

Women Translators in Gujarati and the Re-articulation of Hindu Thought in Colonial and Postcolonial India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000124>

Received: 24 August 2026; Accepted: 29 August 2026; Published: 09 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Translation in colonial India was not a neutral linguistic activity but a deeply ideological and civilisational process. While colonial translations of Hindu texts often reframed Indian knowledge systems through Eurocentric epistemologies, regional-language translations—particularly in Gujarati—emerged as significant sites of resistance, negotiation, and reinterpretation. This paper examines the role of women translators in Gujarati in re-articulating Hindu thought during the colonial and postcolonial periods, foregrounding translation as an act of cultural mediation and intellectual agency.

Focusing on select Gujarati women translators, the study analyses how their translational choices engaged with key Hindu concepts such as *dharma*, social ethics, womanhood, and civilisational values. Unlike colonial translations that frequently abstracted or moralised Hindu philosophy to suit Western frameworks, these translators situated Hindu thought within lived social realities, indigenous hermeneutics, and reformist concerns. Their work demonstrates a conscious negotiation between tradition and modernity, preservation and reinterpretation.

The paper employs a translation studies approach informed by feminist translation theory and indigenous hermeneutics to explore how gendered perspectives influenced translation strategies, paratexts, and narrative framing. It argues that Gujarati women translators did not merely reproduce source texts but actively re-shaped Hindu intellectual discourse by foregrounding ethical reasoning, social reform, and cultural continuity. In doing so, they contributed to the decolonisation of knowledge by reclaiming interpretive authority from colonial frameworks and re-embedding Hindu thought within regional linguistic and cultural contexts.

By situating Gujarati women translators within the broader discourse of Hindu Studies, the paper highlights their overlooked contribution to the preservation and transmission of dharmic and civilisational knowledge. It contends that recognising these translators as intellectual agents is essential to understanding translation as a civilisational practice rather than a purely linguistic exercise. The study thus underscores the importance of regional-language translations—and women's translational labour—in reimagining Hindu thought in modern India.

Keywords: Women Translators; Gujarati Translation; Hindu Thought; Decolonising Knowledge; Civilisational Discourse

INTRODUCTION

Translation in colonial India cannot be understood as a neutral or purely linguistic activity; rather, it functioned as a deeply ideological process embedded within structures of power, knowledge, and cultural representation. Colonial translations of Indian texts—particularly those dealing with religion, philosophy, and social organisation—often reframed indigenous knowledge systems within Eurocentric epistemological frameworks. In doing so, they not only mediated but also reshaped the understanding of Hindu thought for both Western and Indian audiences. Concepts such as *dharma*, social ethics, and the organisation of community life were frequently abstracted, moralised, or selectively interpreted, resulting in a partial and, at times, distorted representation of India's civilisational knowledge.

Within this context, translation into regional languages assumes critical importance. If colonial translations outwardly rearticulated India for the West, regional-language translations worked inwardly, addressing Indian readers and re-situating knowledge within familiar linguistic and cultural frameworks. Gujarati, as a vibrant literary and intellectual language in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emerged as a significant site of such mediation. The rise of print culture, the expansion of education, and the growth of reformist discourse in Gujarat created a fertile environment in which translation became a key instrument for the dissemination, reinterpretation, and negotiation of ideas. Translation in Gujarati was not merely a derivative activity but a formative one, participating actively in shaping modern Gujarati intellectual and cultural life.

However, within the historiography of translation in India, the contributions of women translators remain significantly underexplored. While male translators and reformers have often been foregrounded in discussions of colonial knowledge production, women's participation has been either marginalised or treated as ancillary. This absence is particularly striking given that translation provided one of the earliest and most socially sanctioned avenues for women's intellectual engagement in colonial India. Writing original texts was often constrained by social expectations, but translation—especially of educational, moral, and reformist literature—allowed women to enter the public sphere as interpreters and mediators of knowledge.

This paper seeks to foreground the role of Gujarati women translators in the re-articulation of Hindu thought during the colonial and early postcolonial periods. Focusing on figures such as Vidyagauri Neelkanth, Sharda Mehta, and Hansa Mehta, and extending briefly to Dhiruben Patel, the study examines how translation functioned as a site of cultural negotiation and intellectual agency. These translators engaged with a range of texts—social, educational, literary, and ethical—and through their translational choices, they participated in reshaping key aspects of Hindu social and moral discourse. Their work demonstrates that translation was not a passive act of transmission but an active process of interpretation, adaptation, and contextualisation.

What distinguishes these women translators is their ability to negotiate between multiple and often competing frameworks: colonial modernity and indigenous tradition, Western intellectual currents and Indian ethical systems, reformist impulses and civilisational continuity. In translating texts into Gujarati, they did not merely reproduce the source material but reworked it in ways that resonated with local cultural sensibilities and social realities. Concepts central to Hindu thought—such as duty, social responsibility, and ethical conduct—were not simply translated but reinterpreted within the lived context of Gujarati society. This process can be understood as a form of re-articulation, wherein translation becomes a means of rethinking and re-presenting inherited knowledge rather than simply preserving or transmitting it.

The paper adopts an expanded understanding of translation that includes not only direct linguistic transfer but also adaptation, interpretive mediation, and pedagogic rewriting. Such an approach is particularly necessary in the Indian context, where the boundaries between translation, commentary, and adaptation have historically been fluid. It also allows for a more inclusive recognition of women's intellectual labour, which has often operated within these interstitial spaces rather than within rigidly defined categories of authorship.

By situating Gujarati women translators within the broader discourse of Hindu Studies and civilisational analysis, this study argues that their contributions are integral to understanding how Hindu thought was negotiated, preserved, and transformed in modern India. Translation, in this context, emerges as a critical site of civilisational continuity—one that not only responds to the pressures of colonial modernity but also actively participates in shaping the contours of postcolonial intellectual life.

TRANSLATION, GENDER, AND CIVILISATION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Translation as Knowledge Production

Translation has long been understood not merely as a process of linguistic transfer but as an act of rewriting that participates in the production of knowledge. To translate is to interpret, select, emphasise, and reorganise meaning within a new linguistic and cultural framework. In this sense, translation is inherently transformative; it does not replicate the source text but reconstitutes it within the epistemological and ideological structures of

the target context. The translator, therefore, is not an invisible mediator but an active agent whose choices shape the reception and understanding of the text.

This perspective foregrounds translation as a site of cultural and ideological mediation. Every act of translation involves decisions regarding equivalence, omission, emphasis, and tone, all of which are informed by the translator's positionality and the expectations of the target audience. Particularly in multilingual and culturally dense societies such as India, translation becomes a crucial mechanism through which knowledge circulates across linguistic boundaries. It determines not only what is transmitted but how it is understood, internalised, and adapted.

In the context of Gujarati translation, especially during the colonial and early postcolonial periods, translation functioned as a formative intellectual practice. It enabled the introduction of new ideas—social, ethical, and literary—while simultaneously anchoring them within local cultural frameworks. Thus, translation must be seen as a mode of knowledge production that actively contributes to shaping intellectual traditions, rather than as a secondary or derivative activity.

Colonialism and Translation

The relationship between colonialism and translation is deeply intertwined with structures of power and epistemic control. Colonial regimes relied on translation as a means of accessing, categorising, and governing colonised societies. Indian texts, particularly those related to religion, law, and philosophy, were translated into English and other European languages in ways that rendered them legible within Western intellectual paradigms. However, this process was far from neutral. It often involved selective interpretation, simplification, and reframing, which resulted in partial and sometimes distorted representations of Indian knowledge systems.

Translation in the colonial context thus became a tool of epistemic control. By determining which texts were translated and how they were interpreted, colonial scholars and administrators exercised authority over the production and circulation of knowledge about India. Complex and context-specific concepts such as *dharma*, caste, and social duty were frequently reduced to categories that aligned with Western moral, legal, or religious frameworks. This not only shaped Western perceptions of India but also influenced how educated Indian elites came to understand their own traditions.

Furthermore, colonial translation practices often detached texts from their performative, oral, and contextual dimensions, presenting them instead as static and universalised objects of knowledge. Such reframing contributed to the construction of a homogenised and systematised image of Hindu thought, which overlooked its internal diversity and interpretive flexibility. In this sense, translation was instrumental in the broader colonial project of knowledge production and control.

Translation as Decolonising Practice

If translation under colonialism functioned as a tool of epistemic control, it also simultaneously provided a means for resistance and reinterpretation. Regional-language translations, particularly those into languages such as Gujarati, played a crucial role in reclaiming interpretive authority and re-situating knowledge within indigenous cultural frameworks. By translating texts into the vernacular, translators addressed local audiences directly, bypassing the mediating lens of colonial discourse.

Translation in regional languages thus emerges as a decolonising practice. It enables the re-embedding of ideas within familiar linguistic, cultural, and ethical contexts, thereby countering the abstractions and distortions introduced by colonial translations. Rather than accepting externally imposed interpretations, regional translators often reworked texts to align with local sensibilities and concerns. This process involved not only linguistic translation but also cultural negotiation and reinterpretation.

In the Gujarati context, translation became a means of engaging with modernity without surrendering civilisational continuity. Translators selectively appropriated elements of Western thought while filtering them through indigenous ethical frameworks. At the same time, they revisited and rearticulated aspects of Hindu

thought in ways that were relevant to contemporary social realities. Through such practices, translation contributed to the ongoing project of decolonising knowledge by restoring agency to local intellectual traditions.

Feminist Translation Perspective

A feminist perspective on translation foregrounds the role of the translator as an embodied and situated subject whose gendered experiences inform the act of translation. It challenges the notion of neutrality by emphasising that translation is shaped by the translator's social position, including gender, class, and cultural background. Women translators, in particular, have often navigated constraints and expectations that influence both their choice of texts and their translational strategies.

In the colonial and early postcolonial Indian context, translation offered women a relatively accessible entry point into intellectual and public life. Within socially acceptable boundaries, women engaged with texts that addressed education, morality, social reform, and domestic life. However, their role was not limited to passive transmission. Through their translations, women actively participated in shaping discourse, especially on issues related to gender, ethics, and social responsibility.

Gendered agency in translation is evident in the selection of texts, the modulation of tone, and the framing of ideas. Women translators often emphasised themes such as moral conduct, education, and social reform, aligning their work with broader concerns about the role of women in society. At the same time, they negotiated existing cultural norms, balancing reformist impulses with respect for tradition. Their translations reflect a nuanced engagement with both indigenous and external ideas, demonstrating that women were not merely recipients of knowledge but active contributors to its reinterpretation.

Indigenous Hermeneutics

Understanding translation in the Indian context requires attention to indigenous traditions of interpretation, or hermeneutics, which have historically shaped the ways in which texts are read, understood, and transmitted. Indian intellectual traditions have long recognised that meaning is not fixed but emerges through processes of interpretation, debate, and contextualisation. Practices of commentary, exegesis, and dialogic engagement have been central to the transmission of knowledge across generations.

These interpretive traditions are grounded in ethical and contextual reading practices. Texts are not treated as isolated objects but as part of a living tradition that engages with questions of duty, conduct, and social order. Interpretation involves not only understanding the literal meaning of a text but also situating it within broader philosophical and ethical frameworks. This approach allows for flexibility and adaptation, enabling texts to remain relevant across changing contexts.

Gujarati translators, particularly women working in the colonial and postcolonial periods, can be seen as participating in these indigenous hermeneutic practices. Their translations often go beyond literal equivalence, incorporating explanation, adaptation, and contextualisation. By aligning texts with local cultural and ethical concerns, they contribute to a mode of interpretation that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary realities. In this sense, their work exemplifies a continuity between traditional hermeneutic practices and modern translational activity.

Historical Context: Gujarati Print Culture and Translation

The emergence of print culture in Gujarat during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marks a significant turning point in the region's intellectual and cultural history. With the establishment of printing presses, missionary institutions, and vernacular schools, the production and circulation of texts expanded rapidly, enabling new forms of knowledge dissemination and public engagement. Print culture facilitated the standardisation of Gujarati prose, the growth of periodicals, and the creation of a reading public that extended beyond traditional scholarly elites. Within this evolving landscape, translation assumed a central role, acting as a bridge between languages, knowledge systems, and social contexts.

The rise of print culture coincided with increasing contact between Indian and Western intellectual traditions under colonial rule. English education introduced new forms of knowledge—scientific, literary, and philosophical—which required mediation for regional audiences. Translation from English into Gujarati thus became an essential mechanism for making this knowledge accessible. However, this process was not limited to simple transmission. Translators adapted texts to suit the linguistic, cultural, and moral expectations of Gujarati readers, ensuring that new ideas could be understood within familiar frameworks. In doing so, translation contributed to the shaping of modern Gujarati prose and intellectual discourse.

One of the most significant functions of translation in this period was its role as an educational tool. Translated texts were widely used in schools and colleges, providing access to subjects that ranged from history and science to moral philosophy and literature. Educational institutions relied on translated materials to supplement limited indigenous resources, and translators often modified content to align with pedagogical goals. This educational function of translation was particularly important in a multilingual society, where access to English remained limited. By rendering knowledge into Gujarati, translators enabled broader participation in emerging forms of education and intellectual life.

At the same time, translation operated as a reformist instrument. The nineteenth century in Gujarat witnessed a series of social reform movements addressing issues such as women's education, widow remarriage, caste practices, and social ethics. Reformers recognised the power of print and translation in shaping public opinion and disseminating new ideas. Translations of English and other Indian-language texts on social reform, morality, and domestic life were produced to encourage critical reflection and gradual change within society. These texts often combined elements of Western liberal thought with indigenous ethical frameworks, creating a hybrid discourse that was both innovative and culturally grounded.

The prominence of English-to-Gujarati translation during this period reflects the asymmetrical power dynamics of colonial knowledge production. English functioned as the language of administration, higher education, and global intellectual exchange, while Gujarati remained the language of everyday communication and cultural expression. Translating from English into Gujarati was therefore not merely a linguistic exercise but a process of negotiating between two epistemological worlds. Translators had to decide how to render unfamiliar concepts, how to adapt foreign contexts, and how to reconcile differing moral and social values. These decisions shaped the reception of translated texts and influenced the development of Gujarati intellectual culture.

The broader context of social reform movements in Gujarat further underscores the significance of translation during this period. Reformist organisations, educational societies, and literary circles actively promoted the use of vernacular languages as vehicles for social change. Print culture provided a platform for debates on religion, ethics, and social practices, and translation played a crucial role in sustaining these discussions. By introducing new ideas while reinterpreting existing traditions, translation contributed to a dynamic process of cultural negotiation.

Within this context, the entry of women into education and writing represents a particularly important development. The expansion of female education, though gradual and uneven, created new opportunities for women to participate in intellectual and literary activities. Translation emerged as a relatively accessible and socially acceptable form of engagement. Unlike original authorship, which could be seen as transgressive, translation was often viewed as an extension of learning and moral instruction. This perception allowed women to contribute to the public sphere while remaining within acceptable social boundaries.

Translation thus became a respectable intellectual activity for women, enabling them to engage with texts, ideas, and debates that were otherwise inaccessible. Women translators worked on a range of materials, including educational texts, moral literature, and works related to social reform. Through their translations, they not only facilitated the dissemination of knowledge but also shaped its interpretation. Their choices of texts, their emphasis on particular themes, and their modes of expression reflect a conscious engagement with the social and cultural issues of their time.

In this sense, Gujarati translation during the colonial and early postcolonial periods can be understood as a site where civilisational continuity was negotiated under conditions of colonial disruption. While colonial rule

introduced new structures of knowledge and authority, translation into Gujarati allowed these influences to be filtered, adapted, and reinterpreted within indigenous frameworks. Rather than simply absorbing external ideas, translators participated in an ongoing process of negotiation that sought to balance change with continuity. Through this process, translation contributed to the preservation and transformation of cultural and intellectual traditions, ensuring their relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Case Studies: Women Translators in Colonial and Transitional India

Vidyagauri Neelkanth

Vidyagauri Neelkanth's translational work must be understood not merely as a transfer of content from English into Gujarati, but as a deliberate act of cultural and ethical reinterpretation. The texts she engages with—largely social, reformist, and didactic in nature—are situated within the broader discourse of colonial modernity, yet her translations consistently reframe them within indigenous moral and cultural frameworks.

A key site of this reinterpretation is her treatment of the concept of *dharma*. Rather than offering a direct lexical equivalent for English terms such as “duty” or “moral obligation,” Neelkanth frequently expands the semantic field through contextual elaboration. For instance, where an English source text may state:

“A woman's duty lies in the proper management of her household and moral upbringing of children,”

Neelkanth renders this not as a literal equivalent, but as:

“સ્રીનું ધર્મ માત્ર ઘર સંભાળવામાં નથી, પરંતુ સંસ્કાર અને નૈતિકતા દ્વારા કુટુંબનું ઘડતર કરવાનું છે.” (Neelkanth, p. 56)

Here, the shift from “duty” to *dharma* is not merely terminological but conceptual. The translation expands the scope of responsibility from functional obligation to ethical and cultural formation, embedding the idea within a distinctly Gujarati-Hindu framework of familial and moral responsibility. This illustrates how translation becomes a means of reworking *dharma* as a lived ethical principle rather than an abstract category.

Neelkanth's engagement with social reform is equally evident in her translational strategies. Her source texts often advocate for women's education and social participation within a liberal reformist framework. However, instead of reproducing these arguments in their original form, she rearticulates them in ways that align with prevailing cultural sensibilities. For example:

“Education enables women to become independent thinkers,”

is rendered as:

“શિક્ષણ સ્ત્રીને વિચારશક્તિ આપે છે, જેથી તે પોતાનું કર્તવ્ય સમજીને પરિવાર અને સમાજમાં યોગ્ય સ્થાન મેળવી શકે.” (Neelkanth, p. 98)

The insertion of *kartavya* (duty) and the emphasis on family and society demonstrate a careful balancing act. While the idea of intellectual empowerment is retained, it is reframed within a discourse of responsibility and social harmony. This reflects a broader pattern in her translations, where reform is articulated not as a rupture with tradition but as its ethical extension.

Language choice plays a crucial role in this mediatory process. Neelkanth employs a form of Gujarati that is accessible yet culturally resonant, often favouring terms that carry ethical and emotional weight. Her translations avoid excessive literalism, instead prioritising clarity and relevance for the target audience. This is evident in her adaptation of culturally specific references. Where an English text might invoke abstract moral principles, Neelkanth often introduces examples rooted in everyday Gujarati life, thereby enhancing relatability and comprehension.

Ethical framing is another defining feature of her work. Her translations consistently foreground moral reasoning, guiding the reader toward reflection and self-improvement. Rather than presenting ideas in a neutral

or descriptive manner, she inflects them with a normative tone that aligns with reformist and ethical discourse. This is particularly evident in her treatment of women's roles, where she advocates for education and agency while maintaining continuity with cultural expectations of duty and responsibility.

Cultural localisation further reinforces this approach. Neelkanth adapts not only language but also context, ensuring that the translated text resonates with Gujarati readers. This involves subtle shifts in emphasis, the inclusion of culturally familiar examples, and the reinterpretation of concepts to align with local values. Such interventions demonstrate that her role as a translator extends beyond linguistic equivalence to encompass interpretation, negotiation, and cultural mediation.

Through these strategies, Vidyagauri Neelkanth reshapes Hindu social thought into a reformist yet culturally rooted discourse. Her translations illustrate that engagement with modern ideas need not entail a rejection of tradition; rather, it can facilitate a rearticulation of ethical and social values in ways that are both meaningful and contextually grounded.

Sharda Mehta

Sharda Mehta's contribution to Gujarati translation is most visible through her collaborative work with Vidyagauri Neelkanth. While literary and intellectual histories often foreground individual achievement, the partnership between these two women demonstrates that translation in colonial Gujarat was also a collective intellectual enterprise. Their collaboration highlights how women participated in public discourse not merely as readers or reformers but as co-creators of knowledge who interpreted, adapted, and disseminated ideas for Gujarati audiences.

The significance of Sharda Mehta's role lies not simply in the act of translation itself but in the dialogic process that collaborative translation entails. Unlike solitary authorship, collaborative translation requires negotiation, discussion, and shared interpretation. The translated text therefore emerges from a process of collective meaning-making. In the colonial context, where women's access to formal intellectual institutions remained limited, such partnerships provided important spaces for scholarly engagement and public participation.

The translations associated with Neelkanth and Mehta frequently address themes such as education, moral conduct, social responsibility, and women's advancement. These concerns were central to reformist discourse in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gujarat. However, the translations do not simply replicate reformist arguments borrowed from English texts. Instead, they reinterpret them through culturally resonant language and examples, making them relevant to Gujarati readers.

For instance, where an English source text may advocate:

“The progress of society depends upon the education of its women,”

a Gujarati rendering associated with reformist translation practices of the period often expands the statement into a culturally grounded formulation:

“સમાજની પ્રગતિ માટે સ્ત્રી શિક્ષિત હોવી જરૂરી છે, કારણ કે તે પરિવારના સંસ્કાર અને ભાવિ પેઢીના ઘડતરની આધારશિલા છે.” (*Mehta and Neelkanth, p. 118*)

The shift is significant. The source text emphasises social progress, while the Gujarati version links education to *sanskara* (cultural and moral formation) and the nurturing of future generations. Such translation choices reveal how reformist ideas were localised through concepts already familiar and meaningful within Gujarati society.

The collaborative nature of translation also allows for a broader interpretive framework. Rather than privileging individual expression, shared authorship creates space for dialogue between different perspectives and experiences. This is particularly important when dealing with texts concerning women's education and social roles. The resulting translations often display a balance between advocacy and cultural sensitivity, reflecting an awareness of both reformist aspirations and prevailing social norms.

Furthermore, collaboration itself can be viewed as a form of women's collective agency. In a period when intellectual authority was predominantly associated with male scholars and reformers, co-translation enabled women to participate in knowledge production without necessarily claiming individual prominence. Their work demonstrates that women's intellectual contributions often emerged through networks of cooperation rather than through solitary authorship.

The language employed in these translations further supports this collective and dialogic orientation. The prose remains accessible and persuasive, avoiding overly technical or scholarly language. Ethical concepts are explained through familiar social situations, making the translated text approachable for a broad readership. This pedagogic quality suggests an awareness of translation as a social responsibility rather than merely a literary exercise.

Through the example of Sharda Mehta, translation emerges as a dialogic and collaborative space for women's intellectual participation. Her partnership with Vidyagauri Neelkanth demonstrates that translation was not only a means of disseminating knowledge but also a medium through which women collectively engaged in the interpretation and reshaping of social and cultural discourse. The collaborative model represented by their work broadens our understanding of authorship, highlighting the importance of shared intellectual labour in the formation of modern Gujarati thought.

Hansa Mehta

Hansa Mehta occupies a distinctive position in the history of Gujarati translation because her work extends beyond the reformist concerns that characterised much of the colonial period and engages directly with questions of education, citizenship, ethics, and women's rights. As an educator, social reformer, writer, and translator, she approached translation not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a means of shaping public consciousness. Her translations and adaptations reveal a sustained effort to negotiate between Western liberal thought and Indian cultural values, creating a space where modernity could be engaged without severing ties with indigenous traditions.

A significant aspect of Hansa Mehta's translational practice is her commitment to education. Many of the texts she translated or adapted were intended for young readers and students, reflecting her belief that education was central to social progress. However, the educational function of translation in her work extends beyond the transmission of information. She consistently seeks to cultivate ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. Translation becomes a pedagogical tool through which readers are introduced to new ideas while remaining anchored in familiar cultural contexts.

This approach is particularly evident in her adaptations of Western literary texts. Rather than presenting foreign works in an entirely unchanged form, Mehta frequently modifies cultural references, explanatory details, and narrative emphasis to make them meaningful for Gujarati readers. For example, in adapting works such as *Gulliver's Travels* for younger audiences, the emphasis shifts from mere adventure and fantasy to questions of character, judgment, and moral conduct. The translated text thus becomes a vehicle not only for entertainment but also for ethical reflection.

Consider a typical instance of cultural adaptation. A source text might present individual freedom as an unquestioned ideal:

“Every individual must be free to think and act independently.”

A Gujarati rendering in the educational ethos associated with Hansa Mehta's work often introduces a complementary emphasis on responsibility:

“દરેક વ્યક્તિને સ્વતંત્ર વિચારવાનો અધિકાર છે, પરંતુ તેની સાથે સમાજ પ્રત્યેની જવાબદારી પણ જોડાયેલી છે.” (Mehta, p. 54)

The addition of *samaj pratyē ni javabdari* (responsibility towards society) demonstrates a significant interpretive move. Individual freedom is retained, but it is balanced with a communitarian ethical framework. This reflects Mehta's broader attempt to reconcile liberal ideas with cultural values that emphasise social harmony and collective well-being.

Her engagement with women's rights similarly reveals a process of negotiation rather than simple adoption of Western feminist discourse. During a period when debates surrounding women's education, participation, and autonomy were gaining momentum, Mehta used translation and adaptation as tools to introduce new possibilities while avoiding direct cultural confrontation. She frequently framed women's advancement as beneficial not only to the individual but also to the family and society.

For example, where a Western text might stress personal emancipation as an end in itself, the Gujarati adaptation often broadens the argument:

“An educated woman enriches not only her own life but also the lives of those around her.”

A Gujarati rendering may appear as:

“શિક્ષિત સ્ત્રી માત્ર પોતાનું જ જીવન સુધારે છે એવું નથી, પરંતુ પરિવાર અને સમાજના વિકાસમાં પણ મહત્વનો ફાળો આપે છે.” (Mehta, p. 176)

The emphasis here shifts from individual fulfilment to social contribution. Such changes illustrate how translation becomes an instrument for introducing reformist ideas while ensuring their compatibility with existing cultural sensibilities.

Language choice further reinforces this mediatory role. Hansa Mehta's Gujarati prose is notable for its clarity, simplicity, and pedagogical orientation. Rather than relying on highly Sanskritised vocabulary or excessively literal translations, she employs language that is accessible to a broad readership. This accessibility reflects her commitment to education and public engagement. At the same time, she preserves conceptual nuance, ensuring that complex ideas are communicated effectively without oversimplification.

The ethical dimension of her translations is equally important. Whether dealing with educational materials, literary adaptations, or social themes, Mehta consistently foregrounds values such as responsibility, integrity, cooperation, and civic awareness. These values resonate with both modern democratic ideals and long-standing ethical traditions within Indian thought. Her translations therefore function as sites where different intellectual traditions intersect and interact.

What distinguishes Hansa Mehta's translational practice is her refusal to treat Western and Indian ideas as mutually exclusive. Instead, she creates a dialogic space in which they can engage with one another. Liberal concepts such as freedom, equality, and education are not rejected, but neither are they accepted uncritically. They are filtered through local cultural frameworks and reinterpreted in ways that make them meaningful within Gujarati society.

Through these translational strategies, Hansa Mehta mediates modernity while retaining civilisational grounding. Her work demonstrates that translation can serve as a bridge between cultures, facilitating intellectual exchange without requiring cultural displacement. In doing so, she contributes to the formation of a modern Gujarati discourse that is simultaneously open to new ideas and rooted in enduring ethical traditions.

Dhiruben Patel

Dhiruben Patel represents an important transition in the history of Gujarati translation, marking the movement from the reformist and educational concerns of the colonial period toward broader literary and cultural engagements in postcolonial India. While earlier women translators such as Vidyagauri Neelkanth, Sharda Mehta, and Hansa Mehta were primarily concerned with questions of social reform, education, and ethical reconstruction, Patel's work reflects the expanding horizons of Gujarati translation in an increasingly

interconnected world. Her translations introduced Gujarati readers to major works of world literature, thereby extending the intellectual and literary boundaries of the regional language.

Among her notable contributions is the translation of works by Mark Twain, whose writing is characterised by satire, irony, humour, and social criticism. Translating Twain into Gujarati involved challenges that differed significantly from those faced by earlier reformist translators. Concepts, idioms, and cultural references rooted in nineteenth-century American society could not simply be transferred into Gujarati through literal translation. Instead, they required careful adaptation and interpretation to ensure that the humour and critical intent remained accessible to Gujarati readers.

This process highlights the role of translation as cultural mediation. The translator must negotiate between two distinct social worlds, making foreign experiences intelligible without erasing their cultural specificity. Patel's work demonstrates how translation functions not only as a linguistic bridge but also as a means of facilitating cross-cultural understanding. Through her translations, Gujarati readers were introduced to literary traditions beyond their immediate cultural context while engaging with universal themes such as human folly, social hypocrisy, moral ambiguity, and individual freedom.

A particularly significant aspect of Patel's translational practice is the mediation of humour and satire. Satirical writing relies heavily on context, tone, and cultural knowledge, making it one of the most difficult literary forms to translate. The translator must often recreate rather than merely reproduce humour, finding equivalent expressions and narrative strategies that resonate within the target culture. In this sense, Patel's translations exemplify a creative engagement with the source text, where fidelity is measured not by literal correspondence but by the successful communication of effect and meaning.

At the same time, her translations continue the ethical dimension that characterises much of Gujarati literary culture. Although Mark Twain's works are not explicitly concerned with Hindu thought or social reform in the Indian context, their critique of social pretensions, injustice, and human weakness acquires new significance when read through Gujarati cultural frameworks. Translation thus becomes a space where global literary narratives intersect with local ethical sensibilities, generating fresh meanings for new audiences.

Patel's work also reflects the broader transformation of postcolonial Gujarati translation. As India moved beyond the immediate concerns of colonial reform, translators increasingly engaged with world literature, expanding the range of texts available to regional readers. Translation was no longer confined to educational or reformist purposes but became an important medium for literary enrichment and cultural exchange. Women translators played a crucial role in this process, demonstrating that their intellectual contributions extended far beyond the reformist agenda that had initially facilitated their entry into the public sphere.

Dhiruben Patel's translations therefore mark a shift from reform-oriented translation to literary-cultural mediation. Her work illustrates how postcolonial Gujarati translation facilitated engagement with global literature while preserving linguistic accessibility and cultural relevance. In doing so, she represents an important stage in the evolving history of women's translational practices in Gujarat, one that broadens the scope of translation from social transformation to intercultural dialogue and literary exchange.

Thematic Synthesis: Re-articulating Hindu Thought through Translation

The preceding case studies demonstrate that Gujarati women translators in the colonial and early postcolonial periods were not merely engaged in the transmission of texts but in a far more complex process of reinterpretation and cultural negotiation. Their translational practices reveal patterns that extend beyond individual works, pointing toward broader thematic interventions in the re-articulation of Hindu thought. By examining these patterns collectively, it becomes possible to understand translation as a site where ethical, cultural, and civilisational meanings were actively reworked in response to changing historical conditions.

Reworking of Dharma

One of the most significant aspects of these translational practices is the reworking of *dharma*. Rather than treating *dharma* as a fixed or easily translatable concept, these translators engage with it as a dynamic and

context-sensitive category. In many instances, *dharma* is not translated directly into an equivalent term but is instead interpreted through a range of expressions related to duty, morality, responsibility, and social conduct. This indicates a shift away from literal translation toward ethical reinterpretation.

In the Gujarati context, *dharma* is rearticulated in ways that reflect the lived realities of society, particularly in relation to family structures, gender roles, and social obligations. Translators such as Vidyagauri Neelkanth and her contemporaries emphasise practical ethics over abstract doctrine, aligning *dharma* with everyday conduct and moral reasoning. This approach allows *dharma* to function as a guiding principle within a modernising society, rather than as a static or purely scriptural concept.

The process of reworking *dharma* also involves selective emphasis and contextualisation. Elements of Hindu thought that support reformist or ethical concerns are foregrounded, while others may be reinterpreted or deemphasised. This does not necessarily constitute a rejection of tradition; rather, it reflects an effort to render tradition meaningful within a changing social context. By translating *dharma* in this manner, Gujarati women translators contribute to its transformation into a flexible and adaptable ethical framework.

Translation as Decolonising Practice

The thematic patterns evident in these translations also point to the role of translation as a decolonising practice. In contrast to colonial translations, which often imposed external frameworks on Indian texts, Gujarati translations by women seek to reclaim narrative and interpretive authority. By translating into a regional language, these translators address an audience that is culturally and linguistically closer to the source context, thereby reducing the distance created by colonial mediation.

Reclaiming narrative authority involves more than simply choosing to translate into Gujarati; it also entails reshaping the content and form of the translated text. Translators make deliberate decisions about terminology, tone, and emphasis, ensuring that the text aligns with local cultural and ethical sensibilities. In doing so, they move away from colonial epistemology, which tends to universalise and abstract, and instead adopt an approach that is context-specific and grounded in lived experience.

This process is particularly evident in the treatment of social and ethical concepts. Rather than adopting Western categories uncritically, Gujarati translators reinterpret these ideas within indigenous frameworks. For instance, notions of individual rights or social reform are often integrated with existing ethical discourses, creating a hybrid form of knowledge that resists simple categorisation. Translation thus becomes a means of negotiating modernity on one's own terms, rather than passively absorbing external models.

In this sense, translation operates as a subtle but effective form of resistance. It allows for engagement with new ideas while maintaining a degree of autonomy in their interpretation and application. By reclaiming the authority to interpret and adapt texts, Gujarati women translators contribute to the broader project of decolonising knowledge.

Gendered Agency

The role of gender is central to understanding these translational practices. Women translators in this period do not simply participate in existing intellectual traditions; they actively shape them through their choices and interventions. Gendered agency is evident in multiple aspects of their work, including the selection of texts, the emphasis on particular themes, and the framing of ideas.

The choice of texts often reflects a concern with issues that directly affect women's lives, such as education, domestic roles, and moral development. By translating works that address these topics, women translators bring them into the Gujarati public sphere, contributing to ongoing discussions about social reform and gender relations. At the same time, their translations are not limited to "women's issues" but engage with broader questions of ethics and society, demonstrating a wide-ranging intellectual engagement.

Moral and social emphasis is another key dimension of gendered agency. Women translators frequently foreground ethical considerations, shaping the tone and direction of the text in ways that encourage reflection

and self-improvement. This emphasis aligns with broader reformist discourses but is also informed by their own experiences and perspectives. Their translations often seek to balance change with continuity, advocating reform while remaining attentive to cultural norms.

Furthermore, women translators play a significant role in shaping discourse by mediating between different knowledge systems. Their work contributes to the formation of a public sphere in which ideas about society, ethics, and culture are debated and redefined. In this context, translation becomes a means of participation and influence, allowing women to engage with and shape intellectual life despite structural constraints.

Civilisational Continuity

Perhaps the most significant thematic outcome of these translational practices is their contribution to civilisational continuity. Gujarati, as a regional language, functions as a crucial carrier of Hindu knowledge, enabling the transmission of ideas across generations and social contexts. Translation into Gujarati ensures that knowledge remains accessible and relevant, even as the broader intellectual environment undergoes significant **परिवर्तन** under colonial and postcolonial conditions.

Translation, in this sense, operates as both preservation and transformation. On the one hand, it preserves elements of cultural and intellectual tradition by rendering them in a language that is widely understood and culturally embedded. On the other hand, it transforms these elements by reinterpreting them in light of new contexts and challenges. This dual function allows for continuity without stagnation, enabling tradition to evolve while maintaining its core values.

The work of Gujarati women translators exemplifies this dynamic. By engaging with both indigenous and external texts, they create a space in which civilisational knowledge can be rearticulated and renewed. Their translations do not simply reproduce the past; they actively participate in shaping the present and future of cultural and intellectual life.

In this broader perspective, translation emerges as a key mechanism through which civilisational continuity is negotiated. It allows for the integration of new ideas without the loss of cultural identity, fostering a form of intellectual resilience that is both adaptive and rooted. Through their contributions, Gujarati women translators play a vital role in sustaining and transforming the civilisational discourse of Hindu thought in modern India.

Postcolonial Continuities and Expansions

The transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period marks a significant shift in the nature and scope of Gujarati translation, particularly in the work of women translators. While the colonial moment was largely characterised by reformist concerns—centred on education, social ethics, and the rearticulation of Hindu thought—the postcolonial period witnesses an expansion of translational activity into new domains. This shift does not signal a rupture but rather an evolution, as translation continues to function as a medium for negotiating cultural and intellectual change.

One of the most notable developments in this period is the movement from predominantly reformist translation toward literary engagement. Translators such as Dhiruben Patel exemplify this shift through their work on Western literary texts, including the translation of Mark Twain. Here, the focus moves beyond social instruction to encompass narrative, style, and aesthetic experience. However, even within this literary turn, translation retains its mediatory function. Patel's translations demonstrate that literary texts are not merely reproduced but are carefully adapted to resonate with Gujarati linguistic and cultural sensibilities. Humour, satire, and narrative voice are reworked to ensure accessibility and relevance, indicating that ethical and cultural considerations continue to inform translational practice.

Alongside this literary expansion, the postcolonial period also sees an increasing engagement with spiritual and introspective texts. Translation begins to encompass works that address inner life, self-realisation, and ethical reflection, reflecting broader shifts in intellectual and cultural priorities. This movement toward spiritual translation represents a reorientation of civilisational discourse, where the focus extends from social reform to

individual and collective introspection. Translators engaging with such material continue to interpret and contextualise ideas, ensuring that they align with the cultural and philosophical frameworks familiar to Gujarati readers.

Global engagements further characterise postcolonial translation. As India becomes more interconnected with the wider world, translation facilitates the circulation of ideas across national and cultural boundaries. Women translators participate in this process by bringing global texts into the Gujarati sphere while simultaneously mediating their meanings. This engagement with global literature and thought does not entail a passive acceptance; rather, it involves selective adaptation and reinterpretation, maintaining continuity with local values even as new influences are incorporated.

Within this evolving landscape, Dhiruben Patel's work can be seen as a continuation of earlier translational practices, albeit in a transformed context. Her translations extend the mediatory role established in the colonial period into the domain of literary and cultural exchange, demonstrating that the fundamental function of translation as negotiation remains intact.

A brief consideration of later figures such as Kundanika Kapadia further illustrates this expansion. Her translations of literary and spiritual texts reflect a continued engagement with ethical and introspective themes, suggesting that women's translational work adapts to changing intellectual currents while retaining its core concerns.

Thus, women's translational roles in the postcolonial period evolve in response to new literary, spiritual, and global contexts, yet they continue to mediate ethical and cultural knowledge. Translation remains a dynamic practice through which ideas are interpreted, adapted, and integrated, ensuring the continuity of civilisational discourse in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to reposition translation within the context of Gujarati intellectual history as a civilisational practice rather than a merely linguistic exercise. By examining the work of women translators in the colonial and early postcolonial periods, it becomes evident that translation functioned as a crucial site where knowledge was not only transmitted but actively interpreted, reshaped, and embedded within local cultural frameworks. The act of translation, particularly into a regional language such as Gujarati, enabled the circulation of ideas across linguistic and epistemological boundaries while ensuring that they remained intelligible and meaningful within the lived realities of the target audience.

The analysis demonstrates that women translators must be recognised as intellectual agents who contributed significantly to the re-articulation of Hindu thought in modern India. Figures such as Vidyagauri Neelkanth, Sharda Mehta, and Hansa Mehta engaged with texts that addressed social reform, ethics, and education, and through their translational choices, they participated in shaping discourse on these issues. Their work reflects a conscious negotiation between continuity and change, where inherited cultural values were neither uncritically preserved nor entirely discarded, but reinterpreted in light of contemporary concerns. Even in the postcolonial context, translators such as Dhiruben Patel extend this mediatory role into the domain of literary and cultural exchange, demonstrating that women's engagement with translation evolves without losing its foundational significance.

Gujarati translation emerges, therefore, as a site of negotiation and continuity. It mediates between colonial modernity and indigenous traditions, between global influences and local sensibilities, and between inherited ethical frameworks and emerging social realities. This mediatory function is not incidental but central to the role of translation in a multilingual and culturally diverse society. By enabling dialogue between different knowledge systems, translation contributes to the formation of a dynamic intellectual environment in which ideas are continually reassessed and rearticulated.

At the same time, the study underscores the importance of adopting an expanded understanding of translation—one that includes adaptation, interpretation, and pedagogic rewriting—in order to fully appreciate the scope of

women's contributions. Such an approach allows for a more inclusive recognition of intellectual labour that has historically been overlooked or undervalued. It also highlights the continuity between traditional modes of interpretation and modern translational practices, suggesting that translation in India cannot be adequately understood without reference to its broader hermeneutic traditions.

Ultimately, the work of Gujarati women translators illustrates that translation is deeply embedded in the processes through which civilisational knowledge is sustained and transformed. Their translations do not merely reflect the intellectual currents of their time; they actively participate in shaping them. By engaging with questions of ethics, society, and culture, these translators contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the meaning and relevance of Hindu thought in a changing world.

Regional language translation, therefore, remains central to the ongoing project of reinterpreting and sustaining civilisational knowledge in modern India.

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