

# Is Translation a Room of Our Own?

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The purpose of this presentation is to get away from a binary that is English-vernacular. . Unless we get rid of this binary, neither a rich translation culture is possible in the sphere of Indian languages, nor will that culture, even if it ever takes place, become oriented towards a kind of social science that may be conceived and articulated in these languages. I have a three-fold argument in this regard. Its first layer contains an analysis of the relationship between a translator and a social scientist and the crucial bearing on the hierarchical equation of two interacting languages. English, which always generates the original text and bestows upon the social scientist the status of an author. Hindi or any other Indian language that is the medium of translation the practitioner of which never goes beyond the identity of a mere wordsmith and is never granted an authorial voice. The second aspect of the above argument relates to the translation of concepts. Before being accepted as universals, almost all concepts of social sciences exist in a particular culture, ideology and history. A Change in location of these concepts drastically alters the configuration of these constituent and thereby disturbs the rather peaceful life of such concepts as 'universals'. Th new location of these concepts sometimes subverts their meaning to such an extent that besides their name, they share nothing. Obviously, these are brazen acts of modification the radicalism of which is yet to be ascertained either by the translator or by the author.(you are using these terms interchangeably).

The third layer argues for an almost invisible institutional set-up necessary for the establishment and proliferation of a hitherto unrealised rich culture of translation. In the end I seek to shift the onus of responsibility for creating a translation culture on to the figure of the social scientist. I also insist that from translation we must move towards an orientation that puts a premium on writing social sciences in Indian languages rather than merely translating.

# 1.

From a translator's point of view I would begin by saying that whatever culture of translation we have today is basically a two-pole (what is that? Never heard of it) structure. In fact, we are looking at two airtight compartments: one populated by translators and the other by social scientists with almost no interaction or interchange of positions between them. It seems to me that when we talk of translation culture we take it for granted that this structural arrangement will never change. There would always remain a rarefied community of social scientists responsible for the original text in English and a lowbrow community of translators for the larger world of Indian language readers.

Barring a few notable exceptions, in terms of social and intellectual existence and self-image the inhabitants of these compartments have very little in common. Since no survey of translators has ever been made, I can only make a few conjectures. The Hindi translator of a social science text is some one who is (likely to be) borne and brought up in middle or lower-middle class milieu of a mufassil North Indian town, instructed mainly in the medium of Hindi, may read English reasonably well but may not write or speak it with a great efficiency. Not able to secure a well-paid job in media or in a NGO, the translator depends upon the income from translation either to meet both ends or to supplement his income. With no extensive grounding in any discipline of social sciences, he lives precariously on the edges of a dreadful English-Hindi diglossia. Not even in his dreams does he dare think of becoming a member of the social scientist community. One would tempt to ask whether even in this rundown state he is living a life of mind, or he has any love of social sciences or whether he is in pursuit of knowledge. Can such a person exude confidence while talking about his relationship with the various disciplines of social sciences? In my book, the answer to all these queries is emphatically negative. A translator of a social science text will have to summon great audacity if he is to declare himself as the co-author of the translated text. He suffers from an identity crisis and as if to confirm his underdog position as a non-citizen of the elite world of social sciences he hardly ever gets credit on the jacket of the book. As a rule he never gets his short bio or

photograph printed on its flap and invariably reels under the bad deal inflicted upon him by the wily publisher. The social scientist whose text he is struggling with mostly does not step out of his comfort zone to rescue him. With a meagre cultural capital at his command, he can at best fashion the career of a commentator who churns out small items for Hindi media on editorial demands..

Far away from this figure of translator enveloped in the haze of his own limitations, stands the figure of social scientist. He might or might not come from the same social milieu, but he is a beneficiary of resources spent on his intellectual career by the state, society and his own family. If not always borne in English, the social scientist is either brought up in this language or forced to give up his native language under the pressure exerted by the politics of knowledge. He is well located, financially secure, well travelled, at times a globetrotter and also with some leisure time at hand. His self-image has no hiccups because he is trained to produce a certain form of knowledge. He keeps himself away from the act of translation for two reasons: he has probably forgotten how to write in Hindi(for lack of use) or the act of translation itself may not form a significant part of his own idea of knowledge production. Precisely at this juncture this figure of social scientist runs into a complex contradiction that can be blamed on his long held desire to see his work published in Hindi also. This is not a new desire and its concrete evidence can be found in the debates of sixties on the possibilities of an all India Link language.

Now let me put this contradiction in contrast to what is happening in the literary culture(of what). Almost all established and highly rated fiction writers or poets function as active translators. More often than not they do it voluntarily without expectation of monetary benefits because they feel immense pleasure in mediating the literary works of their own choice to the readers. From Bhartendu to Dwivedi, from Banarsi Das Chaturvedi to Rahul, from Agyey to Rajendra Yadav and from Dharmveer Bharti to Giridhar Rathy, they have all chosen to translate world's great literature into Hindi. These creative writers have brought great works of Bangla, Panjabi and Urdu literature to Hindi. This is precisely why literary culture has a thriving translation scene. With translator and

original author rolled into one, no compartmentalisation of author and 'less than author' is found in literature.

This comparison begs the awkward question: why capable Indian social scientists desist from translating the important works of their fellow social scientists? Why do they not attempt to mediate the world-renowned works of philosophy and theory in Indian languages? Can't they even translate their own works into Hindi? If they can regularly write newspaper articles and columns in Hindi and even enthusiastically participate in the politics of language, why can't they occasionally write their academic papers in Hindi? Under the light of these issues one can understand why Krishna Kumar never attempted to translate Parthoda's work on Nationalism in Hindi no matter how greatly he admires it. In fact, it was on his recommendation that I read this work in 1993. Similarly on the other side Parthoda too will not spare his precious time in translating Krishna Kumar's path breaking work on *Raj, Samaj Aur Shiksha* or Rajni Kothari's 'Politics in India' in Bangla. That is precisely why Sudhir Chandra's 'Oppressive Present', which I rate very highly, has yet to see its translation because he never put to use his own proven capabilities of writing discursive texts in Hindi. Let alone the 'A Theory of Justice' by John Rawls, even Granville Austin's seminal work on Indian Constitution still awaits its translation.

## 2.

Let me extend this line of argument a bit further on the terrain of my own experience to construct the second layer of my claim. It is a fact that no language can hope to sustain its living structures over a long period of time without sticking to its own hegemony.

Translation, by definition, turns into a piece of creation only when hegemony of original text succumbs before the hegemony of translating language. Literary translations are a living illustration of this wonderful process because creative literature works on both sides of it.. Since social sciences, due to their more or less empirical nature and isolated existence, are characteristically detached from the backyard of the language as well as from various forms of political and social practices, they do not allow the hegemony of its original language to be replaced with the translating language. Unless Hindi or any

other Indian language is allowed to impose its hegemony on the language of social sciences most translations will be condemned to remain in the gray zone between success and failure. This is precisely why the meaning of social science terms acquired in the discursive cultures of Indian languages are being frowned upon because they bring with them intentions of hegemony. Whereas when social science text written in a European language is translated into some other European language, this problem is less likely to occur.

When I was translating Sunil Khilnani's 'The Idea of India', I was not sure how to translate ubiquitous concepts as 'secularism' and 'democracy'. No ready advice was available for me to choose from a variety of Hindi equivalents: *dharmnirapekshta*, *sarva-dharma-sambhav*, *panthnirapekshta*, *laukikvaad*, *ladeeniat*; and *loktantra*, *janvaad*, *lokshahi*, *prajatantra*, *jamhuriat*. Looking deceptively synonymous, every word among them has a complex politics of meaning behind it and is coined to address a different public. In fact, all these terms are minted and got ingrained with certain socio-political meaning during the active processes of public life in which Hindi intellectuals invariably found themselves. I have consulted a few social scientists but their advice did not make my life easier due to their arbitrary choice of equivalents. They themselves could not differentiate between these terms with any degree of precision due to their allegiance to fixed standardised meanings.

It is true that Hindi, or for that matter any other Indian language, in its sphere can not boast off a presence of social science literature that is being produced in a university system and research institutes, but they are not bereft of discursive culture of their own kind. I can say for sure that a huge and rich amount of political, social, religious, philosophical and literary thought has been articulated there. But it has remained mostly invisible for our social scientists. My friend Ravikant has brilliantly termed this 'Hindi Ka Adrishya Gyan'. The life of this *adrishya gyan* has two episodes. One that is marked by the happenings of pre-independence period about which Indian social science arguably has some kind of an idea, but it is more or less clueless about the other episode that belongs to the post-colonial period.

How is a social scientist supposed to play a creative role in the translation of concepts when he is not privy to the debates around modernity, secularism and democracy since independence? We, in CSDS, chose to adopt an ingenious way of circumventing all these debates and decided that 'secularism' will be represented as plain and simple 'secularvaad'. We could do it because we at least recognise that in Hindi every translation of the said term addresses a different political and ideological hue. But this minor success was fraught with major failure, for other terms may not allow this kind of engineering. The meanings of concepts and terms that we understand through our learning of social sciences have to wrestle endlessly with an opposing set of meanings in the sphere of Indian languages, therefore critiquing each other will have to be accepted as a norm. If social scientists of my era are ready to recognise this condition, they can learn to use these daily skirmishes for developing a variety of words, terms, phrases and expressions to represent what social science intends to convey.

### 3.

For the third layer of my argument I will compare the experience of translating two classic works of social sciences. Among them, one is Jacques Rancier's 'Nights of Labour' and other is a magnum opus of political theory(name?). Translation of these books demanded great stamina and continuous hard work along with endless innovations and new coinages. Comfortably placed in a premier research institute when I set upon translating Rancier, I was quite sure that several highly competent social scientists are within my reach with the added advantage of some of them having a good knowledge of Hindi. This rare institutional setup helped me greatly in overcoming the hurdles that I used to encounter almost daily over a period of at least one and a half year. I must have taken up a number of hours of my colleagues in impromptu debates and discussions on various concepts and expressions. I can not say exactly how many times I forced them to ponder over several pieces of my translation during informal workshops. My colleagues who come from various disciplines played a silent but a very significant part in resolving various ticklish theoretical issues. This extraordinary facility allowed me to work in a

playful mood by breaking free from the syntax of English that was deliberately made to suit the language of original text in French. The project ultimately resulted in ‘Sarvahara Raten’ about which as a translator today at least I can say that I have authored Ranciere’s book in Hindi.

I don’t know whether this claim for an authorial voice would ultimately prove pyrrhic, but a far more wretched fate visited a young translator who was given the unenviable task of translating a very important work of political philosophy by his well-meaning teachers. With manifold conceptual difficulties, this brave lad somehow accomplished his mission but no matter how admirable his attempt, he knows and we all know the downside of what he achieved. Among many differences between me and him, most crucial one was the institutional setup. His was a rather lonely patrol on the frontiers of theory and philosophy punctuated here and there with little relief when his teachers must have helped him. He visited CSDS at least twice with a list of his problems, but we could only lend a limited hand because the text he was struggling against demanded long painstaking intellectual investment. In my case, the whole institute of CSDS and Sarai was participating in the act of translation. I would not hesitate to say that there were a few guest appearances without which I could not have given my text a desired touch of Urdu.

A Similar kind of help but on a different register was received by me while mediating the works of CSDS’s legendary scholars in two series of books in Hindi. My belief was that my translation will not be a mere word by word or sentence by sentence translation. The act of translation would be there, but as a result of it, the English text would get represented in the kind of Hindi that I have inherited from the discursive cultures of this modern language. From translation to representation, the whole process contained careful additions and deductions, change of titles, highlighting certain portions and some times abridgement of argument. I took pieces of arguments from various scholarly work of an author and cobbled them up in a completely new Hindi article. For instance in Rajni Kothari’s reader, under the *Lok-chintak Granthmala*, this method resulted in the piece titled ‘Sampradayikta ka Ashtavakra’. Professor Kothari never wrote this article in English, but he generously allowed me to do that by using his own text. His magnum

opus 'Politics in India' has been resurrected in Hindi by adding to it his far more developed ideas and discourse since its publication way back in 1969. I edited out the copious data work of sixties from it in order to make it a work that can belong to the turn of the century. Professor Kothari authenticated the net result of this effort titled 'Bharat Mein Rajneeti: Kal Aur Aj' as work done in Hindi and not a mere translation. In fact, while preparing for these books, we readily surrendered the hegemony of English for ensuring the readability of discursive Hindi. To emphasise upon certain meanings we prepared a small dictionary of concepts and usages. I took long interviews and wrote exhaustive introductions to cover even those aspects which were not touched upon by CSDS scholars.

The faculty of CSDS has always exhibited a positive attitude towards these innovations. In fact, when the Indian Language Programme was being conceived by Professor DL Sheth, Professor VB Singh, Professor Yogendra Yadav and me, it was never a translation programme in its traditional sense. The mood and the agenda that informed it was to encourage social science writing first in Hindi and then in other Indian languages. To make an exit from a room, one is bound to take a few steps inside it. I have developed a firm opinion that translation will remain a highly significant option, but this space is not something that we should cherish for Indian languages as a permanent and sole option. We have to step out of this room by using all kind of methods and programmes. We have to innovate through it by using institutional (institutions have little imagination) imagination otherwise the culture of social sciences in Indian languages will never take roots and English-vernacular binary will keep haunting us.