

# Triangulating Translation: Why Place Matters in Interlingual Encounters

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WHAT connects a lecture theater at University College London, Higginbotham's Bookshop in Bangalore, the Edinburgh Festival in 1956, and the Panchavati Forest in western India? The answer is . . . a book, *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Condensed into English Verse*, specifically an individual copy that I bought from a bookshop in Hay-on-Wye in 2018. The Indian civil servant, economic historian, and liberal nationalist Romesh Chunder Dutt produced this translation for the publisher J. M. Dent in 1898. Dent originally issued Dutt's *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as separate items in the Temple Classics, before combining them into a single volume for his larger and more famous cheap reprint series, Everyman's Library. One of that volume's numerous reprints is what now stands on my shelf, in company with titles like *The Song Celestial*, *Indian Idylls*, *The Iliad of the East*, and *Sakoontala, or The Lost Ring*—in short, the departed host of Sanskritic Victoriana. The *Ramayana* is a particular interest of mine. Dutt's was by no means the earliest attempt to offer a cheap, abridged, accessible translation of the epic for the English-speaking general public, but it was the first to be printed in five-figure quantities and distributed around the world. Priced at one shilling, by 1951 the book on my shelf is estimated to have sold 42,566 copies—a total that puts it in the top third of Everyman's best-selling titles.<sup>1</sup>

Setting the book aside for a moment, my reason for posing this question is that we don't always think about where translations are made and the space they occupy in the world. To use a key term from our roundtable, translations are not often thought of as *geospecific*, even when—as is the case with more or less all Victorian translations made from Asian

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languages—they emerge from global networks of movement and exchange. When dealing with other transimperial texts—like the *Lays of Ancient Rome*, which Macaulay wrote, by his own account, during a “dreary sojourn” in the Nilgiri Hills, or Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, which was the product of a ten-day sea voyage from Britain to South Africa—it seems obvious that these contexts of composition were very important. Yet when our discussion turns to “world literature”; when we consider the expansion of the nineteenth-century canon and the stretching of English poetry by foreign meters; when we talk about the Bhagavad Gita as a global text, or the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* as a Victorian classic, discrete literary geographies are apt to dissipate into boundless space. Perhaps it is the very fluidity and efficiency with which the products of Orientalism were disseminated to imperial publics around the globe that lead us to overlook the particular places or surfaces upon which these fast-moving objects obtained traction.

This is a pity, because the places in which Victorian Orientalists did their work were strikingly diverse and often unexpected. Take just one language, Arabic. During work on the *Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia*, Lady Anne Blunt wrote to her husband, the poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, that she “cd never do it elsewhere” than at Sheykh Obeyd, their farm on the outskirts of Cairo (to clarify, it was Anne who made the translation from the Arabic *Muallaqat*, which the more famous Wilfrid then put into English verse).<sup>2</sup> If she needed to hear the language around her, though, other Arabists did not. Charles James Lyall, whose earlier version of the *Muallaqat* made a great impression on Robert Browning, translated at Simla in India, building on work done at Calcutta by William Jones; meanwhile, Richard Burton, as we can see in photographs, compiled his *Arabian Nights* in a fourth-floor apartment overlooking the harbor of Trieste. Or consider sinology, and how the earliest English translations of Confucian philosophy were done by missionaries not at Hong Kong but at Serampore in Bengal, and later at the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca. This does not mean that translation is labor that can be performed anywhere. Place inflects translation, intrinsically so in the case of the *Seven Golden Odes*, which was shaped by Anne’s conversations with Egyptian friends and teachers, such as her neighbor Hamoudeh Abdu, and by her antipathy to the local British administration. Not that these geospecifics are always easily visible, either. When Burton’s volumes appeared, they did not announce themselves as the product of Trieste or of London but bore the imprint of the fictitious Kama Shastra Society of Benares: and so we sometimes need to

reacquaint with their true *genius loci* texts that actively conceal them, and project in their place imagined geographies.

This brings us back to Romesh Chunder Dutt and his rhetorical effort to tie his text to certain resonant locations. The cultural nationalism that motivated Dutt imparts to his translation a preoccupation with sacred and racial geographies, and all places in his *Ramayana* are scrupulously pinpointed on the *modern* map. When Ram and Sita are exiled to the Panchavati Forest, for instance, Dutt's preamble to that chapter treats us to a panoramic vista over the Deccan Plateau ("the reader has now left Northern India and crossed the Vindhya mountains"), before zooming in on a spot "within a hundred miles" of Bombay, "near the sources of the Godavari river." Their arrival here is yoked to contemporary theories about Aryan migration to the subcontinent. Though in modern times the forest has shrunk to a holy precinct in the heart of a major city, Panchavati's metaphorical dimensions are vast. Removed from the corrupt royal court, in this place Rama and Sita can compensate for their lost kingdom by realizing a more perfect connubial union. Here they are happy, until Sita's abduction by Ravana brings about the battle with evil and tyranny that is Rama's divinely ordained mission. This mythic episode appealed to members of the Bengali intelligentsia like Dutt who felt marginalized in public life, many of them followers of the mystic Ramakrishna, who preached withdrawal from politics and business to cultivate domestic virtue, and who meditated in a grove outside Calcutta known as the Panchavati. Whether they were alive to these meanings, it seems likely that many readers will have assumed Dutt's translation was made in India, unless they turned to the volume's final pages, where a lengthy translator's epilogue is signed "University College London, 13th August 1898."<sup>3</sup> In fact, in the winter of that year Dutt had established himself at 33 Warrington Crescent, Maida Vale, and though he was no stranger to the city, he told his brother how "it is a frightfully uphill work to establish your name, and get a footing in the crowded and unsympathetic world of London."<sup>4</sup> His translation activities cannot be understood without this context, squeezed as they were in the spare hours between networking, making stump speeches for the Liberal Party, and delivering a series of lectures at UCL in which he demonstrated how Britain had made India a captive market for its manufactures, eroding its industries and triggering famines. The discourses of cultural revival, governance, and self-sufficiency mingle in his correspondence with sympathizers like Alfred Russel Wallace, with whom he discussed both economics and Sanskrit.

This is a special book, because it carries evidence not just of its composition but also its reception, a process that likewise requires careful mapping. Opening its covers for the first time, I found an owner's signature, a price, a bookseller's stamp, and a news clipping about Noel Coward. In brief, what all this shows is that the book was purchased at Higginbotham's by Ram Gopal (ca. 1912–2003), one of the first Indian classical dancers to achieve international fame. It could not have been sold before it was printed, in 1936, and judging by the date of the news clipping, Gopal is most likely to have bought it in 1940 or 1941, after the outbreak of war had obliged him to cut short his first European tour and return home to Bangalore. Its stories and characters were of course not new to him. In boyhood dreams, Gopal wrote in his autobiography, he was always "some God destroying all the dark devils that kept arising out of the shadows, or Rama, hero prince of the epic Ramayana, wandering in forests accompanied by the beautiful Sita."<sup>5</sup> But this encounter does seem to have helped crystallize the choreography he would present overseas after his wartime hiatus, beginning with a performance at the Victoria & Albert Museum for the reopening of their South Asian galleries in September 1947 (just one month after Indian independence). The handwriting Gopal has left inside the rear endpapers documents these plans: "Yuddha," he notes, refers to the war fought by his namesake Rama with the demon-king Ravana but is also a *kathakali* technique that will "give me an opp. for using the ceylon masks & dances." The notes also refer to the forest of his childhood dreams; but whereas Panchavati had signified for Dutt marital bliss and virtue, what now inspired Gopal was the moment that shatters this "sweet communion." One of his most celebrated pieces after the war was a daringly sensual version of the abduction of Sita, performed not—as was traditional—by a boy and a man but by a man and a woman. A tyrant with strains of nobility, Ravana (portrayed with "terrifying cumulative passion," remarked one critic at the Edinburgh Festival in 1956) is vilified in the poem's orthodox form but heroized in some of the many variants that high-caste commentators have striven to suppress.

Perhaps by naming only locations within India and Britain, I am actually underestimating this book's global itineraries, for Gopal performed worldwide. May 1948 found him in Stockholm, where he made a pilgrimage to a place of great personal significance, entering breathlessly as though it were "the abode or ashram, sacred place of some saint." It was only an apartment building on Blekingegatan, but it was

the birthplace of his ideal of feminine beauty. “This was Vedic magic,” he recalled of his first, ecstatic glimpse in a Bangalore movie house,

every hymn the sages wrote to Lakshmi, Goddess of Beauty, Saraswati, Goddess of Learning, and Parvati, that sensual wife of Siva, all these and every other distilled dream of my boyhood were incarnated in this swan called Garbo.<sup>6</sup>

A book may have many lives. In any case, this copy of a long-lived Victorian translation (reprinted by Everyman as late as 1975 and still reissued occasionally in India today) shows me how unsatisfactory it is to conceive of the *Ramayana* as hovering inside some imaginary space we call world literature. Scholars of the poem, who have studied its variants from Java to East Turkestan, will already know how it became a worlded text long before English became a global language. Within our own period, we should follow their example and locate the *Ramayana* through a process of triangulation, understanding how it was mobilized in the anglosphere through individual acts of translating and reading.

#### NOTES

1. Seymour, *A Printing History*, 208.
2. Anne Blunt to W. S. Blunt, March 21, 1899.
3. Dutt, *Ramayana and the Mahabharata*, 66, 333. For images of my copy, see [www.avatar-books.com](http://www.avatar-books.com).
4. Gupta, *Romesh Chunder Dutt*, 229.
5. Gopal, *Rhythm in the Heavens*, 33.
6. Gopal, *Rhythm in the Heavens*, 174.

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