

The Compassionate Social Sphere: Native Christian Auto/biographies in Colonial India, 1870-1920

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Abstract

This essay examines the construction of a compassionate social sphere in native missionary biographies and autobiographies from colonial India, 1870-1920. It proposes that the native converts begin the fashioning of such a social sphere when they become dissidents within the home and the family. From this assertion of agency in terms of their choice of faith and their disillusionment with, primarily Hinduism, they move on to constructing moral webs, constituted by textual labours and networks of labour wherein the missionary works to produce texts and generates a series of connections with existing missionary networks and building new ones among the converts. In this process they create a compassionate social sphere founded on Christian faith and labour.

Keywords

Native missionaries, India, auto/biography, moral webs, social sphere, converts

Native converts to Christianity in colonial India produced a substantial body of letters, field-notes (since many worked as itinerant preachers), autobiographical accounts, journalistic writings and reports from the missionary society they belonged to. English and European commentators, often missionaries themselves, wrote biographies of some of these native Christians. Autobiographies by the natives are examinations of their lives, their disillusionment with Hinduism or Islam (there are fewer texts from Muslim converts to Christianity that I have found) and their work as Christians. These documents serve at once as personal, subjective autobiographical accounts but also as instances of social history of a community: the native Christian (a community that was, it goes without saying, heterogeneous by way of denominations, originary castes, class and education). Reading these as subjective accounts of individual lives as well as commentaries on a social order enables us to see and sense the operations of particular discourses that constructed selves

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(individual and collective) and a specific milieu. Discourse studies assumes that narratives and representations are material practices and this essay works with that assumption to track the emergence of the compassionate social order, or network, effected through discursive practices, such as autobiography or biography. There is a textual public sphere of the missionary labour, and this textual public sphere lays the foundation for a critique of the material public sphere.

The model of analysis of this textual public sphere draws upon work done on nineteenth and early twentieth century Euro-American missionary writings and often isolate what they see as the genre's quintessential trope: the vulnerable Hindu woman, bowed under the weight of superstition, patriarchy and religion (Thorne; Haggis and Allen). Texts like William Muir's "The Veil, or the Seclusion of Women in India" stereotyped the Hindu woman, especially the widow, as one of the most oppressed in the world. Such a woman needs "rescue," principally in the form of the Euro-American missionary woman who, penetrating the *zenana*, enables emancipation and right thinking. In the case of women converts, Susan Thorne has argued in her study of the London Missionary Society that missionary "piety and... politics were predicated on the projected absence in the colonized woman and/or her society of some quality, strength or virtue" (53). Jane Haggis and Margaret Allen write: "discourse in the missionary annals was firmly gendered: it is Indian women who bear the brunt of a 'heartless' Hinduism, particularly in its conventions of widowhood" (695). The Hindu family is portrayed as the origin of all problems for women, more so if they were widowed:

The overall effect in the [missionary] story is to throw the weight of blame back on the Indian family, so caught in the tyrannical demands of caste as to deny the mother her daughter, while the kindness of the missionary family further reinforces the imagery of Christian generosity and love. (697)

However, the theme of family-as-restrictive-and-obstructive in the pursuit of the "one true faith" that the commentators detect in Euro-American texts is not unique to them, nor is it just a gendered prototype: Indian men who converted also document this state of affairs.

Admittedly, the interpretation of Euro-American missionary texts being transposed onto readings of native texts runs the risk of creating ready ur-frames of decontextualised reading. However, the context in which the natives wrote their experiences were heavily informed by the Euro-American texts they consumed and cited from. Their appearance in the same periodical publications suggests that they read each other's work. Forewords and biographies supplied by Euro-American missionaries on native preachers suggest intersecting spheres of labour, influence and textual scholarship. Hence it is not surprising that the two genres – Euro-American missionary writing and native missionary writings –

occupy an intersecting and mutually influential discursive space, and so share concerns such as the family, the social sphere and the work of Christian labour in the colony.

Readings of the Euro-American missionary archives, it seems to me, turn a blind eye to a subtext emerging in this documentation of the Hindu family in the process of writing native Christian lives: the assertion of agency in the form of domestic dissidence, by both men and women. This domestic dissidence is also a first step in the incremental reinforcement of their agency, as native Christians, when they acquire an education, insert themselves into and shape “moral webs” or networks of compassion, culminating in the making of what this essay identifies as the “compassionate social sphere.”

I take my cue for this interpretation from the new works on missionary narratives, such as Bronwen Everill’s “Bridgeheads of Empire? Liberated African Missionaries in West Africa,” that demonstrate how, in the case of native preachers in West Africa, the indigenous Christians possessed considerable agency in their choice of religion and later, in their missionary activity, social reformist agenda and nationalism. Scholars in the “new imperial history” have noted the constitution of networks involving native Christians and imperial missionaries that contributed to the evolution of global humanitarian regimes within imperial networks of control through the nineteenth century (Ballantyne; Lester 2006, 2011). Religious scholars and émigrés from Asia, Seema Alavi notes, “carved out a spiritual and civilizational space between the British and the Ottoman Empires and projected it as their cosmopolis,” a space marked by a “cosmopolitanism... in sync with the reformist and scientific spirit of the times” (13). This re-reading of the interstices of Empire(s) enables us to see how the colonised subjects worked to assert agency within available networks, but in the process controlled some aspects of such networks. This carved out space within missionary networks is what I identify as the compassionate social sphere.

The social sphere, as theorised by Denise Riley (which she marks as feminised), is where the domestic extends into the public and very often works in antagonism to and in competition with the masculine public space (51). It assimilates features from both the private and the public spheres. The colonial social sphere is the domain of social practices informed by political considerations. It is therefore a conduit through which power moves between public and private. It is in the social sphere that norms of domestication (such as governance or control) and the arrangement of domestic spaces (gardens, household management) are instituted. Writing about such spaces that I characterise as the colonial social sphere, Sara Mills has noted how colonialism troubled the private/public distinctions in terms of spatial organisation. The club in the colony functioned, notes Mrinalini Sinha, as a colonial public sphere, but positioned between “both metropolitan and indigenous public spheres” (492). But in another kind of space the domestic and the public merged, informally,

temporarily, but remained politically charged. Nupur Chaudhuri points out that festivities that would have been private in England became public ceremonies in India, as a result of which extra-familial demands of colonial society invaded the memsahib's private domains (520). At Homes, birthday parties, dinners, balls and festivities constituted a colonial social sphere where favours were curried and bestowed, marriages and alliances made, and officials discussed politics. Protocols of behaviour and social interaction were adhered to and hierarchies respected (Nayar, "The 'Disorderly Memsahib'" 126). The native Christians carved out such a social sphere but this was not necessarily a feminised one although it was definitely a compassionate one. This compassionate social sphere lies somewhere between the political-institutional sphere of government policies and the missionary project, and the private. The social sphere is at once prior to the native missionary's labour and the effect of it. It pre-exists their work, by virtue of ongoing Christian missionary activity that, in the first place, draws the native toward Christianity and conversion, and then is further energised by the newly converted, native missionary's activities.

Evidence of this compassionate social sphere might be seen in Zebina Flavius Griffin's biography, *Chundra Lela: The Story of a Hindu Devotee and Christian Missionary* (1911), Baba Padmanji's autobiography, *Once Hindu, Now Christian* (1889), Florence Nichols' biography, *Lilavati Singh: A Sketch* (1909), –and a selection of little-studied autobiographical letters published by native Christians in periodicals like *The Children's Magazine of the United Presbyterian Church*, *Indian Female Evangelist*, *Juvenile Missionary Herald* and *India's Women*.

The letters in the periodicals were often written as reports from the field. The biographical accounts of native converts and missionaries are also often filled with letters, extracts of speeches, eyewitness accounts by people who knew the missionaries and personal stories of the natives. The borders of biography and autobiography therefore blur in many of these texts.

Missionary activities were not uniform across India. The texts I deal with here were produced by missionaries who wandered extensively as part of their work. Padmanji's work was concentrated mainly in the present-day Maharashtra area of central India. Lilavati Singh worked with Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, a college named after its founder and Singh's former friend and colleague, Isabella Thoburn, an American missionary. Chundra Lela came from a family whose members had been appointed official priests to the kingdom of Nepal. Lela was born in Nepal and spent much of her missionary life travelling across India as an itinerant missionary, mainly through the present-day West Bengal and the provinces of what is now the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, although she did make brief visits to the Northeast as well. The periodicals published missionary letters from all over the country, right from the

Mewar and Punjab regions in the northern parts of the subcontinent down to present-day Tamil Nadu in the south.²

The 1870-1920 period saw a flurry of periodical publications in which the native missionaries began to write their accounts. This is the period when the Raj was beginning to face sustained resistance, and we see a complex of religious affiliations (native Christians, European Christians, native Hindu nationalists) contesting for space – although this is not the subject of the present essay (but is the subject of Chandra Mallampalli's *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937*) – and so the making of a native Christian, compassionate social sphere had political ramifications.

This essay focuses on a small segment of native missionary auto/biographical narratives.

Domestic Dissidence

Accounts of their Hindu phase of life are commonplace in many native Christian auto/biographies. Fifty-one pages of the total eighty-four of Zebina Griffin's biography of Chundra Lela are devoted to the latter's life as a Hindu and the several pilgrimages she undertook. Her early widowhood – she had been married off at the age of seven – comes in for the usual attention, with comments on the “cruel wrongs inflicted on widows in India” (16). The blame is laid squarely at the doors of religion: “cruelty is exercised in the name of religion and custom” and “only a handful of missionaries [have] lift[ed] up their voices in [sic] behalf of these friendless sufferers” (16). Baba Padmanji also spends eighty-six pages of his one hundred and fifty-five-page autobiography on his life as a Hindu. Padmanji notes the devotions of his mother (7), the rituals of purity in his family (6, 24-5, 33 and elsewhere), the emphasis on texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* (8, 27), the religious slant to school education (13-14), “celebrations” of “possession” (29-31), and the many festivities at home and places of worship (19-21). All of these, he states, ensured that he was “entangled in the meshes of Hinduism” (32). Padmanji states that he began to suspect that these rituals were “nothing but the attempts of vulgar cheats to delude simple-minded people” (33). At this point, it must be noted, his exposure to Christian doctrine was still quite minimal, with the Bible being used in the English school he joined (16-17), because, by his own admission, he was “not inclined to read the New Testament, on account of the secret antipathy [he] bore to the name of Christ” (17). He even “tore a Marathi tract in[to] pieces because it made some strictures on the Hindu deities” (17).

² There are, surely, similar accounts from and about native missionaries from other parts of the country, especially in the vernacular. Other writings, such as the early Ganpat Lukshumanji's polemic, *Essay on the Promotion of Domestic Reform among the Natives of India* (1843), offer part autobiographical accounts of their conversion and finding “true” faith and part commentaries on the need to reform Hindus.

What is striking about the temporal sequencing in these narratives is that conversion to Christianity is not, apparently, what drives their distancing from and dissidence toward Hinduism. On the contrary, their dissidence within the family and social order begins, so they claim, well *before* their exposure to the full barrage of Christian theology and its reformist project. In other words, their dissidence within the family, toward the Hindu rituals, as documented by themselves or their biographers, sets the stage for conversion, not the other way round. This suggests not simply dissidence but self-consciousness about their own participation in Hindu rituals, even if we concede that this sequencing might be, in itself, *part of their self-fashioning* in their autobiographical writing. Biographies based on conversations with the native missionary also reinforce this sequencing.³ For instance, Chundra Lela's account of her state after extended, painful penances (immersed up to her neck in the cold waters of a river, standing between two blazing fires [45]) goes thus:

After so long a time, and after so much suffering, I should have had some vision of God or some manifestation of his pleasure in all this, but no vision appeared.... I felt that for all the outlay of money and time, and for all my sufferings, I had found nothing soul-satisfying. No knowledge of myself, nor yet of God, for a vision of whom I had been willing to endure so much. (46-48)

About the *Bhagavad Gita* she writes: "This passage had been explained to me as teaching about the soul, but now I saw teaching in it about God that I had not seen before" (49).⁴

The native Christian's documentation of this sequence of self-awareness, unhappiness over Hinduism and eventual discovery of Christian truth, or the biographer's account of these processes and states of mind, might be read as the discursive construction of dissidence and of the self-aware subject. Following this heightened awareness of their discomfort and unhappiness with and in Hinduism, which is often unarticulated to the rest of the family, the protagonist of these narratives documents her or his expressions of objections and dissidence to the same. If the former was the anterior moment to an agential consciousness, the latter is the expressive moment of agency. It is documented in these narratives as

³ Gender played a crucial role in the fashioning of the native Christian identity. For instance, the issue and "problem" of domesticity would be qualitatively different for men and women inside the Hindu home. This line of inquiry would be worth pursuing, but is not the subject of the present essay.

⁴ This moment of discovery of doubt and uncertainty in Padmanji, Chundra Lela and others is, incidentally, not a new theme. As early as 1815 in an account of one Abdool Messee's conversion, documented in Appendix B to the anonymously authored *The Spirit of British Missions* (1815), we are told he had been "perplexed about the contradictions maintained by the different Mahometan sects" (Anon 87).

objections from the painful and strained relations with the family and the immediate Hindu social circles they inhabit. Padmanji notes: “my stay at home was becoming very painful” (82) because his mother “began to weep” and his father “reproached” him (82). Padmanji records his family’s anxieties and distress, but also their continual attempts to restrain him from converting (98-9, 100, 101), and extended debates about Christianity and Hinduism (102-04). In “From the Shadow of the Purdah to the Shelter of the Cross: An Autobiography of a Hindu Lady of Highest Caste” (Anon, 1892), the woman having experienced Christianity is “very vexed and distressed” when Hindu rituals are performed in her family (9). John Sharp records the troubles a convert faced in his family in an account published in the *Indian Female Evangelist*. Sharp notes that while the convert who did not wish to live with his Hindu wife any longer could apply for a divorce; this recourse to the legal process was, however, not quite advisable (241). Narrating the biography of such a convert, Sharp records how, in the presence of Europeans, the convert sought to convince his wife, but she only spoke “angry and insulting words, and called him a dish-wiper” (244). Sharp is forced to acknowledge that even the Europeans were unable to sort out the tangle the family had woven around the husband’s conversion. Griffin records Lela as having told her how she, Lela, met “two high-caste widows in the household who were anxious to become pilgrims” (24). W. Miller in his short biography of a native convert, Gunga Dhor Saringee, in *Juvenile Missionary Herald* claims: “though scrupulous in the observance of all the prescribed Brahminical rites and ceremonies, he was in his heart wretched and miserable, and sighed for something to satisfy the cravings of his spirit” (44). In the anonymously authored “From the Shadow of the Purdah to the Shelter of the Cross: An Autobiography of a Hindu Lady of Highest Caste,” the about-to-be converted woman records that her family, including her mother, used to “scold and abhor her” (“From the Shadow of the Purdah” 10). Editha Mulvany’s letter extracted in *India’s Women* of September 1893 notes how a convert’s son-in-law “beat her, and forbade her to have anything to do with the Christians” (Mulvany 418). Narrating the “Burdwan case,” S.L. Mulvany, also writing in *India’s Women*, notes that the Mohammedan “girl-wife” had “not gained freedom to worship her Lord Jesus” (“Calcutta: Our Mohammedan Work” 27).

The implication discernible in all these narratives is that with the arrival of a dissident consciousness the protagonist finds participation in Hindu rituals within the family unacceptable. The self-fashioning of the disillusioned Hindu—and enlightened Christian in autobiographical narratives, or the account of such a fashioning by their biographers, draws attention to the *bildungsroman*-like dawning of consciousness. It is this new consciousness that makes it imperative, the narratives suggest, to abandon family, faith and rituals for Christianity.

The refusal to attend religious ceremonies, quoting from the Bible or disputing a tenet from Hinduism, become acts of dissidence conducted within

the family. The family is also the first space where the to-be-Christian establishes a new identity and affiliation. Citing the Bible, for example, ensures that the man or woman positions himself or herself as a minority within the family. Subalternised and criticised for this self-positioning, the individual however begins to fashion a self that is more in tune with the new teachings that she or he encounters.

A related component of this domestic dissidence involves the potential convert's enthusiasm for sharing her or his knowledge of the Bible, or of the new-found faith, with the rest of the family. Taking on the contours of an agential pedagogy, Chundra Lela records that her mother's sister "listened with much interest to [her] preaching and the story of Christianity" (66-67). Then, going home (Nepal) for a short visit, she finds her younger brother seriously ill. "After I had talked to him many times," notes Lela, "and explained the Christian religion to him, he said that he had accepted Christ as his Saviour" (68). Padmanji documents his attempts to impress upon his wife – "strove hard to incline her mind" – the need to accept Christianity and, he says, "she showed her willingness to come to me" (134). Dissidence here therefore manifests as the convert or potential convert's fashioning of him/herself as a proselytiser, teacher and guide, first and foremost, to the *family*. This is the fashioning of the Christian self in the face of familial opposition.

The family is the space where the first moments of a native Christian's self-fashioning and agential assertion takes *place*. The deployment of the Bible enables this assertion to occur, but is essentially carried through on the strength of familial relations. E. Lewis of the London Missionary Society records in "Christian Work Amongst the Women of India" published in the *Indian Female Evangelist*:

Many of the native Christians who are employed as Bible-women are most devoted workers, and exerting an influence which cannot but tell mightily in numerous households. It has frequently given me intense delight to hear, from their own lips, in their own graphic way, the details they have given of their conversations with their Hindu sisters in their own houses. (151)

The recalcitrant family members prove to be the first site of a testing of the faith of the new convert. As Subbarayadu, whose letters and autobiographical notes are quoted extensively by John Sharp, says: "I hope and pray that she not only join me, but also join her precious Saviour" (247). Padmanji records with not inconsiderable joy that his younger brother soon joined him in reading the Bible "openly, and talked with other members of the family on religious matters" (113-14).

Moral Webs

Padmanji notes how, having been first joined by his younger brother in Christianity, his home slowly becomes the centre for theological discussions: “my father’s friends... soon heard of my religious state, and many came to see and argue with me” (114). He also expresses happiness that his family is mellow in its reception of his converted status, a far cry from the experiences of other converts (130).

The compassionate social sphere is governed, in the main, by the individual’s actions, but also made possible by the location of these actions within *networks*. Spreading outward from the domestic into the realm of the social, the native Christian establishes what has been termed a “moral web.” Commentators examining missionary writings have used the terms “networks” and “webs” to describe the flows of people, ideas and objects, all focused on humanitarian aid and philanthropy, across the world – networks often intersecting with imperial networks of dominance and control (Ballantyne; Lester 2006, 2011). Christina Zarowsky in her study of trauma uses the term “moral webs” to describe the bonds and solidarities “built across individuals, communities and institutions” (194). The idea of a moral web or network is suggestive of individual agency in serving as a point or node in a network, but also conveys the sense of being linked to institutions, groups and individuals, and all centred around the related ideas of charity, compassion and Christianity.

Native Christian narratives have two components that go into making the compassionate social sphere.

Textual Labours

Texts compiled by the Euro-American missionaries, by native Christians and circulating in the field were instrumental in constructing the compassionate social sphere alongside, of course, the ambivalent cultural authority the “English book” imposed (Bhabha). Anna Johnston puts it pithily:

Missionary texts are crucial to understanding cross-cultural encounters under the aegis of empire because they illuminate the formation of a mode of *mutual imbrication* between white imperial subjects, white colonial subjects and non-white colonial subjects. (3; emphasis in original)

Johnston is suggesting the making of a textual public sphere, a discursive space constituted by white and native Christians.

The texts and publications of native missionaries and converts, especially Catholics, were influenced by international and local factors. Thus, the Vatican asserted considerable authority on the work of the native Christians. Other preachers and activists displayed an awareness of events, published work and

doctrinal debates in Europe and the USA (see Mallampalli, part II, “Conceiving a Political Community”).

The textual-discursive aspect of native missionary work was often imbricated with processes, bodies and gatherings. The native Christian preacher, teacher, missionary or doctor constructs a compassionate social sphere not merely as an individual but as a part of an entire “discursive assemblage.” Alan Lester writing about the humanitarian projects of the nineteenth century defines “discursive assemblage” as made of “relations, including conversations, episodes of personal encounter, bodily dispositions and textual production and consumption” (“Humanism, Race and the Colonial Frontier” 135).

Every native Christian documents the individual, institutions and organisations through and with whom she or he worked, and widened the scope of the field of labour, both physical and textual. In these narratives it becomes difficult to disentangle the textual productions from the institutional networks, meetings and encounters that constitute the field of inquiry, labour and compassionate relations of the native Christian.

Lilavati Singh “was deeply impressed with the need of good literature for the Christians [in India],” notes Nichols, and actively pleaded for “translations of good books [so] that educated Indians might be trained by reading these to prepare an indigenous literature” (Nichols 30). She translated a part of Booker T. Washington’s autobiography for a newspaper (31). Rainsford, writing in *India’s Women* (July 1893), stated that “one hundred texts” were compiled by a Miss Wauton and were distributed amongst the sick in hospitals (322). Chundra Lela mentions that she distributed books (72). It is Chundra Lela’s *letters* that the villagers read and, after offering their hospitality, eventually persuaded her to preach there, staying there for a month and managing one conversion in that period (59-61). Lela’s sequencing of events seems to imply that the villagers were drawn to her through the textual route of the letters, thus attributing agency to the letters as well.

Padmanji attributes the “Mohammedan hawkers” who sold “religious publications very cheap” (68) with playing a role in his better understanding of religious differences. Religious newspapers such as *Dnyanodaya* and the *Prabhakar*, he notes, were influential in his early years (69-70). In Padmanji’s case, where the English and Marathi textual archive enabled his conversion, his own voluminous textual production enabled the setting up of a whole network for others. An Appendix to his autobiography lists his publications in English and Marathi (151-54). Padmanji stresses the role of the mission press and the translations of Marathi works into English and vice versa that built the textual universe of conversion (70). Padmanji records, with not inconsiderable pride, his responses to accusations and missionary-hating columns in the Marathi newspapers (71). He also documents the societies, such as the Free Church Institution and the Native Missionary Association, that he joined, and the people such as Dr.

Seshadri, Dr. Taylor and Dr. Nesbit, who helped him find the networks into which he inserted himself (91). He documents how he utilised the opportunity of being a student of Grant Medical College to proselytise as well (91-2). Chundra Lela carried letters from missionaries that serve as testimonials to her work. As she puts it: “I was sure by the help of these letters I should be able to find friends wherever I found Christian people” (58). But she also documents how she was abused, beaten and insulted in various places (55, 57, 63-64), even being locked up in an asylum at one point (75-77).

Part of this documentation of the field of textual and compassionate labours is also devoted to the *citation* and repetition of others’ work, suffering and stories of conversion. Surta records how he argued theological doctrines with the village headman and continued until “the Thakoor and those with him agreed in [sic] my argument” (Surta 31). Chundra Lela records how near Kanpur, a Brahmin argued with her until she had to clarify his queries “from his own books” (72). “Crowds came from the town every day to see and converse with me,” records Padmanji (131). Padmanji also cites the work of other missionaries, especially Euro-Americans in his narrative. Lala, an itinerant preacher in Udaipur, writes of the doubts and uncertainties around doctrines and matters of faith in villagers raised in the form of questions addressed to him on his rounds. Several of these questions, Lala notes, were “foolish” and yet he proceeded to answer them with “love,” he claims (47-48).

The native Christian now positions himself or herself as a witness or a monitor to the sufferings, doubts and theological anxieties of others. Citing others’ spiritual crises or familial tensions, and their own responses to these, enables the native Christian to position herself within a collective memory. At once a part of the textual universe of the missionary project and a collective memory, citation also contributes to the making of the compassionate social sphere. It positions the native Christian as the empathetic, sympathetic, knowledgeable and helpful individual with agency within the network. The citationality of such events ensures that the preacher discusses the wider social implications and the nature of the community itself in which the successful convert and the oppressed victim are located. Together, the citation of the intellectual or affective response to another’s trauma, then serves as a descriptor of the community but also enables the native convert to blur the distinction between experiential witnessing and secondary witnessing (witnessing derived from listening to the trauma narrative of another victim). Chundra Lela, we are told, was always calm and dignified in her ascetic garb. Padmanji insists that he always made his arguments based on reason, and this forced the listeners to accept his point of view (114-15).

Native missionaries, especially those who hailed from propertied classes, worked towards the establishment of networks and communities. Driven by an anxiety over the “community’s isolation from the Indian public mainstream,”

they set about trying to “acquire a public voice and engender a more socially and politically relevant church” (Mallampalli 10). Mallampalli in support of this argument documents the periodicals, translations of the Bible and tracts that furthered this effort, and notes how Catholics and Protestants together constituted a parallel public sphere in colonial India. (The intersection of such efforts and the parallel public sphere with nationalist and Hindu-Muslim spheres of influence is worth studying, although this is outside the ambit of the present essay.) The making of a compassionate social sphere was therefore part of the effort of the making of the Christian public sphere that Mallampalli has identified in his work.

Labour Networks

Networks of missionary labour in native Christian narratives demonstrate a centrifugal pattern, originating in the family and moving outward. This movement however is made possible through the existence of Euro-American networks.

Ram Lal of Alwar documents family prayers and the Rajgarh missions. His wife, he notes, taught in the *zenanas* of Rajputana (14-15). Derva, trained in “Urdu, Hindu[s]thani and a little English,” became a school teacher. He thanks “servants from a far country, i.e., from Europe” for saving him but also for having facilitated his services to other Indians in the area (Derva 66-67). Lakha’s letter, the first part of which was published in the *Children’s Magazine of the United Presbyterian Church* of May 1894, lists the followers of the various sects of Hinduism that he engaged with (75), with precepts learnt from “Mr Walker” (75). The bazaar is very often the site of preaching, as Lakha mentions in the second part of his letter published in the June 1894 issue of the same periodical: “In the *bazaar*, when we go to preach, the people listen attentively, and remark that such teaching is proper and good, and several also discuss the matter...” (“Lakha’s Letter,” *Children’s Magazine of the United Presbyterian Church* June 1894, 87)

Abdul Gani, a native convert, in his (translated) appeal published in *India’s Women* pleads that a “Miss Sahiba” may be sent to the village, Sultanwind (near Amritsar) to “work in the surrounding villages” (137). He submits that since he had been working for nearly four years in the area and, since his wife “very diligently works in the *zenanas*,” he was aware of the needs of the area (137). What Gani seeks is a Euro-American *node* in the network.

Padmanji having recorded his discussions of Christianity with his family (82-83, 102-03, 113-14) finds his field of operations extending to friends and the neighbourhood (86-87, 94, 96, 106) and eventually stretches from Bombay to Belgaum. Padmanji’s narrative clearly indicates the intersection of the personal with the public role of proselytiser and missionary where the native Christian does not distinguish between the recipients of his conversations and tracts. Padmanji documents how even those unsympathetic to his faith and belief were

part of the network that helped him to gain greater knowledge of Christianity. For instance, having become convinced of his son's conviction and faith, the father ensured that his education continued in the Christian direction. Padmanji records:

[He] was lavish in expenditure on my education. He not only purchased for me some of the very costliest English books that could be procured in the country, but ordered others out from England.... (111)

It is also significant that Padmanji keeps the Euro-American missionaries informed about his progress, thereby suggesting the imbrication of the multiple sites of his labours.

Chundra Lela, like Padmanji, moves from the family to the neighbourhood to the world. She makes her preferences for Christian doctrines and faith clear first to her "Hindu acquaintances" (55) and her immediate family (an aunt and a brother [57]). In the process of making this preference clear, Lela also informs the local American missionary (of the American Free Baptist Mission) about her intentions to convert, and it is the American missionaries who reminded her that her network might extend beyond the family. Lela records: "the missionaries wanted me to become a *zenana* teacher" (56). Later she extended her work to the neighbourhood (57), before she set out on her itinerancy toward Burdwan (59). She then covered most of Bengal region (including present-day Odisha) and all the way to the Nepal border and Assam. Incidentally, in every town, as Padmanji and Chundra Lela record, they not only found pre-existing missionary networks but also created new ones when they converted more people

This labour by native Christians is directed at the spatial, physical and spiritual renovation of their countrymen and women, and moves across homes, neighbourhoods and beyond.

Order, cleanliness and hygiene achieved with calmness and ease mark the material manifestations of the agential self-fashioning in the native Christian narrative. Central to this is the spatial *ordering* of their environs. In the case of Lilavati Singh, Florence Nichols writes:

The interest Miss Singh showed in shoe-strings, house-keeping problems, sanitation, and methods of bathing, indicated ingenuity as well as executive ability.... She made the most of existing material; vines and plants, a lawn and trees made their appearance, growing in the magical way things grow in the rainy season in India.... Sometimes [in the case of the school girls] a simple change in dress, or even the recutting of a village-made skirt would transform the awkward girl into an inconspicuous, self-respecting student. (37-38)

Ram Lal of Alwar notes that after conversion, many of the lower castes “are clothed better and fare better than the Hindus” (14). A letter cited by F. Gmelin at the conclusion of “From the Shadow of the Purdah to the Shelter of the Cross: An Autobiography of a Hindu Lady of Highest Caste – III” in *India’s Women* describes how, inside the church, the native men and women “are very neat and clean” (“From the Shadow” 113). Lakha notes that, after training, the children in the schools run by native missionaries “sit in their places very quietly” (“Lakha’s Letter,” June 1894, 85). The clean and spatially organised mission school, homes and even entire villages with a preponderance of Christians is a common theme from the mid-eighteenth century. An essay “Christianity in India” in *Fraser’s Magazine* sees the effects of Christianity as embodied in “neatly dressed orphans... happy looking, well fed, well taught, well cared for” (Anon, “Christianity in India” 312). Such representations indicate the shift (“progress”) from heathen disorder to a quiet, calm and picturesque Christian space. Visuals published in periodicals such as *Juvenile Missionary Herald* accompanying accounts like William Carey’s “Mission Work in Eastern Bengal” (28-29) or Robert Spurgeon’s “Barisal School Teachers” (28-29) invariably presented the native converts in clean, formal clothes, standing or sitting at attention, as representative of orderly and picturesque missionary sites (Nayar, *English Writing and India* 117-31).

Such widening labour networks as described above are in fact moral webs because the native Christians deploy words like “love,” “compassion” as keywords in autobiographical and biographical accounts of their work. Alongside these accounts of labour and work these narratives also document socialisation of and with the Euro-Americans, and the impression management that constitutes a part of the social sphere.

Social gatherings after formal lectures on Christian doctrine, Padmanjhi claims, “contributed not only to deepen the impression wrought by the lectures, but to bridge the gulf which separated Natives from Europeans” (73). Her biography records that Lilavati’s first set of network connections are achieved in the face of racism and race-based objections. Nichols writes in guarded prose:

She was the only Indian teacher on the college staff, the only Indian member of the missionary family. While the American missionaries welcomed her as their equal, it was harder for the European and Eurasian teachers.... The complex social life of India was reflected in the college at Lucknow, where the race question has always been one of great perplexity. (13-14)

On her first trip to the United States, Lilavati appeared for her first lecture in San Francisco, “in her very graceful and very becoming Indian costume” and spoke in a “distinct voice, but a quiet manner” (20-21). With her rhetoric but, it is suggested, also through impression management of an exotic appearance, she

managed to raise \$ 20, 000 for the higher education of Indian women. Nichols underscores this aspect – impression management and the appeal of the exotic – when she cites Bishop Thoburn: “the presence of such a representative of the traditional ‘East’ could but make a profound impression upon the representative audience” (22-23). Later, the biography documents her trip to England-Scotland (23-24, 43-48), Japan (32-36), Italy (41-42) and another visit to the United States (49-55). The social life of the native preacher, it appears, is as important as the proselytising, because it fits into the network of the Euro-American kind with its appeal of the “educated” exotic native.

Admittedly, part of the agency proceeds from the power of the network itself, but it is the native Christian who instantiates this power on a case-to-case basis, like Lilavati Singh does in her mesmerising appearance on the Euro-American stage. Built on compassion, affect and labour, but also enabling income-generation and social status, missionary work propelled the native Christian toward public roles. These public roles called for considerable “renegotiation of what constituted professional work and personal lives,” as Rhonda Anne Semple describes the professionalisation of women’s missionary work (199). Converts sending their wives into the *zenana*, as Abdul Gani proudly states in a letter published in *India’s Women*, also contributed to the making of this professionalisation and the compassionate social sphere.

It is important to note that an Indian Christian community was “imagined” by native Christian elites, defined as “high-caste, English-educated Catholics and Protestants, mostly men, who came to occupy prominent positions within church-related institutions and public life” (Mallampalli 8). Thus, an in-built advantage from their pre-converted Hindu caste identity continued to play an important role in the native missionaries’ local standing, powers of patronage and moral authority. Even the law (drafted by the English government), argues Mallampalli, was disposed favourably towards the propertied converts (8-9). The compassionate social sphere that they worked to build was possibly at least partially due to this advantage and cannot, therefore, be attributed solely to their conversion.

The Compassionate Social Sphere

The compassionate social sphere’s origins thus lie in the individual’s first acts of domestic dissidence. Later, employing the rhetoric of compassion and love, charity and care all cast within a discourse of “labour.” The native Christian proceeds to construct a social sphere constantly drawing on her or his personal life, but extending it to include the social world she or he might be located in at the moment. This includes the gifting of Bibles, discussions over matters of faith and personal labour and help in the form of education or charity. The compassionate social sphere is constructed out of the individual’s personal encounters, textual production, including citationality, and the networks

instantiated and initiated by their actions. Founded on the blurring of personal and public roles, as seen in each of the lives above, the compassionate social sphere is the site of native *agency*. That is, the native's actions and influence extend beyond the place of birth through the itinerancy, but also through the documentation of their work in their own autobiographies, their biographies, as exemplars by others, and the thousands of pages of letters in the various missionary periodicals. The moral web comes into being through bodily dispositions, textual production, encounters and public roles, all dealt with through a firm conviction in doctrine and personal example.

The native Christian in these narratives is constructed as a discursive assemblage, as I have demonstrated, with its mix of bodily encounters (with the newly converted, the recalcitrant and the believing) and textual contexts. Blurring the personal with the public in the course of both, textual and corporeal actions, the native Christian assimilates her/himself into the networks, expands and reinforces them through great personal commitment and labours. Thus textual work, labour and networks are constitutive of the native Christian's agency. The efforts in these directions – textual production, setting up networks, the labour of conversion – instantiates the network's full potential when the native Christian effects a conversion. When the narrative documents the expansion of the missionary's field achieved through compassionate labour and textual production, we discern the presence of the compassionate social sphere.

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