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Persian Bible translations in India in the early 19th century

The protestant missionary movement in the early 19th rooted both in the religious and socio-political changes occurring in many Protestant countries was focused on the Bible translation, which became the main field of the protestant missionary activity. William Carey, who in 1792 expressed his call for mission *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, is a good example of linguistically-oriented missionary.¹ In fact, missionaries worked among the multiethnic and multilingual communities attempting to collect materials on vernacular languages, describe them and finally translate the Scripture. Such work also depended on many sociolinguistics factors such as prestige of one language, its area distribution or, like in India, colonial language policy.²

Taking into consideration the Persian Bible translation in the early 19th century in India some questions arise, including: where the Persian language was spoken, what the method of translation was and who the missionaries imagined to be the best receiver of such translation. While searching for the answer we depend mostly on the vast collection of missionary literature from the 19th century, historical accounts and reports of British and Foreign Bible

¹ He expressed his ambitions, after being appointed by Wallesley to one of the Chairs in Fort William College, in such words: “We have it in our power if our means would do for it, in the space of about fifteen years, to have the Word of God translated and printed in all the languages of the East” – Ch. Anderson, *The Annals of the English Bible*, New York 1852, p. 505.

² Cf. J. Errington, *Linguistics in a Colonial World: a story of language, meaning and power*, Blackwell Publishing 2008.

Society³ and – what is the most important – the diary and letters of one of the translators – Henry Martyn.⁴

The Persian language in India

In the 19th century the Persian language was spoken far beyond Persia. Apart from being one of the languages of Islam, which undoubtedly rose its prestige, it was treated as a tool of inter-ethnic communication nearly in the whole Middle East. The popularity of the Persian language had a distinctive meaning for the foundation of the missions among the Muslims and the first modern Bible translation into Persian. Clearly, such a translation was presented not only to the ethnic Persians but to the Persian-speaking population in general, all Muslims speaking Persian in Baghdad, Damascus and Calcutta or Bombay. But in India the high position of the Persian language may be studied from the time of the Moghul dynasty.⁵

The late 18th century scholar William Jones in the introduction to his *Persian grammar* – written mainly for the civil workers of the East India Company – underlined the position, role and meaning of Persian, describing it as “rich, melodious, and elegant.”⁶ What is more, he presented it as a court language. According to Jones the knowledge of the language was obligatory for all British officers not only for its practical usage in the juridical system in India but, he added, similarly to Greek and Latin it should be considered an element of classical education in general.

Explaining the grammatical controversies, Jones implemented the Persian poetry and gave advice to readers suggesting they start reading it with the *Gulistan* of Saadi. His remarks convinced the reader about the great value of the Persian language among the people of Asia. It is hard to reject the opinion that his statements influenced the later missionaries – mainly British – and their decisions to translate the Bible into Persian in India. One of them was Henry Martyn,⁷ Anglican

³ J. Owen, *The history of origin and first ten years of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 2 vols, London 1816, vol 3, London 1820; W. Canton, *A history of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 5 vols, London 1904–1910.

⁴ H. Martyn, *Journals and Letters*, vol. I-II, ed. By Rev. S. Wilberforce, London 1837; Idem, *The letters*, London 1844.

⁵ M. Alam, *The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics*, “*Modern Asian Studies*”, vol. 32 (1998) no. 2, pp. 317–349.

⁶ W. Jones, *Grammar of the Persian language*, [in:], Idem, *The Works*, vol. V, London 1807, p. 165.

Cf. M. J. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones. Sir William Jones, poet, lawyer, and linguist, 1746–1796*, Oxford 2011; G. Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press 1991.

⁷ There is vast collection of books devoted to Martyn, especially from the Victorian era, cf. M. E. Gibson, *Henry Martyn and England's Christian Empire: Rereading 'Jane Eyre' through Missionary Biography*, “*Victorian Literature and Culture*”, Vol. 27.2 (1999), pp. 419–442.

clergyman working in India. However, Jones was not the only British who admired the language of the Persians. Francis Gladwin nearly at the same time published his own translation of the *Gulistan* into English⁸ and proved his lexicographical skills by composing *A Dictionary. Persian, Hindoostanee and English*.⁹

The high position of the Persian language is generally proved in British sources, and its position from the time of Muslim rulers of India was preserved in the British administration – as John Clark Marshman states: “every civil servant, therefore, applied to study Persian.”¹⁰ The role of the British institutions in disseminating the knowledge of Persian is also important.

Claudius Buchanan, the vice-rector of the Fort William College (FWC), educational and research Institute founded in 1800 by sir Richard Wellesley,¹¹ made a statement on the importance of the Persian language drawing the reader’s attention to three aspects: its territorial distribution, its connection to administration and, finally, its prestigious value.¹² From the first years of its activity a great number of Persian teachers were employed and many students were involved in such studies.¹³

It is hard to exaggerate the role of this institution in promoting the usage of vernacular languages in India. On the grounds of its efforts a great number of books in different Indian languages as well as in Persian were published. The institution may be considered a linguistic center in Asia.

Vinay Dharwadker, an Indian scholar, admitted that the creation of the FWC was one of the two main cultural enterprises in the early nineteenth century India. The other one was the establishment of the missionary press and the Baptist Mission in Serampore under the Danish protectorate to avoid British regulations. As evidence of the cultural impact of the two mentioned organizations Dharwadker counted the publications issued in the period 1800–1840: 212000 books and booklets in 40 languages, including Arabic, Armenian and Persian.¹⁴

⁸ F. Gladwin, *The Gulistan or rose garden*, translated from original, London 1808. He translated many other books, including historical text from the Moghul times.

⁹ Calcutta 1809.

¹⁰ J. C. Marshman, *The life and times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward. Embracing the History of the Serampore Mission*, vol. I, London 1859, p. 147.

¹¹ This Institution offered to the servants of the Company a great range of languages being in usage in India: Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, and later Chinese, cf. V. Dharwadker, *Print culture and literary markets in colonial India*, [in:] *Language machines: technologies of literary and cultural production*, ed. J. Masten, Routledge 1997, pp. 108–136.

¹² C. Buchanan, *Christian researchers in Asia with notices of the translation of the scriptures into the Oriental languages*, London 1814 (10th ed.), p. 190.

¹³ Sisir Kumar Das, *A history of Indian literature: Western impact, Indian response, 1800–1910*, New Delhi 1991 (reprint 2005), p. 26.

¹⁴ V. Dharwadker, *Print culture and literary markets...* pp. 108–136, such calculations are mainly base on materials from the Serampore mission. During the period 1793–1832 ten memoirs were published containing information about translated books , cf. G. A. Grieson, *The early*

In his article from the middle of the 19th century, Rev. David O. Allen, American missionary in India tried to explain the linguistic situation in India within the context of English language. He stated: “The Mohammedan princes and emperors, who governed India for several centuries, retained the Persian language in use among themselves and in official transactions. The English, following the example of their predecessors, used the Persian in the courts and in their official transactions in Bengal and Northern India for several years, and some learned men in Government employment were of the opinion that it should be retained, and means be used to make it the common language of the country.”¹⁵ Allen, however, tried to explain the high position of Persian in a retrospective manner, but he focused rather on English and its future role in India.

Generally, we may draw a conclusion that from 1793 till 1837 Persian held privileged position in different parts of India. At that time the official documents or regulations of East India Company were translated into it and published in annual volumes. But in 1837, when lord William Bentinck took the post of the general governor of India, he made English rather than Persian the language of the court.¹⁶ The period between 1793 to 1837 may be supposed to have been the best for the Bible translations into Persian in India. After 1837 the number of publications in Persian drastically decreased.¹⁷

Reassuring, it is worth underlining the nearly common use of Persian among Muslims in India (specially in its Northern parts) and its high territorial distribution in the early 19th century. The evidence that Persian was spoken in the territory between Damascus and Calcutta determined its use by missionary seeking the “global” vehicle to transmit the Christian message to the people from the East. The political circumstances and the linguistic policy conducted by the British in India also played a role in publishing and translating into Persian.

Persian Bible translation in India

Interest in Persian translation was the consequence of its high prestige and its use by the Moghul’s court. In this context the Catholic missionaries should be mentioned, they preceded the Protestant activity.

publications of the Serampore Missionaries, “The Indian Antiquary” 1903, pp. 241- 254. With these institutions were working: Joshua Marshman (1769–1837), William Ward (1769–1823) and William Carey (1761–1834), as a result of their activity 45 different Bible translations were published.

¹⁵ D. O. Allen, *The state and prospects of the English language in India*, “Journal of the American Oriental Society”, Vol. 4 (1854), pp. 263–275.

¹⁶ J. Rosseli, *Lord William Bentinck. The making of a liberal imperialist 1774–1839*, Berkeley 1974, p. 218.

¹⁷ It is proved in statistical data: J. Murdoch, *Catalogue of the Christian vernacular literature of India*, Madras 1870, pp. 99–100.

The Moghul court was visited by Catholic missionaries, scholars and diplomats. The interests of Akbar the Great towards different religions was the subject of many studies, as well as the activity of the Jesuits at that time.¹⁸ One of the first Catholic attempts to familiarize the Christian dogmas in the Indian culture at the Moghul's court was undertaken by Jerome Xavier, relative to Francis Xavier. Father Jerome started his work at Goa in 1581, later moved to Lahore, where he stayed till his death in 1617. In 1602, after studying Persian and preparing a kind of a dictionary of Christian terms in Persian,¹⁹ he translated his book written in Portuguese and presented it to Akbar the Great. The Persian title of this book was *Dāstān-e hazrat-e Isā* (The story of Jesus' life).²⁰ Practically, it was a compilation of stories from the canonical and apocryphical Gospels. Such work, in fact, find no acceptance among Protestants, who estimated all Catholic attempts to make Indian nobles familiar with the Evangelical doctrine with great skepticism.²¹

Many protestants answering the Carey's missionary call shared his opinion on the necessity of the Bible translation as an ideal tool in evangelization. One of them was Henry Martyn, who worked in India as a chaplain of East India Company from 1805 till 1811 when he reached Shiraz in Persia.

Martyn after his arrival to India, was engaged in work on translations into three languages: Hindustani, Arabic and Persian – languages used by Muslims. He came into contact with officials and scholars from the Fort William College and the Baptist mission in Serampore. In these centers the idea of the Bible translation into Persian was firstly introduced – what is interesting is the fact that at that time in Persia the Bible or its parts translated several times found no favorable conditions.

¹⁸ Cf. P. du Jarric, *Akbar and the Jesuites. An account of the Jesuit Mission to the Court of Akbar*, RoutledgeCurzon 2005 (first published 1926).

¹⁹ The good example of such work is his translation of the prayer "Our father": *Ay pidar-i māyān ki dar smān hasti. | Nām-i shumā pāk ast. | Bain-i yad bādshāhī-yi tū bishavand. | Khwāhish-i tū chunānchi dar āsmān wa zamīn ast. | Ay nūsh dihanda'ī 'ala 'd-dawām qūt bidih bamāyān imrūz. | Biguzār gunāhān-i māyān hamchunān māyān biguzārīm | az gunāhkunandegān-i khwud-hā. | Wa māyānrā ma-bar | dar miyān-i su'ūbathā. | Wa nigāh dār māyānrā az badī-ye 'uyun | Zīrāk tuwānā'ī-yi tust wa qadr-i tust wa bādshāhī-yi tust tā rūzgār-i rūzgārān. Āmin kāma* (text and transcription from: A. Camps, *Jerome Xavier S.J. and the Muslim of the Mogul Empire*, Suisse 1957).

²⁰ W. J. Fischel, *The Bible in Persian Translation*, "Harvard Theological Review", 45 (1952), pp. 4–45; A. Camps, *Jerome Xavier S.J. and the Muslim of the Mogul Empire. Controversial works and missionary activity*, Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionnaire, Suisse 1957.

²¹ The anti-Catholic polemics is rather common in the early 19th century, cf. H. M. van der Berg, 'Simply by giving to them macaroni...' *Anti-Roman Catholi polemics in early Protestant missions in the Middle East, 1820–1860*, [in:] M. Tamcke, M. Marten (eds), *Christian witness between continuity and new beginnings. Modern historical missions in the Middle East*, Berlin 2006, pp. 63–80.

In India among the Carey's coworkers in Serampore the translation of the Gospels into Persian was under deliberations and Henry Martyn in 1807 approached to do the work. The team of translators, including Mirza Fitrut and Nathaniel Sabat, Arabs with the knowledge of Persian – was superintended by the professor of Sanskrit – Henry Thomas Colebrook. In fact, Colebrook played the role of a consultant whose task was to verify the translated version with the original text. Luckily, on the basis of Martyn's letters and diary we can reconstruct the progress of their work.

In his letter to Rev. David Brown, who probably proposed Martyn to translate some parts of the Gospel into Persian,²² dated 8 June 1807, Martyn confirmed receiving the two versions of translation from Serampore – one in Hindustani and one in Persian. He admired the Hindustani translation but the Persian one evoke some difficulties.²³ He did not formulate any accusation to the text. However, we can imagine that the problems were created by lexical choices and grammar usage. Such a speculation may be proven in the next letter to Brown dated 13 June 1807. Martyn gave some more details concerning the work and preferences in words and grammar. "What is chiefly defective in them is the arrangement of the words – the words themselves are in general well chosen – Mirza's words indeed are rather too high. If you have no better plan, I should recommend that Sabat write out Mirza's version, properly arranged in the Persian character, and send the copy to me. I should be able to reduce it to a conformity with the Greek, and also substitute simpler words by the help of present moonshee, who being Bengalee, is excellently qualified for that part of the work."²⁴ The problem was, as one may suppose, the meaning of the words. We do not know what "too high" exactly means, probably they were sophisticated Arabic words. Such an opinion, in fact, may be explained on the basis of some other parts of Martyn's diary. The syntax and arrangement of the words made Martyn troubled, and so did the proper meaning of the words. In the letter addressed to Corrie of 15 June 1807 Martyn expressed his critical opinion about the translation showing the errors in the language and print, stating that it was completely useless. Concerning the Persian text he showed that the changes in Colebrook's version were even worse.²⁵ In this context the information that the text is not well prepared for children seems to be interesting as it shows the pragmatic aspect of the work – it should be used as an educational tool.²⁶ Such problems influenced Martyn's decision to go to Persia and correct and

²² Ch. Bell, *Henry Martyn*, New York 1881, p. 89.

²³ H. Martyn, *The letters*, London 1844, p. 121.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁵ H. Martyn, *The letters*... p. 125.

²⁶ Cf. M. A. Laird, *The Serampore Missionaries as Educationalists*, "Baptist Quarterly" 22 (1968), pp. 320–325.

finish the translation among the natives. The year 1807 was very important for the project of the Gospels translation into Persian in India and determined the forthcoming Martyn's work. *The first Serampore Memoir* published in 1808,²⁷ recognized for its importance to show the scale of translation projects undertaken by the Baptist Missionary Society in Serampore, gave some details of that early phase of the translation into Persian. We can find some accounts by the main translator – Nathaniel Sabat, who as a Muslim and Arab spent some years in Persia learning Persian, which for the Serampore's circle was enough to become a Persian translator.²⁸ But, what is more important, we cannot find any other information about the project of Persian translation in the memories published in the following years, which means that such a translation, contrary to the translations into other Iranian languages spoken in India Pashto and Baluchi, had lost its value. Controversies and Martyn's disappointment are described in his writings.

In the journal note dated 30 May 1808 he underlined that his plans to go to Persia were stable and that he was planning to stay in Isfahan.²⁹ His desire to work in Persia with Persians was due to his disappointment with the process of translation. He stated that it was better to learn Persian from Persians and not from Arabs in India. In his letter to Brown of 31 May 1808 he returned to the obligatory changes in translation and comparing with the original Greek text. In fact, he was convinced that all the changes suggested gave a completely new translation.³⁰ Besides, he gave a detailed description of the work he was conducting and even the schedule of his working day.

In the letter dated 6 June 1808 he informed about the end of translation of the Gospel of Matthew, which would be published on the BFBS funds. The Gospels Matthew and Luke were published in 1808 and became the object of sale.³¹

However, the analysis of the letters and diaries of Martyn from 1809 show many doubts and obstacles that Henry Martyn addressed to such translation. They were certainly prepared by a translator for whom Persian was not a native language.

²⁷ W. Carey, *The first Serampore Memoir 1808*, reprinted in: "Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society" 5 (1916) no. 1, pp. 43–64.

²⁸ We know that with some troubles he was brought to Bengal and paid 200 rupees per month.

²⁹ "My purpose of emigrating to the West is not altered. Wheter Sabat live or not, I shall go and plant myself among the Popish missionaries of Ispahan." H. Martyn, *The letters...* p. 214.

³⁰ "To-day we finish comparing St. Matthew with the Greek, if it may be called a comparison; for partly owing to the errors of the scribe, rendering whole verses of unintelligible, – and partly on account of Sabat's anxiety to preverse the rythym, which often requires the change of a whole sentence for a single word, – it is a new translation." *Ibid.*, p. 215.

³¹ R. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia. Assyrians, Armentians, Roman Catholics and Protestants*, London 1973, p. 178.

In November that year he considered some opinions of Mohammed Rasheed, another translator. The letter of 4 November 1809 to Corrie written from Cawnpore sheds some light on those events:

“Rasheed says that the translator has not a facility in writing Persian, hence his style is destitute of ease and elegance.”³² Such an opinion was addressed to Nathanel Sabat. It is hard to question such justification taking into consideration the fact that the translator was an Arab who was not obliged to use the written form of Persian in India. Rasheed, mentioned by Martyn, also formulated the goals of the translation. “He says that the translator of the divine books should aim at perspicuity, in which I agree with him; but perspicuity is not the only requisite; a certain portion of grace is desirable, and dignity indispensable.”³³

The problem described by Martyn shows different opinions about translation based on their own linguistic predispositions. The first value of the translation became its vocabulary. The argument between Rasheed and Sabat was, in fact, limited to the problem of the use of the original Arabic words in the Persian translation. Sabat used too many words of that kind that was necessary. Martyn made a conclusion: “after all, I think it more than probable, that more Persian words would materially improve the work, and I shall endeavour to persuade Sabat to alter it accordingly.”³⁴

With Martyn’s departure in 1811 the Protestant involvement in the Bible translation into Persian in India was finished. Martyn conducted his work in Persia, where he finished his version of the Persian New Testament, published in 1815 in Sankt Petersburg.

As far as India is concerned, apart from Colebrook’s translation is it worth mentioning the Catholic translation made by the priest Leopoldo Sebastiani. He is just mentioned in Martyn’s diary. Sebastiani’s version is the only Catholic translation into Persian from the the 19th century. It was published by a Protestant mission in Calcutta in 1813 in edition of 1000 copies.³⁵

The work on the Bible translation into Persian at the beginning of the 19th century in India was definitely not successful. We are able to count some reasons for it. Firstly, the work was prepared in a great hurry with no profound preparations. Secondly, the team of translators were not well-prepared and the lack of native speakers and consultants seems to be the greatest obstacle in such work. The third reason is a sum of the previous two, and has been well described by Charles Bell: “it contained too many Arabic idioms, and was written in a style well suited to the learned, but not sufficiently adapted to the capacities of the common people.”³⁶

³² H. Martyn, *The letters...*p. 299.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

³⁵ R. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia...*, p. 179.

³⁶ Ch. Bell, *Henry Martyn*, pp. 106–107.