

## ***Once Hindu, Now Christian, Baba Padmanji (1890)***

This summary is based on an English translation of Padmanji's autobiography which he originally wrote in Marathi, one of the languages of Western India. The Marathi autobiography was entitled, *Arunodaya: The Autobiography of Baba Padmanji: Containing a description of his former life as a Hindu; and the causes which led to his conversion*. Baba Padmanji, Bombay: Bombay Tract and Book Society, 1908. [English Trans. *Once Hindu: now Christian. The Early Life of Baba Padmanji. An Autobiography*. Edited by J.M. Mitchell. London: James Nisbet, 1890.]. He offers many details of different social classes and groups that he observes around him, so that we get the impression of a young man who is aware of many contesting opinions around him. He is also a prolific writer, sending articles off to Marathi newspapers and journals for publication both before and after his conversion.

As is typical of many autobiographies written by Indians, Padmanji starts his story with a description of his family and caste. He tells us he was born in Belgaum, Western India in 1831 and that he grew up in relative comfort. Over several chapters, Padmanji describes both his experience growing up in a Hindu family, following different religious rites and his life as a schoolboy at several educational institutions.

Padmanji sets the scene for his conversion through several descriptions of the religious practices of his family, a combination of Hindu rites and beliefs, family prayers offered at a local Muslim saint's tomb, festival days and worship. He is passionately interested in the teachings of the several visiting religious leaders passing through his town and is a keen observer of practices in several religions and across different castes within Hindu society. As a boy Padmanji is trained to read the Hindu scriptures and from an early age held reading sessions, explaining from the Hindu scriptures in the Marathi language to the women in his family and neighbourhood.

His education starts at the Government Vernacular School (that is, a state school run by the British administration in India) in his native language Marathi but he is sent to a local English school run by the London Missionary Society in 1843 when he turns 12. Here during classes in religious instruction (focusing on Christianity) Padmanji is introduced to parts of the Bible and literary works such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

At the several schools he attends, Padmanji is presented with further opportunities to observe different kinds of religious practices and faiths: that of the Hindu brahmins, the Parsis and of pupils from his own caste as well as Christian practices of his school teachers. He also comes across a community of Bene-Israelis (a community claiming Jewish descent in India), who sing parts of the Old Testament in Marathi which makes him mistakenly assume that they too are some Hindu sect!

He is persuaded by another boy to join the Free Church Institution in Bombay in 1849. There he meets Narayan Seshadri, a Hindu Brahmin, who having famously converted to Christianity was teaching at the school. He admires Seshadri and close observation of him leads to a softening towards Christianity. Simultaneously, questioning Hindu caste practices

he also joins, somewhat hesitantly, the 'reformist' Paramhans Mandali Society, where he first breaks caste amongst Hindu reformers. But soon leaves it as he is dissatisfied with their arguments and also discovers that many of them are not sincere in challenging caste. He starts a new society with close friends, calling themselves 'Satyashodhaks' or 'seekers after truth.' During this period, he is actively engaged in religious apologetics, that is, debate between religions taking place all over Bombay city and through journals articles; he himself contributes opinion pieces to leading newspapers and journals.

The next few years are spent getting to know the Christian faith and in reading and writing further. His parents are unhappy with his keen interest in and close association with other Christians and their faith. At this stage, he promises his father that he will not convert to Christianity during his father's life time but he regrets this promise later and manages to re-negotiate with him. During this period, he does not fully or publicly commit himself to 'becoming' a Christian, but there is a marked change in his day-to-day practices and in attitudes to Hindu forms of worship and conduct. He is emotionally fraught between love and loyalty to his family and his increasing belief that he should follow Christ. Although his family is very uncomfortable with his increasing connection with Christianity, his father never rejects him but is willing to accept that his son has a genuine conviction regarding another religion. Meanwhile, acquaintances either consider him a Christian or as one whose conversion is definite and imminent. He makes a final decision in 1854. Interestingly, he makes two public statements of conversion: first, in a long letter to the Bombay newspaper *Dhumketu*, "communicating the intelligence of [his] open renunciation of Hinduism and the reasons for this step" (p. 127); next, a few days later, at his baptism in an evening service attended by a large number of people from his town. Although he and his family reconcile over time, he remains separated from his wife by her family, something he regrets the rest of his life.