International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)
ISSN (Online): 2319 – 7722, ISSN (Print): 2319 – 7714
www.ijhssi.org ||Volume 14 Issue 10 || October 2025 || PP. 14-19

Complexities of Narration and Translation in the Folklore Collections of the Nineteenth Century

Sanjukta Naskar
Associate Professor
English Department
Janki Devi Memorial College
Delhi University

Abstract
English words are used differently in an Indian context. This presumption leads one to verily survey the bevy of folktale collections made in India in the nineteenth century when most of the collected folktales appeared as translations. Translation in its rudimentary sense would imply to "express the sense of (word, sentence, book) in or into another language." However, analysing the body of folktales collected and compiled in nineteenth century India, the meaning of the term culminates into an altogether different sense, more closely associating with the sense of "transcreation" or "transliteration". This departure from a linguistic manifestation of folktales in the nineteenth century identifies an oversight vis à vis the nature of folktales, which grounds its essential attribute on linguistic diversity as an identifying quality dominant upon the process of expression and percolation of tales.

This engagement with literary translation in India in the nineteenth century freely draws upon folktales which was prevalent as a thriving culture in its primary oral form. The body of literary folktales thus produced opens up a discourse on the multi-dimensional nature of the collected folktales. In my paper I attempt to analyse this character of translated/transcreated Indian folktales produced in the ninteenth century which gives birth to a uniquely monolithic existence and character to Indian folktales.
Keywords: *Translation, folktales, nineteenth century, folktales, transcreation*

Date of Submission: 02-10-2025 Date of Acceptance: 11-10-2025

I. Introduction

The bulk of Indian folktales collected and compiled in the nineteenth century are in translation, translated into a better known language that is, English. Even before the concept of translating literary texts into another language had germinated as a field of study, translation of indigenous Indian folktales was being undertaken by the British colonisers in the nineteenth century. Translation appeared to be the most natural step towards compiling Indian folktales in order to represent India in the global discourse of the "Origin of Folktales". The quality or methodology of translation, the modes of dissemination, linguistic changes was not coded nor were the translators answerable; translation served the purpose to merely bridge, to crossover to a larger discourse of the genealogy of folktales. The originally oral expression is thus replaced by the written document without any information on the interim native language version of the folktale. In my paper I wish to first dwell on certain observations relating to translating folktales and in the second half I wish to consider the problematic areas of such translations.

Theorising Translation

Translation has always been seen as regrettable, an inferior product which is always a second alternative to a more proficient primary version. While this is hugely contested in the twentieth century discourse on translation, translation as a process has survived and in the contemporary literary world serves to associate texts across cultures. The translator is equally involved as his product; his task is further accentuated by his double task of linking the text to his intended audience. However, Walter Benjamin in his essay "Task of a Translator" mentions, "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator". (Benjamin 2007:79) The success of any translation is heavily dependent on the translator's knowledge of the culture which reproduced the originals, and "their ability to raise up in our minds the illusion that we also are part of that culture." (Hutson 1949:342) The complexity of

folktale translations, unlike literary translations is manifested by the fact that folktales are products of a society with which it is difficult to achieve a complete acquaintance since the cultural matrix of such a society has evolved over the years and is sufficiently represented in the narrative. The work of a translator is further influenced by his or her immediate audience and their experience or inexperience with the foreign or alien culture. In the case of the latter the 'inexperience' can be bridged with assistance from the translator. The relationship between the translator and his intended audience is further entrenched with common trust and inheritance in which the mass of material is structured and reproduced in a suitably accepted way. In the case of the bulk of Indian folktales copiously translated by the colonial translators the trust is confirmed with the translations remaining faithful to the accepted paradigm of the Orient.

A collector-translator caters to two kinds of reading audiences- a scholarly audience and – a juvenile audience. The former would be engaged with the cognitive sciences that would elucidate perspectives on traditions and histories, whereas for the latter the interest would be directed towards amusement and an introduction to a fascinating world of fabulous stories. The folktales firstly became cultural manifestations of the people who produced them and secondly became valued purely for the aesthetic value the tales exuded. Translation of Indian folktales into English proved to be an essential challenge in the course of folktale collection in India in the nineteenth century by the colonial administrators. Yet the collection of folktales was primarily driven by a desire to configure a storiology and expand perspectives on traditions and histories of popular storytelling and reinstating theories in comparative folklore and folktale. The heterogeneous spoken and written languages of India provided a diversity too ample to be brought under a single umbrella; therefore, by translating the folktales into one common language that is English, the folktales were given a sense of homogeneity. This homogeneity proved to be deceptive and short-lived since a culture-based heterogeneous manifestation reflected through the folktales cannot be compensated by linguistic homogeneity. However, the heterogeneity of Indian folktales that was available in the nineteenth century in English thus broadened the horizon and provided a general global acceptance of India as a leading repository of folktales.

Translating Indian Folktales

Joseph Jacobs in his Preface to *Indian Fairy Tales* makes a pointed remark, "Though Indian fairy tales are the earliest in existence, yet they are also from another point of view the youngest." (Jacobs 1892: ix) Nothing can further fully substantiate the dependability and complete authorisation of the colonisers over nineteenth century Indian folktale collection. The nineteenth century conversions of oral tales into the written format involved two distinct processes, that of converting the oral to written and secondly, translating the same written (in indigenous languages) into a foreign language. The importance of the written language of the tales overrode the importance of the language of communication of the tales, since the latter did not provoke the urgency to preserve the same in the primary language of creation. That is lost, only the translated version remains. Sadhana Naithani explains this phenomenon very clearly, "Colonial folktales' collections could not even be thought of without translation. The value and the change were both connected to this process of translation. Indeed, it is a unique case of translation - where the translated text was more important than the original. For example, none of the colonial collectors kept the manuscripts in the vernacular languages. The status of English texts has gained even more significance due to this absence." (Naithani 2008:2) The quality of translation of the oral tale was guided by two aspects: firstly, that the structure and essence of the tale which needs to be preserved, and the British administrators took great pains to ensure that the narrative is not tampered with. With such an approach, the linguistic appropriation of the tale somehow loses its importance whereas, the construct reveals itself as essentially worth preserving. This in a way plagues all of oral tradition, especially folktales, where it is clearly observed that the "type" of the tale is what gives the tales its signification. This is actually detrimental to the genre of folklore since the linguistic manifestation of a tale and a community is lost and we simply conserve the bare skeleton doing away with the flesh and skin which renders it appealing. The linguistic creativity is compromised with since the translator is taking great pains to bring out as literal a translation as possible, and remove "spurious additions" (Day ix: 1884) forgetting that change which is the very character of all folktales is constantly appropriating surrounding events into the oral narrative. Moreover, these tales also served the purpose of entertaining, and therefore some purposeful deviations would have been devoted to making the tale appealing to the ears. The rhythm of the tale-telling is also lost in translation. Secondly, the tales were further "worked upon" to make them suitable for consumption by the sensitive young British minds, naturally assuming that the East depicted everything that was crude and unrefined, and in order to be accepted by the West changes have to be made in order to make the platter more appetizing. Such versions of conversion of folktales bring out the essential dichotomy that plagues folktale collection in nineteenth century India. The two distinct groups: the more studious and authentic British scholar-administrators and the more casual observers, the wives and daughters of the former who utilized their free hours by coaxing their ayahs, and servants (both men and women) to tell them stories they had heard as children. Folktale collection thus

bifurcated into two distinct divisions: story-book writing which was to essentially develop into a major field of study of children's literature and the academic endeavours as a branch of folklore. These two divisions can broadly be defined in the context of nineteenth century folktale collection with distinct features defining the collections. "Temple described his recording and transcription techniques as follows: We now come to the actual recording....

At first, of course, I had to see everything done under my own eye, but as I became satisfied that the munshi could be trusted to record accurately, the procedure finally adopted, and that now in use is to have the recitation taken down roughly as related, then carefully copied out in a clear Persian hand, and corrected and explained by the bard, his explanations being marginally noted. I then transcribe the whole into Roman characters myself, and translate it. The Roman transliteration and the translation is then gone over by the munshi who heard the song sung, and both are revised by myself finally in consultation with him." (1962: xi) (as quoted in Naithani 1997: 4)

The published text had thus gone through not only many minds but also many languages; yet the bard's own language, which Temple only terms "the rough local dialect," was left out as soon as the recitation was over. By writing simultaneously with narration, Temple faced the problem of narration speed, as a bard would "go through 300 to 400 lines at a time and then have a rest" (1962: x) (as quoted in Naithani 1997: 4). It can be assumed that part of the text was lost in this process. Later, the munshi wrote everything in Persian. Perhaps Temple (like most other anthropologists of the day) knew among eastern languages only Persian, which had been the court language in the preceding Mughal empire but never the language of the people." (Naithani, 1997: 4)

The "colonial folklorists" shared a certain uneasiness about the complex procedure of narration and translation that gave shape to their material. The very fact that they were collecting folklore made them perceive the essential difference in their vocation from that of the Orientalists and Indologists. For Indologists like Max Müller and Monier Williams the 'study' of India was an extension of their lives in Europe as Müller could well study Sanskrit in France (from Eugène Burnouf) or study his texts in the East India Company collection in London. Similarly, Monier Williams (1819-1899) could, without affecting his philological quest, spend his time teaching at Haileybury and Oxford. But for folklorists like Damant, Crooke and Temple such an academic life was implausible, as it did not suit either their career as "busy Indian official[s]" (as Temple described himself) or their folkloristic pursuits. They had to be in contact with the narrators - a murky ill-defined swarm of balladists and rural bards from whom they "extracted" their stories.

Rangeet Sengupta analyses their pursuit thus:

These narrators were essential for the tales to take shape, yet, for them the "administrator-scholar[s]" expressed a certain degree of repugnance and disgust. As Temple goes on to elaborate in the Preface to his *Legends*, "[M]any as the vices and faults of these people are . . . [t]he bhât, the mârâsî, the bharâîn, the jogí, the faqîr and all of that ilk are in truth but a sorry set of drunkards as a rule – tobacco, opium and a little food sufficing for their daily wants, and I have found out that a small payment, say one or two rupees for each separate song, and their keep in food and an abundance of their favourite drugs while employed, has amply satisfied them, and in some cases have been inducement sufficient to send other of their brethren to me." Temple's expertise in extracting stories from these bards was a part of the larger colonial game - a discourse of extraction and control. Temple often employs images that would blur the boundaries between his role as an administrator and his vocation as a scholar. His "catching of bards" was rooted in a Foucauldian disciplining through Knowledge. His was the irrevocable voice that could stamp any balladist as "a most disreputable rascal". It was he who would decidedly ascertain that the bards were "always very ignorant and often stupid to boot." It was for him to reap the harvest, he was the bard-catcher:

If you know how to recognize them when you see them, and catch them when you have lighted on them, you will find bards still wandering over the countryside by the score, so the harvest to be gathered is a very large one (Sengupta 2010).

The ambivalence of Temple's position can be easily comprehended if we glance at the actual process of his extraction of the bardic tales. The songs and tales were rendered to Temple's munshi Chaina Mal in Punjabi and were noted down by the munshi in Persian. This initial note was then "corrected and explained by the bard, his explanations being marginally noted". It was then this Persian version was transliterated by Temple in the Roman script and subsequently translated to English. This translation was then revised by Temple in consultation with the munshi. It is evident from this complex gaming in various different languages that Temple's stance of the all-knowing bard-catcher was at the best, illusive. The bards would have known very little Persian – which was primarily the language of Mughal court elites. Temple, on his part, seems to be not overtly familiar with Punjabi. Chaina Mal's proficiency in both Punjabi and English seems to be a matter of speculation. He stands as the mysterious middleman in this entire colonial game. This intricate linguistic exchange was hence pervaded by a sense of miscomprehension and doubt, an incessant latent fear of slippage

and chaos. This in many ways reflects the pervasive ambivalence in anthropological narratives born out of colonial encounters (Asad 1973).

The informants often refused to submit to the gaze of our administrator-scholars. This fact was often left unrecognised by the folklorists themselves who self-consciously, or unknowingly, affirmed their gaze to be omniscient. In 'Colonial Histories and Native Informants', Nicholas B. Dirks tells us about the resistance of people giving information on social customs to Colin Mackenzie and his assistants in various parts of South India in 1820-1821: "Knowledge was never imparted without suspicion and the direct invocation of some British authority. When British authority was not absolute . . . there were frequent difficulties . . ." (Dirks 1994). The informants often intentionally misinformed the researcher. Often they feared that the researcher worked "with an intention of exposing the secrets" of their way of life. This mutual mistrust, this mutual act of evasion, omission, gaming, deception – gave rise to the complex colonial discourse(s) that cannot be comprehended merely by a Saidian vision of unilateral hegemony (Carol, A. Breckenbridge and Van der Veer, Peter 1994). Sadhana Naithani exposes this inherent ambiguity, this essentially mutual re-framing, in her study of Temple:

"What was the response of the folktale narrators to Temple's invitations/ commands? Was it the collector's choice that only stories of saints and mythical heroes were recorded, or is there a possibility of a judicious narration on the part of the narrator and of silent censorship on the part of the munshis?" (Naithani 1997) We realise that answers to these questions are unknown, and also inherently unknowable. Many writers were rewriting each other through the folklorist's pen.

Discourses were indulged in by both the colonised and the colonisers – each redefining the Other by its own unique experience/s. Besides, these groups were not producing monolithic tonal music – there was plenty of heterogeneous polyphony within these groups too. Folklore in the late nineteenth century India, especially in the Bengali society, evidently reflected this polyphony. Evidently, both the sahib and the native were colonised by each other - both were re-encrypted and reshaped. Yet, the colonial narratives often tried (and mostly failed) to suppress these voice(s) of ambiguity. The ideals upheld by the Folklore Society (established in London in 1878) were of enlightened parochialism. Its journal *Folklore* voiced the late nineteenth century ideals of disciplining through Knowledge. Edward W. Brabooke's article in *Folklore* XII (1901) and Charlotte Burne's *The Handbook of Folklore* (1914) reaffirmed the "empire theory" of folklore, voiced by E. S. Hartland in his Presidential Address in 1900. Hartland emphasised the "practical advantages for the governors, district officers and judges of an enlightened mother-country in learning through folklore about the cultures of the native people under their dominions" (Jobson 1999). Temple does not delude himself about the reason for amassing his collection. For him, this "will enhance our influence over the natives and render our intercourse with them more easy and interesting" (Morrison 1984). He was the distinguished Victorian who would subsequently give lectures on Anthropology in Cambridge in 1904. Temple surely affirmed to his "White Man's Burden". By collecting his book of Bengali folktales as a response to Temple's request, Day acknowledged his own position in the colonial paradigmatic discourse of control.

The Native Collector

Folktale collections by natives in the nineteenth century are sporadic. In most cases natives were the chief informants. As Kirin Narayan analyses, "A chief informant might also be trained in anthropological modes of data collection so that the society could be revealed from within" (Narayan 1993). Franz Boas further argues that materials reported and inscribed by a trained native would have "the immeasurable advantage of trustworthiness, authentically revealing precisely the elusive thoughts and sentiments of the native" (as cited in Narayan 1993). In the case of a smart and adequately Westernised native with a keen interest in folklore would reveal a particular society to the profession with an insider's eye. Kirin Narayan further observes that: "Ordinary people commenting on their society, chief informants friendly with a foreign anthropologist, or insiders trained to collect indigenous texts were all in some sense natives contributing to the enterprise of anthropology. Yet, it was only those who received the full professional initiation into a disciplinary fellowship of discourse who became the bearers of the title of "native" anthropologist" (Narayan 1993). Who then was the native collector? With collections made by Rev Lal Behari Day which incidentally was initiated and later authenticated by Richard Carnac Temple, Day established himself as one of the native forerunners of Indian folkore studies. However, very few were able to enter into the charmed circle of professional discourse because most Indians were considered to be potential tools for data collection for the administrator-folklorists. The native collector unlike their European counterpart was placed at a completely different situation, heavily influenced by the Renaissance the natives saw themselves at the threshold of progress and modernization. This leads to the rise of the Nationalist discourse that the Bengali intelligentsia was exposed to. It is also associated with an acute perception of disjunction between the necessarily androgynous cultural archetypes of South Asia and the gendered identities of the Victorian Imperial discourse. This led to the perception of the natives as childlike – who required cultural 'taming' through the Western, modern and/ or Christian hermeneutical devices in order to mature into adulthood. This also necessitated the repression of the childish (as opposed to the unlearned

innocence of the childlike) – the "unwilling to learn, ungrateful, sinful, savage, unpredictably violent, disloyal" traits in the native psyche. This is reflected in the manner in which both the Victorian-Edwardian discourse as well as the incipient Nationalism viewed the South-Asian traditions and wrote its histories. As Nandy explains:

The colonial ideology handled the problem in two mutually inconsistent ways. Firstly, it postulated a clear disjunction between India's past and its present. The civilized India was the bygone past; it was dead and "museumized". The present India, the argument went, was only nominally related to its history... Secondly and paradoxically, the colonial culture postulated that India's later degradation was not due to colonial rule - which, if anything, had improved Indian culture by fighting against its irrational, oppressive, retrogressive elements - but due to aspects of the traditional Indian culture which in spite of some good points carried the seeds of India's later cultural downfall (Nandy 2005). The position therefore of the native informant was precarious solely dependent on the administrator –scholar. Again with the initiated and educated native folklorist like Rev. Lal Behari Day the translated product is very similar to that of the colonial folklorists and the only visible change is in the absence of the translator-munshis. The translated texts whether by the natives or colonialists were unanimously similar.

Lal Behari, in his Preface to the Tales, expresses this acutely problematic position of paradoxical affiliations – of writing the tales of the folk who were at once the ossified stereotypes to be viewed from a distance (even if sympathetically), of giving a voice to the old women and little children of a bygone nostalgia-tinged childhood; of identifying intimately, yet, of objectifying out of sheer necessity. Lal Behari begins his Preface by such an act of problematic reminiscence:

In my *Peasant Life of Bengal* I make the peasant boy Govinda spend some hours every evening in listening to stories told by an old woman, who was called Sambhu's mother, and who was the best story-teller in the village (Day 1874).

Day later reveals to us that Sambhu's mother was not a fictional character, but someone from whom he had heard his own childhood stories. Failing to find someone who could narrate him the unwritten stories that Temple had desired to be collected, he laments:

But where was an old story-telling woman to be got? I had myself, when a little boy, heard hundreds - it would be no exaggeration to say thousands - of fairy tales from the same old woman, Sambhu's mother - for she was no fictitious person; she actually lived in the place and bore that name; but I had nearly forgotten those stories... How I wished that poor Sambhu's mother had been alive! But she had gone long, long ago, to that bourne from which no traveller returns, and her son Sambhu, too, had followed her thither (Day 1874).

This passage reveals the intense feeling of unalterable change that characterises the late nineteenth century bhadraloki discourse. The lost childhood typifies this lack – which is half-resented and yet, accepted as irrevocable. This disjunction is expressed by the transformation of the essentially cyclical world-view of the South Asian traditions to the irreversible travel to that "bourne from which no traveller returns". And there has been an act of appropriation – Sambhu is made to symbolize and justify the modern (and for Day, decidedly, Reformist/ Baptist) discourse by his very absence. The Bengali folktales hence are tales of the past, references to the present are but "spurious additions".

II. Conclusion

Walter Benjamin mentions, "Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly" (Benjamin 2007:81) These attributes of the translator would have been indispensable when it comes of the scholar translating folktales. The nineteenth century was the founding ground for the emergence of English as a "link language" in India. The literary role of English surfaced during the twentieth century, yet the use and utility of the language clearly prefigures in the policies related to the establishment of English education in India. Such an atmosphere would have made an indirect impact on the production of a literary culture of India in India

The collector-translator of folktales and the subsequent readers were placed within absolutely divergent societies and the task of the translator is explained by C. A. Kincaid in the Preface to his *Deccan Nursery Tales or Fairy Tales from the South* (1914) thus, "I have translated all of them as literally as possible from the original Marathi. But, owing to the difference between Marathi and English canons of taste, I have had in very few places slightly to change the sense. In some places owing to the obscurity of the original text, I have had to amplify the translation. In other places I have had to cut short the descriptions of Hindu rites and ceremonies so as to avoid wearying the English reader." (Kincaid 1914: vii) Notably Kincaid halts his process of literal translation keeping in mind "English canons of taste" and the "obscurity of the original text."

Works Cited

[1]. Asad, Talal (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, (NJ and London: Ithaca Press, 1973)

[2]. Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Intro. Hannah Arendt. Preface. Leon Wieseltier. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. Print.

[3]. Breckenbridge, Carol, A. and Van der Veer, Peter (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 215- 249

[4]. Day, Lal Behari. *Folk Tales of Bengal*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1884. Print.

[5]. Day, Lal Behari. *Govinda Samanta or Bengal Peasant Life*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1874. Print.

[6]. Dirks, Nicolas B., 'Colonial Histories and Narrative Informants: Biography of an Archive', in Carol, A. Breckenbridge and Van der Veer, Peter (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.297

[7]. Hutson, Arthur E. "The Translations of Folk Tales." *Western Folklore*. 8.4 (1949): 342-347. Print.

[8]. Jacobs, Joseph. Sel. and ed. *Indian Fairy Tales*. illus. John D. Batten. London: David Nutt, 1892. Print.

[9]. Jobson, Richard (ed.), *History of British Folklore*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 332

[10]. Kincaid, C.A. *Deccan Nursery Tales or Fairy Tales from the South*. Illus. M.V. Dhurandhar. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1914. Print.

[11]. Morrison, Charles, 'Three Systems of Colonial Ethnography: British Officials and Anthropologists in India', in Kuklick, Heinrika, and Long, Elizabeth (eds.), *Knowledge and Society: Studied in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, Vol. 5, (New York: JAI Press, 1984), p.150

[12]. Naithani, Sadhana. "Value of Changing Forms: Indian Folktales from Colonialism to Bollywood. Presented at Symposium." *Fairy Tales and Folk Tales: Translation, Colonialism, Cinema* (Sep. 23-26). Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2008. Print.

[13]. Naithani, Sadhana. "The Colonizer-Folklorist." *Journal of Folklore Research*. Indian: Indiana University Press. 34.1 (1997): 1-14. Print.

[14]. Sengupta, Rangeet. ""spurious additions": Lal Behari Day and the Discovery of the Genuine Folk." Web. 30 June 2010. www.literature-study-online.com/essays/bengali-folktales.html

[15]. Temple, Richard Carnac, *Legends of the Panjab*. Vol. 1, (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1884), p. vii-x

[16]. Nandy, Ashis, 'The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age and Ideology in 'British India', pp.1-63, in The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism, in the omnibus edition *Exiled at Home*, (New Delhi: Oxford India, 2005) Narayan, Kirin. "How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist*. USA: New Series. 95.3 (1993): 671-686. Print.