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Language, Translation, and the Making of Protestant Identity

Hephzibah Israel
For Hannah Kripa and AJ
# Contents

*Preface and Acknowledgments* ix  
*Note on Transliteration* xv  

**Introduction** 1  
1 *The Terms of the Debate: Translating the Bible in Nineteenth-century India* 35  
2 *Locating the Sacred in Terminology* 81  
3 *Symbolic Versions: The Power of Language Registers* 125  
4 *Prose Truth versus Poetic Fiction: Sacred Translations in Competing Genres* 169  

**Conclusion** 215  

*Notes* 221  

*Bibliography* 241  

*Index* 267
Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is the outcome of research for a PhD degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, funded by the Felix Trust.

However, the issues addressed in the book were of personal interest and relevance long before they translated into academic questions for postgraduate research. Growing up in Delhi, questions of identity, based on religion and language, were posed in a variety of ways—at school, at university, at church, and in social interactions. Some were based on rather crude assumptions regarding Christians in India: “How come you speak Tamil, I thought your mother-tongue would be English?” Or, “I didn’t know ‘South Indians’ could be Christians!” Others were more nuanced, interested in my point of view and whether I felt any irreconcilable contradictions between being “Indian,” “Christian,” and “Tamil.” There was also the mismatch between being labeled “Madrasi” rather derogatorily on Delhi streets and being told by my father at home that Tamil was the “sweetest” language in the world. Having the combination “Hephzibah” and “Israel” for a name has not exactly helped matters either! From academic conferences, to social meetings or hospital appointments in India and the UK, my name has attracted attention: I have either been told that it is a pretty “Indian” name and asked what it means in “Indian” or whether I was ethnically Jewish but just looked “Indian” or how I came to have such an “un-Indian” name. Nonetheless, these questions have initiated interesting conversations on nationality, ethnicity, and religious and language affiliations with strangers, bypassing boring preliminaries! When I have been recognized by fellow Protestant Tamils, the lengthy cross-examinations that inevitably followed—of my family, their ār (town), the Protestant denomination of each, the specific church they attend, and rather more cautiously their caste backgrounds, that is, my entire genealogy compressed into a sort of catechism—have left me exasperated and somewhat ambivalent regarding the issue of “belonging.”

However, I am also grateful for this “double jeopardy,” since these questions made me self-conscious about the politics of self-representation at a very early age, from hearing my parents’ answers
to formulating my own versions, according to context, audience, and expediency. Not fitting readily into any one box has contributed to
the richness of lived experience in Delhi: it not only gave me a dif-
ferent perspective on the supposed “North-South divide” but also
on the way Christians from different parts of India are typecast in
the same mold. Equally, I value the many occasions of shared humor
at the absurdity of living with stereotypes with a mixed group of
friends. This book is an attempt to engage with a few of the historical
reasons behind perceived notions of belonging and otherness and
has grown out of my interest in exploring incongruities in identity-
construction.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge at this point several individuals
who have played a significant role in extending my intellectual and
academic interest in the issues that concern this book. I remember
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Note on Transliteration

Tamil terms are transliterated according to the system employed by the *Tamil Lexicon*, University of Madras, 1982. Sanskrit terms follow the conventional system of Sanskrit transliteration. Wherever Sanskrit forms of terms are more commonly known than the Tamil ones, I have used the former: for example, Śaiva/Śaivite rather than the Tamil Caiva/Caivite. I use modern spelling for place names without diacritics (e.g., Tancavur not Tañcāvūr) to make it easier on the eye but retain nineteenth-century spelling when quoting from primary sources (therefore, Tanjore). Tamil titles are given with diacritics but in cases where the original manuscript or printed text also gives the Tamil title in roman, I have retained the system of transliteration used in the original without diacritics.