





Module 9:Translating Religious

Lecture 32 :The Bible in Different Languages

The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  History of Bible translation
-  The Bible in medieval Europe
-  Modern age
-  The Bible in India
-  The Bible in Malayalam
-  The Contributions to language

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 32: The Bible in Different Languages

Introduction

Translations of the Bible became very significant in the history and evolution of different languages across the world. The language of the Bible passed into common parlance and helped in standardizing the language. The same issues that we have seen regarding the translation of the Torah and Quran are applicable to the Bible also. The injunction against translating the word of God was prevalent for a while with respect to the Bible as well. However, in the course of the evolution of Christianity, the Bible came to be translated into different languages. In fact, it is most popular in its translated version than its original – Latin rather than original Hebrew, but believers do not seem to be concerned about the ‘faithfulness’ of the translation. Eugene Nida describes the translation of the Bible as “arguably the greatest undertaking in interlingual communication in the history of the world” and states: “The significance of Bible translating can be readily sensed when we consider that at least one book of the Scriptures has been translated and published in 2009 languages and dialects, spoken by a minimum of 97 percent of the world’s population” (“Bible translation”, 23).

The Bible is one of the most translated books in the world. It is more popular in its translated versions than in the original Hebrew.

The Bible actually consists of more than one text. It includes the Old Testament and New Testament. The Old Testament contains 39 books and is written Hebrew and partly in Aramaic. The New Testament which has 27 books is in Greek. There are some people, especially the Catholics, who consider the Apocrypha (known also as deuterocanonical), also to be a part of the Bible. It has 12 books and is also in Greek. Since this is not part of original Hebrew, it is not accepted as authentic by the Jews and some Protestants. The Old Testament is common to Judaism and Christianity, and we have seen how it has been translated into Latin by St. Jerome. The Bible eventually reached most corners of the world and its translation was one of the ways in which the faith was spread among non-believers. The translation of the Bible also influenced translation theory, as it raised questions about fidelity and equivalence in translation.

History of Bible translation

Eugene Nida divides the history of Bible translation into three ages: the Greco-Roman period, the Reformation and the modern period. The Greco-Roman period is from 200 BC to 700 AD and covers the ancient phase when the text was still young. The earliest translation was from Hebrew to Greek in the second century BC, known as the Greek Septuagint version. This became the basis for all future translations including into Latin. St. Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin in the 4th century AD, was a great influence not just in the case of Bible translation, but in translation as a whole. He advocated 'sense for sense' translation because he felt that was the best way to convey the message of the text. His Latin translation is called the Vulgate which became the source text for translations into many other languages. The Bible was also translated into other languages like Syriac, Arabic and Gothic during this period.

The Bible became an important text during the turbulent times of the Reformation in Europe which was around the 14th century. The Bible which was believed to be the exclusive privilege of the educated clergy began to have vernacular versions, thanks to the work of religious reformers who felt that even the common man had the right to the word of God. Issues of translation into different languages also got tied up with issues of nationality, as we have already seen in the case of England. This continued up to the 17th-18th centuries.

Spread the word
of God among
common people –
this was the motto
of Bible
translations into
the vernacular.

The Bible in medieval Europe

One of the earliest translators of the Bible in England was John Wycliffe in the 14th century. We see that all translations including Wycliffe's becoming political in a certain sense. The motivation behind these translations was the desire to do away with exploitative middlemen and make God accessible to the common man. In a certain way, these are also the initial steps on the road to democracy where the power is invested in the commons. Maybe that is why the initial translators of the Bible had to face such persecution. But this did not deter the translators, as we see that by the end of the 16th century, the Bible had been translated into most of the European languages. The Hebrew Pentateuch was printed in 1482 and the first complete Hebrew Bible in 1488. The Dutch scholar and philosopher Erasmus published the first Greek New Testament in Basle in 1516. This served as the source text for Martin Luther's German translation in 1522. Danish, Swedish and Czech translations appeared by the end of the 16th century. These translations also had a didactic aim, which was to spread the word of God far and wide. Erasmus in fact expressed this wish when he declared that he wanted all ordinary men and women like the ploughman and the wayfarer to sing the hymns and verses from the Bible, when they were doing their chores of daily life.

Vernacular translations of the Bible paved the way for democracy and Protestantism in Europe.

This liberated the Bible from the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church, and we see the rise of Protestantism in Europe. Martin Luther is the most prominent of all these rebels. We also see that because these translators were very particular in passing across the message of the Bible without any distortions, the concepts of fidelity and equivalence became very important in the context. They were also concerned about developing a good literary style for the vernacular. Luther advised translators to use vernacular proverbs and sayings if that helped in making the meaning clear. This enhanced the power of the vernacular, not just in terms of the vocabulary but also in terms of prestige.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 32: The Bible in Different Languages

Modern age

The 17th and 18th centuries also saw the beginnings of colonization of non-western or non-Christian countries by the west. The translation of the Bible began to take on the new aspect of evangelization which ran parallel to the imperialist mission. Nida observes that there were two phases of Bible translation which was undertaken by missionaries. In the first phase, they translated the Bible into various vernacular languages to spread the faith – for example, William Carey in India. In the second phase, various missionaries were entrusted with translation into languages that hitherto did not have a Bible in their language. Societies like Wycliffe Bible translators, Lutheran Bible Translators and Pioneer Bible Translators have a network of translators who undertake Bible translations in different languages.

The Bible also became an arm of imperialism in the late 19th century in the colonies of Asia and Africa.

This period also saw modern updated versions of the old translations. Thus in English we see the publication of the English Revised Version in 1885 and American Standard Version in 1901. These were texts in modern idiom suited to the tastes of the contemporary reader, devoid of archaisms that could be a problem in understanding the text. The Living Bible of 1971 was a text that used modern language along with interpretation, but there were people who were unhappy about the exegesis.

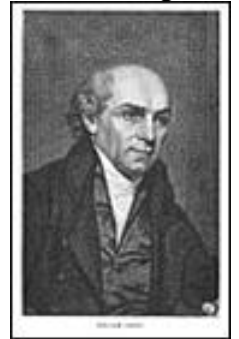
The late 19th century translations of the Bible have to be also seen as an arm of imperialism which worked with the colonial powers in the colonies. The Bible was used to win over the colonized especially in Africa, Asia, and both North and South America. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* talks about the impact of Christianity on a tiny tribal village. The Bible managed to convert people mainly because it tried to reach out to the natives in their own language. This not only helped them in their mission, but helped in the development of the native languages as well.

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 32: The Bible in Different Languages

The Bible in India

India has a very ancient Christian population; it is believed that the first Christians came to India along with St. Thomas in 52 AD. They are believed to have reached the shores of Kerala. The Bible they followed was in Syriac language, and they also had oral instruction in religion. But Bible translation into the Indian languages did not happen till much later with the advent of the missionaries in colonial times. The first of the missionaries to translate the Bible was William Carey of the Baptist Missionary Society. He translated the Bible into Bengali, Sanskrit and other Indian dialects. He along with Joshua Marshman and William Ward (known as the Serampore trio) established the Serampore College to train Indians irrespective of caste and colour, to become Christian clergymen. More importantly, they established the Serampore Mission Press in 1800, which was the first press to start functioning in India. According to Wikipedia, “The press published religious Christian tracts, Indian literary works, translations of the Bible in twenty five Indian vernaculars and other South Asian languages, but the major contribution of the press was printing vernacular textbooks”. This shows how the foreign missionaries helped in the development and standardization of local Indian languages. It must also be mentioned that Carey did not have the blessings of the East India Company in his endeavours, because they were suspicious of missionaries in general.



The Bible Society of India founded in 1811, is another society that undertakes Bible translations. It was established in Calcutta with the aim of making the Bible available in local languages to the people who did not know English. The organization sees to the translation and marketing of the Bible in various parts of India. It has rendered the Bible into 49 Indian languages so far.

It has also to be noted that Bible translations were done only by the Protestant missionaries who came to India with the British. The French or Portuguese were not interested in the mission of translating the Bible; in fact, the Portuguese tried to sever the Christians of India from their indigenous practices and unite them with the Roman Catholic church.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 9 :Translating Religious

Lecture 32:The Bible in Different Languages

The Bible in Malayalam

Let us take the example of the Malayalam translation of the Bible as a representative case from India.

Although the Christians of Kerala formed one of the ancient Christian communities of the world, they did not have a Bible in their language till the 19th century. As was pointed out earlier, the Bible they followed was in the Syriac language, because the Christians of Kerala descended from Syrian ancestors. This situation changed with the advent of the 19th century when the Church Missionary Society arrived in Kerala and discovered that the Christians of Kerala were “languishing for want of scriptures” (George, 63). Dr.



Buchanan the British missionary proposed the translation of the Bible into Malayalam, an idea that was received enthusiastically by the then head of the Syrian Church. Since the British were not very skilled in Malayalam, they took the help of native scholars and priests in this ambitious venture.

Four gospels were initially translated and published in 1811. The translation was made from Syriac, and occasionally the Tamil Bible was also consulted. The British and Foreign Bible Society provided the paper for printing. The Church Missionary Society was based in Kottayam in what was then the princely state of Travancore in the south of Kerala. The British Residents in the state took an active interest in the translation of the Bible, and in 1817 it was decided to translate and publish the complete Bible. Rev. Benjamin Bailey of the Church Missionary Society was entrusted with the work. Assisted by eight Syrian priests, he completed the translation of the New Testament in 1829. The printing was done at the CMS press. The Old Testament was completed later. A committee was appointed in 1835 to supervise his work and finally it was published in 1841 with their approval.

Like most other Bible translations, this too was a group effort of a host of translators under the leadership of Bailey. There were shortcomings as a result, the most prominent being a lack of uniformity of style. There was also criticism about the style that Bailey adopted in the translation. It was felt to be too colloquial and at times, too close to the western idiom that it sounded strange in Malayalam. K. M. George defends it thus: “It is quite a difficult task to give expression to a completely alien culture in a language far removed in background and mode of expression. In certain situations, therefore, the translator is obliged to sacrifice either idiom or faithfulness to the original. And in the translation of Scripture, it is better to sacrifice idiom in order to preserve fidelity” (64). However, the strength and vigour of this prose helped lay the foundation for modern Malayalam.

The Malayalam Bible which was translated by Bailey and his group was revised and published. The person who undertook this was another great linguist and scholar Dr. Herman Gundert from the Basel Evangelical Lutheran Mission. This was published in late 19th century. An important point to be noted is that the first dictionary in Malayalam was compiled by Gundert and so was the first authorized grammar.

Gundert is but one example of how the foreign missionaries helped in the development of local Indian languages through their efforts at translation and lexicography.

◀◀ Previous Next ▶▶

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 32: The Bible in Different Languages

Contributions to language

The contributions made by the Bible to Malayalam prose were not by any means confined to that language alone. In fact this is the case with almost all the languages that the Bible came into contact with. The word of God was brought down to the common person on the street and made part of her daily vocabulary. English, for example, would have been a much poorer language had it not been for the words and idioms from the Bible. There are many phrases that are part of daily usage which we use without realizing that they are actually from the Bible. As old as the hills, manna from heaven, love thy neighbor as thyself, see eye to eye etc are but very few examples. The Bible has seeped into western literature that it is difficult to extricate examples and list them. Imagery and metaphors are deeply indebted to the Bible. Classical works of literature that have drawn upon Biblical sources are too many to recount. Even titles owe themselves to the Bible – for example, *Resurrection* (Tolstoy), *Absalom! Absalom!* (Faulkner), etc. Adaptations of stories from the Old Testament are plenty. Cain and Abel, Sodom and Gomorrah, tower of Babel etc are commonly used images.

A few popular
phrases from the
Bible:

A broken heart

Lamb to the
slaughter

In the twinkling of
the eye

Put words in one's
mouth

The Bible added to the vocabulary of vernacular languages because the significant aspect about Bible translations was its emphasis on fidelity to the source text message. This resulted in sense for sense translation rather than the literal one. Eugene Nida who was primarily involved in Bible translation and was only secondarily a translation theorist, accordingly came up with the concept of dynamic equivalence where the emphasis is on communicating the spirit of the text rather than anything else. He says of dynamic equivalence: “In such a translation one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship, that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message” (129). In practice this meant that the translator had to substitute equivalents from the receptor culture to denote an alien concept. Nida quotes from J. B. Phillips’s translation of the New Testament to prove his point. “In Romans 16:16 he quite naturally translates “greet one another with a holy kiss” as “give one another a hearty handshake all around” (130). The translation has been modified to suit a contemporary milieu.

The Bible thus became the ordinary man’s scripture in the true sense of the word through scores of dedicated translators. They remained faithful to their source text, and made the target language richer

through their indefatigable search for the right words to convey the divine message.

Assignments

1. Trace the history of Biblical translation in the west.
2. Make a list of Biblical words and phrases that has become part of your vernacular vocabulary. Are they different from their usage in English?

References

Nida, Eugene. “Bible Translation”. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. Ed. Mona Baker. London: Routledge, 2000: 22 – 28

“Principles of Correspondence”. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000: 126 – 140

George, K. M. *Western Influence on Malayalam Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1972.

◀ Previous Next ▶