

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

December 14-15, 2015

Committee Room, Humanities and Social Sciences (next to Room 611, Fifth Floor, Main Building) Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi.

Programme

December 14, 2015

9:30-10:00: Registration

10:00-10:20: Hephzibah Israel, University of Edinburgh

Introduction to the Project Conversion, Translation and the Language of Autobiography

10:20-11:10: Sarbeshwar Sahoo, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

Taking Refuge in Christ: Four Narratives on Religious Conversion in India

This paper examines whether Dalits and Adivasis are converted out of genuine spiritual belief and free will, or whether they were induced to convert via material means and association with a powerful group of missionaries. The issues of free will or force and spiritual belief or inducement are very central to the debate on religious conversion, especially to Christianity, in India. These issues signify not just the mismatch between the Hindu nationalists and Christian missionaries in their understanding of conversion in India. They also points out how both these groups have relied on the Constitution to justify as well as to resist religious conversion. Given this, this chapter explores the multiple narratives, perceptions and understandings of the issue of religious conversion in India. In so doing, I have identified four social groups and understood their understandings of religious conversion. These groups are: (1) the Hindu nationalists, (2) the Christian missionaries, (3) the Adivasi converts, and (4) the (Hindu) Adivasis. These four narratives show how different actors/agents have assigned different meanings, often contradictory to each other, to the complex and controversial issue of religious conversion. These four narratives, the paper suggests, should not be read as exclusivist and separable from each other. They should rather be understood as four "partially overlapping spheres of meaning – discrete points of entry into the much broader discursive" issue of conversion in India.

11:10-11:40: Coffee Break

11:40-12:40: Udaya Kumar, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Narratives of Self-transformation: Interiority and Publicness

First person accounts of religious conversion occupy an intriguing place within the autobiographical genre. As accounts of self-transformation, they manifest a vital – perhaps even paradigmatic – aspect of autobiographical writing. At the same time, the status of “conversion,” as an event and as a category of description, raises profound questions regarding the concept of religion and the frames within which shifts in religious affiliation may be understood. While readings of conversion narratives have often privileged the transformation of inner individual beliefs, it may be argued that such an approach relies on interpretative frames that are dependent on a modern, secular understanding of religion as private belief. How do we take cognizance of the public, practice-oriented dimension of utterances about religious belonging? Could conversion narratives be seen not only as texts that document but also as practices that configure the ‘inner’ drama of self-transformation? Scholars have drawn attention to tensions between the self-validating claims of converts and the recognition conferred by colonial law on the rights of communities. The individual and the community to which he/she originally belonged are considered as occupying an external – and often conflicting – relationship in the drama of conversion. However, if one considers ‘habitus’ as the community’s inscription on the individual’s corporeal existence, the picture becomes complex. I hope to outline some challenges posed by the study of conversion autobiographies by drawing on one of the earliest autobiographies published in Malayalam. This text was originally prepared for public presentation by Yakob Ramavarman in 1856 on the occasion of his ordination as a priest by Basel Mission. It was subsequently published in the periodical *Keralopakari*. I hope to focus on the tropes and affects foregrounded in this text and contribute to a discussion on the work of rhetoric as an element of religious practice.

12:40-13:40: Lunch

13:40-14:30: Matthias Frenz, “The happiest day in my life – hüpfend vor Freude – résistance d’un coeur inconverti”: Negotiating conversion between cultural ‘regimes’

Negotiating conversion between cultural ‘regimes’ Herrmann Anandrao Kaundinya (1825-1893), the first India-born pastor to serve in the Protestant Basel Mission, was ordained in Germany in 1851. A Brahmin by birth, he went to the Basel Mission school at Mangalore and converted to Christianity. He was sent to

Switzerland, studied there at the Basel Mission House and eventually worked as a missionary in Kodagu. At several times, Kaundinya reflected upon his life and conversion in letters to missionaries, colonial officials and the German public. His life story and the failed attempt to convince his first wife to join Christianity were printed and published. I will investigate the variations between the (auto-)biographical accounts, written in different contexts and languages, and ask what they tell us about the process of religious reorientation. I argue that 'conversion' may be understood as a process in which an individual struggles to come to terms with different culturally defined 'regimes'. Narratives are a means to disentangle the passage towards a new religious framework. The analysis of multiple versions of a story line offers insights into the complex conversion process. Variations show how the subject time and again has to position itself in the context of value systems, language conventions and social relations.

14:30-15:00 Coffee

15:00-15:50: Mohinder Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Reformist Self-Transformation and its Narrative: Swami Shradddhanand's Autobiography

This paper is based on the analysis of Swami Shradddhanand's autobiography in Hindi *Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*. Written and published in early 1920s, few years before the Swami's death, *Kalyan Marg ka Pathik* is one of the pioneering works of autobiographical writings in Hindi. At the centre of this autobiography is the detailed recounting of the experience of self-transformation or 'conversion' undergone by Munshiram (shradddhanand's family name) under the influence of the ideas of the religious and social reformer Swami Dayanand, who he had met and had a conversation with when he was still atheist and suffering from spiritual doubts. Like all the major modern religious reformist movements, the 19th century reform movement in north-India, Arya Samaj also sought to purify Hinduism (Vedic dharma in the preferred terminology of Arya Samaj) by invoking the authority of the religious texts/scriptures from the remote past and by simultaneously challenging the authority of the established interpreters of those same texts. In the process it also denounced many of established religious rituals and others practices replacing them with a new set of practices and rituals of their own. In his autobiography, Shradddhanand narrates the experience of breaking with the established religious rituals and practices practiced by his family in Punjab in the last quarter of the 19th century. This experience involved a challenge to the authority of his father and his

coming to terms with the pain and trauma it involved and the conviction and faith that carried him through this struggle.

15:50-16:40: Anshu Malhotra, University of Delhi

Dissonance, Ruses and Search for Resolutions in Piro's Verse
Autobiography from Mid-Nineteenth Century Punjab

Piro was a Muslim prostitute who abandoned the brothel in Lahore and became a novice in the Gulabdasi dera sometime in the 1830s in Punjab. Guru Gulabdas was an *advaitin* guru, who was independent minded; however, the sect can be placed within a broad Sikh tradition. Even though Piro (d. 1872) straddled the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Punjab, her cryptic autobiographical fragment in verse – the *Ik Sau Sath Kafian (160 Kafis)* and her other poetry which has autobiographical references – can be seen as “pre-modern” in many ways including their style, content, materiality, and their likely audience. In this presentation I will suggest that Piro's religious conversion, from a Muslim to a neophyte in the Gulabdasi dera, created tensions in her life that manifested in her writing in at least two ways. Her overt story speaks about the tribulations she faced when pressed to “reconvert” to Islam, by her erstwhile clan, friends, *mullahs* and Muslim men, her theatrical story of abduction and rescue. Under the surface of her story, one also discerns the difficulties she may have faced as a daughter in a clan that had expectations from her of forming sexual liaisons, of perhaps earning a livelihood. Conversion, as the anthropological literature suggests, is not an act that instantly transforms the person. Rather, it is a commitment that requires gradual acceptance within the host community, sometimes a slow dilution of dissension in the community abandoned, and most of all a change that effects the self. If the autobiographical text is about self-fashioning, then how did Piro's *160 Kafis* work out the conflicts and tensions in her life? Piro's presentation of her tale as an allegory of the tale of Sita's rescue by Ram on the one hand; and her recourse to bhakti devotion to emphasize the significance of interiority rather than a religiosity bound by externals on the other, were the ruses and reasons employed by her to resolve her various problems. Further, the emancipatory potential of bhakti empowered her to imagine the possibility of a former prostitute following a soteriological path. Thus a careful study of Piro's elliptical text helps us to see the ways through which the marginalized of society imagined themselves otherwise.

17:00-18:30: Panel Discussion on Conversion: Susan Viswanathan in conversation with Sanal Mohan, Udaya Kumar, A.R. Venkatachalapathy

19:00: Dinner

December 15, 2015

10:00-10:50: A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Travels within the Self: Women's Life Writing in Colonial Tamilnadu and M. Lakshmi Ammal's 'Seemai Kaditham

My paper will be on women's autobiographies. I am putting together some autobiographical narratives, most of them uncollected, written by women in the early twentieth century, and trying to make sense of them. These are exclusively by Brahmin women.

10:50-11:20: Coffee

11:20-12:10: Sanal Mohan, Prayers as Life Affirming Practices: Dalit Christianity in Kerala

The proposed paper intends to develop certain aspects of the Religious Practices of Dalits in Kerala in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I wish to analyze the significance of Christian prayers in forming the idea of community among Dalit Christians. I consider the pre-Christian practices that existed among the slave castes of Kerala as life affirming practices as against the missionary interpretations of them as 'heathenism', and 'devil worship' among other things. The pre-Christian practices are referred to as life affirming in the context of the brutalities of slavery. In fact such religious practices gave them the energies to move ahead as individuals as well as communities. I develop my arguments on the basis of the ethnographic and archival information and show how significant were specific religious practices. Their ritual practices were helping the slave castes to survive under conditions of brutality unleashed by the landlords. It is a well-known fact that in the context of slave religion we hardly come across "pure religion" even in the case of Protestant Christianity in the Atlantic World. The proposed paper will show how Christianity helped evolve sometimes more powerful life-affirming practices as the slave castes moved away from their Pre-Christian practices. One case in point is to analyze the deathbed testimonies of Dalit Christians in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries available in the missionary archives and the ethnographic accounts that we have documented. They all point towards the significance of Christian Prayers.

12:10-13:00 Uma Chakravarty, In Search of Liberty: Two Moments from Women's History

"Though I am weak and tired now

And my youthful step is gone
Leaning on this staff
I climb the mountain peak
My cloak cast off, my bowl overturned
I sit here on this rock
And over my spirit blows
The breath
Of liberty”

In this presentation I will look at women’s voices as they speak about their search for freedom and liberty in two moments—the age of the Buddha and the nineteenth century. I will use the Pali *Therigatha* which are the verses composed by bhikkhunis and accounts compiled from different pieces of writing from the corpus left behind by Pandita Ramabai written mainly in English after her conversion to Christianity in England in the 1880s.

13:00-14:00 Lunch

14:00-14:50 **Milind Wakankar**, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

Aporias of Conversion (Some Questions)

The paper looks at the polemical scene of the Marathi late-nineteenth century to uncover some of the paradoxes of conversion. From a philosophical point of view one could argue that conversion in this epoch was not about Christianity per se but was about a Christianity that was no longer Christian, elaborating a space in which religion had denuded itself. This gave rise to the fertile field of the public as such in which a new kind of Marathi came into play. I look at attitudes to conversion among Brahmins, anti-Brahmins and (high Brahmin and non-Brahmin) Christian converts--focusing on the work of the major anti-Brahmin thinker Phule, the prolific and polemical convert Padmanjee and the evangelical non-Brahmin convert Sangle. The paper is in some sense a genealogy of the Marathi Enlightenment as it evolves from an engagement with missionary discourse. Along the way I critique and pay tribute to the work of Rosalind O'Hanlon, perhaps the best known scholar from the 1970's working on these issues.

14:50-15:20 Coffee

15:20-17:00 Roundtable Discussion