

# **‘My language brought me to Jesus’: Brian Smith and Translation as Mission<sup>1</sup>**

## **ABSTRACT**

Brian and Shirley Smith’s outstanding contribution to mission in Tripura was capped by the translation of the New Testament into Kok Borok. This language did not have its own script. The choice of Roman script for the translation had unexpected political ramifications demonstrating once more the power of language to disturb and to convert.

For nearly two decades in the second half of the twentieth century God brought together the people of an ancient royal tribe and a young New Zealand couple, first of all in the remote area of Tripura in North East India, and then in the city of Calcutta in West Bengal. This encounter led to the first ever written version of the Tripuri language and the production of the Kok Borok New Testament, the Bible in the language of the Tripuri tribe.

For centuries Tripura in North East India was largely inaccessible. It was an independent state ruled by a Rajah. From the later years of the British Raj, however, Tripura became somewhat more accessible by train, boat and cart. Today the journey by air from Calcutta - flying over Bangladesh - to Agartala, the state capital of Tripura, takes less than an hour.

1 This essay was prepared in tribute to Brian Smith on his retirement as Principal of Carey Baptist College.

Back in history, the royal tribe of Tripuris ruled a sizeable kingdom. It is thought to have ranged from the Himalayan foothills in the north to Burma (Myanmar) in the south, and from the Assam ranges in the east to the plains of Bengal in the west. The officers of its army rode elephants into battle and its people were feared as conquerors. Slowly, as the might of this once powerful tribe waned, its kingdom was finally reduced to the current borders of the Tripura state homeland.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries several attempts were made by missionaries and national Christians to enter the lands of this remote kingdom of the Tripuri people to share the gospel of Christ. Although welcome to visit by invitation, permission to reside and minister was not given. This did not dent the enthusiasm of further requests to the Maharajah.

In 1891 an NZBMS missionary, Rev H.G.E. de St Dalmas held high hopes of gaining entry into Tripura and asked for more staff from New Zealand. He reported: 'many more workers will be needed...not to speak of the neighbouring tribes in the hill country between Bengal and Burma'. But again the opportunity did not eventuate.

In 1899 John Takle, one of NZBMS's leading missionaries, made a further attempt to gain entry to Tripura. Six years later, when he finally gained permission to send two Bengali workers to live in Agartala, it was again reported that 'they were not allowed to preach (i.e. tell the Gospel story) but could converse with people.'

Finally in 1938 the Maharajah granted permission for Rev Harry and Mrs Nell Jones to visit extensively in the state. This and subsequent visits ultimately led to formal permission being granted by the Maharajah for NZBMS staff to enter and live in his domains. All this culminated in Rev M. J. and Mrs Cath Eade making the historic move to live in Tripura at the end of 1938. The dream and prayer of many was finally realised yet, although permission to share the gospel was given, it carried specific restriction. Permission did not include the people of the royal Tripuri tribe and some associated sub-tribes.

Another event which was formational in the development of the future church in Tripura also occurred at the end of 1938. In December of that year the small group of Christians already present in Tripura formed the Tripura Baptist Christian Union and held their first Assembly 10 kilometres north of Agartala.

With these developments the stage was now set for one of the most significant people movements to the Christian faith in the history of modern mission in India and, under God, NZBMS was at stage centre.

As the next three decades unfolded great advances were made. Churches were planted, and teacher evangelists were trained and commissioned to work with the people in remote villages. A fine hospital was established and education was advanced for both general and bible schooling.

Many NZBMS missionaries joined the Tripura team, each bringing their God-given skills to aid the rapidly developing church. Interestingly a number of international missiologists watched the development and saw the advance of the church in Tripura as one of the most significant in the world. This conviction was reinforced by what was to happen in the area of language translation.

Into this scene of growth and anticipation arrived Brian and Shirley Smith in early 1959. Brian and Shirley commenced the standard two-year programme of study of the Bengali language and culture. Brian excelled. His love of language and fascination with the use of words provided him not only with the skill to complete his Bengali studies earlier than most, but also gave him the opportunity to develop methods and techniques for language acquisition which he was to utilise later in his work in the Tripuri language.

This essay explores the contribution of language in mission. Specifically it will look at the way in which an historic and oral tribal language was reduced to written form, the translation of the Kok Borok rendering of the New Testament and the implications of this for both the Church and people in Tripura State - and beyond.

## **A developing relationship**

From the outset of the Smith's ministry in Tripura they had contact with tribals and village life. The first came in 1960 while they were still doing Bengali language study when they were assigned to North Tripura to oversee the development of ministries in somewhat remote areas. In 1961 while some oversight of the northern region continued, the Smiths also held responsibility for the village churches in Central and South Tripura.

These two years shaped Brian's understanding of village life and tribal culture. Although much of the life in the villages was near subsistence level it provided considerable opportunity to observe the customs and practices of villagers in good and difficult times. But being 'observers' did not stop the Smiths sharing in the pain and suffering of the people. Brian made friendships with nationals while all the time searching for ways to strengthen emerging churches. To achieve this he was compelled to discover better ways to develop leadership. The importance of this task became even more evident in later years in the persecution which came to many villages in a hostile environment enacted by Hindu militants. The strong leadership enabled most of the churches to stand firm in the face of considerable opposition.

This challenge was compounded by another: the challenge which was presented to Brian in 1962 to take over the leadership of the Bible School in Agartala. This occurred at the same time as the national church leadership put the Bible School in charge of evangelism! A double responsibility was accepted by Brian.

Again, through the work of the Bible School, and later in the ministry of the Mobile Bible School (the short term regional schools) Brian sought to strengthen the churches by training competent leaders. He was also in contact with the growing number of Tripuris who needed training for their village congregations. It was part of his strategy at this period to provide his students with resources (catechisms/helps) to assist them in their leadership of village churches and in evangelism.

There was a growing respect from the people toward their teacher. When the opportunity was presented to Brian to undertake the translation of the New Testament into the Kok Borok language he not only had the skills to do so, he also had the friendship and acceptance of many of the tribals. He used stories and visual aids as a means of sharing the gospel and for teaching and training people in the basics of the Christian faith and its practice.

An example from this period will illustrate. On his first furlough in New Zealand Brian developed a simple but effective vertical 'card-o-gram' kind of gimmick for deputation meetings. On one side of each of the vertically taped together cards was a letter, which together read in descending order 'WHAT IS GOD LIKE?' After some questions and answers from the group, Brian would flick his wrist and one by one the cards would turn to their reverse side, on which was written, also in descending order, 'GOD IS LIKE JESUS!' People remembered that presentation and its teaching for many years!

To learn the Tripuri language Brian regularly sought the help of village children to assist his language acquisition. Children such as those out in the fields and up on the hills looking after the village cattle were also his teachers. As they herded the cattle and told village-life stories, he talked with them and listened to their replies to his questioning. Often there would be shrieks of laughter as they listened to their adult student's constant questioning about words and how they would say this or that.

No laptop computer for this man, only a brilliant mind, and pen and paper, and the developing appreciation and respect for another language, and those for whom it was mother tongue. And of course, above all, his own deepening love for 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' who gave him the vision and passion to achieve the goal of the Tripuri New Testament.

Brian had had the open fields and thatched village huts for his school room, so it was most appropriate that the Bible Society suggested the translation work begin at Luke 15 with the 'village-y' stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The old biblical stories newly crafted in the emerging script of

the Tripuri language shouted life and action and reality from the pages.

### **Discerning a dream**

The 1970 census showed that there were approximately 250,000 Tripuris. They were the largest tribal group in Tripura State. (Estimates in 1996 place the number at 500,000.)

While it was initially true that the Tripuris were shielded from hearing the gospel by the edict of their Rajah, as the amalgamation of princely states into a grand plan for a united India gained greater momentum, the Tripuris became Indian citizens like any other. The barriers came down and the gospel story was shared with them as well. At the end of 1960, three Tripuris were baptised near Bisramganj, south of Agartala. Two years later others from the same area were baptised. The following year there were more baptisms in a growing number of villages. By the end of the 1960s the total number of converts among the Tripuri was about 50.

It was in 1962 that the first member of the Tripuri people came to the Bible School as a student. It was not only significant for the Mission and the Tripuri tribe, but also for Brian as that year he assumed the Principalship of the Bible School.

Nearly seven years later Brian Smith was visiting the village of Jurtoli in the region of Bisramganj, the place of the first Tripuri baptisms. He was accompanied by two evangelists. In the evening they held a meeting in the home of the only Christian family in the village. What occurred has been recorded in the centennial history of the NZBMS.

As the oil lamp flicked shadows across the mud walls the small group prayed together. In his mind's eye Brian could see around him the small hills or 'tilas' of western Tripura. On each hilltop stood a simple village church filled with Tripuri men, women and children. They were praising the Lord Jesus, offering prayers in His Name, and hearing the Word of God. But how could they hear

the Word of God when there was no Tripuri Bible? Encouraged by this vision of a Tripuri Church, Brian determined that if possible he would provide an impetus that would lead eventually to the production of a Tripuri New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

While in New Zealand on furlough in 1970 the fruit of Brian's now comprehensive experience in mission and the training of leaders produced the 'prophetic word' which would take him and Shirley back to India to make what was seen by many as the Smiths' finest and lasting contribution to the Tripuri people.

Facing the challenge of a third five-year term Brian said When I get back (to India) I would like to do two things. I would like to get the pastors through their special course for matriculation (planned for 1971) and then see a New Testament in Tripuri completed.<sup>3</sup>

Those words were indeed prophetic and not without significant cost to Brian and Shirley's health.

To achieve those two projects required the Smiths to live and work in what can only be described as the deprivations of Calcutta. Granted that they had 'reasonable' accommodation and access to a few hours of air-conditioning each night, but the pollution of surface and air, and the poverty of the poor was far from easy to bear. The surveillance by security police particularly over their final six months in Calcutta was wearying and at one time it became particularly intrusive. They wanted to know why tribal folk were visiting the Smiths, who their friends were, why they didn't have a telephone, and how, without a phone, did they get urgent messages to the BMS?

Part of the dream, to bring some of the leaders up to matriculation standard in English, was soon achieved. In 1971-72 Brian helped several of the leaders gain greater competency in English for their matriculation. Some succeeded

2 S.L. Edgar & M.L. Eade, *Toward The Sunrise: The Centenary History of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society* (Wellington: N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1985) pp. 223-224.

3 Edgar & Eade p. 224.

in their first year. Four who failed went to Calcutta in 1972 and lived next door to the Smiths. They succeeded in their exams that year, even though during their short term course Brian developed hepatitis. While he was still recovering Brian taught them from his bed. The pastors sat around their teacher's bed and in this way he led them to further educational achievement.

The other part of the dream began in 1972 with the concentrated work of translation of the Tripuri New Testament. Brian and his two Tripuri colleagues, Romesh Deb Borma and Jong Bahadur, began the work in earnest. Ahead of them was the massive task of translating the whole of the New Testament, and this within a finite time. The authorities in Tripura had already instigated the process of quietly removing missionaries from Tripura by not renewing their residential and security area permits.

The work began in May 1972, the hottest and most humid time of the West Bengal year. It was the beginning, not only of the New Testament, but also of the changes which, because of that work, were to come to a people far away from Calcutta in the decades ahead.

### **Sourcing the Script**

Bengali is currently the primary or dominant language of approximately 200 million people. It is spoken in variant forms as determined by religion, geography, economics and culture. It is the language medium used from the time of William Carey (and even by others before him) to share the Christian message in the north eastern region of the Indian sub-continent, which included what is now known as West Bengal (centred on Calcutta), and Bangladesh (East Bengal).

Following the partition of British India into the two nations of Pakistan and India, with their respective Muslim and Hindu majorities, a massive and bloody people movement occurred. People flocked from each of the new countries to the other, seeking religious freedom. There was unbelievable suffering, bloodshed, communal hatred and dislocation as millions of people re-aligned their lives in new areas.

At this time and over the next 30 or more years, mainly from what had become East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), tens of thousands of Bengalis with or without permission poured into tribal Tripura, changing its demographic face forever. Bengali aggression in land and business 'acquisition' in many cases dislocated the tribals from their historic lands and culture. The Bengali language also brought political conflict and confusion for the tribals.

It was against this background that an exceedingly important decision had to be made as to the nature of the script which would be used to convey the hitherto unwritten language of the Tripuri people.

A number of literate Tripuri Christians already had access to the Bengali language version of the Bible, but for them that carried negative emotional overtones. It was as though the Bible was available to them but only in the language of their conquerors! It was not their mother tongue, nor was it even a distant dialect. It was the language of the people from across the border now pouring into their homeland.

As a consequence the translation team in Calcutta faced a challenge of major proportions. In the political climate of the time, whatever script they opted for posed significant possible consequences. These were not only consequences for them, but also for the Tripuri people, and the survival of the very New Testament they were working on. Like the ripples from a stone thrown out into a pond, the consequences could be far-reaching. But what was there to guide them in their decision?

Several years earlier Harry and Nell Jones had faced a similar decision, but with minor consequences. They worked on a translation of the Gospel of Mark and 1 John into Rieng, a Tripuri dialect. After consideration they opted for the Bengali script.

Early in the 1970s a professor of linguistics at the University of Calcutta, and one of his graduate students published an analysis of the Tripuri language. This analysis revealed many differences between the construction of the Bengali and Tripuri languages. It showed that a number of letters and sounds

required in a written Tripuri script did not exist in the Bengali language.

Politically, the governments of both West Bengal (centred on Calcutta) and Tripura State were in the hands of communists. There was growing dissent within Tripura and persecution, greater than anything previously experienced by the Christian Church, began to emerge. Suffering and loss of life occurred within Christian communities at a disturbing rate. Communists and Hindu extremists, many of whom were Bengali speaking, wreaked havoc and created fear among tribals, whether Christian or not. Against this background the decision on the script to be used was made. The Tripuri New Testament was to be given to its people in the Roman script. This choice has proved to have had more implications than even Brian and his team anticipated.

In the perception of many in authority in India Brian was seen as contributing to the civil and communal unrest. Naturally this helped deflect attention away from other (political) events occurring at the time. Newspaper articles and even a programme on the BBC radio commented on the missionary involvement. Brian was asked to respond in Bengali on the BBC world service. Brian declined. Tripura, as well as a number of North Eastern States of India, was subsequently 'closed' to all foreigners, and remained so for more than 20 years until the mid-1990s.

### **From translation to Testament**

The production of the New Testament in the Tripuri language is one of the significant and lasting examples of taking the mission of the gospel news of Jesus Christ beyond the established church to a people largely unreached. Certainly the translation of the New Testament continues to provide rich biblical resources for the Tripuri Christian Community as they strengthen their own spiritual life and seek to communicate the gospel to their own people. The Old Testament translation is well under way.

But let's go back to the mid-1970s. The task of using the people's language to produce for them the Tripuri New Testament took nearly four years of long hot days and nights, exasperating delays, revamps and proof-reading, until it was finally completed in January 1976.

From the beginning of the project, the Bible Society gave a great deal of assistance and encouragement. One of their consultants concluded it was one of the best examples of translation produced. Brian and his team were helped with resources for their work with the opportunity to participate in a month-long translators' course with 80 or so translators from other parts of India. When it came time to publish the Tripuri New Testament the Bible Society bore that cost.

It took three months to complete the first draft of Luke and just over three years to complete the rest of the New Testament. The team worked together and separately bringing together draft after draft, sharing ideas and concepts. Numerous revisions took place in the never-ending search for accuracy and clarity. Finally a glossary was added of terms and names which required explanation. For a people who did not know the stories of the Old Testament it was particularly important to give as part of the New Testament brief sketches of the major Old Testament characters who were referred to in the New. If this had not been done then famous figures such as Abraham, David and Moses would have appeared on the New Testament pages without the reader being aware of who they were.

Printing began in October 1975, but the entire text had to be set by hand with each letter of lead type being added one by one. Endless typesetting corrections had to be made on the massive area of type-set blocks. In January 1976 the Tripuri New Testament was finally completed and printed. There was a 'first edition' of 5,000 copies and these were released in Tripura at a special service of dedication on 20 May 1976.

By this time, with their task completed, Brian and Shirley, unable to re-enter Tripura again as part of the price they paid to translate the Tripuri New Testament in the Roman script, packed up their Calcutta home, took their farewells from

colleagues and friends and returned to New Zealand to teach at the Baptist Theological College. They left the Holy Spirit to use the gift of the New Testament in the hills and valleys of Tripura, and in the communities and churches of the Tripuri people.

Later one of the Tripuri evangelists wrote:

'The Tripuri speaking Christians are very happy.

The non-Christian Tripuris are happy too.

Now we are all using the Bible.'

For all who were now hearing the Word of God in their mother tongue it was like Pentecost all over again as they read or heard of the mighty works of God in their own language.

### **Language in Mission**

In the process of writing the Tripuri language New Testament, Brian, together with his team, gave a profound demonstration of how language is vitally important in mission beyond Christendom.

For the Tripuris the advent of their language in written form began to transform not only thousands of lives for Christ, but much of their society as well. This transformation created for them self esteem, hope, direction, a greater awareness of education, the need for health, economic issues and a growing sense of community - not all at once, but over the following years.

In the two or three years which followed the publication of the Tripuri New Testament more than 1600 Tripuris were baptised. The church among the Tripuris was firmly established and growth has continued.

During the same period another of Brian's missiological dreams began to be significantly realised, that of the development of educated, well trained, effective leadership for the church. While biblical translation is commonplace in mission beyond Christendom, Brian's contribution was at a significantly different level. To him the need was greater than simply providing an acceptable translation. His vision for the Tripuri language New Testament was also earthed in his ecclesiology, what it would mean to 'be church' in those distant

hills of Tripura. The task undertaken was therefore comprehensive and yet focused. Comprehensive because it engaged in the wider plan of the national church leadership to work for the social and spiritual welfare of the Tripuri tribe, and included the enhancement of leadership skills of those who were to be the leaders of new communities of faith in Tripura.

Comprehensive also, because the translation and subsequent literacy and literature based on it, had to support the emerging Tripuri Church in its understanding of its own responsibility for mission in the face of persecution. It largely succeeded in this.

The specific focus of the Tripuri New Testament was to provide, in an appropriate language form, clarity to the biblical story. Much of its language therefore was formed in the Tripuri villages. The ordinary people - even the cow-herders - contributed to it.

In its completed form the New Testament was brought back to the Tripuri villages by 'evangelists' to be read and taught. People were introduced to the Jesus of 'the Book'. Many were baptised and discovered a new reason for community. The efforts of Brian and Shirley Smith, Romesh Deb Borma and Jong Bahadur enabled Tripuris to proclaim 'My language brought me to Jesus'.

**Ian Brown**