The Quran in South Asia: Translations of the Quran in the Tamil Context

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Abstract

Translation of the Quran has been a controversial topic from the moment the Quran was revealed to the Prophet. Though translations were seen as aberrations, the expansion of Islam beyond the Arab world and the number of languages that Islam encountered made the translation of Quran an inevitable task. Similarly when Islam entered the Indian subcontinent, particularly South India, the Quran had to be translated into the local languages. Though Islam arrived in South India very early, translation activities, particularly the Quran, were undertaken during the mid-19th century only. The present paper will focus on the Tamil speaking Muslims and the Tamil translations of the Quran. The interesting factor about the Tamil translation of the Quran is that initially it was not translated using the Tamil script, instead it was translated into Tamil using the Arabic script. This variety of writing which is also known as Arabuttamil/Arwi was being used by the Tamil Muslims for many centuries till the mid-20th century. From the first translation works undertaken around the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, the translation attempts were undertaken in Arabuttamil/Arwi. Only after 1910 the standard Tamil script was used for such translations. The present paper will try to trace the history of translating the Quran into Tamil with particular focus on the early translation done in the Arabic script and the social conditions that led to the adoption of the Tamil script while abandoning the Arabic script. Therefore the present paper seeks to shed some light on the nature and importance of Arabuttamil/Arwi among the Tamil Muslims from socio-linguistic as well as cultural perspectives.

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