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MARCH-APRIL 2010

An Indian perspective

Ravi Kumar discusses the challenges faced by the entrepreneurial translator, with particular reference to the profession's status in India

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There are many issues facing the profession in the UK, including status, rates, working conditions and public opinion, to name but a few. This is though a truly global profession, largely unrecognised, and most certainly undervalued. ITI has members in over 30 countries and supports hundreds of language combinations. ITI is also a member of FIT, the International Federation of Translators, and through FIT we can share knowledge and experience with our colleagues around the globe. Have you wondered what life is like for professional linguists in other countries? The article that follows gives us a powerful insight into the challenges facing translators and interpreters in India. The article paints a remarkably similar picture to life as a linguist in the UK, and we can draw strength from the knowledge that we share our concerns for the profession with our colleagues in India. Individually we risk being ignored, but together we will make a difference. I thank Ravi Kumar for allowing *ITI Bulletin* to publish his paper.

Alan Wheatley

Before we enter into a discussion of the translator as an entrepreneur, we must define entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship means different things to different people. For JA Timmons (*The Entrepreneurial Mind*, 1989), it is the ability to create and build something from practically nothing. For Wennekers and Thurik (*Linking Entrepreneurship and Economic Growth*, 1999), it is the creation of new economic opportunities. For Wickham (*Strategic Entrepreneurship: A decision-making approach to new venture creation and management*, 1998), it means creating and managing vision and demonstrating leadership. For Peter Druker (*Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 1985), it is a practice with a knowledge base.

Conceptually and in practice, the term hints of no stereotypical model. Yet it has its root in the French *entreprendre*, which literally means to undertake – indicating the minimum characteristics of an entrepreneur.

From the perspective of economic functions, three crucial characteristics of entrepreneurial activity are: risk taking, innovation, and venturing into new business activities for profit[1].

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), the core advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, which focuses on creating knowledge capital, has recognised entrepreneurship as one of the key factors in wealth creation and employment generation. As per NKC: 'Entrepreneurship is the professional application of knowledge, skills and competencies and/or of monetising a new idea by an individual or a set of people by launching an enterprise *de novo* or diversifying from an existing one (distinct from seeking self-employment as in a profession or trade), thus to pursue growth while generating wealth, employment and social good'.

Entrepreneurship in India

Entrepreneurship has been 'embedded in the Indian genius and is a part of its tradition'[2]. To quote the renowned economist TN Srinivasan, 'India has been an entrepreneurial society... we had the entrepreneurial skill but suppressed it for too long a time... and now it is thriving.' The entrepreneurial spirit is an ongoing characteristic of India's history, particularly visible in a number of communities engaged primarily in trading[3]. Traditionally, the entrepreneurship of such communities is facilitated principally by the successful use of informal 'entrepreneurial ecosystems' and interdependent business networks. Furthermore, there is also a rich tradition within the Indian diaspora, spanning the past several hundred years, whose spirit of enterprise is legion.

Entrepreneurship in India occurs in 'far more encompassing and far-reaching ways than in developed countries', and could, therefore, be 'far more complex', for there is so much more that needs to be done[4]. Commentators today celebrate the ubiquitous Indian attitude of *jugaad* (a Hindi word roughly translated as 'creative improvisation... a tool to somehow find a solution based on a refusal to accept defeat, and calling on initiative, quick thinking, cunning and resolve... to quickly fulfil market demands at the lowest possible prices[5]') as an entrepreneurial trait that has been as much a part of everyday Indian living as its rich tradition of philosophy and speculation.

The salience of entrepreneurship in India has intensified in recent times, particularly with the rise in knowledge-intensive services. New entrepreneurs who do not belong to traditional business communities have begun to emerge in large numbers; entrepreneurship has grown rapidly, visibly so, creating wealth and generating employment, especially in the past 20 years. Crucial efforts initiated after economic liberalisation – including systematic attempts to reduce the 'licence raj', greater efforts to make finance more easily accessible to entrepreneurs,

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and other institutional support to 'techno-preneurs' – have helped improve the climate for entrepreneurship.

The translator as an entrepreneur

In many countries, after years of struggle, translation has evolved as a professional activity and its practitioners have been able to obtain a professional status. However, it is important to note that India, in spite of having recognised and documented the presence of 1,635 rationalised mother tongues, classified into 234 mother tongues and grouped under 122 languages, has failed to achieve professional status for its translators.

Translation is an activity that helps to bridge the communication gap, and also facilitates a whole set of business activites in terms of localisation and globalisation, thus generating employment. An individual translator not only generates employment for himself/herself but also facilitates multiple activities and thus multiple employment activities, ranging from DTP, advertising and education, to development and facilitation of high-end software and products. A translator applies knowledge, skills and competencies, and consistently evolves and applies new ideas at the individual level or collectively. In most cases, he/she

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is a one-person enterprise that generates employment and wealth, and contributes to the economic development of the country.

It is also notable that most translators in India are forced to orient their profession as per the language demand of the industry, and are restricted to the role of language teacher, business process outsourcing (BPO) employee, member of staff in a call centre, or similar. Those who remain loyal to their professional orientation as a translator become freelance translators and often slowly grow into translation agencies. Unlike big business houses, translation businesses are usually run from home or from sparsely furnished small offices, have limited resources, and often the owners don't know where the next penny is coming from to keep the operation going. Most of the time, such translators or agencies work in isolation and lead lonely existences, as few can empathise with their troubles.

Socio-cultural situation of translators in India

Bilinguals have always been respected in India as people with superior qualifications, and they have played a pivotal role in social and cultural change. Slowly, bilingualism has become so widespread that it is complementary in nature. For example, an individual may use a particular language at home, another in the neighbourhood and the bazaar, and still another in certain formal domains such as education, administration, and the like. In addition, the languages of national and international communication, Hindi and English, are also part of the linguistic repertoire of a sizeable number of Indians. In India, linguistic diversity is not an accident, rather it is inherited in the process of acquiring the composite culture of India.

Economic situation of translators in India

On the one hand, bilingualism/multilingualism have played a pivotal role in shaping the diverse society of India. On the other hand, Indian translators face challenges that are by-products of the bilingualism/multilingualism inherent in Indian society. For example, it is very common to equate a translator with a bilingual neighbour, friend, relative or office colleague who is readily available to help, and who extends their services either at a very low price or, often, even for free. I define these actions as part of the entrepreneurship attitude inherent in almost every Indian who tries to make the best use of available resources. In this case, the resources are readily available bilinguals or multilinguals. These challenges become tougher when a project manager, knowingly or unknowingly, equates the service cost of a professional translator with that of his in-house bilingual colleague whose services he/she has been taking advantage of, free of charge. The challenge becomes stiffer when a translator who is bidding for an international project has to explain the difference between a machine translation and a professional translation, to a project manager or Indian businessman who still insists on using online freeware like Babelfish, Google or Systran. This further

stiffens the resolve of an Indian businessman to prove his entrepreneurial skill, which finally leads to a fiasco.

Making of a translator in India

In spite of India's very rich and continuing diversity of languages, there are only a few universities that offer translation courses in their curriculum, and these find it difficult to sustain themselves because of lack of infrastructure, lack of trained faculty staff, lack of well-formulated course curricula and, above all, a public lack of awareness and government apathy.

In this situation, it becomes very challenging for a translator to evolve as a professional. Those who do so can be easily put into the category of entrepreneurs as they develop the ability to create and build something from practically nothing, and they practise this process of building wealth daily, continuing to defy the odds in the hope that one day they will be established translators.

External challenges faced by the translator entrepreneur

Once a professional translator starts interacting with the industry, external challenges multiply. The translator goes on to face many other issues, including payment issues with clients followed by lack of continuity of work, government apathy towards professional recognition, lack of established standards, lack of certification, lack of funds for upgrading skills, and so on.

Global challenges faced by the translator entrepreneur

Many of the leading translation portals have developed a strong foothold in India. It is true that they have given good opportunities to many translators to get in touch with domestic as well as international agencies, and that this has resulted in an increase in income. However, it is important to note that most of these portals are operated from outside India and they follow their own rules. Often, Indian translators are cheated and then, to add insult to injury, blamed for poor quality. This kind of situation arises because of a mismatch of expectations, and a lack of the documented guidelines and support that agencies or clients must offer translators. Outsourcing is a good phenomenon, but service takers as well as service providers need to develop trust and culture-sensitive relationships that are so often lacking in these web portals.

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Competition from international agencies

It is true that the majority of Indian translators still follow the traditional approach to translation – translations are often handwritten, followed by typing, re-checking, and final delivery. This approach has its own value, but it results in delayed delivery and a lack of quality control, making the whole affair vulnerable to strong competition. On the other hand, international agencies that maintain in-house teams of translators are sophisticated. They make use of trained translators who are well versed in computer applications and CAT tools. Unless Indian

translators also upgrade to this modern approach, they will continue to suffer the snobbery of a select privileged few. Also, there are a few multinational corporations that have already made their presence felt in the Indian market, and, with their organisational strength and economic power, it would be easy for them to develop an economically competitive process that would present a big challenge to entrepreneurial Indian translators who are still struggling for their identity. By the time the latter realised their weaknesses, it would be too late to start competing with these translation houses.

Internal challenges faced by the translator entrepreneur

An individual, after having gone through the hurdles involved in evolving as a translator, faces the next stage of problems and challenges that often originate from him- or herself:

1 Translation activities have traditionally been treated as a very personal and private affair by individual language professionals. Often, even best friends do not share information between themselves about the translation projects they are working on.

2 Translators suffer from an identity crisis. Let us say, an Indian language professional refers to himself as a translator at a gathering of friends or acquaintances who otherwise have no association with the translation industry. The response to the professional's statement would be likely to be, 'Okay, that is what you do. But what is your profession?' This underlines the very simple fact that the translation industry generally has very little professional recognition from the masses. This does affect the credibility and the position of a professional translator in the eyes of his peers. This is what we translators refer to as an identity crisis.

3 Ego clashes. The identity crisis makes an individual more sensitive to issues that have been adversely affecting him, and any new initiative is regarded with suspicion. Once suspicion comes, questions are asked, often resulting in absurd questions that offend egos, and, ultimately, failure of any collective initiatives for professional development.

4 If logic prevails – established translators start to fear they will lose their businesses of many years' standing. Under no circumstances do they want to come to a common platform and discuss their work or issues related to their clients. But this is not expressed directly (part of an identity crisis), rather they will pinpoint personal, professional or organisational weaknesses in the individual who has taken the initiative.

Successful translators and diversification

In spite of the odds stacked against them, there are quite a good number of translators in India who face these challenges and overcome the hurdles to finally make a living and contribute to the economic and cultural growth of the country. In addition, there are a few who grow enough to launch small and medium-sized

translation enterprises, which further add value to translation as a profession.

Need for collaborative efforts

With the collaborative efforts of a few like-minded professional translators, the Indian Translators Association was established in December 2007. It seeks to unite India's widespread translator and interpreter community on a common platform to address issues for the betterment of the industry, and to take steps to ensure that its members provide services that meet the professional standards of the industry. Its integration with the International Federation of Translators (FIT) in July 2008 and its subsequent collaboration with Termnet Austria prove its commitment to achieving its objectives and its goal of developing a vibrant platform for the translators' community in India.

Networking as a possible solution

To counter external as well as internal challenges, a translator needs to take into consideration the phenomenon of globalisation that has brought tremendous dynamism into market forces. The world is evolving towards finding innovative ways of achieving customer satisfaction that is based on N=1 (one consumer experience at a time) and R=G (resources from multiple vendors and often from around the globe).[6]

To achieve competitiveness and provide unique, personalised experiences to consumers, a company needs to create a system that involves individual customers in co-creating a product or service that provides a unique experience. No company is big enough in scope and size to satisfy the experiences of one consumer at a time. Therefore, all companies will access resources from a wide variety of other big and small companies – a global ecosystem. The focus is on access to resources, not ownership of resources. Not to go too deeply into the logistics of this innovative thought, but it is vital to understand that even the biggest companies do not own all the necessary resources to cater to the needs of their customer, nor do they have complete production in-house, as the new dynamics of the market demand inter-dependency on internal and external sources.

The above thoughts are very encouraging for an entrepreneur and especially for the translator who depends heavily on external sources and who does not have enough funds to own resources. As explained above, the big business houses do not have the complete ownership of resources either. The idea is to have fast

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access to these resources. A translator entrepreneur needs to be connected to fellow translators within his own country as well as outside the country to have access to information and knowledge and develop teams for the execution of a project through available resources and to provide services and achieve customer satisfaction. There are already various online systems in place that allow free access to their platform and offer options for developing connectivity and social or professional networks that further help individual members to build on relationships, share knowledge and assist in the overall growth of a complete social or cultural system, thus allowing the creator of the system to benefit from the presence of a large number of human networks connected to its server. Among many other networks, I find Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, Hotmail, Groupsite and Twitter to be examples of the N=1 and R=G phenomenon.

There are also well-known networks that work wonders for translators specifically, and a translator must attune him/herself to the changing dynamics and be competitive through use of these networks. In the Indian context, although there has not been a very visible network of translators empowered by big business houses, many personal initiatives are in place (for example, www.linguaindia.groupsite.com), and it is expected that in times to come when there is a better understanding of the market, translators will start networking in an organised way and such private initiatives will become part of a collective initiative covering a considerable number of translators.

Conclusion

All that remains to be said in conclusion is that, while Indian translators as entrepreneurs are slowly evolving in spite of many obstacles, they are yet to explore their fullest potential by adopting a common platform. On the one hand, this, and the other hurdles and setbacks, can be attributed, to a large extent, to vestigial colonial mindsets on all sides (the coloniser and the colonised), which have endured past their expiry dates and continue to exert an influence. Perhaps the time has come for change and, given the shared impacts of events, east or west, north or south, salvation for all lies in sharing knowledge, experience and resources.

The future of translation as a profession lies in the 'networking' of entrepreneurs to economise processes and sustain growth by using all available resources and infrastructure. All that this requires is the investment of goodwill across the globe.

Footnotes

[1] D. Kirby, *Entrepreneurship*, McGraw Hill, 2003

[2] R. Gopalakrishnan, *Prosperity Beyond Our Cities by Spreading Enterprise*, AD Shroff Memorial Lecture, October 17-18, 2007

[3] Dwijendra Tripathy (ed), *Business Communities of India: A Historical Perspective*. 1984

[4] Tarun Khanna, *Billions of Entrepreneurs: How China and India are reshaping their future and yours*, 2007

[5] See Pawan K Verma, *Being Indian*

[6] This phenomenon is expounded upon in the writings of management gurus CK Prahalad and MS Krishnan in *The New Age of Innovation: Driving Co-Created Value through Global Networks*, Tata McGraw Hill, 2008