“Gained in Translation”

Interviews with
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Minakshi Thakur, HarperCollins Publishers India
Meera Johri, partner, Rajpal & Sons

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KENNEALLY: Translation, as Salman Rushdie has noted, has its roots in the Latin for “bearing across.” Books and other works in translation are the readers' tickets to others' nations and cultures.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Salman Rushdie, born in Mumbai, or Bombay as it was known then, acknowledges the common fear that something always gets lost in translation, yet he hopes, too, that something can be gained. In his native India, where there are 22 official languages and easily 100 more also spoken in many communities, publishers have a bounty of languages to get lost in and to gain from. The emergence of so-called mobile reading on smartphones and tablets excitingly means that the Indian reader may now enjoy the same book as someone on the other side of the country or at the other end of the train.

To learn more about the potential and the power of translation in the Indian publishing economy, we welcome back to Beyond the Book Prashasti Rastogi, director of the German Book Office in New Delhi. Prashasti, welcome to Beyond the Book once again.

RASTOGI: Thanks, Christopher, for having me once again.

KENNEALLY: Yes, and we certainly enjoy having you join us there from Delhi, and we've got some other special guests we will turn to in just a moment, but we really want to sort of set the stage here and ask you a very broad question about just how important translation is to the publishing world in India. It is, we should acknowledge, the second-largest English-language region or nation in terms of publishing volume. But clearly, English is only one of those 22 official languages and only one of those many others which are spoken throughout India. So how important is translation to the Indian publishing world?

RASTOGI: Well, Christopher, the moment we say translation in India, it's suddenly music to my ears, because that's one issue that I passionately feel for, as well. But when we speak about the potential of translation, the potential is huge, because
there's a huge, ardent, stable readership in Indian languages which on the global stage might not be so visible, and partially it is also due to the historical stem that we have, and every time the flow of original works of fiction in English is more prominent on the global stage, but as far as translations are concerned, there's a huge readership there. There's a huge potential. There is a lot of classic literature which has made its way into English, but maybe the world hasn't warmed up to it so prominently, I would say. And the later entrants in writing are primarily writing in English, so that is why it's not as prominently talked about or seen.

But lately in India, there's a huge concentration on Indian languages. As you mentioned, technology is also deep-seated in the market, and we've seen rise of reading apps which cater to Indian languages, and that means books and news both are being disseminated to the readers in their languages, and the challenges of Indic fonts are being discussed, and publishers are also committed to publishing translations. You have some of the guests today who will tell you more about it.

KENNEALLY: Right. What's interesting to me is I referred to the quote from Rushdie about the fear that things get lost in translation, but there's also, he hopes, a potential for gain there. And there's certainly a fear with the digital economy that certain languages will become almost monopolistic – that English becomes, as it is already, the global language, but there's the fear that English will drown out other languages. What I sense here is a kind of ironic twist on that, that digital publishing, that the mobile reading economy, as you referred to it, really can bring many languages into greater prominence.

RASTOGI: That's right. And producing translations has also never been so fancy as before. Because of the digital technology permeation, you're able to reach the last mile, which maybe the Indian distribution system of books has always found as a challenge. We're called the IT backbone of the world, but unfortunately in the metros, the network connectivity is not as great as in the second tier down. Therefore, reading on mobile is more handy there. And maybe through these technological apps which are simple to operate, we are able to reach those readers and create more excitement in the regional languages. But apart from that, some of the friends here on panel will tell you how exciting the regional book fairs are and how hordes of people flock to book fairs maybe in Patna or Kolkata to look for books in Hindi or Bengali, and there's constant excitement there.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. The excitement in India is certainly understandable, but I wonder – and you look at this from a global perspective there at the German Book Office, Prashasti – is that excitement also translating into other marketplaces? Are you seeing perhaps the German publishing world, the North American publishing world, and others now showing more interest in works from India?

RASTOGI: We all understand that the general English-language market has not really warmed up to the fact of translations, because there are fewer translations going
into English when we talk about the more mature markets. But if I take the example from Europe and precisely from Germany, lots of rights sales that we see are to and from Indian languages. English is definitely a substantial rights sale market, but definitely the other languages are more prominent. So if I look at the figure of six and a half thousand books from last year – that's the latest statistical release by the German Booksellers and Publishers Association for India – I would say 80% of them are into Indian local languages. That clearly shows that there is an understanding.

But the major local literary prizes or the writers are not really being prominently highlighted on the global stage. But for the world to see that there's huge potential here, there's lots of vibrant literature that needs yet to be discovered, and similarly, a lot of potential of those stories to come into various Indian languages and make those cultural connections. This is something that the work of the Indian publishing community is clearly set out for, and more stronger government intervention in this regard is definitely called for.

KENNEALLY: Right. As you say, Prashasti Rastogi, there at the German Book Office, there is a lot of work being done in the Indian publishing community on this particular challenge to both reach Indian readers, but also hopefully to go beyond your borders there. And to learn more about that, I want to turn to Minakshi Thakur, who is a publisher, Hindi, and senior commissioning editor at HarperCollins Publishers India. She joins us as well from Delhi. Minakshi, welcome to Beyond the Book.

THAKUR: Thank you, Christopher. I'm delighted to be a part of this conversation.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you, because your perspective is not only there as an editor at HarperCollins Publishers India, but you are also a writer – a well-regarded writer – in the Indian marketplace as well. You have published a collection of poems in English, An Indian Evening. You have since published two collections in Hindi. One of those was shortlisted for an important prize in 2012. And your first novel, Lovers Like You and I, was published in 2013 and shortlisted for the Tibor Jones South Asia Prize. So someone with an interesting perspective both in the publishing world, but also as an author.

I wonder if you could respond to some of the points that Prashasti has raised, Minakshi. Is this a particularly important moment for works in translation in India?

THAKUR: Yes, I think it is, because I think we're at a crossroads as far as publishing in India is concerned. We're growing in a very – not in a huge way, I would say, but very steadily and very significantly. In terms of publishing across platforms, digital publishing is coming into its own in India, and we find people reading across devices. So I think that is the gap we need to fill, and that is where the future readership is going to come from. That gives me a lot of hope for
translations, because even though we are working a lot in many different ways to make our literature travel within India from one language to another, from Indian languages to English, we're not able to sell as much as we would like. Even though there's a huge English readership – English is becoming an aspirational language. People think that if they don't know enough English, they won't find a job. They won't have a great future. So we need to tap into that readership, that we're not quite able to do yet.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. There's so much to discuss here. I guess one of the things must be just keeping up with all of it, Minakshi. Because as we have said, there are 22 official languages. Some calculations are that at least another 100 more, and probably many hundreds more, other languages spoken in isolated and small communities.

THAKUR: That's right.

KENNEALLY: How do you as an editor keep up with what is going to be the next hit or the next classic? How do you know? Who do you reach to? What is your network for learning about works in languages that you perhaps don't read yourself?

THAKUR: We rely a lot on sources in the various languages. By sources, I mean writers in those languages, regional publishers, journalists writing in those languages, and various people — readers, passionate readers. So we have these sources that we develop over time, and we're constantly going back to them to check who is doing well, whose book is a huge hit, which senior writer we should publish, which are the classics in those languages. So we really depend on — we largely depend on these sources in the languages apart from the ones that we speak. Every person in India would tell you that he or she speaks or knows at least three languages, including English.

KENNEALLY: Right. And I would imagine, too, that as an editor, you are also challenged by trying to find a balance between going to the classics, going to those works which are essential reading for an Indian, and then also to being sure to nurture the next generation of writers.

THAKUR: That's right. Correct. We were earlier focusing a lot on the classics — not just HarperCollins, but other publishers who translate from Indian languages to English or to Hindi. That includes Oxford University Press, Penguin, and all the Hindi publishers. But now I think, especially at Harper, our focus has shifted to nurturing younger writers — not just younger writers, but people who have been writing in the last two decades and we know for sure that they will continue to write for some more time. So we want to build those writers as writers of HarperCollins. We want to build their canon, so to speak. We've been focusing more on powerful contemporary writing.
KENNEALL: That focus – I want to, too – raises some issues for you, because I would imagine, and I don't know India at all, but you can tell me whether this is correct, that there's certainly this notion of the mainstream, this aspiration to speak English to enter into the middle class and much, much more than that. But I would imagine, too, that there are some writers quite proud to be writing in their native language and sort of working on traditional themes. As much as they might profit from being discovered, they might also find some problems with it.

THAKUR: Correct. I think what you're saying is quite right, because I would say that these writers from the languages, even though they want to be published in English, because they will be able to reach a wider audience, they are slightly wary of English-language publishers or even other-language publishers at this point, because they do not really understand how we function sometimes. If you tell them what the processes are, how we publicize them, what kind of editing we'll do – because in most of language publishing, there hasn't been a significant culture of editing or pre-publicity. So at contracts, you have to tell them about the little nitty-gritties of how we function. That is one block that they have.

But most of the contemporary regional writers that we're working with, you'd be amazed at their writing. They're writing the real stories from India which must be read not just in India, but also abroad, because they're astounding writers, most of them, and they're happy to be published in English for the first time if you just clear some of their doubts and try and find a way of becoming friends with them. I think there's just that gap between our worlds which we need to bridge. It's not really a big issue there. Also, most of them these days are bilingual writers, so communicating with them regarding publishing or them communicating with their audiences at festivals is not an issue anymore.

KENNEALL: Right. Certainly, unless someone has grown up speaking a multiplicity of languages – and perhaps in India, that's a common occurrence – a dictionary is always important. At Rajpal & Sons in Delhi, one of the specialties there is publishing bilingual dictionaries for various customer segments. We have on the line from Delhi Meera Johri, who joins us on Beyond the Book to discuss that particular aspect of the translation challenge in India. Meera Johri, welcome to Beyond the Book.

JOHRI: I'm glad to be here today, Christopher.

KENNEALL: As we say, Rajpal & Sons, where you have worked for the last 18 years – you're a partner there – develops a range of bilingual dictionaries and is also really keen to set up a vibrant translation program for authors – the type of nationally acclaimed authors that Minakshi Thakur was just speaking of, but also those with potential reach into the global marketplace. So for you, I want to talk about this notion of the dictionary here. With so many different languages spoken – I think of English and the way that it has incorporated so many words from India
into our language, everything from bungalow to pajamas – it must be a real challenge for you to publish a particular dictionary and feel like you've done the job, because they must be growing all the time.

JOHRI: That is very true, and we try and incorporate new words which have crept into the language every two, three years. So we try and update it so that the dictionary is kept up-to-date as possible. However, it always seems that we are chasing behind the growth, because new words are being added faster than we can keep pace with.

But I would like to react to a couple of points which were made earlier in the discussion, and I think, Christopher, you made this point in speaking to Prashasti that you feel that is English drowning the other languages in India? My take on that is that other languages are really thriving, and in fact, there is a increased readership that we see in a lot of local languages.

KENNEALLY: Can you tell us specifically which particular languages are doing especially well right now?

JOHRI: Hindi – there is a renewed interest in buying Hindi books and reading Hindi books. Marathi has always been very vibrant. Malayalam, Bangla. One reason is that these languages have a very strong culture of reading. And the earlier problem was that distribution was very limited in its reach. But today, because of online selling, even a customer sitting in a remote area is able to access the books. So earlier, the problem was that there was no accessibility. With online sales, this problem of reaching the customer has been overcome. And as Minakshi pointed, that because of focus of contemporary or Third World writing about today's issues and speaking the language which the young people speak – a lot of youngsters are finding resonance of their own voice in these books.

So that is very important, that today the young population, which forms a very significant part of Indian population, they are able to relate to these themes, and they like to read books. And of course, the fact that the books are available across devices makes it that much easier.

KENNEALLY: Is there a challenge for publishers, Meera, to not only provide books in translation, but to also help provide books in context? It seems to me that a reader who picks up a book in translation can enjoy it for the language and for the plot and so forth, but yet would enjoy it even more if he or she understood the background for the book. How much of a challenge is that to get people to pick up a book from a culture or from a language that is rather distinct from their own?

JOHRI: Look, today there are two things which because of information being freely available on real-time basis – a book which is being talked about in any part of the world, that there is an organic demand for it even in Indian languages, because
people have access to that information. Say earlier – I must share with you, in Rajpal & Sons, we have been doing translations for last 50, 60 years. We even published *Grapes of Wrath* and *Huckleberry Finn, Portrait of a Lady*.

Now, when we published those books, it was a challenge to inform the readers about the importance of the author and (inaudible). But today that task is so much simpler, because the reader already knows that this book – what the book is about, because he or she has been exposed to it because they read it on the internet or they read something about it on social media. So to that extent, that cultural barrier does not exist.

KENNEALLY: That's a fascinating point. I'm just trying to imagine *Huckleberry Finn* in translation into Hindi. I would love to hear what that sounds like, just the music of the language in Hindi as taken from Twain's original English.

JOHRI: Since then we've done *Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, Count of Monte Cristo* – so many, and they continue to sell well. And today, it is easier to sell these translations because, as I said, there is an organic demand for them. Previously, it was a mind-boggling task that, OK, how do we explain who is John Steinbeck? What's his importance? What book is important about? But today, it just happens very naturally.

And I think the other important point which I think Minakshi made in passing when she talked of young writers is that we must remember that India has a very large segment of its population which is in the young age group. These people are more open and more receptive to new ideas, which is reflected in the foods that we eat today, in the clothes that we wear. Everyone uses the same smartphone. So as a result, they all have the same aspirations and ideals. Everyone wants to read about Steve Jobs. Everyone wants to read about Bill Gates. And to that extent, reaching out to them, to the young people, is so much simpler.

KENNEALLY: What I was going to do was to bring back to our discussion Prashasti Rastogi at the German Book Office there in Delhi and Minakshi Thakur who is at HarperCollins Publishers in India, where she's a publisher in Hindi and a senior commissioning editor, and ask you about the way that these sorts of books may extend themselves into other media. Certainly when one thinks of Indian media, the image of Bollywood comes to mind and the thriving cinematic community. I wonder if any of the books that you are working on have found their way onto the big screen, or for that matter, the small screen. Minakshi, do any of these books wind up on television or in film in India?

THAKUR: You know, we engage agents who pitch these books to filmmakers and producers for the simple fact that they are so difficult to reach out to, because they're such busy people. So sometimes we do get calls from filmmakers. For instance, there's a pulp fiction writer in Hindi who is huge. His name is Surender
Mohan Pathak. Every single crime fiction that he writes sells about 40,000 copies on its first release. We've been publishing him for the last three years, and we do get a lot of calls from filmmakers. But these contracts are so complicated, film contracts. Things written in fine print are so complicated and long-winded sometimes. But these deals take a lot of time. So there are offers, but I wouldn't say there are too many offers.

KENNEALLY: What about that point, Meera Johri there at Rajpal & Sons? Your company, at least, has been working on translations for 50 years. Are there some now classic movies in Bollywood cinema that were translated from works published by Rajpal?

JOHRI: Well, there have been a couple of television series which were based on the books that we published, and one or two films have been made. But now those books are no longer in print, because they didn't really qualify as classics for us to keep them alive. But we have had instances of films as well as television series being adapted without our having to go out and sell or having agents to go and sell them. This happened on its own more organically, if I may say so. Someone read the book, liked it, approached us for rights, and then that is how it happened.

KENNEALLY: And then finally, I wonder – and certainly open this to anyone on the call here – how you respond to a wonderful quote that I saw from Robert Frost, who made the point, our favorite New England poet. He says that poetry is what gets lost in translation. So finally, and perhaps I'll turn to Minakshi Thakur first on this point, does it ever concern you, this notion of lost in translation, or are you actually excited about it, that perhaps translations can be additive, can actually, as Salman Rushdie hopes, add to a work?

THAKUR: You know, there are two sides to this story. Obviously, something will be lost in translation, especially when it comes to poetry, because the music of a certain language cannot be totally transferred to another language, even though the context, the thought behind it, the whole storyline of the poem, can be transferred. But music is almost impossible to transfer to another language. But then if those poets were not translated – if (inaudible) was never translated, if (inaudible) was not translated – if so many of the poets that we've grown up reading have not been translated, would we gain what we've gained by reading them? So that is the question, that is the dilemma that you need to cross when you decide to publish a certain poet in translation. But I do think that I would go for it if the translation was (inaudible).

KENNEALLY: Right. I was thinking, Prashasti Rastogi, as Minakshi was just speaking there, that there's a loss not in translation, but in not translating. That should be a real exciting thought for publishers, that translation here is very much indeed an opportunity.
RASTOGI: Absolutely. Actually, translation can be seen as a curatorial work, not only from the perspective of taking someone's work and bringing it to life for various other readerships, but it is also about nurturing authors and nurturing societies to have a dialogue with each other just by sheer possibility of the written word. There's a lot, lot that can be done there. In fact, Europe with its own diversity, India with its own diversity, are similar examples, just as a reference point for your audiences who are listening to this podcast right now.

JOHRI: Christopher, I'd like to make a point here about poetry and translation of poetry. We do a lot of poetry from Urdu which is called shayari. So that no nuances are lost, what we have started doing is we have a transliteration of the poetry in the (inaudible) script as well as a translation, and the original in Hindi, so that the reader can enjoy the music when he or she reads the translation and understand the meaning by reading the translation.

KENNEALLY: So what your point is, is that the reader can approximate the experience of hearing the work as well as understanding it.

JOHRI: Right, yeah. We found that this is a good way to overcome the problem in poetry, especially, that you have a transliteration so that the music of the words is still retained, and you have a translation so that the meaning is conveyed. That has been a good experiment for us to be able to do this and overcome this problem.

KENNEALLY: Well, we have certainly overcome the challenges of technology here to present what I think has been a fascinating conversation, and I want to thank our guests today. We'll thank, in order, Prashasti Rastogi, who is the director in Delhi of the German Book Office. Prashasti Rastogi, thanks so much for joining us again on Beyond the Book.

RASTOGI: Thank you, Christopher.

KENNEALLY: Also very happy to have had a chance to speak with Minakshi Thakur, who is a publisher in Hindi and a senior commissioning editor at HarperCollins Publishers India, as well as the author of Lovers Like You and I, shortlisted for the Tibor Jones South Asia Prize in 2013. Minakshi Thakur, thank you as well.

THAKUR: Thank you, Christopher, and thank you, Prashasti and Meera. It was wonderful being part of this conversation with you guys.

KENNEALLY: And finally, indeed, thank you to our final guest on the program, Meera Johri, who is a partner at Rajpal & Sons Publishers in Delhi. Meera, thank you for joining us.
JOHRI: Thank you. It was my pleasure to be with all of you this evening and share some thoughts. I hope this leads to some more introspection and ideas which we can put into practice.

KENNEALLY: We’ll look forward to that.

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