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Contribution of the Christian missionaries to the Indian languages

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Abstract

India has a rich and varied heritage of languages as it has had rulers belonging to different religions, rule the land for long periods of time. The Medieval period introduced Persian while the Mughal period saw the evolution of Urdu. The coming of the Europeans further enriched the land. But in order to do business and communicate with the people and propagate their religion, every foreigner learnt the Indian language, be it Bengali, Marathi, Odiya, Hindi etc. The same is true for the English who ruled from 1858 to 1947 AD. However, it was the Christian missionaries who did pioneering work in the literary field. They wrote prose, poetry and grammar in the local dialects to educate the illiterate masses and tribal.

This paper attempts to highlight the work done by the Christian missionaries in the literary field.

Keywords: Language, grammar, dialect, tribal

Introduction

India is home to over 300 spoken languages and 700 dialects, of which the Constitution of India lists only 18 regional languages as languages of India, with Hindi being considered as the official language^[1]. In the past, the great Sanskrit grammarians of India such as Pannini and Patanjali and other pandits in general 'refused to share their rich language' with the masses. They neither struggled to give literary shape to the languages of the people, nor did they enrich them with literature^[2]. Though they did not lack linguistic skills, their attitude ensured that the masses were kept in the iron-grip of illiteracy and ignorance with faint hope of their potential ever blossoming^[3]. There was no advancement in language or literature during the Mughal rule also. Jawaharlal Nehru in his Discovery of India rightly points out that 'the advent and use of the printing press gave a great stimulus to the development of the popular Indian languages^[4]. According to research carried out by India Missions Association (IMA), every language without exception owes some pioneer literary or linguistic work to the Christian missionaries^[5].

Bengali Language

One eminent missionary who has contributed significantly towards the growth of this language is Sir William Carey^[6]. Carey, a shoemaker by profession, sailed from England for India on June 13th, 1792,^[7] and began his ministry in Bengal. Later, John Marshman and William Ward joined him and together, they came to be known as the Serampore Trio. A skilled linguist, Carey was appointed as professor of Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi at the Governor General's College in Calcutta. William Carey initiated in as early as 1814, a grammar of Telugu in English and facilitated a type set for Telugu printing^[8]. He also initiated the work on Punjabi grammar^[9]. His years in India were spent writing and publishing grammars and dictionaries in Indian languages. In A Grammar of the Bengali Language, 4th edition, he added dialogues intended to facilitate the acquiring of the Bengali language^[10]. Bengali is the only language that has been a medium for a Nobel Prize award in literature, e.g. Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali^[11]. It was the Baptist missionaries of Serampore, headed by Carey, who initiated Bengali literary prose with the translation of the Bible^[12].

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Tamil Language

Robert di Nobli is regarded as the father of Tamil prose as he has authored more than twenty works in the Tamil language ^[13]. The Tamil characters in printing were reformed by an Italian missionary Constanzio Beschi (1680-1747), while genre was introduced by two native Christian writers Vedanayagam Pillai (1824-1889) and H. A. Krishna Pillai (1827-1900), who besides writing poetry, wrote the first novel in Tamil - Pratat Madaliyar Carittiram (1875) ^[14].

Development of Grammar and Dictionaries

Christian missionaries played a very important role in the development of Tamil grammar and dictionary. They introduced script reforms, punctuation marks and space between words. Bishop Cadwell's Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages formed the groundwork of linguistic studies in the South ^[15]. Father Henriques was the first grammarian of the spoken dialect, and also the first lexicographer. He gathered funds for starting a Tamil press and was the first to get books printed in Tamil character ^[16]. The first Tamil dictionary to have words in alphabetical order was prepared by Beschi in 1732, which was divided into words, synonyms, classes and rhymes. Two dictionaries, French-Tamil and Tamil-Latin were prepared by a French Jesuit L. N. de Bourzes, who was fluent in Tamil himself.

Hindi - India's Mother Tongue

During the Mughal rule, Hindi was 'so primitive that Akbar had to revive Persian as the court language of India.' ^[17]. Persian was the court language of India almost three centuries before the Mughals. The renaissance of Hindi literature began with the dawn of the 19th Century, when the Baptist mission established a printing press at Serampore and founded the William College in Calcutta in 1800, that became a big centre of activities for Hindi literature ^[18]. While intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi etc., understood the need for a national language - Hindustani, without which India had little future as a nation, it was missionaries like Henry Martin and Gilchrist who 'laboured decades before any Indian nationalist was around, to develop Hindustani as the national language' ^[19].

The development of Hindustani as the court language of the British Government is the fruit of the missionaries' labour of love for the common masses of India. S.H. Kellogg's A Grammar of the Hindi Languages, is the only grammar to attempt a synopsis of all the 'dialects' including Braj Bhasa, Avadhi and Nepali ^[20]. T. Platte John's A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English became a model and source for many generations of lexicographers to follow.

Most missionaries learnt the Hindi language and its various dialects, by staying in areas where the language was spoken and collected data from all available sources that primarily included. folk songs and stories, which enabled them to compose grammar, dictionaries and encyclopaedias that contributed to the growth and development of the Hindi language. The Kashi Nagari Pracharni Sabha made one of the most significant efforts for the growth of the Hindi language and Devanagiri script ^[21]. The key figure behind the work of this Sabha was a missionary by the name of E. Greaves. Father C. Bulcke brought out a glossary entitled A Technical English Hindi Glossary in 1955 and published a

complete English to Hindi Dictionary in 1965 ^[22].

Languages of the Indian Tribes

Most of the Indian tribes, during the colonial period lived in isolated pockets of India with no access to the masses. Each tribe had (and many still have) their own language and dialect, which forms their mother tongue. The early Christian missionaries were the first to explore the areas inhabited by these people. They studied and learnt the language of the area in order to communicate with the tribal and were often successful in teaching them the language of the masses. Apart from this, they made attempts to collect the proverbs of different regions and began editing and publishing them in the forms of dictionaries, from the beginning of the last century; even before any other element of Indian folk-literature came out in print ^[23]. Folk literature provides us with a plethora of information about the beliefs, customs and traditions of a tribal community, which has been passed down through oral tradition. Thus, the missionaries attempted to create the tribal languages by analysing, writing grammar and introducing the script system, besides imparting literacy through that language ^[24].

The Santhal Tribe

The language of the Santhal is Santhali, which is spoken by nearly 60,00,000 Santhals. As of 1977, these people were spread around the states of Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Tripura and West Bengal ^[25]. They never had a script of their own and Santhali was first to be written in Bengali, followed by the Oriya and Nagari scripts in small measure. It was through the initiatives of the Christian missionaries that the Roman alphabet was adopted for Santhali and their rich literature, comprising mythological tales, traditions, folk tales, as well as folk songs, were collected and published in the Roman script, through both missionary and non-missionary enterprises ^[26].

The Naga Tribes

Until the advent of the Christian missions "none of the tribes of Nagaland had a written form of their languages." The laborious efforts of the missionaries in selecting and using only one dialect for a tribe eventually led to the unification of the tribe, and, it freed the people from suspicion, largely caused due to the inability to communicate with one another ^[27]. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, had it not been for the perseverance of the missionaries in uniting each of the tribes through one language, they would not have received a window to the outside world and vice-versa.

Conclusion

The missionaries through their laborious efforts to develop the Indian language and educate the common masses, helped to awaken in the Indians the quest for knowledge and awareness. It also led to the uplift the Indian society as many people began to raise their voices against the social evils that existed in the Indian society. The growth and development of the Indian languages, especially Hindi, by the Christian missionaries ultimately led to the feeling of national integration and unity. Unconsciously the perhaps, provided the Indians with a powerful weapon that worked against the British, by binding the citizens of the country through the cords of language that proved indispensable in India's struggle for freedom.

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