Translating a Community: An Experience from Coastal Karnataka

Shashikantha K.

Abstract

Post-Colonial theories have brought in the agency of the colonized in a rather forceful way to retrieve the lost self-hood. But even as they do that, these theories do not look into the possibility of several communities within the colonies perceiving the colonizers as agents of modernity. This way, colonizers which include British officials as well as missionaries as the translators of several communities into modern communities. This paper looks into a context where one such community, Billavas in South India, opted for Western modernity by taking to Christianity, denying the offer from the elites at home to take to Brahmo Samaj, a way of modern Hinduism in the late nineteenth century.

South Canara[1] provides certain specificities for Translation Studies. Here, we have a multiplicity of languages, not brought about by the urbanity and cosmopolitanism of late modernity, but by the trade and commerce, travel and a constant touch with the outside world. The languages of the region are - Tulu, one of the old languages, considered to be indigenous; Kannada, which has been the administrative as well as literary language of the region for the last one and a half millennium with very few exceptions[2]; Konkani, spoken by Gouda Saraswat Brahmins as well as Catholic Christians, who fled from Goa, escaping from either proselytisation or inquisition from the hands of the Portuguese authorities. We also have the Beary language, spoken by a specific Muslim community. This is apart from certain dialects of Marathi and Malayalam spoken by smaller communities. This pre-colonial melting pot of linguistic communities witnessed speeding up of already existing forms of negotiation between groups during the colonial period. This paper

looks into an instance, which was part of such a negotiation between groups or communities. Textual work, translation, mediation and representation were part of this negotiation. In this sense, this paper does not do a stock taking of all translation works that have taken place in this geo-literary space called South Canara, now rechristened Dakshina Kannada.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the missionaries and the British published vast representations of the Indian people, literatures, customs and traditions in English translation. Some of them dealt with Indian folk traditions at great length. With the help of texts as well as practices, there were efforts to represent modernity to several native communities in India. The contributors to these publications were sometimes Indian elites themselves. Therefore the efforts by the missionaries and the British were mediated by the Indian elites too. In this paper we shall look into the choices of modernity and options that were available to a native community of south coastal Karnataka – Billavas. The principal actors were the missionaries of the Basel Mission, British officials, members of the Billava and Brahmin communities, and the Brahmo Samaj. This article seeks to critique the postcolonial critique of Orientalism, which might ignore or sideline some groups or communities that accepted Western modernity. In other words, the Saidian ambition of retrieving the colonized as the subject of its own history, runs the risk of perceiving the colonizer and the colonized as terms in a binary opposition and might monolithise these terms without looking into the multiplicity and complexity of a variety of identities that these terms might be inclusive of, and the power play therein.

I

> According to the imagination of the people, in the Canara district, the Tulu country is especially fitted for demons, which they say, are partly created by God, like the Panjurli, and partly sprung from men, like the Beiderlu.

> There are several kinds of them, mostly thought to be flying about in the air. Some are, however, considered to be residing in certain places, houses, gardens etc. While some are family Bhutas, others are village Bhutas, and others, again, are only to be found in connection with certain temples (Manner 1894: 5).

> The ceremony at which we were present…was celebrated by the head-man of the Billava (i.e., toddy-tappers) caste, once in about twenty years. The expense, five hundred to a thousand rupees, falls on him, but he is partly compensated by gifts from the people who attend. Europeans have so often failed to get a sight of these rites, that, even after permission had been given and we had accordingly attended, it seemed questionable whether we had really seen the ceremony or had been imposed upon, and it was only after questioning a Bhuta priest, now a Christian, that we found out that what we saw was really the ceremony, and, therefore, we can confidently put forward this account of it (Burnel, A.C., and Hesse, J., 1894: 7).

The above excerpts are examples of ventures to describe the outlandish native customs and practices by the missionaries and British officials.[3] The British and the missionaries in the colonies mostly worked within the framework that has been identified as Orientalism.[4] The critique of Orientalism took to task a description of the Orient as a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" and its enterprise to sift through the Orient into "Western consciousness" (Said 2000: 20-53). The above texts perfectly yield to the postcolonial critique of Orientalism. The critique of Orientalism would argue that the confidence and the power of first hand-experience as seen in the latter passage with the motif of an illusive spectacle on the one hand and on the other, a claim to authenticity, built up a repository of knowledge that made possible an Occidental hegemony over the Orient (ibid.: 24). But before we go further, an effort at acquainting ourselves with the

missionary group called the Basel Mission, which was involved in the linguistic and cultural study of the people, their land, customs and traditions, apart from the proselytizing activities in the south coastal Karnataka may be in order.

The Basel Mission is a relatively little talked about missionary group from Basel (now in Switzerland). It emerged in the early nineteenth century as a small but dedicated missionary group. The missionary organizations were highly ambitious as they entered a vast and almost virgin land. Gauri Viswanathan remarks, "the belief that Hinduism could surely fall from its foundation and the gospel rise on its ruins – that through science and modern learning 'we must all come to one religion' ('an intellectual revolution culminating in a universal Christianity') – was quite clearly an ideology that directed missionary labour in India" (Viswanathan 1990: 62). With a conviction to spread Christianity, this pietist missionary group set foot in India in 1835, in Mangalore, now in Karnataka. The Basel Mission had trained their missionaries to work in acute conditions. There was an Institute in Basel to train candidates who would become missionaries and would work in different parts of the world. The study of language was prioritized in this Institute. The chosen candidates in this Institute were trained both in Oriental and Occidental languages and literatures. In 1881/82, six hours of Greek and Latin was taught to the candidates. Missionaries who came to the East also received training in Arabic, Sanskrit and English. One of the worst exercises given to them was to pull a 'dung-cart through the city of Klein Basel…amidst the laughter of the Basel population' (Bieder 1985: 36-37). These rehearsals to work unabatedly helped these trainees in such a condition as their bazaar speeches during the native festivals, when even things such as cow-dung were thrown at them and they continued their speech being indifferent to the attitudes of the crowd.

Within the first twenty years of work in South Canara, the Basel Mission was able to achieve converts from almost all castes viz, the Brahmin, Bunt, Billava, Moger etc. However, after working among the Billavas for a couple of decades, there was a prominent

change in the profile of the new converts. There was a sudden outburst of response from the Billavas towards Christianity. In the 1860s and 1870s, thousands of Billavas from Mangalore and Udupi region were taken into the fold of Christianity.

II

Billavas were a caste that was considered 'low' in the caste hierarchy, though they were not considered 'untouchables'. Their population in South Canara was 1,51,491 (about twenty percent of the population of South Canara which remains the same even today) in the year 1851 (David 1986). During the olden days they were an important part of armies of the kings of the region. As the wars ceased, their prime occupation became toddy tapping and distillation. Some members of the community played the role of the *bhuta* priest or priests of spirits[5] during the worship ceremonies. They also worked as agricultural but landless laborers. Billavas were ardent worshippers of countless *bhuta*s or spirits. They did not worship any other gods and also did not have a proper temple until 1912, when the visit of Narayana Guru from Kerala prompted the community to build their own temple.[6] High alcoholism, lack of a proper occupation and constant vulnerability to deadly diseases resulted in the socio-economic and political backwardness of Billavas.

It was chiefly for upward mobility that the Billavas started converting to Christianity. Their hope for an exalted material life made many of them accept the fold of Christianity. Coupled with that was the fear of *bhuta*s. They had a feeling that Christians had a power to drive away the *bhuta*s. Stating the reason for conversion, the Report of the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (henceforth RBMS) for 1869 says that the Billavas had realized "that their religion and their social circumstances were rotten and that the manner of life in which they saw the native Christians walking, was far better than their own. Joined to this was the dread of their

demons, a feeling of misery under the annoyances coming from their demons and Gurus, whilst they were convinced that the Christians were stronger than the devil and were able to shelter them also from his persecution" (RBMS 1869: 31).

The study of the *bhuta*s, their worship and the incantations during such worship had been conducted by the missionaries in the first half of the nineteenth century itself as part of the study of the culture and language of the Tulu people and especially Billavas. They had published such studies in various Indological journals such as *Indian Antiquary* and also as independent books and booklets. The presence of these missionaries during worship ceremonies sans any feeling of devotion and yet being immune to any curse of the *bhuta* appealed to the Billavas. The missionaries even got pleas from the newly converted people to stay in their houses so that the presence of the missionaries warded off any approaching *bhuta*. By representing the *bhuta* worship as 'devil' worship both in day-to-day practice as well as in textual translations, the Basel Mission was the agent of modernity in the above-mentioned region in Karnataka. These efforts were accompanied by the Enlightenment idea of 'development' and the pietistic idea of 'hard work'. Part of this was the establishment of some industries where the new converts could work and earn their livelihood.

The conversion to Christianity led to excommunication from the community. The Billavas and others, who got converted, were alienated by their friends, patrons and familial relations. This also resulted in the loss of livelihood not only because they lost their previous social network but also because the Basel Mission banned certain kinds of occupations like toddy tapping.[7] In such cases the Mission had to provide an alternate occupation to a displaced and isolated community. The kind of pressure that worked on the converts resulted in the missionaries trying their hands at various industrial enterprises and teaching the converts "the basic characteristics of modern man in general" (Fischer 1991:129). The

Basel Mission employed the new converts in various industries. The Basel Mission Report for the year 1854 asserted:

> Let us break the force of social excommunication which follows conversion, by teaching the industrial, mechanical and agricultural arts of Europe to the humblest converts, both in Christian colonies and industrial schools formed for their accommodation and tuition the great desirableness of which is becoming apparent (the Report quoted in David 1986: 166).

This solved not just the problem of providing the converts with livelihood, but also built an alternate community, which made up for the effects of excommunication. The Basel Mission established fly-shuttle looms on the West coast, producing high-quality clothes mostly for the Europeans in the region. In 1860, they ventured into tile industry to provide sound economic protection to the converted. In 1910, the number of people working in the weaving and tile factories was 3,500. There were other jobs created such as printing, bookbinding and watch making. All these jobs were occupied by the converted Christians. Fischer sees this as phenomenally different from other mission organizations in India and says "Basel Mission Christians underwent the most radical social change ever inflicted on Indian converts by a missionary society" (Fischer 1991).[8]

III

However, there was a Billava leader who 'was dissatisfied with the social customs of his people and the lack of a temple of their own for worship of God' (Anonymous n.d.: 8). He was well-to-do and could be counted on par with other elites of the region. His name was Arasappa. Arasappa had come into contact with a prominent Saraswat Brahmin of the place called Ullal Raghunathayya. He was the son of the District Munsif and a famous Sanskrit scholar, Ullal Mangeshayya. Raghunathayya had been

inspired by the ideas of Keshab Chandra Sen, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj from Calcutta. Incidentally Raghunathayya's interest in Brahmo Samaj had bloomed by a constant visit to the library adjacent to the Basel Mission School in Mangalore. Later, he started to subscribe to the weekly paper published by the Samaj from Calcutta, titled *Indian Mirror*. This had given a further boost to his interest in the Samaj activities. Arasappa was influenced by Raghunathayya's new inspiration and he too developed interest in the Samaj (Ibid.).

Arasappa was possibly the most powerful and influential leader among the Billavas in and around Mangalore who numbered about 5,000. He held a meeting of the community members in 1869 and sent a telegram to Brahmanand Keshab Chandra Sen, Secretary of the Brahmo Samaj of India, for the services of the missionaries to come and teach Brahmoism to the people of Mangalore. Three missionaries of the Brahmo Samaj, Bhai P.C.Muzoomdar, Bhai Gour Govind Roy, and Bhai Amrit Lal Bose came to Mangalore by the end of April 1870. They were accompanied by Vasudev Nowrangy of the Bombay Prarthana Samaj (Ibid.).

However, Brahmo Samaj missionaries failed in impressing "the minds of Arasappa's people". Their "ways and habits of life" were "something like Christian priests quite unlike their Hindu priests" (Ibid.). Or perhaps they looked rather more alien than the Basel Mission priests working in that region. The latter, they knew, were sympathetic to their cause. They took their children to school; gave medicines whenever they were ill; drove away the fear of *Bhuta*s and so on. But these new comers were totally strangers for them as well as their aspirations. Therefore, the vast Billava contingent turned down the offer of their leader Arasappa. "However, Arasappa tried his best to induce them to come forward" (Ibid.). But only five persons including himself got ready for the initiation into the Brahmo faith. Some twelve days later fourteen more joined them. A Samaj was established for them in Arasappa's house in May 1870, which went by the name of Brahmo Samaj (Ibid: 1-3).

In fact, the possible conversion into Brahma Samaj was highlighted then in the media. The Report of the Mission says, "The news of the Billawars of Mangalore had run the round of Indian newspapers…" (RBMS for 1869: 23). On the other hand, there was a considerable possibility of the large Billava contingent turning to Christianity as propagated by the Basel Mission. Since it was a large group of people who were getting ready for this conversion into Brahma Samaj, the Mission was worried about the prospect of getting anymore converts from that community. The Mission had put up its efforts to win over the minds of some "leaders", when it came to know about the Billava intention to embrace Brahmo Samaj. In fact, the Mission was even granted permission by the leaders. The Report says, "These leaders are people with whom we had been acquainted for many years, and we now tried again to influence them in favor of Christianity. One of their leaders[9] came to our house, and as soon as they granted us permission, we returned the visit to their houses. But it became more and more apparent that there were scarcely any spiritual motives, the chief reason of their wish for change being the desire to rise in social position, and they begged to make conditions, that in the event of their becoming Christians, they would not be *one* with the congregation, but remain an *independent* body, to be allowed to visit heathen plays etc." (Ibid.) The Mission was always for a single congregation without any fragments of caste or creed entering into it. The change in social position would only be a contingent factor along with conversion but not a primary factor. To this ideal, the Mission stuck to the end of its tenure and had a uniform congregation. However, the trickle of Billavas into the Basel Mission fold continued till the Mission existed in India and on the other hand, the Brahmo Samaj consisting of a handful of Billavas, died out with the death of Arasappa in 1876.[10]

IV

Now, it is also important to see why the Billavas felt so alien to the Brahmo ideals that within the time span of a single speech, about 4,995 of them had decided not to accept Brahmoism as a way

of life. Firstly, they saw that the "ways and habits of life" of the Brahmos were alien. Secondly, and more importantly, the people who were involved in persuading and influencing Arasappa were the Saraswat Brahmins of Mangalore such as Ullal Raghunathayya and Bharadwaj Shiva Rao etc. And it was the Brahmins who were quite opposed to the upward mobility of the Billavas in South Canara as was evident in the nineteenth century itself. In 1836 itself, the Brahmins were against the employment of Billavas in government offices as trainees, on the ground that such Billavas would attain the headship of the offices and Brahmins would be compelled to follow the orders of a man they could hardly look at without getting polluted. They even went to the extent of complaining to the judge. However, the judge had replied that under the administration of the East India Company, no man could be deprived of office, or employment on account of religion, custom, and caste (David 1986: 167). It could be easily observed that the ones who had undergone schooling in the Basel Mission school in Mangalore were immediately absorbed in to one of the government offices in Mangalore and it was the Brahmins of Mangalore who had appealed for the starting of the schools by the Mission in Mangalore (Rossel 1986).[11]

At this point, it is interesting to note certain remarks of the Oriental scholars with regard to *bhuta* worship and related cultural practices. It seems that the Brahmin intervention in *bhuta* worship started only in the mid-nineteenth century, roughly since the time the Billavas' entry into modern spaces was legitimised by the British rule in South Canara. To quote R.C. Temple, a British official and a scholar placed in Mangalore in the nineteenth century, "One of the points…which will prominently strike the reader conversant with Hinduism as a whole, is the stronghold that *modern* Brahminism has *now* obtained over the minds of the Tuluva *bhuta*-worshippers, and the acuteness with which their practices have been bent towards Hinduism pure and simple" (Temple 1894: 4, *my emphasis*). It looks probable that a community that could not be 'subdued' or isolated

had to be appropriated and as a way of appropriation, the 'upper castes' got assimilated in practices such as *bhuta* worship[12] and started orienting it towards Brahminical practices. Thus, the various *bhuta*s that were worshipped were identified as the attending forces of Shiva and the names of the ceremonies were also sanskritised, though sometime back, the practices were ignored by Brahmins. As A.C. Burnel and Johannes Hesse remark,

> This primitive religion is *now* no longer neglected by the self-styled "higher castes", which formerly merely tolerated, but now almost respect the barbarous rites; while some philanthropic Brahmins labour to persuade the people that their gods are Bhutas, or attendants on Siva. These influences are apparent in the classification of the rites, which are *deva-kriya* or *asura kriya*, according as offerings are, or are not, made to the Bhuta. As the aboriginal "Peyi" has been changed into "Bhuta", so these rites have now a Sanskrit name, nema (i.e., niyama), and they are sana (i.e., sthana) or illechchhida, according as they are performed at a temple or in a house… (Burnel and Hesse 1894: 7, *my emphasis*).

The word *peyi* has lost currency as the word *bhuta* has already become a commonly accepted word to refer to those spirits or deities. Going through Indological writings, thus, one can get references to 'upper caste' mediation in the modernity as it was represented to other communities. When modernity could not be denied to other communities, the 'upper castes' tried to mediate or appropriate modernity through the cultural sphere to maintain their hegemony. However, the evident opposition of the 'upper castes' to the upward mobility of the Billavas did not allow the latter community to see the agency of modernity (of the kind they wanted) among Brahmins or 'upper castes', who had arrived in the form of Brahmo Samaj.

Conclusion

Going back to where we started, it should be seen that modernity as it was represented by the Western agencies such as the missionaries or the British officials was a conscious choice among certain sections of the native population. By saying that through mechanisms of hegemony the Western colonial forces spread the tentacles of power, and by monolithising the colonial subjects as a uniform collectivity without any agency, is to deny the deliberate opting for colonial modernity by certain native communities, as it was represented by the West. However, a major chunk of Billavas remained within the fold of their caste accepting the Narayana Guru-inspired Hinduism in the early twentieth century.[13]

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NOTES

1. The present districts of Udupi, Dakshina Kannada and Kasargod (of Kerala), in the South-West of India, were considered to be the South Canara district. After linguistic state formation in India in 1956, only Udupi and Dakshina Kannada remained in South Canara, in the state of Karnataka. From 1997, Udupi and Dakshina Kannada have become separate districts. However, nostalgia rules the people in their cultural psyche and many a time we hear the expression 'Avibhajita Dakshina Kannada', i.e., undivided South Canara.

2. Among the inscriptions of Tulunadu, only a couple of inscriptions have been found which are in Tulu and rest all are in Kannada (Ramesh 1980). When it comes to literary expressions, some epic poetry have been found in the last two or three decades. They are *Sri Bhagavato, Devi Mahatme, Kaveri* and the recent one found is *Karna Parva*. All these were deciphered and

brought to light by Venkataraja Puninchittaya, a scholar in Tulu. From the third and the fourth decades of the twentieth century, we have the modern literature in Tulu language starting with a novel *Sati Kamale*, by S.U. Paniyadi.

3. In this case, Rev. August Manner and Johannes Hesse (latter, the father of the illustrious German novelist Herman Hesse) were the missionaries working for the Basel Mission in Mangalore and A.C.Burnel was the British official. In South Canara, the British and the Basel Mission had quite cordial relations except during the World Wars in the twentieth century.

4. Roughly put, that body of knowledge and ways of perceiving or imagining the Orient or the East that led to the hegemony of the West on the East. The hegemony, in turn, reinforced those perceptions and imaginations of the West.

5. The word *bhuta* has been translated in different ways by the Indologists. But predominantly the words 'devil' and 'demon' occur in their translations. *bhuta*s (the corresponding Hindi word being *bhoot*) are sometimes the spirit of the deceased or some other times they are partly divine. Apart from gratifying the wishes of the devotees, they have a high propensity to commit mischief on their devotees. These spirits were therefore highly feared.

6. This moment seems to be an important point in the history of the Billava community in South Canara. Billavas in Mangalore built Kudroli Gokarnanatheswara Temple, where they would have a non-Brahmin priest (However, the Basel Missionary Society considered it only as a step towards Christianity. The Report of the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society for 1912-1913 says, "The efforts of these people to get rid of the Brahman, to appoint priests of their own, and to break away as much as possible from their old ways of life can easily be understood. But as the newly

constructed temple is no real source of strength, this revival of Hinduism, and even the apparent opposition to Christianity can only be interpreted as a step on the road toward Christianity [RBMS 1912-1913: 27]). Many Billava leaders from throughout South Canara went to meet Narayana Guru in Mangalore and with his blessings they started Bhajana Mandalis (*Bhajan* troupes) through out South Canara, which were and are the constellation points of community activities.

7. One of the Tulu pamphlets distributed by the Mission was titled "Kaligangasarada Tayari Kraistareg Yogyadavu Adunda?" (Is preparation of toddy and arrack fit for Christians?)

8. The missionaries had tried to rehabilitate the converts in agriculture too. But the missionaries felt that the tenants tended to be lazy. So the focus turned more on industries as time rolled on (Shiri 1986: 196).

9. We do not come across any other leader of the Billavas, who was of Arasappa's stature. This must have been Arasappa himself.

10. The Saraswat Brahmins had started their own group of congregation called Upasana Sabha, because they did not like to be identified with the Brahmo Samaj, which consisted of Billavas. This group started to be called Brahmo Samaj only in 1903, long after the death of Arasappa in 1876.

11. Goud Saraswat Brahmins, Valerian Rodrigues says, 'were in a way the most troubled community looking for a religious identity throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, unhinged from its traditional anchor by the colonial interventions including that of the Portuguese and looking for a larger alternative' (Rodrigues 2006). However, it did not resort to conversion (except for an occasion in 1844 when three boys of this community were converted followed by a big commotion

in Mangalore city, (see Gundert 1997: 131)) but it oriented itself sometimes to Brahmo Samaj, some other times to Theosophical society and yet other times to a regional variety of Brahmo Samaj – Upasana Sabha (the latter being a distinct part of Brahmo Samaj, since the actual Brahmo Samaj was represented by the Billavas, Saraswat Brahmins did not want to identify themselves with that version of Brahmo Samaj)

12. It should also be noted that the practice of *bhuta* worship also involves the resolution of certain social disputes or disputes related to land etc. This takes place during the *bhuta* worship ceremony called 'Kola', which is an annual ceremony.

13. One study observes that there was no strong non-Brahmin movement in this region because of the intervention of Narayana Guru (Rodrigues 2006).

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