

## **Narratives of Transformation: Language, Conversion, and Indian Traditions of 'Autobiography'**

Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, December 14-15, 2015

What traditions of writing about the self have developed in Indian language traditions? And how have these been put to use by Indians writing about their conversion experiences? It appears that a wide variety of literary genres have been used to speak about religious conversion, from medieval Tamil bhakti poetry to modern prose narratives in a range of modern Indian languages. While religious conversion may have been experienced as a private moment of change, it moves beyond the personal when narrativised through modes of life writing and autobiography. This workshop is an effort to bring into dialogue scholarship on religious conversion and identity with research in autobiography in the South Asian context. The workshop is an attempt to explore in depth the ways in which the conversion experience has been remembered and narrated, inflected by creative uses of old and emerging literary conventions of speaking about the self. What voices emerge? Or, rather, whose voice emerges in these writings? What is remembered about the experience of self-transformation and how is it remembered?

While life writing in any of the Indian language traditions that explore the experience of religious conversion will be the primary focus of the workshop, the organizers believe that examining these in the context of other types of autobiographies with a focus on transformations of the self will make for a fruitful comparative study of overlapping issues and contexts. For instance, access to education leading to transformation is a recurring trope in different types of autobiography, whether conversion, dalit or female autobiography. The organizers seek to facilitate a conversation between the different language traditions as well as across historical time and purpose. We hope also to draw into the discussion the extent to which narrative acts are constitutive, embedded as they are in historical relations of power and wider practices of cultural and literary production.

It is envisaged that the first day of the workshop will focus on autobiographies of conversion, while the second day, by way of comparison, will explore other types of autobiographies describing transformations of the self. Further, papers exploring conversion accounts or life writing in any of the Indian language traditions and from any historical period focusing on self-transformation are invited. While the following sub-themes are provided as a guide, participants are encouraged to think beyond the list and bring to the discussion new materials that they might be working with on narratives of self-transformation:

- The Conversion Account: e.g. prose autobiographies, verse accounts, pamphlet testimony, missionary reportage, accounts of missionary conversion
- Pre-eighteenth century auto/biography tradition: e.g. the Namahs

- Conversion accounts and print culture: e.g. the published diary, the missionary journal, the colonial newspaper and the records of the law courts
- Accounts of conversion and changing relationships: between the individual, family, community and the public sphere
- What languages did writers choose to write in, and why? Were these translated for wider circulation?
- Autobiographies with a focus on self-transformation: e.g. the female autobiography, Dalit autobiography, political autobiographies etc.

**Keynote Speaker:** Professor Udaya Kumar, Department of English, University of Delhi.

Abstracts of 350-400 words are invited by May 25, 2015. Please send your abstract to Dr. Milind Wakankar (IIT Delhi) at [milindwakankar@gmail.com](mailto:milindwakankar@gmail.com).