

Early Christian Print Culture and the Culture of Translation
in Colonial Gujarat: A Study

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Abstract

The beginning of British rule in India and the Christian missionaries that followed in their wake paved the way for the emergence of print culture and culture of translation in India. These new cultures had a profound effect on the Indian culture. Focusing on colonial modernity, public sphere and the question of inequality in castes in Gujarat, this thesis studies the role played by Christian print and translation cultures in the constitution of the Christian public sphere. In this context, some of the questions I investigate are the following:

- i. What was the role played by Christian missionaries in the introduction of print culture in Gujarat?
- ii. What was the nature of translation that developed out of the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries in Gujarat?
- iii. What were the new forms of writing that emerged as a consequence of the emergence of print culture and the culture of translation?
- iv. How did these new forms of writing address the question of liberation and salvation and in what manner did it affect the articulation of 'lower caste' identity?

My hypothesis is that early printed religious books set up a new language of faith that played an important role in the construction of a new public sphere comprising of early converts. The printing and translation of Christian material of such materials resulted in the growth of the new religion.

The study draws on theories of the public sphere to help understand the construction of the public sphere, theories of translation to help analyze translated hymn books, tracts and scriptures translated from English into Gujarati, and theories of nation/nationalism to understand the importance of print culture in the construction of the imagined nation. Archival study, particularly of nineteenth century material on Gujarati Christianity, has played an important role in my research work.

In the first chapter, “Contextualizing Christianity in Colonial Gujarat” I have given an account of the historical landscape of colonial India in the context of Christianity. I have first mapped the links that were put in place between colonial power and Christianity in key locations in India and I followed it up with a more focused exploration of the entry and establishment of Christianity in Gujarat. I have used Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry and hybridity to frame the emergence of the dual identity of the Indian Christian convert and the hyphenated character of this figure. I have shown how, in the initial period, the missionary focus was on converting upper castes. They gradually focused on “lower” caste people to whom the new religion appealed on account of its promise of equality and freedom from oppression.

In the second chapter, titled “Print Culture in Colonial Gujarat”, I have discussed the print culture which affected textual culture of India as well as Gujarat in the nineteenth century. I have shown how the arrival of the printing press effected a shift from scribal to the typographical culture. I have argued that print culture caused the transformation of all forms of knowledge. I show later that this was the condition of possibility for the emergence of a new public sphere. I have studied the processes by which print culture was put into place, from the importation of printing presses to the devising of types for vernacular printing. I have given an account of the arrival of printing in Gujarati with a special emphasis on the printing of Christian books, tracts and

the Bible. I have concluded that Christian initiatives in printing played a critical role in Indian print history and in the history of Christianity in India. Another aspect of this chapter is its focus on the implication of this new print culture on low caste converts. Using examples from Gujarat I show that print culture helped to locate the big question of liberation in the early history of Dalit Christians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by means of giving them access to literacy and information.

In the third chapter, titled “The Culture of Translation in Colonial Christianity in Gujarat” I have tried to study the culture of translation in colonial Christianity in Gujarat. I have first made a detailed study of the possibilities and limits of Bible translation. I have used Eugene Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence as a framework for my analysis. I then study of new forms of Christian vernacular writing influenced by English forms and genres. I have examined the issues and problems faced while translating the hymns and prayers including the deployment of specific vocabularies while translating hymns. I have shown how initial translations used Sanskritized vocabulary as a part of an effort to convert upper castes. However, since most of the converts were from the lower castes, this language was alien to them even if in the vernacular. At this time attempts were made by these converts to write in a more accessible vernacular. Here I have studied *Daud na Geeto*¹ [The Psalms of David] translated by Vahlji Bechar in comparison with *The Psalms of David* (Gujarati translation) by Rev. James Glasgow. The use of words for the same themes and the arrangement of the words gives an idea about the society and the social culture around which those translations were done.

¹ In different books there are different names used for the collection composed by Vahlji Becher but in my thesis I have used *Daud na geeto*.

My last analysis chapter is called “Print Culture, the Culture of Translation and the Christian Public Sphere in Colonial Gujarat”. It is here that pull together the various strands of my thesis. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a place where different people meet together and discuss issues with a view to influencing the State (Bhabha, 27). However, I argue that the public sphere is not an inclusive place. I follow Veena Naregal’s central argument where she argues that print culture in colonial India gave birth to a different public in which the elites shaped the public opinion. I argue that, within the Christian public sphere, the elite upper caste converts had pride of place and this was contested by Dalit Christians in a variety of ways. I have argued that the Christian church in Gujarat could be considered as a kind of public sphere where Christians come together and discuss their common interests. I have analyzed Bechar’s *Daud na Geeto* and shown how it can be read in caste terms.

The fifth chapter concludes the dissertation and pulls together the arguments made in the previous chapters in a comparative perspective. It loops back to question of caste and the role of print culture and culture of translation reflects upon how the new public sphere emerged in colonial Gujarat.

Key words: Print culture, translation, public sphere, colonial Gujarat, cast