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Conversion, Memory and Writing: Remembering and Reforming the Self

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Abstract:

Examining autobiographical statements left by South Asians converting to Christianity from the nineteenth century onwards, this article investigates the function of memory and literary narrative in three features common to several accounts: the translation of conversion accounts; the re-construction of past events through narrative devices; and, the re-formation of the Protestant individual conceived as part of a larger project of ‘reforming’ India to a state of progressive modernity. It argues that personal memory is inflected by conventions of writing about conversion, pressing into service specific tropes to exhibit the convert as ‘Protestant’. This economy of recall allowed converts to participate in wider, public debates on religious and social reform by re-enacting conversion and confession in autobiography.

Keywords: Autobiography, Christianity, Conversion, India, Memory, Reform, Translation

Introduction

Religious conversion is an experience that is particularly suited to autobiographical writing because the central focus of conversion, the supposed awakening to true self-knowledge, anticipates the conversion of lived experience into textual self-representation.¹ While acts of religious conversion might be considered internal ‘spiritual’ processes, it is through narrative that moments of crises, including potentially the crisis that led to conversion, are rhetorically resolved. The power of narrative construction is evident when narrative is conceptualised both as performative act and object: that is, one can speak one’s experience and life into existence (I narrate, therefore I am?) and one’s life becomes the object of the self’s gaze—an object that acquires a life of its own and one which can be probed and investigated for ‘religious truth,’ ‘genuineness’ and ‘usefulness’ both by oneself and others. The presentation of a successfully transformed self, retrospectively constructed, invites us to unpack the mechanics of narrative representation to probe how and why South Asian converts to Christianity were writing prose accounts of their conversion.

In this article, I examine autobiographical accounts of conversion written by South Asians converting to Christianity from the nineteenth century to the first quarter of the

¹ Geoffrey Harpham, ‘Conversion and the Language of Autobiography,’ in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 42.

I thank my colleagues on the AHRC-funded project on conversion autobiographies, Matthias Frenz, Milind Wakankar and John Zavos for on-going discussions over the life of the project. I also thank the AHRC for funding which facilitated archival research on which this article is based. I express my gratitude to my anonymous peer reviewers for their very insightful and clear comments from which the article has benefitted immensely.

twentieth century. Nineteenth-century Protestant converts were constructing multi-layered narratives of reform in an environment where wider sections of Indian society, not just political or religious elites, were for the first time engaging in conversations on religious belief and faith through print. I focus on three features common to several accounts: first, the re-writing and translation of conversion accounts through new colonial networks of print;² second, the use of realist narrative devices to remember and re-construct past events to present a mature and fully rational convert; and third, the purpose of summoning up the reformed self for the larger benefit of 'India.' Each foregrounds a different aspect of the role of memory in reconstructing the event and effects of conversion.

The article draws mainly on conversion accounts that were written in the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, composed either in English or as English translations of Gujarati, Marathi, and Tamil accounts. Much of the previous scholarship on South Asian conversion accounts has plumbed them as authentic sources of individual or social history to recover truths about the past, to evaluate whether conversion was genuine and successful and by implication, celebrate the transformative power of Christian mission.³ Flemming, for instance, retrieves the convert's story as a reliable record of the historical person and life without distinguishing

² For a detailed discussion on the conceptual parallels between translation and conversion, see H. Israel, 'Translation and the Containment of Proliferation: Equivalence, Conversion and Religion' in 'Translation and Religion: Crafting Regimes of Identity,' special issue of *Religion*, forthcoming, December 2018).

³ E. M. Jackson, 'Glimpses of a Prominent Indian Christian Family of Tirunelveli and Madras, 1863-1906; Perspectives on Caste, Culture, and Conversion,' in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communications Since 1500, with special reference to Caste, Conversion and Colonialism*, Ed. Robert Frykenberg, (London, New York: Routledge, 2003) pp. 315-335; John Paul and Robert Frykenberg 'A Research Note on the Discovery of Writings by Savariraya Pillai, A Tamil Diarist of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Tinnevely,' (*Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 44 No. 3, 1985), pp. 521-528; Avril Powell, 'Processes of Conversion to Christianity in Nineteenth-Century North-Western India,' in *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia: Continuities and Change, 1800-1900*, Ed. Geoffrey Oddie, (London, 1997), pp. 15-55 and "'Pillar of new Faith": Christianity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Punjab from the Perspective of a Convert from Islam,' in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communications Since 1500*, Ed. Robert E. Frykenberg (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 223-255.

between the choices of three female convert-writers and their textual representation in narrative.⁴ Although the substantive chapters of Viswanathan's *Outside the Fold* convincingly challenges the abovementioned approaches, she too suggests that "recovering converts' testimonies becomes crucial in establishing what precisely has been repressed in the records"⁵, but as the following sections demonstrate, convert testimonies cannot be treated as unmediated records of convert voices since they were translated, edited, revised, and extracted by the very missionaries whose discourse Viswanathan seeks to challenge. Dube's extensive work on evangelical conversion in Central India is very useful as a general frame of reference but since he does not examine autobiographical accounts of conversion, his work is less pertinent to this article.

Given the limited focus on autobiographical accounts of conversion in current scholarship, then, my aim here is to bring to attention the breadth of accounts in circulation, focusing in particular on three, to delineate how conventions of writing about conversion press into service specific tropes to exhibit the individual as 'Protestant convert'. I engage with the multiple layering of texts across languages and formats and the narrative devices used, because these facilitate the investigation of Christian conversion and shifting religious affiliations in colonial India from fresh perspectives. Since autobiographical writing has a complex relationship with memory and the production of knowledge about the self, it is useful to engage with recent scholarship on memory and narrative to investigate how conversion accounts were written and functioned for multiple audiences.

⁴ See Leslie Flemming, 'Between two Worlds: Self-Construction and Self-Identity in the Writings of Three Nineteenth-Century Indian Christian Women,' in *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, ed. Nita Kumar, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, pp. 81-107.

⁵ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1998) p. 76

The Protestant conversion autobiography: memory and narrative in South Asia

Serious challenges to the reading of autobiographical memory as a reliable witness of the past have been offered by both literary and social historians as well as developmental psychologists. Literary scholars and historians⁶, including narratologists, have already called attention to autobiography as narrative, since they are interested in modes of writing and the ways in which memory is reproduced, constructed and circulated through writing.⁷ The binary that was traditionally constructed between the private and public in studying autobiographical narratives, as if a well-hidden private self is made public through its representation in autobiography, has been repeatedly challenged. Cavarero's concept of the 'narratable self' that is both subject and object of autobiographical memory⁸ is useful in thinking about the construction of the converting self: what aspects of this self are deemed 'narratable' by both author and reader and why? While it is not within the scope of this article to offer an exhaustive summary of the interdisciplinary field of Memory Studies, it is nevertheless instructive to take into account a couple of pertinent points from recent scholarship that augments literary scholarship. Research conducted by developmental psychologists⁹ on autobiographical memory offer valuable insights for understanding the relation between the specificity of single events remembered, that is, 'episodic memory', and a general, structural or 'autobiographical memory' where the latter "typically involves a sense of self experiencing the event" which is

⁶ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Linda Anderson *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 2nd edition 2011)

⁷ Max Saunders, 'Life-Writing, Cultural Memory and Literary Studies,' in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 321-331.

⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives; Storytelling and Selfhood* ([1997] English trans. London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁹ Katherine Nelson, 'Self and Social Functions: Individual autobiographical memory and collective narrative,' *MEMORY*, 2003, 11 (2), pp. 125-136; Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush, 'The Emergence of Autobiographical Memory: A Social Cultural Developmental Theory,' *Psychological Review*, Volume 111(2), April 2004, pp. 486-511.

“recalled from the unique perspective of the self in relation to others.”¹⁰ Nelson argues that autobiographical memory serves a social function at the same time that it serves as a vehicle for self-expression such that the personal and the social are both functionally and structurally related. The more significant agency therefore lies in recalling and foregrounding one’s own actions as having implications far beyond the self. This is a particularly useful reminder that although autobiography as a genre appears to invite exclusive focus on an individual figure and his/her personal memory of conversion, it points equally strongly to the social significance of conversion beyond the individual. Hence, the narrative transformation of episodic, personal memory into autobiographical memory invites exploration of how the relation between the personal and social is constructed and why. In this context, it is also valuable to keep in mind that acts of remembering and forgetting are political, with ideological struggles over “who is authorised to remember and what they are authorised to remember.”¹¹

Jens Brockmeier has most recently argued that there is a crisis in the dominant understanding of memory as an archive, that is, as a repository of past events on which we can draw when necessary. Bringing together psychology and literary studies, he advocates approaching the autobiographical process as a narrative event as it “serves as a conceptual and analytical blueprint for an alternative approach to...autobiographical processes.” Narrative combines, in his view, several modes that are involved in the autobiographical process: linguistic, cognitive, and affective.”¹² As we will see, all three modes were employed in the narrative acts reconstructing individual conversions for wider consumption in colonial India. In the conversion accounts discussed, memory plays a critical role in retrieving and re-

¹⁰ Nelson and Fivush, p. 488.

¹¹ Smith and Watson, p. 24.

¹² Jens Brockmeier, ‘Introduction: The Memory Crisis,’ in *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 14 and p. 15.

interpreting a past experience of self-transformation, offering meaning and intensity to the life thereafter, and a means whereby subsequent crises can be managed by the emotional power of recall. But this act of remembering also allows others to participate vicariously in the affect produced by the experience, in either re-living their own similar experience or perhaps recoiling in horror at what might have been.

Accounts of conversion began to be written from at least the mid-eighteenth century mainly by the missionary under whose mentoring the conversion may have taken place. The earliest surviving accounts from eighteenth century South India were written by Pietist Lutheran German missionaries.¹³ Indian converts began writing their own accounts of conversion from the early nineteenth century, usually in their native languages, subsequently translated into other Indian languages and English. These accounts were published in various formats: the formal printed autobiography;¹⁴ self-contained pamphlets¹⁵ that served as confessional literature for popular consumption; and articles printed in regional journals.¹⁶ Longer accounts such as Padmanji's (1890), Nauroji's (1909), Katirvel's (1938) or Tilak's (1950), tend to elaborate on life before conversion, including everyday, routine events and impressions that are remembered in great detail, although they may seem to hold little

¹³ Huttemann, 'A genuine account of the ... conversion of an Indian priest to Christianity in the year 1763,' (London: Christian Knowledge Society) 1765.

¹⁴ *Tomas katirvēl Nāyanar Cuyacaritam*, *Thomas Kathirvel Nayanar's Autobiography* (Madras; Diocesan Press, 1938); *From Zoroaster to Christ: An Autobiographical Sketch of The Rev. Dhanjibhai Nauroji, The First Modern Convert to Christianity from the Zoroastrian Religion* (Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier 1909); *Arunodaya* (1888), Eng. Trans. *Once Hindu, Now Christian* (1890); *Smruti Chitren* (1934-37), Eng. Trans. *I follow After: An Autobiography* (1950); *Theophilus Subrahmanyam: The Story of a Pilgrimage*, Charles H. Monahan, 1922; *The Ways of Divine Grace in India*, Part 1 (1919); *Devasagayam Pillai's Conversion and Martyrdom From Contemporary Accounts* (1908); *Everyday Life in South India or the Story of Coopooswamey: an Autobiography* (1885); Pandita Ramabai, *My Testimony* (1907); A.S. Appasamy, *Fifty Years' Pilgrimage of a Convert* (1924).

¹⁵ A.S. Appasamy's *My Conversion*, 1921; Ganugapati Krishnayya's *My Conversion* (1904); 'The Testimony and Memoirs of Rao Sahib Thomas Kadirvel Nayanar, retired Tahsildar' (n.d.) published in Tamil.

¹⁶ *Dnyanodaya*, *Morning Star*, *The Calcutta Observer* and *Missionary Register* for example were bilingual journals that frequently carried brief accounts of conversion.

significance in terms of the spiritual transformation of the self. In contrast, shorter accounts offer vignettes of emotionally charged, powerful encounters between the self and a divine conviction.¹⁷ These and at times extracts from longer autobiographies were circulated as tracts, serving as ‘tasters’ to attract Indians to Christianity. Besides these, nineteenth-century writers such as Sattianadhan begin to write autobiographies in the fictional mode, presenting the conversion of her parents as part of her life story.¹⁸ In some cases, such as Sattianadhan’s short story,¹⁹ there is little difference in the characterisation, motivation and plot structure between fictional and autobiographical accounts from the same period, which raises pertinent questions for literary historians about what such mirroring between the autobiographical and fictional mode may say about the conventions of representing religious conversion that had developed in nineteenth-century South Asia.

It is important to note here that most surviving autobiographical accounts of conversion in the archives have been composed by high-caste converts, either brahmanical or non-brahmanical. While we know from missionary records that there were numerically far more low-caste conversions, their personal accounts usually do not survive. There may be several reasons for this archival silence—first generation lower-caste converts in the nineteenth century were rarely literate to write their own narrative, and it appears from missionary records that they were not encouraged to write, unlike upper-caste converts who were repeatedly promoted as exemplary converts above others. Further, as Kent observes, the low-caste convert, having

¹⁷ A number of unpublished letters and statements giving accounts of conversions and baptisms from the early nineteenth century onwards also survive. Several were written on the occasion of the baptism of the convert or their formal ordination as catechist, missionary or minister, others appear as part of obituaries. Extracts from letters were later published in missionary journals.

¹⁸ Krupabai Sattianadhan, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (first serialised in *The Madras Christian College Magazine* 1887-88; 1895).

¹⁹ Krupa Sattianadhan, ‘The Story of a Conversion,’ (Parts 1 and 2), *The Madras Christian College Magazine*, Madras, Lawrence Asylum Press, November 1891, Vol IX, No. 5: pp. 354-361. and Dec 1891, Vol IX, No. 6: 422-434 Madras: CLS Press. See also, *Nayah, the little Hindoo Convert* (1847-49).

been associated pejoratively with ‘mass conversion’ and conversion for ‘rice’ or so-called economic benefit, was not recognised as an individual possessing interiority and able to describe it through narrative.²⁰ Stories of low-caste converts appear only occasionally as incidental to longer high-caste conversion narratives. In *From Darkness to Light* (1882), the low-caste Rangiah’s conversion is compelling and is a significant initiator of the conversion of the high-caste Lukshmiah, and yet the biographer chooses to focus on the latter as protagonist.

Repeated narrations: Embedded, translated and competing texts

Conversion narratives are almost never produced, circulated or consumed in isolation. While there exist several accounts written in the ‘first person’ or, to use a term from classic narratology, with “diegetic” narrators, who speak about and for themselves, these did not circulate as self-contained texts. Despite their focus on the individual, conversion stories circulated as part of a larger network of documents, comprising statements that further discursively re-constructed spiritual transformation or the lack of it, as the case may be. Conversion accounts were almost always accompanied by statements of confidence or mistrust from others; letters, reports, records and statements by a variety of persons involved in some capacity add layers of interpretation to the narrative. There is a process of telling and re-telling involved within many of the conversion narratives as well as in the material repetition of the text through translation and re-publication. These repeat the conversion account, scrutinising and justifying the decision to convert long after the first event, creating a sort of ‘palimpsest effect’ that sustains the story by continually re-confirming it.

²⁰ Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Significantly, several of these narratives appeared in translation for both Indian and international audiences. While a few accounts were written in English, those written in Indian languages were translated into English or German²¹ for wider circulation. Indian conversion accounts were translated for dissemination in Europe amongst churches, patrons and directors of missionary societies. In the intensely competitive world of nineteenth-century missionary enterprise, these accounts may even have served to display star converts as ‘successes’ to rival missionary societies. They were certainly used to reassure funders that their money was well spent and often as an occasion to plead for more to carry on the ‘good work’. Many short accounts are available in the CMS archives in English version, with evidence of translation in superscriptions that state that it is a “true copy” of a “translation of a narrative.”²² Later in the long nineteenth century, the appeal of the single successful personal story may also have helped to offset the immense failure of missions to bring, as it had been hoped at the outset, ‘all of India to Christ.’

Translations were also encouraged between Indian languages. While the conversion stories were meant to attract more individuals from the same language or caste group, the translation of exemplary lives from one linguistic region to another helped not only to persuade others but also inspire newly formed Christian communities. Book length accounts were translated between Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu: Pandita Ramabai’s English account and correspondence were translated into biographies in Tamil,²³

²¹ *A Genuine Account of the Conversion of an Indian Priest to Christianity in the year 1763* (1765) trans. Into German and English; *Devasagayam Pillai’s conversion and Martyrdom from Contemporary Accounts* trans. P. Dahmen, 1908. *Ein Brahmane wird Christ: die Geschichte des Narayan Waman Tilak und seiner Frau Lakshmibai* (Stuttgart: Evang. Missionsverlag, 1958) translated from English translation of Tilak’s Marathi original; *Pilgerfahrt eines jungen Brahmanen* (Zurich, 1924) German translation of the conversion biography of Subrahmanyam.

²² E.g. ‘The Translation of Narrative of Daniel Rasanthiram, catechist of Pannervelei District,’ 1868. CMS/B/OMS/C 12 0206 No. 590.

²³ *Paṇṭitai Rāmāpāy Sarasvatī: jīviya carittiram*, E. S. Appācāmi Ammāl, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1925.

and extracts from Tilak's autobiography by Stacey Waddy was translated into Telugu.²⁴ Such translations were more than one off publications; they were often picked up by several journals, each quoting a previous source. Summaries or extracts from accounts were published separately in Protestant journals that had been established by different missionary societies around the subcontinent. Most often, conversion accounts travelled to other languages through English-language translations, following the practice of what is now designated as 'relay translation'. Short extracts from conversion accounts, as well as statements from those who subsequently recanted, were often reprinted in English in journals such as *The Madras Observer*, *Oriental Christian Spectator*, and *The Calcutta Christian Observer*, or in two languages in bilingual journals such as *Dnyayodaya*, *The Morning Star*, and *The Gospel Magazine*. For instance, the conversion account written in Tamil by Vetanayakam at Coimbatore was first published in English translation in the *Evangelical Magazine* in 1834, accompanied by a short article introducing and corroborating the conversion account by W.B. Addis,²⁵ the missionary under whom Vetanayakam had worked as a school teacher. As Frenz's and Dandekar's articles in this volume demonstrate, significant differences between the various language versions, additions and elisions, change the emphases and focus in the process of translation between languages.²⁶ Nevertheless, such reprinted translations function as independent and reliable narratives within a wider network of debate on religion and conversion in nineteenth-century India.

²⁴ English title, *From Brahma to Christ*; Telugu title: *Brahmanu viḍici Krīstunu vembadiñcuṭa: idi Nārāyaṇa Vāmanu Tilakku ayana bhāryayaina Lakṣmibāya caritramu*, trans. Ti Moses, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1957.

²⁵ 'An Account of the Conversion and baptism of a Native schoolmaster, communicated by Rev. W.B. Addis,' *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, Vol. 13, March 1835, p. 124; Reprinted in *The American Baptist Magazine*, Boston: Vol. 15, No. 10 1835, p. 411.

²⁶ It is not always possible to compare translations however because of gaps in the colonial archive.

Although translation is presented in these texts as a neutral, instrumentalist act to make an account available to a wider audience, it is worthwhile to remember that translation always involves choice—of text, of language register and of words—each with political implications. A clear example of the shifts in emphases that translation introduces is visible in the titles of autobiographies: Tilak’s *Smruti Chitre* [lit. memory pictures] appeared in English translation with the title ‘I follow after’ and in another edition, ‘From Brahma to Christ’. Padmanji’s *Arunodaya* [lit. sunrise] was first published in English translation as ‘Once Hindu, now Christian’, and a second English version under ‘My Struggle for Freedom’. Subrahmanyam’s biography with subtitle ‘Story of a Pilgrimage’ is translated into the German with the main title ‘Pilgrimage of a Young Brahmin’. In each case, the more open-ended and subtle originals are given very specific Christian connotations in the translated titles, of a move away from one state of mind to another and emphasizing the individual—‘I’ or ‘My’.

Further, some of the translators and writers suggest that the disclosure not only of the private self but that of the entire community renders their account more reliable and useful. While a missionary persuades Coopooswamey to write his account with the argument that “[v]ery little is known of the home life of the Hindus,” it is Coopooswamey who justifies his task as offering a “correct picture of Hindu life.”²⁷ Padmanji gives “descriptions of Hindu life and religion [which] are singularly graphic, and they are such as only a born Hindu could have supplied.”²⁸ Rev. Shaffter, English translator of Sinnamalai Iyengar’s Tamil *My Cross: A History of the Conversion of A Brahmin to Christianity* (1911), informs his reader that one of his objects in translating was “to give a peep behind the scenes of a Hindu home to those who can know it only from without, so as to catch a glimpse of the bigotry, ignorance and

²⁷ Coopooswamey, ‘Preface,’ p. 8

²⁸ *Once Hindu*, pp. v-vi.

superstition rampant there.”²⁹ The primary motive for the translation of Babajee Bakhar’s conversion account into English seems more to illustrate “the domestic habits, manners, customs and superstitions of the Hindoos” than delineating his conversion.³⁰ This offer of the translator or biographer to unveil for his European audience the inner life of the Hindu household, hitherto hidden and mysterious, is repeated in several prefaces and introductions to translations as a sign of the reliable memory of the original speaker to counter suggestions that missionaries may be exaggerating the extent of successful conversions in India.³¹ The translations here display not just the interiority of the single convert but allow readers a vicarious glimpse into the private lives of the upper-caste Hindu community, remembered through the convert’s lens. Introductory chapters delineating the ritual life of the Brahmin or other upper-caste Hindu become a stock feature for both writer and translator to include as a sign of the account’s consistency. Recollecting their Hindu past both proves the veracity of their story (the minutiae of Hindu family relations and rituals proves the narrator’s authenticity), as well as the ‘depravity’ out of which they have stepped out (the more devoted the Hindu, the more impressive his conversion).

The repeated presentation of an exemplary conversion in at least two languages spoke to two audiences in new regions that the text entered: those who functioned exclusively in one of the Indian languages, and those such as missionaries and a new generation of Indians who had knowledge of both English and an Indian language. Equally, translation helped to create networks between otherwise scattered groups of converts across regions. Model converts such

²⁹ (n.p.)

³⁰ *The Christian Brahmun; or Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Character of the Converted Brahmun, Babajee*, New York: Leavitt, Lord and Co., 1836.

³¹ “The intention has been to give the inside view of Telugu home and social life, and thus answer the questions asked by many friends, by showing how the people live, act, feel, love, perform their part in life, and die; and describing step by step, their advance from the darkness of heathenism into the light of the new life in Christ Jesus.” *From Darkness to Light: The Story of a Telugu Convert*, J.E. Clough, Boston: W.G. Corthell, 1882.

as Narayan Waman Tilak (1861-1919) and Lakshmibai Tilak (1868-1936), for instance, didn't just acquire a following in the Marathi-speaking regions; they were also invited to speak in South Indian cities further afield such as Madras. Katirvel's Tamil conversion account recommends Pandita Ramabai, writing in Marathi and English, as a commendable Christian convert.

The more a story travelled across languages through translation, the more visibility and commemorative force it acquired. A closer examination of the construction of conversion accounts and the way they circulate reveals that almost all of them embed other narratives and voices: shorter narratives are embedded within a main narrative, parallel stories of others on similar journeys of conversion, those who chose not to or those who challenged and opposed conversion; or the conversion account is itself embedded within a longer report, journal or letter. Testimonials are added to conversion accounts, testifying to the good character of the convert as well as corroborating the story of successful transformation. Take for example *Katirvel Nayanar Cuyacaritam*, where an appendix is added at the end of the conversion account comprising a) a copy of the notice of baptism that was sent out; b) a testimony written and delivered by Katirvel in Tamil and in English three years after his conversion;³² and c) testimonials written by individuals of standing on his character.³³ One of these testimonials, by sub-collector F.H. Hamnett, brings to the reader's notice "the good work done by Kadirvel Nayanar...as a thoroughly competent and trustworthy manager of the Estates under his control. He is a sort of man we want as managers and I would recommend that his pay be raised and his services retained as long as possible by the Court of Wards." This reads more like a reference accompanying a job application and may well have originally been written for such

³² *Tomas katirvēl*, pp. 66-74.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 74-75.

a purpose, but that Katirvel chose to include this with an account which otherwise focuses entirely on his spiritual quest and conversion is telling. Presumably, the dependability of his professional and public persona guarantees the soundness of his spiritual change. The personal narrative of change acquires greater value within such wider public meta-narratives that confirm the good character and standing of the convert who may otherwise be thought of as capricious and fickle. These embedded or framing narratives add to the credibility of the narrating self, confirming that memory, self and action come together seamlessly to produce for the reader a successful convert.

Print, a new powerful medium of communication in colonial India, linking diverse conversion accounts, served autobiographical memory by endowing the personal life with larger public significance. The choice of translations and extracts for re-printing tells us which conversions were deemed 'narratable', and offered publicity beyond the local, isolated significance these would otherwise have had. These repetitions of conversion accounts through translation across languages and figuratively across print formats and publications created a network of conversations on conversion that contributed to the wider context for the debate on reform that we will return to in section three.

Re-membering Selves: Split Narrators and the Construction of Agency

By the mid-nineteenth-century in India, the conversion autobiography became a useful literary tool for Protestant converts to understand and order their conversion experience, such that their lives fitted into a coherent pattern: a misguided, superstitious past transformed to an enlightened, rational present through the central act of conversion. The past is remembered through confessional acts of repentance, revealing as it does so the ever-present dangers of

repeating past sins. Incidentally, the narratives usually do not name sins apart from three—belief in more than one God, worshipping idols, and the practice of religious rituals—each aligned in the missionary discourse with irrationality. The lines of contention and resistance narrated by the convert almost always focus on these three points as part of the metaphorical journey from initial interest to rejection and final acceptance of Christianity as the only true religion, such that the experience of conversion entailed the recognition of ‘duties’ performed by virtuous Hindus as ‘sins’ to be condemned and avoided by faithful Christian converts.

The narratives challenge the assumption that conversion is experienced as a private moment of conviction; rather, they insist that conversion can be recognised and validated socially only through discernible linguistic or non-linguistic markers. So, for instance, the physical body of the convert often becomes one of the first sites of change or controversy, in terms of what religious symbols they may choose to wear or reject,³⁴ what they eat, whom they eat with or where they choose to place themselves physically (e.g. moving out of the ancestral home, into the house of the European missionary); all these played a significant part in the conversion narrative as important choices that confronted them.³⁵ The different spaces that they inhabit at different points in the narrative are important signifiers of both spiritual and social change. The public act of eating with or living amongst other Christians, without maintaining ritual purity, becomes a visible signifier of inward transformation. In fact, many converts claim that it is not the internal turn to Christianity which is trying; rather, it is the repeated ‘choice’

³⁴ For instance, tonsure of the kutumi or removal of the sacred thread which at times led to baptised converts recanting, see for latter Dube, *Stiches in Time: Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles*, (Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2004) p. 57. Nauroji’s removal of the sacred kushti from around his waist at baptism is read as his final rejection of faith by a large Parsi audience, *From Zoroaster*, p. 48.

³⁵ *From Zoroaster*, p. 37, 38; *Once Hindu*, p. 65, 76-79; *My Cross*, p. 10. Katirvel’s concern regarding meals extend to his children at school well after the family’s conversion p. 29.

they must exercise in maintaining or breaking public, social conventions assigned to their social status.³⁶

Since it is impossible to examine the considerable body of conversion accounts in detail, I will limit the discussion in the following sections to three book-length autobiographies, the first two in English translation and the third in Tamil. The conversion autobiography of Rev. Dhanjibhai Nauroji was translated from the Gujarati³⁷ and published in English in 1909.³⁸ Nauroji was born to Parsi parents in Gujarat in 1822 and arrived in Bombay in 1831, when his uncle took charge of his education. After a few years at a Gujarati-medium school, he joined the English-medium General Assembly's Institution run by the Scottish missionary Dr. Wilson in 1835. The main portion of the narrative focuses on his years at this school. His conversion and baptism in 1839 followed by a legal battle initiated one of the most public controversies in Bombay at the time.³⁹ He was ordained as minister in 1846, serving as 'Native clergyman,' and was viewed increasingly by British missionaries as having a larger role to play in the conversion of fellow-Indians to Christianity. Similarly, Baba Padmanji's (1831-1906) Marathi conversion account *Arunodaya*, and its English translation,⁴⁰ starts with his early years but soon moves to his experience of two English schools—Belgaum Mission School (from 1843) and Free Church Institute Bombay (from 1849)—and his gradual change of mind and formal baptism in 1854. Padmanji subsequently worked as a teacher, was a Marathi writer and translator and was ordained as minister in 1867. He was appointed Marathi editor of the

³⁶ While making one's choice public is insisted upon by missionaries (*From Zoroaster* p. 40; *My Cross*, pp. 11-12), families of converts often beg the opposite (*Once Hindu* pp. 97-105). Padmanji writes of his own conflict and of several others in not making a public declaration (see chapter 13, *Once Hindu*). See also, *I follow After* and *Theophilus Subrahmanyam*.

³⁷ Published by the Bombay Tract and Book Society but I have been unable to trace a copy

³⁸ *From Zoroaster*, English translator, Miss Dodson.

³⁹ For details of the court case and response of the Parsi community see Jesse Pelsetia, 'Parsi and Hindu Traditional and Nontraditional Responses to Christian Conversion in Bombay, 1839-45,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 74, Number 3, September 2006, pp. 615-645.

⁴⁰ *Once Hindu*

Bombay Tract and Book Society and the Bible Society for over a decade. Thomas Katirvel Nayanar, born in 1863 in Tancavur, attended CMS College in Tinnevely and Thanjavur Mission College. In his autobiography,⁴¹ he tells of his increasing questioning of Hinduism and encounter with H.A. Krishnapillai (1827-1900), a well-known Vaishnavite convert to Christianity, who sent him a manuscript copy of his epic poem *Irakshaniya Yattirikam*, describing the life of Christ in the style of the *kamparamayanam*. He seeks the company of several other Christian converts before he converts and is baptised in 1901. His narrative alludes to several positions and responsibilities he held within the colonial administration and legal system until he retires in 1919. His account includes a comparison of Hindu and Christian doctrines with a justification of the latter based on personal experience and observation.

The three writers deploy a full repertoire of narrative strategies from autobiographical and classic realist fiction in order to present the rhetorical resolution of several types of crises. There is an obvious parallel between classic realist novels, autobiographical novels and autobiographies: the focus of these narratives is the presentation of the moral growth or education of the individual—a *bildungsroman*—where the tension between the individual and social norms is resolved through the socialisation of the individual to accept dominant social norms. Unlike the conventional *bildungsroman* however, the convert-protagonist here must critically engage with two sets of social and religious norms. As we will see, the use of recognisable narrative formulae (of autobiography and realism) facilitates the exploration of the crises presented by the opposition between two sets of compelling norms and the compulsion to unequivocally choose one over the other rather than expand the divine spectrum to include a new God.

⁴¹ *Tomas katirvēl*

First, although the narratives employ the first person narrative voice, each strategically uses a dual perspective whereby he is able to split the younger experiencing ‘I,’ the subject of the narrative from the older, remembering ‘I’ who figures as the observing narrator in the text. Such a split allows each to narrate incidents from their childhood with immediacy, as if these were unfolding in front of our eyes through the naïve eyes of the child, but at the same time, comment on them retrospectively from a wiser, older perspective. He is thus able to control and exercise adult judgment over himself. This gap between ‘who sees’ and ‘who speaks’ is vital for the exploration of memory as well as morality in each narrative, since as we proceed through it, the adult narrator’s voice plays an increasing part in the way the “story” is mediated. This double perspective then ensures that we view the events unfolding before our eyes through the interpretation that is already encoded in the adult narrator’s voice.

Further, to use a term from classic narratology, they ‘focalise’ through the younger experiencing ‘I’, thus inviting us to identify with the point of view expressed by our first-person narrator-protagonist. The naiveté of Nauroji’s attempts to grapple with belief in a God prepares us for the more complex engagements with questions of faith that we anticipate in a conversion account:

Though I was a mere child, I was anxious to know whether there was such a God. In my childish way I thought I could ascertain this fact. I said to myself that if I could count the stars while lying flat on my back on the ground, I would believe that there is a God. Need I say that every attempt made for several days failed. I was rather glad of this, for I wished to believe that there is no God.⁴²

⁴² *From Zoroaster* p. 11-12.

This fragmentation in perspective between belief and disbelief effectively foreshadows other actors in the story, some of whom eventually make choices other than the narrator-protagonist. Similarly, at several other significant points in the narrative, Nauroji is able to create a narrative distance between the naïve focalising of the child and the interpretative focalising of the adult narrator, whose perspective we are invited to share. This splitting of the narrator, whereby the writing self watches over itself at once acted upon and acting, can be found in the other autobiographies too. At the mission school, Katirvel recalls hearing of a classmate writing a letter to God and trustingly writing one himself. Padmanji finds years later recorded amongst his papers a vow that he had made “not to worship ‘stocks and stones’ but the Supreme Creator of the Universe,” declaring “If I should do any of these things, I shall incur the guilt of the slaughter of a hundred cows.”⁴³ There are two further effects of such doubling. First, the naiveté of the child-self also functions to point us to another implied figure. The child serves as a symbol of the naïve Hindu adult who figures in missionary discourse as the immature, ‘childlike’ face of devout India. In learning to reject the innocence of childhood, the adult-narrator learns also to discard his Hindu or Parsi past as misguided superstition in order to mature into the fully rational Protestant. Second, by inviting the reader to share in the adult-narrator’s memory and identify with *his* judgement, the narrative discourages the reader from acknowledging that he is as much a narrative construct as the child.

Nauroji’s autobiographical account is by no means an exception in employing this narrative strategy. Padmanji states, “I look upon this as a providential arrangement;” “God in His holy providence, did not allow me to remain in one place.”⁴⁴ Three-quarters into his autobiography, Padmanji devotes an entire chapter to retrospection: “Before continuing my

⁴³ *Once Hindu*, pp. 63-64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 52; 57.

narrative, I wish to dwell on a few points in my past history, so that the kindness of God to me may be more distinctly perceived.”⁴⁵ Likewise, the phrase “This was God’s guidance” occurs several times in Katirvel’s narrative. Events, including errors committed by others, are retrospectively assigned providential value and as pre-ordained by Katirvel: “itu teyvaceyal...itu arputamenap pinnāl teriyavantatu” [This was God’s doing...I understood later that this was a miracle].⁴⁶ The adult Katirvel ends his autobiography with a long recital of events that takes the reader back to scenes of childhood and early youth, all re-considered as part of ‘God’s goodness and grace’ that ordained even evil or potentially difficult circumstances to contribute to his salvation.⁴⁷ A layer of interpretative encoding frames events even as they are remembered to assign specific meaning for narrative effect. Hence, past events are recalled in specific ways, and in doing so the narrating I ‘recognises’ itself as in a mirror, a fully formed individual chosen by divine grace. This complete recall allows for the remembering and recovery of the rational, adult self.

Through these literary strategies of the double narratorial perspective and focalisation, in accordance with conventions of the *bildungsroman*, the autobiography keeps our attention focused on the ‘I’ as the agent of action. The narrative very clearly emphasises the agency of the protagonist in comparison with that of other actors in this story: it is the autobiographical I, whether child or adult, who is directly guided by a “merciful God” to take important decisions leading up to conversion. The actions and influences of others, family or missionary-mentors, are retrospectively assigned providential provenance. This direct aligning of the self as active agent working with divine direction reinforces the narrator’s status as autonomous, capable of discerning and rejecting base human persuasions or motivations.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 107.

⁴⁶ *Tomas katirvėl* P. 4; my translation.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 61-64.

The climax of such a display of free will and choice occurs twice in Dhanjibhai's narrative, at two of the most public events described in the course of his conversion. On the first occasion, he is asked before baptism by Dr. Wilson, "was I doing this of my own free will? I replied that it was entirely of my own free will, and that no one had used any improper means to influence me; I was fully convinced that the Parsi religion was not divine, and that the Christian religion was the one given by God; and my determination was to embrace it."⁴⁸ The second is presented as part of court-room drama, when the judge pronounced that since he was of age it was up to him "where he would go and with whom he would remain". The judge, after confirming that he understood the judgment, "asked me with whom I wished to go."⁴⁹ This double affirmation of free will and agency, first within institutional Christianity at formal baptism and repeated within the legal framework of colonial law, constitute his coming of age – both on the personal, spiritual plane and the public, civic level – as a reliable subject within the institutions of British India.

In these autobiographies, the way the post-conversion writing self observes and judges the earlier confused and unconverted self helps to solidify the present-day self as modern, rational and properly god-fearing. The evidence of fearing the true god and for the right reasons lies in subscribing to monotheism, not engaging in 'idol worship', and in not participating in religious ceremonies and rituals associated with them. At the other end of the spectrum lurks another danger—atheism—which attracts several converts, including Nauroji and Padmanji. This too is a hurdle that must be overcome in order to arrive at belief and worship of the true god. Both necessitate a conception of the self as possessing agency, an aspect of "the old

⁴⁸ *From Zoroaster*, p. 48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 53.

Protestant doctrine of individual responsibility,”⁵⁰ where faced with free choice, the individual makes the right decision. The personal memory of an innocent, confused childhood is effectively transformed through narrative into the rational certainty of adulthood for public consumption. It involves the re-organisation of memory and the self in order to present the fully formed adult self as responsible, rational and reformed.

Retrospection with a Purpose: Re-forming the Self and the nation

But memory also serves a larger purpose for the convert-narrators. Conversion autobiographies written by Indians in colonial India were political acts of retrospection and self-construction engaging with issues beyond the private or the sacred. The conversion narrative offered converts a public space within which to redefine themselves in relation to caste, gender, religious and regional identities. This re-formation of the individual was also part of the larger project of ‘reforming’ India to a state of progressive, rational modernity. Crucially, both types of reformation are inflected through the Protestant lens, so that reformation is conceptualised as a Protestant reformation and with Protestant markers of personal and public change.

The narrative strategies examined in the previous section operate to present the reader with the re-formation of the individual—the ‘Nauroji,’ ‘katirvel’ or ‘Padmanji’ within the text—as part of the larger project of ‘reforming’ India. Presented as classic stories of self-education, they participate in the wider conversation on the reformation of ‘India.’ Acquiring the ability to think independently, exercising free will and examining the interior landscapes of the self in order to control one’s moral being function to signal the birth of the ‘modern’ individual. This individual shows his ability to reason and to debate in the very writing of the

⁵⁰ Asad, p. 271

autobiographical text. That is, the ability to construct a powerful and coherent narrative is a sign of the emergence of the modern, self-reflexive individual from the supposed restricting ritual practices of the ‘traditional’ Hindu or Parsi. However, crucially, the move away from traditional Hindu or Parsi practices was not towards a secular modernity but a Protestant modernity. This link is clearly visible in the claim made by the sub-title of the autobiography, “The First *Modern* Convert to Christianity from the Zoroastrian Religion” [emphasis added], and an introduction that frames the narrative. The Rev. D. Mackichan emphasises “[Dhanjibai’s] unique position as the first modern convert to Christianity from the ancient Zoroastrian faith.”⁵¹ Note the contrast between “modern convert” and “ancient Zoroastrian” faith. An entire chapter in Katirvel’s autobiography is devoted to offering evidence from the natural sciences as ‘modern’ knowledge in support of Christianity’s claims.

That there was widespread engagement with ideas of religious and social reform in South Asia from the early nineteenth century has been well documented. But how are we to understand the tie between reform and modernity in relation to religious conversion formulated at the turn of the nineteenth century in India? These conversion accounts linking personal fate with that of the nation debunk the idea of the modern nation as secular. Several scholars have pointed out that modernism in India (as elsewhere) did not imply a turn to secularism⁵² but rather modernisation involved various kinds of ‘reform’ that entailed a return to and re-engagement with originary Hindu,⁵³ Parsi⁵⁴ or Islamic⁵⁵ religious ‘traditions’ and the

⁵¹ *From Zoroaster* p. 6.

⁵² Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001; Viswanathan, 1998.

⁵³ Van Der Veer ed., *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalisation of Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*, (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ Ringer, *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran*, Monica M. Ringer, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press (2011)

⁵⁵ Francis Robinson, ‘Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia,’ *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2/3, Islam in South Asia (2008), pp. 259-281.

constitution of Sikhism as a ‘religion.’⁵⁶ The terms of the debate however were broadly conditioned by the Protestant discourse on polytheism, ‘idol worship’ and ritual practices—all of which recur in conversion narratives as “sins”—with the effect that reformers claimed a ‘pure’ past for their religions that were originally monotheistic, accentuating the individual’s personal faith and responsibility over ritual practices and the worship of icons. As Ringer argues, instead of jettisoning religion, reform movements responded to modernity by recovering religion and thereby emphasised the individual’s responsibility in the private observance of faith rather than the public performance of rituals.⁵⁷ Against this background, the emphasis on personal and rational faith in the conversion accounts is understandable.

The discussion so far has shown that the conversion autobiography became a means whereby emergent, unstable identities could be re-organised into the modern, rational individual, and as the hope for a reformed and progressive India. In this context, Zavos’ contention that modernity was defined by the colonial discourse on organisation—of state, education, law, bureaucracy, travel, and time—versus the ‘disorganisation’ of Indian society is particularly useful. Both the Hindu reformist and traditionalist response to modernity, he argues, is offered through the discourse of organisation, either vertical or horizontal,⁵⁸ whereby, with the idea of the individual self at its heart, this discourse seeks to locate the individualised body in relation to a notion of ordered state and civil society. I suggest that Nauroji, Padmanji and Katirvel and other converts, such as Theophilus Subhramanyam (d. 1933), Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Lakshmibai Tilak (1868-1939), tackled the autobiographical form to demonstrate that their rational engagement with religion indicated the Protestant Indian

⁵⁶ Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁵⁷ Ringer, p. 199

⁵⁸ Zavos, p. 57

convert's ability to present organised selves with which to engage with modern forms of political life, social organisation and reform. Thus, the capacity to organise and govern the self within the narrative space of the autobiography becomes an indicator of a wider readiness for citizenship within the modern colonial structures of governance. Most conversion narratives written from the second half of the nineteenth century show this sense of double self-imaging: well-reformed Protestant converts who will make good citizens in a reformed India.

The narratives establish a link between the reformed self on display and the political future of India either by bringing together theological and political points in their reminiscences or through the narrative strategy of direct address to their reader, imagined as a fellow 'countryman.' In Viswanathan's analysis, Ramabai's conjoining of theological and political points through exercising her will and choice renders her a 'heretic' rather than the desirable 'convert': "She is making the argument, contrary to the missionaries' wish or liking, that Indians have to make their own country, and that the free will, independent conscience, and judgement demonstrated in their religious choices strengthen the kind of moral society Indians must make for themselves" (134-5). But when some other conversion narratives make this association, the narrators, albeit all male, feature as fêted converts of missionary-mentors. Nauroji's final chapter, 'Reflections,' presents the mature narrator reminiscing on his life, linking the organisation of his personal life to that of 'India,' although historically 'India' does not as yet exist as a political entity:

I have lived to see vast and varied changes in the material, intellectual, moral and social conditions of India. They are the product of the many educative influences that are now at work among us, such as the introduction of steam-power, electricity, cheap postage, municipal institutions, colleges and

universities for higher education, the growing power of the press and improved legislation.⁵⁹

This autobiographer clearly sees himself as contributing to the making of a modern Indian (albeit colonial) state. The personal, the social and the political are both functionally and structurally related here. Similarly, at a ‘thanksgiving meeting’ to celebrate the conversion of Katirvel and his family three years after baptism, Katirvel not only chooses to detail why they had converted; he ends his delineation of self-reform with an emotional appeal, in Tamil and English, to his friends, family and ‘countrymen’ or *desattaverkale*:

“I am a very ordinary man and I have neither education nor capacity to deal with such important questions. But still I spend a great deal of my time in thinking upon the reforms and as to how I can be of some use to my countrymen in carrying out these reforms, and in educating the ordinary people on such subjects whenever I have occasion to do so. ... A real Christian is an out and out practical reformer...”⁶⁰

This address justifying conversion, provided additionally in English translation, stands out from the rest of the narrative as a statement that speaks to a wider audience beyond the immediate Tamil readers of the account.

Similarly, justification for the writing of autobiography is given in the narratives in terms of altruistic concern for others, both Protestant converts and the unconverted. Nauroji tells us:

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 88.

⁶⁰ *Tomas katirvėl* p. 71.

I have often been pressed by some of my friends to write my autobiography. I have hitherto stood out against such an undertaking, for I honestly believe that there is nothing specially interesting or stimulating in my life that might prove useful to the public. It has, however, been lately represented to me as a matter of duty that should not be neglected. This consideration has weighed with me, and overcoming my reluctance to the undertaking, I sit down to write what follows.⁶¹

Rather than view this as typical of self-deprecatory claims by Indian authors writing about themselves, it is useful to take this as a statement attempting to construct a link between individual memory and that of the collective. His friends ‘press’ him to remember through writing, because his memory will serve to augment the collective memory of the Christian community in the Bombay Presidency. Padmanji, likewise tells us, “...this detailed account of my early life has not been written to gratify any literary or historical curiosity on the part of my readers, but solely that they may see the wonderful way in which God in His goodness ‘delivered me from the power of darkness’...” and “My non-Christian countrymen will see how great is the power of Christianity in changing the heart of sinful man; how Christian truth, when once it becomes influential in the mind, renovates and sanctifies it, whatever may have been its original condition...”⁶²

Further, accounts of conversions to Christianity strategically negotiated with the past to allow both a disavowal of past continuities and an articulation of belonging in the present. Although he presents Parsis as objects of ridicule through much of his narrative, Nauroji ends

⁶¹ *From Zoroaster*, p. 11.

⁶² *Once Hindu*, pp. 145-46; p. 146

with the reconciliation between himself and his community: “I was born a Parsi and I am still a Parsi of the Parsis. With the exception of...religious faith, I am one with my brethren according to the flesh. Whatever touches them, touches me. ...and if need be, I am ready to lay down my life for them. The bitter feeling that arose amongst them at the time of my baptism has long since passed away...I am proud to belong to a race which stands foremost by reason of many high qualities among the races of the East.”⁶³ Padmanji ends his account with a chapter that debunks the popular assumption of a complete rejection by family and friends: “There are many people who imagine that the man who embraces Christianity becomes quite estranged from his own people; but it is not so.”⁶⁴ Using such narrative devices of framing, several of the accounts start with the Hindu past and end with reconciliation with the Hindu community post-conversion, bringing the narrative full circle, emphasising connections rather than interruptions.

This concern for fellow countrymen is nevertheless presented using an affective register for optimal effect: the emotional links, the deep interest in their welfare, the willingness to sacrifice themselves to serve others. Most conversion accounts recount emotional partings and accusations from close family and friends that their conversion demonstrated their lack of filial love. The guilt and shame that this evokes produces its own set of anxieties, which is overcome with the claim that conversion only strengthens their love for others. There is a reordering of the affective visible here; the anxiety for one’s own soul, it appears, is only symptomatic of a concern for others. It is in recurring assertions that transpose the affective preoccupation with the self to a supposedly selfless commitment for the wider community, that it becomes possible

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 84.

⁶⁴ *Once Hindu* p. 143.

to a persuasive commonality with ‘countrymen.’ Reform when conceived in terms of an affective Christianity can mediate effectively between the personal and the political.

Conclusion

These conversion accounts relate in complex ways to the individual, in how each relates to the wider community and to debates on religion and reform that were increasingly exercising colonial India. They derive from the personal memory of individuals, yet function to sustain conversion stories in collective memory. The conversion account became a means for displaying and distinguishing between individuals capable of remembering and those who are not, and thus between ‘individuals who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not’.⁶⁵ This also helped to mark out high-caste converts as those able to reflect on their lives in writing, to be distinguished from low-caste converts who, apparently having converted for economic benefits rather than rational choice, were not in a position to display themselves through literary devices. It is in the act of remembering and writing the autobiography that certain beliefs and events get codified as unsuitable in the past and as separate from a new present, where a unique individual distinct from those around them begins to take personal responsibility, and where their actions are classified as either exterior/ritual or interior/faith, as sinful or legitimate. This individualising of responsibility also makes the individual an object of surveillance. The act of writing the conversion autobiography is also one of self-surveillance; the writer, in surveying and writing about the self, must participate in various forms of re-organisation and self-control.

The personal crisis of conversion reconstructed in the conversion narrative enacts in microcosm the historical crisis of cultural transformation in late nineteenth-century India,

⁶⁵ Marcus, p. 21.

where ‘traditional’ ways of viewing and practising religion were coming into conflict with the emergence of the examination of religions as an object of critical scrutiny. Converts such as Katirvel, Padmanji and Nauroji show an acute awareness of the public discussions on religious reform and identity that was going on in their lifetimes, and writing a conversion account is one means by which they participate in the debate. Their autobiographical accounts reveal lines of connection with several communities and their competing interests—families, missionaries and other recent converts—placing them squarely within a network of actors. Reform that is provisional and conditional with evolving parameters can be reassuringly presented as fully accomplished fact when constructed discursively and rhetorically through the personal, confessional narrative.

By staging tensions inherent in divisions of the public from the private, these conversion accounts add a further perspective to the critical debate on the privatisation of religion as a conversion to modernity in colonial India. Although conversion to Protestant Christianity may have entailed a move from religious community as arbiters of religious practice to the individual as responsible for their personal faith, Protestant missionary discourse in colonial India demanded a public confession of private faith, often with converts refused baptism until inner change was made public. Their conversion accounts record previous and repeated public tellings proffered at public sites—within the home, at church, at work (most often in the schoolroom), at a district magistrate’s office, at police stations, in colonial courtrooms, and in print journalism—at times before the convert was comfortable doing so. While published conversion accounts act as the public confession or testimony of personal memory, they also function as Protestant ritual, as effectively and powerfully as that other customary ritual, baptism. It is through public confession or testimony that the convert becomes fully Protestant, and their conversion accounts chart their shift from one kind of public

engagement with religion to another. The modern Protestant convert in India, who may have embraced the notion of a privatised faith, materialises as fully and finally Protestant through participation in this public ritual of confession.