Provincializing India

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Very pleasant memories of the mid 1990s here in Chicago, with Arjun, Carol, Dipesh, and I periodically getting together to discuss our work. Arjun was writing *Modernity at Large*; I was trying to think through the structure of *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. I remember especially vividly our session on the early materials for *Provincializing Europe*, and our still unresolved tug-of-war over "historicism."

Provincializing Europe was an attempt to rein in the epistemological arrogance of Europe by showing that its visions were limited and peculiar; that it's story was not the world's story, that its history was not the mansion into which everyone else was waiting to enter, if someday they should be lucky enough to be called. It was a particular and not a paradigm.

I suppose one could argue that, as a consequence of colonialism, the universalist project of the West has been answered in some fashion by universalists projects from India. There are three ways one could think of this. Some of India has simply mimicked the West by establishing such organizations as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the World Hindu Council, which project something entirely new in Indian history: Hinduism as an aggressive universalism (in much milder form but with again global pretensions, the World Hindi Conference, the World Tamil Conference, and so on). Second, Indian cultural forms are having the sort of de-provincializing moment that harkens back to the transculturation processes last seen in the first millennium, when much of Asia went

Indian. The whole world tomorrow may come to look increasingly like India today—global cultural phylogeny, one might say, is recapitulating Indology. The ubiquity of the Bombay film aesthetic, for example, or the success of the Indian English (or chutnified) novel whether written in Calcutta, Toronto, New York, or London, offer signs that something consequential is going on, that history's arrow is being reversed. (The omnipresence in the West of the computer code written in Bangalore or the call center agent is different but somehow related phenomenon).

The third way is a universalist project not as agent but as patient: there is evidence that where India is today the rest of the world will be tomorrow, that India is the global future, and finally in the vanguard of modern history, that the West may now be in the waiting room of history that India already occupies. I certainly think this is true with regard to global warming, slumification, water-foraging, load-shedding, general poverty and income disparity, and the social resources developed for living with scarcity (perfected by e.g., the 300,000 rag pickers of Delhi), but possibly also with respect to democracy.

That question I want to raise with you today, however, concerns the opposite tendency, the processes whereby in the domain of knowledge India is now – here reversing the agency of Dipesh's verb – provincializing itself.

If someone is, as Dipesh puts it, "to write, over the given and privileged narratives . . . other narratives of human connections," where do these narratives come from? If de-universalizing "European" ways of knowing is only the beginning of a process that must lead to some renewal of knowledge from the margins of "Europe," where does this reconstructive knowledge come from, and what kind of knowledge is it? The knowledge

produced by people in India today seems itself to be becoming ever more provincialized, and this in two ways, one horizontal, so to speak, and one vertical. The horizontal provincialization is at once a withdrawal and a continued exclusion of Indian scholarship and thought from the world republic of letters; the vertical sort is the retreat of Indian scholarship from its own past. ~~Let me hasten to state that my evidence is largely subjective: I have not been able to figure out a way to collect hard data on these matters. But I am convinced that if collected the data would sustain these impressions.~~

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First, English is disappearing as the language of scholarship and thought. Many Indian younger scholars and students in the humanities and even in the social sciences have begun abandoning English~~, both the writing of scholarship in English and the reading of what is written in English~~. Whether this is the result of state policy, as in Bengal or TN, the regionalization of higher education, linguistic pride, postcolonial ressentiment or cultural chauvanism or indigenism, or more positively—and I know a good number of cases—simply the desire to reach a different audience, I believe it is a fact that the capacity to communicate in English is eroding among many categories of humanist scholars in post-Independence India. This was brought him to me forcefully when I spent a month at the IIAS Simla, where for all intents and purposes the scholarly language of communication is Hindi. But let me focus on the group I know best, Indian classicists

Some time ago I was asked to contribute an essay to a collection marking the birth centenary of D. D. Kosambi, a celebrated mathematician, historian, Indologist, and Marxist. This led me to reflect on the world of humanist learning in which Kosambi

lived, and how vastly it has changed. It is by no means an exaggeration to declare that there exists today not a single scholar who has the international stature—conferred not just by classical learning but by publication in English—of the classicists of DDK's generation: P. V. Kane, S. K. De, V. Raghavan, Mysore Hiriyanna—men from across the subcontinent from Maharasthra to Bengal and everywhere in between.

Today's Indian classists have almost entirely shut themselves out of the international community of scholarship. They almost never contribute to scholarly journals of university presses in the West. ~~they have little or no sense of what is being done in classical studies outside of India since very few read English scholarship systematically—even material available for free on the Web—and those outside of India have little or no sense of what is being done there.~~ All the great English-language journals have either been terminated or become too mediocre to take notice of; I myself do not even know what regional language journals there may be. The result is an ossification, if not suffocation, of a whole form of knowledge.

~~The situation gets worse the further one gets from the metropolitan centers and the lower one descends on the generational scale. Many scholars in India have told me that the cannot get their students to read works in English. Here is one report: "Most (99 per cent) of my M.A. (History) students in Shimla have very poor English reading (and understanding) skills and also write their examination scripts in Hindi. The English language text-books (in history) in our library remain untouched. Obviously, they cannot read the higher level research work or history journals, because all of that is in English. (Our library gets many of the good international journals in history.)"~~

It is quite instructive to draw a contrast here with scholars of science and technology, where the commitment to contributing a global conversation is stronger than ever. It is rather odd that specialists in language should have less linguistic flexibility than scientists, or that the expectations for participating in the international enterprise that is scholarship be any less for classical scholars than those for biologists. But it is the case.

One could certainly argue that there is no reason for Indians to communicate in the neocolonial medium of English. But that post-European knowledge might be stronger if it could engage with English and confront the pre-existing critique of European universalism. More important, it might be more consequential if it were made known, which in fact it is not.

Consider the case of Hindi, the national language of India. With very few exceptions there is almost no major and systematic project of translating works of scholarship or thought from the West into Hindi.

~~The translation of English scholarship into Hindi was virtually nonexistent in the past three decades. Things are now picking up, not so much for the good and actually old idea (Sanskrit College Benares; Delhi College; work of * on Maharashtra) of building the critical vocabulary of the language but as another sign that English skills are eroding. (An example of the first is the "Indian Languages Programme" at CSDS, but this initiative is to translate English-language works of *Indian* scholars of the social sciences into Hindi, in order as they put it "to create a regenerative context for research in Indian languages"; an example of the second are several new publishers: Granthshilpi (Hobsbaum, Marc Bloch); Rajkamal (Voloshinov); Samvad Prakashan in Bombay (more Hobsbawm).)~~

Even more astonishing is the fact that there is no major and systematic project of translating such works from Hindi. I do not know—nor is any of the half-dozen Hindi scholars I have surveyed—a single major monograph in (say) literary criticism, philosophy, political thought, social theory, history (NOT literature) written in Hindi or other Indian vernacular that has been translated into English in post-Independence India (I cannot even think of one in South Asian studies). It is not a strong argument to say that anything worth translating into English would have been written in English in the first place. **It is sometimes precisely distance from the very possibility of English**—I am thinking of the forthcoming collected work of D R Nagaraj translated from the Kannada and some very recent translations of Tamil Dalit writings (Ravikumar; Thirumaavalavan) **that might contribute to making the work worth translating in the first place**. In addition very few western scholars work seriously through vernacular scholarship even when it directly impinges on their object of study, or read widely in vernacular critical thought. I am not saying there is another *Hindswaraj* waiting to be translated, but if it were, the likelihood is that it would wait for a long time.

~~A few do publish in a regional language and translate their own work (Partha Chatterjee, for example: large parts of *The Nation and its Fragments* and *A Possible India* were translated from *Itihaser uttaradhikar*, and his forthcoming book *Lineages of Political Society* will also have large portions translated from the Bengali book *Praja o tantra*)~~

It is also true that some of those who might write the next *Hindswaraj* are writing in English (our host, for example). But if Gramsci is right that every current of thought has its particular language (32)—or, as Dipesh puts it, a language always imports

"intimations of pre-existing histories" that are singular and unique (xiii)— it's not clear how the new knowledge that we want after the provincialization of Europe can come ever come about if born in a European idiom, even if this is an idiom that has become in some way Indian.

So we have multiple impediments: Indian scholars and thinkers in many fields, such as my own, are making their work available to English scholarship to a far less degree than was the case before Independence, while the Hindi or other regional language scholarship they are producing is never made available in English, and rarely studied by outsiders. ~~Not only does this make it very unlikely that some renewal of post-European knowledge from the margins increasingly unlikely to come to the world from India; the very possibility of a transregional literary or intellectual or political conversation in India itself will be increasingly foreclosed. (As Nathaniel Roberts has pointed out, English is the only lingua franca for Dalits across India, and to the degree there is no translation of Dalit writings into English to that degree the all-India Dalit movement remains fragmented.)~~ In the face of these impediments, which result in an increasing isolation of Indian thinkers from the global community, it is very hard to see how Indian knowledge is ever going to change the rules of the international epistemic order.

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I want to introduce my second species of Indian self-provincialization by citing someone I rarely cite, T.S. Eliot. In "What is a Classic?" one of the few things he gets right, in my view, is his assessment of the past: "In our age . . . there is coming into existence a new kind of provincialism which perhaps deserves a new name. It is a provincialism, not of space, but of time; one for which history is merely the chronicle of

human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares." Unfortunately Eliot himself cannot think of anything serious to say about this threat. But I have spent a good deal of my life trying to argue that the history of India's precolonial past is an especially rich zone for discovering paths for human existence foreclosed by colonialism and capitalism, and perhaps recoverable, and recoverable without nostalgia, indigenism, or fundamentalism.

Two major (and closely related) reasons for my claims about India's scholarly retreat into the present are, first, the status of contemporary Indian scholarship on the past, and, second, the control of the languages within which the past is accessible to us.

On the first point, let me just refer to one institution—though this is not just any institution but the leading university in the country, JNU. For several decades the Centre for Historical Studies produced scholarship on the precolonial past that the rest of the world of learning had to take note of. From what I can see, as the last generation of scholars born before Independence is retiring, the Centre has not been able to renew itself in any adequate way. There exist—or at least I am aware of— no major Indian scholarly journals devoted to precolonial history that have an international stature. Indian Historical Review, ABORI, JASB, BBRAS, JOIB, OR Madras, and so on, are no longer thought of as required reading or appropriate venues for serious publication. (Other such journals do indeed exist: *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, even *Seminar*, so this is not really a question of the Indian publishing industry, and most certainly not a question of intelligence.) All the great series that published mss.—for Sanskrit these include Anandasrama, Trivandrum, Gaekwad, Vani Vilas,

Madras, and so on, have come to an end—which means that none of the mss. in those collections are being edited. We rarely see Indian undergrads coming to the US for doctoral work who have serious training in precolonial historical studies. We get very smart young students often with good skills in a modern Indian language. But they invariably come without access to the past in any deep way.

As I mentioned, this scholarly and academic situation is closely related to the control of the languages of precolonial history. A number of collaborative research projects and seminars that I have organized in India over the past two decades—including a seminar 10 months ago with 25 leading classicists in India — lead to say with real if melancholy conviction that the number of people in India capable of reading of the texts in the premodern regional languages will within one generation have reached a statistical zero. And as a result of this, we are coming to the point that one can say, without gross exaggeration, that the custodians of India's deep history are now located outside India. And if at least a part of a post-European knowledge requires various History 2s, as Dipesh calls, I am not sure where these are to come form.

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It should go without saying that the situation I have described is not a question of personal failings; it is the result of complex historical forces (and frankly it is not very different for e.g. China; translations into English of the books of contemporary Chinese thinkers is rare, though there are there are a few English journals edited by PRC scholars, mostly historians and literature scholars in the US, who publish translated articles from China or solicit papers from Chinese scholars). But however we explain it, there is a new provincialization of India, and one that has consequences for Dipesh's project. If access to

the past is cut off, if the capacity both to learn from the world and to teach the world are more restricted than perhaps at any time in history—by a kind of deglobalization—how are India's potentially unique contributions to creating a post-"European" world ever be discovered?

The possibility, the very real possibility, that the ideas that might be produced might be ideas we do not like, ideas that have no room for us—people here in this room. I quote Ashis Nandy even more infrequently than I quote Eliot, but I believe Ashis was making an important point when he said, "Any talk of nonmodern or traditional forms of knowledge in public life arouses the fear that such knowledge might lead to large-scale displacement or uprooting in the world of knowledge, that the familiar world of knowledge might shrink, if not collapse and, in the new world that might come into being, there will be less space for the likes of us. ~~What Sigmund Freud says about the inescapable human fantasy of immortality — our inability to visualise a world without us — applies in this instance, too.~~ Many of us are haunted by the question: 'What will be my place in a non-secular or nonmodern world?' We cannot conceive of good society without our ideas and ourselves at its helm.]