Subalternity and Translation: The Cultural Apparatus of Human Rights

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What happens when we frame human rights within a cultural context and not just a juridical-political one? This article argues that the cultural apparatus of human rights requires English and translation. This in no way undermines the mother tongue, the vernacular or the local; instead the language of the other enables us to engage with the other so that we reflect upon ourselves.

In this essay I position English and the work of translation as constituting the cultural apparatus of human rights. In the case of historically marginalised subjects who have been denied their rights, such as dalits, arguments in favour of English as the language of empowerment and emancipation have been around for some time now (Anand 1999; Times News Network 2010; Babu 2010). I want to extend these arguments by proposing that the “language” of empowerment demands both English and translation for a real radicalisation of politics.

Human rights cannot, this essay assumes, be circumscribed within the domain of the juridical-legal, but must circulate as the everyday discourse of civil society itself. That is, human rights demands a cultural apparatus in which the discourse of rights, cast in the language of international/transnational standards and norms circulates within a register of claims and in the narrative form of autobiography, personal stories and memoirs. As should be obvious, I am calling for the translation of global norms of human rights into a local context, even as local stories of violations must be translated to fit into a global narrative of campaigns, protests and legalistic measures. This non-formal, non-juridical component – what I am calling the cultural apparatus – of human rights is as significant as legal or political measures guaranteeing or enforcing the human rights regime.

I identify three modalities through which such a cultural apparatus for human rights can be forged. One, through English and the language of cultural citizenship for the historically subjugated; second, through the folklorisation of human rights discourses and the concomitant circulation of apposite narrative forms; and third, through “activist translation” and the making of a new cosmopolitanism. I am proposing a two-way translation as the cultural apparatus of human rights – first, of global discourses (of rights but also radicalising thought) into “folklore” forms and second, of local stories of violations into global narratives.

Civil Society and the Language of Cultural Citizenship

Partha Chatterjee points out that while minorities and dalits may have been incorporated into India’s political society by law, they are not yet a part of its civil society (Chatterjee 2004; Pandey 2006). The language of civil society in the contemporary context might well be English; hence, the need for the disenfranchised to acquire the language. If civil society depends on civic and civil interaction, then English is becoming (has become) the language of this interaction.

When English narrates an Indian episode, writes Narayana Chandran, “its commitment as a medium gets resolutely directed towards a bhasha and its ethos in question” (2010: 18). English as a bhasha means that not only are the dalits trying to “articulate their viewpoint in the language that connotes power, despite the difficulties that surround such an effort” (Anand 1999: 2056), but that this effort gets indigenised when dalits use it to articulate specific local conditions, contexts and demands. Narayana Chandran elsewhere (2006) offers a detailed account of the power of English as the language of “reading” in Indian classrooms, suggesting that English helps students in Indian classrooms understand the “construction of hegemonic paradigms…the complicity of literary texts in stereotyping, and in reinforcing those stereotypes about certain races and castes” (2006: 154-55). He further proposes that English is the language in which critical theory – which has done much, when effectively deployed, to give a decolonising twist to age-old interpretations and texts – can itself be examined, and the terms of discussion and interpretation called into question (167). Chandran concludes that “English…must shed its greatness as an other language and share the common ground of Indian realities” (2006:168, emphasis in original).

Here one needs to see English bhasha as a critical, self-reflexive medium into

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which local inflections, and unequal social conditions are translated to acquire greater political, social and cultural visibility. What both Chandran and Anand are addressing is the rewriting, in a new medium (English) of the cultural script of social and civil interactions. To bring to the surface a different cultural context (or “ethos”, as Chandran calls it) of subaltern oppression, women’s disenfranchisement, and resource exploitation requires, as it were, translation into English. As should be clear, we are here addressing not the political dimension to the articulation of social injustice but the sociocultural one.

The arrival of the English-speaking subaltern revitalises not only the subaltern’s participation in the civil society but also civil society itself. A decade ago, S Anand, now a reputed publisher, made the point that (Anand 1999: 2054):

this realisation of the importance of being articulate in English is particularly felt at the college/university level where the bahujan comes into contact with the posh, convent-educated urban types.

English here is the route to participation in civil rather than political society, required for the acquisition of social membership and cultural citizenship. The separation of political from civil society is a crucial one, for it points to a condition of social and cultural acceptance that is, indisputably, as central to an individual’s sense of selfhood as it is to political citizenship. In other words, the language of social participation and cultural citizenship in a globalised India is English.

But the acquisition of English on the part of the subalterns is only one component of the need to craft a new language of civil society.

The Folklorisation of Human Rights

What happens when we frame human rights within a cultural context, and not just a juridical-political one, of subaltern socialisation, civil society and cultural citizenship? Does this reframing revitalise both the cultural context as well as the political ethos of a nation?

Antonio Gramsci argued that common sense in itself was inadequate to produce an effective political movement. Gramsci treated common sense as popular social thought or common beliefs and opinions held by ordinary people (1992: 323-28). In Martin Green and Peter Ives’ gloss (2009: 12-13), this popular social thought therefore includes popular religion, the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting collectively bundled together under the name “folklore”. For popular social thought to energeise into a political movement requires a level of critical self-awareness. Such a critical self-awareness, Gramsci proposes, can emerge from a “fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions” (1992: 328) drawn from differing philosophies, ideologies, religion, folklore, experience and superstition. Later he elaborates what he means: “‘Common sense’ is the folklore of philosophy, and is always halfway between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists” (1992: 326). Gramsci proposes that this common sense is not to be rejected, but made critical through self-awareness. He is against the imposition of a normative language, even if the vernacular/folkloric is fragmented, proposing, instead, a critical engagement among the various dialects – we can extend it to mean more coherent philosophies, to borrow Gramsci’s own distinction between folklore and philosophy – so that a new language and world view can emerge. I propose that it is this idea of the transformation of the folkloric and the vernacular in Gramsci that offers a potential means of revitalising popular social thought. This “revitalisation” is the making of a new culture.

Ambedkar’s writings – in English – constitute one mode of revitalising common sense and the creation of a new culture. Marx represents another. And, in contemporary times, the discourse of human rights represents by far the most crucial mode. Incorporating the language of universal human rights, the register of dignity, self-respect and freedom from violation – the cultural apparatus of human rights, as I have proposed above – marks a possible catalyst for radicalising common sense and the making of a human rights culture from which, in Gramsci’s words (1992: 325), “vital action” can emerge. In short, what I am arguing for is first, a radicalising of common sense by imbuing it with and embedding it within the larger cosmopolitan (or universal) cultural apparatus of human rights and by making the language of rights a part of everyday lingua franca. Second, I suggest making universal standards of human rights folkloric by sliding them into local cultural forms and practices of thought. As we can
see, both require acts of translation and English. The first calls for an “Englished” common sense – by which I mean a self-reflexive, deeply critical engagement where all terms, as Chandran proposes, are subject to scrutiny on the part of the subalterns where Ambedkar, Marx and where the universal language of human rights enters into popular social thought. The second calls for a vernacularisation, into English bhasha but also, necessarily, into local languages of universal laws and standards.

Human rights discourses depend upon a commitment, Joseph Slaughter argues, to provide a “public, international space that empowers all human beings to speak” (Slaughter 1997: 415, emphasis in original; Nayar 2009). The language of international politics when imbued with the folkloric storytelling of victims becomes a new kind of story space. In the same way, the subaltern’s social thought is radicalised listening to universal legal, social and cultural idea(l)s of rights and claims, in translation. What is called for, therefore, is a close examination of the linkage between translation, language and human rights, the textual and cultural apparatuses that enable various stories to be articulated, heard and held in our heads. Once these stories move across cultures through the means of translation, a new cosmopolitanism emerges.

**Translation and the New Cosmopolitanism**

Michael Ignatieff has proposed that the language of human rights is now a universal lingua franca to articulate and address the problems of suffering (Ignatieff 2001: 7). The discourse of rights is now more or less universal when it comes to political debates about emancipation and agency for the world’s disempowered. In other words, the discourse of human rights addresses the question of suffering across the world. To extend this argument, the discourse of human rights marks the arrival of a serious new element within cosmopolitanism – one can (or might be) concerned about the violation of persons and rights in any part of the world. The feminist-queer thinker Judith Butler phrases it thus (2004: 22-23): “if my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the ‘we’ is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against”. By speaking of a new geopolitics of suffering – an example of which would be the continued linkage of dalits in India with Africans in Africa or African-Americans in the United States and the attempt to register caste-based discrimination as racism – we shift the focus, rightly, from the singularity of local suffering to its connection with global discourses of violation, emancipation and rights. This is a new cosmopolitanism. The new cosmopolitan “moment”, as Gerhard Delanty defines it, “occurs when context-bound cultures encounter each other and undergo transformation as a result” (cited in Cronin 2006: 23).

The new cosmopolitanism – which I have elsewhere termed “affecive cosmopolitanism” for its emphasis on emotional connections across the world (Nayar 2008) – is the awareness of and a possible ethical response to suffering and violation in any part of the world. Cosmopolitanism here is a way of engaging with others, even distant others. Such a cosmopolitanism that recognises suffering, rights-denial and violation and engages with the suffering, historically disenfranchised other, requires translation. Michael Cronin proposes that we think of translation as “a way not only of thinking but of being and acting in the world” (2006: 10). Cronin goes on to list a few cosmopolitan ideals: a concern for freedom, openness to and tolerance of others, and a respect for difference (2006: 14). He then goes on to argue that “micro-cosmopolitanism” is the use of these larger cosmopolitan ideals to “diversify or complexify” smaller political units (2006: 15). This is clearly the agenda of a new translation ethos itself. Cronin calls for the ethical responsibility of transnational translation, which involves engaging with cultural politics at national and international levels (2006: 154).

Alastair Pennycook sees such “activist translation” (the term is Cronin’s) as “making meaning across and against codifications” (2007: 55), where meanings do not stay restricted within a language. Translation is also, therefore, an integral component of globalisation, one which grants visibility to local suffering and folklorises transnational discourses of rights, dignity and agency.

Translation is what enables the use of a universal language of rights (the global human rights campaign, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, campaigns against racism, and for sexual freedom) to be “applied” locally. Admittedly, local communities and cultures conceive of social justice and freedom in different terms from universal norms. What the new cosmopolitanism demands is the translation of transnational norms and discourses of rights into the vernacular (as Sally Engle Merry 2006, has pointed out). Thus when in December 2001, the Indian government introduced the bill on domestic violence, women’s groups protested saying the bill did not incorporate the standards set by Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the definition of domestic violence. The activists were calling for an act of cultural translation, from the universal standards set by a transnational body into the vernacular.

This of course raises the question of whether universal norms and concepts about the individual, personhood and rights are indeed translatable into local cultures. However, if we see cultures as open to change and sites of meaning-contestation rather than fixed and unchanging, this is not an issue at all. For example, if we treat caste or patriarchy as cultural practices open to change and contestation, we can then see translation (of global norms of human rights) as working within local cultures in order to change them. If, as I have proposed above, we can radicalise local political thought by translation and folklorise global discourses of rights by embedding them in local contexts, we can then see the contestation within local cultures. Once global/transnational discourses enter political thought (and I would here align Marx with Gramsci, Ambedkar and Periyar), we...
can see local cultures altering themselves in self-reflexive ways.

The cultural apparatus of human rights thus requires English and translation. Revitalising the language of politics with subaltern identity-markers requires English bhasha of rights and cosmopolitan ideals or standards. This in no way undermines the mother tongue, the vernacular or the local. Indeed, the language of the other enables us – like literary or artistic creations – to hold, along with our sense of ourselves, the thought of the Other in our heads, to engage with the Other so that we reflect upon ourselves. The vernacularisation of universal rights and the micro-cosmopolitanisation of the local conflates the local and the global in acts of cultural, juridical and social translation where the subaltern recognises her/his own subalternity through the language of universal rights – and can then demand justice. The question remains, of course, of the politics of translation and of the cultural intermediary’s role in translating universal standards into local cultures. But a part of this question is already being answered in the languages of rights seen in the work of Kancha Ilaiah, Gopal Guru and the work of cultural intermediaries, non-governmental organisations and activists who situate local politics and identitarian crises within global frames and discourses. Thus transnational translation – which is activist translation – works at a dual level. It folklorises global norms and ideas about discrimination and rights, and takes local stories to international visibility, thus fitting them into global discourses of rights.

REFERENCES


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