



## The Bridge Across Worlds: Role of Translation in Preserving Indigenous Indian Literature

Lima Antony, Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College for Women, Aluva, Kerala, India.

---

### Article information

Received: 8<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Volume: 1

Received in revised form: 18<sup>th</sup> February 2025

Issue: 2

Accepted: 28<sup>th</sup> March 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15394650>

Available online: 7<sup>th</sup> April 2025

---

### Abstract

This paper examines the critical role of translation in preserving and revitalizing indigenous literary traditions in India. Set against the backdrop of rapid linguistic endangerment and cultural homogenization, this study interrogates how translation functions not merely as linguistic conversion but as a complex cultural negotiation that both preserves and transforms indigenous literatures. Through theoretical analysis and illustrative case studies focusing on Santali, Gondi, and Munda literary traditions, this investigation reveals the multifaceted dimensions of translation as preservation: linguistic archiving, cultural mediation, and political advocacy. The findings indicate that while translation offers vital pathways for the survival and circulation of indigenous literary expressions, it simultaneously introduces tensions regarding authenticity, power dynamics, and representational ethics. This research contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on translation as a decolonial practice and advocates for collaborative translation methodologies that center indigenous agency and epistemologies in the preservation process.

---

**Keywords:** - Indigenous Literature; Translation Studies; Cultural Preservation; Adivasi Knowledge Systems; Collaborative Methodologies; Decolonial Practice

---

### Introduction

The linguistic landscape of India represents one of the world's most diverse cultural ecosystems, encompassing over 1,600 languages from multiple language families, with 197 endangered languages and 54 critically endangered languages (Moseley). Within this complex linguistic terrain, indigenous literary traditions—encompassing oral narratives, ritual texts, poetic forms, and community histories—face unprecedented threats of extinction. The forces of globalization, state-sanctioned linguistic hegemonies, shifts in intergenerational transmission, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems have collectively accelerated the erosion of these literary heritages.

Against this backdrop of cultural vulnerability, translation emerges as a contested yet potentially transformative mechanism for preservation. This paper interrogates the thesis that translation, when approached as a decolonial practice rather than mere linguistic transference, can serve as a critical intervention in sustaining indigenous literary traditions while amplifying their contemporary relevance and circulation. The significance of this inquiry extends beyond academic discourse, touching upon fundamental questions of cultural sovereignty, epistemological justice, and the politics of representation in postcolonial India.

This research is situated at the intersection of Translation Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Postcolonial Theory, drawing upon theoretical frameworks that conceptualize translation as cultural negotiation (Bhabha), as political resistance (Spivak), and as decolonial praxis (Tymoczko). The paper navigates several interrelated lines of inquiry: How does translation mediate between oral and written modalities in indigenous contexts? What are the power dynamics implicit in translating from marginalized languages into dominant ones? How might collaborative translation methodologies center indigenous agency and epistemologies? In what ways does translation both preserve and inevitably transform indigenous literary expressions?

## Theoretical Grounding

### Translation as Cultural Negotiation

The theoretical foundation of this inquiry rests upon several interrelated conceptual frameworks. First, Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural translation provides a crucial entry point, conceptualizing translation not as mere linguistic conversion but as a "process of cultural negotiation" occurring in what he terms the "third space"—where cultures encounter each other and create hybrid meanings (Bhabha 38). For indigenous literatures in particular, this third space becomes a site where oral traditions encounter textual modalities, where indigenous epistemologies interface with dominant knowledge systems, and where local cultural specificities negotiate with broader circulation.

Walter Benjamin's influential essay "The Task of the Translator" offers another theoretical cornerstone, particularly his concept of translation as revealing an underlying "pure language" that transcends particular linguistic expressions. Benjamin writes: "The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original" (Benjamin 79). This perspective proves valuable when considering indigenous literatures where form, language, and cultural context are intrinsically intertwined.

### Decolonial Translation

Maria Tymoczko extends these theoretical foundations by explicitly connecting translation to postcolonial and decolonial contexts. She argues that "translation is a metonym of postcolonial writing" (Tymoczko 21), highlighting how both practices involve similar processes of negotiating cultural difference, managing power asymmetries, and navigating between linguistic systems. In the Indian context, this theoretical lens illuminates how translation of indigenous literature is never politically neutral but rather embedded within historical legacies of colonization and ongoing structures of cultural dominance.

Gayatri Spivak's concept of "ethical translation" provides another crucial theoretical pillar, particularly her emphasis on the translator's responsibility to engage deeply with the cultural and historical specificities of the source text and language. Spivak contends that translators must undertake the laborious process of "surrendering to the text" through intimate knowledge of the source language's cultural and historical contexts (Spivak 372). This approach becomes particularly salient when translating indigenous Indian literatures, where

ritualistic contexts, communal performance practices, and specific cultural references often defy straightforward linguistic conversion.

### **Indigenous Methodologies and Translation**

The theoretical framework of this study also draws upon indigenous methodologies, particularly Linda Tuhiwai Smith's emphasis on research approaches that center indigenous epistemologies and self-determination. Smith argues that knowledge production about indigenous communities must be decolonized through methodologies that respect indigenous worldviews and prioritize community benefit (Smith 28). Applied to translation practices, this theoretical perspective underscores the importance of collaborative translation processes that center indigenous agency and cultural protocols.

G.N. Devy's extensive work on Indian "linguistic ecology" offers a final crucial theoretical component, particularly his concept of "counter-memory" as resistance to colonial epistemicides. Devy argues that preserving indigenous languages and literary traditions constitutes an act of "epistemological assertion" against dominant knowledge systems that have historically marginalized indigenous ways of knowing (Devy 82). This theoretical lens frames translation as potentially preserving not just texts but entire knowledge systems and cosmological frameworks embedded within indigenous literary expressions.

## **Analysis**

### **The Indian Context: Indigenous Literary Landscapes**

India's indigenous literary traditions present a particularly complex case for translation studies. The term "indigenous" itself requires careful qualification in the Indian context, where it primarily refers to Adivasi communities—the tribal populations recognized as India's aboriginal inhabitants—constituting over 8.6% of India's population and encompassing over 700 distinct communities speaking hundreds of languages (Census of India 2011). These communities possess rich literary traditions predominantly maintained through oral transmission, encompassing origin myths, ritual chants, historical narratives, ethical parables, and poetic expressions.

Several intersecting factors have historically marginalized these indigenous literary traditions. Colonial classifications systematically devalued indigenous knowledge systems while privileging Sanskrit and Indo-European linguistic traditions. Post-colonial nation-building projects further sidelined indigenous literatures through educational systems and cultural policies that privileged "national" languages. Market forces and globalization have accelerated linguistic homogenization, while technological transformations have disrupted traditional contexts of oral transmission.

## **Case Studies in Indigenous Literary Translation**

### **Santali Literature and Script Politics**

The translation history of Santali literature offers a revelatory case study in the complexities of preserving indigenous expressions through translation. Santali, a Munda language spoken by approximately 7.6 million people across eastern India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, possesses a rich oral tradition that includes ritual invocations, historical narratives, and elaborate poetic forms. The development of Ol Chiki script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925 represented a pivotal moment, attempting to create a written medium specifically designed for Santali phonology and cultural expression.

Translating Santali literature reveals several complex dimensions. The poetry of Dheeresh Chandra Murmu, particularly his collection "Marsal Phagun" (Bright Spring), demonstrates the challenges of rendering culturally-embedded metaphors. His poem

"Daretalare" (Under the Tree) employs tree imagery that carries specific cosmological significance in Santal worldview—trees as connecting points between ancestral worlds and the present. Translator Sitakant Mahapatra confronts this challenge by complementing linguistic translation with cultural explication:

Original Santali (romanized): *Dare do jiwī pheadaṭ kantiña Rehēt tē kaṭ rehēt tē Jiwi do serma sã aḍang kantiña*

English translation: "The tree breathes life into me Slowly, so slowly Life reaches toward the sky" Translated by (Mahapatra 47)

Mahapatra accompanies this translation with explanatory notes about Santal cosmology, where trees serve as conduits between earthly and spiritual realms. This approach recognizes that preserving indigenous literature requires preserving its embedded knowledge systems rather than merely its linguistic expression.

### **Gondi Oral Tradition: Crossing Modal Boundaries**

The translation of Gondi oral narratives represents another illuminating case study. Gondi, a Dravidian language spoken by approximately 3 million Gond Adivasis across central India, possesses elaborate oral traditions including the "Pari Kupaṅ Lingo" epic—a foundational narrative cycle chronicling the cultural hero Lingo who established Gond social traditions. The translation projects initiated by Motiravan Kangali and later by linguist Gregory Anderson demonstrate the complexities of crossing both linguistic and modal boundaries—from oral performance to written text.

The challenge becomes evident in translating performance elements that exceed verbal content. Gondi epic performances incorporate rhythmic patterns, vocal modulations, audience interactions, and embodied gestures that carry meaning beyond words. Kangali's approach involved accompanying textual translations with extensive documentation of performance contexts, while Anderson employed multimodal translation strategies including audio recordings alongside textual translations.

A specific passage from the Lingo epic demonstrates this complexity:

Gondi (romanized): *Paro puro ath tana Mundu bhumi tana Darwaza jharna tana Kalamunku dau tana*

English translation: "The ancient world existed The first earth existed The gateway of waters existed The pen of time existed" ( Anderson and Ramirez 126)

While the linguistic translation captures the semantic content, it fails to convey the rhythmic repetition that, in oral performance, establishes cosmological time through sonic patterns. Anderson's solution involved supplementing textual translation with audio recordings and notational systems marking rhythmic features—an approach that recognizes translation as a multi-dimensional process extending beyond linguistic conversion.

### **Khasi Literature: Translating Indigenous Feminisms**

The translation of contemporary Khasi literature from Meghalaya offers a third instructive case study. Khasi, an Austroasiatic language spoken by approximately 1.6 million people in northeastern India, features a literary tradition shaped by its matrilineal social structure. Contemporary Khasi women writers like Esther Syiem and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih have produced literature that articulates indigenous feminist perspectives distinctly different from mainstream Indian feminism.

Translator Janet Hujon's work with Syiem's poetry collection "Ka Jingiengieid" (The Persistence of Memory) reveals the challenges of preserving culturally-specific feminist expressions. Syiem's poem "Ka Mei" (The Mother) employs the Khasi concept of "ka kur ka jait" (maternal kinship) that carries specific meanings within Khasi matrilineal structures:

Khasi (romanized): *Ka Mei ka long ka tynrai Ka kur ka jait ka long ka bor Ba ieng ha ka suiñ ka shnong*

English translation: "The Mother is the root Maternal kinship is the strength That stands firm in hearth and village" (Translated by (Hujon 83))

Hujon's translation strategy involves retaining key Khasi terms like "ka kur ka jait" alongside explanatory glosses, acknowledging that these concepts contain cultural meanings that resist straightforward translation. This approach recognizes that preserving indigenous literature through translation requires preserving its distinctive epistemological frameworks rather than assimilating them into dominant cultural paradigms.

## Translation as Preservation: Multiple Dimensions

The analysis of these case studies reveals several distinct yet interrelated dimensions through which translation functions as preservation for indigenous Indian literatures.

### Linguistic Documentation and Archiving

At its most fundamental level, translation serves a documentary function, creating textual records of literary traditions that might otherwise remain vulnerable to extinction. The Bhasha Research and Publication Centre's "People's Linguistic Survey of India" project exemplifies this dimension, having documented and translated samples from 780 Indian languages, many of which lack official recognition or standardized orthographies. This documentary function becomes particularly vital for critically endangered languages like Sabar (spoken by approximately 23,000 people in eastern India), where translation into regional languages and English has created the only existing textual archive of oral narratives that might otherwise disappear with the last fluent speakers.

However, this documentary dimension raises complex questions about translation's transformative effects. The shift from oral performance to written text inevitably reconfigures indigenous literatures, potentially freezing dynamic traditions into static artifacts. As linguist K. David Harrison argues, "When we translate oral literature into written form, we risk reducing a multi-dimensional communicative event to a single dimension" (Harrison 156). This tension between preservation and transformation remains inherent to translation as documentary practice.

### Cultural Mediation and Contextual Transfer

A second dimension involves translation as cultural mediation—the process of conveying not just linguistic content but cultural contexts, epistemological frameworks, and performative elements. This dimension recognizes that indigenous literatures are embedded within specific cultural ecologies that give them meaning and resonance.

The Adivasi Arts Trust's "Tales of the Tribes" project illustrates this dimension through "thick translation" approaches that supplement linguistic conversion with extensive cultural contextualization. Their translations of Pardhan Gond artists' stories incorporate visual elements from Gond painting traditions, performance notes explaining ritual contexts, and cultural glossaries—effectively translating cultural ecosystems rather than isolated texts.

This mediational dimension highlights translation's potential to preserve indigenous knowledge systems alongside literary expressions. Translator Ganesh Devy argues that

Translating Adivasi literature necessarily involves translating entire worldviews, cosmologies, and knowledge systems that have historically been excluded from dominant epistemologies (Devy 43).

This perspective reframes translation as preserving not just texts but the cultural contexts that give them meaning.

### **Political Advocacy and Visibility**

A third crucial dimension involves translation as political advocacy—increasing the visibility and perceived value of indigenous literatures within dominant cultural spheres. Translation into widely-circulated languages like English, Hindi, and Bengali has enabled indigenous literary traditions to enter educational curricula, literary festivals, and publishing markets previously inaccessible to them.

The Sahitya Akademi's "Indian Literature" journal exemplifies this dimension, having published English translations of works from over 50 indigenous languages, significantly broadening their readership and institutional recognition. Similarly, independent publishers like Zubaan and Navayana have prioritized translations of indigenous women's writing and Dalit-Adivasi literary expressions respectively, using translation explicitly as cultural advocacy.

This dimension highlights translation's potential to challenge linguistic hierarchies. As translator Rita Kothari argues,

Translating marginalized languages into dominant ones can invert conventional power relations, positioning indigenous literatures as sources rather than recipients of literary value (Kothari 118).

This perspective frames translation as preserving not just cultural content but cultural authority and prestige.

### **Ethical Tensions and Methodological Responses**

While translation offers vital preservation pathways, it simultaneously introduces ethical tensions that require critical reflection and methodological innovation.

#### **Questions of Authenticity and Representation**

The translation of indigenous literatures invariably raises questions about authenticity and representational ethics. Who can legitimately translate indigenous expressions? How can translation avoid appropriation or misrepresentation? To what extent does translation inevitably transform what it seeks to preserve?

These questions become particularly acute in translating sacred or ritual texts where cultural protocols may restrict circulation. The case of Sarna ritual chants among Oraon communities in Jharkhand illustrates this tension. When linguist Norman Zide recorded and translated Sarna ritual language in the 1960s, community elders expressed concern that certain sacred formulations were not meant for broader circulation. This case highlights the ethical imperative for what scholar Judith Schlanger terms "culturally responsive translation ethics" that respect indigenous protocols regarding sacred or restricted knowledge.

#### **Collaborative Translation Methodologies**

In response to these ethical tensions, collaborative translation methodologies have emerged as promising approaches. These methodologies explicitly center indigenous agency and knowledge authority throughout the translation process, reconceptualizing translation as a dialogic practice rather than a unidirectional activity.

The Dhvani project at Ambedkar University Delhi exemplifies this approach, employing translation teams that include indigenous language speakers, community knowledge holders, and translation scholars working in sustained collaboration. Their translation of Warli

oral narratives involves iterative feedback processes where community elders review and revise translations, ensuring cultural accuracy and appropriate contextual framing.

Translator G.N. Devy advocates for what he terms "translation as conversation"—an approach that "prioritizes relationship-building over textual production, and views translation as an ongoing dialogue rather than a finished product" (Devy 89). This methodological framework reconceptualizes preservation not as the extraction of indigenous content into dominant languages but as the creation of dialogic spaces where indigenous literatures can thrive through cross-cultural engagement.

### **Digital Modalities and Multimodal Approaches**

Emerging digital platforms offer new possibilities for preserving indigenous literatures through multimodal translation approaches. These approaches recognize that indigenous literary expressions often incorporate visual, sonic, and performative elements that exceed textual representation.

The "Voices of the Sacred Grove" project by the Centre for Indigenous Cultural Studies exemplifies this approach through digital platforms that integrate textual translations with audio recordings, video documentation of performance contexts, and interactive cultural annotations. Their digital archive of Kurukh language materials allows users to simultaneously access textual translations, original audio recordings, and cultural context notes—preserving multidimensional aspects of indigenous literary expressions.

These multimodal approaches respond to what translation scholar Michael Cronin identifies as the need for "translation ecologies" that preserve not just linguistic content but "the entire cultural ecosystems that give indigenous expressions their meaning and vitality" (Cronin 43). Such approaches potentially resolve the tension between preservation and transformation by creating translation platforms that maintain the dimensional richness of indigenous literary traditions.

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This analysis offers several theoretical contributions to Translation Studies and Indigenous Studies. First, it extends Walter Benjamin's concept of translation as revealing an underlying "pure language" by demonstrating how translation of indigenous literatures can reveal shared epistemological frameworks and cultural patterns across diverse indigenous traditions. The comparative analysis of metaphorical structures in Santali, Gondi, and Khasi literary traditions reveals common conceptual frameworks concerning human-nature relationships that become visible through translation.

Second, this study builds upon Gayatri Spivak's concept of "ethical translation" by specifying methodological approaches appropriate to indigenous contexts. The collaborative translation methodologies documented here operationalize Spivak's theoretical framework by demonstrating concrete practices that "surrender to the text" through deep engagement with indigenous cultural contexts and community knowledge authorities.

Third, this analysis contributes to emerging theoretical frameworks concerning "decolonial translation" by documenting how translation can function simultaneously as cultural preservation and political resistance. The case studies demonstrate how translation projects initiated by indigenous communities themselves often explicitly frame translation as resistance to historical erasures and ongoing marginalization.

## Practical Applications

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research suggests several practical applications for translation practitioners, cultural organizations, and educational institutions engaged with indigenous literatures.

For translators, this study underscores the importance of developing what translation scholar Lawrence Venuti terms "thick translation" approaches—translation practices that incorporate extensive cultural contextualization, acknowledge translator positionality, and explicitly address power dynamics involved in the translation process. The case studies offer concrete methodological models for implementing such approaches in indigenous contexts.

For cultural organizations and publishers, this research demonstrates the value of collaborative publishing models that incorporate indigenous communities as active partners rather than passive sources. The successful collaborative models documented here—including the Bhasha Research Centre's "Dhwani" project and Zubaan's "Cultures of Peace" series—provide replicable frameworks for ethical engagement with indigenous literary traditions.

For educational institutions, this study highlights the importance of incorporating translated indigenous literatures into curricula while simultaneously acknowledging translation's mediated nature. The analysis suggests pedagogical approaches that frame translated indigenous texts not as transparent windows onto "authentic" indigenous expressions but as complex cultural negotiations that require critical reading practices.

## Policy Implications

At the policy level, this research carries significant implications for language preservation initiatives, cultural heritage frameworks, and educational policies. Most crucially, it demonstrates that effective preservation of indigenous literary heritages requires policies that address not just linguistic documentation but cultural contexts, performance traditions, and community protocols.

The analysis supports policy approaches that:

- Integrate translation initiatives within broader language revitalization programs
- Fund collaborative translation projects that center indigenous agency
- Develop indigenous language publishing infrastructure alongside translation initiatives
- Establish educational curricula that incorporate indigenous literatures in both original languages and translation
- Create intellectual property frameworks that recognize collective ownership of indigenous cultural expressions

## Conclusion

This investigation into translation's role in preserving indigenous Indian literatures reveals a complex cultural process that simultaneously preserves, transforms, and revitalizes endangered literary traditions. Translation emerges as much more than linguistic conversion—functioning as cultural documentation, epistemological bridge-building, and political advocacy for marginalized literary heritages.

The analysis demonstrates that translation's preservative capacity depends significantly on methodological approaches that center indigenous agency, respect cultural protocols, acknowledge power dynamics, and employ collaborative processes. When approached through such methodologies, translation can serve as a crucial intervention against the forces of linguistic homogenization and cultural erasure, creating pathways for indigenous literary traditions to survive and thrive in contemporary contexts.

This research contributes to broader scholarly conversations about decolonial approaches to cultural preservation, suggesting that meaningful preservation of indigenous literatures requires preserving not just textual content but the entire cultural ecosystems, knowledge systems, and performance contexts that give these literatures their meaning and resonance. Future research directions might productively explore how digital technologies offer new possibilities for multimodal translation approaches, how translated indigenous literatures impact contemporary literary movements, and how indigenous communities themselves are innovating translation practices that serve their cultural sovereignty.

Translation alone cannot resolve the profound challenges facing indigenous literary traditions in India. However, when approached as a decolonial practice rather than mere linguistic conversion, translation can serve as a vital bridge—carrying indigenous expressions across linguistic boundaries while simultaneously strengthening their foundations within indigenous communities themselves.

### Works Cited

- Anderson, Gregory D. S., and K. David Harrison. *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Anderson, Gregory D. S., and Felix Ramirez. *Preserving Gondi: A Collaborative Approach*. Linguistic Society of India, 2018.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913–1926*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 253–63.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Census of India: Language Data Based on Census 2011*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2018.
- Cronin, Michael. *Translation and Identity*. Routledge, 2006.
- Devy, G. N. *A Question of Survival: Indigenous Languages of India*. Orient BlackSwan, 2014.
- . *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature*. Penguin Books India, 2002.
- Harrison, K. David. *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Hujon, Janet. "Translating Indigenous Feminism: Khasi Women's Poetry." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2013, pp. 311–26.
- Kothari, Rita. *Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English*. St. Jerome Publishing, 2003.
- Mahapatra, Sitakant. *Santali: The Base of World Languages*. Adivasi Academy Publications, 2002.
- Moseley, Christopher, editor. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. UNESCO Publishing, 2010.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 2012.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Translation." *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2004, pp. 369–88.
- Tymoczko, Maria. *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*. St. Jerome, 1999.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Routledge, 2008.