



Accomplishing Colonial Ambitions through Translation: The Case of Modern Marathi Theatre

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Abstract

This research paper examines the contributions of the Dakshina Prize Committee in facilitating colonial objectives through Marathi translations of European plays during the British imperial period. The Committee, tasked with evaluating translations and awarding prizes, became a driving force in this literary and cultural endeavour. A significant early example of its influence is *Tara Natak*, a Marathi translation of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, rendered by Vishnu Moreshwar Mahajani. The financial incentives offered by the Dakshina Prize led to a surge in drama translations that disseminated European literary traditions and ideologies within the colonial framework. The mid to late nineteenth century is often referred to by Marathi historiographers as the 'Bhashantar Yug' (Translation Age), 'Rupantar Yug' (Adaptation Age), or the '*Shakespeare ani Molière Yug*' (Shakespeare and Molière Age). However, these historians often overlook the significant role played by the Dakshina Prize Committee therefore, it would be valuable to map the milestones of comparative literature, trace the trajectory of translation theory in colonial Marathi theatre, and study translation as a form of cultural contact while also examining the colonial ambitions that shaped these efforts.

Keywords: Dakshina Prize Committee, Colonial ambitions, Marathi theatre, Translation, Shakespeare.

Introduction

The Bombay Government issued an order in 1851 regarding awards to be given to selected Marathi translations from other languages caused the flurry of drama translations in Marathi post 1860 that gave rise to modern Marathi theatre. My observations that I have made in this research paper are based on records from the Bombay Government Secretariat. While I do not list all the literary works and translations that received prize money, my findings are speculative and informed by critical perspectives, such as those articulated by Shankar Bapuji Mujumdar. Mujumdar, the editor of the Marathi magazine *Rangbhumi* (started in 1908),

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criticised the Dakshina Prize Committee's practices. In his critique of the Marathi translation *Bhimrao*- a 1907 translation of Friedrich Schiller's play, he wrote:

A useless institute, run by a few people who are unknown to Marathi readers, took avatar in Pune many years ago to ensure our (the ones who have become dependent due to our stupidity) dependency in the art of writing. By sidelining independent works and rewarding artisans engaged in the dependent art of translation, they have perpetuated our dependence. (Mujumdar 1907)

The critic likely refers to Deccan College and its principal, Major Thomas Candy, who promoted translation efforts by awarding prize money to Marathi translations of European literary texts through the Dakshina Prize Committee. It is important to note that the critic disagreed with the imperial policy of prioritising prizes for translations over independent works, highlighting the dependency it fostered among native writers.

Dakshina Prize Committee

In various princely states during the pre-colonial period in India, kings distributed Dakshina to provide a means of livelihood for Brahmins, who were expected to devote their time and energy to studying and teaching. Among these kings was Shri. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. The Dakshina consisted of corn and cash, given in proportion to the accomplishments of Brahmins, who were tested by Panditrao (the Minister for Religion) in his cabinet of ministers. This practice was continued during the reign of Shivaji Maharaj's sons, Sambhaji and Rajaram. When Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj assumed the throne, he reformed and resumed the Dakshina system. He entrusted the responsibility of distributing Dakshina to his Commander-in-Chief, Khanderao Dabhade, who was expected to spend around 2 to 4 lakhs of rupees from the revenues of his Taluka, Talegaon, for Dakshina to Brahmins during the month of Shravana. Notably, Dakshina thus became an official state affair. After Khanderao Dabhade was killed in a battle with Peshwa Bajirao Ballal, the Dakshina establishment was moved to Poona (now Pune) to appease the people. In the month of Shravana, the Dakshina ceremony was held, during which large cash allowances were distributed to learned Brahmins at the Parvati Temple in Poona. This was done by the Peshwas to support religion and learning, reinforcing their legitimacy.

The newly established British Government continued the practice of Dakshina in the Bombay Presidency after the fall of Peshwa rule in 1818. Mountstuart Elphinstone, the first Governor of the Bombay Presidency, assured the Brahmins that the government would not interfere in the religious practices of the natives. As a result, there was no government interference in the distribution of Dakshina between 1818 and 1836. However, in 1836, following the introduction of a new educational policy in 1835 that secularised education, the British Government revised the rules regarding Dakshina. The new regulations were formulated in 1836, and although the Brahmins opposed these changes through a petition, the government affirmed that Dakshina was to be used as an 'educational fund' rather than a 'religious donation' and declared it a 'secular grant' on January 6, 1838. This policy enabled the government to assert its dominance over the Brahmins in the Bombay Presidency, which had a significant impact on the traditional learning practices of the Brahmins.

The government also issued a notice stating that new candidates might be considered for the Dakshina, prompting students from English schools in Poona to claim their share of the grant. They believed that the distribution of Dakshina to Sanskrit students and the study of the Vedas had become a lifelong privilege. In their view, since Dakshina has evolved into an educational fund, any student attending a government English school or Poona College (now Deccan College) should be entitled to it. In exchange for Dakshina, they offered their

services to the government as translators and authors in the most cost-effective manner. They also proposed that the fund be used to support original Marathi works and translations. In his essay “Dakshina Rules of Bombay Presidency (1836-1851): Its Constitution and Principles”, published in the Journal of the *Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, (Vol.13, 2001) Kyosuke Adachi deliberates:

Candy and W. J. Hunter, the Agent for Sirdars proposed a plan for the balance in hand, Rs. 1,500 and the future surplus amount of Dakshina; this plan was sanctioned by the government in 1851 after a few modifications. This plan implied that public instruction embraced Dakshina. The most important part of this arrangement was that Dakshina came to be used for the prizes of vernacular literature. These prizes were open for competition to “all classes and castes of natives of India”. They were supposed to be given as rewards for the composition of original “useful” works in Marathi or for translation into it of “useful” works from other languages. Their works should be submitted to the judgement of Dakshina Prize committee, who will decide on their merits and the amount of reward. (Adachi 2001)

The Dakshina Prize Committee and the General Fund for the Encouragement of Native Literature and Education were established in 1851, based on the schemes proposed by Mr. Hunter and Major Candy. R. V. Parulekar, editor of *Selections from the Records of Government of Bombay: Education, Part I (1819–1852)*, first published in 1953, argues that the minutes of the Dakshina Prize Committee meeting held on 7th November 1851 by the Agent for Sirdars in the Deccan reveal a significant decision. It was resolved to award ten Dakshina prizes, totaling Rs. 1,300, to ten selected Marathi writers and translators. The Dakshina Prize Committee was established in 1851 to promote Marathi literature, award fellowships, and encourage translations. Major Candy served as its president, and Reverend Michel was a European member. The advisory board included Brahmin members Krushnashastri Chiplunkar and Bhaskar Palande. The committee often favored awarding prizes to Marathi translations of European and Sanskrit literature, which contributed to a surge in Marathi translations of European plays in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For the original Marathi works, the committee ensured that the texts were authored by individuals who demonstrated a deep assimilation of European literature and modern science. In 1855, Jotirao Phule, the first Dalit social reformer and a prominent intellectual, submitted his play *Tritiya Ratna* - his first manuscript - to the Dakshina Prize Committee. However, the committee rejected the play due to its anti-Brahmin themes, despite the Dakshina Prize being regarded as a secular grant. This rejection marked a turning point for Phule, who chose not to write another play afterwards. In his book *Slavery* (1873), Phule reflected on this incident, stating:

In 1855, I wrote a short play illustrating how the Bhatjoshis deceive the ignorant Shudras by propagating falsehoods about their self-serving religion, and how Christian preachers guide the Shudras onto the right path by imparting true knowledge based on an impartial religion. I submitted this manuscript to the Dakshina Prize Committee. However, due to the opposition of the Bhat members present, the European members took no action, and the committee ultimately rejected my manuscript. Thus, it is fair to say that the Dakshina Prize Committee is akin to the younger sister of the municipality, as it has failed to illuminate the lives of the Shudras by encouraging them in their endeavours. (Phule 2006)

Prior to this, in 1851, Phule submitted a poem on Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in response to a competition organised by the Dakshina Prize Committee for the ‘Best Original Marathi Poem on Shivaji, the Founder of the Maratha Empire,’ which carried a prize of Rs. 400. However, the Brahmin members of the committee ensured that grants for poems, plays, and

other works were awarded exclusively to fellow Brahmin scholars. Consequently, the Dakshina initiative became a tool to uphold the hegemony of the Brahmin caste. This demonstrates how organic intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense, aided traditional intellectuals in preserving their dominant position within the social structure.

The Brahmin members maintained their monopoly by selectively awarding prizes to works that aligned with their caste interests. For instance, *Tara Natak*, a translation of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, received prize money despite its exclusive focus on upper-caste characters. The protagonist, Tara, a Maratha caste woman, asserts individual agency in the play, reflecting values acceptable to the Brahmin caste. Conversely, texts perceived as contrary to the interests of the committee were rejected, such as *Tritiya Ratna*.

English Education and Translation

Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, a renowned essayist, journalist, and biographer, argues in his essay on translation, "Bhashantar" (the first essay on translation written in Marathi, first publication date unknown, later published in 1889), that the translations of Sanskrit and English literary texts were primarily motivated by the incentives provided by the Dakshina Prize Committee. Therefore, I speculate that the announcement of cash prizes by the committee significantly contributed to the rise of Marathi translations beginning in 1867 with the publication of *Othello*. Veena Naregal, in her book *Language Politics, Elites and the Public Sphere: Western India Under Colonialism* (2001), observes that:

From the mid 1850s, as the education project developed into a system of higher education, the policy towards the vernaculars showed shifts as plans for the establishment of Bombay University emerged and as budgetary allocations were divided between vernacular (Marathi) schools and schools where the medium of instruction was English. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the vernaculars had been subalternised within the education system, as had the status of the Marathi school-educated intelligentsia vis-à-vis the university/English educated elite...Its logic ran thus: if an English education was meant to advance skills that students had acquired through reading vernacular- material prepared mainly through translations from English 'originals'- then the only proof of English learning could be their ability to successfully translate their lessons into the vernacular! Such oral and, where possible, written translation exercises formed the core of class tests and public examinations...Translation was not just confined to the learning of languages; it formed the very basis of the instructional method adopted for other subjects as well. (Naregal 2001)

The new education policy introduced in Western India during the mid-1850s prioritised the English language, relegating 'vernacular languages' like Marathi to secondary importance. This shift in focus facilitated the emergence of higher education through English, which primarily catered to the elites. Notably, the medium of instruction in higher education was exclusively English. As a result, university graduates naturally became bilingual, not only because they were required to study in English, but also due to the inclusion of translation exercises in their curriculum. These exercises were designed to enhance English language skills, with students being evaluated on their ability to translate texts from English to Marathi. This emphasis on translation within the syllabus familiarised students with translation methods and honed their skills in the process. Consequently, young university graduates developed a strong foundation in translation techniques through their academic training.

The qualifications of the translators were highlighted on the first page of the translations to emphasize their background in English education. This background made it easier for them to translate plays that were part of their academic syllabus, such as *Twelfth*

Night, Hamlet, Othello, Julius Caesar, and The Tempest. Having studied these works, the translators were more familiar with them compared to Shakespeare's lesser-known plays. As a result, these frequently studied plays were more commonly translated into Marathi. In the introductions to the translations, the translators often stated that their goal was to assist students who were studying these plays as a part of their syllabus. For instance, the translators of *Himmatbahadar* and *The Tempest* explicitly mentioned that their translations were intended to support students.

The Case of Modern Marathi Theatre

The translators used their translations of Shakespeare and other European playwrights to introduce modern ideas and engage with themes of social reform. In their introductions, prefaces, and translator's notes, they often stated that their aim was to bring modernity to Marathi society. They believed that introducing foreign cultural practices was essential to address certain problematic aspects of traditional Marathi culture. These translations contributed to the larger discussions on social change led by upper-caste reformers in Maharashtra.

However, the question of what truly motivated this wave of European drama translations remains unanswered. The inclusion of these plays in academic syllabi and classroom translation exercises does not fully explain the surge of Shakespearean translations during the colonial period, spanning the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. External incentives, such as dakshina prize money awarded for translations and adaptations, likely played a crucial role. A prominent example is *Tara Natak*, a Marathi adaptation of *Cymbeline*, which gained significant recognition and popularity. The play was particularly admired for the dramatic scene where Khanduji (Iachimo) enters Tara's (Imogen's) bedchamber to test her fidelity to her secret lover. Veena Naregal's argument is relevant here. She observes:

The prospects for modernity within the colonial context thus came to depend largely upon translation. As native discourse realised, the pedagogic transfer of Western knowledge needed to be backed by an officially sponsored translation project- on this depended a laicized cognitive order. Discussion on shifts in the distribution of dakshina has shown the trend in official initiatives and the extent of patronage to encourage vernacular production. However, as the following argument will elaborate, the establishment of the University of Bombay in 1857 saw important changes in the position of the vernacular sphere and the official support now available to it. An official patronage for translation into Marathi shows that, by the 1860s, the state had already relinquished its interests in the vernacular sphere, ostensibly because its interventions had secured the required structural shifts. (Naregal 2001)

It is evident that the government actively supported translations into Marathi. Initially, prize money was awarded for both literary and non-literary works. During the early phase of the translation project, official funding encouraged translators to produce works on a wide range of subjects, including science and mathematics, primarily to develop educational materials in Marathi for schools. However, from the mid-1850s onwards, the focus shifted toward literary genres.

The motive behind this shift was clear: the literary tastes of the Marathi audience and readers were being shaped by exposure to English translations. The Marathi audience and readers, who had previously engaged primarily with mythological plays, began reading English novels, poems, and plays in Marathi translations, thereby becoming acquainted with new literary genres. Prize money was also awarded for original literary compositions, further

encouraging the adaptation of English literary genres, such as the novel, into Marathi. This transplantation of English literary genres marked a significant change in readers' tastes and preferences.

Colonial Ambitions

The British government's conversion of Dakshina funds into prize money for translations suggests their intent to reshape the literary tastes and cultural norms of Marathi society by introducing English literature and values. The administration of these funds initially fell under the Deccan Commission and was later transferred to the Poona Collector's office. As Naregal further argues:

Financial assistance in the form of modest prizes from the dakshina fund for worthy translations of educational materials into Marathi was withdrawn during the 1850s. These prizes were now offered for original, 'literary' compositions – novels, lyric poetry, dramas, and translations and adaptations of such works in Marathi. This was meant to 'create a taste for reading among the masses' that would hopefully supplant the great delight they took in 'mere myths.' (Naregal 2001)

The prizes awarded by the Dakshina Prize Committee served as a significant incentive for translators and playwrights to produce translations, both for readers and stage performances. Many translators of European plays submitted their works to the committee, seeking recognition and rewards. Given that the committee and advisory board were composed primarily of Brahmins, along with European members such as Major Candy and Reverend Michel, it is reasonable to infer that the committee's composition likely reflected and reinforced cultural dominance, shaping the nature and direction of these translations.

A glimpse at the histories of the Marathi Theatre mostly written by upper caste historiographers enables us to comprehend that the historiographers have missed mentioning the translations which were popular among the audience at that time. S.N.Banhatti in his book *Marathi Rangbhumi: Itihas: Khanda Pahila 1843-79* published in 1957, does not mention how the translations contributed to the literary taste of the audience and readers. M.S. Kanade, in his book *Natya-Shodh* published in 1987, argues that none of the translations consisted of standard or first-class dramatic value. All of them were the sheer material productions of the originals. Except one or two, they were not even popular on the stage and among the audience.

Anand Patil, in his book *Marathi Natakavaril Ingraji Prabhav* published in 1987, titles two of the chapters "Bhashantar, Rupatar Yug", "Shakespeare ani Moliere Yuga" but fails to reason that one of the causes for the flurry of translations was Dakshina Prize Money awarded to translations. Dr. Anant Deshmukh, in his book *Natyavichar* published in 1988, mentions only two translations of pre-1950s *Othello* and *Hamlet* in only three sentences and calls the post 1950 more productive in the case of translation than before that.

Conclusion

All these historiographers have not acknowledged the contribution these translations made to the trend in the theory of translation and drama criticism. They excluded these plays as, according to them, they were just translations rather than original Marathi plays and hence lacked originality, creativity, and most importantly the Marathi cultural norms. It seems to me that the Marathi historiographers have failed to map the milestones of comparative literature and trace the trajectory of translation theory in colonial modern Marathi theatre. Translation, here, was not only a tool of cultural contact, but also to fulfill the imperial aim of producing a society that was English in taste.

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Bio-note

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