



Translation as Cultural Transaction: The Establishment of the Bramha Samaj in Mangalore

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Abstract: This paper attempts to unravel the complex transactions that go into the enterprise of colonial and missionary translation, through a reading of a particular historical moment in the genealogy of the Brahma Samaj, namely the event of the establishment of a branch of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The archival history of the arrival of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore is simultaneously a history of the complexity of religious translations as well as the history of the migration of a socio-religious reform movement of nineteenth century India. It indicates to us that the enterprise of translating religions across cultures results in unanticipated intersections of faith traditions which advertently or inadvertently reshape cultural and personal practices of being. It also tells us that exchanges across, and translations of, religions are organized within and inscribed by networks of power and shaped by historically specific social aspirations. Ultimately it undermines our understanding of religion as a trans-historical category and disaggregates the present commonsense of religion as a fairly stable, recognizable and institutionally structured organization of belief with its system of ethical norms and worship practices shared across a community of believers which can be translated and has been transmitted across cultures and histories.

Keywords: *colonial, brahma samaj, translation*

British colonisation of India led to a whole range of complex and difficult cultural transactions between various groups of people. A large number of Protestant evangelical societies also came to India during this period. In an attempt to make indigenous social, religious and political practices pervious and legible to the colonial gaze the colonial government embarked on a massive project of translation. This was a two-way process and took place through, and within the institutional structures brought into being by colonialism, such as the judiciary, the school

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

and the colonial administrative system. On the one hand the alien culture of the colonizing power had to be translated in such a way that not only could it be projected as the marker of a superior civilization but this projected superiority would also be acceded to by the indigenous peoples. On the other hand, colonization required the translation of indigenous cultures and practices of being, as an adjunct and aid to colonial rule. Simultaneously there was a missionary attempt at translating Christianity to the indigenous communities and making the indigenous faith practices legible to the missionary gaze. The enterprise of colonial and missionary translation intersected with each other at various points while also diverging from each other at several other points. Both were dependent on the skills and services of indigenous translators and were inflected by the social location of these intermediaries and their location within the relational and shifting networks of power through which they were bound to their colonial employers and missionary mentors. Both missionary and colonial translations of themselves were very often retranslated in the process of their indigenous receptions and their appropriations through and within the indigenous contexts of reception.

My paper attempts to unravel the complex transactions that go into the enterprise of colonial and missionary translation, through a reading of a particular historical moment in the genealogy of the Brahma Samaj, namely the *event* of the establishment of a branch of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore in the latter half of the nineteenth century. An influential socio religious reform movement of the nineteenth century the Brahma Samaj emerged at the cusp of British colonial and Protestant missionary presence in India. Though the Protestant colonial government officially distanced itself from the Protestant missionary societies that came to India during its rule, Christian evangelism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and colonial rule were imbricated with each other in subtle ways. Formally established on the 20th of August 1828 as the Brahma Sabha, by Raja Ram Mohan Roy the Brahma Samaj was the hybrid offspring of Christian Unitarianism, Islamic monotheism and its rejection of images and idols, and Brahminic Hinduism. These influences were reflected in the weekly divine service of the Brahma Sabha which was congregational in character and without any symbol or image or sacrifice. The Vedas were given the status of its Scripture though the right to read and interpret

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

it was sanctioned only to Brahmins. Manilal C Parekh in his history of the Brahma Samaj describes the service of the Brahma Sabha as follows,

The service begins with two or three of the Pandits singing or chanting in the cathedral style, some of the spiritual portions of the Veda, which are next explained in the vernacular dialect to the people by another Pundit. This is followed by a discourse in Bengali and the whole is concluded by hymns both in Sanskrit and Bengali, sung with the voice and accompanied by instrumental music, which is also occasionally interposed between other parts of the service. ...

...A special feature of this divine service was that there was a room within room, a sanctum sanctorum where sat the officiating minister, who read the Vedas and delivered his sermon. Evidently this was due to the wish of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his co-workers not to violate the prevailing belief and sentiment of the people that the Vedas should not be brought before the vulgar gaze. Another noticeable feature of the service was that it was the Brahmins alone who could recite the Vedas in the inner sanctuary.ⁱ

Parekh goes on to say that the reforming activities of the members of the Brahma Sabha did not go beyond,

...the advocacy of the abolition of Suttee, and in a few cases a certain amount of liberty or rather licence taken in secret in matters of eating and drinking with people of other castes and creeds. It was too early for the question of intermarriage to become one of practical social reform, and even the best of them including Ram Mohan himself were too careful to do anything which might involve open break with their castes.ⁱⁱ

By the time a branch of the Brahma Samaj was established in Mangalore in 1870 it had undergone internal schisms and had come under the leadership of Keshub Chunder Sen. The non-Brahmin Keshub Chunder through his radical translation of the concept of Christian brotherhood introduced a deeper and socially broader sense of fraternity into the Sabha that cut across caste distinctions. The leadership of Keshub for whom Christ was “above ordinary humanity”ⁱⁱⁱ, introduced into the Samaj a Christian zeal for missionary work which led to the formation of an apostolic missionary band which travelled all over India spreading the message of the Samaj. Having been born into a devout Vaishnavite family Sen also brought Vaishnava devotionism into the worship practices of the Brahma Samaj.

Three missionaries of the Samaj came to Mangalore in 1869 on the invitation of Arsappa and Ullal Raghunathayya. By this time, Mangalore had come under the influence of the Basel

INTERVENTIONS



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017**

Mission which had set up its first mission station in Mangalore in 1834. Many from the lower caste Billava community to which Arsappa belonged had converted to the Protestantism of the Basel Mission while many from the upper caste Saraswath community to which Ullal Raghunathayya belonged had been educated in the English School of the Basel Mission though few of them had converted to Protestant Christianity. On the one hand the religious eclecticism of the Brahma Samaj and its amenability to hybrid religious accretions at the level of practice/belief, and on the other hand, the markers of European Christianity that were displayed in the self-representation of the Samaj and its members both appealed to its potential converts in Mangalore as well as made them suspicious of it. In a book titled *A Brief History of the Mangalore Brahma Samaj 1870-1970* the establishment of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore is described as follows,

Ullal Rahunathayya, Bharadwaj Shiva Rao and a few other educated members of the Saraswath community were members of the Library attached to the Basel Mission Middle School in the year 1861 when Rev. Zeiglar was its manager. These members had lost faith in the Orthodox Hinduism and some of them were inclined towards Christianity. The reading of a copy of the works of Raja Ram Mohan Roy found in the library, attracted the attention of these gentlemen towards the Brahma Samaj. And Ullal Raghunathayya who was always on spiritual search by reading religious books came to know of the publication of a weekly paper "Indian Mirror" published by the Brahma Samaj of India at Calcutta and he subscribed for that paper. He also read several Books and Tracts published by Maharshi Devendranath Tagore about Brahmoism. And so, he pounced upon the new Gospel as a message of deliverance for himself and his countrymen.

Thus, the idea of starting a Theistic Church in Mangalore was born and Raghunathayya's father Ullal Mangeshayya, a District Munsiff and a reputed Sanskrit Scholar, gave his blessings to it.

At this time, N. Arasappa the Leader of the sect of non-brahmins called "Billavas" who was dissatisfied with the Social Customs of his people and the lack of a Temple of their own for worship of God and who was hankering after the social, moral and religious elevation of his people came in contact with Ullal Raghunathayya and became an enthusiastic co-worker with him in popularizing a theistic faith.^{iv}

However, the establishment of the Brahma Samaj was not an easy task. Though Arsappa had initially gathered together 5000 members of his community as potential members of the Brahma Samaj the first impression made by the missionaries of the Brahma Samaj on his followers was not favourable. To quote from *The History of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore*,

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

These Missionaries were taken to be something like Christian Priests quite unlike their Hindu Priests in their ways and habits of life. Whatever might have been their thoughts, in the end most of them skulked away from Arasappa's plan of operations. The Missionaries tried their best to explain the new principles and some of the lectures, sermons and prayers of Muzoomdar were very effective on the educated Communities of the place and everybody admired them. But they had no appreciable effect on Arasappa's people, naturally as a majority of them were uneducated. Arasappa tried his best to induce them to come forward but only five persons including Arasappa got ready for initiation into the Brahma Faith. ^v

The Basel Mission Report of 1870 gives the following history of the events preceding the arrival of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore,

The news of the Billawars of Mangalore has run the round of Indian newspapers, and we now do not think it out of place to tell about them what we know. A telegram was sent to Calcutta by one of their leaders requesting the Brahma Somaj to send a missionary of theirs to Mangalore where 5000 were said to be willing to enter the community. These leaders are people with whom we had been acquainted for many years, and we now tried again to influence them in favor of Christianity. One of their leaders came to our house, and as soon as they granted us permission, we returned the visit in their houses. But it became more and more apparent that there were scarcely any spiritual motives, the chief reason of their wish for change being the desire to rise in social position, they begged to make conditions, that, in the event of their becoming Christians they would not be *one* with the congregation, but remain an *Independent* body, to be allowed to visit heathen plays etc. We saw that the utmost discretion was required, unless we would run the risk of getting a church built on a rotten foundation. We asked for permission to explain the matter of religion and Christianity to gatherings of people in their or our apartments; but this they would not consent to, and it seems that, after all they have called a missionary of the Brahma Somaj. It is said that he will soon arrive, and we are anxious to see what part he will take with us and what will be the results for our work. They may possibly be in favour or the reverse. But we trust that the Lord knoweth His people and that He will not allow them to find rest, anywhere short of full reconciliation through Christ with God. We also have not given up the hope that some of those people may at last direct their eyes to higher things and seek for true salvation. ^{vi}

Both Arasappa as well as Raghunathayya had a difficult task of running the Brahma Sabha. The upper caste Saraswath's were reluctant to associate themselves with the Billawas and a separate Upasana Sabha was established for them on 11th June, 1870, while the Brahma Samaj was established in Arasappa's house. A few months after the establishment of the Brahma Samaj its membership declined from the original 19 to 9 mainly composed of personal friends and

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

dependents of Arsappa. Some members of Arsappa's community tried to stop the prayer meetings held at Arsappa's house and his brother-in-law Raju's wife was detained in her parental home with the intention of breaking her first marriage and procuring another husband for her. Meanwhile in 1871 Raghunathayya was excommunicated by the swami for mingling with members of the Billawa Community.

The archival history of the arrival of the Brahma Samaj in Mangalore is simultaneously a history of the complexity of religious translations as well as the history of the migration of socio-religious reform movement in nineteenth century India. It indicates to us that the enterprise of translating religions across cultures results in unanticipated intersections of faith traditions which advertently or inadvertently reshape cultural and personal practices of being. It also tells us that exchanges across, and translations of, religions are organized within and inscribed by networks of power and shaped by historically specific social aspirations. Ultimately it undermines our understanding of religion as a trans-historical category and disaggregates the present commonsense of religion as a fairly stable, recognizable and institutionally structured organization of belief with its system of ethical norms and worship practices shared across a community of believers which can be translated and has been transmitted across cultures and histories.

The Billawas belonged to an ancestor worshipping community which followed the Bhuta cult. A majority of the converts of the Basel Mission came from this community. Most of these converts saw in Christianity a release from the oppressions of a feudal system of landownership and from the inscrutable wrath and destructive power of the Bhutas. For educated Billawas like Arsappa who were re-cognizing their position within the social site of caste, through the grids of intelligibility brought by Protestant Christianity and the Protestant colonial government, the casteless egalitarianism of Christianity was its greatest appeal. Christianity was also the religion of the colonial dispensation and was conflated with colonial power and colonial modernity. For Arsappa and his followers, conversion to Christianity was a strategic move to displace themselves from the oppressions of caste and replace themselves in the casteless hierarchy of

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

ability, structured through missionary/colonial education. They saw themselves as forming an Independent body of Christians that would accommodate without any disruptions or contradictions the faith practices of their relinquished community and those they chose to practice from their adopted community. The religious eclecticism of the Brahma Samaj with its strong Christian inflexion and its radical interpretation, under the leadership of Sen, of the Christian concept of human fraternity, would not only appeal to such aspirations but also accommodate them. At the same time the resemblances between the missionaries of the Brahma Samaj and those of the Basel Mission in their repertoires of self-representation also created a fear in Arsappa's followers that they were being tricked into submitting themselves to the authority of a missionary organization similar to that of the Basel Mission that would coerce them to transform their whole being through the constant surveillance and authority of the missionaries and their institutions. For the Basel Missionaries, the proposed conversion of Arsappa and his followers was devoid of any spiritual basis and "would run the risk of getting a church built on a rotten foundation." True conversion for the Pietist missionaries had to be preceded by a conversion experience and followed by a willingness to fit into the Basel Mission regimen of the Christian life. By the time the Brahma Samaj came to Mangalore the Basel Mission had already made its presence felt in the region for 36 years though its convert community was still very small. The Basel Mission welcomed the emergence of a public sphere of debating societies, reading rooms, reform organizations, in the middle of the nineteenth century, and felt that the opinions discussed there and disseminated through them would ease and enable the entry of Christianity into a heathen world.^{vii} Though the Mission was critical of the British colonial government's administrative policy of religious neutrality, it did receive private patronage and support from many of the colonial administrators and believed that British colonization of India was part of the Christian God's plan to redeem a heathen people from its sinful state. Much of what was introduced by the colonial government and accepted by the indigenous reformers in the name of modernity and liberal reform was grounded on a Protestant ideal of the Christian life.

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

However, Christian and indigenous socio/religious reform ideals were imbricated in complex and conflicting ways. The organizational structures of the Basel Mission, the associations it formed and the rituals through which the meetings of these associations were organized, the mission's Protestant Christian re-cognition of the indigenous social structures and practices and its reform enterprises, provided a template for indigenous reform enterprises organized under the leadership of upper caste men, like Ullal Raghunathayya, of the region. An interesting instance of this is described in the BMR of 1907,

There is a congregation of the Brahma- Samaj at Mangalore, the existence of which has much to do with the preaching of the Gospel in that town. A missionary at Mangalore points out a very interesting feature in the development of this sect, i.e., the institution of services for women. Every Thursday evening a number of women meet in the hall of the Brahma-Samaj for devotional service. The missionary gives a short description of one of those services. At the commencement of the service a hymn is sung to a Hindu tune. After that, a woman rose and prayed to God, the Creator of everything, thanking Him for all the temporal boons He had bestowed upon them. This prayer was followed by an exhortation in which the woman spoke at length about the necessity of fighting against their spiritual enemies. Another hymn concluded the service. It is not difficult to see that these services are an imitation of our Christian worship. But the most striking feature in connection with these Brahma-Samaj women meetings is the fact that the women that are taking a leading part in them are former students of our Brahmin Girls' School in Mangalore.^{viii}

Since this meeting of the female branch of the Brahma Samaj is being described by a missionary for the reading public of the Mission's English reports the description would be structured through, and inflected by the institutional location of the narrator and the expectations of financial help he has from his readers. However, the Brahma Samaj meeting must have shared a number of similarities with 'Christian worship' enabling the missionary to read it as an imitation of 'Christian worship'. That the leading women at this meeting were former students of the Brahmin Girls' School established and run by the Basel Mission, further reaffirms this. On the one hand, the Christian beliefs and the rituals of worship of the Basel mission provided a template for the organization of new and modern associations among the indigenous people and for the functioning of these organizations. On the other hand, for the Saraswath Brahmin women who were participating in this meeting such participation would be one way of displaying their entry into new secular spaces opened up by colonial modernity where they

INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

could re-form themselves as new women. Basel Mission Christianity inscribed itself most powerfully and lastingly on the indigenous communities through such imbrications with and accessibility to the necessities and functioning of colonial modernity. If the Mission saw in these reform movements the incipient Christianization of the indigenous people, the indigenous participants of these reform movements saw in them the incipient formation of a modern nation of which upper caste/class women were to be significant markers. For the participants of these movements the proclamation and achievement of their nationalist aspirations, demanded the denial of the Christian provenance of many of the reform ideals of these movements. It is this contradiction at the heart of 'liberal Hinduism' that comes across in this 1903 report of the Basel Mission and which made the missionaries hope that these movements would be the precursors to the Christian conversion of India. The BMR of 1904 reports,

Characteristic for the last year all over our own Mission field was the increased activity of all the progressive parties within Hinduism whose presence formerly had been scarce perceptible. Christian workers have every reason to welcome any movement of this kind. It is true, most of the adherents of these liberal fractions in Hinduism, on the one hand not satisfied with "the vain manner of life handed down from their fathers", and on the other hand anxious that all progress should carefully avoid anything like disruption and move on national lines, seem to be lost to Christianity, and they seem to take refuge in a Samaj and other societies to escape the danger of Christianity. They will, however, willingly or unwillingly help to pave the way for Christ's entrance into their country.^{ix}

The Basel Missionaries hopes of converting the whole of India to Christianity was never fulfilled. However, the historical conjuncture of the establishment of missions like the Basel Mission and the introduction of colonial modernity paved the way for the Christianisation of powerful and influential segments of the indigenous society while converting a small segment of the lower castes to Christianity. It was this Christianised elite that embarked on the programme of reinterpreting Hinduism and reforming its social and institutional structures and practices through reform movements and organizations like the Brahma Samaj. The regional histories of these reform movements recuperate for us the complexities of the social transactions involved in the process of translating and transplanting religions and cultures.

Notes

INTERVENTIONS



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017**

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- ⁱ Manilal C Parekh, *The Brahma Samaj (A Short History)*. Vaibhav Press, Bombay, 1929. P 3. (microform)
- ⁱⁱ Parekh, p 8
- ⁱⁱⁱ Parekh, p 83
- ^{iv} *A Brief History of the Mangalore Brahma Samaj*, p1
- ^v *A Brief History*, p2.
- ^{vi} BMR, 1870, p23
- ^{vii} Reporting from its station in Dharwar the BMR of 1854 states, "In the course of last year, a Native Reading and Debating Society was established here by an enterprising and intelligent young man from Poonah. Although this institution has of course no direct Christian tendency, yet the Missionaries have watched its rise and progress with attention, and have thought it right to encourage it by permitting the use of one of their schoolrooms for the debating meetings. The debates have frequently turned upon those points, which must be uppermost in the mind of every real friend of India, such as the degraded state of the female sex, the pernicious effects of caste, the uselessness of charms & c. The Library and Reading Room is also, for the present, established in a side room of one of our school buildings. In connection with this society, our Native friends have established a High Caste Girl School, which is well attended, and where the progress of the pupils was shown, at a late examination, to be very satisfactory. We hope, that with regard to these interesting undertakings of the Natives themselves, the saying of our lord will be fulfilled, "He that is not against us, is on our part." Pp,30-1.
- ^{viii} BMR 1907, pp 66-7
- ^{ix} BMR 1904 p 22

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INTERVENTIONS



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017**

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