

Book Review

Baba Padmanji:

Vernacular Christianity in Colonial India

by Deepra Dandekar

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Religious conversion is a contentious issue in India, often viewed as a civilizational threat. This threat expresses itself as outrage when the conversion is not in the native religion. It is perceived as a betrayal to cultural, religious, and civilizational values. It is considered to be an act of manipulation by crafty European missionaries to lure innocent people. But, not all religious conversions fall under the same narrative. The book *Baba Padmanji: Vernacular Christianity in Colonial India* interrogates the diversity in conversion and its perceptions in 19th century Maharashtra. In this work, Deepra Dandekar sketched Padmanji's social and literary contributions in the formation of native missionaries in vernacular space.

This work provides a well-researched narrative on the life of Padmanji that highlights the discursive framework of 19th century Maharashtra. It provides an account of Padmanji's attempts to direct his own development in guiding the vernacular community through the act of writing. Dandekar divides this book into an introduction, four main chapters, and a final chapter with concluding remarks. It begins with an analysis of postcolonial outrage against missionaries. The introduction stresses on themes that run throughout the book, that is, Padmanji's nativization of Christianity as a Marathi religion through the intervention of "vernacular mission field", thus creating an alternate social, literary, linguistic, and emotional space.

The author claims that her work is a challenge to the selective religious and cultural history of 19th century Maharashtra. She argues that the 19th century intellectual history conveniently located the spirit of modernity by identifying social reformers as theistic or deistic in their religious outlook. It ignored the strong intervention of vernacular Christianity pioneered by Padmanji, which advocated widow remarriage, religious freedom and the abolition of caste.

The author delves into great details to show how the hagiography and autobiography of Padmanji established him as a saintly native Christian leader. By discussing the contemporary scholarship on autobiographical writing, the author situates Padmanji's autobiography '*Arunodaya*' into a teleological hagiography, a self-authored *mahatmya*. His autobiography provides inspiration to a larger group of emulators to make the transition from their present Hindu self to an emerging Christian selfhood. According to the author, Padmanji's autobiography demonstrates the formation of a transcultural Christian moment of harmony between Europeans and native.

Chapter two of this book details the emerging role of Padmanji's Marathi Christian writing in 19th century intellectual history. In this chapter, the author emphasizes Padmanji's rigorous engagement with Hindu reformers, Hindu traditionalists, converts and European missionaries. She points out that the genre of vernacular Christian writing had greater responsibility to create the epistemic room between European missionaries and the Hindu and Muslim apologists. One of the most fascinating contributions of this work is Dandekar's explanation of Padmanji's literary and religious scholarship to strengthen the identity of vernacular Christian converts, so they could differentiate themselves ideologically, religiously, and culturally from both Hindu reformists and European missionaries converts. In his Marathi treatise *Nihshastravadpariksha* or *Examination of the Claims of Deism*, Padmanji argued against Hindu, Muslims and Zoroastrians, who did not believe in traditional religion because of their fascination with deism. Padmanji also showed his reservation against conversion as emancipatory for women and lower castes. Against these claims, Padmanji remained critical of the utilitarian approach. He feared that a utilitarian approach to conversion would expose native Christians to European and Hindu accusations of opportunism.

Chapter three is an exploration of three important writings of Padmanji, which are representative of the Christian vernacular genre. The first text is *Strividyabhyasnibandh* (an essay on the education of women), where Padmanji criticizes patriarchal dominance as an obstacle to women education and emphasizes the social role of women education. The second text is *Vyabhicharnishedhak Bodh* (Evils of Licentiousness), which deals with Hindu sexual immorality. The third text is *Naranayak the Son of Jagatshet*, which counters Hindu accusations against native Christians for abandoning their families after conversion. These three texts constitute a pioneering vernacular intervention that transforms social issues into an emotional experience that can be internally transformative.

The fourth chapter has assessed the most important writing of Padmanji, *Yamunaparyatan*. It is considered to be the first vernacular novel. Here, Dandekar explains how novel writing practices in colonial India constitute a mark of Indian modernity. This chapter studies the plight of women through the lens of caste. The author critically evaluates the charge against Padmanji that he is not empathetic in his approach to women's sexuality. The author believes that his opposition to utilitarian conversion limits women's agency only to Christian protestant ideas of sexual morality. This chapter also discusses the differences of Padmanji with reformists like Lokhitvadi and affiliation with Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati and Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

The final chapter of this book is largely dedicated to the broad framework of contributions by Padmanji to transforming the reform agenda into a righteous, ethical, and religious cause.

The author's survey of literature from the protestant writing to vernacular writing offers a journey into the objective narratives of conversion in colonial India. She makes a compelling case that conversion in India is not limited to any single point of origin, neither is it limited to motivation for any social progress. Rather it was for many, a case of "conversion for the sake of conversion". To make this argument, this work does not limit itself to the biography of Padmanji, but also offers a balanced intersection of history, literature, and religion in 19th century Maharashtra.

In sum, this book articulates history and religion through the medium of narratives which open various shades of life and society in colonial era. It reveals the multiplicity of theistic, deistic, and pantheistic presumptions of social reformers. It is a well-written and carefully argued work that provided an incredible service to the scholarship of history and religion in the colonial era. It will be of interest to anyone with a serious interest in philosophy of religion, comparative religion and history of social reforms during colonial era, among other social science and humanities disciplines.

