

A SLOW, NOT SWIFT, BATTLE OF THE BOOKS: Christian Literature in Nineteenth-Century India

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the preparation, distribution, and reception of Christian literature in nineteenth-century India. To the missionaries, the contemporary publishing landscape lacked any moral content. The output of Indian-owned presses, dominated by religious works, was contemptible; the popular literature imported from Europe deplored; and “infidel” works feared for their potential to turn Indians against all religion. To battle all this, the urgency to prepare a “moral” literature was at the heart of the evangelical project. Indian Christian works ranged from Bible translation into regional languages to all kinds of “support” literature. Various channels were used to distribute this literature, both individual and institutional. Counter-attacks were mounted by India’s own religious communities, turning the missionaries’ own methods against them.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le présent article, nous étudions la conception, la diffusion et la réception de la littérature chrétienne en Inde au xix^e siècle. Aux yeux des missionnaires, le paysage éditorial de l’époque était dépourvu de toute composante morale. Ceux-ci dédaignaient à la fois la production des presses détenues par des Indiens, composée surtout d’ouvrages religieux, et la littérature populaire importée d’Europe. Quant aux œuvres « infidèles », elles étaient redoutées, car elles auraient pu détourner les Indiens de toute religion. Pour contrer ces menaces, il apparaissait impératif de proposer une littérature « morale », projet au cœur de l’entreprise évangélique et soutenu par une croyance pratiquement magique quant au pouvoir de conversion du Verbe imprimé. Les œuvres chrétiennes produites en Inde allaient des traductions de la Bible dans des langues régionales à la documentation d’« accompagnement » en tout genre. Divers réseaux, tant individuels qu’institutionnels, étaient utilisés pour la diffusion de cette littérature. Cependant, la contre-attaque s’organisa chez les communautés religieuses indigènes, de sorte

que les méthodes préconisées par les missionnaires en vinrent à se retourner contre eux.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the preparation and distribution of Christian literature in Indian languages formed a key component of the Protestant missionaries' conversion strategy. Next to educational material, it became the largest category of print created by Europeans in India at that period. It is surprising, therefore, that the overall phenomenon of missionary publishing has been largely neglected by researchers into the history of the book in the sub-continent, except for some studies of responses to Christian literature among India's other religious communities.¹ By contrast, commercial publishing in India during the nineteenth century has received more attention.² The purpose of this essay therefore is to attempt for the first time an overview of missionary publishing. It examines the publishing landscape of nineteenth-century India into which Christian literature intruded, the scale and scope of the works produced, the problems surrounding their preparation, the methods used for their distribution, and some aspects of their reception by the Indian population.

The main sources used for this study were a representative sample of the annual reports of the various Christian organizations working in the region, evangelical periodicals published both in Britain and India, and the proceedings of the periodic interdenominational conferences in which the state of Indian Christian publishing was regularly reviewed. Such evidence provided by the "biased lenses" of the missionaries themselves must be treated with great caution, as has rightly been pointed out,³ not least on account of their eagerness to hype up the success of Christian endeavour in the region for purposes of fund-raising at home. Nevertheless, some missionaries, perturbed by the failure of Christian literature to produce the "step-change" in conversion expected from the widespread deployment of the printing press, were able to display a capacity for self-criticism.

Missionary Publishing and Government

Like all other aspects of missionaries' operations, publishing was ultimately dependent upon how far government was prepared to tolerate or preferred to restrict their activities. Ostensibly the insertion of the "pious clause" into

the East India Company's charter at its 1813 renewal removed its previous ban on missionary operations in British India. But the relationship between Christian missionaries and the British government in India remained ambiguous and uneasy throughout most of the nineteenth century, as a number of recent studies have explored.⁴ Official attitudes towards their activities varied over time and from region to region, but restrictions of various kinds continued as government concerns for security and social stability overrode any propensity to assist the Christianization of the Indian population. In line with Government's policy of "religious neutrality," the circulation of Christian tracts that would outrage Hindu or Muslim sensibilities was suppressed. One of the earliest examples of this was in 1807, when the Baptist missionary William Carey was obliged by the Governor-General Lord Minto to withdraw a Persian pamphlet abusive of the Prophet Muhammad printed at the Serampore Mission Press.⁵

The Publishing Landscape of Nineteenth-Century India

In the metropolitan centres of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, if not in smaller towns and villages, nineteenth-century India was awash with books of all kinds. The products of the burgeoning indigenous presses jostled for attention with works exported to India by British publishers and booksellers, who saw the subcontinent as a lucrative colonial market in the educational and leisure-reading spheres.⁶ For the Christian missionaries, the stage was set for a moral "battle of the books," the written equivalents of the public theological debates between Christian missionaries and Muslim scholars in north India, in which Christianity's weak-spot—its confusing textual tradition—was often forensically exposed.⁷ The nineteenth century was a period of tremendous literary creativity and innovation in all the regional languages, including the adoption and adaptation of forms such as the newspaper, magazine, and novel, as part of India's overall cultural revival. This was accompanied by an explosion in indigenous publishing, particularly following the 1835 Press Act which led to widespread Indian ownership of presses. From the Christian missionaries, even more than from the British administrators, the output of these presses drew blanket scorn and denigration. Out of a potent brew of intellectual arrogance, religious prejudice, and large-scale ignorance, Indian publishing was sweepingly dismissed as lacking all merit. Writer after writer condemned the "immoral character" of literature in the regional languages: Hindu works

were particularly condemned for celebrating lewdness and Islamic works for perpetuating superstition. Witness James Edward Payne of the London Missionary Society, an editor of Bengali Christian works for the Calcutta Tract and Book Society:

Current Bengali literature consists largely of poetry, dramas, and fiction, and there is very little that is not licentious; probably not one in twenty of these works is fit to be read. Twenty years ago a writer said, “There are for sale in the Calcutta bazaar pamphlets written for the express purpose of reducing bestiality to a systematic theory. Had we not seen them we could not have believed in their existence.” To this day this kind of vile trash circulates everywhere, and acts as a deterrent to Bengali gentlemen in the matter of educating their daughters. It is moreover becoming a formidable obstacle to the progress of the pure gospel of salvation: for when education has loosened caste and superstition, the vile produce of the low presses of Calcutta excites levity and encourages vice. If other parts of India are afflicted with such polluting rubbish as Bengal is, then surely the time has come for missionaries generally to lay the matter before the Supreme Government and pray for the just punishment of all, whether writers, printers, or booksellers, who get their living by issuing immoral and corrupting literature.⁸

As well as the texts of orthodox Hinduism and Islam, a more subtle challenge was presented by the works of certain new movements. Published largely in English, they were more likely to appeal to the better educated and influential strata of Indian society. For instance, the reformist brand of Hinduism known as the Brahmo Samaj, active from the late 1820s, was felt with its emphasis on monotheism to be a welcome “halfway house” towards Christianity, but it also had the potential to confuse progressive Indian mentality. The anti-Christian stance of the Theosophical Society with its publications urging Hindus to rediscover the pure roots of Hinduism in the Vedas represented a similar threat to the conversion project. As the Rev. John Hewlett of the London Missionary Society, Benares, told the second decennial missionary conference in 1882

However thankful we should feel at the partial Christian light shining through the writings with which members of the Brahmo Samaj are flooding the country, yet zeal

for the salvation of the precious souls of the Hindus should kindle a holy determination within those who have the ability and the opportunity, to scatter judicious writings over the country. . . . It is true that English is the language in which most of the literary works of this body is both poured forth by its members and ably dealt with by missionaries. But the influence of this literature extends widely amongst the vernacular speaking peoples, and presents a powerful call to us to correct its errors and supply its deficiency by shedding upon it the full light of Christian truth. Then again the subtle and rapidly spreading mischief wrought to our Saviour's kingdom by the writings of the theosophists demands to be followed up by a prompt exposure from the pen of vernacular Christian scholars. What wonder that the minds of Hindus should be bewitched with a system which tells them that all true religion is contained in their adored ancient Vedas? How opportune are those writings which shew them that the Vedas contain only broken rays of truth, which find their completion and consummation in the Gospel of Christ.⁹

The missionaries did not object to the educational texts being imported from Britain, using them to supplement the books which they printed themselves for their schools. Their complaint as regards school-books was against the British Government in India's policy of showing tolerance towards all religions. This forbade the use of Christian texts in Government-funded schools, while allowing into the curriculum (in the missionaries' opinion) "immoral" Islamic and Hindu works from Persian, Sanskrit, Tamil, and other literatures. The books imported to cater to the leisure-reading tastes of Europeans in India and the growing number of English-educated Indians were regarded by the missionaries as largely deplorable. The English classics had a fair sale "probably because they are supposed to be good aids in acquiring a knowledge of the language," but it was the more popular novels which held sway. It was with some sense of relief, therefore, that John Murdoch, Travelling Secretary of the Christian Vernacular Education Society, reported a drop in demand for the works of the prolific novelist George W. M. Reynolds in 1893: "Formerly Reynolds was considered the 'Prince of Novelists.' His writings had nearly as large a circulation as those of all the other works of fiction taken together; but their sale has fallen off considerably."¹⁰ Murdoch especially disapproved of the influx of French

novels into India and the ease with which they could be purchased at A. H. Wheeler's network of outlets at the stations along India's expanding railway network:

One firm claims to have made a speciality for their Indian Railway Bookstalls of translations from French novels. Those of Zola have been forbidden to be sold, but they are said to be procurable in other quarters. Books describing the dark shades of European life are popular with some.¹¹

The final, and perhaps most potent threat within India's publishing landscape was secularist or "infidel" literature. As early as 1848 James Long noted that American publishers had sent hundreds of copies of Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *The Age of Reason*, to Calcutta.¹² The works of contemporary authors such as the American free-thinker Robert Ingersoll and the English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer were also widely imported from Britain, America, and even Australia. Freethought journals sprang up in India itself, such as the *Philosophic Inquirer* at Madras and the *Anti-Christian* at Calcutta. The availability of such publications rendered the missionaries' condemnation of India's religions as outdated modes of thinking fraught with danger. Potential converts could easily conclude that Christianity was similarly a 'creed of the past' and adopt secularism instead as the modern man's creed:

A few years ago, a vigorous effort was made to circulate infidel literature. Madras had two "Free-Thought Depots." There seems less of it now; but, under an innocent title, a pernicious book, advocating free thought and free love, is kept on sale in all the great cities. Though publications of the Ingersoll type may not be so widely diffused as before, it is to be feared that this does not apply to the works of writers like Herbert Spencer and others. The idea is very general among educated Hindus that Christianity has been given up by enlightened men in Europe.¹³

The missionaries also considered the creation of a large body of literature imbued with Christian values, apart from aiding conversion to Christianity, important for the reform and uplift of Indian society in general. These books should be "at once interesting and instructive. All of them should be written in a Christian spirit, though in many cases they may not be directly

religious in their character.”¹⁴ There could be no let-up in the constant battle against what was perceived as the moral turpitude of popular publishing. Even at the end of the century, the need to provide more in the way of improving literature was felt as keenly as ever, and the same complaint against regional-language literatures was as shrill, with the pernicious influence of the novel being particularly castigated:

The book in the home may do much good or infinite harm. Part of the training of a girl who is to be sold to a life of immorality, as many a girl in certain half gipsy tribes in South India is sold, is learning to sing songs of grossest impurity in her own language. Such songs and poems are poison. But they may be bought for a farthing or two at the book-shop in the bazar street or of the wandering book-hawker. Mere denunciation of such publications is generally useless, and convictions for publishing obscene literature are difficult to secure, though its existence is well-known. Beside this essentially bad literature there is a comparatively new class of book—the vernacular “*Nawal*.” For some years in Bengali and Urdu and more recently in Tamil there has been much translating, adapting and writing of novels in the vernacular by men who are not Christians. Some of these books are healthy. Some of them are not. In one that I read recently the villain of the piece was a Christian Bible-woman. Perhaps this is only to be expected. Certainly here again denunciation is useless. Evil must be overcome by good. To keep bad poems and harmful stories out of the homes of the people, especially out of the homes of Christians, we must give them better books.¹⁵

The Scope and Scale of Indian Christian Publishing

Although Indian Christian literature dates back to the Tamil works published by Jesuits in the 1570s, the heyday of missionary publishing in the subcontinent was the nineteenth century. It was almost entirely a Protestant phenomenon and increased all century long, from the hand presses of the British Baptist Serampore Mission at its beginning to the machine presses of the American Methodist Episcopal Church at its end. For most of the century, on average twenty-five mission presses were in operation in India. The various societies acknowledged that the number of missionaries they

could deploy at any one time would never be adequate for their overall ambition to convert India's entire population. They therefore literally put their faith in the supernatural power of the printed Word to achieve what we might term "biblio-conversion," that is, conversion through the private reading and study of Christian texts, as expressed by Albert Charles Clayton, Secretary to the Board for Tamil Christian Literature:

Preacher or teacher can only be heard by a few. The preacher passes on to another village or city, and the student must leave the class-room. Again and again the word spoken is forgotten. While there is no influence so suasive as a powerful personality, in India it is the written word that abides. The Christian book or tract or magazine is a missionary never silent, never weary, never sick, and never needing furlough.¹⁶

The European population in India was too small to raise sufficient funding for missionary publishing on any significant scale, and therefore these activities depended very largely upon money raised in Britain or America by the parent missionary societies. Two prominent players were the Religious Tract Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society who acted in an inter-denominational way, providing annual grants to various groups of Protestant missionaries in India. Relations were not always harmonious: the grants made were often regarded on the ground as wholly inadequate to India's needs. The British and Foreign Bible Society's "iron rules" that its funding could only be used for printing *unannotated* Bible translations caused great frustration. Missionaries in India felt it would have been far better spent funding texts that used simpler terminology and language to elucidate the Bible's message for an Indian audience.

At the centre of publishing activity by all the Protestant missionary societies in India was the translation of the Bible into the regional languages. This reflected their belief in the primacy of the Bible as the source of revealed truth and moral authority and the importance they attached to the constant reading and study of its text. As William Carey, son of the famous father of the same name, put it in 1896

The Bible is electric with God's power. It refuses to be lightly handled. . . . The Bible, as a book, stands apart. Its relation to other books, even to "sacred" books, is that of the sky to the earth—of the sun to the chandelier. . . .

Every sentence is a sunbeam. Every page burns and glows and glorifies. . . . The Bible is alive. A mystic personality pervades it—a living spirit—operating always with Divine might, through the form of words. . . . Unseen hands take the cold type and knead it into life-giving bread, as fine flour is kneaded, and bring it, as bread from the oven is brought and offered to famished men.¹⁷

By 1900 more than a thousand editions of the whole or parts of the Bible had been issued in over 50 Indian languages and dialects. The Serampore missionaries led the way with an ambitious program of translations into many languages, but their versions were superseded by those of missionaries of other societies who became more familiar with the languages of regions outside Bengal. The historian of Indian missions Julius Richter identified two phases in this translation process: the first, lasting roughly until the middle of the century, featured translations by gifted individual linguists; the second, dating from the 1850s onwards, saw translation being conducted more and more by “revision committees” in which missionaries from different societies pooled their linguistic expertise to hone the rendering of the Biblical text.¹⁸

From the outset, however, the missionaries recognized that the distribution of the Bible in translation would not in itself ensure success for the conversion project. Around this “Scripture core” a variety of didactic and expository literature would have to be constructed. As found earlier in Europe, different strategies were needed to make the reading of the Bible by potential converts as effective as possible.¹⁹ This support literature included Biblical commentaries, annotations and paraphrases, explanations and summaries of doctrine, concordances and lexicons, harmonies, chronologies and histories of the Church, devotional works and guides to the Christian life, and narratives such as the lives of role-model converts, down to simplified retellings of selected Bible stories (some designed specifically for children), handbills listing the Ten Commandments, and picture-books for the totally illiterate.

A significant part of the Christian literature produced comprised tracts and books illustrating the perceived “falsehood” of Hinduism and Islam, contrasted with the “truth” of Christianity. By the 1870s, some missionaries

regarded such polemics as hindering rather than helping the growth of an indigenous church. The emphasis should shift towards producing more positive works to nurture and sustain the Christian community, as Theodore Stephen Wynkoop of the American Presbyterian Mission noted:

The controversial branch of Christian literature may be virtually deemed complete; whilst towards the preparation of a literature to meet the growing wants of the Christian Church scarcely more than a beginning has been made. It was natural that the stress of Christian effort should first have been laid upon controversy. The first stage of missionary work is necessarily and almost exclusively controversial. We must break down before we can build anew. . . . But in the following stages of mission work, while controversy does not cease to be important, it gradually yields in importance to the wants of the Church which is growing up. . . . It is through the native Church alone that we can hope to affect the great mass of heathenism.²⁰

One other important new dimension added in the nineteenth century was missionary journalism in the regional languages as well as English. A whole series of magazines and newspapers were published beginning in 1818 with the Bengali monthly *Dig-darshan* and the weekly *Samachar Darpan*—Serampore again providing the pattern for later mission publishing enterprises to emulate. Newspapers were felt to be very useful evangelical vehicles as they had the potential to enjoy a wider circulation than “regular” Christian literature, and news items provided a useful platform to which a Christian perspective or tone could be added in a fairly unforced way. Henry Haigh of the Wesleyan Missionary Society in Mysore, who produced the very successful Kannada newspaper, the *Vrttanta Patrike*, with a weekly circulation of 1,500–2,000 copies, summarized its effectiveness as follows:

Some time ago I went to a village where no missionary had ever been before. After some enquiry I found the head man of the place and sat down to have a chat with him. . . . I asked him if any one in the village could read. “Only one man,” was his reply; “I have engaged a Brahman to teach the boys of the village.” This led me to remark on the advantages of education, if, for nothing else, yet at least for making them acquainted with all that goes on in the world. “Oh, we get to know that. On market days we hear a good deal from different people,

and besides that there is another way. . . . Every Friday evening, about this time, a newspaper comes to our village. . . . When it comes I take it to the schoolmaster and a boy goes round to tell the neighbours. After a while they all come together and sit down under that great tree, as many as thirty or forty. . . . There is an almanac every week, and we always see what are the market prices in Mysore and Bangalore. Then it explains all that the Sirkar [Government] is doing, and sometimes tells the Sirkar that it is making mistakes. . . . It says a great many things about our customs. It is always telling us that idolatry is false and we have great talks about that; and every week there is something about a Great Guru, called Jesus Christ.”²¹

This quotation also illustrates why overall literacy rates did not necessarily unduly hinder the reception of Christian texts. Reading texts aloud to an audience—part of the Indian performance tradition—was still very much alive. For the missionaries’ work on the ground, it only required a single person such as a schoolmaster with the ability to read for the Christian message to be communicated to the entire population of a village.

The scale of the output of all the mission presses in India during the nineteenth century was truly prodigious. It is impossible to estimate with any accuracy, although specimen statistics can be found in abundance. For instance, between 1838 and 1848 the three most important tract societies at Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras brought out over four million volumes; between 1852 and 1861 all the mission presses combined published nearly seven million volumes; between 1891 and 1900 the various tract societies together issued 53.5 million volumes.²² The best “guestimate” at total production during the century therefore might lie between 80 and 100 million volumes. For the number of Christian works composed in each Indian language, John Murdoch’s 1870 survey listed over 3,600 titles in 30 languages, including English. The quantity of material prepared in each language varied enormously, reflecting the different scale and longevity of missionary activity in each region of India. The leading position of Tamil Christian literature with 1,000 works and almost 500 in the other Dravidian languages was due to the continuity of missionary operations in south India from the early eighteenth century onwards. The over 600 Urdu and Hindi

titles were attributable to the plethora of missionary societies operating across the northern Indian plains in the nineteenth century.²³

Problems of Creation and Manufacture of Indian Christian Literature

The greatest challenge facing every new missionary in India was learning the local language or languages. Without a grasp of at least the predominant vernacular, he would never become an effective preacher in the bazaar or a successful teacher in the mission school. Even an impressive mastery of colloquial language was not enough to make a missionary a writer of original material. Some knowledge of Indian literary style and idiom was also necessary to produce material with Indian reader appeal, and few missionaries possessed that. Moreover the day-to-day routine of missionary duties all too often left little time for literary pursuits. As the experienced reviser of the Kannada Bible, Henry Haigh rather ruefully reflected

Missionaries as a rule are so placed that they have no leisure to write books; the literary instinct, where it existed, dies of inevitable repression, and the literary habit fails. What books do issue are produced under the strong pressure of some momentary necessity. They are born in a day and—live for a day. They come at the urgent desire of a committee, rather than from an inward impulse that will not be denied expression. The result is plain. Our literature lacks breadth, strength and form.²⁴

Only rarely was a missionary with recognized literary talent relieved of other duties to devote his time completely to writing or translating. To fast-track the creation of a body of Christian literature in Indian languages, the missionaries adopted a parasitic approach. They reprinted, adapted, or translated titles already published by other tract societies within India or by parent societies such as the Religious Tract Society and the American Tract Society. Despite the best endeavours of those missionaries with a literary bent, it was increasingly acknowledged that a truly Indian Christian literature would only emerge once Indian Christians began writing works themselves, with all the advantages of working from within Indian linguistic, literary, and wider cultural traditions. This process, some more pessimistic missionaries thought, might take a few generations, but some Indian Christian writers were already successful during the nineteenth century, such as Imad-ud-Din

Lahiz in Urdu, Baba Padmanji in Marathi, and Lal Behari Dey in Bengali. To draw out and encourage latent talent, several missionary bodies including the American Marathi Mission in Bombay and the North India Tract Society at Allahabad imitated the British Government in India's initiative of offering prizes for original "good" works in the local languages.

Most mission presses aimed to be self-sufficient in materials, establishing type-foundries and binderies alongside their printing operations, rather than having to rely on supplies from Britain or America with all the hazards of transportation by sea. Mission presses also proved a useful source of employment for Indian Christians. In the case of types, for many Indian scripts it was not possible to obtain supplies from Britain, although professional typesetters such as Vincent Figgins of London had begun to produce some Indian fonts. Mission presses had perforce to be pioneers in the development of Indian typefaces, the best-known example being the Serampore Mission Press which, when its printing-office was almost totally destroyed by fire in 1812, possessed fonts for printing 14 different Indian languages.²⁵ One material above all proved continually vexatious: paper for printing. In the absence of good local sources of rags, attempts by missionaries to establish European-style paper-mills were not very successful. Locally manufactured varieties of "country paper" were found unsuitable for taking inked impressions, so mission presses generally depended upon paper supplies donated by societies in Europe and America, leading to frequent interruptions and delays in production. The British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society regularly sent supplies to presses which they had commissioned to print off new editions of Bibles or tracts in Indian languages.

Later in the century, some missionary societies became disenchanted with their printing operations in India. The impression increasingly formed that they had over-expanded, in some cases for instance raising revenue by jobbing printing totally unconnected with their original evangelical purpose. They were absorbing too many financial and staff resources to the detriment of the principal missionary activities of preaching and teaching. The first serious review of mission presses in India was undertaken by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in the mid-1850s. As a result their printing program in India was significantly cut back and more emphasis placed on missionaries' working through the spoken rather than

the written Word. In other cases, mission stations outsourced their printing to local commercial presses, as this was often a cheaper option than maintaining their own presses.

Once printed off, stocks of new publications had to be brought together from different mission presses into locations where they could be stored until required. For this purpose, networks of mission book depots were established across India, principally by the local auxiliary bodies of the Religious Tract Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. The North India Tract Society, for example, opened its principal depository at Agra in 1847, “a single room of 21 feet by 41 inside, and nearly 20 feet high. It is fitted with four large racks for bookshelves reaching nearly to the roof,”²⁶ which supplied stock to over twenty smaller branch depots (at Lahore, Saharanpur, Meerut, Mainpuri, Allahabad, Almora, Varanasi, etc.). In 1864 the Ludhiana depository of the American Presbyterian Mission housed 161,722 Christian volumes in Hindi, Urdu, and Panjabi, ranging from translations of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to handbills of the Ten Commandments.²⁷

After preparation and manufacture, there remained the crucial but laborious task of getting Christian literature into the hands and homes of potential converts. Many missionaries took no part in distribution themselves, setting an unhelpful example to reluctant converts who considered the selling of books a lowly, unworthy occupation. Notable exceptions were the highly successful English Baptist Thomas Evans in north India and the American Methodist Arthur Prautch in the south, but John Murdoch was not alone in his concern that mission stations overall did not give enough priority to circulating tracts and books:

Let us not put these lights under a bushel or hide them away on the mouldy shelves of the publisher’s shop or of the missionary’s book case. . . . A good book is a John the Baptist going before the master with the universal cry of “prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” and woe be to that missionary, Herod Antipas, who would deliberately imprison this forerunner in a book case or behead its influence by refusing to send it forth. . . . In India, as far as vernacular books are concerned, when peddling them ceases it is time to stop the rattle of the types and close the press and write over

the door: “To let as an undertaker’s shop or a tombstone manufactory.”²⁸

The Channels of Distribution for Christian Literature

We can divide the channels of distribution used by Christian missionaries in India into three categories: those requiring individual action, those represented by institutions, and those exploiting new communications. The first and most regularly used method was missionary itineration. Tracts and gospels would routinely be distributed after preaching not only in chapels but also in local bazaars and outside places of non-Christian worship—Hindu, Jain, or Zoroastrian temples, Sikh gurdwaras, and mosques. During the cold season, travelling was easier and the missionaries undertook more wide-ranging tours, systematically visiting towns and villages in the area surrounding their station with supplies of Christian literature packed under the mattresses in their bullock-carts. More provocatively, the missionaries plugged into the annual cycle of Indian religious festivals and pilgrimages. Such events attracted huge crowds of people who could be approached all at once, and the books and tracts distributed would be carried home by pilgrims, the missionaries hoped, far beyond any area they could ever physically cover themselves. For instance, the Baptist missionary J. T. Thompson in 1827 handing out tracts in the holy city of Haridwar envisaged that those in Kashmiri would be carried north, those in Nepali east-north-east, those in Panjabi and Pashto northwest, those in Bikaneri west, and those in Marwari and Gujarati south-south-west.²⁹

Although the missionaries were generally disappointed at the indifference of Europeans in India towards evangelism, there were some sympathetic individuals who were prepared to distribute tracts. For instance, in 1832 the Calcutta Christian Instruction Society was established specifically to evangelize the servants in European households:

The servants of nearly ninety families are assembled by four readers every week, and nearly *nine hundred* native servants thus have their attention drawn to the truths of the Gospel weekly for about an hour. One of the readers at preset employed was himself a native servant in Calcutta, brought to the knowledge of the truth by the means he now uses for the benefit of others.³⁰

Some committed evangelicals among the East India Company's military chaplains and officers ignored the government prohibition on attempting to convert Indian soldiers (sepoys) to pursue an unofficial agenda of proselytization. A Colonel Colin Mackenzie, for example, at Barrackpur in the 1850s even forced the regimental munshi to study the Urdu Bible with him.³¹ The missionaries themselves tracked the movements of regiments in the East India Company's armies in the hope that, between periods of active service, sepoys, like pilgrims, would take tracts back to their distant home villages.

At first, indiscriminate free distribution of Christian publications was the norm. But, over time aware of misuse and waste, missionaries became more discriminating in their distribution, quizzing recipients about their ability to read and trying to assess their spiritual desire. Greater discrimination in giving Christian texts away led to the principle of free circulation being questioned altogether. The American Robert Wilson Hume, secretary of the Bombay Tract Society, is usually credited with successfully introducing charging about 1850. This move was not prompted primarily by a desire for cost recovery (indeed prices were always set well below the initial outlay of production) but from a growing conviction that Indians could not respect a religion which gave away its sacred books so lightly. By free distribution Christianity was demeaning itself. Once charging for all Christian literature—except for simple handbills—had been accepted, other channels of distribution could be brought into use. Circulation would no longer depend on missionaries or their Indian converts being willing to devote time to this activity. Full-time professional colporteurs (travelling book-hawkers) could be and were employed by almost all missionary societies operating in India, often but not always Indian Christians themselves. One great advantage was that, being full-time, colporteurs could cover a far wider geographical area than the missionaries themselves and therefore deliver the Christian message in printed form to a much larger audience. But colportage was not uniformly successful. Ensuring that proper accounts of sales were kept was difficult,³² and it was not easy to succeed in charging communities for items which they had become accustomed to receiving for free. Bible-women—sometimes the wives of colporteurs—also sold Christian literature while teaching English to Indian women in their home quarters of the zenana.

Foremost among the institutional channels the missionaries exploited were the numerous mission schools which they established, for which primers and other text-books incorporating Christian teachings were prepared and printed. In this way, not only would the schoolchildren themselves be taught the fundamentals of the Christian faith but potentially a whole family, as the school books were taken home and read aloud to parents and other relatives. In conjunction often with their schools, the missionaries opened libraries and reading rooms where their own printed items could be consulted alongside Christian literature imported from Europe. For instance, by the mid-1830s the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge had a modest network of 15 lending libraries across north India from Landour to Chittagong. The reading-room of the Religious Book Society at Meerut subscribed to the *Dublin Christian Examiner* and the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor* as well as *the Madras Christian Observer* and the *Bombay Oriental Spectator*.³³

Attempts to use the existing commercial book trade to distribute Christian literature proved very difficult because the low prices put on their publications meant that missionary bodies could not offer booksellers enough of a discount to excite their interest. Not surprisingly, therefore, some missionary bodies decided to establish their own permanent bookshops at their larger stations, such as the American mission in the south Indian temple-town of Madurai in 1839.³⁴ A more widespread practice was to set up temporary mission bookstalls at religious fairs and places of pilgrimage, such as Ethel Pantin of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society at the Makar Sankranti festival on Sagar Island, the confluence of the river Ganges and the Bay of Bengal: “We bought some of the dried-leaf screens that the people use, and had a little booth put up, and opened a book-shop. . . . We sold over 300 portions of Scripture.”³⁵ In the earlier part of the century, missionaries such as those at Serampore routinely visited jails to offer Christian literature to inmates, and in 1822 the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge donated Bibles, prayer-books and tracts to prisons in Calcutta.³⁶ Patients waiting on the verandahs of mission hospitals and dispensaries to receive treatment represented a different kind of “captive” audience to whom Christian materials were often distributed.

Finally, the missionaries were quick to appreciate the potential of India’s rapidly expanding railway system to assist the circulation of Christian

literature. In 1893 George Taylor reported the Bombay, Baroda & Central Indian Railway's cooperation with his Irish Presbyterian Mission:

In recent times we have been able to dispose of a very considerable number of tracts at railway stations. Through the kindness of the Traffic Manager of the B. B. & C. I. Railway free platform passes have been granted to some of our colporteurs, who now meet most of the trains at the large stations of Surat, Broach, Baroda, Anand, and Ahmedabad. The enormous increase in passenger traffic makes this department of tract circulation singularly encouraging, and by this agency seeds of truth are being scattered far and wide over vast stretches of country.³⁷

Aspects of Reception

From the missionaries' perspective, accepting a Christian book or tract marked the first step on the road to conversion. Ideally the recipient would then read and re-read the text and, interest aroused, make an effort to obtain more Christian literature. Repeated reading would raise questions about the Christian message and he would seek out a missionary to answer them and provide a correct interpretation of the text. Further reading and private study would follow, leading to more regular discussion with a missionary to deepen his understanding of Christian doctrine. Once he professed his faith in Christ, this would have to be tested and retested to a missionary's satisfaction. Only then would he be deemed ready to be baptized and formally welcomed into the Christian community. All this was a comparatively rigorous and long drawn-out process, in stark contrast to the "shallow," "instant" conversions of which the Protestants continually accused the Roman Catholic Church in India.

Although it is difficult to find first-hand accounts from within Indian religious communities of how Christian books and tracts were received, the missionaries' own publications provide much indirect evidence. Not surprisingly these brim with reports of "biblio-conversion," of which this is an especially bizarre example:

There is a story of a profane cobbler who one day received a little tract from the hands of a pious tract distributor, as he was in the act of mending a shoe. As

soon as he saw the character of the publication, he folded it up, tucked it in between the inner and outer soles of the shoe and securely pegged it in; remarking as he did so, with an oath, that he had effectually disposed of *that* tract. And so he had. Many days after the sole of the shoe again wore off, and somebody found the tract. The finder read it, and was converted by means of so doing.³⁸

But by the missionaries' own admission, their attempts at distribution encountered as much hostility as favour. There was a widespread belief among Hindus that Christian texts were sources of ritual pollution and many, therefore, refused even to touch such a volume. People were also fearful that Christian works might contain magic spells to convert the unsuspecting reader against his will, schoolchildren being especially at risk in this way. Brahmin priests would also threaten any who read Christian works with exclusion from worship in their local temple.³⁹ Muslim leaders could place similar reading bans on their communities, as encountered by Thomas Hughes of the Church Missionary Society:

With regard to existing vernacular works on the Muhammadan controversy, I regret to say that in our Peshawar Mission we find it impossible to distribute them for it is said that the great religious leader of the day, the Akhund of Swat, has placed an interdiction upon the reading of Christian books.⁴⁰

More violently, tracts and books would be snatched away to be burnt, or torn up in front of the missionaries' eyes and the leaves strewn upon their heads, as happened to the Scottish missionary John Wilson at Ratnagiri in 1837.⁴¹ These reactions were usually, in the missionaries' opinion, orchestrated by Brahmin priests.

Apart from outright rejection, Christian works were frequently taken away for a variety of unforeseen purposes. Many missionaries all too easily misinterpreted the eagerness with which their books and tracts were sought. Their audience was acting not out of a craving for the spiritual message they contained but for the raw material on which they were printed—the precious commodity of good-quality paper. Books were taken for direct resale to waste-paper merchants and their bindings used to cover Muslim manuscripts.⁴² Children found large handbills of the Ten Commandments an ideal size for making their fighting kites. Wandering through the bazaar,

missionaries sometimes came upon leaves from Christian works being used for wrapping medicines, or even as wrappers for fireworks to be lit at the Muslim festival of Shab-I Qadr when Allah revealed the Qur'an's first verses to the Prophet Muhammad.⁴³ Most worryingly, those who expressed an interest in the Bible sometimes only did so in order to be able to attack its textual tradition, as the American Presbyterian Jesse Jamieson experienced at Ambala in 1849:

A blind Hafiz obtained a Persian New Testament, and a copy of the Psalms, which he had read to him so frequently by one of his disciples, that he committed to memory many portions of them, and could repeat them with readiness. This he did, however, for the purpose of convincing me our Bible is spurious; but the truth may yet take root in his heart.⁴⁴

Feeling threatened by Christian evangelism, the other religious communities in India were not slow to adopt print in their own defence. They turned the missionaries' own methods against them. As John Hewlett of the London Missionary Society remarked in 1882, "the powerful engine of the press which we have put into the hands of the people is being vigorously wielded to support and further rival systems."⁴⁵ Hindus, Brahmo Samajists, Muslims, Jains and Sikhs all founded their own presses to print religious books and tracts, including some which were pointedly anti-Christian. For instance, the Hindu reform movement, the Arya Samaj, published a polemical Hindi work entitled *Isu-pariksha* ("An examination of Jesus"), mimicking the *Ram-pariksha* printed earlier by the missionaries in defamation of the Hindu god.⁴⁶ Some religious presses enjoyed the patronage of local rulers such as Hamid Ali Khan, Nawab of the princely state of Rampur, who "has laid out several thousand rupees in lithographing the Koran, and distributing it gratuitously among the followers of his faith."⁴⁷ Non-Christian tract societies were formed, employing their own colporteurs, notably in north India the Society for the Defence of Islam and in the south the Hindu Tract Society founded at Madras in 1887 by the Gujarati Brahmin R. Sivasankara Pandiah. His Hindu Triumph tract series opened with *One Hundred and Fifty Contradictions of the Bible*. A popular Muslim tract widely distributed in Calcutta in 1881 was entitled *A Bundle of Sticks for the Backs of Christian Donkeys*.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most effective publications against the encroachment of Christianity were the newspapers and magazines which were widely read,

including the Brahmo Samaj's *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, the Muslim *Munshi-i Muhammadiyah*, and the Arya Samaj's *Arya Patrika*.

Faced with this powerful counter-offensive, the Christian missionaries fought on, subjecting their own publications to detailed scrutiny to identify ways to improve their effectiveness as agents of conversion. For instance, they placed greater emphasis on visual appeal—printing small tracts on coloured papers and including more illustrations—and generally designing their books according to an Indian rather than an “Anglo-Saxon” aesthetic. They adopted literary genres familiar to Indian readers such as almanacs to disguise the Christian nature of their works and “borrowed” traditional Indian titles such as “The Light of Wisdom” and “The Jewel Mine of Salvation.” Christian hymns were composed that were more akin to Hindu *bhajans* (devotional songs), making them suitable for public performance that was such an enduringly popular Indian tradition.

As the century wore on, the Christian community increased broadly in line with India's population as a whole, but in 1901 still represented just one per cent of the total of 295 million. The creation of a Christian community of almost three million may be regarded as a not inconsiderable achievement numerically, but by the missionaries' own vaunting ambitions for the wholesale conversion of India this represented a bitter disappointment. Printed Christian literature had certainly played a central role in inspiring, facilitating, and sustaining conversion. But it had equally impacted on the other religious communities, leading them to adopt print to counter the missionaries' incursions. In the slow battle of the books, Christian print now faced formidable opponents of its own creation.

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Notes

¹ Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 229–51, and Geoff A. Oddie, "Anti-Missionary Feeling and Hindu Revivalism in Madras: The Hindu Preaching and Tract Societies, c. 1886–1891," in *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia*, ed. Fred W. Clothey (Madras: New Era Publications, 1982), 228–43.

² For instance, Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), and Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009).

³ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778–1905* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006), 166–68.

⁴ For instance, Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), and Penelope Carson, "An Imperial Dilemma: The Propagation of Christianity in Early Colonial India," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 18, no. 2 (1990): 169–90.

⁵ Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698–1858* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012), 90–91.

⁶ See Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 35–92 (Chapter 2 "The Circulation of Fiction in Indian Libraries, ca. 1835–1901").

⁷ See Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond: Curzon, 1993).

⁸ John Murdoch ed., *Report of the General Missionary Conference, Held at Allahabad, 1872–73* (London: Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1873), 414–45.

⁹ George Henry Rouse ed., *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference Held at Calcutta, 1882–83* (Calcutta: Christian Literature Society, 1883), 342.

¹⁰ Alfred Manwaring ed., *Report of the Third Decennial Missionary Conference Held at Bombay, 1892–93*, vol. 2 (Bombay: Education Society's Steam Press, 1893), 675.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 675–76.

¹² James Long, *History of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in Bengal, from 1814 to 1847* (Calcutta: S. P. C. K., 1848), 32.

¹³ Alfred Manwaring, *Report of the Third Decennial Missionary Conference*, 676.

¹⁴ *Christian Vernacular Education Society for India, Fourth Annual Report* (1862): 39.

¹⁵ Albert Charles Clayton, *Preachers in Print: An Outline of the Work of the Christian Literature Society for India* (London: Christian Literature Society for India, [1914]), 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ *The Indian Evangelical Review* 23, no. 89 (1896): 223–24.

¹⁸ Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India* (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1908), 287–93.

¹⁹ Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 100.

²⁰ John Murdoch, *Report of the General Missionary Conference, Held at Allahabad*, 397.

²¹ Alfred Manwaring, *Report of the Third Decennial Missionary Conference*, 735–36.

²² Joseph Mullens, *A Brief Review of Ten Years' Missionary Labour in India Between 1852 and 1861* (London: James Nisbet, 1863), 163.

²³ John Murdoch, *Catalogue of the Christian Vernacular Literature of India* (Madras: Caleb Foster, 1870), ii.

²⁴ Alfred Manwaring, *Report of the Third Decennial Missionary Conference*, 665.

²⁵ *Monthly Circular Letters, Relative to the Missions in India* 6 (1813): 5.

²⁶ *Second Report of the North India Bible Society Auxiliary to the British and Foreign Bible for the Year 1847* (1848): 10.

²⁷ Folded table appended to *The Thirtieth Annual Report of the Lodianna Mission* (1865).

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- ²⁸ John Murdoch, *The Indian Missionary Manual: Or, Hints to Young Missionaries in India*, 2nd ed. revised, (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1870), 462.
- ²⁹ *Periodical Accounts of the Serampore Mission* New Series 1 (1834): 46.
- ³⁰ John Murdoch, *The Indian Missionary Manual*, 462.
- ³¹ See Nile Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 72–75.
- ³² See John Murdoch, *Review of Colportage in India During 1873; With Suggestions for its Improvement*, (Madras: Foster and Co. 1874).
- ³³ James Long, *Hand-Book of Bengal Missions, in Connexion with the Church of England* (London: John Farquhar Shaw, 1848), 30; *The Calcutta Christian Observer* 1 (1832): 259.
- ³⁴ *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirtieth Annual Meeting* (1839): 109.
- ³⁵ *India's Women* 12, no. 68 (1892): 69.
- ³⁶ Reported in *The Christian Observer* 22 (1824): 816.
- ³⁷ Alfred Manwaring, *Report of the Third Decennial Missionary Conference*, 706.
- ³⁸ *The Indian Evangelical Review* 2 no. 7 (1875): 350.
- ³⁹ *Report on Colportage in the Methodist Episcopal Church Mission, U. S. A. in India for the Year 1866* (1867): 23–24; *The Fifth Report of the German Mission, in the Canara, Southern Mabratta, and Malabar Provinces* (1845): 11.
- ⁴⁰ John Murdoch and Augustus Brodhead, eds., *Conference on Urdu and Hindi Christian Literature, Held at Allahabad, 24th and 25th February, 1875* (Madras: Christian Vernacular Education Society, 1875), 22.
- ⁴¹ *Report of the Bombay Auxiliary Church of Scotland's Mission Society, for M.DCCC.XXXVII* (1838): 23.
- ⁴² John Murdoch and Augustus Brodhead, *Conference on Urdu and Hindi Christian literature*, 33; *Third Report of the North India Bible Society Auxiliary to the British and Foreign Bible for the Year 1848* (1849): 14.
- ⁴³ John Murdoch, *Hints on the Management of Tract Societies in India* (London: printed for the compiler, 1870), 53–54; J. G. Driberg, *Report on the Nurbudda Mission* (Calcutta: Bishop's College Press, 1847), xli–xlii; *Indian Evangelical Review* 13, no. 49 (1886): 163.
- ⁴⁴ *Fourth Report of the North India Bible Society Auxiliary to the British and Foreign Bible for the Year 1849* (1850): 20.

⁴⁵ George Henry Rouse ed., *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference*, 341–42.

⁴⁶ *The Missionary Herald* (1 January 1887), 29.

⁴⁷ Robert George Hobbes, *Reminiscences of Seventy Years' Life, Travel, and Adventure; Military and Civil; Scientific and Literary*, vol. 1 (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), 290.

⁴⁸ Sundararaj Manickam, "Hindu Reaction to Missionary Activities in the Negapatam and Trichinopoly District of the Methodists 1870–1920," *Indian Church History Review* 15, no. 2 (1981): 87; *India's Women* 5, no. 26 (1885): 102.

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