

Santali New Testament Revision

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The Santals, numbering nearly three million people, are the largest of the aboriginal tribes who have their home in N.E. India. Up till comparatively recent times their habitation was confined mainly to the districts of Bihar and Bengal lying to the south of the Ganges, but during the latter part of last century large migrations took place north-eastwards across the river, and nowadays there are Santal settlements in N. Bengal and Assam where many of them are employed in the tea-gardens. In all the territories where they have made their home the Santals form a minority, often a very small minority, of the population, which is mainly Aryan in race and Hindi or Bengali in speech, but the Santals live in separate villages, and they have preserved the purity of their race and language to a remarkable degree. Although words of Sanskrit origin have been freely imported, the structure of the language remains constant wherever it is spoken. Santali is highly inflected, and rejoices in having a dual number and inclusive and exclusive forms of both dual and plural 'we', numerous tenses of the verb and a formidable array of particles and interjections which give a rich flavour to Santali conversation. Such linguistic refinements enable the speaker to convey his meaning with small risk of misunderstanding — except on the part of the unwary foreigner.

Historical

The first Santali translation of the complete New Testament, published in 1888, was made by the C. M. S. missionaries, who based their version on the English Authorised Version. The first complete translation from the Greek, made by the Lutherans of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches, appeared in 1908. The Lutherans also made the first and the only complete translation of the Old Testament, though portions of it, including the Psalms, had previously been rendered into Santali by the C. M. S. missionaries. Other missions to the Santals adopted one or other of the New Testament versions in their Churches. The Lutherans form the largest single Christian community and this numerical preponderance, together with the fact that they have made the only translation of the whole Bible, accounts for the wider use of their rendering of the New Testament, which is known as the Benagaria version, as compared with the C.M.S., or Taljhari version, though the latter finds great acceptance in many quarters.

The Bible Society, which published both translations, was not slow to recognise the anomaly of having two versions of the New Testament for a single language area in which there was no variation of dialect, and in 1912 a conference of the parties interested took place under its auspices with the object of promoting one translation acceptable to all.

But the protagonists on either side, while agreeing in principle (blessed word!) with the Society's object, were so firmly wedded to their respective versions that no progress was made. In fact it appears that the attempt to reconcile them had the effect of exacerbating their differences and of strengthening the conviction of the parties on either side that their own translation was vastly superior to the other. It is recorded that an impartial observer at this stage remarked that there would be no agreed version of the New Testament in Santali until three first-class funerals had taken place! These occurred in course of time, but many years passed before the Society found a helpful response to its appeals for a fresh attempt at producing an agreed translation.

The increasing influence of educated Santals in the counsels of the Church, where the foreign missionary no longer seeks to play a predominant part, the growing solidarity of the Church amongst a people who are not greatly interested in denominational barriers imported from the West, and the steady pressure of the Bible Society — all these factors helped towards promoting a more co-operative attitude to the problem of New Testament revision, and the task is now in hand under the auspices of the Santal Christian Council and the Bible Society of India, Pakistan and Ceylon.

The Revisers' Task

The procedure followed is that outlined in the *Rules and Procedure* of the Bible Society. The draft reviser is a Santal who is a B.D. graduate of Serampore College with a good working knowledge of Greek, and there are five other members of the Translation Committee, three being Santals, one a Norwegian and one a Scot, both of the latter having some Greek. After studying the revised draft of a Gospel beforehand, the committee meets and makes a detailed revision of the draft, which is then referred to the 'panel of consultants' for their opinion as to its acceptability. Although the consultants are asked not to make detailed criticisms, few of them can resist the temptation to do so, and as these are sometimes helpful, the Translation Committee has found it advisable to give them careful consideration before issuing a final revision of the text.

Both of the existing translations of the New Testament have been revised from time to time in the course of the years, and both of them are in many respects admirable. If one criticises, one does so with diffidence. The main objection to them from the Bible Society's point of view is that there are *two* of them. The Taljhari version, while many Santals find it to be the more readable of the two, shows definite evidence of being a translation from English and not from Greek, and here and there traces of what the Santals call 'sahibs' Santali' crop up. The Benagaria version has the supreme merit of being faithful to the Greek, but a too rigid practice of this virtue has resulted in a Santali translation which, while grammatically beyond reproach, is a little cumbrous in style and strikes heavily on the ear at times. It is possible to interpret too literally the rule of faithfulness to the Greek, and when this happens there is a risk of developing a 'Biblical' language which is divorced from the common speech and life of the people.

The object of the present revisers is to produce a version which is strictly faithful to the original Greek and at the same time true to the idiom of everyday Santali speech. They have approached their task with a deep sense of responsibility, knowing that the new rendering, when it follows one of the existing versions, will be unfamiliar to those accustomed to the other; and when an entirely new rendering is given, it may prove unacceptable to both constituencies. Especially is this the case in the key passages of the New Testament, where the very words of the version with which he is familiar are precious to the reader. It must be remembered also that the liturgies and hymn-books of the Lutherans and Anglicans use the Biblical vocabulary of their respective translations.

Some Problems

In the meetings of the Translation Committee for joint study of the revised drafts, it has been interesting to observe the extent to which the members are influenced by the version on which they have been brought up, the Santals by their respective versions and the missionaries by the translation in their native tongue. One not very important instance of this occurred in the translation of *ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς* and *οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς*. Are we to distinguish the *high* priest from the *chief* priests as the English versions do, or, keeping literally to Greek, are we to use only 'chief priest' and 'chief priests', as in the Benagaria version, the Norwegian and some other translations? The Santal members were unanimously of the opinion that, if there was in fact something distinctive about the office of *ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς*, this ought to be brought out in the translation, even though the Greek did not make it, and that the English and Taljhari versions should be followed here. The Norwegian member was quite unconvinced!

The influence of the English versions appears in the Taljhari translation of 'faith', 'to have faith' and 'to believe'. In Santali there are two words for 'faith', *patiau* and *biswas*, and we have it on the authority of the late P.O. Boddling, the master Santali linguist, that these have the same meaning and are used in the same way. Like most Santali words, they are commonly used both as substantives and as verbs. The Taljhari version uses *patiau* for 'to believe', and *biswas* for 'faith', following the Authorised Version. Benagaria uses the one word *patiau* throughout. There is something to be said in favour of making use of both the Santali words, since the arbitrary discarding of one of them is a loss to the Biblical vocabulary, but on the whole it would seem wiser to follow the Greek and employ only one word in the Santali version.

Different words are used in the existing translations for 'neighbour', as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Taljhari giving *aɖepaseren hor*, which is used precisely in the English sense of the word, while Benagaria gives *phedren hor*, which means 'the person beside you'. Here it would seem that the Lutherans have carried over into their Santali translation the connotation of 'neighbour' in the Scandinavian languages, but most Santals seem to think that the English sense of the word is closer to the Greek *πλησίον*, certainly in the context of the great parable, and the majority of the revisers favour *aɖepaseren hor*.

Again, different words are used for *φίλος*, and the choice of the

appropriate Santali word raised a critical issue in John 15:13ff. The Taljhari word, *gate*, is chiefly used of friendship between young people, and it may mean no more than 'a companion'. The Benagaria version uses *pera*, which means 'friend' and also 'kinsman' — ('friend' in vernacular Scots often connotes 'kinsman') — and it is used verbally in the sense of 'to give hospitably to'. *γίλος* does not mean 'kinsman', but is it reading too much into John 15:14 to suggest that when Jesus said, "Ye are my friends", he meant also, "Ye are my kinsmen"? Santal opinion is divided on this point, and both *gate* and *pera* will have to be preserved, one being given as a marginal reading.

The revisers have tried as far as possible to avoid the *pis aller* of a marginal reading, but sometimes it is the only solution, as in the case of the word for 'Spirit'. Benagaria uses *Jiu* and Taljhari has *Atma*. No amount of argument will settle the controversy here, and Santal opinion is divided, strong preference being expressed in favour of the word familiar to the reader in his own translation of the New Testament and in the liturgies and hymns of his Church. We have had to follow the opinion of the majority in this instance, and *Jiu* will be used in the text of the revised version, *Atma* being given in a list of alternative readings of key words at the beginning of the book.

Of the Epistles only Ephesians has been revised so far. The problem of translating Pauline language and thought into Santali is no easier than it is in the case of the language of other so-called primitive people, which, as Dr. Nida has pointed out in a recent article in *The Bible Translator*, are by no means 'primitive'. Both the older translations have preserved the long sentences from the Greek original, a procedure which is quite foreign to the genius of Santali. The revisers have tried in Ephesians to break these up wherever possible into more readily intelligible passages, on the lines of the modern English versions. In doing so strict vigilance is necessary to avoid the cardinal errors of doing violence to the Greek and of interpreting instead of translating. The new version of Ephesians seeks to fulfil these conditions, and it has been well received as being more digestible than either of the old versions.

This work of revision is a stimulating experience in every way, and the harmony that pervades the meetings of the revisers even in the midst of their controversies is a demonstration of what the fellowship of the Spirit can mean.

'I' and 'We' in the Pauline Letters

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In a short article, published in *The Expository Times*, lviii, 179 [April, 1947], I called attention to the rapid transitions in the Pauline Epistles from the first personal singular pronoun to the first plural, and *vice versa*, for which there often seemed to be no reason at all. Singular and plural