilitude, which was not the norm at that time – many poetic-religious texts into the local languages of the common people. Many vernacular literatures of India owe their origins to these translatory acts during the medieval period. These translations were reflections not only of the religious-aesthetic aspirations of certain sections of the society, but also expressions of caste, regional and other markers that consolidated group identities.

The rise of vernacular literatures effectively ended the dominance of Sanskrit in the discourses of power/knowledge. The vernacular literatures, in due course of time, developed their own grammars, dictionaries and aesthetic principles – sometimes closely following in the footsteps of Sanskrit and at other times charting out their own independent existence – but like Sanskrit, they remained absolutely unselfconscious about acts of translation and the dynamics of a multilingual society.

Such self-consciousness can be discerned only in the colonial and missionary translation activity in the 19th century.[9] Taming Indian multilingualism was a practical necessity for the missionaries and colonists. Translation, which had proliferated in the fertile ground of multilingualism, ironically was used to propagate the monocultural ideology of a colonial power structure in alliance with a proselytizing religion.

It is true that the colonialist/missionary agenda did not succeed completely. One fallout of that enterprise, however, was that iconic translations became a norm and fidelity to the source text, a principal value in translatory projects. Moreover, because of the colonial/missionary intervention the language-based discourses expanded their base from mere caste-loyalties into broader regional,

ethnic and more sophisticated identity formations.[10] More importantly, the self-consciousness regarding translation activity, which was hitherto absent in the Indian episteme, began to be registered.

The translational praxis of the Christian missionaries and the British colonialists converged in their hegemonic agenda[11]. Consequently, the elaborate theoretical framework of translation was imported from the so-called centre of knowledge, i.e. the west, and was imposed on the supposedly blank space of the Indian colonies. Predictably, such a theory was both ignorant of the literary and cultural history of India and lacked empathy for the task of comprehending the phenomena that the theories sought to map out. Although colonial forms of knowledge were inadequate in their ability to assess the entire range of translational history and the dynamics of language relationships in India, they can be credited with generating self-consciousness about translational activity.

One must hasten to add that such self-consciousness has not so far been able to provide a comprehensive theory of translation that is capable of historicizing, analyzing and providing suitable models for practice. Moreover, as can be felt from the above brief overview of translation practice in India, translation studies can be employed in order to construct an alternative historiography of a culture. Since translations are ideological enterprises, a set of translations could profitably be studied in order to unearth the ideological and power equations underpinning the culture of their origin. Tentative steps in these two directions – theorizing translation activity and analyzing the sociology of translation in India – have been taken of late. The international conference on 'Translation and Multilingualism" organized March 6-7, 2009, at the Department of English, BHU, in collaboration with CIIL, Mysore and Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi was a humble step in that direction. It was deliberately organized at an international level, so as to welcome theoretical inputs from experts in the field and test

them against Indian background. Such an exercise, it was presumed, would help the process of theory-building in India. The essays that follow were selected from among more than one hundred presentations at the conference. Vincent Rafael's previously published essay has been included because it resonates well with the theme of the volume.

Finally, this volume does not claim to answer all the questions regarding translation historiography or to provide a theory that can explain the politics of language in a multilingual society. The only hope is that the essays will sensitize the readers to the politics of language in India and elsewhere and to the role of translation in multilingual societies like India. It is also hoped that the essays, in addition to providing intellectual and socio-historical insights, will encourage a similar mapping out of translational territory in other cultural settings and contribute to the common pursuit of building an indigenous theory of translation.

Before concluding I would like to thank everyone who was associated with the Conference and putting together this volume including the paper presenters at the Conference and contributors to this volume. I especially remember with gratitude the support of Prof. Giridhar of CIIL, Mysore, my friend and former colleague Dr. Sanjay Kumar of the Department of English, BHU in organizing the Conference and Mr. Durbadal Bhattacharjee, Research Scholar at BHU and my co-editor Prof. Paul St-Pierre, former Professor of Translation Studies, Montreal University, Canada for putting together this special issue. I would also like to thank Prof. Vicente Rafael and Duke University Press for granting permission to include the essay by the author in this volume.

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Notes

1. Sudarshan Acharya, *Odia Kavya Kaushala* (Cuttack: Friends Publishers, 1983, 2002), 21

2. for the detailed analysis of the language relationships and translation scenario in ancient and medieval India see two essays by Debendra Dash and Diptiranjan Pattanaik, i.e. "Translation and Social Praxis in Ancient & Medieval india" in *In Translation* eds. Paul St. Pierre & Prafulla C. Kar.(Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007) and "Translating Medieval Orissa" in *Translation Today* vol.3, Nos. 1& 2, 2006(Mysore; CIIL)

3. G.N. Devy*, In Another Tongue: Essays on Indian Literature in English.* (Bangalore: Macmillan, India, 1993), 135.

4. For an elaborate analysis of such a phenomenon, at least in case of Odia language, see Dipti R. Pattanaik, "The power of Translation" in *Changing the Terms* eds. Sherry Simon & Paul St. Pierre (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2000).

5. See for more details Dash & Pattanaik "Translation and Social Praxis in Ancient and Medieval India" in *In Translation* eds. Paul St. Pierre & Prafulla C.Kar (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007)

6. Cited in Edward L. Keenan, "Some Logical Problems in Translation" in *Meaning and Translation* eds.F. Guenthner and M. Guenthner-Reutter (London: Duckworth, 1978) 157.

7. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*. (London: Penguin Books, 2005) 28-30

8. The case of Somadeva's *Kathasaritasagara* may be cited as one of the few exceptions. Somadeva rendered Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* in original Paisachi into Sanskrit.

9. For greater details on missionary translation activity see Debendra K.Dash & Dipti R. Pattanaik "Missionary Position: The Irony of Translational Activism in Colonial Orissa", *TTR* Vol.XVIII no.2.(Montreal: McGill University, 2005)

10. ibid.

11. Although both the colonialist and missionary translation practices were hegemonic in their character there were several differences between them in terms of their ideology and modus operandi. Proselytization was the principal aim of the missionary translations. The western missionaries were mainly involved in that task. The modus operandi has more or less been discussed in great detail in the essay "Missionary Position…." cited above. However, the colonialist translation practice was much more insidious. Its mode of operation has varied along the changes in political situation encountered by the colonial power centers. Moreover, the co-opted natives, more than the members of the western ruling class, were participants in such a process. No significant account of the character of the colonial translation practice in India is available at present.