



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Revival Of Tradition Through Translations: A Critical Study Of Translations Of Jaina Texts

Kriti Jain

Research scholar

Department of English and Modern European Languages

Banasthali Vidyapith

Geetha Yadav

Associate Professor

Banasthali Vidyapith

Abstract

Translations have been a crucial exercise since their inception and have acted as a powerful tool in enriching, propagating, and preserving the literary canon on the global platform. In Jainism, translations have not only been a linguistic practice but has been a living practice that has continuously revived, revitalized and reshaped the canonical structure. This paper briefly places translations in the Indian context and discusses its need, history and evolution in the multilingual Indian landscape. This paper critically traces the Jaina tradition of multilingualism, translations, and adaptations and sheds light on various stages of the evolution of translations throughout the process of its canon-building, including the oral literature phase, transition to the written form, Samskrtaization, vernacularization, and modernization of literary texts. It situates translations as a reviving force in the larger corpora of literature and analyses its role as a performative and communal act essential and relevant for the survival of ancient texts. The paper substantiates the point of view that translations invigorate doctrinal, literary and philosophical landscape and upgrade the source texts to suit the needs of the contemporary readers- hence, acting as a dynamic, revitalizing practice.

Keywords: Adaptations, Jainism, Multilingualism, Translations, Traditional texts, Revival of Literary Canon.

Introduction

Translations have a long history and have their roots in the time since the human civilizations began. The tradition of translation is a long-drawn process that has evolved through diverse social, political and cultural scenarios and has taken place due to diverse reasons and needs. The roots of the word 'Translation' lie in the Latin word 'translatio' which means to transfer or to carry out. Though the term was employed to denote a linguistic transfer from source to target language, it has come to have greater significance and meaning over the centuries.

In the multilingual, multicultural and multireligious context of India, translations have been an everyday activity that were not just required to convert texts into multiple tongues, but were necessary for participation in vital activities including livelihood, communication, cross cultural exchange and basic survival in the growing global village. The present paper sheds light on the development of the tradition of translation in the Indian context and discusses the periods of its evolution ranging over medieval, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary periods. It asserts the vital role that translations play and their need in the bridging the linguistic and cultural gaps and encouraging cross cultural exchanges.

The Jaina tradition of Translations is fundamentally a tradition of revival and revitalization. This is because it enlivens and regenerates the principle teachings and practices of Jainism through constant reinterpretation and adaptation inspiring communal participation and cultural negotiation. In the Jaina literary canon-building, translations and adaptations have played a significant role in ensuring the survival, relevance and flourishing of Jainism across centuries and have acted as a creative, communal, and adaptive enterprise- a primary literary activity, and not merely a secondary or derivative function.

In the Jaina context, translations were considered as a process of interpretation, education, community formation and doctrinal preservation and propagation. It was a necessary act that ensured the continuity and revival of the Jaina canonical texts and helped them being an active tradition that could be comprehensible to the audience of the changing temporal, cultural and geographical frames. The primary focus of the present paper is the dynamic nature of the Jaina tradition of translations and establishing its significant role in reviving and revitalising the canonical texts of this tradition. The paper traces the history and evolution of the Jaina Translation Tradition incorporating its various stages from an oral tradition to its present form.

The revival and revitalization of the Jaina tradition through translations is examined through an analysis of its characteristics and practices. The multilingual involvement in the creation of the Jaina canon, from Prakrit, Samskrta and Apabhramsha, to vernacular and modern languages acts as a vehicle to free the canon from the boundaries of the educated elite and bring it within the reach of commoners. John E. Cort asserts this fact in the following words, "Vernacularizing scriptures broke down elitist boundaries, extending the reach of doctrine and ritual, and enabling participation by those traditionally excluded by linguistic barriers" (Cort 67; "Making it Vernacular"). Cultural adaptations, rewritings and reinterpretations give rise to vivid comprehension and cross-cultural pollination, hence, enriching the literary canon and aiding greater scope for the doctrinal and philosophical texts. Translations also play preservation and propagation roles through sustaining the source texts through periods of social unrest, political upheaval or religious adversities. They ensure preservation of manuscripts through rewriting, hence preventing their complete erasure due to their fragile conditions. Lastly, translations in the form of performative acts bring life to the ancient texts and engage larger audiences with them, hence invigorating them and instilling a sense of spiritual transformation in them.

Landscape of Translations in India: A Brief Overview

Translations have a far deeper history and diversity when it comes to the context of India. It has multifaceted aspects pertaining to its origin, development, and impact in the multilingual, multicultural land of India. The field of Translation Studies in India explores these aspects tracing down the history and evolution of the field. Indian translation theorists have played a pivotal role in bringing to forefront the ideas of translation as a primary activity, creative adaptation, and an imperative act which has been integral to the Indian literary culture, against the common notion of translation being a mere reproduction of the originally existing texts. G.N. Devy (1993) accounts three roles of translations in Indian context. First, those interested in preserving the ancient heritage. Second, those interested in westernising Indian languages and heritage. Third, those interested in nationalizing literature in modern Indian languages (Devy, 149).

The need of translations has been understood since always and its increasing value relies on the fact that firstly, they perform the function of bridging gap across nations and between the past and the present. Secondly, they emphasize the importance of the source language or “upgrade the level of source language” in the words of McGuire (p.71). Thirdly, they contribute majorly to the increased readership of the text that would earlier be limited only to the knowers of the original language. Fourth, they encourage intelligent readers to return to the original text and also makes them better readers and interpreters of the original. Fifth, creation of a plethora of translated texts takes place that also occupies space in mainstream literature hence enriching it. Lastly, translations encourage intellectual exchange where people of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds can share ideas and present themselves to a larger global audience.

Bijay Kumar Das in his *A Handbook of Translation Studies (2005)* briefly traces the history and sheds light on how despite the various debates over the need and process of translation and the question of translatability of any text, translation continues to grow. In the Indian literary canon, Saṃskṛta texts and their tradition of translations throughout history are compartmentalized into four categories based on the social scenario and the political need of the times.

First, during medieval times, in the beginning of the literary tradition, translations took place amidst the Indian languages whose mother was considered to be Saṃskṛta itself. Here both the source language and the target language were considered to be “their own” by the translators who had a possessive sense over both and it was considered to be a traditional activity. The main aim here was to free the scriptures from the clutches of any particular class and make it available to the masses in the languages known to them. Second, Das talks about the colonial period in India wherein the scenario changed and translations were done in order to revive the national culture and bring about national unity and restore national pride. During the freedom struggle, there was an exposure to European literature as well as the English translations of Saṃskṛta texts by Sir William Jones, Max Muller etc. Combined with this new knowledge and increased reaction to the colonial situation, the translations of both took place- European literature, and Indian literature in other Indian languages. Third, Das deals with the translations in the post-colonial India where there was an increased trend of translations from Indian languages into English. English translations started to be considered as a symbol of status and Indian writers considered it a matter of pride to get their works translated in English. Regarding the contemporary times, laying emphasis on the greater need of translation, much more than the bygone days, Das asserts, “We live in multilingual and multicultural society where the need for interaction between people of different linguistic groups and cultures is highly necessary. Translation fulfils that goal of putting across the view of the people in a multilingual society, thus has acquired a place for itself in the highly sophisticated techno-electronic age.” (Das 25). Hence, it becomes evident how translations take place in a political and cultural context and is dictated by several factors, the need of the contemporary time period being major factor.

Jaina tradition of Translations and Multilingualism: Historical Development and Social Context

In the building of the Jaina literary canon, translations have been a dynamic and multifaceted tradition. This tradition has evolved through and spans over various phases including oral transmission, vernacularization, Samskr̥taization and modern linguistic adaptations. Jaina translators and scholars have been committed to accessibility, philosophical clarity and linguistic innovation, hence shaping the literary landscape of India. John E. Cort in “Making it Vernacular in Agra: The Practice of Translation by Seventeenth-Century Jains” where he writes, “The Jains in particular were accustomed to working in and between multiple languages. Their sacred scriptures and other early authoritative texts were in various dialects of Prakrit, while from early in the Common Era the Jains had been full participants in the intellectual and literary cultures of Samskr̥ta (and later Apabhramsha).” (Cort) This has ensured the transmission and preservation of the legacy of Jaina texts and wisdom across cultures and centuries.

The Introduction to *Literary Transcreation as a Jaina Practice* discusses the contribution of the Jains in the following way, “The Jains have contributed particularly in three significant ways that could all be interpreted as signalling a concern for preservation and transmission: the first is the production and preservation of manuscripts, the second is the creation of adaptations and translations, and the third is the privileging of multilingualism” (Jonckheere 11). Hence, these three factors including a practice to preserve manuscripts, propagation of adaptations and an exploration of multilingualism, together contribute in the production of Jaina texts. The origin and evolution of Jaina texts and its translations is studied as follows.

Initially, Jainism originated as a practice of passing down of knowledge verbally from the teachings of Tīrthaṅkaras, Gaṇadhara (immediate disciple of Tīrthaṅkaras) and subsequent monks known as the Śruta-paramparā. This uninterrupted transmission or passing down of knowledge depended on direct transfer, spiritual insight and memorizing power. Tīrthaṅkaras preached in *Samavsharana* from here it as meticulously preserved and propagated as Śruta Jnana, and further transmitted by Shrut Kevalis or senior monks. For over centuries, this oral tradition ensured the continuity and fidelity of the Śruta Jnana.

Then, until few years after the nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra, the Śruta-paramparā continued to exist through oral preaching and earnings majorly by monks and scholars. It lasted till Ācārya Dhārṣeṇa in the first century CE under whose influence the indoctrination of the scriptures began. Anticipating the diminishment of Śruta Jnana or loss of oral knowledge, Ācārya Dhārṣeṇa passed down his knowledge to his disciples Puṣpadanta and Bhūtabali and instructed them to write it down in order to preserve the available knowledge. In this way shift occurred from oral to written tradition, which resulted in the documentation of the first Jaina text *Ṣaṭkhaṇḍāgama*. This day is celebrated as Śruta Pañcamī. Subsequently, the Jaina Canonical literature gradually got organised into structured books documenting the eleven aṅgas and fourteen pūrvas that Śruta Jnana comprised of, and hence the shaping of written scriptures took place. The Jaina scriptures were formulated in Ardhamāgadhī Prakrit, a middle Indo-Aryan language, and were preserved by generations of saints and scholars who transmitting them down. With the geographical and temporal spread of Jainism, in incorporation of additional languages including Samskr̥ta, Gujarati, Tamil etc became evident.

Linguistic expansion as an attribute of the written canon is implored here. The recording was done in Prakrit, particularly Ardhamāgadhī and Śaurasenī reflecting the vernacular prevalent during that time in that region. However, in 5th century CE a linguistic turn took place where Samskr̥taization of the texts was adopted. Among the intellectual elites, Samskr̥ta occupied a pace of repute and was widely circulated on the subcontinent. A scholarly observation notes that, “The Jaina researchers understood that the Samskr̥ta language had a more extensive reach and could help in proliferating the lessons of the Jaina religion to a bigger crowd” (“Jaina literature in Samskr̥ta”). It is important to emphasize on the fact that the introduction of Samskr̥taization did not come with an abandonment of Prakrit, in fact, both the languages complemented

each other in the textual tradition, hence enabling the scholars a wider participation in the intellectual discourse.

Linguistic evolution and promotion of vernaculars took place as the in order to make the teaching accessible and comprehensible to a broader audience across cultures extensive commentaries and sub commentaries were written to supplement the Dvādaśāṅga (twelve aṅgas). The Jaina Literature was translated as well as composed in various languages including Saṃskṛta, Maharāṣṭrī Prākṛta, Śaurasenī, Tamiḷ, Kannaḍa, Marāṭhī, Rājasthānī, Dhundari, Mārṇwārī, Hindī, Gujarātī, Malayālam, and, foreign languages like English and German. Ācārya Hemacandra, for instance, wrote the *Siddha-Hema-Śabdanuśāśana*, a comprehensive grammar covering Saṃskṛta, Prakrit, and Apabhramsha, which had a significant impact on the development of Gujarati and other regional languages. Jaina grammarians played a pivotal role in the codification and standardization of Indian languages, both Dravidian and Indo-Aryan. Jaina monks in southern India wrote extensively in Tamil during the Sangam period hence contribution to the foundational Tamil grammar and literary texts. The *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest available Tamil grammar, is attributed to a Jaina author, and later grammar works like *Naṇṇūl* were also composed by Jaina ascetics ("Jaina Literature"). The introduction of *Transcreation as a Jaina Practice* brings to light the significant amount in which the Jaina authors wrote extensively in Middle Indic languages, including Prakrit and Apabhramsha, besides Saṃskṛta, and “were the first to start writing in vernacular languages, the extent of which one author in this volume has called ‘a major chapter in the global history of translation’” (Jonckheere 12).

Jaina authors were one of the pioneers who formulated religious, spiritual and philosophical texts in regional languages, making spirituality more accessible and democratic for the common people. The Jaina community practiced Svādhyāya or self-study or study of the Self for which they installed huge libraries or *bhaṇḍāras* inside their temples wherein one of the largest collections of manuscripts were preserved. Such activities cultivated intellectualism and cultural production which became a fertile ground for translations, transcreations and adaptations. In *Introduction: Jaina Transcreations and the Creativity of Similarity* it is evident that “another result of the intellectualism Jains cultivated for themselves was the translation and transcreation of many works of poetry, philosophy, grammar, astrology, and political and other sciences, besides religious and didactic texts. While the influence of the belief system is visible in many of these texts, it is important to point out that Jains as a community organised by means of their religious affiliation contributed to all genres of Indian literature” (Jonckheere 12).

The contributions of Jaina scholars to translation, grammar, and literature have been widely acknowledged. As German scholar Georg Bühler (1837–1898) observed, “In grammar, in astronomy as well as in all branches the achievements of the Jains have been so great that even their opponents have taken notice of them and that some of their works are of importance for European science even today. In the south where they have worked among the Dravidian peoples, they have also promoted the development of these languages. The Kanarese, Tamil, Telugu literary languages rest on the foundations erected by the Jaina monks” (Sen 74).

Revival and Revitalization: The Tradition of Translations in Jainism

The tradition of translations in Jainism is not merely a stagnant tradition of linguistic transfer but a dynamic tradition that continuously revives and revitalizes the Jaina literary canon. The rich heritage of Jaina philosophy, literature and doctrines has been made accessible and comprehensible to the new audience through this systematic practice of translating them to vernaculars and modern languages keeping the tradition vibrant across regions and generations. The Jaina tradition of translations can be examined as the tradition of revival and revitalization through practices that ensured that the canonical doctrines do not stay confined to Saṃskṛta and Prakrit but reach communities and temporal frames beyond that.

First, translating the sacred texts into vernacular languages has been a tool to make the canon accessible to non-specialist audience. Jaina scholars have revived the texts time and again though translating them into vernacular languages or writing commentaries on them which enabled access to philosophical concepts and core doctrines by the laymen. This made the works relevant in the ever-changing social context without the need of linguistic education in Prakrit or Saṃskṛta. An example of this practice of reviving the classical teachings and bringing them into the day-to-day affairs is asserted by John E. Cort in “Making it Vernacular in Agra: The Practice of Translation by Seventeenth-Century Jains” where he writes, “The many Saṃskṛta commentaries of Prakrit texts often included a literal word-for-word trot or *chāyā*, in which the Prakrit was directly translated word-to-word into Saṃskṛta. Then there was the practice of vernacular commentarial translations, often known as *bālbodh* or *bālāvabodh*, which Phyllis Granoff has translated as “Instructions for the Unlettered” (Cort 61-105). Hence, it can be inferred that Jains tradition of translations served as a powerful vehicle for sustaining and reviving the literary and philosophical heritage of the tradition and kept the sacred knowledge relevant in the changing historical, cultural and social contexts.

Second, the tradition of translations gave rise to cultural adaptations and subsequent cross-pollination of texts between several religious and regional traditions. The Jaina tradition that embraced vernacularization and reinterpretation of classical works, composed its narratives and Puranas in multiple languages. Adaptations were reworkings of the ancient tales, with added flavours of the target culture, readers and time. In the words of Cort, “Jaina translators rarely pursued mere replication. Instead, a creative engagement with the source text was typical, seeking accessibility and pedagogical value over slavish fidelity (Cort 78–80)”. This facilitated not just a revival of the ancient Jaina texts but also encouraged an interaction with other literary traditions like Hinduism and other, hence enriching the Indian literary and religious landscape. This catalysed the dialogue between various Indian religions and philosophical thoughts and contributed to cross-cultural exchange and created an intellectual environment that fostered debates, discussions and discourses.

Third, translations and adaptations played a key role in preservation and propagation of the Jaina doctrines and facilitated the community to combat new challenges, including periods of social and political upheaval, shifting of cultural and temporal time frames and maintaining individuality and identity amidst multiple philosophical traditions. The original manuscripts were written on palm leaves or later onto paper which became fragile and delicate over the time. Their translations, rewritings and adaptations ensure their continuity and sustainability not only physically but also intellectually. Translations preserve core doctrinal teachings and foster cultural resilience in order to keep Jaina literary canon a living, adaptable and dynamic tradition, protecting it from the pangs of time and the possibility of becoming a dead tradition. The reworking of the texts enabled them to remain active and influential rather than being static and brought the canon closer to the audience across cultures and timeframes.

Lastly, the tradition of translations acts as a tool of revival through its performative nature. The performance of tradition demonstrates the role of translation as cultural performance that receives appreciation from the audience and fosters spiritual transformation in them. For instance, the performative work, Banarsidas’s (1587–1643) *Samaysār nāṭak* which is a Brajbhasha adaptation of Kundakunda’s *Samayasāra* involved both- the learned intellectuals as well the common people who participated in these programmes, hence turning them into a communal, dialogic process. Through these practices, the foundational texts that were previously confined to limited readers, gained new resonance amidst commoners who largely got engaged in doctrinal discussions, devotional poetry and narrative retelling (Cort 80–85).

Limitations, Challenges and Critical Issues

Though translations are a vibrant and dynamic activity that have been adding new dimensions to the existing literary corpora, there are certain limitations and challenges that come in its way. There are silences in the historical and literary records of Jaina translations that limit our understanding and knowledge of their evolution and interaction with their contemporary traditions. The lack of comprehensible and preserved translations needs to be attended by linguists, literature and philosophy scholars, and digital experts, in order to preserve and propagate the existing corpora. This paper briefly shed light on the reviving and revitalizing properties of translations, but is limited to the theoretical aspects of the work. Further critical engagement may include a study of practical approaches that can act in the same direction.

Conclusion

In the light of above discussion and arguments, it is inferred that translations of Jaina texts is a dynamic process that is beyond linguistic transference, and ensures accessibility and cultural revival. By enabling cross-cultural dialogue, it keeps the religion and philosophy living, creating space for it in the modern-day intellectual discourse. The translations, commentaries and adaptations have enriched the literary, religious, philosophical and cultural landscape of India. In order to ensure accurate scholarship in the future, preservation and revival attempts need to be made integrating the technological advancements in this direction.

Works Cited

1. Bassnett-McGuire, Susan. *Translation Studies*. Rev. ed., London: Routledge, 1991, p. 71.
2. Cort, John E. "Making it Vernacular in Agra: The Practice of Translation by Seventeenth-Century Jains." *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature, and Performance in North India*, edited by Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, Open Book Publishers, 2015, pp. 61–105. <https://books.openedition.org/obp/2500?lang=en>
3. Das, Bijay Kumar. *A Handbook of Translation Studies*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2005.
4. De Clercq, Eva, Heleen De Jonckheere, and Simon Winant, editors. *Literary Transcreation as a Jaina Practice*. Ergon Verlag, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783987401602>
5. Devy, G.N. "Translation Theory: An Indian Perspective." In *Translation: An Indian Perspective*, edited by G.N. Devy, Orient Longman, 1993, p. 149.
6. "Jaina literature in Samskrta." Studocu, Alagappa University, <https://www.studocu.com/in/document/alagappa-university/socio-cultural-history-of-tamil-nadu-from-1800-to-1967-ce/jaina-literature-in-Samskrta/53857754>.
7. "Jaina literature." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 31 July 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jain_literature.
8. Sen, Sailendra Nath. *Ancient Indian History and Civilization*. New Age International, 1999, p. 74. ISBN: 978-81-224-1198-0.