Competing Narratives on Bible Translation in India: Missionary Linguistics, Postcolonial Criticism and Translation Studies

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Abstract:

This chapter focuses on Bible translation in India as a form of biblical criticism. It points out some of the limitations in scholarly approaches to the study of Bible translation in India and highlights the critical perspectives that a postcolonial translation approach can bring to scholarship on Bible translation and biblical criticism. It argues for a radical re-thinking and contextualising of Bible translation that focuses on hitherto marginalised Indian translators who undertook translation of large parts of the Bible into verse. The chapter’s premise is that translation across genres should be taken as seriously as conventional linguistic translation since they offer a significant challenge to the concept of ‘authorised’ Bible translation and, more significantly, to continued philological scholarship focused on comparisons of lexical items that obfuscate histories of power and marginalisation.
Key words:

Bible translation, India, biblical criticism, postcolonial translation, missionary linguistics, translation studies, verse translation, Protestant, Jesuit translations

Biography:

Hephzibah Israel is Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies, University of Edinburgh. Her current research interests include translation and religion, literary translation, literary practice and translation in South Asia. She led an AHRC-funded collaborative research project (2014-2017) under their ‘Translating Cultures’ theme which focused on the role of translation in the movement of religious concepts across languages and the ways in which this impacts religious conversion and autobiographical writing about conversion experiences. Her monograph entitled Religious Transactions in Colonial South India (2011) offers an analysis of the translated Bible as an object of cultural transfer in South Asia in the context of evolving attitudes to translation in the Tamil sacred landscapes from the eighteenth century. She has guest edited (with John Zavos) a special section on Indian traditions of life writing on religious conversion for the journal South Asia (41:2, 2018) and a special issue (with Matthias Frenz) ‘Translation and Religion’ (49: 3, 2019) for the journal Religion.
Introduction

Despite its long history of dissemination through translation, Bible translation has not been considered a form of biblical criticism in India, or elsewhere. The act of translation, however, is primarily an act of interpretation. The kind of close textual analysis that is traditionally assigned to biblical hermeneutics applies in equal degree to the process of biblical translation. Yet, translation as an interpretative act that offers only one out of a range of potential ‘meanings’ or interpretations is mostly viewed in narrow terms of linguistic choice rather than as a significant hermeneutical strategy that has considerable and wide-ranging ideological implications. All translation projects, including that of Bible translation, participate in a network of interpretative choice and effect, which when examined carefully indicate the work of translation as a key interpretative framework much as biblical criticism. This chapter focuses on bible translation in India and how this history, as far as it is possible to reconstruct it, may be seen to intersect with colonial and postcolonial interests. It is important to state this at the outset because this history in relation to Indian language Bibles has so far been commissioned by the Bible Society\(^1\) or written from the perspective of mission studies which has by and large ignored developments in translation studies or postcolonial studies. This chapter therefore attempts to engage with Bible translation from these alternative critical perspectives apart from evaluating a few key approaches in current studies of Bible translation.

But before engaging with some of the critical themes and issues that emerge from the history of bible translation in Indian languages, it would be valuable to examine how translation and postcolonial studies intersect or in effect, and more specifically, what does a distinctly postcolonial translation studies perspective bring to the handbook’s focus on postcolonial biblical criticism. It is apposite at this point to clarify that the use of the category ‘postcolonial’
in this chapter refers to the entire period from the first occasion of cultural contact with European traders and colonisers until after the political independence of India from the British. This both avoids reference to political independence as a sharp and artificial break from a colonial past, dividing pre-independent from post-independent history, while also acknowledging that resistance to colonialism was part of the fabric of colonial experience right from the start and not just a movement that gained momentum in the lead up to the Indian nationalist struggle for independence.

**Postcolonial translation studies and the study of religion**

Translation studies has a relatively short history as an academic discipline (from the early 1970s) and coincides more or less with the emergence in the 1970s of a critical intervention from literary scholars that eventually came to be known as postcolonial studies. The 1990s saw a few key studies that brought prominence to the converging scholarly concerns of translation and postcolonial studies. These scholarly engagements, focusing mainly on literary translation, have highlighted that far from being a neutral act of transfer across languages, translation is a political act with both immediate and long-term repercussions. They remind us that while translation served imperial interests in colonising more effectively it was equally available as a tool of resistance to challenge colonial rule and lead to various forms of decolonisation. One important concern that these scholars share, and pertinent to the focus of this chapter, is that of the unequal relations of power such that the supposed hierarchy between an ‘original’ and its ‘translation’ in Western intellectual history has been compared to the hierarchy assumed between the superior colonising ‘West’ and the lesser colonised ‘non-West:’ the colony was imagined for all intents and purposes as an inferior copy much as a translation is taken to be. A second point that these scholars point to is the hierarchy of
languages and the effects this has on translation projects and their reception amongst audiences. The direction of translation, whether from a perceived ‘higher’ language to a ‘less developed’ one, or the other way round, directly impacts the translation choices adopted which inevitably influence the way the translation is received or experienced in a colonial context. Often, underlying Eurocentric assumptions or purposes have been shown to be at work through translation, subtly promoting the viewpoint of one culture as superior to others. The decision to translate or to leave words or parts of the text untranslated were strategic choices to promote one point of view over others. The choice of translation strategies and decisions are thus considered either to have perpetrated and perpetuated ‘violence’ (ethnic, cultural, religious) of one kind or other on the colonised or used to challenge colonial authority, providing a powerful impetus to challenge colonial rule and assist in various forms of ‘decolonisation.’

The majority of postcolonial translation scholarship has however not engaged fully with religion or religious identities, texts or practices within colonial contexts. The aspect of religion in translation has more recently been attracting attention from scholars in other disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology of religion and translation studies. These scholars are particularly interested in the role of translation in the construction of religion as a category in colonial encounters, in the production of knowledge about religions within the colonial context and the effects of these on religious identities. There is, for instance, a growing body of work focusing on Jesuit translations in East Asia, South Asia and South America and the effects of their linguistic conversion on the languages and communities of the peoples encountered. One of the earliest was Vicente Rafael’s study of Jesuit translation projects in Tagalog societies in sixteenth-century Philippines. Rafael argued that translation was a conceptual tool in the hands of the Spanish Jesuits with which they did not just ‘convey’ the Christian message to the Tagalog but sought to mould their self-conceptualisation as Catholic Tagalogs; by not translating key terms into Tagalog, the Jesuits attempted to control the meaning and use of
Catholic terminology but by the same token opened these up to some radical appropriations by the Tagalogs. Linguistic anthropologist, William Hanks’ outstanding study of Jesuit translation amongst the Maya of Yucaten in Mesoamerica argues that although this has been presented as a peaceful conquest, the forms of linguistic translation that were undertaken “were actually forms of reducción in the strong sense of systematically re-forming their object.”

Hanks states that translation served, for all intents and purposes, as a process of reducción, convincing and putting to better order three key aspects of Mayan life: a re-ordering of their towns, their conduct and their language. In Hanks’s view translation was the framework within which the social, religious and political institutions of the Maya were re-ordered to agree with Spanish and Catholic systems of organising civil society:

…the tie to language runs deeper still, since the indigenous languages were the objects, and not only the instruments, of reducción. The missionaries sought to reducir the Indian languages, including Yucatec Maya, by describing them in terms of rules and patterns. The result of this kind of reducción is a grammar, or a set of rules that specify the structure and regularity of the language. In the overall project, town layout, regional governance, civility of conduct, grammar, and proper speech are of a single cloth.

Jesuit translations served to re-form and re-order Yucatec Maya from a language referring to “false words of idolatry and superstition” into “build[ing] cathedrals of meaning around their triune god.” In a similar study of Jesuit translations in India, Zupanov’s examination of Jesuits in South India points to their use of translation as a mode by which Christian concepts could be presented in ‘pagan’ languages such as Tamil in a transparent and simplistic manner to control language for Jesuit purposes. Zupanov argues that for instance, Henriquez’s sixteenth-century Arte Malabar was
a Christian missionary grammar since the choice of its interior linguistic apparatus is geared to keeping the conversion machine going. It comes as no surprise then that the verb employed to demonstrate the conjugation paradigm…in Tamil was vicuvadi, to believe. On more than thirty sheets, this verb spreads faith in all its forms—participles, verbal nouns, imperatives, conditionals, and so on. Sentence examples in Tamil and Portuguese translation cover almost all that can be said and done with the word to believe in two languages and often in two scripts.⁸

Studying a range of sixteenth and seventeenth-century interlinear translations of key Catholic texts—the catechism, creed, prayers, and missionary grammars—Zupanov contends that translation in practice proved a disorderly instrument that altered both Tamil and Portuguese. In a further study of what Xavier and Zupanov’s term ‘Catholic Orientalism,’ they point to the collusion between Portuguese colonial and missionary interests: “The process of ‘grammaticalization’ of Indian languages—on the basis of Portuguese and Latin grammatical rules—which inaugurated translation of Christian doctrine and extraction of useful information was far from an innocent intervention.”⁹ But, they argue, these ‘translation instruments’ of imperial agents worked both ways, on the one hand allowing the ordering, classification and objectification of Indian languages to facilitate Portuguese imperial interests but also offered Indians ways to redefine and express new idioms and metaphors.

Apart from scholarship on Jesuit translation projects, other scholars have examined the role of translation in the trajectories of other religious traditions active in India. These include studies of translations undertaken by both European and Indian translators and the effects these have had on religious scriptures, communities, and identities. Mandair points to a philosophy of "generalized translation" that emerged as a key conceptual matrix in the colonial encounter
between South Asia and the West. Critically engaging with postcolonial theory and political theology, Mandair demonstrates how this philosophy of translation constructed a specific formulation of Sikh tradition and identity in colonial South Asia which continues to have repercussions for the religious identity of the Sikh community in South Asia and in diaspora.

Herling’s study of Herder and Friedrich Schlegel’s translations of the Bhagvatgita into Latin points to translation strategies that presented it as a classical text that offered a powerful Romantic synthesis between continental philosophy and Indian religion and culture. In his view, by refraining from non-philological commentary, Schlegel in his full Latin translation of 1823, resists the temptation to impose some cultural or philosophical agenda on his rendering. This move reveals that a new interpretive structure is at work in the examination of Indian sources: that of philological science. The hermeneutical issues, the interpretive questions that prompted response and further inquiry within this discursive community, were concentrated within the language itself; they resided within the translator’s choices, and these become the more technical sites of inquiry that anchored the practice of interpretation in the era of Indology.

Although these were translations in the opposite direction, from Indian to European cultural contexts, Herling’s study of German Indological engagements and translations complements the numerous other translation projects undertaken by the English, French and Portuguese in India, in relation to several other religions observed in the sub-continent. Numark, for instance, argues that Scottish missionary translations of Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jain, and Buddhist sacred texts and inscriptions led to an increasingly comparative approach to the study of religions in India, amongst which Christianity by then featured prominently.
Why offer this whistle-stop tour of colonial translations of a range of sacred texts\textsuperscript{14} in a chapter on Bible translation and postcolonial criticism? First, while postcolonial criticism may not have sufficiently engaged with religion, its critical interventions offer valuable lines of enquiry with which to approach translations of sacred texts in colonial contexts as part of a larger history of postcolonial translation and transmission. Second, posing questions drawn from the different strands of postcolonial criticism, including postcolonial translation, opens up the study of the Bible in India to its translation history as embedded within a wider cultural context of translation, where translation decisions taken to present the Bible in Indian languages were directly influenced by non-biblical translation activities that were taking place simultaneously in other religious and cultural contexts. This therefore allows us to see its material and cultural presence as a sacred text in interaction with many other sacred and non-sacred texts in the sub-continent, and in the context of the number of different ways communities have interacted with it. Such studies of the translated Bible as imbricated in wider social, political and cultural contexts study have rarely been undertaken; instead, Bible translation in South Asia is mostly studied as distinct from all other literary writing and translation activity that is carried on in parallel. In the following section, I briefly discuss three strands of scholarly debates where such a wider focus can be seen to offer valuable interventions in the current scholarly approaches to the study of Bible translation in India.

**Three approaches to the study of Bible translation and three areas of intervention**

There is a long-standing difference in critical perspective to the study of Bible translation between the philological approach, mainly exemplified in the work of scholarship that has more recently come to be known as ‘missionary linguistics,’ and the more discursive, postcolonial,
approaches, amongst whom also fall scholars who more recently self-identify with an alternative approach they term ‘colonial linguistics.’ The main aim of scholars of missionary linguistics is to retrieve and recuperate the extensive labour of missionaries in writing and translating, preparing grammars and dictionaries, by comparing Latin, and one of the European vernaculars such as Spanish, English, German or French with a non-European language. They acknowledge imperial ideology and colonialism but treat these as a composite and somewhat neutral backdrop against which missionary translations and linguistic activities take place. This means that they do not engage critically with the extent to which missionary linguist-translators may have been influenced by the historical and political contexts within which they were working. By continuing in the vein of missionary scholars, that is, by only digging deep into languages to compare linguistic structures and vocabulary at the expense of wider political contexts that shape language use as well as its study, scholars of missionary linguistics can be said to perpetuate a critical perspective that constructs linguistic histories without reference to issues of power, whether material, economic or ideological. By not acknowledging that the logic of colonialism ideologically informed linguistic treatment and by isolating linguistic work from wider cultural networks, scholars of missionary linguistics ignore the relations of power which affect how languages mutate in relation to each other and how such academic study of languages can effectively maintain imbalances in power long after political control by European empires may have ceased. One of the effects of the current limited focus of missionary linguistics is that it constructs the European missionary linguist, with the Bible in one hand and the Latin grammar in the other, as the sole ‘expert’ who brings order and organisation to the disorderly, unsystematic and intuitive ‘users’ of non-European languages.

Scholars of missionary linguistics study linguistic activity in erstwhile colonies as if missionaries were the sole scholars studying languages systematically. As Stolz and Wanke
point out, “ML [Missionary Linguistics] is largely a ‘monodisciplinary’ project which aims at determining the impact the linguistic work of missionaries has had on the development of linguistics in general.”\textsuperscript{15} But a careful consideration of the social history of linguistic work reveals the situation to be otherwise: first, there were many other European scholars and linguists—colonial administrators, civil servants, sailors, merchants, and travellers—besides missionaries, although the latter may have dominated language study in specific periods; and second, Europeans almost never worked on their own but always in conjunction with local scholars. Many, such as James\textsuperscript{16} or Jeyaraj,\textsuperscript{17} discussing missionary study of Tamil and Bible translation, show little interest in perspectives from local non-Christian scholars or users of the translated Bibles, both Christian and non-Christian. If local language scholars are mentioned at all, it is usually in passing and without equal consideration of their works or critical perspectives along that of missionary scholars.

This unidirectional focus is challenged by scholars of colonial linguists who call for a bidirectional study of languages, to take into account that missionary linguistics was heavily influenced by a range of colonial discourses that were operating within the same space and time. Colonial Linguistics, “counts among its tasks (ideally) the entire range of phenomenon which interconnect language and colonialism, most of which are irrelevant for the goals of ML. Colonialism in CL [colonial linguistics] therefore is no background phenomenon for an interest in languages but a precondition for linguistic constellations, from language contact through to language politics and finally language analysis and documentation.”\textsuperscript{18} Colonial linguists are interested, for instance, in the phenomenon that Latin invariably served as the main reference point against which all non-European languages were compared, resulting in the presentation of a ‘lack’ in the latter in terms of vocabulary, grammar or orthography. They point out that this perceived lack was then used to confirm the assumed inferiority of the language
community. By the same token, a further challenge is posed to missionary linguistics if non-linguistic factors influencing languages and the social uses of languages are taken into account. Just as languages never develop in isolation, the systematic study of languages is never undertaken without reference to the social and ideological imperatives that shape language use. Some recent scholars such as Muru do suggest that it would be valuable for future studies to consider the perspectives of Tamil language users and what they thought of missionary linguistic activities but does not herself undertake this in her article.¹⁹

A second difference in critical perspective centres on whether or not Bible translation projects are viewed as implicated in colonial history, and as influenced by imperial trading interests and colonial conquest. There are three main scholars who have argued against viewing Bible translation as linked to colonial contexts: Brian Stanley (1990) in the Bible and the Flag, Lamin Sanneh ([1989] 2009) in Translating the Message and William Smalley (1991) in Translation as Mission. The three scholars focus on Protestant Bible translation projects undertaken by missionaries in Africa and Asia. Stanley critiques the argument that British missionaries were agents of European colonialism and argues instead that rather than commercial gain, it was the Christian revivals of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain that fuelled British missionary interest in Asia. While the focus of his book is not Bible translation alone, this argument reinforces the scholarly treatment of Bible translation as separate from colonial interests and discourses. Smalley argues that Bible translations undertaken by missionaries put “local languages and the relevant parts of local culture…on a par with the missionary language and culture…”,²⁰ which presumes that all non-European languages were inferior to European languages and needed to be ‘made’ equal through Bible translation. Such an interpretation is problematic from a postcolonial perspective. Lamin Sanneh theologian and World Christianity scholar with a special interest in West African Christianity, has
dominated the debate on African Christianity, Bible translation and colonialism.\textsuperscript{21} Although he too offers a positive account of Bible translation as one that renewed indigenous African languages and cultures, his arguments contest the standpoint of Stanley and Smalley in important ways. On the one hand, the position he sets out in his introduction is not that different: “Persisting through all this material is the idea that specific Christian translation projects have helped to create an overarching series of cultural experiences, with hitherto obscure and marginal cultural systems being drawn into the general stream of universal history.”\textsuperscript{22} Sanneh’s reading of the history of biblical translations and the interactions of Christian cultures outside the Western world is one where non-Christian religious cultures enter into a Christian ‘stream of universal history’ without coercion, conflict or resistance. Although this may seem like wishful thinking on his part, Sanneh is also strongly critical of those European missionaries with short-sighted and paternalistic attitudes, who were often undone in his view by their own inability to set aside cultural superiority. He argues that the power and cultural chauvinism of missionaries and of Western Christianity were dismantled by Christianity’s inherent “force of translatability” which challenged the missionary enterprise:

“Translation creates a pluralistic environment of incredible variety and possibility, and invests culture with an ethical and qualitative power. That power may be defined as the capacity to participate in intercultural and interpersonal exchange, as the recognition that whatever and however we are doing now, we can do differently and, under certain circumstances, we must do differently in order to live ethically as neighbours. … Christianity promotes two sorts of universal appeal in its mission: the universal truth of one God is represented by the ethics of commitment to local specificity.”\textsuperscript{23}
Sanneh is convinced that the “vernacular translation” of the missionaries “overshadowed colonial assumption and presumptions” and “outdistanced and outlasted the forces of ephemeral colonial rule.”24 Sanneh’s theological interpretation of the politics of Bible translation as an intrinsically egalitarian process has been welcomed by many Christian theologians for re-orienting critical attention on the peoples and languages of Christianity in the global south. However, his wholehearted celebration of translation in the “African vernaculars” is also based on an acceptance of the claim (unethical, some might say) that these cultures and languages were inherently inferior in the first place, needing “religious renewal and indigenous revitalisation.”25 By arguing that the “vernacular Bible was the divine imprimatur on otherwise inferior cultures,”26 Sanneh offers a theological solution to redress the perceived inequality and inferiority of African languages, apparently stimulated and renewed by the superior power of Christianity: “There is radical pluralism associated with vernacular translation wherein all languages and cultures are in principle equal in expressing the word of God.”27 Despite his strong reservations, Sanneh draws a picture of (missionary) translators undone by (Bible) translation while all the time preserving the message of God intact because his Christian ethics dictate that biblical meaning is transferred faithfully and independently of colonial inequalities. Thus, his celebratory view of Bible translation’s rejuvenating effects in Christianity’s history in the global south, remains fragmented by contradictions.

It is left to other African theologians to offer a more challenging view to Sanneh’s. Kwame Bediako a Ghanian theologian, taking his cue from Sanneh, argues for the increasing need for a “mother-tongue theology” to ensure translation is not based on simple “word equivalents” as opposed to “theology” shaped by “Western Christian history and experience” that rejects Ghanian idioms and images as inappropriate.28 Kinyua argues that “Bible
translation in colonial Africa, though in most cases defended as a neutral, legitimate, and benevolent act of redemption, disguises the colonial power situation.” He examines the extent to which Bible translation, leading to the standardisation of languages such as Gĩkũyũ, “was a hegemonic process that facilitated the domestication as well as homogenization of the idiom through the predetermined process of cooption and expansion of the linguistic tools. Since the Africans were not consulted or involved in the decision-making process it was also an obvious act of imposition.” Bringing to attention the work of parallel African translators, whose work was not accepted by the Bible Society, he also argues that “translation was not immune to the ambivalence and contradictions of the discourse of colonialism. Like any other colonial discourse, Bible translation betrays instability. By choosing to translate the Bible into the vernacular languages, the colonial church flung wide open the interrogatory interstices where biblical texts, hermeneutics, doctrines, culture, and power could be negotiated, contested, and hybridized.” For Kinyua, like Rafael, the instability of languages and their resistance to translation’s re-ordering of semantics meant that the African Christian could be read as an active translator rather than a passive victim of translation, leading to translation becoming “a performative act of decolonization.” Similarly, writing largely on the Asian context, theologian R.S. Sugirtharajah has consistently offered postcolonial critiques of missionary handling of the Bible in colonial encounters. He has re-vitalised theological debates by recovering marginalised narratives of biblical interpretation and alternative theological forays by Indians and by analysing them from postcolonial perspectives. Although he does not discuss biblical translation, his argument regarding biblical criticism can as easily be applied to bible translation.

The third critical difference pertains particularly to the scholarship on Bible translation in India. For too long the study of Bible translation and biblical criticism in India has been
conducted as an isolated, self-contained and self-defensive object of study. Either the translation history of the Bible in individual languages has been studied independently or if any comparative study is undertaken, it is with reference to Bible translation in ‘neighbouring’ Indian languages. In the case of discussions of Christian terminology, and there are plentiful examples of this, most studies focus on whether a particular term was accepted or rejected on the grounds of being a perceived ‘Hindu’ soteriological term. This usually plays out as a rather limited ‘inculturation’ or ‘interfaith dialogue’ argument that I will elaborate on further in the next section. Little effort is made to locate the history of Bible translation in India as part of a larger history of textual transmission and translation involving numerous other sacred texts. As some of the scholarship cited in this chapter shows, translations of other sacred and non-sacred texts directly or indirectly impacted Bible translation throughout the postcolonial period, from the earliest contact to post-independent present. Moreover, any serious study of Bible translation should also situate it within the long history of sacred text translation34 traditions of South Asia that pre-dated European contact. Not taking into account these two intersecting vectors circumscribes the critical lenses with which one views the specifics of Bible translation, resulting in a partial engagement with translation history in India. Moreover, there is no effort to engage with translation studies as a discipline that directly relates to the field of enquiry despite historic connections between translation studies and Bible translation.35 The consequence of such a blinkered approach is that the scholarship on Bible translation in India remains detached from other literary and cultural studies, apparently representing the ‘minority’ scholarly interests of a ‘minority’ religious community. While there are a few exceptions to this, and I will elaborate on these further below, much of the treatment of Bible translation, whether by Anglo-American historians of mission or by Indian theologians, tends to incorporate its history within conventional Christian apologetics which limits the potential of this field of study.
The Study of Bible translation in India

Much of the scholarly study of Bible translation, limited as it is, focuses mainly on the nineteenth century with disproportionate attention paid to the Serampore Baptist missionaries in Bengal and later the British and Foreign Bible Society [hereafter BFBS] that followed soon after. This, accompanied by the assumption that the Baptists’ printing press at Serampore inaugurated the birth of print technology in India, has helped to convey the mistaken notion that the history of the Bible and Bible translation in India only started in nineteenth-century Bengal. Neither are factually correct. The Bible is believed to have existed in the Syriac in the western state of Kerala in South India since the second C.E. with at least one extant version that dates between 9 and 12\textsuperscript{th} C.E.\textsuperscript{36} The earliest known translation of the Bible in India was undertaken at Agra in the Mughal courts at the invitation of the emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), who ordered a Persian version to be prepared to satisfy his interest in Christianity. The Jesuit, Jerome Xavier, and Akbar’s courtier Abd al-Sattar together prepared a translation under the title *Mirat al-Quds* or the ‘Mirror of Holiness’ which combined events from the four New Testament Gospels with a biography of Jesus’s life. Presented first to Akbar in 1602 as a ‘Life of Christ’ and later to his son Jehangir (r. 1605-1627), this was a collaborative Persian translation arrived at from a combination of ‘source texts’—the Latin Vulgate, Greek, Syriac and Arabic translations—that were available to them in India at the time. Whatever its limitations,\textsuperscript{37} the existence of this version demonstrates that this early version of the Bible extant in India was supported by royal invitation and patronage and available to an elite audience at least two hundred years before the Baptists started operating the printing press at Serampore. It is also important at this point to take into account that the New Testament was only one amongst a range of sacred texts translated into Persian in the imperial translation
bureaus of Akbar and Jehangir. Besides the New Testament, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* for instance were also translated into Persian under Mughal patronage. Whatever the proselytizing intentions of the Jesuit Xavier may have been, the Mughal interest in supporting the translation of sacred texts, including the New Testament, indicates, as Alam and Subrahmanyam\textsuperscript{38} and Truschke\textsuperscript{39} argue, not just a desire to synthesize the best from all religions into the ‘universal’ religion *din-i-ilahi* (as is represented in popular historiography), but part of imperial image-making where the Moghuls wished to project themselves as sophisticated and well-versed in a range of philosophical and religious disputations.

Jesuit translations of parts of the Bible in Goa on the western coast and in Tamilnadu on the eastern coast through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been well documented.\textsuperscript{40} There is evidence that the Catholic translation of the catechism, *Doctrina Christam* in Tamil was first printed in Quilon in South India in 1578. A few Dutch translation efforts in Sri Lanka of sections of the Bible, (mainly Phillipus Baldeus’ Gospel of St Matthew which he was unable to print) preceded the first complete New Testament in Tamil translation published in 1714-1715 in Tranquebar a few miles south of Madras. This was undertaken by the German Pietist Bartholomeus Ziegenbalg under the patronage of the Danish king, with a printing press shipped by the SPCK and Tamil fonts produced in Halle. This major translation in Tamil print and subsequent translation history undertaken by German Lutheran missionaries and their rivalry with the Jesuits working in neighbouring areas,\textsuperscript{41} well documented by Tamil theologians and scholars of Tamil translation and print history, thrived a good hundred years before the arrival of print in Bengal with the Baptists (1793) and later the British and Foreign Bible Society (1811). However, as I have argued previously,\textsuperscript{42} once they entered the scene, the nature and degree of Bible translation in India changed from small translation teams working on individual language pairs. Instead, the Baptist mission and the BFBS undertook several
Indian language translations in swift succession and very quickly established an intricate network between translators, printers, colporteurs and readers. They worked to standardise Protestant terminology and publish ‘standard’ translations in each of the languages. This is not to say that the two societies worked in conjunction with each other. They battled over the translation of key terms, chief amongst them was the appropriate term for ‘baptism’ across the languages.\textsuperscript{43} Much of these lexical disputes and discussions dominate nineteenth-century archival documents—reports, minutes of translation committee meetings, prefaces to dictionaries and ‘scriptural lexicons’\textsuperscript{44}—and appear to be repetitive, transferring to the colonial stage the theological and hermeneutical arguments that dogged British Christianity through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Current examination of Bible translation in India continues this focus on detailed discussions of individual terms and of the merits of one equivalent over others, not dissimilar to the scholarship on missionary linguistics delineated above. Such a focus however has limited potential. From a translation studies perspective, it is pertinent to emphasize that the focus on the translation of individual lexical items can only offer a partial and limited picture of the complex social and cultural interaction that translation involves. This is in fact merely the first stage in the building blocks of translation research since pointing to the different nuances in meaning across different languages or pointing to the ‘lack’ of equivalents does not take a scholarly argument very far. This scholarship is almost solely interested in proving that some terms successfully ‘inculturate’ Christianity, usually understood as bringing it closer to a high, philosophical register of Hinduism, while others do not achieve this ‘inter-faith dialogue’. Take for instance, Bror Tilliander’s study,\textsuperscript{45} along with Kulendran\textsuperscript{46} and Packiamuthu\textsuperscript{47} writing in Tamil; these offer classic examples of this genre in relation to the Tamil Bible, focusing mainly on which terms brought the Christian message closer to Hindu concepts and usage without
diluting the Christian message. Similarly, Ulla Sandgren’s 48 is a short study of selected passages of the New Testament in seven Tamil translations. Sandgren follows in the tradition of Tiliander in comparing terms and passages from the Tamil Bible but there is much less effort than Tiliander at offering an analysis of how the terms work in each translation context. Sandgren’s textual and linguistic comparisons are useful perhaps to the translator but the lack of a contextualized analysis limits its value. Brekke 49 on the Bengali Bible and the conflict over the choice to represent ‘baptism’ and Peter Dass’s 50 more recent consideration of Protestant translations of the Bible in Hindi where he discusses the merits of representing the incarnation of Christ as avatar over dehadharan, are along a similar vein, although Dass does point to the blurring of distinctions between the two religions in the use of some terms. However, such a focus on differences in specific terminology across languages at the expense of other considerations limits the scholar to a display of philological and grammatical flair in specific languages rather than the politics of asymmetrical power between languages. It is the political implications of lexical choice, what meanings are marginalised, and a consideration of who has the power to make such lexical choices for whom and how this plays out that is by far the more valuable focus in translation research. For instance, standardisation of terminology, not just within each language but across all Indian languages was seen as key to establishing the Bible as ‘scripture’ in nineteenth-century BFBS discourse but to achieve this all languages had to be re-moulded with reference to Sanskrit and Protestant requirements, in order to arrive at one standard Protestant vocabulary even when some languages, such as Tamil, had a separate lineage from the Sanskrit. 51

If the ‘inculturation’ model needs must be used, it would be worthwhile to engage more critically with what definitions of ‘culture’ scholars are working with. By far, there is a tendency amongst scholars of biblical terminology and translation, to focus on individual
Sanskrit terms as the etymological foundations of a single extensive bank of sacred
terminology underlying modern Indian languages available to modern day translators. This is
possible because they take their cue from the nineteenth-century missionary and orientalist split
between the perceived ‘high,’ philosophical and more acceptable form of Hinduism and the
‘low’ ritualistic Hinduism observed in practice.\textsuperscript{52} The repeated focus on Sanskrit, as a language
both of classical and sacred provenance served, and continues to service, the argument of
conceptual commensurability between European Christianity and Indian Hinduism. This
emphasis therefore obviates the study of other languages, including demotic or subaltern
registers of languages used for sacred purposes for centuries within Hinduism, let alone in the
context of Bible translation for Christian communities. This further succeeds in reifying the
assumption of a homogenous ‘high-caste’ Hinduism and a monolithic postulation of Indian
culture, which also functions to marginalise sections of the Indian society that were historically
denied the right to participate in Sanskritic high culture even before they converted to
Christianity. It also effectively marginalises language communities, such as those of north-
eastern India, that do not trace their lineage to Sanskrit, from mainstream scholarly
examinations of Bible translation in India. The philological focus on individual lexical items
examined through the lens of missionary linguistics facilitates textual study at the expense of
situating the text at the intersections of race, class and gender politics.

By way of contrast, a more valuable form of ‘inculturation’ (again if one must needs
use this term) is where Bible translation, past and present, is situated squarely within the politics
of class and caste difference, within the pulls of regional nationalisms in post-independent India
or the challenge posed by feminist scholars critically engaging with the deployment of religions
as social forms of control. There are currently just a handful of scholars who have attempted
to offer such analyses of the role of Bible translation in the political lives of language
communities. Longkumer’s recent study of Christianity’s persistence as a form of political articulation in contemporary Nagaland, includes a section on Bible translation and print, as a legacy from the American Baptists that has had long-reaching effects. In his analysis, the decision of the Baptists to represent the numerous Naga languages in the Roman script functioned to unify the different tribes that previously had no standardised lingua franca. The romanisation of Naga languages had three important ideological effects according to Longkumer, first the decision to simplify and contain linguistic diversity led to a greater spread of literacy, centralised education in English and upward social mobility amongst the Naga; second, that it resulted in Bible translation and text production in the Naga languages; third there was greater inter-tribal solidarity amongst the different Naga groups. Drawing on Anderson’s (1991) thesis of “imagined communities,” Longkumer argues that it was not monolingualism but the use of a single script in print, first introduced through Bible translation, that enabled the Nagas to imagine themselves as a unified ‘Naga nation’ and as different from other social and linguistic groupings in India. While he warns that it would be erroneous to privilege print over orality and performance, he argues that Bible translation and its print played an important role through “the adoption of the Roman script, and not [a] dependence on a unitary vernacular. The script unified the linguistic landscape in terms of its mutual and strategic practicalities, but it did not obliterate local vernaculars in the case of the polyglot Nagas.”

Barkataki-Ruscheweyh too analyses the politics of Bible language choice and translation amongst the Tangsa groups in northeast India, arguing that the fracturing of the Tangsa communities was the result not of theological disagreements but the role played by “differences over the choice of (Tangsa) language for translation of the Bible…that caused these splits.” Unlike the Naga situation, the Tangsa versions of the Bible had neither a common language nor a common script, which could be used to read the Bible across the language family, which led to disputes between the different groups. There is potential for
Bible translation scholarship in other Indian languages to be examined in like manner with reference to language, print and book history at the regional and national levels and how these intersected with religious, social and political identities however, there have been few such studies.

Therefore, rather than once again summarise the available literature focusing on terminological choice in the history of the Bible in Indian language translations I propose, in the spirit of this chapter’s objective to challenge and advance mainstream scholarship on Bible translation, to present translations of parts of the Bible, which for long have been marginalised, both in the historical narratives constructed by the BFBS and the more recent academic studies of the translated Bible. In the following section I recuperate verse translations of the Bible that have been paid little attention in the history of the Bible in Indian languages and comment on reasons for their marginalisation. By recovering such translations from obscurity, I construct an alternative politics of biblical poetics and theology in India.

*Verse Translations of the Bible*

Of what significance is the choice of genre in the history of the Bible in Indian language translations and in its function as a sacred text? The conceptual difference between prose and verse translation is an important one to keep in mind since texts considered ‘scriptural’ by one faith community when translated without sufficient consideration of the cultural significance of textual genres may not even be recognized as ‘scripture’ by its receiving audiences. The predominant scholarly interest in the ‘meanings’ that lexical items carry with them precludes any discussion of the importance of literary genre in the shaping of biblical scripture and the politics of translation choice implied. Prose translations of the Bible in Indian languages have
always been recognized as the ‘authorised’ and official translations of the Bible and have consistently been treated as ‘sacred texts’ in Christian ritual life. In contrast, verse translations have been appreciated more for their aesthetical appeal as literary texts, and while they did not serve a sacred function, have instead been called upon to represent the successful ‘inculturation’ of Christianity in India. It is these verse translations that are always conveniently exhibited in any discussions of ‘inter-faith dialogue’ or ‘Christian syncretism’. Authored almost exclusively by Indian Christians and non-Christians (there are just a couple of European Jesuits who also chose verse genres), verse translations have been dismissed as charming poetry at best and as bordering on heretical similarities with ‘misleading’ sacred poetry of other religious groups at worst. Prose translations however are simply the Bible in an Indian language and are meant to function primarily as sacred scripture.

I first highlighted the significance of examining verse or poetic versions of the Bible as ‘translations’ when I discussed Tamil verse translations in Religious Transactions in Colonial South India. I argued that despite repeated and widespread observation that verse was assigned the highest sacred and literary status in most Indian languages and that the ‘Indian mind’ was persuaded best by sacred texts in verse, Protestant missionaries and the British and Foreign Bible Society approved only prose translations for publication because in the British Protestant missionary imagination, prose was the form of rational, sacred truth and clearly to be separated from verse, seen as the domain of rival Hindu and Catholic poets. Spats between Catholics and Protestants missionaries over verse translations, as I have discussed there, reveal an important difference in translation strategy. Examining a nineteenth-century controversy over the Jesuit Beschi’s Tempavani, a Tamil epic (composed 1726-29?), narrating portions of the Old and New Testament in the literary style of the Tamil classic, kamparamayana, my contention was that Christian verse translations of the Bible were
suppressed precisely because Protestant detractors recognized the aesthetic power of sacred verse and its cultural significance in the religious lives of Indian communities. In poetry’s place, Protestant interlocutors wished to instate prose as the discursive form best able to convey Christian truth. Yelle’s argument that the Protestant “disenchantment” of Sanskrit in colonial India was a continuation of Reformation’s movement towards literalism is equally applicable to the context of Bible translation: because it meant “both a valorization of the semantic content of language and a devaluation of its poetic and magical functions, which contributed to the rise of polemics against both ritual and mythological language.”

Verse genres were associated strongly with the magical, mythological and erotic, three features that Protestant translators were determined to keep out of the Bible.

This bias in favour of prose, strong in the nineteenth century, has survived in current scholarly examinations of the Bible in Indian languages. There are but a handful of scholars (including myself) who have commented on the significance of verse translations. Amongst these, those working on early Jesuit materials have been very interested in verse translations. For instance, Županov writing on Tamil Jesuit and Malayalam works comments that “Jesuit versified translations, communicating Christian message while at the same time referring back to local literary traditions, were the most successful. Some poems such as Tempavani and Johann Ernst Hanxleden’s Puthen pana (New Hymn in Malayalam), retelling the life of Christ in twelve cantos are still recited on the radio and read in Christian families. Others are invisibly incorporated into folk literature such as the popular stories of guru Paramarta.”

Annie George has more recently worked on the Marathi verse translation Kristapuranam by the English Jesuit, Thomas Stephens. Composed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Beschi’s Tamil Tempavani and Stephens’s Marathi Kristapuranam were serious efforts to
engage with the sacred idioms, metaphors and genres of religious poetry they encountered in the South Asian literary and religious landscapes.

But with the onset of Protestant translation projects from the early eighteenth century, there was deliberate eschewal of verse in missionary translations but conversely, or perhaps because of this suppression of poetry, the mantle of poetry was picked up, by and large, by Indian converts to Christianity. From the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, there were several Protestant poets who translated parts of the Bible into verse. I have compiled a list of titles across different languages to show that there a good number of these verse translations that can be culled from catalogues of Christian literature. I have not here included the vast body of Christian hymns and poetical literature but only those that purport to offer a specific book of the Bible in verse translation:

**Bengali:**


**Oriya:**

- Mukanda Das, 1883. Verse translations of the four Gospels, the Psalms and Proverbs.
Malayalam:


Marathi:


Sanskrit:

- William Mill. [Book 1. 1831] 1842. *Srī Khṛṣṭasaṅgītā. English introduction to the Christa-Sangitā or the sacred history of our Lord Jesus Christ in Sanscrit verse, etc.*

Tamil:

- Constantin Beschi, *Tembavani* (composed 1726-29)

Telugu:


This list is by no means complete but included here merely to indicate the number of such translation projects that were undertaken to translate prose into poetry within the same language, which suggest the perceived significance of this task amongst Indian writers and translators. Why were so many writers translating the Bible or parts of it into verse? And why are these not catalogued under ‘Bible translation’?

I deliberately employ the category translation to draw attention to the texts, to emphasize that these ‘metrical’ or ‘poetical’ versions were as much a form of translation as established prose translations of the Bible. In some cases, such as Tempavani and Kristapuranam, there is considerable poetic licence exercised in terms of selection of narratives incorporated and the specific saints focused on. But in other instances, such as Kanagasabai’s Tiruvakkupuranam, the poet takes care to indicate correspondence between chapter and verse of the Tamil prose Bible in his translation. In my opinion, his careful attempt to follow the structure of the source text, was a means to indicate that although he was translating into verse, Kanagasabai wanted his verse translation to be taken as seriously as any prose translation in Tamil. Each poet-translator used traditional and complex verse genres (such as the Tamil
venpa) and narrative structures (such as the purana) from existing religious literatures in India to translate the Bible. It is important to attend to what the poets are signalling to their contemporaries and not dismiss them as mere amateur attempts to express the Christian message or theology in literary works. By continuing to ignore such translation attempts or not recognize them as ‘Bible translation,’ the current scholarship on biblical criticism and missionary history is marginalising a whole body of translations that were undertaken to signal different types of cultural allegiances to the Protestant prose project. Although many poetic translations have been incorporated by the Christian communities into church worship and music, however controversial at some points, by not offering them official status as ‘translations’ of the Bible, they remain secondary to prose translations, that are often criticised for stiff, unnatural and ungrammatical use of Indian languages.

Conclusion:

There is currently little research on the rich history of Bible translation in the many languages of India and how it intersects with wider literary history. What there is, is atomised and circumscribed within each language, lacking a more comparative perspective. Although this may pose some difficulties, collaborative research projects can overcome the challenge of comparative research across a range of languages, since most scholars may have limited access to languages. Collaborative work may also make it possible to include experts in the literary cultures of each language, so that it is possible to study how the Bible in Indian language translation intersects with other sacred texts, literary translations and literary movements. This has potential not only to exploit postcolonial criticism but also contribute further to
postcolonial translation studies, by drawing attention to the significance of attending to the cultural histories of sacred texts as they travelled across languages.

It must be acknowledged in conclusion that the effects of the power imbalances generated by colonialism and empire on Bible translation is only one area that needs further examination. There are several other power imbalances at play in contemporary India that continue to intersect and impact on Bible translation that urgently need scholarly attention. For instance, while dalit theologians have engaged constructively with liberation theology to challenge continuing caste hierarchies within the Christian community, they have not yet turned critical attention to Bible translation as an important aspect of biblical criticism. This is despite the engagement of key Dalit theologians in the process of Bible translation. For instance, James Massey (1943-2015) one of the few dalit theologians who also translated the Bible on his own (he spent approximately ten years between 1970 and 1980 in translating the Bible into Punjabi) does not comment on whether and to what extent dalit liberation theology impacted his translation in an article he wrote on the Punjabi Bible and his translation. Similarly, there is hardly any Indian feminist studies of Bible translation or studies of translations undertaken by women. A significant example here is Ramabai’s translation of the New Testament into Marathi, published in 1912 which has not been studied either by feminist scholars examining Ramabai’s ouvre or by feminist theologians studying Christianity in India.

Whether engaging with postcolonial criticism or not, it is important that scholars examining Bible translation in India recognize that translation is a process of intervention, of contrived commensurability that suits specific purposes at specific historical junctures. Taking full cognizance of this invites scholars to engage critically with political contexts such as postcolonial encounters rather than ignore or vilify it as dangerous to or undermining
Christianity in India. Ultimately, looking beyond missionary linguistics and philology to the politics of translation opens up new ways of engaging with the Bible in postcolonial contexts, especially of how it becomes ‘sacred’ in and through translation.

Reference List


Županov, Ines G. *Missionary Tropics: The Catholic Frontier in India, 16th-17th Centuries.*

1 I use this as a generic category to refer both to the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) that was a key player in Bible translation from the early 19th century to Indian Independence and the Bible Society of India after 1947. For a critique of the BFBS’s historiography, see Sue Zemca, “The Holy Book of Empire: Translations of the British and Foreign Bible Society,” 1991 and Israel *Religious Translations in Colonial South India* 2011, Chapter 1.
4 See William F. Hanks, *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross,* 2010.
6 Hanks, 2010, 3.
8 Županov, *Missionary Tropics,* 2005, 251
9 Ângela Barreto Xavier, and Ines G. Županov, *Catholic Orientalism: Portuguese Empire, Indian Knowledge (16th-18th Centuries),* 2015, 204.
12 Herling, 2010, 70.
14 The category ‘sacred text’ is defined here as any text perceived as sacred or used for any purpose considered sacred by a faith community. This includes both the written and oral text, as well as sacred texts as objects of veneration and so ‘handled’ in special or ritualised ways.


20 William Smalley, Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement, 1991, 244.


22 Sanneh 2009, 3.


24 Sanneh 2009, 163.


26 Sanneh 2009, 193.

27 Sanneh 2009, 251.


30 Kinyua, 2013, 84.

31 Kinyua, 2013, 65.

32 Kinyua, 2013, 84-85.

33 R. S. Sugirtharajah, The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations, 2005.

34 Sacred text translation refers to the translation and/or verbal interpreting of any sacred text through any medium or mode of communication.

35 For instance, most Translation Studies scholars take into account statements on translation by key Bible translators such as fourth century C.E. Jerome who translated the Latin Vulgate and Eugene Nida (1914-2011), who contributed considerably to the development of the study of translation in the twentieth century.

36 Claudius Buchanan is reported to have presented to Cambridge University Library in the nineteenth century this manuscript of the Bible in Syriac which has come to be known as the ‘Buchanan Bible.’

37 See R.S. Sugirtharajah, Jesus in Asia, 2018 for an extended discussion.


39 Audrey Truschke, Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court, 2016.

40 Županov 2005; Xavier and Županov 2015.


42 Israel 2011


47 Sarojini Packiamuthu, Viviḻiyamum Tamiḻum [Bible and Tamil], 2000.


49 Brekke 2006.


54 Longkumer 2019, 173.
56 Israel 2011.
57 See Israel, Religious Transactions in Colonial India, Chapter 4.
59 Xavier and Županov, 2015, 230-231.
61 I have used only English and Tamil-language catalogues to compile this list. I believe a search through each of the language catalogues would yield more such verse translations, but something I am unable to do without access to the different languages.
62 See discussion on Tamil verse translations of the Bible in Israel 2011, Chapter 4.