

Beyond Translation: Retelling and Literary History

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Abstract

“Translation” as a literary term, originated in a specific European context. However, the term has been generalised to such an extent that it is often used to read texts across languages and cultures. While this process can help in identifying and establishing links between languages and cultures, acknowledging the theoretical tools provided within the concerned literary tradition could provide better insights into the literary history of the tradition, and reception of a text. To the latter end, this paper proposes to go beyond the concept of translation, and focus on the Sanskrit concept of anuvada or “retelling” (and its later equivalent, “rewriting”), to show how this concept of “retelling” can contribute to a better understanding of literary history, especially in a country like India, where several linguistic traditions are organically connected. I shall primarily rely on The Mahabharata to substantiate my argument.

Keywords: Retelling, Translation, Literary history, Anuvada, The Mahabharata.

Introduction

Colonial intervention impacted the Indians’ (and subsequently, the non-Indians’) understandings of pre-colonial history and texts in major ways. In their eagerness to communicate with their colonial masters, the colonisers and the colonised people often ended up creating equivalents between the two cultures, sometimes at the cost of compromising with their own uniqueness. That translation is such a site of colonial contact and conflict, has been explained by scholars (Lefevere 1988; Niranjana 1990 & 1992; Venuti 1995). Use of the European notion of translation in reading Indian texts can cause a distorted understanding of the textual practices of this land. Ancient

and medieval India had its own notions of transmission of texts, which may not be equal to the European notion of translation, but nonetheless, are crucial to comprehend the literary practices and productions of those times. This paper posits that a literary tradition can be comprehended fully only when it is read based on its own terms, and not on “equivalents” borrowed from another literary tradition. More specifically, I argue that taking into account the various ways in which texts – oral or written – were transmitted in ancient and medieval India, is crucial to understand the literary history of India. In order to explain this point, I shall focus on the Sanskrit concept of retelling or *anuvada*, and to substantiate my argument I have chosen one of the longest surviving texts – *The Mahabharata* – that would enable me to look at its various retellings across time and languages.

In his essay “Translation and Literary History”, Ganesh Devy pointed out, “No critic has taken any well-defined position about the exact placement of translations in literary history.” (Devy 1998: 183). In the long history of translation in West Europe, the debate between free and literal translation- readability versus fidelity- has played a significant role, often leaning towards readability (Venuti, 1995). That is to say, the target language has usually played a dominant role in translation. Therefore, as Devy pointed out, it is no surprise that, “the developments concerning the interdependence between meaning and structure in the field of linguistics have been based on monolingual data and situations” (183). In the colonial context, steeped in colonial power politics, a different dimension was added to this debate on “fidelity” and “readability”. This power politics, which came to the forefront much later with the introduction of Translation Studies, permeated into the Indian consciousness far earlier, prompting inquiries – by European as well as Indian scholars – about the “authenticity” of a text, and/or its translation. While debates around “authenticity” can be extremely useful in dating a text, identifying authors, and many other respects, they also tend to establish a hierarchy by putting the “authentic” version at the centre, and marginalising the rest in much the same way as translation in a colonial context prioritises the target text/language. It is this hierarchy that this paper aims to challenge by

focusing on the concept of retelling or rewriting, as only after breaking through this hierarchy, a journey towards literary history could begin.

Acknowledging the difficulties of applying the West European concept of translation to read Indian texts, A. K. Ramanujan (2004) proposed to read the “translation-relations between texts” in terms of iconic, indexical and symbolic translations. This method, though substantially widened the scope of the West European idea of translation, perceived the relations between texts as translation. My primary inquiry would be to understand the ways of transmission of texts in ancient India, which may or may not conform to the idea of West European translation. I argue that only acknowledging these various methods of transmission of texts – even methods that do not conform to the broader understanding of the West European notion of translation – can provide a comprehensive understanding of the literary history of the land that is now known as India.

To that end, I have divided the paper into three sections. The first section explores certain theoretical ideas of transmission of texts in the Sanskrit literary tradition to highlight that translation is not the only way of transmission of texts. The second section focuses on some of the ways of transmission as depicted within the narrative structure of the *Mahabharata*, to underscore how the various ways of transmission were integral to the narrative of a text. The third section concentrates on some retellings of *The Mahabharata* in the regional traditions of India, particularly the Bangla (Bengali) literary tradition, to explore the politics of transmission, and its link to the form and content of texts, which, if taken into account, can help in comprehending the literary history of India.

Transmission

In contemporary India, a very popular synonym for “translation” in many languages (like Bangla, Hindi, Assamese, Marathi etc.) is *anuvada*. The word *anuvada* is a Sanskrit term, and the phenomenon of using it as a synonym of the English word “translation” began with India’s exposure to the English language and culture. Gradually, the word lost its Sanskrit connotation where it was used primarily to refer to the idea of retelling. The *Sanskrit* word *anuvada*

derived from combining the root “*vad*” (to speak) with the prefix “*anu*”, thus denoting the idea of speaking after or repeating. In the field of Sanskrit grammar, the earliest mention of the term was perhaps by Panini. In one of the sutras in his *Astadhyayi*, Panini said, “*anuvāde caraṇanām*” (2.4.3), where, according to commentators (Panini 1894), *anuvada* stood for repeating a statement or information, as opposed to saying it for the first time. In other words, re-telling. It was also in this sense that the word *anuvada* was used in *Dhvanyaloka* and *Sahityadarpanah*. In this sense, the large corpus of *bhasya*, *varṭika*, *tika* and other forms of commentaries available in Sanskrit were nothing but *anuvada*. In fact, based on the definition provided in the *Natyasastra*, *nataka* would also fall under the purview of *anuvada*, because they recount well-known stories of well-known protagonists: “*prakhyātavastuviṣayam prakhyātodattanāyakam caiva*” (Bharata 1996: 20). Various literary traditions of India have a substantial corpus of *nataka* based on the stories of the *Mahabharata*. In fact, texts like *Kiratarjuniya* (by Bharavi), *Shishupalvadha* (by Magha), *Arjuncarita* (by Anandavardhana) and many others can also be read as retellings.

Interestingly, major Sanskrit theoreticians did not discuss much about *anuvada* as a literary term¹, however, the concept of retelling or rewriting was evidently very significant in Sanskrit literary theory. Phukan (2008) draws attention to the plurality of translation practices in pre-colonial India. Exploring some aspects of this plurality could help in establishing the connection between forms of retelling and literary history. Rajshekhara’s *Kavyamimansa* (c. 880-920 AD) dedicated a complete chapter to *arthaharanam* or appropriation of meaning. The Sanskrit word “*āharaṇam*” is derived from the root “*hṛ*” that meant to gather something from outside. Thus, *arthaharanam* referred to the process of appropriation of meaning, or, the process of meaning making, which worked essentially in a linear manner of succession, and could not happen in isolation – a process that was explored in Europe much later, by the

¹ The reason might be that the term, like many other words, had multiple connotations. *The Mahabharata*, for instance, used the word “*anuvada*” in a very different sense. In “*Santiparva*”, Visma’s use of the word “*anuvada*” is usually interpreted to mean blame.

structuralists and post-structuralists. A poet, according to Rajshekhara, constructed meaning in relation to existing works. There were multiple ways of drawing upon these existing works, and one of these ways was *natanepathyam*, which Rajshekhara defined as changing the language of one text into another. This is what is largely understood as “inter-lingual translation” (Jakobson 1959) today. As an example of *natanepathyam*, Rajshekhara cited a Prakrita verse and then changed the language to Sanskrit. However, the Sanskrit verse he quoted was not an exact translation of the Prakrita verse. The former retained the sense of the latter but also elaborated it somewhat. This kind of retelling existed side by side with other kinds, such as, *cchandovinimayam* where the metre of a verse was changed into another, but the meaning remained the same; *tailavindu* where the idea expressed in one verse/work was amplified by another poet in another work; *khandam* where ideas expressed by other poets were summarised by a later poet; *hetuvyatayaya* where a poet used the ideas of another poet, but in a context different from its earlier usage; *samputa* where two verses of a poet were combined into one by another poet, etc. Thus, Rajshekhara acknowledged the various ways in which a literary work could be linked to its previous works.

It should be noted here that, unlike the European notion of translation, this process of appropriation of meaning did not create any hierarchy between the works. Therefore, the questions of “authenticity” and “fidelity” were never given much importance in ancient or medieval India. It was significant that Sanskrit used a single word, *kavi*, to refer to the creators of various kinds of art forms and literary genres.² There were various types of *kavi* – the great ones, the better ones, the good ones, and of course, the bad ones – nevertheless, Sanskrit neither did create a hierarchy between the “author” and the “translator”, nor between an “original” text and a “translation”. Rajshekhara mentioned three major types of *kavi*,

² That is why, the English word “poet” does not really capture the meaning of the word “kavi” which is closer to the Greek idea of “poet” (ποιητής). The word “kavi” derived from the root “ku”, and usually stood for a person who was wise, enlightened, sensible, prudent, skilful, seer. The Greek word “poetes” derived from the root “poe” means “to make”. In this sense, a poet was a maker, creator.

depending on their ways of *arthaharanam* or appropriation of meaning. A *kavi*, according to Rajshekhara, might acquire the idea, or seeds, of a work from other creators. Such a group of creators, Rajshekhara called *anyayoni*. However, at times, such sources might not be very specific, which made the creators *nihynutyoni*. Creators, who expressed their very own ideas in their own ways, were *ayoni*. Based on this broad division, Rajshekhara explained that there could be thirty-two different ways of appropriation of meaning. This tradition of connecting a text with other existing texts, from the same or another literary tradition, has existed in India for long, thus acknowledging the potentially never-ending chain of transmission of texts, and an organic connection between texts.

Placement of texts on a non-hierarchized plane, however, did not mean compromising with the quality. The question of the quality of a work was also deemed important, and therefore, the Sanskrit tradition focused on concepts of *kavipratibha* or the innate talent of the creator, as well as on the ideal reader/spectator, who was the *sahridaya*. Many Sanskrit theoreticians affirmed that only a *sahridaya* could be a great *kavi*. Thus, in the Sanskrit tradition, “author”, “critic” and “reader” were not hierarchical, separate entities, as found in the European tradition. Rather, in the Sanskrit tradition, only a good reader/critic could successfully transmit a received message, which made the idea of retelling or rewriting even more significant, as each text in this chain of transmission became equally important.

In fact, this idea of transmission of messages is very similar to the idea of literary transduction as explained much later by the Prague school. Literary transduction (Levy 2011) is different from the idea of translation, as unlike the latter, the former does not focus on a single “source text”. Instead, it acknowledges the multiplicity of received messages, and considers the interventions.

How exactly this is done, can be explained with the examples of the retellings/rewritings of *The Mahabharata*.

Narratives

As a text that was composed over a long period of time, the Mahabharata³ offered excellent insights into the politics of transmission of messages, both oral and written. The version of the Mahabharata which is regarded to be the most ancient is generally ascribed to Krisnadvaipayana Vyasa. The very first part of this version, the “Adiparva”, narrated that the sage Vyasa had taught the tale of the Mahabharata to his son Suka, and his four disciples: Vaisampayana, Paila, Jaimini and Sumantu. Each one of them narrated the story in their way. In other words, they retold the text in their ways. Out of these five versions, only the version of Vaisampayana was recited in the snake sacrifice performed by Janmejaya, in the presence of Vyasa, which later Souti recounted to Sounaka and other sages. This is the version that is now generally known as *The Mahabharata*.

The text can be extremely useful in problematising the notions of narration, recitation, retelling and authorship. The boxed narrative structure of this text became very clear right from the beginning, as various tales were unfolded by various narrators. Primarily, these narrators seemed to function in an oral culture where texts/messages were circulated by word of mouth. This process of circulation, therefore, was inextricably connected to the limitations of individual memory and creativity. The point can be explained with the example of the story of Utanka. Among the innumerable stories of the Mahabharata, there are a few stories that have been narrated more than once within the text, and the story of Utanka is one of them. The story first appears in the first chapter, the “Adiparva”, where Souti is the narrator; and again, in the “Asvamedhaparva”, where Vaisampayana is the narrator. Although it is evident that these are the same story, there are certain discrepancies between the two retellings. The version of Souti, which is longer than the version of Vaisampayana, describes Utanka as the disciple of Veda, the wife of Veda is not named, and the character of their daughter does not

³ Henceforth, the *Mahabharata* (in italics) will be used to refer to a specific text ascribed to/authored by someone, whereas the Mahabharata (non-italicised) will be used to refer to the various stories of the Mahabharata.

exist. The version of Vaisampayana, however, mentions that Utanka's guru is Gautama, his wife is Ahalya, and Utanka marries their daughter. From the two versions, it is possible to create a basic structure of the story:

- At the end of his education (Bramhacharyasrama), Utanka wanted to repay his debts to his guru, a tradition known as *gurudaksina*.
- On Utanka's insistence, his guru sent him to his wife, to ask her if she wanted anything, and she asked Utanka to bring her a very specific, and apparently very precious, pair of earrings. In other words, she sent him in search of treasure.
- Utanka found the desired pair of earrings, but while returning, the earrings were stolen.
- Utanka went to retrieve the lost earrings and after overcoming a series of obstacles, he, finally with the aid of Indra and Agni, found the earrings in the Nagloka. Thus, he paid his *gurudaksina*.

After this, the version in the “Adiparva” continued to narrate how Utanka went to Janmejaya and pressed him to perform the snake sacrifice, in order to avenge Taksaka, the king of the Nagloka, thus connecting the story of Utanka to the saga of the dynasty of Bharata. In the other version, however, it was Janmejaya who asked Vaisampayana about Utanka during the snake sacrifice, thus establishing that he had no connection to Utanaka at all. Based on the European understanding of plot, such inconsistency would surely be regarded as a major fault, but evidently, it did not matter to the various creators/orators of the Mahabharata, who told the story again and again. The creators/orators of the Mahabharata treated both these versions as valid and neither version was tagged to any particular “owner” or authority figure. That was because, in this idea of retelling/rewriting, facts and information had little value. Without entering into a debate on “authenticity”, it could be said that both versions were representations of society, and they both depicted how various bards concentrated on various kinds of representations. It was this *itihasa* – and not the European “History” – that the

Mahabharata narrated, and the so-called inconsistencies were integral to this scheme of *itihasa*, just like real life.

Like *anuvada*, *itihasa* was another concept that eventually became synonymous with the European idea of “History”. However, unlike “History”, *itihasa* did not set much store on hardcore, verifiable facts. The concept of *itihasa* took into account the factors which might have impacted the process of narration, and the limitation of individual memory was one of those factors. In the “Asvamedhaparva”, or the section on horse-sacrifice, when Arjuna confessed to Krishna about forgetting the precious advices Krishna had given him prior to the war of Kuruksetra, and requested Krishna to repeat those once again, Krishna clearly told Arjuna that he could not possibly “repeat” exactly what he had told Arjuna earlier. Instead, he told Arjuna certain stories, thereby implying that these stories could impart knowledge similar to the advices given earlier. The name of this section was significant, “Anugita parvadyay”, a sequel to, or a shortened version of the “Bhagavadgita parvadyay”, or the section that contained the advices known as the Bhagavadgita. The message was clear: in an oral culture, when a person recounted something s/he/they had already said before, the later narration was bound to be different from the former version, and the degree of this difference would depend on several factors. Only a written culture could produce copies of one version, and to produce “copies”, one did not require *kavipratibha* or innate poetic talent.⁴

In fact, as a text developed over centuries, the Mahabharata also incorporated the tassel between the oral and the written culture. There was a popular legend that credited the god Ganesa as the scripter of the *Mahabharata* (Satchidanandan 2009). According to this legend, when Vyasa was looking for a scripter to write down his verses, Bramha suggested Ganesa for the job. Ganesa agreed to do it, but on condition that once he had begun writing, his pen would never pause for a moment, thus challenging the very nature of extempore oral compositions. Vyasa accepted Ganesa’s condition, given that Ganesa would not write down anything without

⁴ Significantly, while the didactic text of Bhagavatgita became part of the scriptures, Anugita was left out, showing that stories have a lesser degree of verisimilitude.

understanding it first. This term set by Vyasa implicitly drew attention to the power play between oral and written compositions, hinting that it was possible for someone to write down something without really understanding it. Or, produce mere copies. However, *composition* of a text, oral or written, was essentially a creative act.

Poetic talent or *kavipratibha* therefore, was extremely important, as was *each text* in a chain of transmission of messages. To highlight the latter point is extremely important, as many of the famous Indologists have ignored it completely. Maurice Winternitz, for example, eschews the Mahabharata, claiming it to be a total “nonsense”, that which neither has any kind of art, nor consistency. In his famous multivolume work, *A History of Indian Literature*, published between 1905 and 1922, he observed:

The Mahabharata as a whole is a literary nonsense. Never has an artist’s hand tried – and it would have been also really impossible – to unite the conflicting elements to a unitary poem. Only theologians and commentators without poetic leanings and unskilled copyists have at last welded together into a disorderly mass the actually non-combinable parts coming down from different centuries (Winternitz 1981: 305).

In his anxiety to read – or failing to read – *the Mahabharata* as “a unitary poem”, Winternitz never stopped to consider its various retellings and rewritings. Even though, in the third volume of his book (Winternitz 1985), he discussed *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Vikramorvasiyam* and several other retellings of the Mahabharata, he read all these as “unitary” and isolated, texts, and failed to make the connection between these texts, which was crucial to understand the historiography of India.

Retelling and Literary History

As mentioned earlier, Vyasa taught his creation to five of his disciples, including his son. Apart from the version of Vaisampayana, the other version that has survived, although partially (only the “Asvamedhaparva”) is that of Jaimini. Known as the *Jaimini Asvamedha*, this version of the “Asvamedhaparva” is

quite different from, and longer than, that of the Vaisampayana version. The Jaimini version, composed around 2-4 c. BC, contains many tales which are not found in the Vaisampayana version, and omits many tales present in the Vaisampayana version. Many scholars (Bhattacharya 2018; Koskikallio 1992; Hazra 1955) believe that Jaimini composed other parts of the Mahabharata as well.

To explain why the concept of retelling/rewriting is vital to the understanding of Indian literary history, I shall discuss certain aspects of the dissemination of the *Jaimini Asvamedha*, not only in Sanskrit, but also in the regional Bangla tradition. Actually, taking into account the organic connections between various literary traditions of India – the “courtly”, the “popular”, the “regional”, and all other types – is elementary to gain any idea of the literary history of this land, and failing to make this connection could result in faulty conclusions.

Take for example, the case of J. Duncan Derrett, a prominent Indologist, who wrote about his “discovery” of the *Jaimini Asvamedha*:

...by accident I stumbled upon the *Jaimini-Asvamedha*, an anonymous Hindu work, a work ignored or very slightly handled by writers on Sanskrit literature (Winternitz is the honourable exception), a Cinderella amongst Sanskrit compositions. Enquiries in India brought no response, even from scholars who might have been expected to be knowledgeable about the book (Derrett 1970: 19).

Rushing to identify Christian “influences” in “oriental” texts, Derrett did not realise that *Jaimini Asvamedha* had been one of the most popular versions of the Mahabharata, and the extent of that popularity could be gauged by glimpsing into a few other literary traditions. Almost four hundred years before Derrett, in the year 1586, the Mughal emperor, Akbar, ordered to prepare an abbreviated and illustrated version of this text in Persian and many researchers believe that there was more than one version of this Persian text (Rice 2010). Unfortunately, not much is known about the details of this rewriting, as the manuscript is not quite accessible (Rice 2010).

However, it is certain that during the medieval period, the text of Jaimini was very much a part of the dominant culture.

In fact, the version of Jaimini was very popular in Bengal⁵, even before *Razmnama*, the Persian rewriting ordered by Akbar. There were several retellings/ rewritings of the *Mahabharata* in Bangla, and despite the difficulty of identifying the exact creator/s and their dates, these versions could provide interesting insights into the idea of retelling. Debnath Bandyopadhyay explained that some of these retellings were meant for common people, for their education and entertainment, while some versions were composed in the court, by the order of the local ruler. Some scholars believe that one of the earliest retellings of the *Mahabharata* in Bangla was by a poet named Sanjay, dated around the early 14th century (Sanjay 1969).⁶ Sanjay's retelling of the *Mahabharata* was meant for common people. He, like many other poets who composed their poems for common people, narrated almost the entire *Mahabharata* in an abbreviated form.

However, Sanjay did not use any particular version as his "source text". Munindrakumar Ghosh, who published a meticulously edited version of Sanjay's text in 1969, explained that the published version was based on several manuscripts of various styles and periods, presuming that there were various creators involved in the making of the text. This version was also particularly significant, because here was found – perhaps for the first time – an attempt to unify the scattered tales of the Mahabharata. Sanjay's text began with Janmejaya, who appeared to be arrogant, and fell ill. To cure his illness, Vyasa advised him to listen to the entire Mahabharata, which Vaisampayana then narrated to Janmejaya. Towards the end, after the Pandavas had left the earth (*svargarohana*), the story circled back to Janmejaya, whose illness was cured by then. Besides drawing attention to the healing power of narrative, this work established a kind of linearity in the spiral narrative of Vaisampayana.

⁵ Here, the reference is to the undivided, pre-colonial Bengal.

⁶ Readers might remember Sanjay, the bard of the Mahabharata, who narrated the Kuruksetra war to the king Dhritarastra. Due to this reason, many scholars believe this to be a pen name (Sen 1975).

More interestingly, although Sanjay chose Vaisampayana as his narrator, the narrative that followed, was not exactly the version of Vaisampayana. Here I am going to focus on two specific examples to elaborate on why Sanjay's text cannot be read as a translation of the Vaisampayana version. Firstly, in Sanjay's text, the story of Sakuntala and Dusyanta did not follow that of Vaisampayana. Sanjay followed the *nataka* of Kalidasa, *Abhijñanasakuntalam*. Secondly, Sanjay's "Asvamedhaparva" was borrowed from the version of Jaimini, although Sanjay kept Vaisampayana as the narrator. In order to understand such amalgamations, it was important to read this text as a retelling, where the poet was not required to be "faithful" to any particular text/author.

Actually, many Indian texts defy the notion of a single creator of one particular literary work. The most well-known version of the Mahabharata in Bangla is ascribed to Kashiram Das, however, the text that goes in the name of Kashiram nowadays, is believed to be a compilation of the works of several poets. Bandyopadhyay (1993) has identified at least five poets – Shibram Ghosh, Nityananda Ghosh, Krisananda Basu, Dwija Raghunath, and Dwaipayan Das—whose works have become parts of the text ascribed to Kashiram. On the one hand, it reflects the popularity of Kashiram, but on the other hand, it also draws attention to another interesting phenomenon which links texts together.

As I mentioned earlier, some poets had composed the entire story of the Mahabharata in an abbreviated form. There was, however, another significant group of poets who had narrated only one or two chapters of the Mahabharata and not the entire story. Ghosh (1969) believed that many of these oral compositions were meant to be performed, during public occasions or in the court. The entire story of the Mahabharata, even in an abbreviated form, was too extensive to fit into one single performance in a day. Hence, many poets decided to narrate one particular chapter of the Mahabharata to be performed on one particular occasion. Ghosh (1969) explained that generally "Viratparva" was recited during funerals, while landlords and rulers often preferred "Sabhaparva" on several occasions. Such conventions gave rise to several seemingly incomplete versions of the Mahabharata in Bangla, some of which, at some point in time,

might have been consolidated into a single compilation.⁷ This might have been the case with the text of Kashiram Das. This explanation could also account for the multiple source texts used in these narratives.

However, not all incomplete versions became parts of larger compilations. Two of the very famous versions of the Mahabharata in Bangla were by Kabindra Parameswar and Srikar Nandi. They were both court poets of two local rulers, Paragal Khan and Cchuti Khan, (c.16th century AD) respectively.⁸ Perhaps the rulers wanted a concise version of the Mahabharata, which could be performed at the court in a single session, and therefore, they ordered compositions of abbreviated versions, and not the entire Mahabharata. That could be the reason why Kabindra Parameswar concentrated on the story of the Pandavas, omitting most of the tales which were not linked directly to the saga of the Pandavas, and long descriptions of war, philosophical discourses, etc. However, a total lack of war probably did not suit the taste of all rulers. Srikar Nandi, therefore, included war, but a war that could be narrated concisely in a session of the court and would not create an unsettling and morbid effect like the Kuruksetra war. This resulted in the selection of the “Asvamedhparva” not of Vaisampayana, but of Jaimini, where there were wars, and other stories which would interest a courtly audience.

Such crucial factors which shape the creation, dissemination and reception of texts, along with the acts of selection, elimination and addition, can surface only if these texts are read as retellings/rewritings; any attempt to read these texts as “unfaithful translations” without considering the contextual factors would be pointless. For instance, as far as the Bangla versions are concerned, Vaisnavism evidently plays an important role. Vaisnava literature, especially lyric poems, began to flourish in Bengal with Jaydev’s *Gitagovindam* (c.12th century AD), which reached its peak during

⁷ Of course, the tropical climate of Bengal has never been suitable for preserving manuscripts. Therefore, the possibility that many manuscripts may have been destroyed or lost cannot be ruled out.

⁸ The fact that rulers of different religious orientations patronised the composition of the *Mahabharata*, called attention to the secular nature of these literary texts.

the time of Caitanya (1486-1534). These poems primarily sang the glory of Krishna; and the Mahabharata, already having Krishna as a chief protagonist, was an obvious choice to eulogise Krishna. Interestingly, however, in Vaisampayana's text, Krishna, except a few brief instances, mostly appeared to be human. An extremely wise, learned, intelligent, strategic human; but still a human, who could be befriended, accused, cursed, and finally, killed by an ordinary hunter. He influenced the outcome of many wars with his careful manipulations and ministrations, but hardly fought one. In the medieval Bangla retellings, especially in Kashiram's text, gradually, this humane Krishna was transformed into an omnipotent, omnipresent, unquestionable god. Kashiram's focus on "harinam" or chanting the name of Krishna inevitably draws attention to Chaitanya who popularised "harinam" in Bengal:

"Sarvasastra bija harinam dviaksara
Adi anta nahi jar, vede agocar." (Bandyopadhyay 1993: 1206).

Kashiram's text revealed that the poet was also conscious about the generic changes he effected, how he transformed a Sanskrit kavya into a "panchali", primarily an oral genre, in a regional language. He might have had doubts as to whether his audience would accept the illustrious story of the Mahabharata told in such an everyday metre and genre. He, therefore, warned his audience not to disregard it just because of its genre, "pancali boliya mone na koriho hela" (Bandyopadhyay 1993: 1206).

The gradual transformation of the retellings could be identified in various ways. To explain my point, here I shall focus on the Vandana section of some of these retellings to demonstrate how the context of each retelling differed from the others, and how the context influenced the content. Traditionally, most ancient and mediaeval Indian texts began with a Vandana, or worship of a particular god/s, goddess/es, or the Supreme Being. The Vaisampayana version of the Mahabharata, for example, began with a simple shloka, saying that Narayana, that was another name of Krishna, Nara, Narottam, and the goddess Saraswati must be worshipped before any recital of the Mahabharata:

Narayanam namaskritya narancaiva narottamam
Devim sarasvatim caiva tato jayamudirayet (1929: 1).

The Jaimini version also uses this shloka at the beginning, but after Saraswati, it adds the name of Vyasa, thus acknowledging Vyasa as Jaimini's guru and the original creator of the text:

Narayanam namaskritya narancaiva narottamam
Devim sarasvatim caiva vyasam tato jayamudirayet (Jaimini Manuscript)

Sanjay borrowed the tale of Sakuntala and Dusyanta from Kalidasa, and the "Asvamedhaparva" from Jaimini, but in the Vandana he did not mention any of them. Instead, he narrated the ten incarnations of Vishnu, and interestingly, this description matched Jaydev's (Mukhopadhyay 2000) description of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, which again drew attention to the impact of Vaishnavism. Srikar Nandi, unlike many other poets, acknowledged his debts to Jaimini:

Sunanta bharaṭa tobe ati puṇya katha
Mahamuni Jaimini kohilo saṃhita (Nandi 1905: 8).

Kashiram Das was probably a post-Caitanya poet, because his work clearly reflected his unquestionable devotion or *bhakti* to the lord Hari. His version opened with the opening shloka of Jaimini, including the name of Vyasa, although the name of Jaimini was not mentioned. Unlike the humane characters of the Vaisampayana version of the Mahabharata who were mostly portrayed in shades of grey, Kashiram's characters became rather simple, black and white. The very complicated philosophical questions of *dharma* and *adharma* that Vaisampayana raised and dealt with ease, drawing attention to the beauty as well as the complicity of human existence and its accountability were missing in Kashiram Das. With common people as their primary audience, Kashiram and the later poets mostly diluted the profundity of *dharma* and *adharma* into binary groups of "good" and "evil", easily defined by an omniscient god. This helped the common people to rely on a "good" omnipotent god, who would protect them against all "evil" forces. Thus, it was these various social, political, economic and religious factors which

shaped the retellings of the Mahabharata, and not just a poet's allegiance to any particular literary work.⁹

Conclusion: Beyond Translation

Reading the ancient and mediaeval retellings of the Mahabharata through the lens of “fidelity” then, would be difficult and misleading, because of the typical tendency of these poets to insert their own work within some famous work by some famous poet. Although it is generally possible for experts to identify such interpolations through their language, style, spelling, manuscript quality, and other factors; it is extremely difficult to identify the creators of the interpolated sections. Among the many retellings, perhaps only the famous compositions were scripted, sometimes by inept scriptors. Thus, to establish a version as “authentic” is extremely difficult, if not outright impossible, as many editors (Bandyopadhyay 1993; Basu 2008; Ghosh 1969) of these texts have pointed out again and again. Needless to add that the larger versions of the Mahabharata have more interpolations than the shorter versions.

Thus, the quest for an “authentic” and “unitary” version, that was aptly carried across to a “target text”, mostly leads to nowhere. As I have substantiated, by and large, attempts to identify a specific “source text” would be futile, thereby ruling out possibilities of reading the versions as “translations”, even in a broader sense. Instead, going beyond translation, the idea of retelling/ rewriting could help in reading all versions as organically connected and equally valid. This could facilitate a better understanding of the (heavily interrupted) chain of transmission, the context of reception, and thereby acknowledging a larger and more inclusive literary history.

⁹ This is the reason why the Mahabharata has been retold, again and again, by various marginalized groups/ communities, to express their own reality. For details, see (Devy 2022 & Hildebeitel 2009)

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