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## Reflections on Translation and Multilingualism and the Indian Periodical Press of the 1870s–1910

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# Reflections on Translation and Multilingualism and the Indian Periodical Press of the 1870s–1910

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The workshop on multilingualism and periodical studies invited participants to reflect on the intersection of the topic with their research interests. Mine have focussed on the political press culture(s) of British India from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, with a particular emphasis on the engagement between the Indian periodical press on the one hand and the colonial government on the other. I am grateful for this opportunity to share some ongoing challenges that come with the territory, given that the political (overwhelmingly nationalist) press as much as pamphleteering cultures of the time were linguistically (and thus culturally) heterogeneous. As a researcher whose aim it has been to engage with the public political culture of early nationalist India, the fact that periodicals and newspapers were produced in a multiplicity of languages (such as Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Oriya, Assamese, Gujarati, Farsi) has meant that claims I have made in scholarly articles or monographs about this culture have been even more contingent than they would normally be, if one acknowledges that intent is never transparent to a reader at the best of times. Collaboration, as an attempt to negotiate this important limitation on one's work, has come with its own set of problems. It has meant an awkward negotiation, at best, of the fraught scene in which scholars of the global north, with access to research funding, manageable teaching loads, easy access to networks of dissemination (of results) and so on, reach out to scholars of the global south who are, quite rightly, concerned about the asymmetrical arrangement in and by which their contribution is less likely to be fully acknowledged. It has been a bind to which I have not found a workable solution.

Changing focus, I would like to draw attention to the history of the Indian periodical press on which I write, as I think it is a past, of colonial intent, which frames, or should frame, contemporary debates about multilingualism as a structuring of social relations in democratic societies that is much to be desired. It is a story of the marginalizing, erasure even, of the very principles which multilingualism performs in a platform such as the periodical press, via the notion and activity of (imperial) linguistic translation. Let me explain: a vibrantly multilingual press industry from its earliest days, the Indian periodical press, which expanded rapidly from the 1870s on as did its reader and listenership, is best read as evidence of a people's preference for multiple language (public) spheres, as spheres constitutive of a nation's public political culture. Its very existence, from the 1860s, however, was deeply compromised by the constraints placed on it by the government — which included surveillance, in the form of the Indian Newspaper Reports; regulatory, pre-censorship laws, which targeted the 'vernacular

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press', and criminalizing of dissent in the form of seditious libel laws. At the centre of the apparatus, of political censorship, I have suggested, was linguistic translation, from Indian languages into English, of articles appearing in Indian newspapers. You might say, then, that multilingualism, as a typical practice even in a nascent Indian press, came up smack dab against an imperial politics in which translation — linguistic and hence cultural — furthered the assumption of English as the linguistic norm that, further, quite properly produces the ideal of a public political sphere.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I will say that the dangers of a 'translational society' (one dependent on the concept of translation, that is, for its projecting of collective identity) are all too obvious now, in large part because of modern colonialism's assimilation of translation to power. The challenges of practising multilingualism through means such as collaboration, in a world that has inherited the structures put in place by modern colonialism, are equally difficult to set aside.

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