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Judgments in Indian languages: technology and access to justice

Most Indians do not read English, the main language of higher courts. How translation technology is making judgments accessible in Indian languages.

A person who wins or loses a case should be able to read the judgment. In India that simple idea meets a hard fact. Proceedings in the Supreme Court and the High Courts are conducted in English, as the Constitution provides, and most citizens are more comfortable in another language.

The constitutional position

Article 348 provides that proceedings in the Supreme Court and in every High Court shall be in English, unless Parliament provides otherwise. With the President's consent, the Governor of a State may authorise the use of Hindi or another official language in the High Court's proceedings, though judgments and orders must still be in English. A few High Courts use Hindi in this way. The district courts work largely in the language of the State.

The gap this creates

A litigant may follow the trial in their own language and then receive an appellate judgment they cannot read. They depend on a lawyer or a relative to explain what the court decided about their life.

What technology has changed

The Supreme Court's translation software, SUVAS, launched in 2019, produces draft translations of judgments into Indian languages, which are then checked by people. Thousands of Supreme Court judgments are now available in Hindi and other languages, and several High Courts publish translations of their own decisions. The e-Courts programme supports this work.

Why it matters

- **Understanding.** Parties can read the reasons for a decision.
- **Trust.** Justice that is understood is more readily accepted.
- **Legal education.** Students and lawyers who work in Indian languages gain access to precedent.
- **Local practice.** District court lawyers can cite higher court decisions more confidently.
- **Public debate.** Important rulings reach a wider audience directly.

The challenges

- Legal language is precise, and machine translation makes errors.
- Many legal terms have no settled equivalent in every language.
- The English text remains authoritative, so a translation is an aid, not a substitute.
- Human review takes time and trained people.
- Coverage across languages is uneven.

What would help

- Standard legal glossaries for each language.
- More trained legal translators.
- Short plain-language summaries of important judgments.
- Translation of older landmark decisions.
- Involvement of law colleges and State Bar Councils in review.

A role for firms and colleges

Firms can explain outcomes to clients in their own language as a matter of routine. Law colleges can involve students in building glossaries and checking translations.

The principle

Law made in the people's name should be readable by the people. Technology has made that practical for the first time.

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