
Lost in Untranslatability: Ishvara, Allah and Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract: *While translation plays a vital role in bridging intercultural gaps, it struggles to convey the exact meaning of certain ideas due to the unique characteristics and structures inherent in each language and the underlying social context. This difficulty is pronounced when translating between the language pair Hindi and Urdu, which, despite both originating from Khari Boli, have diverged significantly under the influences of Hinduism and Islam. In an Indian social context, the Arabic-origin Urdu word Allah is often equated with the Sanskrit-origin Hindi word Ishvara. However, this translation is problematic and can cause confusion because the Hindu idea of the divine, Ishvara, is fundamentally different from the Islamic concept of Allah. Building upon the theory of Sanskrit non-translatability proposed by Malhotra and Babaji, this paper argues for the existence of cultural untranslatability in the domain of Urdu-Sanskrit translation. Using a case study approach for the terms Ishvara and Allah, the paper concludes that specific religious terms should not be translated and makes the case that preserving precise linguistic categories is essential for meaningful inter-faith engagement.*

Keywords: *Untranslatability, Sanskrit Non-Translatables, Religious Communication, Hindi-Urdu.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of untranslatability is well-established in literature and applies to both language and culture. Linguistic untranslatability is defined as a “property” of a text or utterance in one language for which no equivalent can be found in another [6, p. 826]. Cultural translatability is broader and occurs when a particular concept in a source language is “completely absent” in the target language. While the former is a formal feature of the source and target languages, the latter is cultural, and approximate translation from source to target language may produce an “unusual collocation” [4, pp. 99-101]. The concept of untranslatability is not absolute: it is not possible to claim that a specific word in the original language can be perfectly translated or deemed untranslatable in the target language. Catford prefers to use the relative concept of

“more or less translatable” [4 p. 93]. Gogolitsyna elaborates on this aspect and clarifies that untranslatable words are those that are “very difficult to translate because they are so imbued with cultural or historical meaning” [9, p. 6].

Malhotra and Babaji go beyond untranslatability and proposes the idea of non-translatability in the context of the Sanskrit-English language pair and posit that certain Sanskrit terms, when translated to English, lose many of their crucial dimensions and attributes [14]. Our paper suggests that the theory of Sanskrit non-translatability can be recontextualized and applied to the Urdu-Sanskrit language pair. This will be demonstrated by examining the terms Allah and Ishvara, frequently depicted as having the same meaning. The popular Indian song “raghupati rāghava rājā rāma” insists that the Ishvara of the Hindu is the same as the Allah of the Muslim. Based on a traditional devotional Hindu song of the same name, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), one of the important leaders of India’s freedom struggle, popularized a modified version to spread a message of harmony between Hindus and Muslims: “raghupati rāghava rājā rāma, patita pāvana sītā rāma, īśvara allāha tero nāma, sabako sanmati de bhagavāna” [21, p. 80]. Since 1947, when India gained independence, the Ishvara-Allah equation has been promoted extensively in schools, popular media, public policy, and public fora. While the intent is noble, such false equivalences create more harm than harmony.

2. RELATED WORK

2.1. Untranslatability

Extensive research has been conducted on the topic of untranslatability, employing various language pairs across the globe, and this body of work is well-documented in the existing literature. Cui outlines three specific categories of linguistic untranslatability in English-Chinese translation exercises: untranslatability in phonology, character structure, and figures of speech [6, pp. 826-827]. In the context of the Japanese language, Kitamura brings in the concept of cultural incongruity to explain cultural untranslatability [12, pp. 2-3]. Cultural untranslatability arises when culturally significant concepts in the source language are rendered meaningless in the target language, even if they can be translated linguistically. He provides the example of a sentence about an independent person with strong individuality in English and Japanese. While praising a person for their individuality is perfectly acceptable in American English, the same sentence, when translated into Japanese, becomes an insult and is seen as a sign of selfishness.

Within the Indian socio-cultural milieu, it has been observed that “bhasha translation,” or translation within Indic languages, is easier than translation to English. Chandran attributes this phenomenon to “the cultural filiation shared by Indian bhasha works despite their linguistic difference.” The interbhasha translator shares the same “cultural habitat” with the reader, and given that languages and culture within the Indian context are interconnected, “translations from one bhasha into another have the advantage of being fluent, domesticated texts without appearing to inflict ethnocentric violence on the source texts” [5, pp. 359, 374]. On the other hand, when Indian texts are rendered in English, “negotiating semantic and cultural hurdles to achieve equivalence of meaning” becomes a challenging task [15, p. 189].

2.2. Non-Translatability

Non-translatability, as proposed by Malhotra and Babaji, becomes particularly important when translating philosophical terms from Sanskrit to English or from English to Indian languages, as the translated words assimilate the cultural characteristics of the concepts, leading to significant misunderstandings. Since culture is made up of shared experiences unique to a specific region and history, the unique experiences of one culture cannot be interchanged with the experience of another culture. Malhotra and Babaji identify three factors contributing to the non-translatability of Sanskrit terms into English: constriction of context, distortion of meaning, and loss of authenticity [14, p. 24]. These variations can be attributed to several reasons such as differences in knowledge sources, different planes of meaning, context, logic systems, and variations in epistemologies, ontologies, and causation.

For example, both soul and atman refer to the idea of an inner being in Christianity and Hinduism, respectively. Nonetheless, the specifics are quite different, and the ideas are rooted in the corresponding religious metaphysics and distinct historical experiences. While they are often used interchangeably in an Indian context, these are different ideas, conveying “distinct worldviews and religious experiences.” When atman is translated as soul, it loses its dimensions like transcendence and omnipresence. Similarly, when the soul is translated as atman, the soul is imbued with characteristics like omnipresence, which contradict the core beliefs of Christianity [16]. In religious studies, the concept of untranslatability is particularly relevant. From ancient times, there have been prohibitions against translating the names of gods and deities. Assmann notes that when dealing with divine names, “one has to exclude all questions of meaning and reference. The name is to be regarded as a mystical symbol. It cannot be understood and for this very reason it cannot be translated” [1, p. 25].

2.3. Hindi-Urdu Translation

The relationship between Hindi and Urdu is complex and has been influenced by several factors including politics, cultural factors, and religious ideologies, which has led to the emergence of distinct identities [8]. Both Urdu and Hindi evolved from Khari Boli, yet their growth followed different trajectories with Urdu borrowing Perso-Arabic words while Hindi remained rooted in Sanskrit. Urdu gradually became “the literary, cultural, and religious language of Muslims in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other parts of the world.” Dua note that the foreign elements in the Urdu language “do not merely constitute a superimposed structure but also form an integral aspect of language identity and its literary tradition” [7, pp. 269, 273]. In Pakistan, Urdu is not only the national language but is also seen as a part of an Islamic Pakistani identity, in contrast to a “secular and Westernized” identity [19, p. 115]. On the other hand, many religious, philosophical, and cultural words in Hindi are derived from Sanskrit. Some examples of such Sanskrit-origin words include “karma” (related to action or deed), “dharma” (meaning duty or religion), and “yoga” (referring to union or discipline) [2, pp. 149, 416, 685].

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach to selecting and analyzing data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the concept of the divine in Islam and Hinduism. The primary focus is on

the terms Allah and Ishvara, examining their non-translatibility. The methodology is organized under the following headings:

3.1. Study Design

The study design is based on a comparative analysis of the terms Allah, an Arabic-origin word used in Urdu, and Ishvara, a Sanskrit-origin word used in Hindi. This allows us to perform a detailed examination of the cultural and religious contexts in which these terms are embedded.

3.2. Corpus and Data Selection

The corpus for this study consists of textual examples and contexts demonstrating the usage of the terms Allah and Ishvara within their respective religious and cultural settings. The data selection process includes:

- **Religious Texts:** Collecting occurrences of Allah and Ishvara in sacred scriptures such as the Quran, the Vedas, the Upanishads, and commentaries.
- **Cultural Discourse:** Identifying references to these terms in cultural narratives, literary works, academic papers, and theological discussions.
- **Daily Language:** Observing the usage of Allah and Ishvara in everyday speech and practice within Muslim and Hindu communities.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis involves systematically examining the selected instances to gauge the degree to which the terms Allah and Ishvara retain their original meaning and context when translated. This analysis is guided by the theoretical framework of non-translatibility.

3.4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the concept of non-translatibility proposed by Malhotra and Babaji [14]. Their theory highlights three primary issues in translations from Sanskrit to English:

- **Constriction of Context:** The narrowing of cultural and religious contexts that affects the interpretation of terms.
- **Distortion of Meaning:** The alteration or misrepresentation of the original meaning of terms.
- **Loss of Authenticity:** The diminishing of the original cultural and religious significance of terms.

This framework is recontextualized for the Hindi-Urdu language pair, using the case study of Allah and Ishvara to illustrate non-translatibility challenges.

3.5. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis involves:

- Analyzing how Allah and Ishvara are used in their respective religious texts and cultural settings.
- Highlighting instances where translation leads to constriction of context, distortion of meaning, or loss of authenticity.

- Evaluating how well the terms retain their original significance when translated between Hindi and Urdu.

By employing this structured methodology, the study intends to provide a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the non-translatibility of the idea of the divine in Islam and Hinduism, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on cultural and linguistic translation challenges.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Islamic Idea of Oneness: Tawhid

At the core of the Islamic faith lies the principle of Tawhid, which emphasizes the unity of Allah and categorically rejects any belief in multiple gods, intermediaries, or partners in divinity. Muslims consider Allah to be the sole creator and sustainer of the universe and the ultimate authority over all aspects of existence. Tawhid implies that Allah is “beyond all relationality and duality, beyond the differences of gender and of all qualities that distinguishes beings from each other in this world” [18, p. 96].

The entirety of creation relies on Allah, while Allah relies on no one or nothing. Allah is the singular and absolute reality Who transcends both the material world and the entire universe. The three main characteristics of Allah in the context of Tawhid are as follows [10, pp. 25-26]:

- Allah is the Ultimate Reality; “the Cherisher, the Provider and the Creator of everything and everyone.” Since Allah is the Creator, the creation can in no way be associated with the Creator.
- Allah is the Ultimate Lord, the Sustainer of everything and everyone (Rabb al-Alamin).
- Allah does not resemble His creation in “in essence nor in attributes or action.”

Allah is the only One (wahid) and singular (ahad). The idea of the unity of Allah is conveyed through the shahadah prayer, which declares that there is only one God and Mohammed is His prophet. Allah is separate from His creations in essence, attributes, and actions. This idea of tanzih, or transcendence, involves acknowledging and affirming His absolute uniqueness and ensuring He is distinct from anything that resembles His creations. To refer to something as tanzih technically means “to declare something pure and free of something else.” This means that Allah cannot be described by thoughts or compared to material objects since all objects, ideas, and thoughts are created [17, p. 77].

Tawhid entails acknowledging the complete unity of God and simultaneously rejecting any other deity: “Allah neither resembles His creature in essence nor in attributes or action. In this case, tawhid emphasizes on the transcendental unity of God; neither pantheon unity of gods, nor the division of the character of God is acceptable. In Islam, God is one in His essence without division, one in His attributes without resemblance and one in His actions without partner” [10, pp. 25-26]. It logically follows that there is an infinite separation between Man and Allah. Although Allah created the world and the human beings residing there, Allah and Man are qualitatively different. He is beyond the material world and exists independently of it. Being a transcendental God, He is neither knowable nor graspable by human experience.

4.2. Hindu Idea of Non-Duality: Advaita

The inquiry into the identity and nature of Ishvara is an important philosophical question that has undergone extensive examination within Hinduism. The Vedas, revered as sacred texts in Hinduism, serve as the foundation for various traditions offering distinctive interpretations of Ishvara. In this paper, we present the idea of the divine or Ishvara from the standpoint of the Advaita (non-dual) school of thought. Advaita Vedanta posits an Ultimate Reality, Brahman, beyond all names and forms. This reality transcends space, time, and causation and is qualitatively different from the universe that we live in [3, p. 80].

The essential nature of Brahman is that of pure existence, awareness, and bliss. Furthermore, according to Advaita, when one directs their attention inward, this reality is present as the ultimate subject that underlies all human experiences, commonly known as Atman. As a subject, Atman experiences the object known as the universe. Brahman is the same as Atman; these are just two names of the same Reality when seen from different perspectives. One of the key tenets of Advaita is that only Brahman is sat (real), and the universe that we see and experience is but a projection of Brahman. ‘Sat’ is a technical term that means that which has always existed and will always exist. It is an uncaused reality that is “undecaying, immortal, beyond fear, pure, homogenous,” and permanent [11, p. 24]. In this sense, the universe is not real since it began at a specific point and will likely end at some point. The categories of space, time, and causation came into being at the universe's inception and will cease to exist at its culmination. Brahman, on the other hand, embodies eternal existence that has always been and will always be.

Nevertheless, due to the phenomenon of maya, humans remain unaware of their inherent, infinite, and blissful nature. According to the Mandukya Upanishad (II.2.8): “All knots of the heart are cut asunder, all doubts are dissolved, and all karmas are ended, when the highest Brahman is realized as one’s self.” The traditional example is that of the snake and the rope. In darkness, a person might mistake a rope on the ground for a snake, causing them to feel extreme fear and terror. However, as soon as it becomes clear that what was thought to be a snake is a rope, the snake and fear dissipate. The universe is also like the snake in the previous metaphor, and maya, often translated as illusion, is seen as the power behind the creation of this universe [3, pp. 79-81]. From the standpoint of Brahman, there is no universe. Nevertheless, the existence of the universe and human life cannot be denied. To reconcile this apparent discrepancy, Advaita Vedanta postulates the idea of maya: that which does not exist but appears to be. While the cause of the universe is the ultimate truth principle, Brahman, Brahman cannot have the universe as an effect. The rope-snake analogy illustrates that individuals can sometimes misinterpret a rope as a snake, even though the rope itself cannot become a snake. As far as the rope is concerned there never was and never can be any snake [20, p. 81].

Ishvara must be seen from this point of view. Brahman alone is real, and Ishvara is the projection of Brahman through maya at a cosmic level. Ishvara is, therefore, Brahman supported by maya, which means that the existence of Ishvara is tied to the cosmos. From this point of view, Ishvara is the universal lord, the “Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of the world.” He is described as being all-powerful (sarvashaktiman), all-knowing (sarvajnah), and all-pervading (sarvavyapi). More importantly, Ishvara is both the material and efficient cause of



the universe [20, pp. 101-102]. This is unlike Allah, who is, as we have noted earlier, only the efficient cause of the universe and not the material cause.

4.3. Analysis and Discussion

When technical terms in Sanskrit are mistranslated by mapping them onto a Judeo-Christian framework, the underlying Vedic metaphysical concepts are “compromised.” As Malhotra and Babaji note, “some elements even atrophy once it becomes acceptable to substitute them” with other equivalents [14, p. xxvii]. We have extended this idea to Islam, since the underlying metaphysics of the two systems, Hinduism and Islam, are quite different, and present the findings of the three-factor model below:

Constriction of Context: In Hinduism, particularly within the Advaita Vedanta school, Ishvara is a technical Sanskrit term with precise meaning as seen earlier. Ishvara is both the material and efficient cause of the universe. Translating Ishvara as Allah restricts the context since Allah is only the efficient cause of the universe and not the material cause. Tawhid implies that although Allah is one in essence, attributes, and actions, He is distinct from His creations. To say that He is the material cause is not only incorrect but also considered blasphemous as per Islamic scriptures. Comparing Ishvara and Allah diminishes the omnipresent nature of former.

Distortion of Meaning: In Advaita, Ishvara is the universal lord, the Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer of the world, embodying both the material and efficient causes of the universe. It is easy to mistakenly equate Ishvara and Allah based on this statement. However, the primary definition of Ishvara, as we have seen, is the projection of Brahman through maya at a cosmic level. From an Advaita standpoint, Ishvara is not an ontological reality like Allah is for Islam, since Ishvara’s existence is tied to maya. When the projection of the universe ceases, Ishvara will also cease to be, and Brahman alone will remain as pure existence-consciousness-bliss. The very idea of the universe and what constitutes reality is quite distinct in Islam and Hinduism. While Allah is eternal, Ishvara is not despite being the supreme Lord since His existence is tied to maya.

Loss of Authenticity: An authentic appreciation of Ishvara in Hinduism involves recognizing the non-dual nature of Brahman. Brahman being the ultimate cause, is eternal and omnipresent. Unlike Islam, where the gap between Man and God is infinite, Hinduism is an experiential system where it is possible to know and understand the supreme truth, Ishvara or Brahman. Translating Ishvara as Allah, without acknowledging the non-dual nature of reality and the all-encompassing theological framework integrating both transcendence and immanence, will lead to a loss of authenticity in appreciating the philosophical context that defines Ishvara.

These factors highlight the major theological, philosophical, and cultural differences between the concepts, rendering direct translation not only difficult but also misleading. Let us take an example that is often encountered in India. Since Ishvara is omnipresent and all-pervading, a Hindu is perfectly justified in saying that the divine or “God” resides everywhere, including within man. However, equating Ishvara with Allah and attributing the property of omnipresence to the latter is theologically incorrect in Islam. From a Muslim point of view, the

idea of Allah residing within man is considered blasphemous and a sign of ignorance of the tenets of Islam. Similarly, a Muslim may assume that Ishvara is all-powerful and resides in a realm infinitely far away from the human realm. Hence, Hindu practices like yoga or sadhana to realize the divine may seem superfluous and, in fact, blasphemous. This dilemma is also reflected in words like *antaryami* (He who resides within) used in a Hindu context and *uparwala* (He who resides in Heaven) in Islam. As a result, these incorrect translations can lead to confusion, even in simple conversations, popular discourse, and media representations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Applying Malhotra and Babaji's theory and focusing on the constriction of context, distortion of meaning, and loss of authenticity helps us understand why Ishvara and Allah are non-translatables. Although both terms refer to the concept of divinity in some sense, their differences far outweigh any similarities. Hinduism and Islam are different and do not share a similar cultural habitat, and this leads to divergent perspectives on the idea of the divine. Understanding these nuances is crucial for meaningful interfaith dialogue and preserving the integrity of both religious traditions. This type of untranslatability is one of the major reasons why Hindus and Muslims are not able to engage effectively in interfaith dialogue. Cultural context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of a philosophical word in the source and target language. When a non-translatable term like Ishvara is equated to a specific term like Allah in another culture, which means something different, "crucial distinctions and understandings are lost, important direct experiences of the rishi-s sidelined, and the most fertile, productive and visionary dimension of dharma eradicated and relegated to antiquity" [13, p. 10].

Ishvara should remain as Ishvara, and Allah should remain as Allah. Interfaith dialogue becomes meaningful only when different cultures accept and respect each other as they are rather than based on a false premise of similarity. Meaningful engagement between Hindus and Muslims in India can only occur when there is understanding and appreciation for each other's perspectives. Creating false equivalences between these two belief systems and their ideas in the name of religious harmony is detrimental to the idea of national integration. Therefore, it is crucial for scholars of religion, public intellectuals, media personalities, and leaders to use accurate and precise language when expressing religious concepts to foster unity and enable understanding among diverse religious communities.

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