

## The Autobiography of a Thousand Languages retold

*Translation of Human and Social sciences books and Literature in India*

by Mini Krishnan, Editor and Translator (India)

*In India, with 14 major writing systems in use, 5 language families and around 400 spoken languages, translation is a tremendous challenge—and a vital need. In this specific context, translations from English are dominant, and the government tries to support Indian texts to be translated into main international languages.*



A land in which the majority of people believe in rebirth is a comfortable place for people to say that translation is a kind of new birth. Ironically, in India, sustained translation programmes with a national readership appear only in English. This linguistic rebirth has an almost unnatural origin because, the world over, translation is undertaken from a foreign language into one's mother-tongue. In India, the publishing zone under discussion, we have a unique situation of Indians translating into the other tongue, an exercise which is part of a prolonged, post-colonial race to reach a phantom readership, which we like to think is waiting to read us. This rebirth is very difficult, as it is frameworked by specifics of culture, metaphysics, politics, and the social institutions of linguistic communities. A tribal's Hindi (for instance) idiom and vocabulary would have to move through two processes. First, silently and invisibly into the mainstream of that language, and then into English. Since the translator is most likely to be a product of a Western-style education, trained in

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babu (governmentalese) English, creativity in it is twice as hard. Finding the words that fit or look like they will fit, then refitting the words that are found to make up the text.

The complexity of India's language map is tremendous. There are fourteen major writing systems in use. No other country has five language families. We can count the Indo-Aryan, the Dravidian, the Austro-Asiatic, the Sino-Tibetan, and the Andamanese. Some 400 languages are spoken, though the Census documents only 114. Of these, only eighteen enjoy official recognition and only some correspond to geographical boundaries.

As always India puzzles anyone who tries to study what is happening amidst the chaos and colour, but, of the countless books in print, about five or six Indian languages can boast fairly well-edited and well-produced English versions of at least fifty books each. A persistent belief is that there are three kinds of readership for translations in English: a first within the country, particularly in the large cities; a second in culture-study courses run for non-Indians outside the country, forming an exotic addition to the subject of Indology; and a third which meets the nostalgia of Indians who are language-orphaned no matter where they are, In-

dians who lost their mother-tongues when they left their country but not memories of their culture and origin.

Beginning with the Literary Academy of India (Sahitya Akademi, 1954) whose first president was also the first prime minister of India, and the National Book Trust (1957), translations into English gradually started appearing from private publishers as well. The institutionalization of translation studies in universities, the establishment of prestigious awards for translators and the rise of nativism have all aided the rise of both literary and non-literary translations. Caste, tribal and gender studies have thrown up a continuous demand for autobiographies and memoirs.

The job is labour and capital intensive, and slow. Because India is a continent not a country, linguistically speaking, translating out of its many languages is a huge undertaking for anyone.

Three years ago, the Indian Ministry of Culture set aside a considerable sum of money to promote serious Indian fiction in the six UNESCO languages: Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, Arabic and English. They sent out a message worldwide, offering to fund translators and publishers to move Indian texts (selected by the venture called Indian Literature Abroad) into

any of these languages. In short, without Indian money there seemed to be little hope of interesting publishers in foreign languages to carry anything at all from India in their lists other than white tigers.

The prospect for non-fiction and the social sciences is even more bleak. So although much of contemporary writing in these fields from the West is available in, and translated, in India, little of Indian scholarship or current affairs commentaries find their way into Europe or the US via translation.

The map of translation is also the path of the crucial but often invisible intersections in world culture, which, like the tracks in a rail-junction, show a criss-cross movement of ideas, words and forms. Translation jumps over oceans and travels in the time-machines of language. All intellectual transfers from ancient Phoenician, Chinese, Persian, Arabic and Greek civilizations to the present global village and Internet-oriented knowledge systems, have had to depend on people who moved—and can move—words, sentences, images, and themes from one language world to another. One knowledge system to another. Translation is essential if we want to avoid monocultures of the mind.

## Author



Editor and translator **Mini Krishnan** has degrees in English Literature from Bangalore and Delhi Universities. She has been in publishing for more than two decades. She works for Oxford University Press India, where she sources and edits both literary and non-literary works from 13 Indian languages. She is a member of the National Translation Mission and of the Indian Literature Abroad—a Government of India venture that seeks to promote Indian literature in five world languages.