

# Translation Trending: Comparing Recent Trends in Indian English Fiction and English Translations of Bhasha Fiction

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## Abstract

*For a long time now, Indian literature has meant Indian English literature to the reading public, especially in the West. This came about after Rushdie burst into the international literary scene with *Midnight's Children*, a novel about India that changed the very course of Indian English fiction. Even when the translation industry in India is considered to have boomed in the 1990s, translated literature still remained largely popular only with academics and with a small discerning readership. But this seems to have changed in the new millennium. This is evident from more and more publishing houses getting involved in bringing out translations, constitution of new literary prizes solely aimed at translated literature, translated literature from India finding a place in the long lists and short lists of international awards and featuring in almost every list of Indian newspapers and magazines that bring out year-end best lists. Is translation in India getting its due share of glory now? What changed from the 1990s to the second decade of the 2000s that the tables almost seem to have turned regarding Indian English fiction and Indian fiction in English translation? The paper looks at this resurgence of translations in comparison with Indian English fiction and attempts to explore the ways these changes have come about. The paper argues that if Indian English novels have become more local, bhasha novels have become more global. The paper will focus on the recent translations from Malayalam literature to substantiate its arguments and seeks to comment on the politics of language, literature, and representation in contemporary India.*

**Keywords:** Translation, Indian English Fiction, Bhasha Novels in English Translation, New Trends.

## **Introduction: The Quest for Indian Literature**

The tussle between Indian English writing and bhasha literatures has been a long-standing one. The subjects of the debates range from authenticity to colonial baggage and privilege. Fiction is seen as the representational genre of literature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and therefore, it is not surprising that these debates are pronounced in the case of fiction. It has been pointed out that the relationship between Indian English fiction and English translation of bhasha fiction has been very curious. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her article “Divided by the Same Language”, problematized the strange phenomenon of the disparity in the success of Indian fiction in English and Indian fiction in translation. Considering that a lot of Indian literature is being translated into English, she wonders about the “two numerically comparable sets — Indian novels written in English and Indian novels translated into English and the asymmetry in their reception...” (2008:195). But this seems to have changed in the new millennium. This is evident from more and more publishing houses getting involved in bringing out translations, constitution of new literary prizes solely aimed at translated literature, translated literature from India finding a place in the long lists and short lists of international awards and featuring in almost every list of Indian newspapers and magazines that bring out year-end best lists. Is translation in India getting its due share of glory now? What changed from the 1990s to the second decade of the 2000s that the tables almost seem to have turned regarding Indian English fiction and Indian fiction in English translation? In my paper, I propose to look at this resurgence of translations to decode why Indian fiction finally resembles Indian fiction in (English) translation. This will be done through a comparative study of the recent trends in themes and reception of Indian English novels and bhasha novels translated into English.

Sujit Mukherjee in his decisive work, *Translation as Discovery* (1981), writes about two branches of Indian writing in English. He terms translation as Indo-English writing and Indian writing in

English as Indo-Anglian writing and treats both as part of one genre of literature and seems not to have perceived one as a rival of the other. Even when he is skeptical of the ability of English to capture the nuances of an Indian context, he concludes that English "offers the widest area of discovery through and in translation". In fact, he predicts wrongly that Indo-English works or translations would serve as the link literature of India leading to a wholesome entity that can be called Indian literature (1981: ix-x). Later, in *Translation as Recovery* (2004) published posthumously, Mukherjee claimed the growing popularity of translations into English and seemed optimistic about the changing equation of the reception of translated texts within academia.

What is Indian literature itself is a question that scholars have not found an answer to. PP Raveendran posits that the theoretical category called Indian literature came into existence only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the political and ideological needs of the time. Indian literature as a discipline took shape in the wake of colonialist and capitalistic expansion, the awakening of nationalist consciousness, and the spread of reform movements and under the influence of modernity heralded in by Western thought and aesthetics (Raveendran, 2558–2563). The language question was central to this defining period of India's history. The Orientalists overlooked the importance of the "regional" Indian languages while they upheld the importance of the classical language of Sanskrit, while the Anglicists were concerned about making "mimic men" of privileged Indians educated in English. Meanwhile, stories and poems were written all over India in various "regional" languages. These languages, or the bhashas, produced literature that was steeped in local culture and color. Sisir Kumar Das discusses in his *History of Indian Literature*, that even when these literatures are different from one another, the commonalities and convergences regarding themes, ideologies, and influences cannot be disregarded. After independence, bhashas and the corresponding literatures also came to be associated with the politics of partition and linguistic realignment of states (Das, 1995: xiv). Thus, every language and literature defined itself differently and grew not in any particular pattern. The very idea of representing these different literatures as a

unified representational literature of India is an arduous task, especially when that representation happens to be in English with which India has a complicated relationship. While steering clear of this complexity, the attempts of the early leaders of a newly independent India were to showcase a single nation with a common past and a shared dream. A representative literature was imperative to project the idea of ‘the essential unity of India’s thought and literary background’ and to proclaim ‘Indian literature was one thought written in many languages.’ (Pollock, 2003: 6). The Sahitya Akademi was set up precisely to further the idea of one national literature, and many initial projects undertaken by the Akademi intended to project this idea of unity through literature. However, as Rosemary Marangoli substantiates, the Sahitya Akademi projects betrayed a plurality that could not many times be channeled into a singular idea of Indian literature (2013: 136-172). Even when English is not on the scheduled list of languages, it has remained the *lingua franca*. Representations of Indian literature to the world invariably had to be in English translations. Though there were ambitious projects of translating amongst other Indian languages, this came to become a more minor activity compared to the translations from bhashas to English. Thus, one can very well claim that translations from Indian languages to English were more or less the norm and today translations between bhashas are also routed through English. The reception of English translations remained tepid as bhasha literatures remained rooted to their locales. Indian English fiction too remained in the fringes, with the anxiety of Indianness very much in focus. The language of these writers, RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, ad Raja Rao, Kamala Markandeya, and Nayantara Sehgal, continued to be in an acquired tongue, the feel of it very much that of a translated text. GJV Prasad in his “Writing Translation: The Strange Case of the Indian English Novel” points out that Indian English writing is created by translation and assimilation and transformation of the Indian text, context and English language (1999: 42). This has been further re-iterated by many other scholars. Sujit Mukherjee comments that Indian English fiction was a companion to translations and that is how it mostly remained till Rushdie broke into the scene.

It was practically in the 1980s or rather specifically with the publication of *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie and the Booker Prize that came in 1981 for the work, that Indian English fiction soared to newer heights. *Midnight's Children* started a new epoch in Indian English fiction and has more or less changed what the world considers Indian literature to be. It is largely considered to be a pioneering work where the postmodern and the postcolonial converge, featuring a quest for the real identity of the nation and the national. The novel signals a change from the earlier Indian English fiction whose concerns were as 'local' as any work in an Indian language. With *Midnight's Children*, the concerns became global, multiculturalism came into vogue, and Indian history became a reservoir of countless narratives and counter-narratives. Even when scholars like Asaduddin have felt that the 90s saw a translation boom in India with more and more publishing houses turning to translations from bhashas to English (2006:16), Indian English fiction marched ahead with the likes of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Amitav Ghosh bringing international attention and prizes. The narratives of all these novels, except Ghosh's, are sweeping statements about India and its ills in the line of *Midnight's Children*. Many of them are located in urban spaces and offer a glimpse of the underbelly of these places but also comment on villages as places of ignorance breeding inequality and crime. But from the latter half of the last decade, one can see a different trend in the case of Indian English fiction.

### **Recent Trends in Indian English Novel:**

It looks like there is no longer the need to write back to the Empire, insisting that the decolonization drive is on. A survey of the scene would reveal that there are quite a few Indian English writers whose concerns are no longer about representing the idea of Indianness to the world. Rather, they reflect on matters pertaining to lived experiences in small towns. Anjum Hasan's novels are one of the first ones that indicate this shift. Her novels are tied to Shillong, her hometown. According to her, "Shillong is the place that formed me. Probably if I were born and brought up somewhere else, I would have been a different person. It made me an observer. It made me the

writer that I am." (2008). Uncle Rock in *Neti, Neti* (2009) tells as much when he says: "No place like Shillong. It's fine to travel and see the world and all of that, but in the end, I just want to go back to my own little place and shut the door. Time is an ocean but it ends at the shore, as Dylan said. We all need to find our own shores, moh" (2008: 184). Another writer who engages with local realities is Anees Salim. The contexts of his novels are highly localized, and the characters are inward-looking. Any Malayali who reads *The Small Town Sea* (2017) would be able to relate to the landscape and sensibility the novel has managed to capture. Commenting on the locale of his books, Salim says: "I found it easier to place my characters in streets I roamed as a child, in the house I grew up in, by the sea and on the cliff my hometown is famous for" (2019). Amit Chaudhary, Anuradha Roy, Easterine Kire, and Jahnvi Barua keep finding their shores in small towns and villages. They talk about intimate milieus, personal stories, and local histories which are necessary to be told. These are writers who have known and belonged to their locales and the familiarity is evident in their writing. Jahnvi Baruah writes in *Undertow* about the Brahmaputra and Guwahati, "... the river was spectacular, rain or shine. The river could make a grown man cry...It took affection to see the loveliness of Gauhati, this small city-town spread out over low hills and lush valleys along the river..." (2020: 106).

The idea of India that is put forward in these works is an amalgamation of differences. In *Neti Neti*, Sophie who grew up in Shillong and had always identified herself against the idea India, moves to Bangalore in search of a job and freedom, and becomes part of such an amalgamation:

When Sophie moved to Bangalore she'd expected to be overwhelmed by the excess of India, and for the first few months she had approached everything with caution --- the alien-looking mangoes, the little heaps of blood-red, deep-fried gobi Manchurian in roadside stalls, the gloomy recesses of the temples, the astrologer's consulting room...But over the past year, she had by implication herself become India and now the opposite seemed strange --- the idea that she could have lived the first twenty-four years of her life believing in her foreignness" (2008: 126).

Many of these novels have young protagonists who are able to notice and accept the differences though it might also signal towards a kind of resignation. In *Undertow*, Bangalore-based Loya learns from her mother about ULFA and muses: “Assam dreamt of breaking away. As she lay in bed looking out at the starry sky, Loya was restless with a vague disapproval. She did not feel strongly about politics in any way, but she took for granted certain things --- the idea of loving one’s country and wishing it no harm” (Barua, 2020: 88).

Language has been a matter of debate and antagonism amongst Indian English writers and Bhasha writers since it was always associated with the question of the target readers, and therefore of representation. Especially after the success of *Midnight’s Children*, it became fashionable to display the bilingual credentials of the Indian English writers in an attempt to “decolonize” English. That meant more bhasha words in the text, but most of these did not carry much cultural load or if they did, the writers resorted to glossing. But in many recent Indian English novels, there is no eagerness to pepper English with any Indian language, and bilingualism, if at all, is a natural choice. Sample this all-familiar instance when the experienced father of a rash son “redeems” the situation, when the traffic police stop the car and he realizes the son was not carrying the driving license with him: “Sir, I know it’s very difficult for you to take care of all these things. Hamne bhi duniya dekhi hai. What to do? There’s so much traffic these days, these kinds of things happen once in a while.” He slipped a five hundred rupee note into the cop’s hand (2008: 158). The languages are mixed naturally with no italics. However, she resorts to glossing in the Sanskrit title of her novel, *Neti Neti*, which explains the term as “not this, not this”. Anuradha Roy does not use any other language in her fiction, though she keeps kinship terms such as Akka, Dada, etc. In *The Folded Earth* (2011) words like teacherni, mam (for ma’am) are used. In a novel like *The Earthspinner* (2021), which talks about a religious conflict in rural Kummarapet, one would expect a few Urdu or Tamil words by way of technique to mark the differences between the main characters. But Roy uses none. It is the same with Anees Salim and Jahnvi Barua. These writers do not need the use of a local language to bring

local sensibility into their novels. Their English seems to be Indian enough to bring alive Varkkala, Kummarapet, Gauhati, and Ranikhet for their readers.

## Recent Trends in Bhasha Novels in English Translation

Bhasha writers, on the other hand, were considered to be regional, or even parochial. The statements of writers such as Salman Rushdie and VS Naipaul to this effect have been criticized by many bhasha writers such as Balachandra Nemade, who also urged Indians to keep English outdoors like footwear, only to be used when required to interact with the outside world (Purandare, 2015). Interestingly, one of the changes that have happened in the last decade is that bhasha writers have become more “less local”. Or at least, these are the kind of works that get translated and get a good reception. For example, consider a novella like *Ghachar Ghochar*. This Kannada novel, a thriller, set in Bangalore converses with the Indian middle class caught up in the race for inching up the economic ladder at any cost. It’s a novella that retains but also surpasses the ‘regional’ sensibility to connect with every reader. A recently published translation of the contemporary Tamil writer, Iyayam, is a strong commentary on the caste-class nexus of patriarchy that ends up immolating young women. The English title of the book *A Woman Burnt* (2023) takes on symbolic significance to include all women burnt, literally and figuratively. This is a theme that is relevant all over India, and beyond it. One cannot but mention a translation that caught the attention of the world with the International Booker Prize, *Tomb of Stone*. Harish Trivedi observes about the novel: “The major themes that Geetanjali highlights in her novel—old age, a liberating mother-daughter relationship, a sympathetically treated LGBTQ character shown now as a female and now as a male, and bold border-crossing—are not a throwback but universal concerns of our own day and age, and likely to grow more topical as time passes” (Trivedi, 2022).

To take this point further, one may explore a few recent Malayalam novels in translation that have been making news for all the right reasons. Interestingly, most of these novels are not set in



Kerala. KR Meera's much-celebrated novel *Aarachar* translated as *The Hangwoman: Everyone Loves a Good Hanging* by J Devika, has a singular theme, from a feminist perspective, and the setting is Bengal. Benyamin is another writer much translated and his stories too through Malayali diasporic protagonists talk about universal topical themes of migration, displacement, and survival, and his novels are mostly based in the Gulf region. Indu Menon's short stories translated as *The Lesbian Cow and Other Stories* shock you with their treatment and their universal appeal. Her stories are scattered all over the subcontinent. Another novel that spans centuries and countries is *Sugandhi alias Andal Devanayaki* by TD Ramakrishnan translated by Priya K Nair. Sarah Joseph's latest novel *Budhini* talks about the plight of the Santal girl, Budhini, and through her many others like her, whose lives get trampled upon in the name of development. S Hareesh's *Moustache* could be one exception. The novel, spanning across centuries, reads like a fantasy novel and is woven like an oral narrative with stories within stories. The novel is deeply rooted in the socio-political context of Kerala and challenges the accepted history of the land. The newness of the narrative itself lends it an aura of grandeur and that grandeur itself is subversive. One might assume that these aspects of the novel mark it as different and therefore, one that needs to be translated. Jayasree Kalathil, the translator felt that "The main challenge was to find a voice that suited Hareesh's way of storytelling, especially because the storyscape of *Moustache* is a masculine one that is quite different from my own writing voice. In terms of translating, I found the chapter about songs the most difficult." She however felt that the book "is written in a non-linear, folksy way with several voices and tones. This was actually very enabling for me as a translator because it gave me a lot of latitude" (Khan, 2021). She also talks about how she was in constant touch with the author, all through the eleven months that she took to translate the book.

This is another important change that has come in regard to translation. There was a time when translation was considered to be a tug of war of power between authors and translators: Ranga Rao called it the translation trauma (2006: 28). Authors believed that their works were deliberately getting misinterpreted and

misrepresented while translators thought they were not getting appreciated for their effort and creativity. The term translator's invisibility is a familiar term by now. But this seems to be an old story now. In an interview the writer of *Ghachar Ghochar*, Vivek Shanbagh, and Sriram Perur, the translator talked about their collaborative process which the author describes as more of a process of "dismantling and rebuilding." Thus, as Nicole Brossard would put it, as mentioned by Barbara Godard, translation many times reveals more than it hides. She quotes Brossard:

Exhausting work is to read a text of one's own in translation. Tiring, because the mental operations one performs in writing the text are added to the process I shall call unveiling. Because what one chooses to hide in a text must now be exposed. Where criticism, for example, can only presume, dream, or imagine a meaning, translation seeks to ascertain. In this process of corroboration, I must confront what I have consciously and scrupulously hidden from myself. To be translated is to be interrogated not only in what one believes oneself to be but in one's way of thinking in a language, and of being thought by the same language (2006: 2).

Shanbagh comments how the discussions made him aware of his strengths and weaknesses as a writer. He points out how the discussion was never about a word or a sentence but what lies beneath them (Carvalho, 2020). EV Fathima and Nandakumar who translated M Mukundan's *Delhi: A Soliloquy* have observed how their translation techniques were different but how they still collaborated with success (*Delhi: A Soliloquy*, 2021). These are translators who are aware of their craft and role and can reflect on the process of creation and re-creation and this has immensely helped the case of translations in India. Translation thus becomes collaborative authorship with both writer and translator having equal stakes. J Devika highlights the evaluative role of the editor in making a translation successful (Malhotra, 2020).

In a 2008 interview, Gita Krishnankutty who won the Katha Awards and Crossword Prize for translation opined when asked about the impact of her translations: "I don't know that it makes that much difference. Translations are not selling well anyway and I

don't have much hope on that score. They say it's changing but as far as we are concerned, I look for my books in bookshops and I don't see them." (Interview with Gita Krishnankutty, 2008) While one cannot vouch for the fact that translations are selling well, one does spot more translations in bookshops now. More than that, translators are given a platform to speak in various social media and literature festivals. EV Fathima on one such occasion spoke about how she was then booked for almost one year (Fathima, 2021). The books mentioned above have been translated by different translators and all of them have been interviewed by YouTube channels, newspapers, online portals, and so on. This creates more awareness about translation itself and brings the spotlight on translators. J Devika, in one of the interviews, stressed that Malayalam literature is doing much better and some writers are doing better in English because of their imaginative translators.

Money was another constricting factor when it came to translation. It always used to be a labor of love and nothing else. Monetarily it still remains a much-limited occupation. But this also has improved with the setting up of awards such as the JCB literary prize which is given every year for the best Indian fiction. Apart from the Sahitya Akademi Award for Translation in the scheduled languages, The Crossword Book Prize, instituted in 1998 also considers translated works for awards though they are considered as a different category. The Hindu Literary Prize and JCB Literary Prize do not classify translated works into a different category. JCB prize carries a cash award of 25 lakhs and 10 lakhs is for the translators. A work of literature is ultimately a labor of love indeed but there is no denying that recognitions in the form of awards and fellowships do give an impetus to the creative energy. The discussions in academic spaces and media after Geetanjali Shree won the International Booker 2022 hint at excitement regarding translations. The 2022 International Booker Prize judges termed the novel "a loud and irresistible novel" while her translator called it "a love letter to the Hindi language".

The change in the trend is very much visible in the media too. The year-end Best of Indian Fiction lists of various media publications invariably have been featuring translations along with Indian English

fiction for the last few years. Daisy Rockwell who translated *Tomb of Stone* says “In India, there is definitely a growing interest in translations and a growing respect for non-English language literatures. I am not sure how this happened, but I am thankful for it, and all signs point to continued growth in publication and interest” (Rose, 2017).

## Relevance of Translation

One can only speculate on what this growing interest is about. Since in postcolonial India, the story of translations and Indian English fiction was always intertwined, one would assume that this change too is because of the other. The establishment of Translation Studies as a discipline in the West in the late 1970s coincided, unfortunately for translations in India, with the rise of Indian English fiction and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Ironically, in India, it is the decolonization drive that really paved the way for the consolidation of Indian English fiction. The decolonization exercise required colonized societies to identify, respond, and react to the hegemony of language and culture as imposed by the West. But in the era of globalization, even these responses have been appropriated to become the Centre, paving the way to neo-colonialism where the unfinished stories of colonialism continue to find their resonance in post-liberalization India. Graham Huggan attributes the success of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in the West to its “marketable otherness”, the way his novel reinforced the image of India as an exotic third-world country (1994: 29). While Indian English fiction stormed the Western markets and academia as Indian literature, they were really the narratives of lives closer to the Colonial self. But now when they turn their gaze towards lives closer to themselves in a language that need not write back to the empire to prove itself, we have a different kind of Indian English writing emerging. Theorists such as Emily Apter put forward the same warning regarding translation. She argues in favor of “untranslatability” and warns against the ‘entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world’s cultural resources, as evinced in projects sponsored by some proponents of World Literature’ (2013: 3). This is what Trivedi underlines when he says that the translation of *Ret*

*Samadhi* to Tomb of Stone evokes the images of the broken statue of Ozymandias, while in Hindi, he explains, the title has a different meaning: “A long passage in the novel describes the Buddha practicing precisely such a penance; that is what in the book is called “ret-samadhi,” and by association that is what is going to be the fate of the mother in the novel.” He would have preferred the word “meditation” for samadhi (Trivedi, 2022). While translations are not free from simplifications or homogenization, it is also true that after all words too are travellers like texts. They, too many times, “take on a new life” when they cross borders. “In any exchange despite philological and philosophical questionings of equivalency, be it translation or barter, equivalencies are established. These are usually metaphoric in nature. The metaphoric nature of exchange means we are dealing in arbitrary fiction whenever we establish, in the case of translation, linguistic equivalencies. No matter how hard we try to be “accurate” or “faithful to the original,” we inevitably create something vastly different from the model we seek to emulate in a different language (Levine et al, 2018:4). Now that we have moved far away from the “word for word” or “sense for sense” debate, what might be of more interest is the way translators come up with their strategies and the politics of language and culture as we try to make sense of other cultures and the world as a whole. As Supriya Chaudhuri observes:

Translation --- especially the kind of translation through which we seek to understand the speech of the other while allowing it to be different from others --- is a political act. It threatens the autonomy of the other speaker, the plurality of the multilingual nation, through a form of linguistic assimilation. At the same time, since it is all that we have by way of a hermeneutic instrument, our task must be to make it as plural, as mobile, and as various as we can (2018: 348).

Active translators’ forums can help in conversations across borders, national and international, to encourage a feeling of camaraderie and continuity in the field of translation. Multiple translations and multilingual translations along with a dialogue with Indian English writers would help to open channels of understanding and evaluation of the literatures of India to substantially consolidate the plurality of Indian literature.

## Conclusion

In the introduction to their book, *Indian Literature and the World* (2017), Rosella Ciosca and Neelam Srivastava highlight the four characteristics of contemporary Indian literature: it is multilingual, translational, comparative, and located and internationalist at the same time (2017:1). English being the most powerful world language of our times, the international representation of our literature will continue to be in that language. Still, this kind of assessment of Indian literature avoids pitting one kind of Indian writing against the other, whether it be bhasha literature, translations, or Indian English writing. Instead, it appreciates the confluence of thoughts, commentaries, and expressions in the form of plural literature.

One might observe that the obsession with the postcolonial might finally be waning and as we introspect to grapple with our realities closer at home, we also navigate through this world brought together and swept apart at the same time by the forces of globalization. Many of these Indian novels, in English translation or otherwise, might not sell too well in the international market. But within the country, the literary and publishing scenes are changing fast. Even when the number of translated texts that are brought out by big publishing houses is not too many, they do garner attention in bookstores and media. Moreover, the search for one national literature seems to have been increasingly replaced by the appreciation of the plurality of Indianness and its many literatures. Thus, Indian literature seems to be poised to make the best of the opportunities that the contemporary socio-political and economic contexts provide. Maybe Sujith Mukherjee's prediction about English translations representing Indian literature would finally come true. Or rather, a category called Indian literature in English seems to be a possibility. Mukherjee had in fact hoped that a Booker prize for translation was not far away! While a Booker or an International Booker is not to be considered the ultimate accomplishment of any literature, there is no harm in a little international recognition. From Rushdie to Shree, the tide definitely seems to be turning.

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