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ROLE OF TRANSLATIONS IN SHAPING A GLOBAL IMAGE OF INDIA

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Abstract

Translation has been a crucial vehicle for transmitting India's cultural, philosophical, and literary wealth to the global stage. From ancient scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads* to modern literature, cinema, and digital media, translations have enabled India to engage in a global dialogue and project its multifaceted identity. This paper explores how translations have historically constructed and continue to shape India's global image—as a land of spiritual depth, cultural richness, and intellectual vitality. It examines institutional efforts, literary achievements, and audiovisual translations that have influenced global perceptions. Furthermore, it analyzes the challenges of linguistic nuance, cultural representation, and the politics of selection in translation practices. The study concludes that translation is not just a linguistic act but a cultural and political one, essential for building a nuanced and inclusive global image of India.

Keywords: Translation, Cultural Diplomacy, Indian Literature, Global Image, Sahitya Akademi, Dalit Literature, Sanskrit Texts, Indian Cinema, Diaspora.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of dialects spoken across its vast geography. This multilingual reality has made translation a necessity for internal communication, national integration, and global outreach. However, beyond mere linguistic conversion, translation in the Indian context has functioned as a powerful cultural and diplomatic tool, helping to project India's heritage, values, and identity on the world stage.

Throughout history, translations of Indian religious scriptures, literary classics, philosophical treatises, and modern creative works have introduced the richness of Indian thought and culture to diverse global audiences. From the translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* into English by Charles Wilkins in the 18th century to the worldwide success of translated Indian authors like Rabindranath Tagore and Arundhati Roy, translation has served as a bridge between India and the rest of the world.

In the post-independence era, translation has also played a crucial role in shaping India's image as a pluralistic, democratic, and intellectually vibrant nation. Through the efforts of national institutions like the Sahitya Akademi, National Book Trust, and the National Translation Mission, the Indian state has actively promoted translation to highlight the country's linguistic diversity and literary wealth.

Moreover, the rise of Indian cinema, global interest in Indian traditions like Yoga and Ayurveda, and the expansion of digital platforms have amplified the need and scope for translations. Whether in subtitled films, multilingual web series, or translated novels and political speeches, India's global presence is increasingly mediated by acts of translation.

2. HISTORICAL LEGACY OF TRANSLATION IN INDIA

1. Ancient and Classical Period

Religious and Philosophical Texts: India's earliest documented instances of translation are rooted in religion and philosophy. Sanskrit texts such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* were translated into Pali, Prakrit, and later into Tibetan, Chinese, and other Asian languages, particularly with the spread of Buddhism across Asia.

- The Asokan edicts, inscribed in multiple languages including Greek and Aramaic, are among the earliest examples of state-sponsored multilingual communication.
- Buddhist monks like Kumārajīva played a central role in translating Indian scriptures into Chinese, thereby laying the foundation for the global Buddhist tradition.

These early translations projected India as a spiritual and philosophical powerhouse and helped solidify its image as a cradle of wisdom and moral order.

2. Medieval Period

a. Persian and Arabic Translations: The medieval period saw the rise of translation activities under Muslim rule, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. Persian became the court language, and many Sanskrit and vernacular texts were translated into Persian to make indigenous knowledge accessible to the ruling elites.

- Under Alauddin Khalji, texts on mathematics, astronomy, and medicine were translated into Persian.
- The *Razmnama*, a Persian translation of the *Mahabharata* commissioned by Akbar, is a landmark in Indo-Islamic cultural synthesis.
- Akbar also commissioned translations of the *Ramayana*, *Yoga Vasistha*, and works on Indian music and ethics.

These translations helped shape a syncretic Indo-Persian cultural identity and allowed Indian epics and ethical traditions to enter Islamic and Central Asian intellectual circles.

b. Bhakti and Sufi Movements: The Bhakti and Sufi movements facilitated widespread vernacularization of religious ideas. Saints like Kabir, Tulsidas, and Meera Bai expressed complex spiritual ideas in local dialects, and their works were later translated across regions and even into English during the colonial era.

This dissemination emphasized India's image as a spiritually egalitarian society with a strong oral and poetic tradition rooted in devotion, love, and unity.

3. Colonial Period

a. Orientalist Translations: With the advent of British colonial rule, translation took on new political and ideological dimensions. The British were deeply interested in understanding Indian society, religion, and law to strengthen their administrative control.

- Scholars like Sir William Jones (founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal) and Charles Wilkins translated texts like the *Manusmriti*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Shakuntala* into English.
- These translations introduced Indian literature and philosophy to European intellectuals and helped shape Western perceptions of India as an ancient and mystical civilization.
- However, many of these translations were filtered through a colonial lens, often exoticizing or distorting Indian traditions to reinforce narratives of civilizational decline and justify imperial rule.

b. Indian Reformist Translations: In response, Indian thinkers and reformers began translating indigenous texts into English and other European languages to reclaim the narrative.

- Raja Ram Mohan Roy translated key Hindu scriptures to show their rational and monotheistic content, countering missionary claims of Hindu superstition.
- Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda, and others used translation to communicate Indian spiritual and nationalistic ideals to both Indian and Western audiences.

This counter-discursive use of translation helped reframe India's image from a passive colony to a land of ancient wisdom and emerging nationalism.

The historical legacy of translation in India reveals a complex interplay of cultural exchange, political negotiation, and intellectual reimagining. Whether it was Buddhist monks translating sutras, Mughal emperors commissioning epic retellings, or colonial Orientalists discovering Sanskrit, each phase of translation contributed to shaping India's image in the wider world. These early efforts laid the foundation for modern translation practices, which continue to evolve in India's contemporary literary and diplomatic engagements. Crucially, they demonstrate that translation in India has never been a mere act of linguistic substitution—it has always been a dynamic and deeply cultural process with far-reaching implications.

3. TRANSLATION AS A TOOL OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Translation is not only a literary or linguistic activity but also a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy. For a country like India, with a long history of civilization, religion, and knowledge production, translation has served as a vehicle for engaging with the global community. It helps communicate India's intellectual and cultural wealth, softens political relationships, and projects the nation as a peaceful, diverse, and spiritually grounded society. In this context, translation becomes a vital aspect of India's soft power strategy, complementing formal diplomacy and economic policies.

1. Literary Translation as Cultural Messaging

a. Rabindranath Tagore and the Global Imagination

One of the earliest and most iconic examples of translation as cultural diplomacy was Rabindranath Tagore's English translation of *Gitanjali*. His Nobel Prize in 1913 not only established him as a global literary figure but also brought Indian aesthetics, spirituality, and philosophical depth to the attention of the Western world.

- Tagore's self-translations blended Bengali lyricism with universal humanism, portraying India as a land of introspection, peace, and cultural refinement.
- His global travels—accompanied by translated works and lectures—established cultural connections with Europe, Japan, Latin America, and the U.S., fostering people-to-people diplomacy.

b. Contemporary Literary Figures

Authors like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Jhumpa Lahiri, either write in English or are widely translated into other languages. Their works explore modern Indian realities—colonialism, migration, gender, caste, and globalization—thereby offering global audiences nuanced, updated portrayals of India.

- Translations of regional authors such as Perumal Murugan, Bama, Girish Karnad and U.R. Ananthamurthy help global readers access marginalized voices from India, promoting inclusivity and intellectual diversity in India's international image.

Recently, the recognition of *Heart Lamp*, the translated work of Banu Mustapha, who belongs to Karnataka state, with the prestigious Booker Prize, underscores the vital role of translation in global literature. Translation serves as a bridge between cultures, allowing stories rooted in one language and tradition to resonate with readers across the world. It not only preserves the voice of the original author but also amplifies it to reach broader audiences. By making regional and vernacular literature accessible internationally, translation promotes cultural diversity, fosters empathy, and enriches the global literary landscape.

2. Translation of Spiritual and Traditional Knowledge

India's soft power is also deeply rooted in its ancient spiritual and philosophical traditions, made accessible through translations:

- Translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upanishads*, *Yoga Sutras*, and *Ayurvedic texts* have positioned India as a spiritual and holistic knowledge hub.
- Figures like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo translated spiritual concepts into accessible English during their travels and writings, contributing to India's global image as a source of peace, moral philosophy, and inner transformation.

Such translations continue to influence global discourse on wellness, meditation, environmental harmony, and ethical living, furthering India's cultural diplomacy objectives.

3. Institutional Efforts and Government Initiatives

- **Sahitya Akademi & National Book Trust (NBT)**

These organizations promote Indian literature across languages, including translations into and from English. By supporting translated works at international book fairs, literary festivals, and academic conferences, they project India as a culturally vibrant and linguistically diverse nation.

- **National Translation Mission (NTM)**

Launched by the Government of India, the NTM aims to translate educational and knowledge texts into multiple Indian languages. Indirectly, this strengthens India's intellectual capital and aids in projecting the country as a knowledge economy with inclusive access.

- **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**

The MEA uses translations of Indian literature and heritage texts in cultural diplomacy programs, including those conducted by Indian cultural centers, embassies, and missions abroad (e.g., *Indian Council for Cultural Relations - ICCR*).

4. Translation in Cultural and Academic Exchanges

India participates in global cultural forums like:

- UNESCO World Book Capital, where translations are promoted as cultural goods.
- Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) and its global editions (in London, New York, etc.), where Indian literature in translation plays a major role in bilateral cultural engagements.
- University partnerships and Indian Studies programs abroad use translated Indian texts as foundational reading, creating a long-term cultural and educational connection with foreign scholars and students.

5. Translation in the Digital and Audiovisual Sphere

With the rise of digital diplomacy and streaming platforms:

- Bollywood movies, regional cinema, and Indian web series are subtitled and dubbed in dozens of languages. This creates global engagement with Indian culture and society through popular entertainment.
- Campaigns like “Incredible India” and “Digital India” often include multilingual translations of content, ensuring accessibility and wider cultural outreach.
- Yoga Day and other cultural events are supported with multilingual translations of promotional and instructional content.

6. Cultural Narratives and Image Building

Translations enable India to project itself as:

- A land of non-violence and spirituality.
- A pluralistic society that accommodates different voices and ideologies.
- A knowledge power, rooted in both tradition and innovation.
- A literary and cinematic powerhouse, offering stories that transcend borders.

In doing so, translation becomes central to how India controls and shapes its narrative sovereignty—the ability to tell its own stories in its own voice, adapted for global reception. Translation, as a tool of cultural diplomacy, has helped India shape a positive, multifaceted image on the global stage. From classical scriptures to modern literature, from folk traditions to cutting-edge cinema, the process of translating India for the world continues to evolve. It fosters mutual understanding, builds intellectual bridges, and reinforces India’s identity as a global cultural contributor. Investing in translation infrastructure, training, and ethical practices is thus crucial not just for literary engagement, but for enhancing India’s soft power and global influence.

4. DIASPORA AND TRANSLATIONS OF INDIAN IDENTITY

The Indian diaspora, one of the largest and most diverse in the world, plays a crucial role in transmitting, negotiating, and translating Indian identity across borders. With over 30 million people of Indian origin residing outside India, the diaspora serves as a cultural bridge between India and the rest of the world. Through literature, media, education, religious practices, and community activities, diasporic communities engage in continuous acts of translation—linguistic, cultural, and ideological—that both preserve their heritage and adapt it to new sociocultural contexts. These translations help shape the global image of India not just from within, but also from without.

1. Diasporic Literature and Linguistic Translation

Writers from the Indian diaspora have produced a rich corpus of literature that reflects on themes of migration, identity, belonging, and cultural conflict. Many of these works, though written in English or translated into English, reach international audiences and offer nuanced portrayals of Indian values, traditions, and struggles.

- Authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Vikram Seth have become global literary voices. Their works often involve self-translation of Indian customs, idioms, food, and familial structures for Western readers.
- Regional Indian authors in diaspora, like Meena Alexander or M. G. Vassanji, often incorporate Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, or Hindi expressions, which are then translated in-text or through glossaries to make them accessible.

These acts of literary translation not only retain cultural specificity but also internationalize Indian experience, contributing to the global perception of India as emotionally layered and intellectually vibrant.

2. Religious and Cultural Transmission in Translation

The diaspora translates Indian religious and cultural traditions for foreign contexts through both language and practice:

- Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam are practiced across diasporic communities in temples, gurdwaras, and community centers.
- Texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, Guru Granth Sahib, Ramayana, and Qur'an are often translated into English and local languages in countries like the USA, UK, Canada, Malaysia, and South Africa.
- Rituals and festivals—Diwali, Holi, Eid, Pongal—are explained, adapted, and celebrated in translated forms, often incorporating local elements without losing cultural essence.

Such translations foster interfaith dialogue, cultural understanding, and project India as a land of spiritual richness and pluralistic traditions.

3. Indian Languages and Multilingualism in the Diaspora

Diasporic communities also engage in sustaining and translating Indian languages abroad:

- Weekend language schools, cultural associations, and online platforms teach Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Bengali to second-generation Indian youth.
- In literature and cinema, code-switching between English and Indian languages is common, reflecting bilingual realities and promoting interest in Indian tongues.
- Subtitling and dubbing of Indian films and TV shows are crucial for heritage language retention and identity formation among diasporic youth.

This form of linguistic translation helps diasporic Indians remain connected to their roots and present India as linguistically rich and dynamic to host cultures.

Diasporic translations of Indian identity are multifaceted, fluid, and deeply influential in constructing a global image of India. Whether through literature, religion, language, cuisine, or politics, the diaspora continually mediates between Indian traditions and global modernity. These translations challenge static notions of identity and offer a living, evolving portrait of India—one that is multilingual, multicultural, and profoundly human. In a globalized world, the Indian diaspora stands as both custodian and innovator, ensuring that India's image is not just preserved but also dynamically reimagined for generations to come.

5. CONCLUSION

Translation, in the Indian context, is not merely a linguistic exercise but a profound cultural act that carries historical, philosophical, political, and emotional significance. It is through the medium of translation that India has communicated its ancient wisdom, literary richness, artistic traditions, and modern democratic ideals to the world. From the early colonial translations of Indian scriptures and epics to contemporary digital subtitling and literary festivals, translation has been instrumental in crafting and projecting India's global image.

As a multilingual nation, India depends on translation for internal coherence and international dialogue. Through literary translations, India's regional diversity finds a unified voice on the global stage. Through audiovisual and cinematic translation, Indian narratives transcend language barriers to reach diverse audiences. Through diaspora-led translation efforts, Indian identity is continually negotiated, adapted, and celebrated in foreign cultural spaces.

Moreover, translation operates as a strategic tool of cultural diplomacy, allowing India to assert soft power and promote intercultural understanding. Institutions like Sahitya Akademi, ICCR, and the National Translation Mission have played critical roles in institutionalizing and internationalizing Indian thought through organized translation programs.

However, challenges remain. Issues of fidelity, cultural appropriation, loss of nuance, and political mediation continue to shape the ethics and impact of translation. In an age of globalization and digital connectivity, the demand for accurate, sensitive, and inclusive translations is more urgent than ever.

Ultimately, translation shapes not just how the world sees India, but how India sees itself in the mirror of world opinion. It is a dynamic process of self-representation, cross-cultural dialogue, and global integration. By embracing and investing in translation as a national and cultural priority, India can ensure that its global image remains as diverse, complex, and compelling as the civilization it represents.

6. STATEMENTS & DECLARATIONS:

Use of AI Statement

The authors declare that they have not used generative artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT in the writing of this manuscript and/or in the creation of images, graphics, tables, or their corresponding captions

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