



by Kimberly Dickson

WORDS MATTER

HOW A CORRECTED TRANSLATION TRANSFORMED A COMMUNITY

We were under pressure! We had agreed to participate in a UNICEF grant that expanded our normal community health work in rural northern India from several dozen villages to several *hundred*. Our director had to triple the size of our community health team to reach these villages as quickly as possible. It was up to the three of us: our director (a physician with a Master of Public Health [MPH]), our gifted community organizer, and myself—the only foreigner, with just one year of language study and my own newly-earned MPH. We were tasked with training our new staff in community survey techniques, the principles of sanitation and hygiene, record keeping, and—most importantly—community organizing in just a few short weeks.

In order to train our team effectively, we modeled community development techniques by facilitating discussions where they created their own interventions and methods of reaching the community. The newly hired young men joined these discussions with enthusiasm, ideas, and humor, but the young women pulled their shawls closer around their faces and refused to say a word.

We needed their input; these young women were crucial to our success. Most of our work would be with women's groups, since women were the ones who fed and cleansed their families. We intended these newly hired women who refused to talk to become the group facilitators. If they did not understand and embrace community organizing, then this UNICEF contract, a first of its kind for our organization with the potential to dramatically change the health reality for a large portion of our district, would fail. We cajoled, we lectured, and as the weeks for training disappeared, we begged for their participation. Finally, one young woman said, "Why are you so desperate for our input? We are just feeble-minded women." The rest of the women nodded in agreement.

I was dumbfounded. Where had this view of themselves come from? I was used to illiterate women in the villages, raised under the curse of the societal caste system, saying nearly the same thing: "Why are you working with us, we are just dumb water buffalo." However, the women on our team were different. They were not illiterate. They had all completed secondary school, and some had additional training and experience. They were not Hindus nor Muslims with their varying degrees of caste.¹ No, they were Christians. Didn't they know they were made in God's own image, that we wanted their involvement because we truly valued their contributions to the project?

GENESIS 3 TRANSLATION

While we puzzled over this, I began leading a very small Bible study with four of the young women from my team. We were looking at how God saw women, so we started at the beginning, with creation (Genesis 1–2). They read their Hindi language Bibles, I read my English language Bible, and between the five of us with our varying degrees of language ability, we managed to get to the heart of the passages.

Genesis 1 and 2 were beautiful. I had the opportunity to explain the meaning of the Hebrew word *ezer* used to describe the first woman in Genesis 2:18. Then we looked at Psalm 121, where God acts as an *ezer*—demonstrating *ezer's* meaning as one who rescues those facing insurmountable odds. God intended women to be rescuers opposite of men.² We next studied Genesis 2:24, in which a man leaves his father and mother to cling to his wife. In India the bride's family pays a dowry to the husband's family. She then belongs to his family, not the other way around. In the Indian context, a man leaving his family to cleave to his wife was a radical biblical idea.³

But it was with Genesis 3 that everything fell into place. As I read aloud from my English Bible about the serpent's words to the woman, the women in the study stopped me and had me read it again, astonished. They explained, "Our Hindi version says that the serpent spoke to the woman because she was feeble-minded—but you're not reading that in English." The four of them gathered around my Bible to read it for themselves.

Suddenly the struggles we were having with our community development team clicked! Our team of women had refused to engage in our well-intentioned efforts to involve them in leadership because of their sincere faith. They understood the stakes of this new project, and they did not want to risk its success by adding their "feeble-minded" ideas.

There was more. They continued comparing my Bible translation in English to their translation in Hindi, discussing among themselves at a level of Hindustani that my one year of language study could not understand.⁴ Finally, they let me in on what they were seeing: my translation described Adam standing right there with Eve while the serpent tempted both of them. In their Bibles, Adam was missing. That clinched it: *both* Adam and Eve were guilty. The Fall was not solely Eve's fault because she was feeble-minded, as they had always been taught.

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EVERYTHING TRANSFORMED

Nothing was the same again. Our women teammates now came to our planning meetings with their heads held high and their shawls relaxed around their shoulders. They shared their brilliant ideas and delighted in the growth of our team. They learned to ride mopeds to reach remote villages. Their self-confidence and competence inspired the village girls in what women could do. They internalized all the excellent training from our community organizer—how to disregard caste strictures and relate to people at their own level,

to live in the villages if the opportunity arose, to trust that people can and will change, and how to facilitate groups so that each group determined how to solve its own problems.

Their work transformed. One of the women's groups realized that the government had distributed funds for clean water, but the funds had been diverted by a local government official. Instead of making the well available to the village, he had the well drilled in his own private residence. These women—who no longer considered themselves "dumb like water buffalo"—decided together that they would just sit in his private yard until he was so embarrassed that he paid for a deep well for the village out of his own funds. And it worked! They got their clean water. Waterborne disease declined, which meant that malnutrition and death also declined. Without malnutrition, the children could study well in school. In short, thanks to good Bible translation and study, four women learned of their God-given value and an entire village was transformed for generations.

INDIAN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Years later, while studying for my Master of Theological Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, I wrote a paper on Bible translation in India based on this experience. I was shocked to discover that most Indian translations did not rely on the original Hebrew and Greek biblical languages, but instead depended on the English 1885 Revised Standard Version (RSV).⁵ This version was plagued with errors. One glaring error that had hobbled my teammates was its omission of the Hebrew word *immah* "with her," in relation to Adam standing *with* Eve while she ate the fruit after the serpent gave his deceptive speech in Genesis 3:6. This omission allowed the inference that Eve was more susceptible to deception. A diverse team bringing different perspectives to the text usually identifies these types of errors or omissions,

but the 1885 translation team was critiqued for its lack of diversity. As Bible translator and missionary Dr. Katharine Bushnell said of the team, “These men may have done the best they could,” but it was not “the best that could have been done.”⁶

William Carey started the trend of relying on a secondary source document like the 1885 RSV for modern Indian translations. With Hindu scholars, he created a Sanskrit translation. He then used the Sanskrit translation as the basis for all other Indian language translations, neglecting the original Greek and Hebrew source documents. Using local cultures and ideas to communicate spiritual truths is as ancient as our faith. However, as Indian Bible scholars like Pandita Ramabai have long noted, in the Indian context, this practice entrenched Hindu patriarchy where it did not belong.⁷

This is still the case. Like Ramabai, Dr. Boaz Johnson, a Hebrew Bible scholar at North Park University in Chicago, contends that the Indian Bible’s use of Hindu deities for the name of God results in endorsing hierarchy and abuse.⁸ In addition to his academic argument, he also cites his experience as a boy and young man growing up in the slums of New Delhi. There he saw the Bible’s Hindu influences perpetuate the same caste abuses against the marginalized that occur among Hindus.

Furthermore, William Carey’s work has long been critiqued for “unwarranted additions of words not in the Greek text (added) for theological reasons.”⁹ It does not take much imagination to deduce where my teammate’s Bibles’ additional word “feeble-minded” came from. This was a commonly held belief about women throughout most of history. During Carey’s era, even men who believed women should be involved in ministry thought that the serpent deceived the woman because of her “feeble mind.”¹⁰

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

My heart weeps at the millions of people over the centuries and up to our very own day who could have been saved if only they had good Bible translations. Jesus said he came to bring life and life abundantly (John 10:10), which was happening in these villages through my teammates’ work. Not only was their physical and educational health improving, so too was their spiritual health. Every six months our project asked the staff if they had seen any spiritual changes in the villages where they worked. The teammate who originally challenged why we were asking for their feeble-minded input responded, “Well, my groups have taken down their Hindu gods and now only pray to Jesus.”

Notes

1. Islam in India is unique in that it incorporates part of the Hindu caste system—something not inherent to the Muslim religion. However, it is more gentle than Hindu caste, with only five distinct castes rather than Hinduism’s approximately 3,000 castes and 25,000 subcastes. See Wikipedia’s Caste in India.
2. The Hebrew term *kinēdo* in Genesis 2:18 follows the word *ezer*, and means “in front of” like sitting opposite/in front of me.
3. To better understand the countercultural power of Adam considering Eve kin in this passage, listen to Dr. Havilah Dharamraj, professor at South Asia Institute for Advanced Christian Studies in India, explain this in *Mutuality Matters*, see Mimi Haddad and Havilah Dharamraj, “Women and Words: Translating the Old Testament Part One,” September 1, 2023, in *Mutuality Matters*, produced by CBE International, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://mutualitymatters.podbean.com/e/women-words-translating-the-old-testament-part-one-with-dr-havilah-dharamraj/>.
4. Hindustani is the *lingua franca* of India spoken by most North Indians. It is the combination of Sanskrit Hindi and Urdu (the language spoken by the Muslims in India).
5. T. Johnson Chakkuvarackal, “Important Issues in the Translation of the Bible in the Indian Context,” *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 34 no. 1 (June 2002), 163, 164 169, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/important-issues-in-the-translation-of-the-bible-in-the-indian-context/>.
6. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), 17.
7. Arun Jones, “Ramabai, Pandita,” in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Marion Ann Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2012), 417.
8. Boaz Johnson, “Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), India and the Pandemic, Plight of Women 1896-1918.” 2021 CBE Conference London, 2021, video: *Pandita Ramabai India and the Pandemic, Plague, Plight of Women with Boaz Johnson*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjVYLhBMMAA&list=PLtcLHT-MtlpfxKsT8h9l0aTdY8WotUwDV&index=27>.
9. John Carman, “Protestant Bible Translation in India: An Unrecognizable Dialogue?,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 4 no. 3 (January 1991), <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1041>.
10. Priscilla Pope-Levison, “Five Women in Ministry Articles Transcribed from Tongues of Fire,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, 11 no. 1 (2019), 76-79. An example of this can be seen in the written work of Richard Reader Harris, editor of *Tongues of Fire*, who espoused the prevalent belief “that it was Eve, not Adam, who fell prey initially to Satan’s temptation in the Garden of Eden” because Adam was not there. Then he attributes Eve’s easy deception to “the feminine mind.” Yet, in 1893 he wrote an article outlining why women should be preachers, largely influenced by the writings of Catherine Booth. Reader Harris, “Female Ministry,” *Tongues of Fire*, 3/35 (November 1893), 7–8.

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Kimberly Dickson, Masters in Public Health (MPH), has studied and worked in the Middle East, East Africa, India, and in her home state of California. She has seen the welfare of entire communities transform when those who are traditionally marginalized are brought into the center of community decision making. She hosts the “Women in Scripture and Christian History” theme on CBE’s podcast, *Mutuality Matters*. In the fall of 2024 Kimberly will begin PhD work in Old Testament and Hebrew studies at the University of Edinburgh.