

## GANDHI AS A TRANSLATOR: A CASE STUDY

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One wonders as to why ‘passive resistance’, an English equivalence of *Satyagraha*, sounds so jarring and why didn’t Gandhi contest it? And why does *Swaraj* sound more appealing than ‘Independence’ or ‘Freedom’ in the colonial and nationalistic sense? These are not just questions dealing with the language of translation but with the direction/s of translation. Answers to these questions lie in the Gandhi’s profound sense weighing while translating English into Gujarati and vice versa. For Gandhi, as it is widely known, translation was a tool to instill sense of ‘nationalism’ (in the most comprehensive sense) in the hearts of people of the time. Also, his conviction for the perfect blending of purity of means and goal is reflected in his translation practices wherein he chose an Indian way of transition i.e. *Anuvad* which carries greater sense of an exchange and a dialogue. A dialogue that he had with the oppressor (British) on one hand and with the oppressed (both Indians and Africans) on the other got culminated into his total philosophy of cooperative life. Needless to mention that Gandhi developed a unique register which awaits critical inquiry and hence in the larger frame of (translation) history, he is yet to be properly theorized as a translator in action.

Gandhi stands at an important juncture in the history of translation in India when the intense dialogue with the West took place on various aspects; be it culture, philosophy, politics etc. Therefore, it is pertinent to revisit Gandhi’s discourse through his translations so as to make better sense of the larger historical frame. Being committed more to ‘the truth’ of the words than their beauty, Gandhi did not, even remotely, try to please English gentlemen’s taste by his English translations. As an unremitting translator, Gandhi did anuvad of Socrates’ *Apology* (tr. as “The Soldier of Truth”), Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, *A Letter to a Hindoo*, Thoreau’s *On Civil Disobedience* (tr. as “The Duty of Disobeying Laws”); and John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* (tr. as “Sarvodaya”), his own *Hind Swaraj* into English. Besides, he also wrote a commentary (a new interpretation on a text) of Bhagvad Gita which is also an act of anuvad (not translation in the purist Western sense) that he performed in order to reiterate infallibility of nonviolence during the state of war with the British. The paper tries to examine (a) Gandhi’s translation practices as the prolongation of the Indian intellectual tradition of discourse, dialogue and translation and (b) the fortunate untranslatability of Gandhian terms.

**Key terms:** Translation Historiography, Anuvad, Dialogue, Indian Tradition

### **Lead In:**

Gandhi was not only a keen student of languages but also of translation. Let’s begin with a very profound example of his serious engagement with translation. When he was in South Africa, the Transvaal Government proposed changes in the Asiatic Act. In the proposed act, it was suggested that all the Asiatics have to submit impressions of all their fingers. Gandhi considered

this clause to be not only mortifying but also undignified. His response to this act was a transnational one. What did can be heard in his own words, “I took the Transvaal Government Gazette Extraordinary of August 22, 1906 in which the Ordinance was published, home from the office. I went up a hill near the house in the company of a friend and began to translate the draft Ordinance into Gujarati.” (Gandhi, M.K., *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Navjivan, 2003, reprint. P. 91.) One of the finest Gandhianscholar, TridipSuhrod critique this act of translation and says, “Thus, for him, translation was a process by which alien notions could be grasped, their meanings internalized, and cultural response to it could be offered.”<sup>1</sup> This example alone stands for the fact that as a translator, he was not just a “translator” but an interpreter. He could see what was otherwise imperceptible for other barristers of the time. It is also pertinent to note here that Gandhi’s insistence to speak to the people in their tongues made him publish *Indian Opinion* in four Indian languages.

### **Gandhi as a Translator:**

The colonizers translated a lot of Indian texts even before Gandhi was born and many Indians translated Western texts into Indian languages. So it was the right time for Gandhi to engage himself with the act of translation. One more thing which is not often acknowledged is the presence of a few great translators like Mahadevhai Desai and KishorlalMashruvala. Gandhi’s translation practice, it seems, was an off shoot of the greater design of his pursuits of self-realization. Keeping in mind his objectives, his translation practices can be classified by two broad categories: (a) Translation for Social reforms and (b) Translation for Spiritual Seeking. In the first category, we can have his translation of Thoreau’s *On Civil Disobedience* (tr. as “The Duty of Disobeying Laws”); and John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* (tr. as “Sarvodaya”,) and *Hind Swaraj*. On the other hand, we have his translation of Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You, A Letter to a Hindoo* and his commentary (a new interpretation on a text) of Bhagvad Gita in the second category. Interestingly, there is no watertight compartment between these two categories; on the contrary at times *Hind Sawraj* seems to be text for contemplating the collective spiritual seeking and his commentary on Bhagvad Gita seems to be his message about non-violence for the masses during the conflict with the British. All the translations, commentaries and interpretations of the cultural texts are subject to the historical context in which they are made to emerge. Here is one such example of two commentaries of Bhagvat Gitawere opposite to each other:

Tilak helped spread the word and the authority of the Gita. He made it yield a message of militant activism, to such an extent that some of his followers assassinated two British officers (Embree 1972:301). After Tilak’s death in 1920, Mahatma Gandhi followed in his footsteps. As Gandhi extended the Gita’s importance within Hinduism even further by calling it his “mother” (Gandhi 1950: 157) and by offering his own translation (Sarma 1956). Gandhi agreed with Tilak that the thrust of the Gita was one of action. Whereas Tilak had translated the Gita to emphasize the message of *militant* action, however, Gandhi read into the text a message of *nonviolence*. Like Tilak before him, Gandhi both broadened the authority of the Gita within Hinduism and modified its message. (Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth (2012) *Translators through History*, Chapter 6: The Spread of Religion, 176-77. Benjamin Translation Library. FIT & UNESCO)

Writing a commentary is a very old practice in the great Indian intellectual tradition. When Gandhi read the *Bhagvad Gita*’s message as nonviolent one, we must see his act of

translation/anuvad/commentary in the colonial context when he wanted the masses to carry out a non-violent fight against the British. He writes,

The author of the Mahabharata has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance, and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries. In this great work (The Mahabharata) the Gita is the crown. Its second chapter, instead of teaching the rules of physical warfare, tells us how a perfected man is to be known. In the characteristics of the perfected man of the Gita, I do not see any to correspond to physical warfare. Its whole design is inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between warring parties (*Gita according to Gandhi* Translated by Mahadevbhai Desai, p.126-27).

When Gandhi rendered the commentary, he was constantly thinking of the rise of the suppressed sections of the society which is why he clarified his purpose in the very introduction to his commentary of Gita, “Again this rendering is designed for women, the commercial class, the so-called Shudras and the like who have little or no literary equipment, who have neither the time nor the desire to read the Gita in the original and yet who stand in need of its support.” (*Gita according to Gandhi* Translated by Mahadevbhai Desai, p.125). Gandhi read Bhagvad Gita for the first time in 1888 in London and got tempted to read original but being poor in Sanskrit, he had to read it in several translations. Since he considered Bhagvad Gita his spiritual guide for his personal and social activities, he revisited the text in 1932 when he was in Yarovadaprision. He read translations by Aurobindo, Tilak, Shankara and Jnaneshwar.

Let us study his translation of his booklet *Hind Swaraj*. Before approaching the critique on his translation, it is necessary to understand a few facts about the text because these facts had been decisive factors for its translation into English. Gandhi wrote the text in Gujarati in 1908 while traveling from London to South Africa “in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa.” It was serially published in 1909 in the *Indian Opinion* weekly and as a separate booklet in 1910 but it was proscribed by the Government of Bombay on March 24, 1910. This decision of the Bombay Government provoked Gandhi to translate it into English. Thus, translation of *Hind Swaraj* was example of the translation as a protest vehicle. Gandhi was very much aware of the implications of the English translation that’s why he wrote in the preface, “I am quite aware of the many imperfections in the original. The English rendering, besides sharing these, must naturally exaggerate them, owing to my inability to convey the exact meaning of the original. (Preface to *The Indian Home Rule*)” Also, he does not claim the ownership of the ideas discussed in the book and says, “Whilst the views expressed in *Hind Swaraj* are held by me, I have but endeavoured humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers, besides the masters of Indian philosophy (Preface).” Shall we then say that Gandhi has rendered translation/commentary/trans-creation of the writers and thinkers mentioned above? Let us not get into the complexities and politics authorship of ideas and originality of thoughts because Gandhi in practiced translation in broader Indian sense and not the limited sense. Rather, let us look at how comprehensively, lucidly and convincingly he voiced those writers and their views for the good of the masses.

The very title *Hind Swaraj or The Home Rule* was very much in use however, Gandhi thought it necessary at places to change it from *Home Rule* to *Swaraj* only into English. There are several reasons that he rendered to us. For example, it cannot be ‘freedom’ because it entails various other meanings like doing whatever one like to do which Gandhi was certainly against to. Moreover, a word like ‘Independence’ carries a sense of non-cooperative society. Hence, it was

Gandhi's way of resistance and protest not to translate 'Swaraj'. For him, controlling one's self was equal to controlling one's nation which is why he said, "It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves." It is more of a moral duty for everyone to earn the self-rule rather than to get it somehow. When we examine the very index in English translation of *Hind Swaraj*, we find so many leaps and bounds from the original. Let's take three examples,

Chapter No.	Original	Translation
6.	<i>SudharanuDarshan</i>	Civilization
17.	<i>Satyagraha-Atmabal</i>	Passive Resistance
20.	<i>Chhutkaro</i>	Conclusion

In the first case, there is no remote relation, either linguistic or philosophical, between the original and the translation. The original can be literally translated as *Vision for the Reform*. However, possibly there is a deep cultural reason for Gandhi's choice of the word. TridipSuhud speculates the possible reason and tells us, "Gandhi was clearly invoking Sudhar in two senses which have been latent in Gujarati. *Su-dhar* not just as good path, but one that holds, bears; from the Sanskrit root *dri, dharyati*. One, which holds and bears human society is Sudhar and only such Sudhar could point out to man the path of duty and open the possibility of self-knowledge. Sudhar is civilization in this sense (2012:25)." Also, there is no harm in considering *Sudharo* as Civilization in the sense of reform because lexical meaning of the word 'civilization' is "the condition that exists when people have developed effective ways of organizing a society (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civilization>)." Let us not forget the word 'people' in this definition and Gandhi was telling the people on how to bring about the reform in the society at large and not just fighting against the British. In this sense, though the word is 'civilization' what he meant was a comprehensive societal reform itself.

Translating *Satyagraha* as the 'passive resistance' killed the spiritual vitality of the original concept. Later Gandhi himself realized it and said, "*Satyagraha* differs from Passive Resistance as the North Pole from the South (CWMG, Vol. 8.)" "What he actually wanted to convey" tells Nandiani Bhattacharya, "was a unique principle of active nonviolent resistance to injustice, which was aimed at not simply neutralizing violence but transforming the opponent. (193)" Gandhi was in constant search for the better word and his search got intensified when a newspaper in Johannesburg called 'passive resistance' as the "weapon of the week". He studied the social and spiritual history of the Christian society so as to understand the meaning of the phrase 'passive resistance' and defined *Satyagraha* as "soul force pure and simple, and whenever and to whatever extent there is room for the use of arms or physical force or brute force, there and to that extent is there so much less possibility for soul force (*Hind Swaraj*, p.105)." Gradually, he got so convinced about the difference between 'Satyagraha' and 'Passive Resistance' that he gave a new interpretation to the belief about Christ and said in *Hind Swaraj*, "Jesus Christ indeed has been acclaimed as the prince of passive resisters but I submit in that case passive resistance must mean *Satyagraha* and *Satyagraha* alone."

Curiously enough, the last chapter *Chhutkaro* is translated as 'Conclusion' and this has led to many contentions and critiques. For example, Nandini Bhattacharya in her scholarly paper "Gandhian Translations/Translating Gandhi" argues:

However, in the English version Gandhi uses "Conclusion" to end his work, when he could have used an equivalent of '*chukaroo*' such as 'release' or 'emancipation.' The decision to avoid a semantic equivalent (say such as 'release') to distinguish the concluding-section of the English *Hind Swaraj*, robs

the text of its vital charge, denudes it, and renders it far less effective in terms of what it purports to propagate! (193).

Not only that, she speculates three reasons why Gandhi translated *Chhutkaro* as ‘Conclusion’: (1) “Gandhi’s is careless, or unmindful approach to the text, (2) He prefers not to confuse his English-knowing audience with a strange unconventional term like ‘release’ to conclude his text, and (3) Gandhi directs our attention, once again, towards the (im)possibilities of translation (194-94)”. We may argue against her first assumption which considers Gandhi as a careless translator not because we love and respect Gandhi as a person but because we know how he himself commissioned translations of his own works and took extra care in weighing each term before it gets translated into English. Nonetheless, we may fully subscribe to her second assumption because for Gandhi, and most of the translators, the aim of translating a text is to communicate it to the target language culture. If ‘conclusion’ is the accepted term to end a text in English culture, why not do so! Rather than being stringent about the connotations of original, let us focus on the possible connotation of ‘conclusion’ in English language and culture. And one of the meanings of the word ‘conclusion’ is “an opinion or decision that is formed after a period of thought or research” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conclusion>). Thus, he is concluding his argument by proposing 23 (19+4) distinct points for contemplation on how to attain Swaraj. Also, one should celebrate Gandhi’s style of writing i.e. in dialogue form which why it is argued that Gandhi practiced Indian tradition of Anuvad. In fact, *Hind Swaraj* seems to be translation of a Western mode of writing from a prosaic narration into an Indian mode of writing which is a discourse through a dialogue.

Today in India there are several hundreds of schools and NGOs which carry the name ‘Sarvodaya’. Thanks to Gandhi’s act of translation; in fact it would not be exaggeration to say Gandhi translated not only a text but an idea that floated in the hearts of the masses. May be his Indic imagination dictated to him that ideas outlive individuals and that is why he preferred to anuvad – retell rather than translate. Retelling has a deep rhetorical meaning as well because a successful retelling of great ideas carries a protracted intellectual tradition and individual impression on the text retold. That is why may be when he rendered Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* into Gujarati, he called it a ‘paraphrase’ and not a translation.

Gandhi described experience of reading Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* as “the magic spell” in his autobiography. Gandhi wins hearts by his translation of the very title of the book as *Sarvodaya*<sup>2</sup> (Published in translation in 1922) and he talks about it.

I have not translated the title of the book literally because it would not really convey any meaning to people who have no English or Bible reading habits. This book is about the upliftment of all and not just the advancement of majority and hence I have chosen the name ‘sarvodaya’. (Forward, p.3)

Tridip Suhrud tells us, “The phrase ‘Unto This Last’ would have been translated in Gujarati as *Antyodaya* or the welfare of the last person. Gandhi does not translate it as *Antyodaya* but as *Sarvodaya*. *Sarvodaya* means welfare of all. This was the central idea of Gandhi’s economic thinking (Suhrud: 2102: p.10)”. Besides, we have reasons to believe that apart from economic emancipation, Gandhi might have in mind social, moral and spiritual emancipation of the masses. It can be said that when a translator has an ideological agreement with the original text, he/she is always better in terms of reading and rendering the comprehensiveness of the original text. In the otherwise cases, we have history of political-translations wherein translators have twisted the meanings at various levels because they were at odds with original texts ideologically. Besides, it is an interesting Indian way of Anuvad wherein a text is retold by instilling the

translator-cum-composer's ideas. As Gandhi gives a subtitle to the text, *Ruskin na Unto This Last na Aadhare* (Based on *Ruskin's Unto This Last*). His translation has called it a paraphrase rather than a 'translation'. However, when we take a close look at the translation, it seems to be more of an adaptation than a paraphrase. Here, we find a special reason and that is, Gandhi did not give credit to Ruskin for his ideas in the book and argued that even Ruskin was inspired by Socrates and has expanded his ideas only. To me, this is a great example of Indianizing an intellectual tradition through translation and make it a global intellectual tradition.

### **Lead Out:**

Revising Gandhi as a translator makes us aware of the complexity of his development of a thinker in the colonial time. The Gandhian register has made the world rethink core Indian values of spirituality and social welfare. As a translator, Gandhi communicated the best of the ideas from wherever he could find, be it Socrates, Tolstoy, Ruskin or Gita. All these translations came at the very specific junctures of his life as a person and as a leader of the mass movement for India's freedom struggle. He can be a role model for the translators in terms of choosing the texts for translation. In other words, when a text has a "magic spell" impact on you, when a text renders a useful message to the suppressed people and when a text is vital enough to transform you, you must translate it.

### **Endnotes:**

1. In his seminal essay "*Reading Gandhi in Two Tongues*" Tridip Suhrud interprets this act of translation in an interesting way and says, "He knew that the Ordinance was intended for the Asiatic community, particularly Indians. The humiliation inherent in that cold, bureaucratic document could be internalized fully only in his own language. It was only after its translation not only in a linguistic sense but also cultural sense that any effective opposition to it could be thought of. (p.3.)"
2. Nandini Bhattacharya discusses how Gandhi was very much aware of the Christian and Biblical references of the texts and wanted to re-write it for the Indian readers. She says, "Gandhi's awareness that examples/analogies drawn from the *Bible*, and concepts of Christian Socialism or Christian brotherhood (emanating from Bible-reading/knowing European/British cultural contexts) would fall flat upon the Indian diaspora of Gujarati speaking indentured labour in South Africa. It is a realization of cultural specificity, and the distinct nontransferable con-text of Ruskin's work that motivated him to 'paraphrase' rather than 'translate' the book. Also, the very title of the book, (which Ruskin gleans from the parable of the "Labourers in the Vineyard," chapter xx, verse 14, "Book of Mathews" of the *New Testament*) and where the phrase "I will give unto this last, even as unto thee" is used to signify unselfish service; commitment to the poorest of the poor, the wretched of the earth - is changed to *sarvodaya* as it conveys Ruskin's spirit. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* critiques Adam Smith's proposition that pursuit of happiness is constituted in the accruing of wealth and thereby, wellbeing, for the majority, and even when such pursuit is achieved at the cost of overlooking (as well as infringing upon) the rights of the weakest in a community and in contravention of ethical positions (187-88)."

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