

# Translation as Cultural Dialogue

- *An Indian context*

(A reference to two texts- Assamese version of the *Holy Bible*, & *Kirttana Ghosā* by Srimanta Sankardev)

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## *An abstract*

*Translation is basically a trans-language activity. Language is one of the basic elements in formation and development of the cultural life of a nation. The bulk of higher and finer products in a language in various forms is what forms 'literature' in that language. Since literature is a record of the cultural life and identity of a nation, translation as a literary activity has some potential of cultural dialogue, at least between the speakers of the source language and the target language. Culture is a matter of interaction and intermingling among mankind, and groups and units of mankind- races, communities, societies and nations. Today almost every society is multicultural in nature where as tomorrow the entire world is going to be multicultural. This question of multiculturalism and issues like accommodation, coexistence, reciprocity, acculturation, multiculturalism and nation-building are not less pertinent issues in India than anywhere else in the world.*

*Translation, a linguistic practice thus gets promoted to a cultural dialogue among peoples. The present paper is a focus on the potential of translation as a cultural dialogue with reference to multicultural identity (ies) in India. The Assamese version of the **Holy Bible** and Srimanta*

*Sankardeva's Kirttana Ghosa will be referred to as two specimens of cultural dialogue through translation- in the first, literal and in the latter, cultural.*

*Keywords- language, national identity, translation, multicultural, cultural dialogue.*

## Introduction

Generally speaking, translation to popular mind means reproducing a text from its source language (SL) to a target language (TL) other than the former. But at this twenty first century it stands for much more complex and multi-dimensional literary activities than that. Literature embodies the cultural tracts of a nation through language. If translation is to be taken as 'reproduction', this reproduction can be accomplished, from one form (ex. story) to another (ex. drama) or one version to another within the same form- both activities within the same language or, from one language to another. By any of the methods of translation, the primary objective of translation always remains a sort of dialogue. If translation is done within the same language, this cultural dialogue may be targeted from one generation to another or from one target group to another. Again translation between two languages, the respective cultural specimen of the nation speaking the source language gets transmitted to the speakers of the target language who are also the readers of literature in that language.

Translation therefore clearly bears the potential for cultural dialogue. The present paper is an attempt at focusing translation as a dynamic means for cultural dialogue. It will refer to selected portions from two translational or transcreative works- the *Pabitra Bāibel* - the Assamese version of the *Holy Bible* (King James' Bible) and *Kirttana Ghosā*. The latter is the masterpiece by the great Assamese saint Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 BC) composed primarily for sermonizing *Neovaisnavite* cult in medieval Assam coming back from a twelve year long pilgrimage to various shrines in north India. The *Kirttana Ghosa* is considered as a "selection (adaptation) from the *Bhagavata*" (Sarma, 2015, p. 117) - the most authoritative script in Neovaisnavism in Assam. Focus will be made on the linguistic and literary aspects

craftily handled by the great poet in transcreating dissimilar portions on similar content and sources. In case of the first specimen text, namely *Pabitra Bāibel*, it is a clear instance of cultural dialogue between the western Christian culture and the Indian non-Christian world. It was mainly through this translational work that Christianity started peeping into Assam dominated for ages by both Brahminical and non-Brahminical traditions far away from Christianity.

### Objectives

Following are the primary objectives of the present paper-

- i. to look into various potentials of translation
- ii. to focus on translation as a means of cultural dialogue
- iii. to attempt at understanding the referred texts as two distinct potentials of translation
- iv. to focus on the linguistic and literary nuances in the selected portions of the referred texts

### Methodology

The basic methodology applied in the present deliberation is analytical. The comparative perception is strictly restricted to the respective Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT). Comparative understanding across STs is neither thought appropriate within the purview of the present deliberation, nor ever attempted.

A brief reference to the theoretical orientation on translation is first made before concentrating on translation as a cultural dialogue.

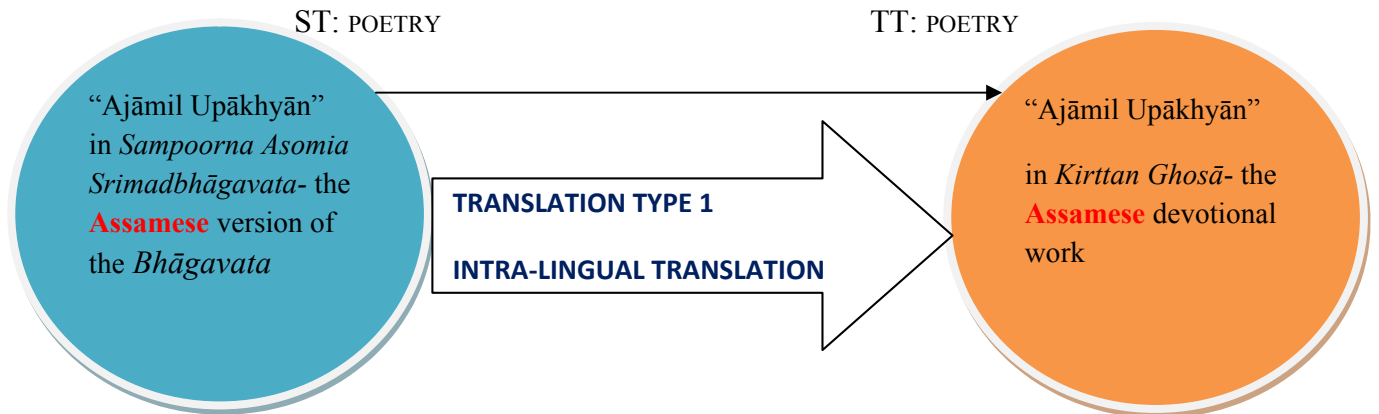
The *Pabitra Bāibel* and the *Kirttana Ghosā* are the specimen works of translation here. The first specimen translation picked up here is the *Pabitra Bāibel*- an Assamese translation of the Holy Bible. Its starting verses (Old Testament) from The First Book of Moses, Called Genesis “The Creation” have been

referred to as specimen. *The King James Version of the Holy Bible* in its PDF version downloaded from the URL <http://www.davince.com/bible> is used as the source text. The target text the *Pabitra Bāibel* was published by the Bible Society of India, Bangalore (ISBN 81-221-1480-6). The second specimen work here is the *Kirttana Ghosā* authored by Srimanta Sankardeva. For the sake of deeper concentration, the portion titled “Ajāmil Upākhyān” (the story of Ajāmil) has been picked up for reference. This story is a transcreation of the story under the same title in the *Bhāgavata* as adapted by the same poet. Then focus is made on the linguistic and literary aspects applied by the poet in this act of transcreation. *Sampoorna Asomiā Srimadbhāgavata* (the Complete Srimadbhāgavata in Assamese, 1st publication, 2004) compiled and edited by Dr Nabin Chandra Sarma and published by Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati is the source text here. The target text is taken from Jatindranath Goswami edited *Kirttana Ghosā & Naam Ghosā* (6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2001), published by Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati.

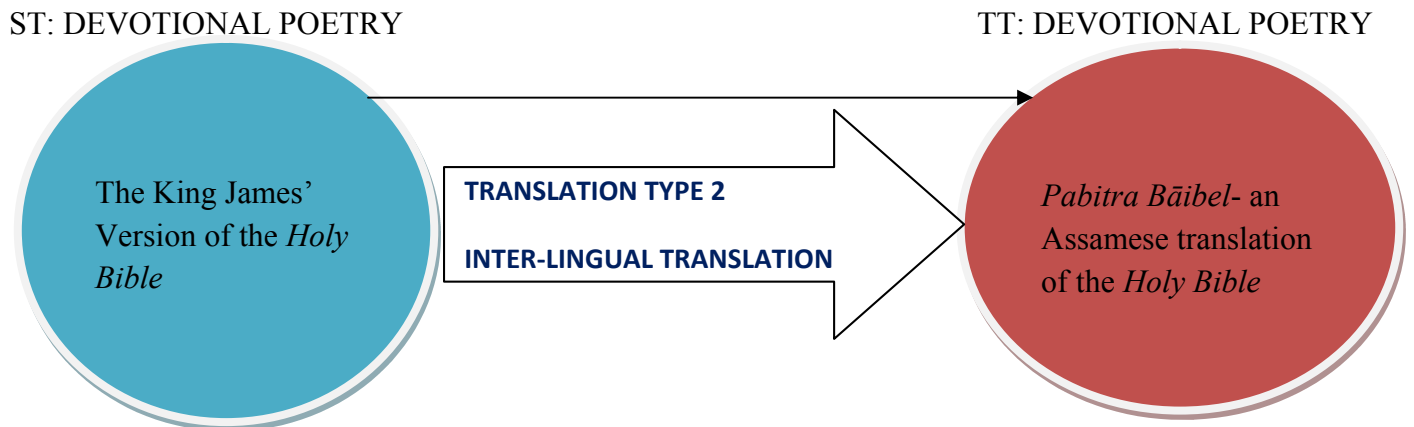
### Translation as a cultural dialogue

Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) classifies translation into three broad categories (1959)- 1. Intra-lingual translation 2. Inter-lingual translation and 3. Inter-semiotic translation. Intra-lingual translation as the name signifies is done within the same language. In other words, the language of the ST and TT is identical in this type of translation. The second type of translation is accomplished between two distinct languages. In short, this type is the translation proper. The third type on the other hand, is transcreative and adaptive in nature. When a text from a particular semiotic system (ex. Novel- language) is recreated in another semiotic system (ex. film), it becomes an inter-semiotic translation. Translation thus has got newer dimensions in the twenty first century.

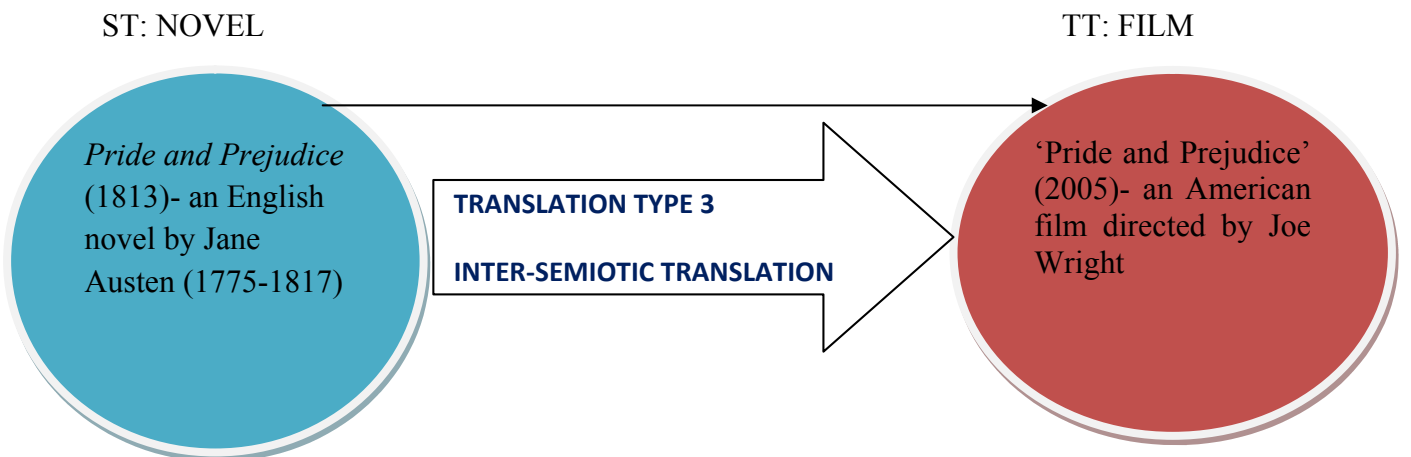
Jakobson's classification of translation: a graphic representation



**SEMIOTIC SYSTEM: LANGUAGE (Assamese) SEMIOTIC SYSTEM: LANGUAGE (Assamese)**



**SEMIOTIC SYSTEM: LANGUAGE (ENGLISH) SEMIOTIC SYSTE: LANGUAGE (ASSAMESE)**



**SEMIOTIC SYSTEM: LANGUAGE**

**SEMIOTIC SYSTEM: DIGITAL/ FILM**

While quoting Edward Sapir, Sussan Bessnett (2002 p. 22) states:

Edward Sapir claims that ‘language is a guide to social reality’ and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society. Experience, he asserts, is largely determined by the language habits of the community, and each separate structure represents a separate reality: No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

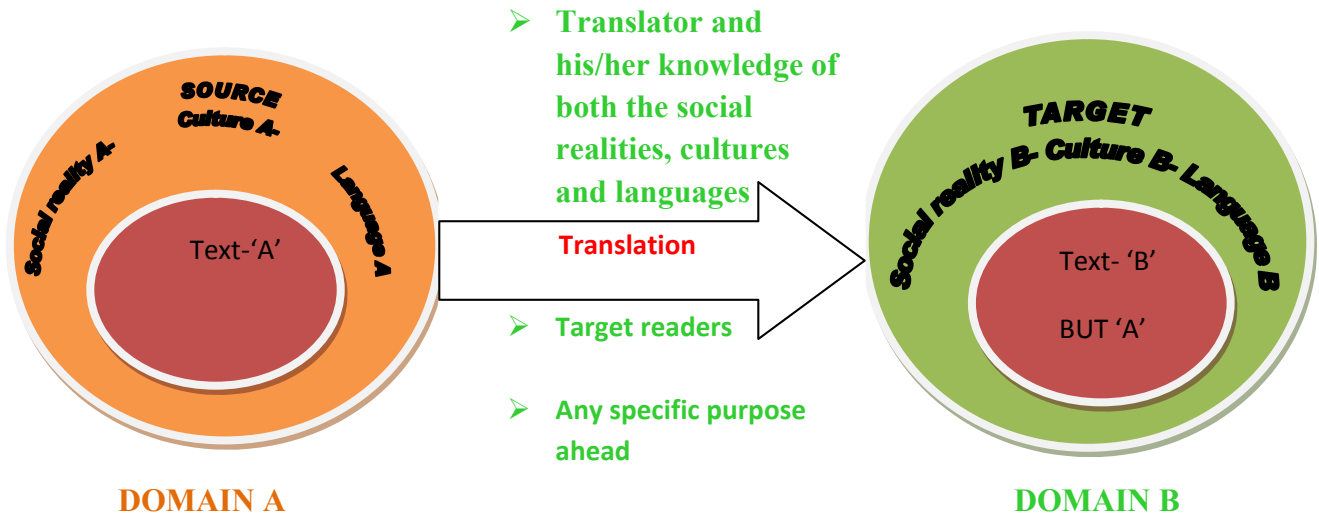
Bessnett further observes, “...Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture”. (2002 p. 22) Few seminal ideas on the cultural significance of translation can be drawn from what Bessnett observes-

- Language is the cementing force in human culture and civilization
- Language (through literature) convincingly represents the social reality
- Each society (along with its language/ languages) is distinct from the other
- It is very hard to represent the social realities of a society in a language distant from that social reality

Sujit Mukherjee going further therefore states, “Absolutely literal translation, in any case, is impossible.”

(Mukherjee, 1994 p.6) Here he indicates the question of untranslatability.

A simple diagram can be drawn from Bessnett's observation for easy and ready reference:



The translator as the above diagram reflects is one who transforms and carries Text A from Domain A to Domain B as Text B which at the same time should never fail to remain Text A. To accomplish this risky mission therefore, the translator ought to have sufficient knowledge about all the aspects of both the domain- A and B. Besides, though a translator, he/she plays the role of an original author for the readers of Domain B remaining faithful to Domain A, especially the ST and its writer. The responsibilities and liabilities being immense, the translator till date enjoys a meager exposure of a well defined theoretical orientation regarding the art and science of translation. That is why the difficulties through which the translator has to travel are very finely related by Susan Bessnett through a metaphor:

(The translator is) one who is like the driver of a Rolls who has no idea what makes the car move. Likewise, the mechanic who spends a lifetime taking engines apart but never goes out for a drive in the country is a fitting image for the dry academician who examines the *how* at the expense of *what* is.

(Bessnett, 2002 p.82)

Translation is a massive voyage across time and space. It is thus one of the most potent cultural dialogues in this beautiful world inhabited by peoples all different in cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, economic and social ways of the world, mode and means of expression and so forth. The international interdisciplinary conference on “Translating Across Time and Space” organized by PENN HUMANITIES FORUM in Franklin Hall, American Philosophical Society at the University of Pennsylvania, USA from 13<sup>th</sup> October to 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2016 is the recent example how translation is now considered as a potent means of cultural exchange and hence of cultural studies in this century. Sujit Mukherjee who is a keen observer of issues related to translation therefore considers translation as an act of discovery and recovery both.

### Specimen I *Pabitra Bāibel*

Translation of the *Holy Bible* into various languages of the world paralleled American missionary activities and British imperial expansion. *Pabitra Bāibel* published by the Bible Society of India, Bangalore is an example of such an attempt. A tiny part of the Assamese version of the Bible, **The First Book of Moses, Called Genesis-** The Creation from the Old Testament has been picked up for deliberation under question. As far as the technicalities of translation are concerned, this translation is basically an example of literary translation. Even then it contains few linguistic and literary aspects that concern a student of literature.

Lets go through the first five verses of this portion:

1In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

2And the earth was without form, and void ; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

3And God said, Let there be light : and there was light.



4And God saw the light, that *it was* good : and God divided the light from the darkness.

5And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Corresponding Assamese version in the referred text:

*1ādite īshware ākash-mandal āru prithivi sristi karile.  
2prithivi nirjan āru shoonya āsil; āru āndhar agādh jalar  
oporat āsil; āru īshwarar ātmāi jalsamoohar oporat  
umāisil. 3pāse īshware kale, pohar houk; tāte pohar houl  
4tetiā īshware poharto uttam dekhi, āndhārar parā  
poharak beleg karile. 5pāse īshware poharar nām din, āru  
āndhārar nām rāti thole. Ghodhuli āru poowā holot, ek din  
houl.*

No one can imagine a more straightforward literal translation than this. The reason behind is best known to all. The only aim of such a translation like the Assamese version of the *Bible* by a missionary organization like the Bible Society of India is to spread the message of Christianity among the people of Assam mostly illiterate and semiliterate, especially during the beginning of the nineteenth century when such attempts to translate the *Bible* into Assamese tongue got accelerated. Between the two primary assets of literature- matter and manner, the former always remains the only choice.

A reception:

i. *the heaven*= *ākash-mandal*: *The heaven* has been translated as *ākash-mandal* (the cosmic world) in the beginning verse of the TT which in the Target language very hardly means heaven. One of many finer

Assamese equivalent (ex. *sarag*, *swarga* etc.) could have been used instead of such an ambiguous and less appropriate word.

ii. *without form* meaning without a creature = *nirjan*- Assamese compounding *nir* (*neg*)+ *jan* (mankind). In spite of the compounding being appropriate, the parallel is wrong since *nirjan* in Assamese means ‘quiet’ which may of course be resulted from an atmosphere devoid of inhabitation.

iii. God moved upon the face of the waters = *īshwarar ātmāi jalsamoohar oporat umāisil* (brooded)

The TT phrase is endowed with an additional epithet- ‘ātma’. But it seems unnecessary since no harm would have been caused even if the translator had reproduced that ‘God brooded’. Another interesting choice of diction in the TT is ‘umāisil’(brooded). God’s “moving upon the face of water” bears very distant and indirect implication of Him brooding the water mass. Whereas God’s act of brooding the water mass is more explicitly expressed when the translator uses the word ‘umāisil’ for creating the world. Hence the TT reaches out the ST with the use of this lone word.

iv. God **divided** the light from the darkness = *āndhārar parā poharak beleg karile* Had it been any composition in modern English, a possible phrasing for the ST would have been like - God **divided** the light **and** the darkness. In place of the preposition ‘from’, the conjunction ‘and’ would have appeared more appropriate. Because the group verb “divide from” here actually means “separated from”. But being a Biblical expression of the ages, it of course has its own beauty. Hence “beleg karile” (separated) in the TT comes closure to the implied meaning of the sentence.

Effect: The ST is really effective piece of poetry as any from the entire *Bible* whereas the TT here is a rough piece of prose. The Biblical rhythm is missed in the TT probably without missing the target of sermonizing the Christian glorification of God the Almighty.

Christianity had been almost an unknown phenomenon in Indian cultural context, especially in Assam till the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dr Barpujari (1987 p. 1) observes the effect of introduction of western education and culture-

19<sup>th</sup> century was an important age in Indian history. In its beginning through spread of English education and through infiltration of western culture, revolutionary changes took place in Indian religious, social and philosophical domain. (Barpujari 1987 p. 1)

He further observes how the newer and scientific approaches of Bacon, Darwin, Spencer, Locke, J S Mill, Adam Smith, Gorky, Goethe, Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Burke, Rosseau, Voltaire and Garibaldi strongly affected the age old spiritual, religious, social and political beliefs among the Indian thinkers as well as the masses.

Religious conversion was one of the primary objectives of the western commercial turned political invaders, especially of the British and Americans:

The American Baptist missionaries had no less contributions in spreading western education and ideology. They started their preachings from 1936 under the supervision of Natahn Brown, Oliver Cutter and Miles Bronson in Sadiya, Joypur and the Naga hills. Religious conversion was their primary objective. (Barpujari, 1987, p.3)

It must be remembered that this Rev Nathan Brown (1807-1886) was the person who first translated the *Bible* into Assamese with the help of the Christian convert Assamese Brahmin Atmaram Sarma as “Amaar Traankorta Jisu Christor Natun Niyom” (a translation of the New Testament) from Sibsagar in 1848

followed by another book from the Bible titled “Christor Biboran aru Shubha Barta” (Jesus Christ and his Holy Message) in 1854.

Thus a new western world of Christian belief and scientific knowledge was opened up before the Assamese as in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. Gradually the Indians were inspired and provoked to rethink about their as old traditional beliefs- “Under the influence of these personalities the Indians became skeptic about the rationality of their own religious and social systems.” (Barpujari, 1987, p. 1) This can surely be stated as an exemplary incident of a far reaching cultural dialogue between the west and the east.

Hence, translation is the most effective of all the tools and means of cultural dialogue between two distinct nation, culture and language.

### Specimen II Ajāmil Upakhyān (the story of Ajāmil)

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 BC), the medieval Assamese saint, very commonly honoured as ‘mahāpurush’ (the great personality) had been the greatest figure in the neovaisnavite movement in this part of the country. He along with his disciples including Madhabdeva laid the foundation of ‘Ek Saran Nām Dharma’ as the premier sect of vaisnavite cult in medieval Assam enriched with his exposure to the contemporary Bhakti Movement in the main land of India. As the name indicates, singular devotion to Lord Vishnu with due honour to all His incarnations is the seminal idea of his ‘Ek Saran Nām Dharma’. Deliberation, intuition glorification and attention to the glory, kindness and precepts in the acts of Lord Vishnu are considered the primary ways of salvation in this cult. “Sravana and kirttana” (concentration and recitation a) to the advices, precepts and glories are what is considered as ‘nām’ in this context. Like in any religion, Srimanta Sankardeva too devised this cult to be practiced and followed through various myths, prayers, stories and spiritual orientations. The mahapurush fully utilized his literary and artistic gift for this primary mission in his life. Though in various capacities such as lyricist (composed *Borgeet*), playwright-director, poet, performing artist, he had always targeted at preaching his ek saran nām dharma.

Srimanta Sankardeva was the pioneer even in the task of translating the *Bhāgavata* into Assamese (from Sanskrit). “In the very beginning Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva initiated the translation of the *Bhāgavata* by translating the first ‘skanddha’ (part/book) of *Srimadbhāgavata*.” (Sarma, 2004, p. .122) The Sixth Skanddha of the Assamese version of the *Srimadbhāgavata* relates the story of Ajāmil, a reckless and lost Brahmin. Sankardeva himself is the contributor of this portion. Again the story of Ajāmil finds a formidable place in *Kirttana Ghosa*- the masterpiece of this saint-poet.

The Ajāmil Upākhyān in the *Bhāgavata* and in the *Kirttana* relates the same story of the reckless Brahmin. But they two are distinct texts from linguistic and literary point of view. According to the chronological list of Sankardeva’s composition (Goswami, 2001, p. 7), the Ajāmil Upākhyān of the *Bhāgavata* was composed earlier to that for the *Kirttana*. Hence the “Ajāmil Upākhyān” in the *Kirttana* can for all reasons be accepted as a translation of the second type in Jakobson’s classification- an intra-lingual translation.

“Ajāmil Upākhyān” tells the reader the story of the lost Brahmin who is engulfed in all sorts of sins known to humankind. Such a sinner too can have his path of salvation with the kindness of God. In the *Kali yuga* the best way to appeal to God is to just utter his name (Harinām). Ajāmil while suffering for his sins yelled out the name of his youngest son named ‘Narayana’ by which God also is called. Thus Ajāmil gets his way to salvation.

“Ajāmil Upākhyān” in *Bhāgavata* is a full length narration with all necessary details. Some of the subtitles of this part may be shortlisted to have an idea about the detail planning of the part in the *Bhāgavata*: The epilogue containing glorification of heavenly compassion, description hell, Advice of the poet (several times in between two significant portions), allocation of punishment for various sins, Various types of penance, Bhakti’- devotion as the best type of penance, Harinām (hymns and prayer) as the supreme shelter, The story of Ajāmil, Tug of war between the messengers of Yama (King of the

underworld) and of Lord Vishnu, Ajāmil’s repentance, Ajāmil’s salvation. In addition to such references, few other allusions have also been made part of the “Ajāmil Upākhyān”. Thus it has achieved an epic dimension in itself.

“Ajāmil Upākhyān” in the *Kirttana* is less than one fourth of its counterpart in the *Bhāgavata* in length. Here the description directly goes into the story of the Brahmin. Within the 30<sup>th</sup> line here Ajāmil is rescued by the messengers/ guards of the Lord. Following this main course of event the poet narrates God’s glory and the need of reciting it in human life. Many of the details narrated in the *Bhāgavata* are just compiled in shorter ‘kirttanas’ (part for recital). In short, “Ajāmil Upākhyān” in the *Kirttana* is a very abridged form of that in the *Bhāgavata*.

The *Kirttana* was meant for ready reference and daily recitation of the followers of the saint. The poet has very tactfully transcreated the story here without losing any of the merits of the original such as Ajāmil’s recklessness, description of hell, menace in hell, power of compassion and devotion towards God, and the ways of salvation:

doshara nidana	kaliyuga āta
eka mahāguna āse	
kewala kirttane	sansārara bānddha
erāi muksha pāwe pāse  34	

(*Kirttana*, Ajāmil Upakhyān, Fourth Kirttana)

*There is a great remedy for suffering in the kaliyug. Only by reciting, and concentrating on God’s glory one here attains the path of salvation overcoming all worldly liabilities, pains and sufferings.*

### Concluding Remark

Translation has a great role to play in establishing cultural dialogue among peoples all divided in ethnicity, culture, socio-political heritage, and above all, in language. The twenty first century has been marked with international accommodation, coexistence and reciprocity among all divergent groups because these are the only ways to sustain human civilization in the world. All are now to very seriously consider the questions like acculturation and multiculturalism. Especially in a political nationhood like India where hundreds of languages are spoken by no less number of peoples having their own ethnic and cultural heritage, such liberal and scientific approaches are surely to prove very pertinent. One has just to remember what Bipan Chanda observes, “Today almost every society is multicultural in nature (where as) ... tomorrow the entire world is going to be multicultural.” (2007 p. vii) As such is the intellectual and socio-political situation in India and world-wide, cultural studies demands closure attention where translation is definitely going to play a very momentous role.

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