

Deliberate Mistranslations?

Mananeeya B. Nivedita¹

Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture is established to study the traditions and customs of various communities in Northeast from the Indian point of view and also to discover and focus on the commonalities in all communities. It is a fact that the foreign missionaries were the pioneers in documenting the traditions and customs of various communities and mainly the Vanavasi communities in India. The British established the universities in India after deliberately destroying the prevalent higher education in India. The subjects like Indology, Anthropology etc in these universities are taught from the Western point of view. As said by Shri Dharampal in his book 'Bharatiya Chitta, Manas and Kala' - "The work of Indologist is in fact akin to anthropology. Anthropology, as recognized by its practitioners, is a peculiar science of the West. The defeated, subjugated and fragmented societies of the non-western world form the subject of this science. Anthropology thus is a science of the study of the conquered by the conquerors. Claude Levi Straus, an authentic spokesman and a major scholar of anthropology defines his discipline in more or less these terms."

Therefore the scholars who come from these disciplines naturally get trained in the western mindset and western paradigm. Even the books they refer to are also the books written by the earlier missionaries while documenting the traditions in India. Thus by training and by material available the Indian scholars are handicapped to understand the Indian communities from the Indian point of view. When they write books, in many cases it happens that the same thinking of missionaries is continued instead of looking at it from the Indian point of view.

When the VKIC undertook the study of the communities in the North East - that is study of ourselves it is a daunting task as all of us are westernised in our thinking and are used to look at ourselves from the western point of view. But gradually as an interaction with the communities started, many beautiful points came to the front. Till then most of the knowledge was based on the books written by the missionaries on these communities. The Christian study on these communities is, to put it very mildly, a totally misleading study. Whether it was a true inability of the western mind to comprehend a vastly different way of life or a deliberate attempt to portray the traditions so as to create a feeling of loathing in its inheritors is an aspect, which will forever be debated. The fact remains that the documentation process, particularly the translations, was far from faithful to the traditions inherited by these simple communities of the Northeast. It is these Indian concepts in English - a foreign tongue - that have managed to undermine the confidence of the communities in the wisdom of forefathers.

The *Bawi* system of Mizoram is commonly understood as a form of exploitation quite akin to the despicable form of slavery as existed in the west. The foreign missionaries used as they were to slavery as practised back home translated Bawi- the indigenous system to take care of the destitute, orphans and disadvantaged as slavery. Only when Bawi system was studied it was realised that it was a welfare system for orphans and destitute. Any orphan or a destitute was given place in the house of the Chief of the community. They were taken care of as the children of the Chief were taken care of.

¹ Nivedita Bhide is Jeevanvrat of Vivekananda Rock Memorial and Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari. She is presently its All India Vice President.

They had to work in the fields and houses of the chief as of course his own children used to work. After their marriage they were able to set up their separate household and work on the land, which was given to them by the community. This system was called as Bawi. How can it be translated into Slavery? But it was. We can only imagine the shame and embarrassment that this 'slight' mistake of translating the word Bawi has caused to so many for so long!

In all most all the Vanavasi communities the bridegroom gives the gifts and articles to the bride's parents before marriage. This was translated as 'Bride -Price' and it is now a commonly used term by all. Now some scholars like Dr Lalitluangliana Khiangte protest against the wholly absurd notion and say that this 'translation' attributed low status to women in the traditional Mizo society, though the evidence in the folk-literature is exactly contrary to this notion. Actually the marriage form amongst tribals is Arsha form of marriage, i.e. the form of marriage as in Rishis. In which as token of respect to the bride, the groom gives a couple of cattle to the bride's parent. In Vedic lore it is considered as one of the best form of marriage.

The missionaries translated the Gods and Goddesses of these communities as spirits. It is also possible that such translation sprung from the mind unable to appreciate a reality where many Gods and Goddesses are just the expression of one Reality. But seeing how this term spirit was used by the missionaries in undermining the confidence of the people in their own Gods and Goddesses it is felt that the use of word spirit was deliberate. First introducing and then popularising the use of word spirits for the Devi Devata of these communities, missionaries started the campaign for conversion. The people are told, "You do not have God. You worship only spirits. What you have is only primitive ideas of religion and a bundle of superstitions. If you want to be saved then follow the Only True God." It is a very common experience to listen to a misinformed or a convent educated Vanavasi saying, "Hamara Dharam to hai nahin' - There is no religion for us." Gods and Goddesses are our deepest identity and that identity itself is put in doubts and then gradually lost by wrong translation. Those Arunachalis who have realised this mischief of missionaries have now started using the words Devi Devata.

By using the word 'spirits' for the Gods and Goddesses of these communities the missionaries achieved one more thing. Indirectly they could impress upon them that the Vanavasi communities are not Hindus. They devised even a word 'Adivasi' for these communities. The next step to break them from the Hindus was a move at governmental level. Till 1901 all whether Nagarvasi, Gramvasi or Vanavasi were enrolled as Hindus. But in 1901, the census officers were directed to mention the religion of Adivasis as 'Animism'. After the census, many census officers complained that it was too difficult for them to decide who was animist and who was Hindu as both who stay on the mountains and forests and who stay in the villages and towns worshipped God in many forms. But the British Government did not budge from its directives under the pressure from the missionaries in successive census. It happened that in one census a community was Animist and in the next one it was Hindu or vice versa. **Ultimately to 'solve' this problem the government directed the census officers to mention the name of the community as the name of the religion.** Thus the religion of Santhal community became Santhal, of Nagas became Naga, etc. In one stroke the government further divided even the Vanavasi communities. After that deriding each 'religion' became still easier for missionaries to follow the policy of 'Divide and Convert.'

All most all the Vanavasi communities have the practice of what is translated as Youth

Dormitory. Whenever we read of the youth dormitories or Bachelor dormitories, as they are known in the books of missionaries, the image that comes to the mind is one of free-mixing of youth as is prevalent in the West implying licentiousness. However, the paper presented by Shri Kabuk Pertin at a Seminar in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh and particularly the docu-drama on the life from birth to death of an Adi was to change all our notions forever. As explained, the purpose and nature of the Youth Dormitory called as '*Musup*' (for boys) and '*Raseng*' (for girls) amongst the Adis were truly the non-formal schools of these communities, something akin to Gurukulas of Vedic times. In these institutions the boys and girls above 12 years of age were to stay in *Musup* and *Raseng* respectively. In *Musup* the boys were taught to hunt, to observe and then slowly to participate in the village *Kebang* (panchayat). They were also taught to protect the village from the predators and enemy attacks. They were the readily available force for any community service. The youth were at the disposal of the society in all the emergencies and exigencies. The girls were taught to weave and to cook, to collect firewood, to tend the cattle and the fields. They were also given training in talking to the strangers, elders and youth. A versatile widow used to stay in the *Raseng* and give them all necessary training in 'Home-Science.' There were strict rules about the mixing of *Musup* and *Raseng*. The youth brought up thus till their marriage time later could live the life useful to the society and also in companionship with his community. Whatever was the need of the society and whatever knowledge was required for living happy and contented life in tune with the need of the society in those days was imparted to them in these 'Youth dormitories.' If this is not real education then what is? It was education for life and not just meaningless diplomas and degrees. Just imagine if only these *Musup* and *Raseng* were translated as Non-formal schools of Adi community how much confidence and pride it would have generated in these people. It applies to all the Vanavasi communities.

It is because, such value based and community oriented education was imparted that we see in these communities there are no beggars, there are no orphans and destitute. There are no locks on the houses or the granaries. The principle of living is one for all and all for one. When a young couple wants to build a house, the whole community works together to build the house. If any house gets burnt the whole village works to build the house and all the houses in the village come together and provide materials for the family whose house is burnt. Thus within 24 hours a well-furnished house is ready for the family. When a complete village is burnt then all the nearby villages come together and build the houses again and even furnish it. **The society is a living society so it responds to the needs of its members immediately.** Thus the society does not need an orphanage or a destitute home or police force or even the government welfare schemes, as the society itself is a welfare society. And yet the missionaries want to 'civilise' them! Wherever conversion takes place these traditional values are lost.

The above are but a few instances of how wrong and deliberate translations can undermine the confidence of the people. **But once the mischief is realised then the community rises and defends its traditions from the debilitating impact of the self-professed experts and specialists.** Thus the work of VKIC is very important from the point of view of giving the Indian perspective to understand us and to surge ahead with confidence.
