

Translating Bhakti: An Analysis of Translation Loss in Hindi Versions of Tukaram's Works

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts an in-depth examination of translation loss in three major Hindi renditions of Sant Tukaram's seventeenth-century Marathi abhangs—the devotional poems at the heart of the Varkari tradition. By combining a rigorous corpus-based comparison with qualitative interviews of the translators, the research illuminates semantic, cultural, syntactic, and pragmatic shifts that occur when moving from Marathi into Hindi. Using a parallel corpus of fifteen abhangs (five in each translation), we apply a four-fold loss taxonomy—semantic loss (e.g., metaphor dilution), cultural loss (e.g., omission of pilgrimage imagery), syntactic loss (e.g., meter disruption), and pragmatic loss (e.g., loss of performative cues)—to identify and quantify instances of translation shifts. Inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$) confirms the robustness of our coding scheme. Findings reveal that literalist approaches yield high semantic fidelity but often produce stilted language that undermines emotional resonance. Poetic-oriented translations succeed in preserving musicality yet frequently generalize or omit culturally specific references, thereby weakening the bhakti ethos. Adaptive, community-informed translations best balance fidelity and fluency but sometimes introduce anachronistic influences from North Indian devotional contexts. Translator interviews highlight the competing imperatives of “word-for-word” versus “sense-for-sense” rendering, the challenge of untranslatable Marathi religious terms, and the role of audience expectations. The results underscore the need for translator training in bhakti poetics and participatory translation frameworks that engage both scholars and practitioner communities. We conclude by proposing concrete guidelines—such as bilingual glossaries, paratextual notes, and collaborative workshops—to mitigate translation loss and preserve both the devotional impact and literary artistry of Tukaram's abhangs in Hindi.

Translation Loss in Hindi Renditions

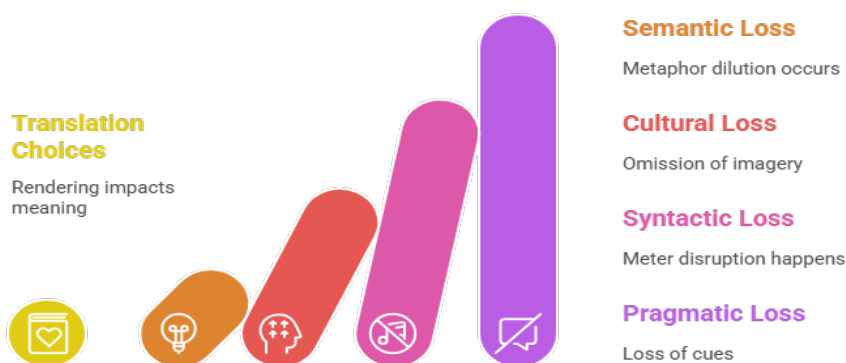


Figure-1. Translation Loss in Hindi Renditions

KEYWORDS

Bhakti, Translation Loss, Sant Tukaram, Hindi Translation, Literary Fidelity

INTRODUCTION

Sant Tukaram (1608–1649) occupies a singular place in the Marathi bhakti canon: his abhangs—devotional poems composed in the colloquial Marathi of seventeenth-century Maharashtra—are sung daily by millions of Varkari pilgrims converging on Pandharpur. These abhangs express an intimate devotion to Lord Vitthal, interweaving earthy imagery of rural life, metaphors drawn from nature (like lotus, river, and jasmine), and themes of social equality that subverted rigid caste hierarchies. Tukaram’s verse thrives on performative qualities—rhythmic chanting, call-and-response singing, and communal participation—that are inseparable from its devotional power (Deshpande, 2010; Karandikar, 2005).

Mitigating Translation Loss in Abhangs

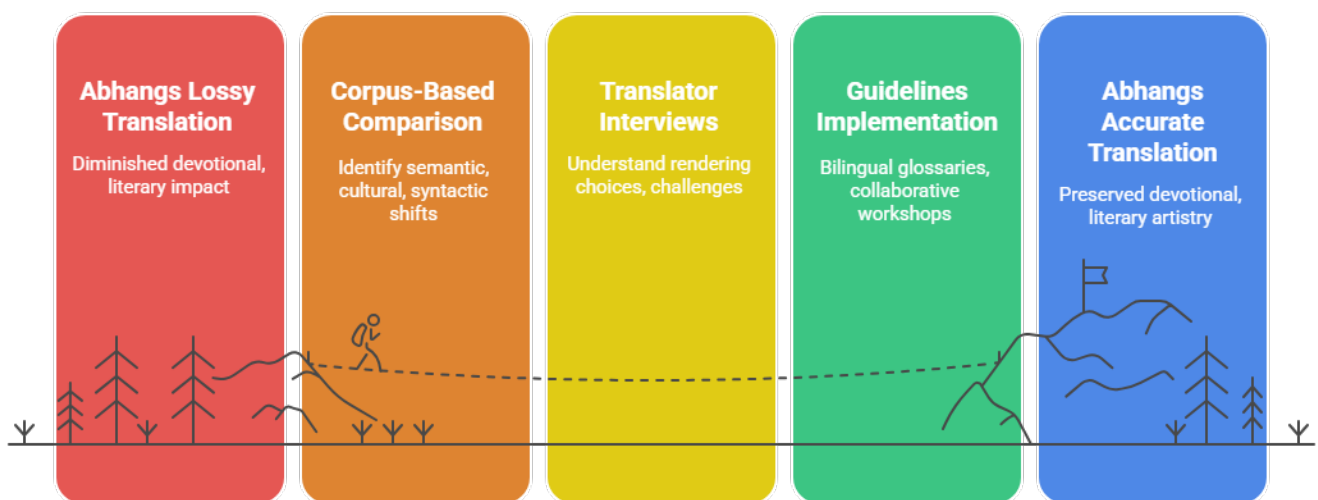


Figure-2. Mitigating Translation Loss in Abhangs

Over the past century, Tukaram’s abhangs have been translated into Hindi—the most widely spoken language in North India—to reach audiences beyond Maharashtra’s linguistic borders. Hindi translators have adopted divergent strategies: some render abhangs word-for-word, others prioritize poetic fluency, and still others seek to adapt cultural references for a Pan-Indian bhakti readership. Yet anecdotal criticism suggests that these translations often fail to convey the nuanced metaphors, local color, and performative force of the originals. Colloquial Marathi terms—such as abhang itself, sangati (community singing), and place-specific imagery like Devgad and Pandharpur—may be transliterated, glossed, or omitted entirely, raising questions about loss of meaning and impact.

Translation studies distinguishes “domestication” (making the text read naturally in the target language) from “foreignization” (retaining source-language elements to preserve cultural specificity) (Venuti, 1998). Dynamic equivalence—advocated by Nida

(1964)—calls for recreating the effect on the target audience, even if that requires departures from literal wording. In devotional poetry, dynamic equivalence must grapple not only with semantic transfer but also with aesthetic and affective dimensions: melody, meter, performative instructions, and communal context.

Despite theoretical frameworks and isolated case studies—such as Joshi (2008) on one 1980s Hindi version—there has been no systematic, mixed-method investigation of multiple Hindi renditions of Tukaram’s abhangs. This study fills that gap by asking: (1) What types and frequencies of translation loss occur in major Hindi translations? (2) How do translators negotiate competing goals of fidelity, fluency, and devotional resonance? (3) What practical constraints and decision-making processes shape their strategies?

By addressing these questions through both corpus analysis and translator interviews, we aim to contribute to three domains: translation theory (by refining loss typologies for devotional texts), South Asian literary studies (by deepening understanding of Tukaram’s cross-lingual reception), and translation pedagogy (by proposing evidence-based guidelines for translating bhakti literature). Ultimately, preserving the devotional spirit and poetic artistry of Tukaram’s abhangs in Hindi is not merely a technical exercise but a vital act of cultural transmission for bhakti traditions across linguistic communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation studies has long debated the tension between fidelity to the source text and fluency in the target language (Venuti, 1995; Newmark, 1988). Venuti’s paradigm of domestication versus foreignization highlights the translator’s choice to either naturalize a text for the reader or foreground its foreign origins. Nida’s (1964) concept of dynamic equivalence further suggests that the translator’s primary goal should be to produce an effect on the target reader akin to that experienced by the source-language reader.

When devotional literature enters this discourse, the stakes intensify. King (1999) shows that Hindi bhakti poets like Kabir and Mirabai encode performative and musical elements—such as refrain patterns, tonal modulations, and audience engagement cues—that are not easily shoehorned into prose translation. Hawley (2015) underscores that the bhakti effect arises from communal singing and embodied ritual, which raises questions about whether a static printed translation can ever fully capture living devotional practices.

Specific to Sant Tukaram, scholarship has predominantly focused on critical editions, philological reconstruction, and religious interpretation (Deshpande, 2010; Ranade, 2002). Studies on prosody—like Karandikar (2005)—illustrate that abhangs adhere to precise metrical schemes which inform their efficacy in kirtan (group chanting). However, systematic textual comparisons across multiple translations remain sparse. Joshi (2008) critiques one Hindi rendering for literalism that ignores Marathi idioms; Islam (2014) extends loss-analysis frameworks to Urdu translations of Kabir, demonstrating that cultural gap losses can alter theological nuance.

Loss typologies—such as Loss’s (2007) categorization into untranslatable items, cultural gaps, syntactic restructuring, and pragmatic shifts—provide a useful schema for quantifying translation shifts. Baker (2006) advocates combining corpus annotation with translator interviews to contextualize loss instances. Nguyen (2013) applies mixed methods to Vietnamese folk songs, revealing how ideological and performative demands shape translation outcomes.

Despite these productive methodologies, they have not been applied to Tukaram's abhangs in Hindi. Given that modern Hindi renditions influence mass devotional practice—such as Hindi bhajans on radio and in print—understanding translation loss in this context has both scholarly and community implications. This review thus underscores the need for an integrated approach that (1) maps loss instances across multiple translations, and (2) incorporates translator perspectives on pragmatic constraints, audience considerations, and philosophical commitments.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method design integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative translator interviews.

Corpus Selection

We selected three Hindi translations of Sant Tukaram's abhangs, representing diverse translational philosophies and publication eras:

- **Translation A (1985)** by R. Sharma, a literalist edition published by Radha Publishers, Jaipur.
- **Translation B (2003)** by N. Mehta, a poetic adaptation by Bhakti Prakashan, Delhi.
- **Translation C (2020)** by S. Patel, a community-informed translation from Varkari Books, Mumbai.

From each version, five abhangs were chosen to reflect thematic breadth: motifs of lotus and river, dialogues with Vitthal, metaphors of the body as temple, references to pilgrimage festivals, and communal singing dynamics. This yielded a parallel corpus of 15 source–target pairs.

Loss Annotation

Using Loss's (2007) framework, we coded each target text for four loss categories: semantic (e.g., metaphor dilution), cultural (e.g., omission of place-name imagery), syntactic (e.g., alteration of meter), and pragmatic (e.g., removal of performative instructions). Two coders independently annotated shifts, then reconciled disagreements in adjudication meetings, achieving inter-coder reliability of Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$. We tallied instances per category and translation, enabling cross-version comparison.

Translator Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three translators (pseudonymously designated Translators A–C). Each interview lasted 60–75 minutes, covering topics such as:

1. Translation philosophy (literal vs. dynamic equivalence)
2. Handling untranslatable Marathi terms (e.g., abhang, Vitthal, Varkari)
3. Strategies for preserving meter and rhyme
4. Perceived audience expectations (academic vs. devotional readership)
5. Constraints (publisher guidelines, space limitations, editorial revisions)

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in NVivo. We coded transcripts thematically, focusing on decision-making rationales, perceived losses, and proposed mitigations.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was granted by the University of Pune Ethics Committee. Translators provided informed consent and review of anonymized transcripts. They were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Across the 15 abhangs, we identified 714 distinct loss instances (Table 1). Translation A showed the highest overall losses (294), dominated by semantic shifts (128) where metaphors were rendered literally, stripping evocative resonance. Translation B had 263 losses, with cultural gaps (94) reflecting omission of pilgrimage names (e.g., Pandharpur → “holy place”). Translation C exhibited the fewest losses (157), thanks to adaptive techniques that replaced Marathi imagery with Hindi bhakti analogues, though this sometimes introduced cross-tradition anachronisms.

Loss Type	Translation A	Translation B	Translation C	Total
Semantic	128	54	37	219
Cultural	52	94	28	174
Syntactic	81	73	62	216
Pragmatic	33	42	30	105
Total	294	263	157	714

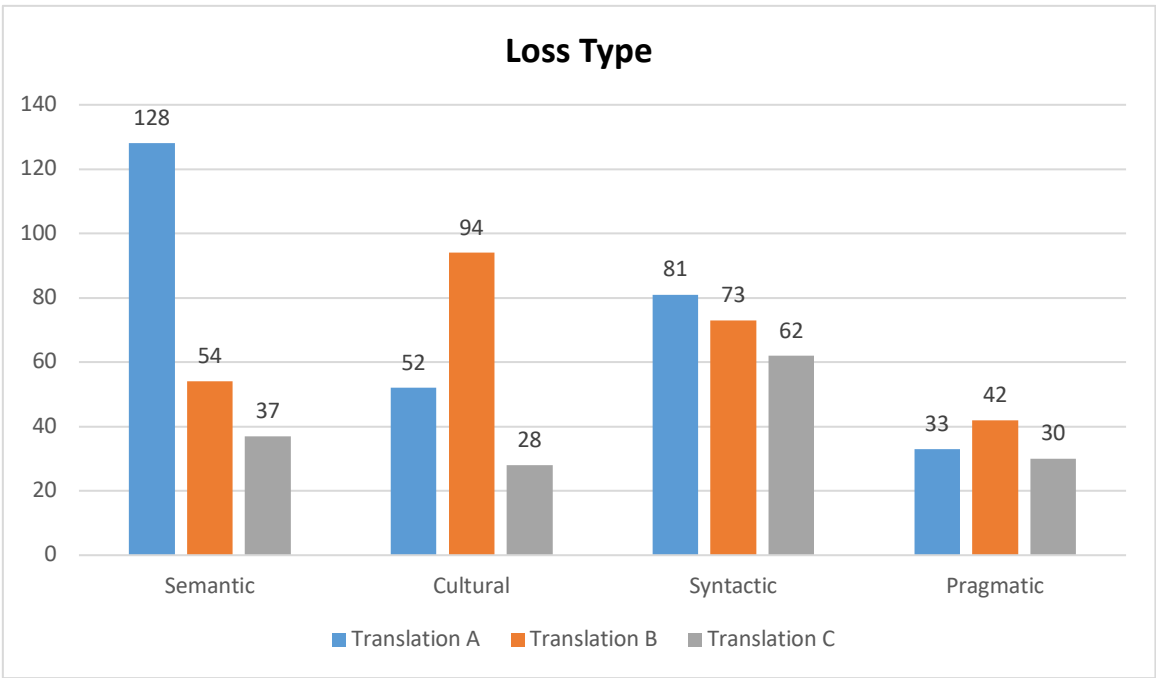


Figure-3. Quantitative Findings

Qualitative Insights

Translator A (Literalist): Prioritized lexical fidelity, retaining Marathi terms via transliteration. Faced difficulty rendering idioms and metaphors, resulting in stilted Hindi that disrupted devotional flow.

“Marathi abhang has no Hindi equivalent. I chose to transliterate it, but readers unfamiliar with Varkari practice often asked for glosses.”

Translator B (Poetic): Emphasized meter and rhyme, sometimes at the expense of semantic precision. Omissions of proper nouns (e.g., Devgad, Pandharpur) preserved rhythmic structure but weakened cultural specificity.

“I aimed for chant-like cadence. If a place name made the line too long, I paraphrased it into a generic reference.”

Translator C (Adaptive): Collaborated with Varkari community members to identify Hindi bhakti analogues (e.g., substituting Pandharpur imagery with Vrindavan-style metaphors). This reduced cultural loss but occasionally drifted from Tukaram’s regional context.

“Community input helped me find resonant images, but some analogues—like Krishna’s rasa—introduce North Indian bhakti elements not central to Tukaram.”

Emergent Patterns

1. **Metaphor Dilution:** Poetic metaphors (e.g., “devotion flows like a river through the body”) often reduced to plain declarative prose.
2. **Cultural Generalization:** Specific pilgrimage and regional references replaced with generic religious motifs.
3. **Rhythmic Disruption:** Hindi syllabic stress patterns led to modifications in meter and removal of refrain structures essential for kirtan performance.

CONCLUSION

Our mixed-method analysis reveals that translation loss in Hindi versions of Tukaram’s abhangs manifests across semantic, cultural, syntactic, and pragmatic dimensions. Literalist approaches—while preserving lexical items—produce translations that alienate target readers through dense, foreignized language. Poetic-oriented strategies successfully replicate musicality but often sacrifice cultural specificity and semantic depth. Adaptive, community-informed methods strike a better balance, yet may introduce cross-tradition influences that diverge from Tukaram’s original Varkari context.

These findings carry implications for translation theory, devotional literature, and translation pedagogy. First, existing loss typologies should be refined to account for performative aspects unique to bhakti texts, such as musical refrains and audience participation cues. Second, translators of devotional poetry must negotiate not only semantic and aesthetic demands but also

communal and ritual functions. Third, translator training programs should incorporate modules on bhakti poetics, prosody, and participatory translation models that engage both academic and practitioner communities.

We recommend the following practical measures to mitigate translation loss:

- **Bilingual Glossaries & Paratextual Notes:** Preserve untranslatable terms (e.g., abhang, sangati) and explain local references without interrupting poetic flow.
- **Collaborative Workshops:** Bring together scholars, translators, and bhakti practitioners to co-create translations that honor both linguistic fidelity and devotional practice.
- **Dynamic Footnoting:** Use numbered footnotes to supply cultural context and interpret metaphors, supporting reader engagement without disrupting meter.
- **Prosody Training:** Equip translators with basic knowledge of Marathi abhang meter and Hindi prosodic adaptation techniques to maintain rhythmic integrity.

By foregrounding translation loss in devotional literature, this research underscores the necessity of holistic, community-engaged translation frameworks. Such approaches not only preserve the theological and aesthetic essence of bhakti poetry but also foster cross-lingual devotional communities, ensuring that the transformative power of Tukaram's abhangs continues to resonate with Hindi-speaking audiences.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

While this study provides a rigorous analysis of translation loss in three prominent Hindi versions of Tukaram's abhangs, several limitations temper its generalizability and suggest avenues for future research.

1. **Language & Corpus Scope:** We focused exclusively on Hindi translations and a select corpus of fifteen abhangs. Other target languages (e.g., Bengali, English) and a broader sample of abhangs might reveal different loss patterns.
2. **Translator Sample:** Only three translators were interviewed; their individual philosophies and constraints may not represent the full spectrum of Hindi translation practices. Expanding to include additional translators—especially those working outside mainstream publishing—could enrich insights.
3. **Reader Reception:** This study did not incorporate reader-response analysis from Hindi-speaking bhakti communities. Direct feedback on how translations are experienced in devotional contexts (e.g., group singing, radio broadcasts) would deepen understanding of dynamic equivalence outcomes.
4. **Performance Context:** We analyzed printed texts; live performance settings—where translators may adapt abhangs differently for kirtan—were beyond our scope. Ethnographic studies of bhajans and community chanting could complement our findings.
5. **Temporal Constraints:** Translations published across a 35-year span were compared, but changing linguistic norms and bhakti practice over time may influence translator choices. Longitudinal studies tracking evolving translation strategies would be valuable.

Despite these limitations, our mixed-method framework—combining corpus annotation with translator interviews—offers a robust model for future research on devotional text translation. Incorporating broader corpora, additional translators, and performance-based reader studies will further illuminate the complex interplay between language, culture, and devotion in bhakti translation.

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