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Translation in Nepal

I have translated a few short pieces, but I am not translator per se. And I cannot talk knowledgeably about the challenges inherent in translation. I will therefore give you a sketchy picture of the Nepali translation scene instead.

Nepal doesn't have a long history of literary production. The history of literary production in Nepal started in earnest a little over one hundred and fifty years ago when Bhanubhakta, the *adikabi* (the first poet), translated the epic *Ramayana* from Sanskrit to rhyming Nepali. Later, Motiram Bhatta, a literary activist, was instrumental in popularizing the *Ramayana* and promoting Nepali literature along with his contemporaries, who were all studying in Benaras in India. Still later, the publication of the *Gorkhaptra* daily, in 1901, fuelled the growth of Nepali literature by providing a forum for the publication of poems, short stories and essays. But no other avenues were available to writers, as there were few printing presses and no commercial publishing houses in Nepal then, and the number of people writing literature was negligible.

However, the situation changed a bit after the 1930s when Nepal saw the arrival of many promising writers. Some of them—like Laxmi Prasad Devkota (the most well-known Nepali writer) and Bal Krishna Sama—were very good and were equally conversant in the English language. They realized the need for translating Nepali literature into English and vice versa to enrich Nepali literature and to take it to the international stage and started translating not just their work but also the work of their contemporaries. They also established a centre to carry out translations. Sadly, no efforts were made by other people or fronts to give impetus to what they were doing. Of course, there was the then Royal Academy, which was established primarily to promote Nepali literature and language. And it had started commissioning translation of western classics into Nepali and Nepali poetry into English, but it failed to pursue the commissioning purposefully.

Some decades later, in the eighties and the nineties, the Nepali literary scene got a boost when many writers with a background of English education and a few foreign scholars of Nepali literature started to translate short stories and poems. Most of them no longer translate, but a few others have begun to translate since. However, what has been translated so far doesn't make up a sizeable corpus, and the quality of the translations is mostly forgettable, which often makes us question, "Aren't we better off without these translations?" which in turn begs the question, "Why is the Nepali translation scene the way it is?"

There are a number of reasons for it:

First: a short history of English education. English education came to Nepal relatively late in 1950 and was available to only a handful of people till 1990. Understandably, Nepal lacked (and still lacks) a large pool of people proficient enough in English to competently translate from Nepali to English and vice versa.

Second: little financial incentive. Translation is creatively rewarding but not financially. Translators are paid little, if at all. This discourages people from making translation their full-time vocation. Interestingly, the market for translating technical material is growing, thanks to ever-burgeoning NGOs and INGOs. They need people to translate reports, seminar proceedings, etc., and their pay is very good. This makes literary translation a less attractive proposition.

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Third: a lack of institutional support for translation. There is little institutional support for translators. The government-run Academy provided little support to translation/translators and has long been defunct in recent times, owing to the political instability in the country. Other cultural institutes and corporate houses are yet to wake up to the importance of providing support to cultural initiatives like translation.

Fourth: the absence of a center for translation studies. Nepal doesn't have any institution where one can learn theories of translation, hone one's translation skills and pursue translation as an academic discipline. Naturally, the few people who might have wanted to study translation haven't got a chance to study it.

Fifth: a small book market. The Nepali book market is very small and one cannot hope to sell a translated work beyond a few thousand copies at best. So publishing a translated work isn't commercially viable for either publishers or translators, who put many months of effort into the work with the expectation that it will do well in the market.

However, we can hope to see the Nepali translation scene change for the better in the years to come. The Nepali book market is growing all the time, as is evidenced by growing interest shown by international publishing houses like Penguin, HarperCollins, etc, in Nepali authors. This growth will hopefully make the publication of translations a viable proposition. More and more Nepalis have become proficient in English, as testified by a spurt of books in English that has come out of Nepal. This proficiency will lead to better translations.

Of late, Nepal has been going through so much—the ten years of the Maoist conflict, the royal massacre, the usurpation of executive powers by former king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah, the peaceful movement of 2006 that ended the monarchial rule, the historic election to the constituent assembly, the declaration of a republic, the ethnic movement, the prolonged constitutional writing process, etc.—and this, ironically, augurs well for our writing. These interesting turns of events have found their way into fictional and non-fictional narratives, adding novelty to them. Sooner or later the attention of international publishing houses will be attracted to these narratives, and they will start commissioning the translations of these narratives. This will make the Nepali translation scene more vibrant.
