

## **TRANSLATING RELIGIOUS TEXTS: A CULTURAL ENCOUNTER!**

**‘With a specific reference to the translation of the Bible into Hindi, Oriya and Sadri’**

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Globalization and cultural exchange programmes between the nations have made the role of translation indispensable. Each book shelves in our houses today have at least a book that has been translated from other languages. And this speaks volumes about the position of translation in present times. Language written or spoken is the channel through which human experience, wisdom, knowledge, intelligence, literature and belief systems get transmitted. Therefore translation was considered merely a linguistic activity. At many points translation is looked at as a trade-off between literal precision and readability, between “formal equivalence” in expression and “functional equivalence” in communication. But there is a great deal of cultural assimilation in the process. A translated idea can’t be perceived without any reference to the cultural context in which it was conceived. The process of translation doesn’t merely require competence in source and target languages but also familiarity with the cultures. The very process is a platform on which cultures with their languages and literatures meet. There are not only linguistic impasses but also cultural stalemates in the process. It is important for a translator to be at home with both the source and target languages and cultures; because, they work as a bridge of compromise between the source and target cultures. “Translators are the artisans of compromise,” (Andre Lefevere, 1992).

Translation of the religious tracts and the sacred scriptures has always been viewed with distrust and suspicion. This is often associated with the propagation of faith and proselytization. Translating a sacred scripture or a religious tract is certainly a herculean task. This involves translating the faith and god experience of a community, which speaks different language and belongs to a different cultural, political, geographical and social milieu. This introduces a new theology to a new world. And in the process imitates the tone and register of the Holy Scriptures in the target language. But this doesn’t solve the problem, because the God experience and notion about the presence of god is particular to a land and culture. The Christian concept of “life after death” is alien to ordinary Non-Christians so is the concept of “Rebirth” to ordinary Non-Hindus. Equivalence of the source language terminologies may be found in the target language but they may miss the theological undertone. And therefore, the job of a translator becomes all the more complicated. But they are left with no option but to compromise with the terminology existing in the target language.

Translation is not a new concept to Christianity. The Old Testament of the Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament in Greek. It is believed that Jesus spoke and preached in Aramaic but the New Testament was written in Greek because Greek then (50 to 100 AD, during which the New Testament was composed) was a language of scholarship. Therefore, we find that the writing of the New Testament begins with translation. With the spread of Christianity to the west and later on to the third world countries these

Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts began to be translated into Latin, which was for quite some time the official language of Christianity. Christianity right from its inception believed in evangelization. Therefore, in the early phase, conversions and later the concept of so called Inter religious dialogues became the reasons for translating the Bible.

The Bible translations have been “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each book in the Bible. Its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between target literary language and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original. But in the process the words have either fallen short of the desired meaning or added unnecessary information to the context. Some Bible versions have followed a “thought-for-thought” rather than “word-for-word” translation philosophy, emphasizing “dynamic equivalence” rather than the “essentially literal” meaning of the original (John Schwandt, 2006). A “thought-for thought” translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture.

Translation of the Bible in India gained momentum in early nineteenth century. And since then the Bible has been translated in part (only the New Testament) and whole into most Indian languages and dialects. These translations have carried forward classic translation principles in their literary styles. Accordingly they try to retain theological terminology—words such as grace, faith, justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, propitiation—because of their central importance for Christian doctrine and also because the underlying Greek words were the key words and technical terms in New Testament times. The Bible has been translated from the different versions of original texts. But here the concern is the standard text of the Bible translated into Hindi, Oriya and Sadri approved by the Catholic bishops of the Arch Diocese of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar (Orissa Catholic Bishops’ Regional Council, 2004).

The gospel of St. John was written in Greek with an evangelistic purpose, primarily for the Greeks and Greek-speaking non-believer Jews. The second purpose was to counter criticisms or unorthodox beliefs of Jews, who believed Jesus was only spirit and not flesh. Here the attempt has been made by the author to present Jesus as the spirit transformed into flesh (Barclay, 2006). Let’s have a look at John. 2:1-12 which describes Jesus attending a wedding at Cana where his mother Mary was present. And here he performs the first miracle of his ministry – turning water into wine. (The translated versions of the passage have been given at the end of the paper.) The Hindi and Oriya versions of the text have been translated from the Original Greek text. But Sadri version has been mostly translated from English, Latin and other Indian languages standard translated versions (Hindi and Oriya).

In reply to his mother’s request Jesus in this passage addresses his mother “Woman.” (*gunai* is the word for woman in Greek). Addressing one’s mother as woman in an Indian context would sound rough and harsh. But for Hellenic tradition it was a title of respect. In Homer it is the title by which Odysseus addresses Penelope, his beloved wife. Again, it is the title by which Augustus the Roman emperor addresses Cleopatra, the famous Egyptian Queen (Barclay, 2006). The word has been translated *Nari* in Oriya and Sadri and *Bhadrein* in Hindi. The words certainly are the respectable words in Hindi and Oriya. But these words certainly don’t carry the same meaning as the Greek word *gunai*. The word *nari* didn’t figure in the list of Sadri words prior to this translation. The Sadri word for a Woman is *Janana*. But this particular word is

not the equivalent word for *nari*. It has been borrowed from Hindi because Sadri speaking audience is quite at home with Hindi expressions. The Hindi translation we see here tries to be more polite in its address. If the Indian translations included any other word than what have been used it would miss the Christian theological implications. (Sin Came to this world through a woman so did the salvation of mankind)

The Jews rite of purification (Greek *Katharismos* “cleansing”) in the passage has been translated into *Shudhikaran* in Hindi and Sadri and *shauchapratha* in Oriya. The term *shudhikaran* in Hindi certainly means purification. *Shauchapratha* the Oriya translation of the word goes a little further to explain the rite. *Shaucha* means purifications of the body according to the injunctions of the Sastras (PurnachandraOrdiaBhasakosha). *Shaucha* is somewhat close to the Jewish rite of purification (*Katharismos*). But the word *Shaucha* is not the same as (*Katharismos*) the Jewish rites. Jars of water were kept for the purification ceremonies of the Jews. Water was needed mainly for two purposes. First washing of the feet on entry to the houses, second it was required for hand washing. The strict Jews washed their hands before eating and between each course (Barclay, 2006).

The word for wine in Greek has been rightly translated *anguri* in Hindi and *drakhyarasain* Oriya and *dakhras* in Sadri. The word *dakhras* wasn’t there in Sadri. And the possibility is that the word has been borrowed either from Oriya or Hindi. To a common man in India ‘wine’ refers only to an alcoholic drink. But this wine has to be understood in the cultural contest of the Jewish and Greek society. For a Jewish feast wine was essential. “Without wine” said the Rabbis “there is no joy.” It is not that people were drunk, but in the East wine was essential. Drunkenness in Jewish society was in fact a great disgrace, and they drank wine in a mixture composed of two parts of wine to three parts of water. Wine was actually needed for hospitality and for feasts and weddings (Barclay, 2006). And if the word was translated literally they would be *madira* in Hindi, *mada* in Oriya and *Handia* or *Daru* in Sadri. But in their meaning they would be misleading. And the Christian theological point where wine is associated with the fullness of life would be completely lost.

The steward in-charge of the party or a feast (Greek word *Architriklinos*) has been translated *prabandhakand parichalaka*, in Hindi and Oriya respectively. The Sadri translation of the word is *mett*, which in the present time means a person in-charge and also a ‘contractor’. Therefore, the better translation would have been *Khamharee* which refers to the provider at a feast. In the present context it simply means the head waiter. The tradition of keeping a steward of a feast or a banquet was in practice in the Roman Empire and the Jewish tradition during the time the Bible was written. The person in-charge was responsible for seeing the guests and the proper running of the banquet. Sometimes one of the guests acted as the responsible person for the running of the feast. Interestingly this tradition was in practice among the Sadri speaking tribals.

Thus this is not merely a translation of the apparent incidents and instruction written down in the Bible. These translations take care of the theological undertones as well. But the translated scriptures always seem to get into the root of the other culture just to find an acceptance. These translations have tried to present the marriage scene at Cana as the marriages in the target cultures. To judge whether they have succeeded is a big question. We looked at the passage with a cultural shock – A son addressing his mother “Woman.” *Drakhyarasa oranguri ordakhras* being served in a marriage party is certainly a new concept to the people speaking Hindi, Oriya and Sadri. Message is the ultimate goal of translating the scriptures and message can be understood only in a particular cultural context. Therefore, commentary is needed to

understand it. When other culture is being presented to us in our own languages we certainly feel the differences existing in our life and theirs. And that's how translation becomes the meeting point of the cultures. At times it is seen as a struggle between the source and target cultures and at times as a practice of cultural hegemony. But that's how a culture has the feel of other cultures.

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