

## FROM TRANSLATION TO REVIEW, HINDI LITERATURE IN GERMAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper surveys the publication of Indian literature in German translation. The focus would be on Hindi texts. Texts from and about India which are written in English have a smooth passage; in contrast the non-English texts largely remain unnoticed in German. This paper aims to investigate the reasons for this and uncover solutions which address the different stakeholders such as the publishers, translators, authors and cultural institutions of the source and target countries. The paper will also investigate the role of reviews in the reception of literature in translation. It shows some possible ways how the issue can see a positive outcome.*

**Keywords:** India, Frankfurt Book Fair, Guest of Honour, Niche Publishers, UNESCO Index Translationum

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the UNESCO Index Translationum (last updated 2009), Germany counts first among the top 50 countries publishing translations from a given original language (the website makes no distinction whether these are fictional or non-fictional or knowledge texts). However, when it comes to the statistics on “Top Authors” for India and Germany, the authors mentioned are predominantly fiction writers. Amongst its “TOP 10” original languages is English with 173,057 books, followed by French, Italian, Dutch and Russian. Hindi and other Indian languages do not figure anywhere on this list of the top 10. The languages on this list have either geographical or cultural proximity with the country. Therefore, a look into the statistics on some of those languages that have been translated into German but are not part of the top 10 might offer some insights:

Table 1: Translated Languages

Sr. No.	Original Language	Translations in German
1.	Japanese	2024
2.	Chinese	1063
4.	Farsi	310
5.	Korean	208
7.	Hindi	93
9.	Indonesian	44
10.	Vietnamese	29
11.	Thai	13
12.	Kurdish	11
13.	Nepali	7
14.	Malay	6
15.	Burmese	4

As we can discern, Hindi is much below some of the other Asian languages, and other Indian languages are even less represented: Telugu has only 24 books, Urdu 23, Marathi, and Tamil 9 books each, Malayalam, and Panjabi 5 books each and 1 book each from Kashmiri, Kumauni, Maithili, Oriya, Rajasthani, and Sindhi. In fact, even within this limited number, some works might be indirect-translations, that is not translated from the original language, for example Baby Halder’s book Aalo-Andhari was published in German and is considered a success story in German but was translated from English. The question arises, why does Germany despite being the top country when it comes to translating works from other languages, not reflect this trend for translations from Indian languages? Especially because India has twice been the guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair (FBF), and that these events contribute towards promoting interest in the literature of that country.

This article will take a closer look at literature translated into German from Hindi, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and a language with a booming literature that aspires to the status of world literature. It will be argued that translations of Hindi literary works while being promoted by a small number of dedicated publishers and literary associations, has received only sporadic support from larger publishing houses and reviewers in influential media.

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The paper takes the view that systematic institutional support from both the source and target cultures and increased collaboration between the different stakeholders would result in a stronger representation and wider reception of Hindi (and Indian) literature within the German book market.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

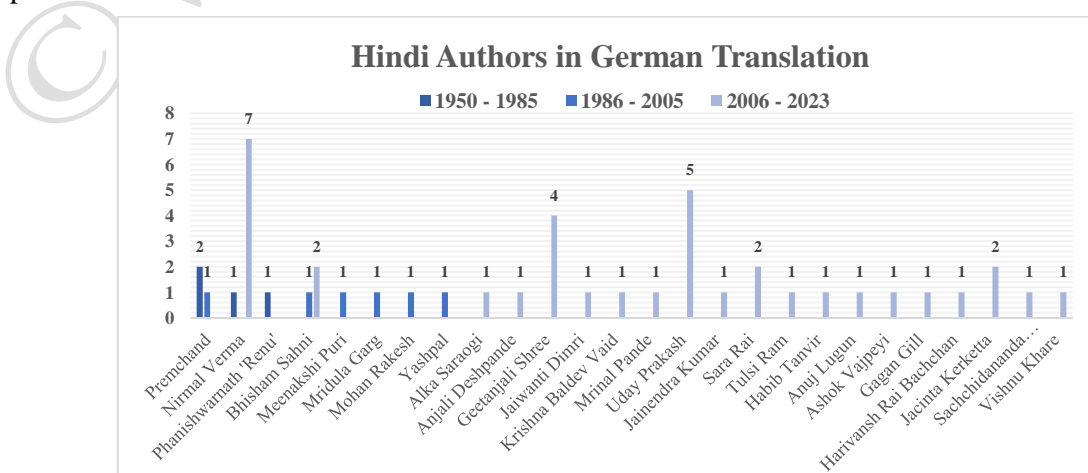
This article will be focusing on works that have been directly translated from Hindi, and on fictional, literary works only. I will show, which authors and genres have been translated, and where these works have been published. For this, I would be focusing only on books; magazines and journals will not be included. It is evident that reviews play an important role in the dissemination of information about a literary work, therefore I will engage with the reception of these works based on their reviews in the different media, which will be predominantly newspaper, magazines, and partially radio. Here, I will also look at what kind of readers are addressed through them and what is the intention of these reviews. My assumption is that this will further broaden the understanding on the status of translated Hindi literature. Some of the sources that I will be using while engaging with these aspects are websites and newsletters of literature forums such as Literaturforum Indien e.V., which has the objective of making literature from India and other south Asian countries popular in German speaking countries. While the Literaturforum Indien focuses specially on literature from South Asia, and provides insight into Hindi literature in German translation, a very small section of the German book market, the very popular website Perlentaucher, looks at the major newspapers and offers an overview of the reviews published in them and provides the reader an orientation into the endless book market. My research is not confined to these two sources, but they may be taken as representative of media addressing a public interested in Indian or South Asian literature on the one hand, and a general reading public on the other hand.

## 3. TRANSLATIONS FROM HINDI IN THE PAST SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS

In 1913 when Rabindranath Tagore was given the Nobel Prize for Literature, a new trend began in the translation of Indian literature, wherein works of living authors and modern Indian languages started getting translated, for instance an anthology of Premchand's short stories was first published in 1958 in East Germany which was translated from English. We will now look at which authors and what works got translated when and where.

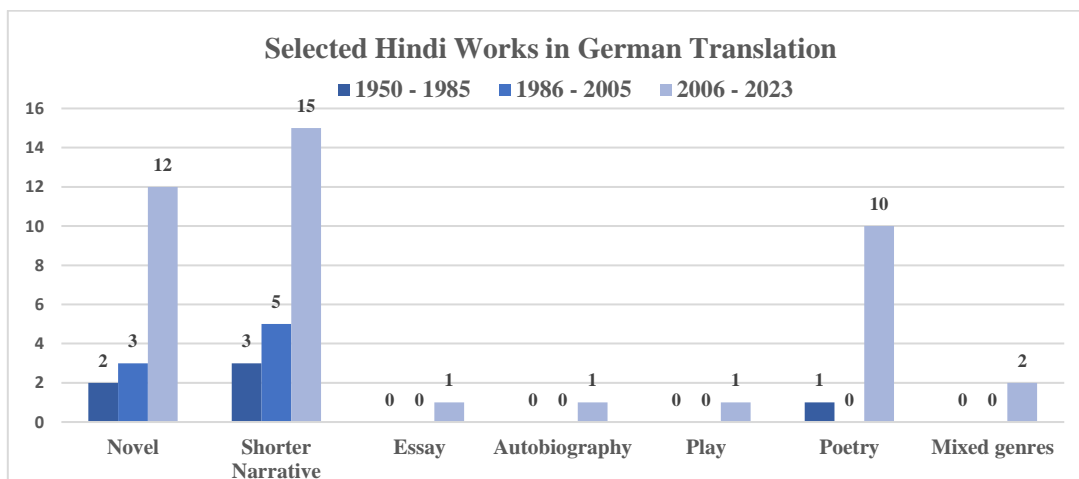
### a. Authors

Looking at the period between 1950 and 1985, and the period after India first became the Guest of Honour at the FBF in 1986 till 2005, and thereafter the period when India was once again the Guest of Honour in 2006, we see that Nirmal Verma's works have been most translated in the entire span and out of the 56 books, nine are by him. Sarma (2006, p. 235) argues it is not mere coincidence; it was his friendship with the publisher Roland Beer that led to this canon-creation and is not necessarily a reflection of the literary landscape of the source culture. The other authors who have more than one work to their name are Uday Prakash, Geetanjali Shree, Premchand, Bisham Sahni, Jacinta Kerketta and Sara Rai. Here it also must be mentioned that some German publishers prefer bringing out works by living authors as these writers can then be invited for book readings and in this way, they can promote the works as well.



## b. Genre

As we can see from the diagram, shorter narrative used to be the most preferred genre for translating Hindi literature into German between 1950 and 2005, even in the later period it is the most preferred genre but now novels have seen a marked increase as compared to earlier years. What is equally remarkable is that poetry has seen a significant increase from 2006 onwards, especially since poetry is generally considered as hard to sell in the German book market, and even in well-stocked bookstores poetry books are hard to find. Another noticeable fact is the translation of books of other genres. Both the trends could mean that there is a growth in readership, wherein the readers are eager to read varied works from Hindi, although according to Sarma (p.237) most of the Germans prefer reading novels, and poetry, dramas and essays are the least preferred genres.



Another look at the period between 1950 and 1985 reveals, the number of books which were a direct translation from Hindi are only six. However, as per the data collected from the Literaturforum Indien as well as the catalogues of Draupadi Verlag and Lotos Verlag there is a slight increase thereafter in the number of published books which were translated directly from Hindi, and from 2006 onwards the numbers have gone up to forty-two and this reaffirms that systematic promotion does influence the transportation of literature.

## c. Publishers

If we now look at the publishing houses, where these books are published, we notice that only two Hindi novels have been published by the big publishers, a novel by Alka Saraogi and another by Premchand, both were published for the FBF in 2006. However, the latter was already available in translation and it is assumed that the second edition was brought out keeping the 'renewed interest' in India in mind. A look into the catalogues of some other big publishers reveals that most of the Indian works available are either written in English or are translated using the translations available in this language. As the figures show, it is the so-called niche publishers, and as Kämpchen (2013) shows it is the publishers Wolf Mersch in the 1980s and Roland Beer in 1990/2000 or Christian Weiß since early 2000s who have been constantly working towards bringing literature from India to the German readers and it is here that support should be directed.



Some factors which Sarma (p. 233) mentions for the lack of representative works and for the low number of translated works include not just the dearth of professional translators and the lack of experts who can advise the publishers on what should be translated but also how the literary works and their translations get promoted not only in the source but also in the target language and culture.

#### **4. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION**

To address these gaps, some institutions have been working in the direction of translator training, advising publishers, and promoting published works. Inter-university translation programmes such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) funded A New Passage to India translation project between the Bergische Universität (BU), Wuppertal and the Department of Germanic and Romance Studies (DGRS), University of Delhi for translations from Hindi into German. These programmes go a long way in training future translators, as is also evident from the way the programme was put into practice. The students of both the universities worked together for close to one year on the translation, wherein the DGRS students prepared the first draft in German translation and then along with their German counterparts smoothed the draft and the final stage was reached, when the BU students prepared a publication worthy draft. Some of the works selected for this project were Rehan Par Ragghu by Kashinath Singh, Miss Samuel Ek Yahudi Gatha by Sheela Rohekar, Global Gaon Ke Devta by Ranendra, Tarpan by Shivmurti, Topi Shukla and Adha Gaon by Rahi Masoon Raza, Ek Karod Ki Botal by Krishan Chander and Aadmi Ka Zahar by Shrilal Shukla.

Another institution which has been working in the direction of promoting translators is the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin (LCB). It has initiated along with the German Translators' Fund and the Robert Bosch Stiftung for instance in 2010 ViceVersa workshops for the training of literary translators. The workshops are funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and supported by many international partners. Through this program the LCB strives to encourage dialogue between the translators of a particular language pair. These workshops are usually held over a period of approximately 3 to 5 days and encourage participation by young as well as more experienced translators. Till now ViceVersa translation workshops have been held twice for the language pair Hindi and German. Once at a translation residency in Looren, Switzerland and the second time at the Doon University. As a part of the second workshop, it was decided that works from both the languages will be translated. For translation into German, Mrinal Pande's Himuli Hiramani Katha was selected and has also been published now.

When it comes to advising the publishers on what can be translated, the Ministry of Culture, Government of India has initiated a programme entitled Indian Literature Abroad (ILA) "to support and facilitate translation and promotion of literary heritage and contemporary literature from the Indian languages into major foreign languages." It offers a list of contemporary Indian writing and supports the translations by offering workshops, collaborations and fellowships and helping with contracts and negotiations.

Similarly, Litprom is an organisation in Germany which was initiated in 1980, when the FBF's focus was on creative writing from Africa. It states that its goal is to intensify the efforts to have books by authors from the so-called Global South translated into German, as it is convinced that literature is one of the most important means of cross-cultural learning and that books do provide a unique opportunity to learn about cultures. It publishes a list of the respective season's seven best literary titles in translation, called Weltempfänger.

As is visible from the above examples, there are already mechanisms in place which are trying to overcome the hurdle of lack of availability of literature from India into German. But what is needed is a much more intensive cooperation between Indian and Germany in this field.

#### **5. RECEPTION IN PRINT MEDIA**

The factors which we discussed earlier undoubtedly have a role to play in the underrepresentation of non-English Indian literature, however, it is also important to look at what kind of reception does this literature get in German speaking countries. And it is undisputed that book reviews contribute greatly to the reception, especially when it comes to lesser-known authors or rather authors who are less well-known in Germany. Therefore, it is relevant to analyse the book reviews to see whom they address, and what they say.

Sorensen & Rasmussen (2004, p. 2) show that reviews can be broadly classified as, “primarily persuasive, i.e., their effect is to influence consumers’ evaluations of a book’s quality [or they are] primarily informative, i.e., their effect is to inform readers of a book’s existence and/or characteristics,” while analysing the reviews this classification would also be kept in mind. Two sources were primarily accessed for the purpose of obtaining reviews, namely Perlentaucher, a website which looks at the major newspapers and offers an overview of the reviews published in them and provides the reader an orientation into the endless book market and Literaturforum Indien, which we know has the objective of making literature from India and other south Asian countries popular in German speaking countries.

If we take Premchand as a case in point for meagre reception of Indian Literature in German speaking countries, we see that only one major daily newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) from Switzerland, had for instance published an article on his birth centenary. His novel *Godan*, was published by a big publishing house in 1979, however the publication was funded by a Swiss foundation. The second edition was published in 2006 and Günter Grass as well as the *Buchmarkt*, a magazine for the book trade commended the book (Oesterheld, pp. 191 – 192). It was reviewed by some major newspapers, such as the afore-mentioned daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and a weekly *Die Zeit*. The reviewer in NZZ puts Premchand on par with Maxim Gorky, but also states that the novel comes out better because the author has less revolutionary dynamism than Gorky. The reviewer also writes about the two backdrops of the novel, the backward rural environ and the modern urban space. The FAZ reviewer praises the work for its absolute rejection of any glorification of the idyllic rural life as well as for the political and philosophical debates which are carried out and which he compares with the great Russian novels of the 19th century. For the reviewer of *Die Zeit*, reading this monumental work meant immersing herself in India's "legendary contrast" between rich and poor, country and city, tradition and cynicism. She also emphasizes the fact that "*Godan*" is deeply critical literature and anything but folkloristic. All the reviews can be categorised as primarily persuasive in nature.

Uday Prakash’s several works have been translated into German. His novels *Aur Ant Mein Prarthna*, *Mohandas*, and *Peeli Chatri Wali Ladki*, a collection of shorter narratives *Dilli Ki Diwar* as well as an anthology of five of his short stories, have been published along with some other stories in the literary journal *Horen*. This leads to the assumption that he is well received by the readers and that the reviews have contributed greatly to this reception, however, only three of his works have been reviewed. The reviewer of *Aur Ant Mein Prarthna* in the *Tageszeitung* (TAZ), a national daily, comments that Prakash has shown through his work, how lies, deception, bribery and murder happen in India and that corruption is not something which he handles lightly in his work, for him it is something dead-serious. She then writes about the plot and the author’s life. She praises his work that it looks beyond the glitter of the Indian megapolis and is situated in the provinces. She finds that Prakash writes with humour and understated irony, and thinks that his work can be described in some instances as political satire. She goes on to bemoan the fact that very few books from Hindi and other Indian languages get translated and that what does get received as country’s literature has been translated from English. The review is persuasive in that it tells the readers that they should look further, and not just satisfy themselves with English literature from India.

The review in *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung* (RNZ) compares Dr. Wakankar, the protagonist with Michael Kohlhaas and thus leads the reader to find an affinity with the character. He writes that Prakash is one of the most important Indian writers and this work is one of his best works. He praises the work for being easy to read, interesting and describing relentlessly the greed, corruption, and criminality in India. The reviewer praises the publisher that it has brought to the reader something beyond Gandhi and Goa, something which is not readily accessible, that is a political novel which can be read at one go. Both the reviews can easily be classified as highly persuasive and due to a larger readership, they would positively impact the outreach of this work.

In 2014, Mohandas was placed on top of the Litprom’s seven best literary titles, Ilija Trojanow one of the juries finds, Prakash digs up with fine irony and in a seemingly light tone the graveyard where the rulers bury their victims. He states further, "the main character is one of the countless who struggle, barely visible, for their right to live. An exemplary story of universal significance." The review in *E+Z* states “unlike internationally known Indian bestseller writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni or Shashi Tharoor, Uday Prakash writes in Hindi and unlike them writes about places which are inhabited by the poor, about them who are marginalised and exploited. He then describes the



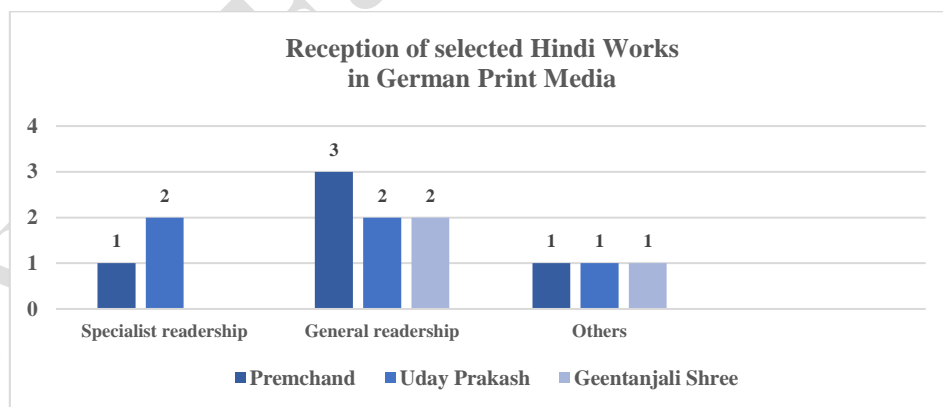
plot and talks about the writer's life. The review only talks about the literary merits of the work in so far that it mentions the positive reception of this work in India, its cinematic adaptation and that it was given the Sahitya Akademi award. This review can be counted as more informative than persuasive. E+Z is a journal which addresses issues in the "Third World" – and its readership - is not interested in literature as such but only as a medium to inform about those countries.

Der goldene Gürtel has been reviewed in iz3w, the reviewer states that the stories in this collection are situated far away from the metropolis and tell the stories of joint families. The focus of these stories are small things, such as a nail cutter, a box etc. These stories reflect childhood emotions and symbolise greed, lack of empathy, dark family secrets and cruelty. The reviewer finds that Prakash has opened new perspectives in Hindi-literature through his use of magical realism. This review can also be categorised as informative.

Geetanjali Shree's novel Ret Samadhi has recently been awarded the International Booker Prize for literature. However, this work has not yet been translated in German. Although some other works have been published in Germany, for instance her novels Khali Jagah, Hamara Shahar Us Baras, Mai and an anthology of her shorter narratives. Both her latter novels have been reviewed in newspapers with a larger readership.

The review of Mai and the anthology appeared in RNZ, which has a wide readership in Heidelberg and neighbouring areas. The reviewer recommends to the readers that they should remember Shree's name. He tells them that she is one of the most important Hindi-writers. After giving some more information about her, he moves on to the plot of the novel and praises it for being written in a very smooth and nuanced manner. According to him the novel is not only a study in human psychology but also portrays the daily life in India. The anthology also finds favour with the reviewer, he finds the author describes the happenings in a lively and deft manner and he especially likes one story for the fact that it compares two great cultures, Japan, and India, which he thinks would be interesting from the European perspective.

The review for Hamara Shahar Us Baras in the TAZ talks about fanaticism, be it in India or North Ireland, Israel or in Germany's national socialist past. She praises the novel that it makes us delve into ourselves and see how easily we get lured into such traps. She finds that Shree's work is poetic in nature, her metaphors unfurl slowly and that is why they have a lasting effect and she detangles with fine psychological understanding the hatred and relentlessness that is present in the city. The reviewer compares the narration to that of theatre. Both the reviews are very persuasive and the fact that they have appeared in publications which have a wider readership would have certainly made the reader look up her work.



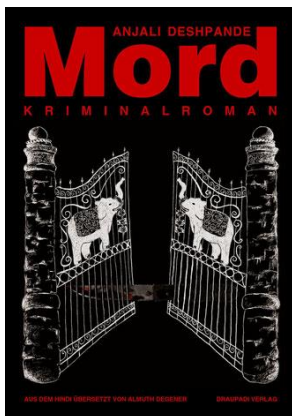
The diagram shows that some Hindi works indeed get received in the German print media and that they are not restricted to media which cater to a specialist readership, which is in any case familiar with and interested in them but also finds representation in the mainstream media. The diagram also reflects the reception of these works in some other media, such as radio or they being commended by important German litterateurs etc, as these also play a role in how the works get received. Interestingly, a single work by Premchand has resonated better than those by Uday Prakash and Geetanjali Shree. However, it must be pointed out that in the case of Godan, it might also be the fact that it was published - unlike the works of the other two authors - around the time when India was a guest of honour at FBB – which might have played a role in its better reception and the fact that it was published by Manesse Verlag would mean that the book had a better chance of getting reviewed because the publishing house would have more resources

to work for its promotion. However, this is also not always the case, as Alka Saraogi's work finds no reflection in the mainstream media. In the case of works by Uday Prakash and Geetanjali Shree, what must be kept in mind, they were published by Draupadi Verlag, a so-called niche publishing house. If these works have made it to the mainstream media, then the contribution of the publisher must be acknowledged and supported, because the publishing house neither has the resources which its bigger counterparts have nor does it work with bestseller authors writing in English like Amitav Ghosh or Arundhati Roy, whose 25 reviews for 9 works and 10 reviews for 4 works are available on Perleнтаucher.

The reviews have highlighted that the German reader would be open to reading literature from and about India, but might need persuasion, which might be in form of comparison with the literature they are familiar with. The reviews have also shown that the readers might have a stereotypical image of India in mind and hence the reviewers have tried to encourage them to read the reviewed works, as they know very well that Indian literature which is not written in English finds meagre reception in the readers' universe.

## 6. HATYA, A SAFE LANDING?

We now look at how different stakeholders came together so that a piece of translated literature could reach another ground. Within the ambit of a ViceVersa translation project between the language pair Hindi and German, it was initially decided that both languages would translate crime-fiction. Here one of the works which was suggested was Hatya by Anjali Deshpande. However, it was later decided that this work will be translated separately by one of the workshop participants and another work was selected as a part of the ViceVersa workshop. This book is now a part of the German literary landscape and has been published by Draupadi Verlag. Litprom included this book in its September 2023, Weltempfänger list, wherein new translations from all over the world are nominated, the purpose being to introduce excellent literary voices into the German speaking countries. This work's selection was justified by stating that the author stays close to the people who are placed low in the Indian society and that the work is a clever and critical analysis of the society which appears in the garb of a work of crime-fiction.



If we look at the “packaging” of this book (Sarma, p. 239) the title Mord (Hatya), unlike the usual titles for Hindi-literature in German translation, is short and direct and tells the reader immediately, what is to be expected – it corresponds exactly to the original Hindi title and is seemingly simple, even sensational, although later the reader will find out that “murder” has more than one meaning in this novel. Similarly, its cover is creatively and imaginatively designed, and does not have too many colours, which might eventually distract the reader but gets the message conveyed precisely and directly. The book made it to the ten best crime fiction works in the July list of Deutschlandfunk Kultur, a national radio station whose programmes cover culture, arts, and science. Interestingly all other books that were listed have been translated from English. The jury calls it the most unusual book within the list, where the murder investigation reveals the

prevalent hierarchies of rank, caste, and gender. The review persuades the readers to read this book by mentioning that it has been written because the author identifies with the issues deeply and that this is the reason why crime-fiction is written. The Rhein-Neckar Zeitung also reviewed this work, and while providing a synopsis of the work and introducing the author, praised the translation done by Almuth Degener. The reviewer writes that the work is a combination of a well-knit plot, which one is familiar with from the occidental crime-fiction, with a very vivid description of the different ways of life in India. A national daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung while presenting a summary of the plot, praises the book for the matter of fact writing style of the author while she conveys the ills of the society. SWR2 a radio station lauds the work by stating that a characteristic of good crime fiction is that it tells of those who otherwise hardly find a place in literature. A German weekly national newspaper Der Freitag mentions that the author has been fighting for many years for women's rights and the improvement of the living conditions of the "untouchables" at the lower end of the Indian caste system. She also mentions that the book is one among the few crime-fiction works written in Hindi and that it has been translated directly into German.

What is heartening while reading the reviews is not just their number and the fact that they were a mix of being informative as well as persuasive but more importantly the fact that the work was being reviewed for its literary merit and that the reviewers were cognisant of the realities the work was portraying. The purpose behind the details related to the work's journey into German literary terra firma was to show, that it requires

multiple channels to reach there. On the one hand there was co-operation between the different stakeholders in the process of its textual translation. The translator, author and the publisher collaborated well, though it must be highlighted and perhaps also questioned, that the translation was just a labour of love and no immediate monetary rewards were provided to the translation. The Literaturforum Indien provided financial support for the publication of the work and has also invited the translator to talk about this work during their annual conference. Another institution, Litprom also provided support by placing it on the Weltempfänger list. Persuasive reviews in various media contributed towards making the book a bestseller for the publisher. What can be culled out is that both German and Indian stakeholders must join forces, there should also be some mechanism in place, where the translators are rewarded for their labour and that publishers who are committed to promoting the country's literature should not just be commended but also supported in their endeavour to promote Indian cultural values as a form of active and self-confident self-representation of modern India in Germany and Europe.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to highlight that literatures in vernaculars are seldom accessible in translation, though they represent different worldviews and anthropologies of India which thus remain largely inaccessible and unknown to the non-Indian readership. The only way to overcome this one-sidedness and to access the variety and richness of Indian cultures and literatures is through Hindi and other “regional languages” and the translation of their texts. This can be achieved by systematic support from the source and target cultures, wherein the support encompasses regular interaction with the different stakeholders, that is the translators, publishers, and the reviewers, because only when all three collaborate can we ensure that we are not depriving our readers from grasping the “illustrative role [which that particular language and in this instance] Hindi can play in the future understanding of the complex relations between India, its languages and literatures, and the world in postcolonial times.” (Burger & Pozza 2010 p. 12)

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### Note:

<sup>^</sup> Here those works or anthologies have not been included, where there were either works from other languages or it was not possible to ascertain whether these were direct translations.