

The History of Bible Translation in Tribal Languages of Araku Valley

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Abstract: *This article examines the development of Bible translation in the tribal languages of Araku Valley in the Eastern Ghats, with particular attention to Desia, Kuvi, and Konda Basha. Drawing on published historical and linguistic sources, translation materials, and interviews with individuals associated with translation work, the study traces the movement from early linguistic documentation and missionary involvement toward sustained vernacular translation and greater indigenous participation. Particular attention is given to the contributions of Uwe Gustafsson, K.C. Markose, local translators, and translation organisations. The study shows how literacy development, community testing, oral traditions, and mother-tongue participation contributed to the production and reception of vernacular Scripture. It argues that Bible translation in Araku Valley has functioned not only as linguistic and theological work but also as a means of affirming cultural identity and strengthening local Christian expression.*

Keywords: Bible translation, Araku Valley, Desia, Kuvi, Konda Basha, tribal Christianity, vernacular Scripture, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Araku Valley, situated in the Eastern Ghats along the Andhra Pradesh–Odisha border, is home to diverse tribal communities whose languages embody memory, identity, and faith. For these peoples, Bible translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a theological witness and a means of cultural preservation.

This paper traces the history and significance of Bible translation in three languages: Desia (Kotia-Desia), Kuvi (Kondh), and Konda Basha (Konda Dora). It highlights the pioneering work of Uwe Gustafsson, the contributions of K.C. Markose, and the institutional role of C-Base in coordinating translation projects. By situating these efforts within the broader missional and cultural landscape, the study demonstrates how vernacular translations have shaped Christianity in the valley, sustained tribal dignity, and affirmed community identity.

2. Methodology

This study combines historical and documentary sources with interviews conducted among translators and community leaders in Araku Valley. Interview participants were selected based on their direct involvement in translation projects or their leadership roles in tribal communities. Information from interviews was cross-checked against published sources and translation materials where possible. Consent was obtained from participants, and ethical care was taken to represent their perspectives accurately.

Cultural and Social Context of Araku Valley

Araku Valley is one of the most culturally diverse tribal regions in the Eastern Ghats. More than ninety percent of its population belongs to Scheduled Tribes, including the

Bagatha, Gadaba, Kotia, Kondh, Porja, Valmiki, and Konda Dora, among others.¹ Each group maintains distinct cultural practices, languages, and social hierarchies, often expressed through systems of phratries and clan affiliations. Traditional leadership structures regulate village life, with the Naik (headman), Bariki (messenger), and Dehuri (priest) serving as key figures in governance and ritual. The Sadar, a sacred gathering place beneath a banyan or peepul tree, functions as the hub for collective decision-making, dispute resolution, and festival planning.²

Religious life is equally vibrant. Animistic practices, ancestor veneration, and agricultural festivals such as the Seed Festival form the spiritual rhythms of the valley. Shrines like the hundi embody the sacred presence of the divine within village life, while rituals often include animal sacrifices and offerings to local deities (Gram Devata). Cultural resilience is vividly expressed through practices such as the Dhimsa dance, performed during weddings and festivals, and marital customs ranging from levirate unions to pot-exchange agreements.³ These customs provide the cultural setting for understanding Bible translation, reminding us that translation must always be seen against this living backdrop.

Economically, most households rely on agriculture, cultivating rice, millets, pulses, and beans, alongside forest products like honey, tamarind, and medicinal roots. Coffee plantations, introduced during the colonial era, have expanded significantly in recent decades, making Araku Valley known for its organic coffee brands.⁴ This economic base sustains village life and provides the context in which literacy and translation initiatives take root.

Araku Valley's linguistic diversity is both a challenge and an opportunity for Bible translation. The Desia dialect, spoken by the Kotia and widely used as a market language, functions as a lingua franca across tribal groups. The Kuvi language,

¹ Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 45–47.

² Pamela Mackenzie, *Keeping it Local: Change and Development in an Indian Tribal Community* (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2006), 62–65.

³ Konduparti Maalyada and Bhavaraju Lakshmi Surya Teja, "Tribal Festivals and Dhimsa Dance of North Coastal Andhra: An Ethnographic Study in Araku Valley," *International Journal of Arts and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (January 2026): 12–15.

⁴ Vivek Nemana, *The Sun Always Rises: Caste, Predatory Development and the Struggle for Self-Worth in India's Araku Valley* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2025), 88–92.

belonging to the Kondh (classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group), reflects Dravidian roots and carries deep cultural memory. The Konda Basha, spoken by the Konda Dora, shows contact between Dravidian and Indo-Aryan traditions, embodying the valley's hybrid identity.⁵

These languages are not merely tools of communication; they are vessels of identity, ritual, and belonging. Translation into them therefore becomes more than linguistic transfer- it is a theological witness and cultural affirmation.

3. Prelude to the Translation Work

The decades preceding Indian independence were marked by two parallel quests: the nationalist struggle for political freedom and the missionary search for transformative engagement with tribal communities. While Indian leaders envisioned liberation from colonial rule, missionaries sought to bring both spiritual renewal and practical uplift to marginalised populations. In tribal regions such as Araku Valley, these two trajectories intersected in complex ways. Missionaries introduced literacy programs, agricultural innovations, and community development initiatives, while the British colonial administration focused on infrastructure, governance, and linguistic surveys.⁶ Together, these forces created the conditions that would later shape Bible translation efforts in the Valley.

The British administration viewed Araku Valley primarily through strategic and infrastructural lenses. The rugged terrain of the Eastern Ghats prompted the construction of the Ghat road, facilitating troop movement and trade. Later, in the 1960s, the railway line connecting Visakhapatnam to Araku (the KK line—Kothavalasa to Kirandul) became a marvel of engineering, with fifty-eight tunnels and numerous bridges cutting through the hills. This railway not only integrated Araku into colonial and post-colonial networks but also symbolised the emphasis on infrastructure as a means of control and resource extraction.⁷

Agriculture in Araku was also shaped by wartime priorities. Padmapuram Gardens, established in 1942 on a 26-acre plot to supply vegetables to soldiers during World War II, later became a horticultural nursery and training centre. Featuring orchards, rare species of flowers and trees, rose gardens, and exotic plants such as eucalyptus and pine, Padmapuram Gardens today is a tourist hub.⁸ Yet its origins lie firmly in the colonial wartime effort to sustain troops through local cultivation.

Beyond infrastructure, the British invested heavily in linguistic research. The Linguistic Survey of India (1894–

1928), directed by George Abraham Grierson, documented 364 languages and dialects across the subcontinent. Grierson famously noted that “every few hours of travel in India brings one to a new language, attire, and lifestyle.”⁹ This observation highlighted the sheer density of cultural and linguistic variation across the subcontinent, reminding both colonial administrators and later missionaries that India could not be approached as a monolithic entity but required sensitivity to local identities and tongues.

Missionaries across India often engaged in agriculture as part of their holistic vision of mission. In Bengal, Baptist missionaries such as William Carey experimented with botanical gardens and agricultural science, contributing to the diffusion of crops like indigo and encouraging scientific farming. In Assam, American Baptist missionaries arrived in the 1830s, coinciding with the East India Company's experiments in tea cultivation.¹⁰ In Andhra Pradesh, Canadian Baptist missionaries such as Thomas Gabriel (arriving in 1850) and later Robert McLaurin combined evangelism with horticulture and literacy.¹¹ This dual emphasis reflected their holistic vision of mission: material well-being and literacy as pathways to Christian discipleship.

During World War II, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) began engaging with the Government of India through memoranda of understanding to study and document languages nationwide. SIL's mission was tied to literacy, language documentation, and Bible translation. Its entry into India reflected a global trend: the recognition that linguistic research was essential for both education and evangelism.¹² By the 1970s, nationalist movements demanded that foreigners leave the country, but SIL continued its linguistic engagement, emphasising respect for indigenous languages and cultural identity.

This period marked a transition from foreign-led initiatives to indigenous leadership. Missionaries departing from India often prayed for native leaders to rise up and continue the work. SIL's linguistic documentation ensured that tribal languages were not neglected, even as political pressures limited foreign involvement. The prelude to Bible translation in Araku Valley thus involved multiple strands: missionary agricultural initiatives, British infrastructural development, colonial linguistic surveys, and SIL's linguistic engagement. Together, these elements created a foundation upon which translation work could later be built.

4. Uwe Gustafsson: Linguistic Foundations in Araku Valley

⁵ Bh. Krishnamurti, *Konda or Kubi: A Dravidian Language* (Hyderabad: Department of Tribal Welfare, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1969), 3–7.

⁶ Kenneth Ingham, *Reformers in India, 1793–1833: An Account of the Work of Christian Missionaries on Behalf of Social Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 112–118.

⁷ K. V. Subrahmanyam, *Railways in Andhra Pradesh: A Historical Survey* (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1988), 55–59.

⁸ Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation, *Padmapuram Gardens: A Historical Overview* (Visakhapatnam: APTDC, 2005), 9–12.

⁹ George Abraham Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Government of India, 1903), xiii–xv.

¹⁰ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 142–147.

¹¹ Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 148–152.

¹² William Smalley, *Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 201–205.

The figure whose work became a living bridge between missionary beginnings and indigenous leadership in Araku Valley was Uwe Gustafsson, a Canadian linguist and missionary whose presence in the Eastern Ghats from the 1970s onward left a profound legacy. Gustafsson arrived at a time when the Kotia-Desia language was widely spoken but remained almost entirely oral. Literacy levels were low, and there was no standardised script. He recognised that without a written form, translation would remain fragile and faith expression limited.¹³

Gustafsson's contribution was twofold: linguistic documentation and cultural engagement. His monumental *Adivasi Oriya-Telugu-English Dictionary*, compiled over years of fieldwork, preserved thousands of oral terms, idioms, and proverbs.¹⁴ This dictionary gave Desia a written identity for the first time, enabling literacy programs and providing translators with a foundation for rendering biblical concepts faithfully. He also produced primers, bilingual readers, and literacy materials such as *Fireside Stories* (1982),¹⁵ designed to help tribal children learn to read in their own tongue while simultaneously affirming cultural heritage..

Beyond linguistic work, Gustafsson immersed himself in the everyday life of Araku Valley. He participated in agricultural initiatives, encouraged sustainable farming, and documented folk songs and oral narratives. His conviction was clear: "Scripture speaks most effectively in the mother tongue." By stabilising orthography and preparing communities for vernacular literacy, he laid the groundwork for Bible translation in Desia.

The culmination of decades of linguistic groundwork and missionary perseverance was the publication of the Desia New Testament, locally known as *Nuva Niyom*. The earliest steps toward this achievement were modest: in 1977, the Gospel of Mark was translated into Desia and printed in Telugu script to ensure accessibility for semi-literate readers. By 1984, plans were underway for the Gospel of John, with proposals to print 5,000 illustrated copies to aid comprehension among new readers.¹⁶ Drafts were read aloud in village gatherings, and elders confirmed whether the words carried the intended sense without distortion.

The first complete New Testament in Desia was officially published in 2014.¹⁷ Its release marked a decisive moment in the history of tribal translation, affirming that the Kotia and neighbouring communities could now hear and read the Word of God in their own tongue. Gustafsson's legacy is best understood as the foundation stage of translation in Araku Valley. He envisioned Scripture in the mother tongue, created linguistic tools, and preserved oral heritage. His work demonstrated that translation must begin with careful listening

to the rhythms of tribal speech, even if devotional ownership was still to come.

5. Bible Translation in Konda Basha

Missionary engagement in Araku Valley during the 1940s brought new dimensions to tribal life. The Canadian Baptist Mission presence at Sunkarametta, spearheaded by Ralph Smith, opened the Valley to international partners who combined evangelistic zeal with humanitarian service. Among them were Richard and Edith, American missionaries who settled in Champaguda village among the Konda Dora community.¹⁸ Their primary mission was medical: providing care for leprosy patients and addressing general health needs in a region where modern healthcare was virtually absent. Yet their vision extended beyond medicine. With a second agenda of agricultural development, they taught the tribal people methods to protect the forest ecosystem and introduced new crops such as potato and coffee, which later became staples in the Valley.

By weaving together medical care, agricultural innovation, and educational empowerment, Richard and Edith left a legacy that profoundly shaped the Konda Dora people's trajectory. Their contributions created fertile ground- socially, economically, and spiritually- for the later translation of the Bible into Konda Basha, as literacy and community organisation were already strengthened by their presence. It was within this context that Jacob George was introduced to the region and subsequently assumed leadership of the Konda Basha Bible translation initiatives.¹⁹

Jacob George, serving as India Director for Bible translations, alongside his wife Susan George, began work in 1979 when literacy among the Konda Dora was still emerging and the language had limited written sources. Though not trained linguists, they worked closely with local speakers, ensuring that the text was made available to the people. They produced primers and literacy materials in Konda, such as *Primer Book 2* (1998), published under the Tribal Literacy Project, Every Home Crusade, which helped standardise orthography and train readers in the script.²⁰ These primers were important preparatory resources, enabling the community to engage with the translated Scriptures.

Recognising the need for dedicated personnel, George invited two unmarried women from Kerala, Minnie and Delani, whose commitment and service provided the continuity necessary for the translation effort to begin. Their presence signalled the transition from exploratory missionary engagement to sustained work among the tribal communities of Araku Valley. Delani later married K.C. Markose, while Minnie married Viji Matthews, who subsequently became the Director

¹³ Greg Younger-Lewis and Seema B. Nair, "How Uwe Gustafsson Rewrote the History of Araku Valley," *Rediff.com*, August 18, 2025.

¹⁴ Uwe Gustafsson, *Adivasi Oriya-Telugu-English Dictionary* (Madras: Diocesan Press, 1982).

¹⁵ Uwe Gustafsson, Buridi Rogumoni, Golori Ram, and Golori Baram, *Fireside Stories* (Madras: Diocesan Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Interview with Johnson Kuruvilla, Padmapuram, October 19, 2025

¹⁷ Bible Society of India, *Desia New Testament: Nuva Niyom* (Bangalore: Bible Society of India, 2014).

¹⁸ Interview with Vanthala Gasi, Araku Valley, September 15, 2025.

¹⁹ Jacob George and Susan George. *Bible Translation Story*. YouTube video, 26:13. Posted by *Houston Voice by SO*, August 15, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qYw2hXcFzM> (youtube.com in Bing).

²⁰ Tribal Literacy Project, *Primer Book 2* (Madras: Every Home Crusade, 1998).

of Translations and one of the founders of C-Base, the organization under which translation work in Araku Valley and throughout India continues today.²¹

5.1 K.C. Markose's Role in Konda Bible Translation – Kotha Opumanam

K.C. Markose, originally from Kottayam, Kerala, stands as a pivotal figure in the history of Bible translation among the tribal communities of Araku Valley. His early theological training and pastoral ministry prepared him for cross-cultural engagement, but it was his marriage to Delani that decisively shaped his missionary trajectory. In 1996, Markose and his wife relocated to Maradaguda village in Ananthagiri, where they immersed themselves in tribal life. Formal linguistic training at Nashik in 1997 further equipped them for the complexities of translation work.²² Within six months of immersion, Markose attained fluency in Konda, a remarkable achievement that enabled him to begin translation projects almost immediately.

Markose's translation work in Konda began in 1997 with the narrative of Noah's Flood, followed by the Gospel of Matthew. Over the next several years, he systematically translated key New Testament texts: 1 and 2 Thessalonians (1998), 1 and 2 Corinthians (1999), and Revelation (2001).²³ His methodology combined linguistic precision with cultural sensitivity, ensuring that the translated texts resonated with the oral traditions and world-views of the Konda-speaking communities. Drafts were read aloud in village gatherings to test comprehension and accuracy, embodying a participatory approach that valued community feedback. Assisted by Sontari Dayanidhi, a native pastor, Markose refined the texts through iterative community engagement.

Recognising the importance of oral and musical traditions, Markose produced *Neggi Devunni* (2002), the first audio cassette of indigenous Christian songs. This integration of Scripture and song reinforced the accessibility of biblical themes. A comprehensive revision of the New Testament was completed in 2004, culminating in its publication on 16 January 2006, with a formal dedication at Maradaguda and Kumarput. Supplementary projects included *Yehova Devun* (2007, audio cassette and CDs) and the *God's Story* video in Konda (2007).²⁴ These initiatives demonstrated Markose's holistic vision: translation was not confined to print but extended to oral and visual media, ensuring engagement across literacy levels.

Markose's commitment was underscored by extensive travel—nearly 80,000 kilometres across Konda villages by motorbike. This sacrificial service reflected his deep integration into tribal life. By visiting households, participating in festivals, and engaging in daily routines, he embodied the scholar-practitioner model, where translation was inseparable from presence and relationship. His immersion fostered trust, a crucial factor in the acceptance of vernacular Scripture.

6. Bible Translation in Kuvi- Puyini Paramana

The Kuvi language, spoken by the Kondh people of the Eastern Ghats, represents one of the most culturally significant translation projects in Araku Valley. As a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Kondh have historically been marginalised, with low literacy rates and limited access to education. Their language, however, carries deep cultural resonance, rooted in oral traditions, ritual songs, and ancestral narratives. Translating the Bible into Kuvi was therefore not only a linguistic task but also a political and cultural affirmation of dignity.

The earliest scholarly interest in Kuvi dates back to colonial ethnographers such as F.V.P. Schulze, who published *The Religion of the Kuvi-Konds: Their Customs and Folk-Lore* in 1912.²⁵ Schulze's work documented ritual practices, cosmology, and oral traditions, providing a foundation for later linguistic engagement. Yet systematic translation did not begin until the late twentieth century, when C-Base identified Kuvi as a priority language for Scripture. Emerging from earlier Konda translation efforts led by K.C. Markose, the Kuvi project was formally inaugurated in 2011 under the Central India Cluster (CIC) and Wycliffe Bible Translators.²⁶ This initiative included multiple tribal languages—Kondh, Kuvi, Duruva, Halbi, and Gondi—reflecting a cluster strategy designed to maximize resources and foster sustainability.

In 2009, Markose shifted his focus from Konda Basha to Kuvi translation. This transition was not a matter of abandoning responsibility but a strategic move within the broader translation movement. By situating Kuvi within a cluster of related tribal languages, the project leveraged shared resources, training programs, and methodological frameworks, ensuring efficiency and sustainability. The earlier Kuvi New Testament in Odia script had been published in 1994 by the Bible Society of India, inaugurated at Laxmipur, Koraput district, Odisha, under the Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church. With Markose's leadership, however, a new phase began—initiating Kuvi translation in the Telugu script, thereby aligning the language more closely with regional literacy practices and expanding its accessibility among tribal communities. The Kuvi Bible translation project was initially designed under the collaborative leadership of Ezra Sastry from Kothavalasa village in Hukumpeta and Markose. The first published Kuvi text was the Gospel of Mark, released in 2012.²⁷ This choice was strategic; Mark's concise narrative style and emphasis on action made it accessible to new readers and listeners. The translation was tested in village gatherings, where drafts were read aloud to ensure comprehension.

7. C-Base and the Leadership of Viji Matthews

The institutional consolidation of Bible translation in Araku Valley came under the leadership of Viji Matthews, who, together with his wife Minnie Matthews, transformed the work into a multi-language and international enterprise. Originally trained in software management, Viji brought organisational

²¹ Interview with K.C. Markose, Paderu, October 10, 2025.

²² Interview, Markose, Oct 10, 2025.

²³ Interview, Markose, Oct 10, 2025.

²⁴ Interview with Sappi Rajesh, Visakhapatnam, October 22, 2025.

²⁵ F.V.P. Schulze, *The Religion of the Kuvi-Konds: Their Customs and Folk-Lore* (Saluru: Graves, Cookson & Co., 1912).

²⁶ Interview with Viji Matthews, Visakhapatnam, October 5, 2025.

²⁷ Interview, Markose, Oct 10, 2025.

expertise that complemented Minnie's linguistic training in Hebrew and Greek. Their marriage in the early 1990s marked a decisive turning point, as Minnie had already been engaged in translation among the Konda Dora. Settling in Maradaguda, they assumed responsibility for the Konda project, which had earlier been initiated under Jacob George and the Konda Tribal Foundation.²⁸ Under Viji's direction, the work was expanded and formalised, eventually leading to the establishment of C-Base in Visakhapatnam in 2022.

C-Base quickly became the hub for translation projects not only in Araku Valley but across India and beyond. With support from Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International, the organisation coordinated projects in eighteen languages, including Kuvi, Konda Basha, and Desia, while also extending its reach to Nepal, Bangladesh, and South Africa.²⁹ Viji's leadership emphasised community ownership, equipping mother-tongue translators such as Ravi, Samuel, Ezra Sastry (Kuvi), Rajesh Sappi, Killo Parasuram (Konda), and Vanthala Gopala Rao (Desia). Minnie's role as a global consultant ensured linguistic precision and theological depth, while Viji's managerial vision provided sustainability and expansion. Together, they exemplified how translation in Araku Valley matured from missionary beginnings into a locally rooted, globally connected movement.

8. Conclusion

The history of Bible translation in Araku Valley demonstrates a gradual movement from linguistic documentation and externally initiated missionary work toward sustained community participation and stronger mother-tongue involvement. The development of Scripture resources in Desia, Konda Basha, and Kuvi depended on literacy initiatives, linguistic preparation, oral testing, institutional support, and the contributions of both outside workers and local speakers.

The work associated with Uwe Gustafsson, Jacob and Susan George, K.C. Markose, Minnie and Delani Matthews, and native translators shows that translation developed through continuing relationships with the communities concerned rather than through textual production alone. Gustafsson's linguistic foundations gave Desia a written identity; George and his colleagues provided administrative continuity and literacy resources; Markose's sacrificial immersion and participatory methodology ensured cultural resonance and acceptance.

Print, audio, digital, and indigenous-language resources further extended access across different literacy contexts. Taken together, these histories show that vernacular Bible translation in Araku Valley has contributed to local Christian expression while also giving written and institutional visibility to tribal languages and their cultural contexts. The continuing involvement of mother-tongue translators indicates an important shift toward greater local ownership and sustainability, ensuring that the Scriptures remain both linguistically faithful and culturally meaningful for generations to come.³³

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