

Historical Trajectory of Bible Translation: From Septuagint to Modern Indian Translations

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Abstract: This article traces the long history of Bible translation from the Septuagint to contemporary tribal language translations in India, showing how translation has shaped Christian faith across cultures and generations. It examines key stages in this journey, including the Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, medieval vernacular efforts, the Protestant Reformation, the growth of Bible Societies, and the expansion of missionary translation. The discussion highlights how vernacular Scripture has strengthened access to Christian teaching, supported literacy, preserved local languages, and encouraged cultural identity. Particular attention is given to India's contribution through early missionary work, the Bible Society of India, and translations in Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Santali, and other tribal languages. The article argues that Bible translation is both a theological responsibility and a cultural bridge, allowing communities to encounter Scripture through the language they know best while preserving their linguistic heritage and strengthening their place within the wider Christian tradition.

Keywords: Bible translation, Christian mission, Vernacular languages, Tribal communities, Bible Society of India

1. Introduction

Bible translation has always stood at the heart of Christian mission. From its earliest beginnings, the faith has grown not by preserving a single sacred language but by continually finding new life in vernacular speech. Lamin Sanneh argues that Christianity is unique among world religions precisely because it is translatable: it does not bind revelation to one language but insists that God's Word must be heard in the language of every people.¹ Andrew Walls complements this by describing Christianity's "serial expansion," where faith takes root afresh in each new culture and language.² Kwame Bediako adds that theology itself is shaped by culture, and translation becomes the medium through which faith and identity interact.³ This insight is especially vital in contexts where oral traditions dominate, such as tribal communities in India. Translation here is not simply linguistic transfer but a theological and cultural act. It affirms dignity, sustains worship, and nurtures belonging among marginalized groups. The story of Bible translation is therefore not only about texts but about communities, identity, and mission.

From the Septuagint in Alexandria to the Bible Society of India's modern tribal translations, the trajectory of Bible translation demonstrates how Scripture has continually democratized faith. Translation has been the means by which Christianity has crossed boundaries of culture, geography, and politics. It has empowered ordinary believers, challenged ecclesiastical control, and reshaped societies. Sanneh insists that translation is not a substitute for revelation but the very means by which the Gospel takes root in new cultures.⁴ For him, the vernacular Bible is the most radical act of Christian mission, because it places God's Word in the hands of ordinary people. Walls echoes this by noting that when

Scripture is translated, faith truly belongs to the community; people encounter God through the rhythms and creativity of their own speech.⁵ This article reconstructs the historical trajectory of Bible translation, situating India within the wider story. It argues that translation is not merely linguistic work but theological and cultural witness. By tracing the journey from the Septuagint to modern Indian tribal translations, the study shows that vernacular Scripture is central to the Christian mission, past and future.

2. Early Foundations: Septuagint and Vulgate

The story begins long before the Christian era, with the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures produced in Alexandria in the third century BCE. This translation was not simply a linguistic exercise but a cultural and theological milestone. It gave diaspora Jews access to Scripture in the lingua franca of the Mediterranean world, Greek, and profoundly shaped the way early Christians interpreted the Old Testament in light of Christ. Karen Jobes and Moises Silva emphasize that the Septuagint was more than a translation; it was also an interpretation.⁶ By rendering Hebrew idioms into Greek, the translators reshaped meaning for new audiences. Martin Hengel underscores that the Septuagint became the "Bible of the early church," since most New Testament writers quoted from it rather than the Hebrew text.⁷ Timothy Michael Law adds that the Septuagint demonstrates how translation itself can create new theological horizons, as Greek readers encountered Scripture in categories familiar to them.⁸

The Septuagint was traditionally begun under the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE), who is said to have commissioned the translation of the Hebrew Torah for the

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 51-53.

² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 27-28.

³ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 229–233.

⁴ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 55–56.

⁵ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 27–28.

⁶ Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 29-31.

⁷ Martin Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problems of Its Canon* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 34-36.

⁸ Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45-48.

Library of Alexandria.⁹ According to the Letter of Aristeas, seventy-two Jewish elders completed the work in seventy-two days, a legend that gave the translation its name.¹⁰ Over the following century, the translation expanded beyond the Pentateuch to include the Prophets, Writings, and several apocryphal texts, becoming the Scriptures most widely used in the Hellenistic Jewish world.¹¹

The Septuagint also illustrates the political dimension of translation. Produced in a cosmopolitan city under Hellenistic influence, it reflected the cultural negotiation between Jewish identity and Greek intellectual life. Translation here was not neutral; it was a way of preserving faith while engaging with dominant culture. For diaspora Jews, the Septuagint affirmed their identity in a foreign land. For Christians, it became the foundation for Christological readings of the Old Testament.

Centuries later, another translation would shape the Western church: Jerome's Latin Vulgate (late fourth century CE). Commissioned by Pope Damasus I, Jerome sought to unify the diverse Latin versions circulating in the church. His translation from Hebrew and Greek into Latin established a standard text that would dominate Western Christianity for more than a millennium. Bruce Metzger explains that the Vulgate became the authoritative text of the Western church, shaping worship, doctrine, and theology.¹² It was read in liturgy, studied by theologians, and used in pastoral care. Yet its dominance also limited vernacular diversity, as Latin became the sole sacred language of Western Christianity. This tension — between unity and suppression of local voices - is a recurring theme in the history of translation.

Jerome began his work on the Latin Vulgate around 382 CE, after Pope Damasus I commissioned him to revise the Old Latin texts then circulating in the church.¹³ He first corrected the Gospels using Greek manuscripts, then translated much of the Old Testament directly from Hebrew, a controversial choice at the time.¹⁴ Completed by the early fifth century, the Vulgate became the standard Bible of Western Christianity, shaping liturgy, theology, and education for more than a millennium.¹⁵

The Septuagint and Vulgate together illustrate the double nature of translation. On the one hand, translation empowers communities by giving them access to Scripture in their own language. On the other hand, it can restrict diversity by elevating one language as authoritative. This tension continues to resonate in tribal contexts today, where dominant languages like Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, or Hindi often overshadow smaller vernaculars.

3. Medieval Vernacular Movements

The medieval era (6th- 15th centuries) was marked by both the dominance of Jerome's Latin Vulgate and the emergence of vernacular movements that sought to make Scripture accessible to ordinary believers. Translation during this period was never neutral; it carried pastoral, cultural, and political meaning. While the Vulgate unified Western Christianity, vernacular efforts reflected the desire to embed faith within local languages and identities.

One of the earliest examples of medieval vernacular translation is found in Bede's Anglo-Saxon rendering of the Gospel of John in the 8th century. Although only fragments survive, Bede's work illustrates a pastoral concern: to make Scripture clear and accessible to ordinary believers who did not know Latin.¹⁶ David Crystal notes that such efforts were part of a broader movement to affirm English identity through language.¹⁷ Later, King Alfred the Great (9th century) promoted vernacular literacy as part of his educational reforms. He believed that wisdom and faith should be accessible to all, not confined to Latin elites. Janet Batley explains that Alfred's reforms included translating parts of Scripture and other religious texts into Old English, motivated by both political and pastoral concerns.¹⁸ By promoting literacy in the vernacular, Alfred sought to strengthen national identity and intensify religious devotion.

The Carolingian Reform (8th – 9th centuries) under Charlemagne emphasized the importance of correct Latin in liturgy and education. While this reform reinforced the authority of the Vulgate, it also encouraged vernacular literature as a means of teaching faith to ordinary people. Vernacular homilies and catechetical texts emerged, reflecting the pastoral need to communicate in the language of the people.

Perhaps the most significant medieval translation project was undertaken by Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine missionaries to the Slavs in the 9th century. They created the Glagolitic script and translated Scripture into Old Slavonic, making worship possible in the local language. Francis Dvornik highlights that their work was deeply political, securing a place for Slavic Christianity within the Byzantine world.¹⁹ By translating Scripture into Slavonic, Cyril and Methodius gave cultural legitimacy to Slavic Christianity. Their work laid the foundation for Slavic literacy, culture, and church influence. Translation here was not only pastoral but also cultural and political, embedding faith within the rhythms of Slavic identity.

Throughout the medieval period, vernacular translation often faced resistance from ecclesiastical authorities. The church

⁹ Aristeas, *Letter of Aristeas*, trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 45-47.

¹⁰ Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture*, 34-36.

¹¹ Law, *When God Spoke Greek*, 45-48.

¹² Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 69-72.

¹³ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 7-9.

¹⁴ Jerome, *Preface to the Pentateuch*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 489-491.

¹⁵ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 69-72.

¹⁶ Bede, quoted in David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (London: Penguin, 2004), 87.

¹⁷ Crystal, *The Stories of English*, 87.

¹⁸ Janet Batley, *The Literary Prose of King Alfred's Reign* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 34-36.

¹⁹ Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 97-103.

feared that vernacular Scripture might undermine clerical control and lead to heresy. Yet vernacular movements persisted, driven by pastoral concern and cultural identity. For example, in England, the Wycliffite Bible (late 14th century) translated Scripture into Middle English.²⁰ Although condemned by church authorities, it became a powerful tool for lay devotion and reform. Vernacular translation here was both theological and political, challenging ecclesiastical monopoly and empowering ordinary believers. Medieval vernacular movements illustrate the double meaning of translation: it was both a pastoral act of care and a political act of resistance. By translating Scripture into local languages, translators affirmed cultural identity and empowered ordinary believers. At the same time, they challenged ecclesiastical control and reshaped the relationship between faith and society.

4. Reformation and Democratization

The sixteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the history of Bible translation. The Protestant Reformation was not only a theological upheaval but also a linguistic revolution. Translation became the means by which the principle of *Sola Scriptura*- Scripture alone - was realized. By rendering the Bible into vernacular languages, reformers democratized faith, challenged ecclesiastical control, and reshaped culture.

In 1522, Martin Luther published his translation of the New Testament into German, followed by the complete Bible in 1534. His work embodied the conviction that Scripture should be accessible to ordinary Christians. Diarmaid MacCulloch notes that Luther's translation was not only theological but cultural, helping to standardize the German language and foster national identity.²¹ Luther insisted that Scripture should "speak German," meaning that it should resonate with the rhythms of everyday speech. His approach was receptor-oriented, anticipating later theories of dynamic equivalence. By translating into the vernacular, Luther empowered ordinary believers to read Scripture directly, without mediation by clergy.

In England, William Tyndale undertook a similar project. In 1526, he published his translation of the New Testament into English. David Daniell observes that Tyndale's work was revolutionary, both linguistically and spiritually, because it gave ordinary believers direct access to God's Word.²² Tyndale's translation laid the foundation for the later King James Version (1611), one of the most influential texts in English history. His phrasing shaped English prose and devotion for centuries. Yet his work was condemned by church authorities, and he was executed in 1536. His martyrdom underscores the risks faced by translators who challenged ecclesiastical monopoly, reminding that vernacular Scripture was not only a theological project but also a dangerous act of resistance. Tyndale's vision was clear:

"I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost."²³ Translation here was democratization, placing Scripture in the hands of ordinary people and reshaping the relationship between faith and society.

5. Modern Expansion: Bible Societies and Missionary Zeal

The centuries following the Reformation witnessed an unprecedented expansion of Bible translation. Advances in printing, the rise of missionary movements, and the establishment of Bible Societies transformed translation into a global enterprise. By the nineteenth century, Scripture was being translated into hundreds of languages, embedding Christianity into diverse cultural settings across Asia, Africa, and the Pacific.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Bible Societies had transformed translation into a truly global enterprise. The British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), founded in 1804, reported distributing more than 4.2 million Bibles and Testaments by 1824, and by 1879 circulation had reached 82 million copies; by 1909, over 215 million copies had been issued in more than 200 languages.²⁴ Early projects illustrate the breadth of this expansion: the Mohawk Gospel portions in Canada (1804), the Bengali New Testament printed at Serampore in 1813, Adoniram Judson's Burmese Bible completed in 1834, the Tahitian New Testament in 1829, and the Amharic Bible in Ethiopia during the nineteenth century.²⁵ These translations were often the first written texts in their respective languages, simultaneously preserving linguistic heritage and embedding Christian faith within local cultures. The scale and diversity of these efforts demonstrate that Bible Societies were not merely distributing Scripture but actively shaping literacy, identity, and theology across continents.²⁶ The BFBS was followed by other national societies, including the American Bible Society (1816).

By rendering Scripture into local languages, missionaries affirmed cultural identity and reshaped mission. Missionary translation was often receptor-oriented, seeking to communicate meaning in everyday speech. Eugene Nida later formalized this approach as dynamic equivalence, but its roots can be traced to nineteenth-century missionary practice. Translation here was not only linguistic but cultural, embedding faith within the rhythms of local life.

The nineteenth century also witnessed advances in philology and textual criticism. Scholars studied ancient manuscripts, compared versions, and sought to produce more accurate translations. Metzger notes that these advances improved the reliability of translations, ensuring that Scripture could be understood with greater precision.²⁷ Philology also influenced

²⁰ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 341–345.

²¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Viking, 2003), 121–123.

²² David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 118–122.

²³ Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 119.

²⁴ John Sharpe, *The British and Foreign Bible Society: A History* (London: BFBS, 1964), 44–46.

²⁵ Bridwell Library Special Collections, *Bibles in Asian Languages: Eight Centuries of the Bible in Translation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 2024).

²⁶ Saneh, *Translating the Message*, 51–53.

²⁷ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 69–72.

missionary translation. By studying local languages systematically, missionaries produced grammars, dictionaries, and linguistic analyses. These efforts not only facilitated translation but also contributed to the preservation of indigenous languages. Translation here was both scholarly and missional, linking academic study with cultural empowerment.

The impact of Bible Societies and missionary translation was immense. By the late nineteenth century, Scripture had been translated into hundreds of languages, reaching communities across Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Sanneh observes that this expansion was not merely about numbers but about identity.²⁸ By translating Scripture into local languages, missionaries affirmed cultural dignity and reshaped mission. Translation became a tool of empowerment, literacy growth, and theological reflection.

6. India's Distinctive Contribution

India occupies a unique place in the global history of Bible translation. While the Reformation and the rise of Bible Societies shaped Europe and the wider world, India became a laboratory of vernacular translation where missionaries, scholars, and local leaders engaged deeply with culture and language.

Roman Catholic Beginnings: The earliest phase of Bible translation in India was shaped by Roman Catholic missionaries during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their efforts were closely tied to liturgical and catechetical needs, rather than the production of complete Bibles. Partial translations appeared in Konkani, Tamil, and Malayalam, often in the form of Gospel portions, catechisms, or prayer texts. Thomas K. Kunnunkal notes that these fragmentary translations were designed to serve worship and instruction, embedding Christian teaching within the rhythms of local languages.²⁹ Catholic translations reflected the missionary strategy of embedding faith within local culture, while maintaining ecclesiastical oversight. They opened Scripture to ordinary believers but also highlighted the tension between accessibility and authority.

Protestant Initiatives: A decisive breakthrough came with the Protestant Tranquebar Mission. Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, a Lutheran missionary sent in 1706, completed the first full Tamil New Testament in 1715.³⁰ His work engaged deeply with Tamil idioms and rhythms, anticipating later theories of dynamic equivalence. Ziegenbalg believed that Scripture should be accessible to ordinary believers in their own language, embedding faith within Tamil culture and reshaping mission. His translation set a standard for later

Protestant efforts, demonstrating that vernacular Scripture was central to Christian mission in India.

Other Indian translations followed prior to the Serampore Mission, but the most ambitious project was undertaken by William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward in the early nineteenth century. Brian Stanley describes their work as encyclopaedic, covering dozens of Indian languages and dialects.³¹ The Serampore Trio produced grammars, dictionaries, and linguistic analyses, laying the foundation for systematic translation. Their work was not only theological but also scholarly, contributing to the preservation of Indian languages. By seeking to communicate meaning in everyday speech, they ensured that Scripture resonated with local communities and became embedded in the rhythms of Indian life.

The Bible Society of India: The Bible Society of India, founded in 1811, institutionalized this work. By the late nineteenth century, it had published Bibles in more than eighty Indian languages.³² Its establishment marked a shift from individual missionary initiatives to coordinated institutional efforts. By the twentieth century, attention shifted to indigenous and tribal languages, affirming communities long excluded from dominant narratives. The Bible Society's work ensured that translation was not merely a missionary endeavour but a national and ecumenical enterprise, embedding Scripture into the linguistic diversity of India.

Tribal Language Translations: The twentieth century witnessed a significant expansion into tribal languages, reflecting both missional concern and cultural affirmation. The Khasi Bible was first published in 1891, building on the pioneering work of Welsh missionary Thomas Jones, who introduced the Roman script to Khasi in the mid-19th century. His 1842 Khasi Reader and subsequent translations laid the foundation for Khasi literacy and literature, embedding Christian faith within tribal identity.³³ The Garo Bible followed in 1924, produced under the auspices of the Bible Society of India. Missionaries adopted Roman script to overcome difficulties with Bengali orthography, and the translation became central to Garo Christian worship and education.³⁴ Both Khasi and Garo translations illustrate how Bible work was inseparable from the creation of written traditions, schools, and cultural preservation.

In Mizoram, the Mizo Bible was completed in 1959 by the Bible Society of India, building on earlier portions translated by J.H. Lorraine and F.W. Savidge, who had introduced a written form of Mizo in the late 19th century.³⁵ The translation catalysed a literacy revolution, making Mizoram one of the most literate states in India. The Santali New Testament was

²⁸ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 55-56.

²⁹ Thomas K. Kunnunkal, "Early Catholic Bible Translations in India," *The Bible Translator* 34, no. 2 (1983): 201-205.

³⁰ Daniel Jeyaraj, *Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg: The Father of Modern Protestant Mission* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 142-145.

³¹ Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 63-65.

³² Bible Society of India, *Two Hundred Years of Bible Work in India* (Bangalore: BSI, 2011), 220-24; Hrangthan Chhungi, "Bible

Translation in India: A Missiological Appraisal," *The Bible Translator* 63, no. 2 (2012): 67-75.

³³ Andrew J. May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of Clouds in North-East India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 87-90.

³⁴ Bible Society of India, *Two Hundred Years of Bible Work in India*, 87-90.

³⁵ D. Ben Rees, ed., *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1840-1970* (Liverpool: Welsh Religious Studies Trust, 2002), 145-147.

published in 1922, but the full Bible was only completed in 2008, reflecting the long trajectory of translation in Austroasiatic tribal languages.³⁶ The Santali Bible is significant not only for faith but also for affirming Santali identity across India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where the community is dispersed. These translations were often the first written texts in their languages, simultaneously preserving oral traditions and embedding Christian faith within local cultures.

Tribal Importance

The importance of tribal translations in India lies in their role as catalysts of identity and empowerment. They codified unwritten languages, strengthened cultural heritage, and enabled education. In Khasi and Mizo, Bible translation laid the foundation for modern tribal literature, newspapers, and schools. In Santali, the translation affirmed dignity and belonging among marginalized groups, ensuring that faith was expressed in the “language of the heart.” By 2008, the Bible Society of India reported 84 full Bibles and 88 New Testaments completed in Indian languages, many of them tribal, with a roadmap to reach 225 additional languages by 2036.³⁷ This trajectory shows that tribal translations are not secondary but central to Christian mission in India, embodying continuity with global translation movements while retaining distinctiveness rooted in India’s linguistic diversity.

7. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Bible translation - from the Septuagint to modern Indian tribal versions - demonstrates that translation is not merely linguistic work but theological and cultural witness. It democratizes faith, affirms identity, and reshapes mission. The Septuagint showed that translation could create new theological horizons; the Vulgate revealed both unity and suppression; medieval vernacular movements affirmed cultural identity and resisted ecclesiastical control; the Reformation democratized faith and reshaped culture; Bible Societies institutionalized translation as a global mission; and India’s distinctive contribution affirmed vernacular dignity and tribal identity.

For India and its tribal communities, vernacular Scripture is not secondary but central to Christian life. Translation here is both theological witness and cultural empowerment, ensuring that faith belongs to the people in the rhythms of their own speech. The story of Bible translation reminds that Christianity’s vitality lies in its translatability - its capacity to take root afresh in every culture and language, past and future.

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³⁷ Chhungi, “Bible Translation in India: A Missiological Appraisal,” 67-75.