

Religious Experience: Conversion

(Advanced Higher Religious and Moral Philosophical Studies Support Materials)

Text: *Once Hindu Now Christian: The Early Life of Baba Padmanji, 1890 (An Autobiography Edited by J. Murray Mitchell).*

The following story of religious conversion is taken from the autobiography of the life of Baba Padmanji who converted from Hinduism to Christianity in the mid- 19th century. This story is focused on the process of conversion and not the rejection of one faith for another.

Background to story

The Christian population of India, according to the 2011 census, is nearly 28 million people. This may sound like a substantial population, but in fact it makes up just 2.3% of the population of the Republic of India, which has a population now in excess of 1.2 billion (<http://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>). The Christian community in India is, then, very much a minority community, albeit one with a distinctive social and cultural significance. Although some suggest that there has been a Christian presence in certain parts of India since the First Century AD, the religion became much more prominent and the Christian population grew substantially during the colonial era. That is, the era during which large parts of India were governed first by a trading company known as the East India Company, under Royal Charter granted by the British state (from 1757 through until 1858), and then directly by the British state as an Imperial asset (from 1858 through until independence in 1947).

During this period, many people converted to Christianity from other religions, contributing to the consolidation of the Christian presence in the subcontinent. This trend was encouraged greatly by the association between Christianity and British rule. Baba Padmanji, the author of *Once Hindu, Now Christian*, was born in 1831 and grew up in Belgaum, a district town south of Bombay. Although he began by attending the government school in Belgaum, at the age of 12 he began attending a local Mission High School, and it was from this point on that his journey towards Christianity began. Education was a key facet of the missionary strategy. From the 1820s onwards, missionary schools and colleges were an increasingly common feature of the social landscape of India. English education was

perceived by many amongst the elites in India as a route to secure employment in the context of colonial rule, and it was this perception, rather than any particular interest in Christianity, that motivated most attendees of such schools. Nevertheless, it is true that many missionaries in the first half of the 19th century regarded educational institutions like those attended by Baba Padmanji as important arenas for evangelization, particularly amongst high caste elites.

Caste in India

India has one of the world's oldest social systems that divided people up into different classes or categories. India has one of the world's oldest social divisions, placing people in different classes or hierarchical categories, known as *varna*. *Varṇa* is mentioned in the Rig Veda, one of the oldest known sacred texts (composed roughly between 1500 and 1200 BCE). It organises society into four recognisable roles – Brahmins (teachers and priests), Kshatriyas (Warriors and statesmen), Vaishyas (traders and businessmen) and Shudras (labourers, artisans, skilled workers and servants). This formal theory is now related to an elaborate concept of social distinction apparent in Indian society, known as *jati* (or social 'type'), There are thousands of *jati* groups in India. Many Indians look to the *varna* theory to help them organise *jatis* in relation to one another, so that one *jati* will be seen as Kshatriya, one as Vaishya and so on. It is this dynamic set of relations that we today understand as the hierarchical 'caste system.'

Each of the four major castes was divided into smaller castes and each smaller caste was further divided into sub-castes which number in the thousands. Padmanji's family belonged to a sub-caste of the Shudra known as Kasar who were best known for manufacturing handmade utensils of Brass and copper. Padmanji's father was an engineer and his ancestors we are told were among the wealthiest in Bombay. Members of the Kasar caste were known for being very religious people and, though Shudra by birth, followed rituals prescribed for Brahmins. Padmanji's family were no exception; his mother was very devout and observed rites around worshipping the family deity.

For centuries, caste and its various manifestations dictated almost every aspect of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain and Christian religious and social life on the Indian

subcontinent, with families of each denomination occupying a specific place in this complex hierarchy. Rural communities were long arranged on the basis of castes - the upper and lower castes almost always lived in segregated colonies, the water wells were not shared, Brahmins would not accept food or drink from the Shudras, and one could marry only within one's caste. Caste, therefore, was and still is an important factor in the social identity of a large number of Indians, and although some Hindu theologians such as Shankara clearly advocated different classes of humanity, there were others who from as early as the 7th century CE spoke out against such discrimination with the understanding that God is equally present in all beings. Such calls were reiterated in various contexts by the major saints of the 16-17th centuries, whether members of the Bhakti movements, Sikhism, Sufism and others.

Caste and Conversion to Christianity

An interesting feature of the narrative told by Baba Padmanji is related to his perception that conversion to Christianity would release him from the many elaborate social and ritual constraints associated with his caste (although he was not a Brahmin, the group of highest castes, his family nevertheless had a certain status associated with their caste, since caste status could often be fluid in practice). This perception was encouraged by many Christian missionaries, who developed a strong critique of caste as a set of institutions strongly associated with Indian religions, from which individuals could be released by turning to the 'true light' of Christianity. In reality, many of those who converted found that the social constraints associated with caste were perpetuated by others who had similarly converted, although they may be reconfigured in the context of Christian identity.

This point helps us to see how the perception of conversion as a simple movement from one religious system to another was, and indeed still is, invariably complicated by different understandings of what constitutes 'religion'; by the deep social and cultural embedding that is associated with forms of religious identity; and by the representation of these identities in diverse settings, such as the public environment of nineteenth century India which shaped Baba Padmanji's experience of Christianity. Padmanji began thinking critically about caste, as did other young men, much before his conversion as you can see in the extract from Chapter 11.

Baba Padmanji

Padmanji was very devoted to the religious duties of his caste as a child, as were his family, but he claimed that it did not bring any of them peace. Attending the London Missionary School in 1843 set him on his journey towards Christianity. There the Bible was read daily and the school day was closed with prayers. He was also influenced by the Head Master who had converted from a respectable caste to Christianity and from a Hindu friend who similarly followed suit. Two other great influences included articles within a newspaper known as Dnyanodaya which refuted Hindu spirituality and atheism. The other was his experience of the Brahmins taking money from the poor in engineering firms to use for religious rites. He made an agreement with his father that in exchange for no longer worshipping 'idolatrous idols' as he now referred to them he would not convert to Christianity in his father's lifetime. This meant that although he lived his life as a Christian he could not accept baptism and full initiation into the faith. His father probably would have been quite happy with such an arrangement since his concern is with ritual practice and ritual status. The idea of worshipping particular divine figures is often separate from this set of obligations in Hindu traditions. However, Padmanji was to regret this decision deeply as he felt torn between not bringing shame and disappointment on his family from changing religion to the shame of not following his call to follow Christ. To renounce his faith could result in his family being excluded by society and from taking part in important religious rites that were seen as central to maintaining membership of a given caste. It may also mean that his family may reject him as an outcaste. To not renounce his faith made him feel further from God.

Extract 1 (From Chapter 13)

Letter from Padmanji to Dr. M. Mitchell

This extract from a letter written by Padmanji to his Christian friend Dr. M. Mitchell, dated 26th September 1852, explains the state of conflict he is in wrestling with the possible implications from converting to Christianity.

"I therefore write a brief but faithful account of what is intimately connected with my soul. In the first place, I acknowledge my great fault in still remaining in heathenism after being convinced of the truth of Christianity. I am almost ashamed to state the reason of this. I am

not yet prepared to withstand and to suffer the persecutions and trials which a true believer in Christ has to undergo in India when he confesses his Master before his countrymen. Oh, may He give me His Spirit, and encourage me to say, 'Here I stand; I can do nothing else. So help me God!' Yet I fully admit that all my trials are nothing in comparison with the suffering of Christ, who died for our salvation.

It is true that the love of my parents and family sometimes overcomes me and makes me forget my resolution, but again the burden of my sins and the fear of the sinner's doom in a future life greatly trouble me. Thus there is a constant struggle in my mind between the desires of this life and the hopes of a future one. My mind is not at rest. I am dissatisfied with my own righteousness. My promises to myself are in vain. I need mighty Saviour; I need a guide to direct me, to help me, and to take me safely through the wilderness of this world of sin and sorrow in which I am lost. My guilt conscience terrifies me when offering up prayer at the throne of the Holy God. I pray to Him in the name of One whom I have found revealed in the writings of the Prophets of old and in those of the Evangelists. Yet he is not my friend. He appears to me as a Judge, severely rebuking me for my past sins, and for the present ones in which I still live. Now, Sir, this is the real state of my mind at the present time. I hope you will believe me in this. I have not exaggerated nor invented anything to please you. But all this is within me. None but God and myself know it. I shall now tell you about my outward behaviour towards my friends and relatives. I make no puja to the idols that are in our house. I perform no Sandhya,¹ but instead of this I pray to my Creator and ask His Blessing. I often speak to my friends on the necessity of a Divine revelation and of a true religion."

Questions

- Q.1 What reasons does Padmanji give for embracing Christianity?
- Q.2 What prevents Padmanji from becoming baptised as a Christian? Discuss the choices he is faced with and possible implications of each choice?
- Q.3 The psychologist William James coined the concept, 'the sick soul.' He argued that many people dissatisfied with their lives look for meaning and purpose in a God figure.

¹ **Sandhya** definition: a ritual of worship and meditation performed three times a day normally by Hindus.

How far could it be argued that Padmanji suffered from a 'sick soul'?

- Q.4 The psychologist Sigmund Freud also believed that 'conversions' were linked to a person's mental state that it was a temporary psychotic problem. The Alistair Hardy research centre refuted this and found that from over 500 cases of religious experience the majority of people were well educated, mentally well balanced and were concerned greatly with social justice.

Whose description, Freud's or Hardie's, would best fit the testimony of Padmanji?

- Q.5 The common shared characteristics of conversion according to the psychologist Sigmund Freud are a period of emotional confusion and disturbance, accompanied by intellectual doubts?

To what extent does the conversion experience as described by Padmanji fit these characteristics?

- Q.6 Religious conversions are also said to involve breaking from the past? How far could it be argued was Padmani trying to break from his past?

- Q.7 In certain branches of Christianity, conversion is referred to as in stages beginning with the 'conviction of sin,' the 'vocation or calling,' the feeling of an unmerited love and being chosen for salvation, followed by 'justification,' achievement of a saving faith and culminating in glorification in the world to come

How far does this criteria match experience of Padmani as described in the passage?

- Q.8 Research two conversion stories including Martin Luther, John Bunyan or George Whitefield. You might want to surf the net or interview people from a local religious congregation. Draw up a table to compare the different accounts. Use the following three headings:

- from what
- to what
- by what.

How do you account for any similarities of differences with these conversion stories to the testimony of Padmanji?

Q.9 The Christian author CS Lewis describes conversion experiences of sharing 5 common points:

- the presence of a mentor to guide the convert
- the convert exercising free will
- the presence of supernatural forces which, optimally, drive the convert to submission
- pain associated with the conversion process
- a blessing or curse as a consequence of the choice.

To what extent are these five common points shared with Padmanji's account?

Q.10 The sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that religion was an expression of social solidarity. How might Padmanji's testimony contradict that statement?

Q.11 The sociologist Bryan Wilson argued that the role of religion is salvation and the guide to achieving it. People chose to convert in the hope of salvation and to escape a world of uncertainty.

From an analysis of the testimony of Padmanji and one other story of conversion how far have these goals been the motivation for the person's conversion?

Q.12 One reason given for conversion is that they provide people with a sense of their own identity and offer individuals support and respect and a sense of self-esteem.

From a reading of Padmanji's testimony how far might these have been a reason for his conversion?

Extract Two (Chapter 17)

Padmanji's Vision

Alistair Hardy from his research noticed that all religious experiences were positive bringing about feelings of safety, security, love and contentment. Padmanji had an experience that seemed to follow this.

Throughout the book Padmanji hears God calling him to, "follow me." In a later passage Padmanji describes a vision of God coming to him shortly after he had been reading, praying and had fallen asleep.

“I had put out the lamp, but still the room appeared to be full of light; and one like the Son of God, arrayed in glory, I thought, came to me as a to a friend, and a sense of perfect safety and peace possessed my soul. I felt refreshed and happy, as the weary wanderer who has been pinched with cold and hunger does when he finds rest and shelter in his house. Light and joy almost overwhelmed me, and I was lost in blessedness. The experience of the night was unique, and the memory of it will never die. The vision of God then given was a dim reflection of that which the children of God enjoy in heaven. I was indeed standing on Pisgah or on the Mount of Transfiguration, or I was in the land of Beulah “He brought me to the banqueting-house and His banner over me was love” (Song of Solomon, ii.4).

Questions:

- Q.1 What are the key features of Padmanji’s religious experience?
- Q.2 In what ways is this example of religious experience similar to the ‘classical examples’ from the past that you have studied?
- Q.3 David Hay, a former research colleague of Alistair Hardy, identifies 3 categories of religious experience. Awareness of the presence of God, awareness of receiving help in answer to prayer, awareness of a guiding presence, not necessarily God. How far does the religious experience account of Padmanji fit this criteria?
- Q.4 To what extent can the different features of Padmanji’s religious experience be explained in different ways?
- Q.5 To what extent might the features of the religious experience described by Padmanji point towards something existing out with our minds and within?
- Q.6 How might religious experiences, such as that described by Padmanji be used as evidence for the existence of God?
- Q.7 Religious Experiences such as Padmanji’s it could be argued are an ‘illusion’ all in the mind. How far do you agree?
- Q.8 What challenge might the low level of recorded incidences of, ‘Religious Experience’ present for those believe them to be true?

Q.9 Many converts adopt a new faith after having had a direct experience of God. What challenges might this present to Christianity?

Suggested essays

1. Critically evaluate the claim that conversion is the most important form of religious experience. 30 Marks
2. To what extent does conversion provide evidence for the existence of God? Present a reasoned argument and conclusion. 30 Marks

Suggestions for Further Reading:

On Christianity in India

Antony Copley (1994) 'The conversion experience of India's Christian Elite in the mid-nineteenth century,' *Journal of Religious History* 18 (1): 52-74.

Robert Frykenberg (2008) *Christianity in India: from beginnings to the present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mitch Numark (2011) 'Translating Dharma: Scottish Missionary-Orientalists and the politics of religious understanding in nineteenth century Bombay,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 70 (2): 471-500.

On Religious Experience in general

Beit-Hallahmi, Benjamin & Argyle, Michael (1997) *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience*, Routledge, London.

0 4151 2331 3.

Detailed chapter on religious experience, with survey figures etc.

Clark, Patrick J. (1999) *Questions about God, A Guide for A/AS Level students*, Stanley Thornes, Cheltenham.

0 7487 4340 5.

Useful sections on religious experience, conversion and mysticism.

Connolly, Peter (1999) *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Cassell, London.

0 304 33710 2.

A comprehensive textbook, dealing with psychological and sociological approaches.

Davis, Caroline F. (1999) *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*,

OUP, Oxford.

0 1982 5001 0.

Using contemporary and classic sources from the world religions, she gives an account of different types of religious experience and, drawing extensively on psychological and sociological as well as philosophical literature, deals with sceptical challenges about religious experiences.

Holt, Bradley P. (1997) *A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*,

Lion, Oxford.

0 7459 3721 7

A sympathetic and somewhat superficial survey.

Hood, Ralph W. Jr, et al (1996) *The Psychology of Religion – an Empirical Approach*, Guildford Press, New York.

Reference work.

RMPS: Religious Experience (Advanced Higher) 78 Jordan, Anne et al (1999) *Philosophy of Religion for A Level*, Stanley Thornes, Cheltenham.

0 7487 4339 1.

Useful sections on religious experience and psychology of religion.

King, Ursula (1998) *Christian Mystics*, B T Batsford, London.

0 7134 8107 2.

Focuses on 54 men and women mystics. Beautifully illustrated.

Wulff, David M. (1997) *Psychology of Religion*, John Wiley & Sons Inc., New York.

0 4710 3706 0.

Reference work with extensive sections on religious experience, William James, Freud, Jung and many more.

Web links

1. http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/7740rmps2_tcm4-123878.pdf
2. https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.deanscommunityhighschool.com%2Fteachers%2Fhomework-files%2F12-08-2015-204206799255cafad58461c_AHRMPSReligiousExperienceupdate_tcm4-853920-2.doc