

Capital in Bangla: Postcolonial Translations of Marx

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Abstract

Few have paid attention to the relationship of communist politics in India to the material nature of Marxist discourse in our context, which is mediated by a range of vernaculars and regional cultures. Some do recognize that it involved a complex process of postcolonial translation of Marx but this mainly conceptual recognition seldom involves a close reading of the translated works or texts. This paper will offer such a reading in the context of Bengal. It will talk about the first unabridged Bangla translation of Capital, especially volume one, and more specifically, the translated section on commodity fetishism, titled *Panya Pouttalikata Ebang tar Rahasya*. The next part of the paper will situate this text in a larger background of creative and vernacular translations of Marx since the late colonial period in Bengal. We will conclude with some general remarks on comparative strategies of translation and the shifting nature of Marxist discourse in the postcolonial period.

I

Let us take a pause to mull over the irony of thinking about the significance of Marx's critique of capital today – at a moment when political leaders across the board are falling over each other to eagerly invite foreign capital to our country. The formerly ruling Left in this state has of course paid a rather dear price in trying the same and losing the electoral plot in the process. It may be a good time to ask today how far their economic and political understanding was grounded, if at all, in Marxist political economy or, to put it in simpler terms, in the critical philosophy inaugurated by Marx. How far did the Indian Left succeed in what could be described in shorthand as a postcolonial translation of Marx, in literal as well as conceptual terms? The ideological crisis that seems to have completely enveloped the immensely powerful political force in the immediate wake of its electoral decline makes this question not only relevant but urgent at the same time. My larger contention in this paper is that this ideological crisis has much to do with the failure of precisely the project of a postcolonial translation of Marx. And I would like to make this point in a small way by laying out in broad strokes the historical outlines of this project in Bengal.

There is a long history of the reception of socialist ideas in colonial Bengal and Bankim's essay on *samyā* is an important signpost in the process. However, it seems that the direct ideas of Marx and what may be described as a primary circulation of a Marxist discourse only gained pace after the Bolshevik revolution and the formation of a nascent communist movement roughly century ago. Much of these early texts on Marxism are familiar to us through the important work of Shipra Sarkar and Anamitra Das who provided an invaluable anthology of significant excerpts from such texts. As we know, apart from certain rare and creative adaptations, like, *Biswamanaber Laxmilabh* by Soumyendranath Tagore, texts available in late colonial Bengal were more often those authored by Lenin, like *Rashtra o Biplab*, and translations of texts put out by the Marx Engels Institute in Moscow, translated by the likes of Noni Bhoumik. Most of these available texts were of course proscribed and secretly published by what used to be the Barman Publishing House, which later mutated into PPH.

What I want to draw your attention to is however the decade of nineteen forties and fifties. We do roughly recall this period as one of vibrant cultural activism with the IPTA and progressive literature dominating the intellectual field not only in Bengal but many parts of the country. What is often missed in this nostalgic recall is precisely how many creative intellectuals came together in this period under P C Joshi to practically construct a discourse of Marxism in different vernaculars, perhaps most palpably in Bangla. This is the moment when the task of a postcolonial translation of Marx was materially taken up in earnest, and I believe it is this period that came to lay down the practical basis of the ideological hegemony that made the Left into a formidable electoral force in the years to follow. I seldom tire of making this point because I believe the communist movement itself hardly

realizes the significance of this early phase, having broken its vital connection with the creative intelligentsia practically for good after independence. This is the moment I want you to keep in mind as a framing device.

However, in what follows I would like us to briefly consider a much later moment, one that follows in the eve of the historic electoral victory of Left Front and in the wake of the waning of Naxalite movement. The year in question is 1974, seven years after the first bitter split of the communist movement and five years after the second one. Few will doubt that from the movement's perspective it was an extremely important moment for ideological clarification, and one of the ways it was attempted to be resolved was to return to the texts of Marx. It was the year when the very first unabridged Bangla translation of *Capital* came to be published. The first volume was published in 1974; the rest took six more volumes to complete over the next two decades. The publisher was not however the communist party's publishing house, but a small concern, named Bani Prakash, owned by an individual, Akhtar Hossain. The translator was Piyush Dasgupta, a professor of economics and party member since his teenage years growing up in Faridpur, Bangladesh, a communist refugee who helped to build what is now a college in Netajinagar, but who was now seen with suspicion by the party leadership for opposing the electoral line and allegedly harbouring sympathies for the Naxalites. As he writes in the preface, the task was entrusted to him by 'Kakababu' Muzaffar Ahmad and it was meant to be published from Moscow. Instead, it was quietly published from A129 College Street market. Although its circulation has been limited, a second edition came out in 1981, a third edition in 1986, and the copy I am working on is the fourth edition, printed in 2009.

II

Given the translated texts of Marx we are familiar with in Bangla, Piyush Dasgupta's work stands out for me for a number of reasons. Admittedly, I find the older and more creative efforts more attractive, which were bold and experimental in their approach. The aspect of experimentation is particularly significant in their struggle with language. The older translations by Rehati Barman, for instance, often tried to radically simplify the discourse and avoid the more complex nuances of economic theory in trying to create a wide readership among people with presumably little cultural capital. A few of them were experimental in a way that took a certain creative license with the literal text, adapting the essence to a narrative tradition that is based on folk and oral culture. I have written elsewhere about Subhash Mukhopadhyay's brilliant translation of 'Wage Labour and Capital' as *Bhuter Begaar*, which was however proscribed by the party for lacking the scientific tenor understood as proper to Marx. Dasgupta's translation was a departure in a number of ways from this tradition of simplistic scientific discourse and creative experiments. His translation was not only faithful to Marx in a rigorous and scholarly manner but at the same time extremely accessible, perhaps because his translation arrived in the seventies, already in the background of a significant tradition of polemical debates in Bangla, participated by a large number of intelligentsia and middle class readership, familiar with not only Marx but the likes of Mao Tse Tung and Liu Shao Chi.

The lucidity and accessibility of Dasgupta's translation is most evident in the famous chapter on commodity fetishism, conceptually one of the more tricky and complicated segment of *Capital* volume one. As we know from the commentaries by commentators, ranging from Althusser to Zizek, the difficulties in parsing this chapter has much to do with not only Marx's criticism of the lack of distinction between use value and exchange value in Ricardo but also taking his critique of ideology to a far higher degree of sophistication than German Ideology with striking insights overlapping with psychoanalysis. The language is, at least in the 1886 edition edited by Engels and translated by Samuel Moore, which is what Dasgupta relied on, very often reminiscent of the verve and sarcastic

wit of Manifesto, besides its theoretical erudition. These qualities are perhaps the most palpable in the paragraph on what Marx elaborates as ‘post-festum’ thinking – the commonest doxa and key opponent of materialist thinking and theory. In his translation Dasgupta not only manages to retain the sophistication of the exposition but at the same renders it extremely accessible and lucid, using a Bangla that is remarkably refreshing in its felicity. Consider the following passage:

Samajik jibaner rup je aitihashik kramabikasher rasta dhore agrasar hay, manusher chintar bhitari protifalita hay thik tar biparitbhaba, sutarang biparit bhabei tar baignanik bisleshan haye thhake. Hater kachhe jug paribartaner je falafel paoa jay tai niyei lok samajik ruper bisleshan arambha kare pichhan dike mukh kare. Je charitra dwara shramotpanna drabya panyarupe chinhita hayebang panya binimayer prathamik shartaswarup shramajata drabyake je charitra labh kartei habe, loke tar arthha abiskar arambha karar agei ta samajer swabhabik ebang swatasidhha rup hisebe pratisthita haye gechhe. Takhan tar arthha ki tai khnoj kara hay, tar aitihashik charitra ki loke ta khnojena, kenana, tar chokhe sei charitrati hala sanatan satya. (p. 102)

Despite the four editions of this remarkable Bangla translation, I must confess to a deep sense of disappointment with the utter lack of attention, circulation and recognition suffered by such texts with regard to the communist parties and the wider movement. Translations of Marx’s original texts became fewer and far between in the years to follow, with the vitality of communist party literature practically kept alive by a wonderful trove of socialist childrens’ literature, besides a familiar set of pamphlets and mostly functional translation of scholarship by well-known Marxist historians. Despite the interesting contrast of translation strategies between the older efforts such as that of Subhash Mukhopadhyay and later ones such as that of Piyush Dasgupta, the broader communist movement has shown a singularly consistent indifference to these labours of love and material practices that helped to set up the Marxist discourse in the vernaculars across the country in the first place. The moment I signposted with the nineteen forties seems to have had met with a secret and silent closure in the nineteen seventies, precisely when the communists were inching towards an electoral hegemony that was to become unprecedented in the years when we were growing up. The moment of arrival of governmental power was at the same time a moment of abandoning the historical project that I describe as the postcolonial translations of Marx. Victory is not without a sense of ironic loss, it seems, that hegemony is not without the beginning of a crisis at the same time. True, it would take that crisis three decades to reach its apogee of utter ideological poverty. But Marx had already been transformed into a curious polemical idol by that time, worshipped like a sacred fetish, exchanged like a base commodity. Can we muster the intellectual energy to begin, here and today, the task of a postcolonial translation of Marx, once again? I want to leave you with that sobering thought.