

Education and the Vernacular in 19th Century Bengal: Translation, Print, and Standardization

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Abstract

With the introduction of print modalities and the subsequent introduction of modern/western education systems, the questions of language, vernacular education, book production, and translations became important in 19th century Bengal. As the introduction of a new epistemological system in 19th century Bengal necessitated the production of books and translations, several western knowledge texts got translated into Bengali by the efforts of various individuals and institutions. These translations play a pivotal role in producing textbooks in Bengali and represent a site where the structure and vocabulary of the Bengali language got standardised and redefined through printed language and language of translations. This study tracks the translations produced by the collaboration of Fort William College and Serampore Missionary Press, Calcutta School Book Society and Vernacular Literature Society and argues that the translations produced by these institutions gave shape to a kind of Bengali language that represented a class and social hierarchy. This study argues that the translations produced by the aforementioned institutions and the printed textbooks paved a way for the upper-class urban elites to mould the Bengali language in their way (by excluding the colloquial register and language of the masses) to represent their ethos and class hierarchy and identity. This study argues that the translations produced by these institutions, in many ways, were the tools through which the various contesting views on the form and diction of the language of/print got articulated.

Keywords: Translation Studies, Cultural Studies, Print Cultures, Print History, History of Books, Colonial

Epistemology, Standardization through Translation, Translation as Knowledge Production, Translation and the Vernacular.

Introduction

The print culture along with the early educational institutions initiated a restructuring of the Bengali language and broadly the epistemology, which in turn, created new alignments and linkages and social identities sought through the language. Bernard Cohn in his book *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (1996) makes a similar argument in terms of the Indian languages in general and this could also be applicable to the emerging scenario in 19th century Bengal. The indigenous intelligentsia had an important role in shaping the language along the new lines for attaining and serving some imminent political situations. As the members of the aspiring section, they had their own interests in shaping the language in a certain way to exert their social hierarchy in the emerging socio-political scenario. While engaging with the various issues related to colonialism, translation, representation and vernacular in Translation Studies, scholars like Tejaswini Nirajnana (1992), Harish Trivedi (1993) Shivarama Padikkal (1993) and V. B. Tharakeshwar (2002) focused on the issues like asymmetrical power relationships in translation, the reception of English language and literature in the colony, questions of nationalism and colonialism, the politics of the advent of literary genres in the Indian languages and literatures and others. These studies argued that the translations in the colonies got employed by the colonizers to represent certain binary of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ identity to exert their dominance. The study by Vincent Rafel (1992), on the contrary, showed how vernacular translation was employed by the colonized to resist colonial dominance. The study by Chandrani Chatterjee (2010) uses the

framework of the debates surrounding the ‘Bengal Renaissance’ when she discusses the advent of literary modernity through the translation of literary genres into Bengali. The work by Sherry Simon (2013) opens up a new area related to space and translation where she dedicates a chapter on Calcutta to show how 19th century Calcutta as a renaissance city responded to translations.

However, the studies have not focused much on how the colonized made use of vernacular translations to configure certain questions of social class and identity within their native social structure. The site of vernacular translations might be an important archive for providing new perspectives to the existing knowledge in Translation Studies. The studies in this area mentioned above do not talk much about these issues from the perspective of print history although print and vernacular translations are the important sites through which various issues in the intersection of translation, print, and identity can be addressed. My study takes the question of print into account to see if the intersection of translation and print has something new to offer to the questions of identity and translation. The following sections illustrate how the spheres of education, printed language, and language of translation were intertwined and how the participation of the upper-class elites marked these spheres with a class hierarchy and social dominance. As the spheres of the printing press, printed language and translations were intertwined; the language of printed texts and the language of translations got influenced by each other. It can also be argued that the language of various translations determined the language of the printed texts and the printed language too, in turn, determined the pattern or type of language in translations. If translations were the tools, the printed texts were the modes through which social hierarchy and class identity imprinted the Bengali language in the first half of the 19th century.

Translations, Printed Textbooks and the Questions of Class

This section briefly discusses the early scenario of western education and the initial phases of printed texts and translations in 19th Century Bengal. This section also discusses that mostly there was a participation of the Brahmins, wealthy merchants, and other members of the upper-class section of the society in the emerging scenario of education, print, and translation of textbooks in the 19th century Bengal. A look at the social class of the translators and other influential figures engaged in the spheres of education, translation and textbook production would better validate the argument.

The native intelligentsia that was directly associated with the systems of education, translations, and the printing press assisting its European masters, turned out to be the Brahmin pundits, as a great amount of credibility was accrued to them by the colonial rulers. David Kopf (1969) has argued that the regime of Warren Hastings was paved through a ‘Brahminist liaison’. Hence, the existing parameters of the Bengali language started getting realigned towards a more Sanskritised form. The early composition of books and early education systems, although was initiated by the British, could not escape the native collaboration. The establishment of the Serampore Mission Press (1800) and the Fort William College (1800) accommodated a number of native pundits and intellectuals who played several important roles in shaping the language as modern vernacular (Roebuck 1819). Scholars like Mrityunjay Vidyalankar (1762-1819), Ramram Basu (1751-1813), Ramnath Vachaspati (?-?), Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay (?-?), who were the erstwhile teachers in various Sanskrit Tols¹ (Roebuck 1819) were the appointed teachers in the college of Fort William. Apart from such participation, the natives were set to establish vernacular printing presses too. The Hindu

¹ Seminaries of learning for the Hindus in 19th century Bengal.

College (1817) and the School Book Societies were obviously under the management of the urban wealthiest individuals. Kopf has argued that three categories of Bengali literati formed the part of the urban intelligentsia thriving on British patronage – the Persianised Hindu like Ramram Basu (1751-1813), Brahmin scholar like Mrityunjay Vidyalankar (1762-1819) and the descendants of the Calcutta nouveau-riche class of *Banias* and merchants like Radhakanta Deb (1784-1867). People like Dwarakanath Tagore (1794–1846), an industrialist and wealthy individual of his time donated a large sum of money for modern Western education (Shastri 1903). Rusomoy Dutt and Radhakanta Deb were a few of the initiators who played an important role in the establishment of the Hindu College and the School Book Societies. Towards the latter half of the 19th century, the native intelligentsia established a number of reading clubs and libraries to promote education in the public. Landed wealthy patrons like Raja Krishnachandra of Nawadip (1710-1783), the King of Burdwan, Jaykrishna Mukherji (1808-1888) of Uttarpara, Jagadish Sinha of Paikpara opened up their private collections for the public.

Hence, the efforts of the bilingual wealthy elites and the urban literati go hand in hand with the questions of language and its consequent concerns about education, literature, the printed book, and translation. The phase of the early education scenario needs special mention because a great amount of effort was dedicated to produce textbooks in the vernacular. Certainly then, the process of textbook production, as well as the question of vernacular education (to disseminate or replant the terms of western modernity), had to depend upon bilingual conditions. This is a phase where the standards of the Bengali language were getting rearranged with the plural play, interactions, inclusion, and exclusion of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and English. In the following sections, this paper discusses a brief history of the translations carried out by the

early educational institutions like Fort William College, the books societies like the Calcutta School Book Societies (CSBS), and literary societies like the Vernacular Literature Society (VLS) and points out how the Bengali individuals associated with these spaces were mostly Brahmins ('pundits'), wealthy nobles, and members of the upper-class section of the society.

Translations in the Bengali Department at the College of Fort William and the Serampore Printing Press

Printing and publishing in Serampore Mission Press (1800) marks an important phase in the history of the Bengali language, prose, and education. Although the printing activity was initiated by the missionaries and later on utilized by the British government for their purpose, the collaboration and assistance of the local experts and intelligentsia cannot be overlooked in that project. The foundation of the press was laid by William Carey who had come to Bengal in 1793 as a missionary for evangelical purposes.

Carey's project was made easy by the arrival of four members of the Baptist Missionary Society of England namely Ward, Marshman, Bransdon and Grant with Ward being an expert in printing techniques. Several native scholars and pundits like Panchanan Karmakar (?-1804), Ramram Basu (1751-1813), Mrityunjay Vidyalankar (1762-1819) were chosen as the assistants in the project of the Mission Press to help in many works ranging from setting and creating punches to composing and translating books for the Bengali language. With all these experts and resources, translations and publications of texts became a vibrant affair.

All these initial publications and translations reveal that various translators or scholars used different types of Bengali in their translations. In a way, through these several translations in the first half of the 19th century in Bengal, these

institutions could endorse a certain type of Bengali as the standard language of/in print. Sukumar Sen (1998) is of the opinion that the Bengali books written or translated by pundits knowing Sanskrit used to bear the Sanskritic style of the Bengali language. The works of scholars/ teachers like Mrityunjay Vidyalankar used to bear the traces of Sanskritised Bengali whereas Bengali works by Ramram Basu used to bear the traces of Perso-Arabic vocabulary and style.

Tarini Charan Mitra's (1772-1837) language of translation used to carry the traces of English language and style as he was translating from the English language sources. The sources of translations of these translators and scholars were also quite different. While translators like William Carey and Mrityunjay Vidyalankar translated from Sanskrit texts, Ramram Basu used to translate from the Persian texts. As a result, Carey and Vidyalankar's translations used a type of Bengali that was influenced by the structure and idiom of Sanskrit, while the Bengali used by Ramram Basu was influenced by Persian diction and vocabulary.

There were various other teachers appointed in other language departments in the college of Fort William but some of them came forward to compose books for the Bengali department. Tarini Charan Mitra (1772-1837), Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay (b?), Munshi Chandicharan (? – 1819) and Haraprasad Roy (b.?) were the notable scholars who contributed to Bengali textbook production, prose and translation to a considerable amount. The languages of these translators too were influenced by Sanskrit and Persian/Arabic vocabulary and structure. A brief discussion with examples in the following section would be important to support this argument, as these translators had different views on the language of translation which also determined the language of print and its standards.

The Early Translators, Language of Translation, and Types of Bengali in Collaboration of Fort William College and Serampore Mission Press

William Carey's book titled *Kathopakathan* or *Dialogues Intended to Facilitate the Learning of the Bengali Language* published in 1801 shows that he was aware of the various strands of Bengali language used by different social groups as the language of this bilingual book included the colloquial as well as high registers of the Bengali language. Apart from these, at around the same time, he also printed and published the Bengali translation of *The Ramayana* in 1802 written by Krittibas. This translation was a bit influenced by Sanskritised Bengali. Another important book composed by Carey in Bengali was *Itihasmala* (1812). The early book *Kathopakathan* was a bilingual book with Bengali and English texts put side by side. Carey's one more composition *Itihasmala* or *A Collection of Stories in the Bengali language* included one hundred and fifty stories where some of the stories can be traced back to Sanskrit stories like *Betalpanchabinshati* and some of the stories can be traced back to Persian and Hindustani sources.

However, none of the stories in *Itihasmala* can be termed as a direct translation from the sources (Sen 1998). The stories in this collection were only collected by Carey but got translated by other Bengali scholars. The type of Bengali language used in this book is lucid and simple. Though this particular book was not prescribed in the syllabus of the Bengali department for its supposed lucid and light contents but this book certainly carries value in being the first-ever Bengali book of stories.

Golaknath Sharma (?-?) was another name in the history of Bengali language and prose known for his Bengali translation of *Hitopadesa* in 1802. Golaknath's knowledge of Sanskrit was not much and his translation of the Sanskrit text was not

literal. He rather provided a lucid version of the Sanskrit text in Bengali. Scholars like Sukumar Sen (1998) suggest that Golaknath had even skipped many of the paragraphs from the source text and the spellings of many *tatsama* words were erroneous and twisted. This shows how Golaknath was trying to simplify the complexity of Bengali words derived from Sanskrit. The language of his translation follows a lucid style with occasional usage of colloquial form.

Mrityunjay Vidyalankar was one of the major influential figures engaged in translating into Bengali and shaping the Bengali prose. The first book written by Mrityunjay was *Batrish Simhusana* (1802) which followed the Sanskritised high-Bengali in its prose. The syntax of the language used by him was complex and the use of fewer punctuation marks makes the prose difficult to understand. Tales like *Batrish Simhusana* were quite popular in Bengal as many versions of the same text in Sanskrit were also in circulation. A certain version of *Batrish Simhusana* credited to Kalidasa was also quite popular. Mrityunjay might have had followed one of these texts for his translation. *Rajabali* written by Mrityunjay and published in 1808 is considered to be an original composition but much of the evidence proves it to be a translation of an unknown Sanskrit (?) work. The title page of the work mentions that the book contains materials collected from the language and even at the end of the book the author describes it as *Rajtaranga*. Scholars like Sukumar Sen (1998) and Sajanikanta Das (1988) have argued that the book was a translation of the materials collected from the region and also assume that the name *Rajabali* refers to a book in Sanskrit and *Rajtaranga* was Mrityunjany's version of it. Scholars like Kopf (1969) think that *Rajabali* represents the various forms of historical mode prevalent among contemporary Hindu literati. *Hitopadesa* published in 1808 was a translation of the popular Sanskrit text. This is almost a literal translation in Bengali

which carries a distinct influence on the complex syntax of Sanskrit. Nevertheless, this translation by Mrityunjay was so popular that it was followed by almost all the ten translations of the same text published between 1801- 1810. A bilingual book titled *Vedanata Chandrika* or *An Apology for the Present System of Hindoo Worship* is also credited to Mrityunjay published in 1817. Mrityunjay's use of highly Sanskritised Bengali with a complex syntax is pointed out by many scholars like Sukumar Sen (1998).

One of his most famous books is the Bengali translation of *Aesop's Fable* published in 1803 to be used in the Bengali classes of Fort William College. The collection which features the Bengali translation is titled *Oriental Fabulist* which was a project supervised by John Gilchrist, a teacher in the Hindustani department. This book contains the English text and its translation into six languages like Hindustani, Persian, Arabic, Brajbhasa, Bengali, and Sanskrit. The entire book is printed in Roman script with the title reading as *The Oriental Fabulist* or Polyglot Translations of Esop's and other Ancient Fables (1803). The introduction written to this by Gilchrist mentions that Tarini Charan translated the text not only in Bengali but also in Persian and Hindustani. Tarini Charan's Bengali translation reveals that his prose was easy to read, lucid and simple although in some places his Bengali seemed to be influenced by English syntax. Appropriate and apt use of punctuation marks in his prose made it easy to understand. At around the same time, he translated another book in collaboration with Radhakanta Deb (1784-1867) and Ramcomul Sen (1783-1844) titled *Nitikotha* (1818) or *Fables in the Bengalee Language*, for use in schools. This was a collection of tales from English and Arabic and translated into Bengali for CSBS. Munshi Chandicharan's *Tota Itihas* got published in the Serampore press in 1805 as a text prescribed in the college of Fort William. The tales included in this

translation were taken from the Sanskrit text *Sukasaptati*. This book was a translation from *Tota Kahani* in Hindustani by Haider Buksh which was actually also a translation of a Persian text. Sajanikanta Das mentions:

Tota Kuhanee a translation into the Hindoostane tongue, of the popular Persian tales entitled *Tootee Namu*, by Sueyeid Huedur Buksh Hueduree, under the superintendence of John Gilchrist... printed at the Hindoostanee Press... (1988:177).

The language of Chandicharan's prose is lucid, simple, short containing many Perso-Arabic words. The Bengali prose used by Chandicharan followed the grammatical conventions of Sanskrit but kept the simplicity of language intact.

Haraprasad Roy (?-?) was also another language faculty in the college of Fort William. He translated a book titled *Purushpariksha* in 1815. This book was a translation of a Sanskrit book bearing the same title written by the Maithili poet Vidyapati. The influence of Sanskrit syntax and usage of complex diction was quite discernible in this book as it was a translation from Sanskrit.

The joint publications of Fort William College and Serampore Missionaries mark a distinct phase of the history of Bengali books, prose, and translations in some way. Literary historians like Sajanikanta Das (1988) suggest that the influence and relevance of Fort William and Serampore books started to die down by 1815 as learned Bengali scholars and socially/Economically influential individuals appear in the scenario and contribute largely to vernacular elementary and higher education. Hence, the establishment of societies and institutes like Calcutta School Book Society, Calcutta School Society, Hindu College etc. brought in a new phase which can be seen as the indigenous intelligentsia's response to negotiate and reconfigure some of the aspects of education, language, translation and book production. As the indigenous

intelligentsia sought to spread education in vernacular, a lot of translations had been done from the western knowledge texts of science, mathematics, biology, natural history and many others. The activities of the Calcutta School Book Society remain immensely important in this respect. The following section discusses the book productions and translations of the CSBS.

Calcutta School Book Society and the Production of Translations

The role of the Calcutta School Book Society (established 1817) has largely been ignored in the history of Bengali vernacular education, the history of books and the history of translations in terms of their importance accrued to the history of English education initiated in Bengal in 1835. The establishment of School Book Society and Calcutta School Society (est. 1818) in the vernacular education scenario of contemporary Bengal marks a departure from the existing patterns and practices of elementary/school education. Society can be viewed as a response of the Bengali intelligentsia, both Hindus and Muslims, to the intellectual conditions created by the British education institutions like the Fort William College. Calcutta School book Society (CSBS) was one of those few exemplary institutions where the participation of the Muslims and Hindus to promote the cause of education in the vernacular (Bengali) could be witnessed. In this sense, the formation of the society can be viewed as an “act” of translation too, where a particular ideal set by the British education system was altered, modified, and transformed by the Bengali intelligentsia to suit their purpose. With the beginning of the new school system initiated by Calcutta School Society (CSS), the idea of producing appropriate secular textbooks in the vernacular stemmed up. The upper-class Hindu and Muslim elites came

forward to support the idea of promoting a secular vernacular elementary education in Bengali.

Followed by its establishment the School Book Society had sanctioned a bulk of grants for the spread of textbooks in various schools. This phase of textbook production brought a change in Bengali language education and laid one of the foundations towards the discourse of modernity. Shibaji Bandopadhyay (2013) has discussed how the grant for translation and production of textbooks in the Bengal presidency was much higher than Bombay and Madras presidencies because there was a detailed outline and estimation of books prepared in Bengal and a grant of some particular amount was asked from the government.

Bandopadhyay (2013) has also discussed how the first phase of the learning curriculum was full of moral tales, tales about ethics and of course moral lessons of overwhelming importance and influence of ‘education’ in one’s life. The first of the books to be published by the School Book Society was Nitikatha (1818), composed by three Bengalis Ramcomul Sen, Tarini Charan Mitra and Radha Kanta Deb and *Hitopadesh* (1820), composed and edited by Ramcomul Sen. John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* was translated into Bengali by Felix Carey. Books on sciences in general and Physics, Chemistry in particular also started getting published from 1825 onwards. A lot of bilingual books started getting published around this time as well. William Yates’ *Padartha Vidaysar* (1825) is one such bilingual book written in the mode of conversation. Yates’ another bilingual book published in 1833 was *Jyotirvidya* which is a translation of a book on astronomy by David Brewster. A bilingual textbook titled *Anecdotes of Virtue and Valour or Sadgun o Birjer Itihas* got translated into Bengali in 1829. The name of the translator was not mentioned but scholars like Sen (1998) assume that book

was translated by J. C Marshman. In an article on the 19th century Bengali prose Swapan Chakravorty (2004) discusses the situation of various books and compilations where there was a play of the heteroglot:

Reading Bengali in a Romanised text was a minor matter compared to the spate of printed books that could summon up an unsettling heteroglot world of mixed characters, translations, and socio-linguistic registers. Besides dictionaries, vocabularies and readers, there were bilingual editions of textbooks... (Chakravorty 2004: 207).

A lot of books on history were translated around the third and fourth decade of the 19th century in Bengal. Sukumar Sen (1998) comments that around this phase composition of history books held an important position among the textbook composers; two books on the history of India and Bengal by Marshman were the most preferred source for the authors of history textbooks like Gobinda Chandra Sen, Gopal Lal Mitra, Khetramohan Banerjee, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar et al. Sukumar Sen (1998) also mentions that the only book of history in this phase which was not a translation was Dhekial Phukan's *Assam Buronji* (1829). All other books of history composed in this phase were translations of Marshman's books. Gopal Lal Mitra's *Bharatbarsher Itihas* (1840) was one of the first translations of Marshman's History of India. The book by Mitra was published under the patronage of the Committee of Public Instructions.

Gobinda Chandra Sen's *Bangalar Itihas* (Vol I) published in 1840 is also a translation of Marshman's *History of Bengal*. Vidyasagar's *Bangalar Itihas* (Vol II) published in 1848 is also a translation of Marshman's *History of Bengal*. Vidyasagar's translation can be seen as a continuation of the translation started by Gobinda Chandra as Vidyasagar had translated the last nine chapters of Marshman's book.

The Vernacular Literature Society: Translations for a Vernacular Domestic Literature

The idea behind establishing the Vernacular Literature Society (VLS) or *Bangavasanubadak Samaj* (roughly translated as ‘Society for Bengali Language Translation’) was to promote more translated educational and literary texts for a larger section of people in the Bengali society. The society came into existence in 1851 collaborated by missionaries, British officials and Bengali intelligentsia alike to publish appropriate, easy and cheap texts in translation, which would best suit the aforementioned objective.

Scholars like Abhijit Gupta (2011) argue that the purpose of establishing the VLS might have been to bring in publications of more refined standards as opposed to the popular publications and genres of Battala and their supposed ‘vulgarity’ and ‘obscenity’. The argument might be valid as we see in one of the first books *Lord Clive* (1852) published by the society. In the preface of the book, the translator Harachandra Dutta asserts the superiority of the works published by the VLS and takes a dig at the popular literature saying “much of the literature thus provided for the people is confessedly pernicious in its character” (Quoted in Sen 1998: 59).

Vernacular Literature Society and the Popular Translations: Shaping Domestic Literary Taste

When VLS made its appearance in the scenario of publishing in the vernacular, the overall interest and motivation for vernacular education and publication were on the decline and a number of British scholars and officials had been against the idea of translating anything from English into Bengali as they thought the Bengali tongue was incapable of expressing the subtler thoughts expressed in English and they argued for educating the natives in English itself (Gupta 2011: 153). In a

note on their plan, the committee revealed that they planned to translate and publish those valuable books which are generally left out by the societies like ‘Calcutta Christian Tract and Book Society’ (1823), Calcutta Christian School Book Society’ (1839), Christian Knowledge Society’, School Book Society or Asiatic Society.

The Vernacular Literature Society was, in some sense established to complement the activities of various institutions and societies promoting vernacular education and translations. The members of the society consisted of indigenous wealthy people like Jaykrishna Mukherjee, Rusomoy Dutta, Prasanna Kumar Tagore et al, indigenous scholars like Vidyasagar, Radha Kanta Deb et al, missionaries like James Long, J. C. Marshman et al and British officials and enthusiasts like Marquis of Dalhousie (Patron), J. R. Colvin (as President), H. T. Buckland, H. V. Bayley, J. A. Crawford, W. Seton-Karr, H. Woodrow (as treasurer) and Hodgson Pratt (Secretary) et al.

With the objectives of the committee directed towards translating and producing cheap books, the society set out to execute its ambitious plan of translating classics from English for mass circulation under the series of ‘Bengal Family Library’ or *Garhastya Bangala Pushtak Sangraha*. The project of the society was to produce and circulate a suitable ‘vernacular domestic literature’. The society had a set of rules for the selection of texts to be translated as well as for the method of translation to be followed. James Long in his *Returns* thus describes:

This Society was established in 1851 to publish translations of such works that are not included in the design of the Tract or Christian knowledge Societies on the one hand, or of the School Book or Asiatic Societies on the other, and likewise to provide a sound and useful Vernacular Domestic Literature for Bengal (Long 1859: LIV).

VLS and its Method for Suitable Bengali Translation

One of the first publications to have been brought out by the society was a translation of *Robinson Crusoe* by John Robinson in 1852 as *Robinson Crusoer Bhramanbrittanta*. The translation was aimed to suit the conditions and context of the Bengali language. In order to bridge the cultural gap and connotation, Robinson Crusoe is represented as someone from Calcutta. Pratt writes about the features of the adaptation and the public reactions to it as follows:

On the ground that the paramount object was to bring the story home to the understanding of a Bengali public, we did not hesitate to change the scene, to make Robinson Crusoe the son of an Armenian merchant living in Calcutta and to wreck him on one of the islands of the Eastern Archipelago... The beauty and point of the Story were, I contend, in no way affected by a change of this sort, while on the other hand it made the story much more *real* to the reader than the description of a voyage from Hull to London could have been. But these liberties with De Foe's text were considered by the majority of the Committee in bad taste, and *non-adaptation* became the rule of the Society (Pratt quoted in Gupta 2011: 6).

Edward Roer was a European writing and translating in Bengali. Roer translated Charles and Mary Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare into Bengali in 1853. He apparently translated nine of the abridged stories from Lamb's Tales - *Jhor Brittanta* (The Tempest), *Nidagh Nisith Swapna Bibaran* (A Midsummer Night's Dream), *Benice Nagario Raja* (Merchant of Venice), *Lear Raja (King Lear)*, *Hemlet* (Hamlet) etc. were among the ones translated by him. Sukumar Sen (1998) is of the opinion that the language used by Roer was simple, colloquial, and easy. Sen also mentions about Roer's introduction to the translation to describe how Roer had to deal with two different registers of the language, i.e. *sadhu*

(Sankritised Bengali) and *chalit* (Colloquial Bengali) in translation:

“...if I follow a Sanskritised register, the mass would not be able to understand it and if I use ordinary/popular language, the pedants would frown at it. Considering this, I have decided to follow none of these registers at a stretch and I have mostly tried to achieve a middle ground.” (Introduction by Roer quoted in Sen 1998: 61).

Another important translator for the society at that point of time was Ramnarayan Vidyaratna (?-?) best known for his translation of the French novel *Paul et Virginie* (1787) into Bengali as *Pal O Barginia Itihas* in 1856. Vidyaratna’s other translation was from Sanskrit *Hitopadesha* into Bengali as *Hitkathabali* in 1861. He translated the first three parts of the text. There were three more books translated by Vidyaratna according to Sen (1998) – *Gopalkamini* (1856), *Satyachandradoy* (1855), and *Advut Itihas* (1857). The sources of these translations have not been much discussed but the work *Advut Itihas* (1857) seems to be a translation of Parley’s *Wonders of History*. Ananda Chandra Vedantabagish’s translation of Somdeva’s *Katha Saritsagar* into Bengali was published in 1857 as *Brihatkatha*. The work was an abridged translation of the source text. His other translation too was from Sanskrit and he translated Kalidasa’s work as *Shakuntalopakhyan* (1858) into Bengali. The most prolific and popular translator of the society was of course Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay who had to his credit no less than seventeen translations. Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay is the translator of the majority of the translations published by the society under the Bengal Family Library Series and it was quite probable that he would be appointed the assistant-secretary to the society. His translations include Andersen’s stories like Chinese Nightingale etc. (*Chin Desiya Bulbul Pakshir*

Bibaran, 1857), Mermaid (*Marmet*, 1857), The Ugly Duckling (*Kutsit Hangsa Sabak o Kharbakayar Bibaran*, 1858), Wild Swans (*Hamsa Rupi Rajputra*, 1859), The Tinder Box and The Emperor's New Cloth (*Chakmaki Baksha o Apurba Rajbastra*, 1867) and Great Klaus and Little Klaus (*Choto Kilas Bodo Kilas*, 1860). He also translated Percy's Anecdotes (*Manroramya Path*, 1857), and Kriolf's Fables (*Krilfer Nitigalpa*, 1870). His historical and biographical works and translations include *Jahanirar Charitra* (1858), *Nurjahan Ragginr Jibanbrittanta* (1857), *Mujahid Shah* (1859), *Ahalya Haddikar Jiban Brittanta* (1858) etc. Historical book like *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon was also commissioned by the society for translation which was done by Hemanga Chandra Basu as *Musalmandiger Ovyudoyer Sonkshep Biboron* (1865).

Conclusion

The discussions above reveal how there was a marked difference in the kind of Bengali written by a Sanskrit pundit like Mrityunjay Vidyalankar (a Brahmin) and a Persian munshi like Ramram Basu (a Kayastha). While Mrityunjay's Bengali owed its origins to Sanskrit texts and style, Ramram Basu's writings revealed a Persian influence. While the majority of the Bengali textbooks produced in the Bengali department of the College of Fort William were translations from Sanskrit, the textbooks produced by the CSBS were translations from English knowledge texts and literature. The language of the textbooks produced by CSBS mostly contained what is generally termed as 'missionary' prose. As most of the textbooks commissioned by CSBS were composed in Serampore Mission Press, the textbooks and translations developed prose, which was looked down upon by the Bengali pundits of Fort William College. The missionary prose and translations generally made use of the repertoire of the *chalit*

(colloquial/in use among people) Bengali which was very different from the *sadhu* (standard/respectable) Bengali developed by the Brahmin pundits. The purpose of the CSBS textbooks was to reach out to varied sections of school students. Hence, the language of translation in these books was lucid and simple compared to the complex structure of the Brahmin pundit's Sanskritised Bengali. The translations and books produced in Fort William, on the other hand, were meant for higher education, i.e. college students. Interesting to observe here is that, apart from the issues of class in the spheres of print and translation, there was also a divide on the basis of Hindus and Muslims in terms of their participation in the spheres of print, education, and translation.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century, we hardly come across any Bengali Muslim translator in the sphere of education. The sphere of higher education reveals certain issues about the representation of class through language. As mentioned earlier, the language promoted by the Fort William pundits was quite complex in terms of vocabulary and structure. This partly might have been the Hindu upper-class strategy to keep their exclusive dominance intact in the higher learning system. The role of textbook production has been seen by scholars like Gauri Viswanathan (1989) as a mode of perpetuating the superiority of Western knowledge and English education with the agency of native intelligentsia. However, the negotiations and modifications that the various reader groups made in their reception of these texts got overlooked. The modifications of most of the western knowledge texts through translation in the emerging scenario of education prove how the native response negotiated with the texts. The sphere of textbook production was also channelised by the native intelligentsia to reconfigure certain questions of identity and class within the native social structure. The phenomenon of textbook production reveals how the Hindu upper-class

bhadralok shaped the Bengali language in a Sanskritised way (through print, education, translation, and book production) and turned it into an exclusive medium of exhibiting their class hierarchy.

The Vernacular Literature Society and its translations were aimed at reaching out to the general public. The translations commissioned by the CSBS were translations of mainly educational textbooks including knowledge texts and some literary texts from English literature. The translations commissioned by the VLS on the other hand were meant for the consumption of the general reading public. These translations however were aimed at providing a refined ‘domestic’ reading material, which distanced itself from the ‘vulgar’ literature produced by popular printing presses. This suggests that a certain amount of effort was employed by the upper-class Hindus through print and language (in which translation was an inevitable tool) to keep intact the idea of gentility and class distinctions. The upper-class Hindus took considerable care to make sure the circulation of these ‘refined’ and ‘healthy’ books in the appropriate social groups. One of the important aspects of VLS is the question of the participation of Muslims in this society. The members of the society were missionaries, upper-class Hindu intelligentsia and British officials with hardly any Muslim representation. In terms of choosing their sources, the translations commissioned by VLS showed a general interest in English texts. Although most of the translations published by the society were done by upper-class Hindus like Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay, Ramnarayan Vidyaratna et al, the language of these translations was not necessarily sanskritised. The style of Bengali prose that was created and endorsed by the VLS was in many ways different from both the prose composed by the missionaries and the Sanskritised prose produced by the Brahminic Hindu elites. The traits of this prose can be best

understood by the comments made by Roer while translating Lamb's *Tales*. The idea of Roer to strike a middle ground between Sanskritised 'high' Bengali and the popular/colloquial Bengali sums up the kind of prose that got formulated through the Society's translations and publications.

Another interesting aspect that comes up from the discussions is that VLS and its efforts tried to include wider social classes in the sphere of print and literature. The plans of VLS for wider circulation of its materials even in District towns and villages through various modes suggest that efforts were made to represent the various social groups. The translations published by the Society almost consciously tried to do away with the Sanskritised 'high' register of the Bengali language and tried to strike a middle ground for the ease of reading and understanding. However, by the end of the 1860s, the Society's activities and translations had been on the wane and Society's objective of producing 'original' fictional works as well as translations in Bengali got diverted and abandoned. The variety of Bengali language shaped by VLS was not paid much attention to by later authors in the Bengali literary sphere. Publication of the first novel *Durgeshnandini*, in a highly Sanskritised Bengali by Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) in 1865 effectively put a closure to the entire project of VLS and other contemporary societies which had so long been instrumental in shaping a more lucid and popular version of the Bengali language through textbook production and translation. The use of 'high' Sanskritised Bengali in print, translations, and literature came to represent the new ethos of social class and distinction.

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