Annie Rachel Royson (2022) *Texts, Traditions and Sacredness: Cultural Translation in Kristapurāṇa,* New York and New Delhi: Routledge, 190 pp. ISBN 9780367641580 (pbk) £35.99.

Retelling the Sacred: Cultural Translation and Beyond

In his well-known essay entitled *The Task of the Translator,* Walter Benjamin (1968) contends that no piece of art is produced with the onlooker in mind, no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder and no symphony for the audience. In the same essay, he allegedly goes on to claim that if a translation is undertaken to serve the reader, it will prove to be an 'inferior' one. In other words, Benjamin, here, not only grossly undermines the utilitarian motive of a translation exercise but also brings into sharp focus the 'superiority quotient' of the so-called source language and culture. However, even a cursory glance at the translation practices in South Asia, historically and otherwise, seems to go against Benjamin's celebrated theorization. Contrary to Benjamin's advice, the translation practices in South Asia have had a convention of keeping the target readers and culture in mind, carried a definite purpose and were amply revered. *Texts, Traditions, and Sacredness: Cultural Translation in Kristapurāṇa* by Annie Rachel Royson, under consideration here, is a case in point. Royson's monograph is an extended commentary on *Kristapurāṇa – Krista,* meaning Christ and *Purana*, meaning 'ancient' in Sanskrit (Purana is also the genre of ancient Indian sacred literature). Authored in original by Thomas Stephens (1549–1619), a young Jesuit priest who arrived in Goa with the aim of preaching Christianity to the local subjects of the Portuguese colony, *Kristapurāṇa* (1616) also carries a unique distinction of being the first ever translation and retelling of the Bible in any South Asian language, Marathi in the present case.

Using 'cultural translation' as a trope, Royson engages with *Kristapurāṇa* as a sociological, geographical, cultural and demographical artifact. Navigating the ever-expanding colonial mission that heralded the need for Bible translation into oriental languages, the author posits translation of the Bible a colonial necessity. By translating and retelling the Bible into a South Asian tongue, the colonial machinery ensured that Christianity was inducted into the oriental discourse. This oriental discourse, in turn, not only justified the colonial presence but also paved the way for a rule that was based majorly on consent and not on coercion.

Thomas Stephens, the translator of *Kristapurāṇa*, attempts an epic poetic retelling of the Christian Bible in the Marathi language. He renders the Biblical story as a Purana by employing the Marathi *Ovi* meter, consisting of four lines, where the first three lines rhyme while the fourth line remains either rhymed or unrhymed. *Ovi* is the dominant poetic meter in the Marathi language, used heavily by the Marathi saint poets in their poetic renditions. The final text of *Kristapurāṇa* is a sweeping narrative consisting of 10,962 verses, spread across thirty-six cantos.

Having accounted thus, in the hands of Stephens, *Kristapurāṇa* no longer remains a very 'strict' translation of the Biblical Story, but a retelling or a rewriting in a genre and a form that suits the cultural and literary environment of the native culture. Contrary to Benjamin's assumption, again, Stephens's translation indeed "undertakes to serve the reader". Consequently, the case of *Kristapurāṇa* lends Royson a position where she approaches Stephens' handiwork from an indigenous translation viewpoint. In fact, Royson goes on to show how translation practice takes a native turn in native spaces. Critiquing the translation choices exercised in *Kristapurāṇa*, Royson problematizes the over-reliance that translation studies places on western models, particularly, on conventions such as fidelity to the source text. Foregrounding Stephens's *Kristapurāṇa* as an example, Royson argues for a (fluid) model of translation that is very much rooted in the cultural milieu of South Asia.

The book makes its case through 5 chapters besides an introduction. The opening of the book lays out *Kristapurāṇa* as a seventeenth-century text that needs to be looked at through the critical lens of translation. This recovery of *Kristapurāṇa* as a translation product, Royson asserts, is navigated through the diverse trajectories of textual practices, travel, sacredness, genre and geography. The major undercurrent in the subsequent chapters, therefore, is not only to show the transformation of Biblical narrative into *Kristapurāṇa* as a 'new' cultural production alone, but also to advance an alternative view of the history of the spread of Christianity in India. While charting a nuanced role that translation played in consolidating Christianity as a way of life in India, it also provides a counter-narrative to the popular belief that Christian identity formation in India had a linear development. In fact, it was a very complex and polyphonic phenomenon.

Royson succeeds in understanding a greater part of this complexity by unpacking the politics of cultural translation embedded in *Kristapurāṇa*. Cultural translation calls for a certain culture to

be at the heart of the translation process. For instance, in *Kristapurāṇa*, Stephens highlights the importance of transcribing geographical/topographical features in his translation, as a way of bringing about a smooth acclimatization of the source text into the target culture (2022:2-3). While retelling the Biblical story in Marathi, Stephens not only creates linguistic equivalents of the places described in the Bible but also populates the retelling with Goan geographical characteristics. Royson aptly describes *Kristapurāṇa* as a "Christian narrative with distinct South Asian visual characteristics and geographical/topographical features" (2022:116).

Consequently, Royson submits that it will be fitting to place *Kristapurāṇa* in a geographical third space that she terms as a "mediating landscape of cultural translation" (2022:119). At the same time, this third space is not strictly Biblical or Goan but inherits features from both. Royson's study of the text brings out various instances where such geographical transformations happen. The translator's active agency in modifying the source text becomes apparent in how he adapts the story to the geographical cues of the target culture. For instance, the entire Biblical story in *Kristapurāṇa* occurs in an Indian landscape, whereby the Ganga flows and the koel bird sings. The geography of Goa filters into the target text, as the translation registers the presence of the champak tree, and the Champa flowers, for instance. Another instance is that of the use of banana leaves (in place of Fig leaves) by Adam and Eve when covering themselves up, for there are no Fig trees in Goa. These are some of the various instances where such indigenous cultural referents have been used in *Kristapurāṇa*. Yet another, but no less significant inclusion in *Kristapurāṇa* is that of the Indian caste system. Stephens describes Adam's sin by employing the caste system prevalent in seventeenth-century Goa. While inviting everyone to listen to the story of Christ, Stephen says, "So all you listeners/Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, and all" and thereby, "caste enters Stephens' 'Christian' text as a result of a dialogue with the natives" (Royson 2022:128).

Genre is an important methodological tool in a sacred text translation. The book analyses the question of genre in great depth, examining, particularly, the inter-connectedness between cultural translation and the genre of narratives. As hinted earlier, *Kristapurāṇa* is a retelling of the Biblical story in the Sanskrit Puranic form; it retains the Puranic traditions of meter, form and dialogic narration. The Purana as a genre has been intimately connected with the development of Hindu religious imagination. Royson critiques how Stephens attempts to appropriate the Bible by

transcribing it within the Puranic tradition, such that the Christian narrative "evokes similar 'expectations' in the target culture" (2022:86).

The subjectivity of the translator is another significant marker in *Kristapurāṇa*. For analyzing the translation, the biography and occupation of Thomas Stephens are excavated in detail. The book designates an entire section tracing the life and times of Stephens with his arrival in Goa as a Jesuit, for an evangelizing mission. Situating Stephens among predecessors such as Robert di Nobili and Francis Xavier, Royson sheds light upon a conglomerate of cultures that the Jesuits incorporated. Stephens himself is sketched out as an individual who negotiates the boundaries of various languages: he was an Englishman, on a Portuguese colonial mission, to evangelize the Christian biblical story by rendering it into Marathi (with a mix of Konkani as well), in order to interpellate the local newly-converted Catholics into a Christian culture. Royson writes how the process of Translation, for a figure like Stephens, was a "multi-layered" one. Speaking otherwise, Royson corroborates the figure of the translator as an active agent in the entire dynamics of cultural translation. The book is an elaborate analysis of how the translator, in the process of translation, is translated and changed. With Stephens as her prime example, Royson charts out the various languages and cultures which he negotiates while rewriting the Biblical story for a South Asian readership. Rushdie's terminology, "translated men", is used in order to describe the predicament of an individual like Stephens – not only are they translating the text at hand, but they are also getting translated in the process.

The book does not shy away from putting forth the implications inherent in the translation of a sacred text. The very practice, in fact, is wielded as a double-edged sword. In *Kristapurāṇa*, not only does the medium of the message change but also the message itself. By being woven into the very native fabric of Goa, the biblical story transforms and attains a local flavour. We witness a plethora of reassignments of meaning, places, local registers, words and generic conventions, infused eventually with Christian ontology. Translation is also approached as a rite of passage that texts undergo to emerge in a new, modified light.

The conclusion of the book, which is titled "Speaking After", offers many facets to the central crux, which has not been explicated by the author herself but can well be taken up for further research. With a bibliography that runs across ten pages, the book is evidently a well-researched,

well-rounded exploration into the field of translation practice in pre-colonial India, particularly with regard to a religious text. A comment should also be made upon the lucidity with which Royson posits her arguments. The author keeps her language jargon-free, easy to read and understand. In fact, the appeal of the book lies in the multi-faceted approach, especially, when the author addresses various parallel strands of arguments – geography, genre, language, culture, translation methodology, Christianity, and evangelization – all of which converge – providing a comprehensive view of the issue at hand.

However, in casting an extended focus upon the spread of Christianity as a motif for Bible translation practices, Royson's book fails to record the presence of other religious communities in Goa at the time, apart from the Hindus. The time period that the book deals with coincides with the peak of the Mughal Empire in India. No mention has been made of it or with regard to how the Islamic community in the subcontinent had been reacting to such processes of acculturation. Only a passing mention has been made of the antipathetic reaction that the missionaries had been met with during the process of evangelization. An active reader is left with questions arising on these counts. However, when weighed against the achievements that the book scores, these absences do not appear detrimental in any way.

Yet another commendable aspect of the book is that it refuses to constrict itself within a single label. It simultaneously acts as a documentation of history, a travelogue, a partial biography, and most importantly, as a record of the practice(s) of translation in pre-colonial India. The consideration of geography and generic conventions when assessing a translation (especially the one that negotiates two very foreign cultures) is rarely explored by South Asian scholars. Royson's book provides a significant scholarly impetus in that regard. It makes a significant contribution to the discourse of cultural translation and could be a model for studying hitherto understudied texts.

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