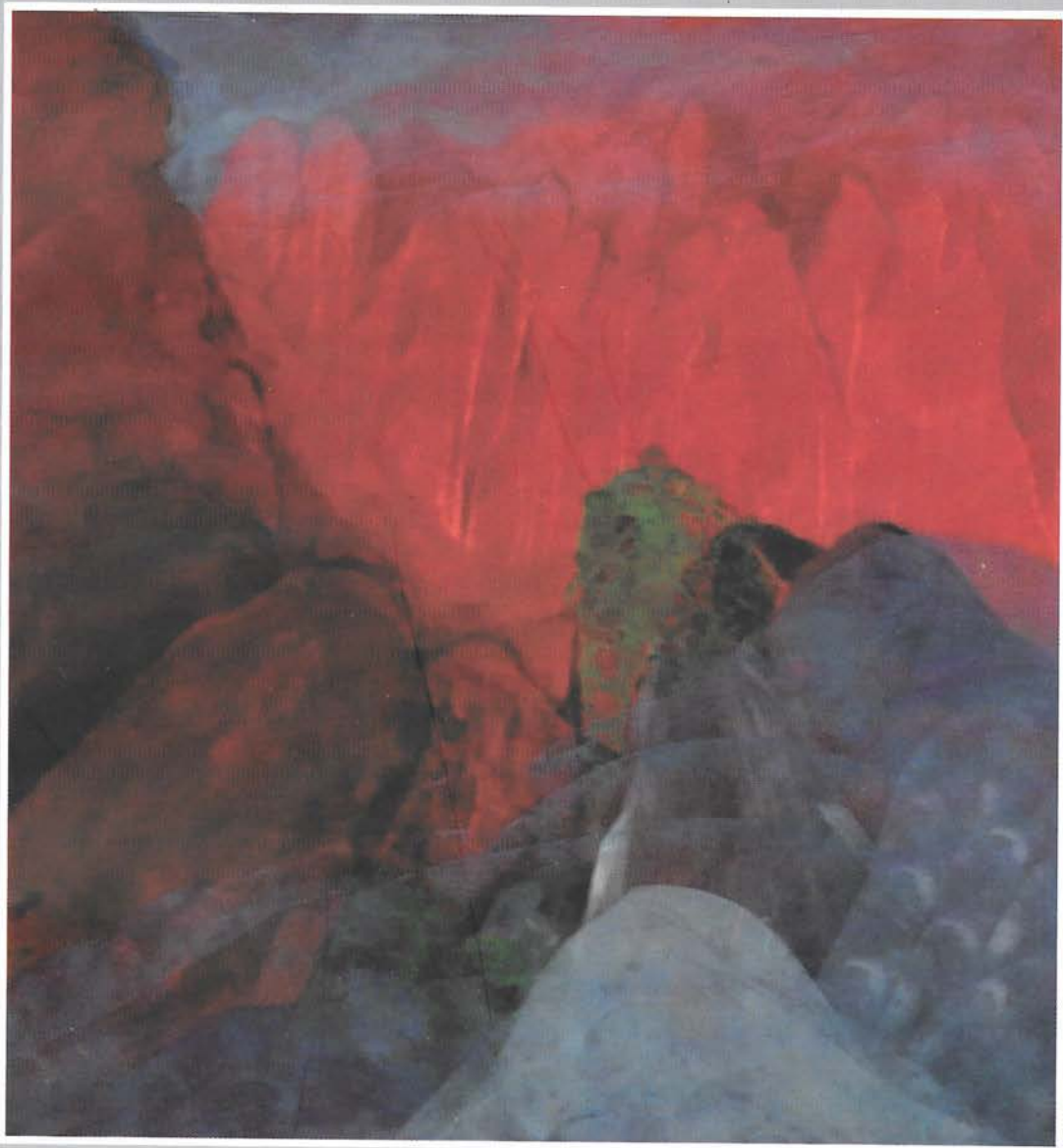


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Sahitya Akademi's Bi-Monthly Journal



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Negotiating the Spiritual: Purushottama Choudhari and Early 19th Century Christian Literature in Telugu

K.W. Christopher

Dalit and exclusion studies have focused attention on minority literatures that have not yet been accommodated in the literary canon. Despite the recent scholarly interest in the literatures of the marginalized, Christian literature in Indian languages in general and Telugu Christian literature in particular still remains an unmapped terrain. Even postcolonial studies that focus on the colonial encounters in India show no engagement with the work of early Christian writers in the *bhashas* (Indian languages) like Narayan Vaman Tilak, Nehemiah Goreh, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay, and Vedanayagam Sastriar. This evasion/erasure stems from a particular postcolonialist mode of perceiving India in Hindu nationalist terms.

Commenting on the paucity of scholarly attention towards Indian Christian cultural production Stephen Neill in his magisterial history of the Indian church observes:

No general study has yet been made of the work of Indian Christian poets in the many languages in which the Gospel was being preached during the nineteenth century. Such a study would be valuable, and might be invaluable as revealing strands in Indian Christianity which are often overlooked. There is a tendency to exaggerate the dependence of Indian Christian thought on the West and its traditions and its consequent lack of originality. This may be true of theologians; a study of the poets suggest that these devotees, while grateful to the Western friends who had brought them the Gospel, were from the start determined that Indian Christianity should be unmistakably and uncompromisingly Indian (1985:412)

Neill's observations, though made in the context of church historiography, can be extended to literary studies in India as well. Despite the general neglect, a few Christian poets in Tamil, Marathi and Bengali have received some attention in histories of Indian literatures (Das, 1981) but Telugu Christian poets rarely find a mention in mainstream literary historiography barring notable exceptions like Arudra (1984) and Gopalakrishna Rao (1976). Influential scholars of Telugu in the Anglophone academia like Velcheru Narayan Rao and David Schulman show a preoccupation with Sanskritic Telugu traditions and so far have not shown any engagement with other traditions in Telugu. Work on Telugu Christian literature is very sparse in the first place and is confined to only scholars in the seminaries. It is only recently that Dalit writers have begun to explore the Dalit Christian literary archive.

The erasure of 'other' literatures stems from certain postcolonial tendencies to perpetuate the orientalist binary—'us/them', colonizer/colonized—homogenizing the colonized and thus masking the micro narratives of gender, caste, and class. Some of the recent interrogations of colonialism in the Indian context by Anglophone and Indian scholars veer dangerously close towards the Hindutva nationalist reading of colonialism that characterizes it as an encounter between Hindu and Christian cultures *a la* Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' (1996). India in such formulations is imagined as a 'great civilization' 'wounded' by a series of external invasions—the Islamic and the European—that eventually 'destroyed' and 'corrupted' it. Consequently caste, *sati*, female infanticide, *devadasi* system and Hinduism itself are seen as colonial inventions (Pennington, 2005; Derks, 2001). Such an essentialist reading of colonialism, apart from homogenizing the colonized, inscribes passivity into the colonized thereby denying any agency.

The colonial encounter despite its 'violence' (Ngugi, Fanon, 2004) was never a one way process but also generated responses from native traditions. As Will Sweetman puts it: "The colonial encounter was not merely an arena in which ideas originating in the European metropolis were projected and forcibly imposed on the colonized, but rather a process in which those ideas took their modern shape through the actions of both the colonizer and colonized" (2005). Few scholars have begun to focus on the native 'vernacular' literary responses to colonialism (Vijayasree, 2005). Unlike postcolonial theorists who drawing from Edward Said's *Orientalism* argue that western knowledges "created" an India (through translation, census, medicine, science, religion, art) only to master it, scholars and critics in the Indian languages (*bhashas*) saw colonialism as also a facilitator, a catalyst that ushered far reaching changes. The work

of the missionaries and colonial officials in the South like Ziegenbalg, Benjamin Schulze, G.U. Pope, Caldwell, Des Granges, Prichett, Mackenzie, and C.P. Brown, negotiated in complex ways with colonial administration, education, religion and native cultures.

This paper seeks to explore the complexity of colonial encounter through the life and career of the famous early 19th century Telugu Christian poet Purushottama Choudhari.

Christian literature in Telugu dates back to early 17th century and most of it is a product of the Roman Catholic missionary endeavours. The Italian missionaries of the order of St Caetano at Goa were sent to Golconda and Chandragiri under Vijayanagara kings in latter part of the 16th century. They produced catechisms in Sanskrit as well as Telugu which are considered to be the earliest Christian works in Telugu. The 17th century Jesuit Robert de Nobili of the Madurai mission too is credited with some works in Telugu but no copies have survived. Pinagali Ellanarya's *Thobhya Charitra* (a poetic rendition of Tobias in Roman Catholic Bible), Mangalagiri Aananda Kavi's *Vedantarasayanamu*, Mallela Thimmaraju's *Gnanachintamani* are the earliest creative works with Christian themes (Brown, 1840). Despite their literary merits they are not acknowledged as part of 'true' Christian literature since they were putatively "commissioned" works. (Literary scholarship is divided on the authors being Christians (Brown, 1840)). The Roman Catholic missionaries from Europe produced devotional literature in Telugu which included catechisms, summaries of the gospels. However it is only from the early 19th century that Protestant Telugu Christian literature became a vibrant tradition with numerous writers like William Dawson¹, Pulipaka Jagannatham, producing a sizeable corpus of devotional literature.

The Danish Mission in Tranquebar (Tarangambadi) introduced the print culture in Telugu. This print culture initiated by the missionaries gave rise to the public sphere in India (Menon 2002). Even before William Carey began his work at Serampore, Benjamin Schulze of the Tranquebar Mission initiated pioneering work in print culture in Tamil as well as Telugu. Apart from his translation of the *Bible* into Telugu (subsequently lost) he printed four books in Telugu in Halle. *Mokshamunaku Konchupoye Tova* printed in 1742 was the first book to be printed in Telugu (Mangamma 1970). The 18th and 19th century missionary activities gave rise to lot of literature—polemical, evangelical and literary—which strangely remains unacknowledged in the dominant literary discourse (Murdoch 1870). The missionaries learnt Telugu with the help of native scholars and their use of the language came in for derision from some quarters, however their contribution to Telugu language by way of lexicography,

translations, standardizing of grammar has generally been acknowledged by native scholars (Lalitha, Arudra, Mangamma, Bangore, Donappa).

The missionaries use of Telugu, in the initial stages at least, sounded "alien" "outlandish" as some contemporary critiques testify but strangely a stereotype of native 'Christian Telugu' was constructed over the years. The Telugu used by the native Christians was described as stilted and pedantic. Velcheru Narayan Rao the most visible and influential Telugu scholar abroad sums up the popular misconception about "Christian Telugu":

The native Christian converts knew the missionary Telugu sounded different, but they had neither scholarly equipment to offer a critique nor the status to offer suggestions to the revered priests. They quietly accepted it, and even emulated it in their own religious use as the respectable language of scripture, while Hindu scholars paid no attention to it at all (2004:147)

Narayan Rao for strange reasons ignores the archival sources pertaining to Telugu Christian writers and denies native Christians any position of agency. Gurram Joshua, the iconic Telugu poet, himself a Dalit Christian, also perpetuates the stereotype of "Christian Telugu". In the *Preface* to his *Kristu Charitra* (Life of Christ) he sounds apologetic about Christian usage of Telugu. The stereotyped "Christian Telugu" continues to be circulated in contemporary popular culture through films and television.

Some of the native converts came from scholarly background and were employed by the missionaries in the schools, seminaries and printing presses run by them. It was these early converts who shaped the protestant literary tradition in Telugu. Purushottama Choudhari (1803-1890) the foremost Christian poet belonged to this group. He produced over fifteen major works in different literary forms in Telugu such as *Kavya*, *Sataka*, and *Prabandha* besides several tracts on theology, apologetics, Christian doctrine and ethics. He was also associated with the translation work of Rev Dr Hay (Hooper, 1963:91-93) and authored the earliest bible concordance in Telugu (Choudhari 1935). Choudhari composed over 200 *keertanas* set in *ragas* and *talas* of the south Indian music (Carnatic Music). Choudhari's work though distinct from non-Christian Telugu literature was embedded in indigenous aesthetic, cultural and spiritual discourses. He also authored what is probably one of the earliest critiques of caste system by an 'upper caste' convert. Choudhari also has parallels with the famous 18th century Tanjavur Tamil Christian poet Vedanayagam Sastriar.

Purushottama Choudhari was born in a Gouda Brahmin family on September 5, 1803 in Madanapur in Ganjam district. His ancestors had migrated two centuries ago from Bengal and settled in Parlakimidi in Ganjam during the Mughal period and were variously employed as court poets, tax collectors (*mirasdars*) and *Karanams* (clerks). Purushottama Choudhari's childhood was steeped in classical and vedic learning and he soon became proficient in Sanskrit, Telugu, Bangla and Utkala. From a very early age he showed great predilection for spirituality. He was reputed for his musical talent and learning and was employed as a court *vidwan* in Parlakimidi *Samsthana*. The death of his father prompted him into a yearning for spiritual fulfilment. The desire to attain true salvation through a *satguru* (true teacher) became an obsession. He experimented with different teachings, sects and cults, in the process he became an *avadhutha* (mendicant), an *aghor* and even made an abortive attempt to run away to Varanasi. In 1825 his brother Jagannadha Choudhari handed him a tract in Telugu probably printed by William Carey at Serampore. He was indifferent to the contents and put it away in a chest but returned to it at sometime later. It aroused his interest. It needs to be mentioned here that the tracts in vernaculars produced by missionaries were far from readable (in terms of language) and Carey's tract was no exception yet it made an indelible impression on Choudhari. At that time the Bible had not been translated into Telugu completely and there was no unanimity regarding the truthfulness of translations.² However, certain portions of the gospels translated by Cran, Des Granges (1810) and Pritchett (1819) were in circulation (Mullens, 1864:9-13). Purushottama Choudhari could gain access to these translations only at a later stage. His long unfulfilled desire to find a *satguru* was rekindled on reading the tract and this subsequently led him to few more tracts printed by the missionaries in Bellary. As he himself narrated in his testimony he travelled on foot for hundreds of miles in search of spiritual guidance (Choudhari 1833:154). This strong yearning for a guru was a part of the vaishnava bhakti traditions that Choudhari imbibed from his childhood and quite naturally he refers to Christ as a *satguru* in many of his works.

He sought to know more about the new faith but was not successful in finding a person who could provide guidance. In 1832 some one directed him to a Roman Catholic Church in Vizagpatnam (Vishakapatnam) but Choudhari who had already tried different traditions within Hinduism by then was disappointed at the sight of idols in the church and turned back without conversing with the priest. Rev James Dawson (1784-1852) of the London Missionary Society (LMS) who was active in that "station

had died in the same year, so his attempt to engage in a spiritual discourse with an influential Christian preacher in that area did not fructify (Badley 1886: 33). During that period the East India Company battalions were stationed at Vijayanagaram, Srikakulam (Chicacole), and Parlakimidi to quell the uprisings by the local *zamindars*. The 41st battalion at Srikakulam had a few practicing Christians that included Maj. Baxter, Capt. Keating, Gen. Taylor, and Capt. Campbell (Russell 1856). It was these officers who helped Pursushottama Choudhari in his spiritual quest.

He met Mrs. Helen Knott in Srikakulam who gave him a translation of St Luke's gospel. Choudhari was also able to make acquaintance with Major Brett who commanded the battalion of European Veterans in the fort of Vizagapatnam and also associated with the London Missionary Society. From him he obtained Prichett's translation of the *Bible*. As Purushottama Choudhari acknowledges in his letters, it was Mrs. Helen Knott who provided him spiritual guidance, and he always referred to her fondly as "my spiritual mother". In 1833 he took baptism in Cuttak, but even before that, he renounced his sacred thread (*yagnopavitha*) worn by the "twice-born" (*dwijas*) thus rejecting his caste. This was not an easy thing because the sacred thread, a symbol of *samskara*, was a marker of exclusivity and privilege in the secular space. Choudhari's conversion narrative can be obtained from *Autobiography of a Native Convert* (1833)

His baptism was a public event. Rev. Lasey who officiated at his baptism wrote:

Lord's Day, October 6th, 1833, was fixed upon as the day for his baptism. The Circuit Judge readily granted us the use of the large tank, near the kutchereee, which being in a central place, close to the large road, and near the bazaar, was well suited for the administration of the sacred ordinance. We had a hymn, a prayer, and an address in the native language; and there were certainly not fewer than a thousand persons present. As soon as the previous service was over, the crowd involuntarily placed themselves on the grassy sloping banks of the fine tank, and the scene was most interesting. The multitude was silent, and the administrator and candidate descended the steps into the water, and the ordinance was administered. The sacred names were repeated, both in the English and native languages. The reasons for so public a place being fixed upon were, first, that a large company might be brought together and addressed; and then, that by seeing how baptism was administered, the people might be disabused of a number of ridiculous notions, which the interested have industriously propagated for the purpose of prejudicing the public against the ordinance (229).

Conversion was as problematic then as it is still today. The colonial administration inscribed conversion in administrative and juridical terms making the convert's identity a complicated thing as Chandra Mallampalli (2004) shows in his study of South Indian Christians during colonial period. The conversion of Choudhari's younger contemporary Pulipaka Jagannadham evoked such a hostile response from his relatives that his baptism necessitated military escort (Lovett 1899:130). Choudhari upon his conversion was ostracized by his family and community and faced humiliations and even physical attacks. His wife and child were separated from him. Eventually his wife Radhamani Devi following her husband's footsteps became a Christian. He served as a catechist initially and was ordained in 1837 and became an itinerant preacher travelling thousands of miles on foot (Wardlaw 1845). In Srikakulam he worked with Rev William Dawson (son of James Dawson of LMS) who was a poet himself in Telugu.

Purushottama Choudhari's conversion and consequent literary production exemplifies the complex relationship between colonialism and native cultural productions. He created a body of literature that was rooted in native traditions yet negotiated in creative and original fashion with the new faith in its Western form (Durairaj Singh).

Colonial Encounter and Music

The new faith brought a new mode of worship that was distinct from the native forms/traditions in a number of ways. In contrast to Hindu forms of worship, the Protestant tradition is founded on the principle of "corporate worship" (corpus-body of Christ-church) where the congregation is an active participant. Congregational singing is a distinguishing feature of protestant worship that had earned it the epithet "singing church". Martin Luther himself composed many hymns, the most popular being *Ein Feste Burg*. The new faith also introduced liturgy – a highly structured worship where the laity performed a key function. It may be noted that liturgical music contributed to the growth and richness of Western classical music. J.S. Bach (to some extent Handel and Buxtehude) more than any other composer contributed to the development of protestant sacred music with his cantatas and oratorios. Almost all important composers since have experimented with liturgical music by way of a *Requiem* or a *Missa*.

Hymn emerged as a preferred genre of Protestant Church music. Yet hymn as poetry has not been given a high place in literature but

was seen as a poor cousin of poetry proper, characterized by clichés, predictable feelings and wooden rhythms. Dr. Samuel Johnson was very critical of the poetic content in the hymns though he considered Milton and Isaac Watts as exceptions (Watson 1999). Commenting on the limitations of hymn as poetry he remarked:

The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but, few as they are, they can be made no more; they receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression. (Johnson 1787:267)

However in Indian literary traditions, a hymn is given the highest literary and musical value. The poet-composer (*Vaggeyakara*) was revered as saint. Thus the trinity of Carnatic music Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri are referred to as saints. In the beginning the Telugu church made use of the translations of German, Latin, and English hymns in its worship. These hymns were sung in their original western tunes. Translated hymn introduced the concept of choir hitherto non-existent in south Indian musical tradition and shaped a distinct music style associated with protestant Telugu Christians. Apart from the translations the native congregations began to use hymns and songs written by the converts. As mentioned earlier the converts brought into church music their own music cultures and gradually a parallel music tradition alongside the western music emerged and over a period dislodged the primacy of the translated hymn... *Keertana* form served the function of the western hymn in native worship.

The *keertana* form in Tamil context is seen by some ethnomusicologists as a caste marker privileging the brahmin over other music cultures (because Carnatic music has always been an exclusive brahmin domain), however in the Telugu protestant churches which are predominantly dalit this does not seem to be the case (Sherinian 2007). It would also be wrong to say that the *keertana* tradition was a part of the 'indigenization' of Christianity as some studies do. Such a view would make the new faith an imposition rather than an expression of complexly negotiated interiority (Hepziba Israel 2014).

The first Telugu Hymnal was published by William Dawson in 1857 (Murdoch 1870) containing hymns by Pulipaka Jagannadham, Purushottama Choudhari and Dawson himself. This was the most important event in the evolution of Protestant Telugu literature. Soon the Hymnal became a cultural marker, accorded a very high place only

next to the Bible in all Protestant denominations. The Telugu Hymnal continues to be truly ecumenical, transcending denominational boundaries.

Purushottama Choudhari was one of the first Christian *vaggeyakaras*, for he not only wrote hymns but also set them to music and performed them. Thyagaraja, who was an older contemporary exerted a great influence on Purushottama Choudhari as is evident in the hymn '*kanna thandri vanukontini gati neeve Rama*' (I thought you were my father O Rama, my only refuge) his only surviving hymn before conversion. One can also notice the influence of older *vaggeyakaras* Annamayya and Ramadasa. Choudhari used the *keertana* form to propagate the gospel especially in the tradition of *nagara sankeertanas*. His *keertanas* since they were basically expressions of personal spirituality were lyrical as well as evangelical.

A significant feature of Choudhari's *keertanas* is that while expressing an intensely personal experience they also expounded Christian theology using images, symbols from Telugu religious and literary traditions. Each *keertana* was occasioned by a significant personal experience in the life of the poet. Scholars have demonstrated how Purushottama Choudhari's *keertanas*, influenced by the poet's Vaishnava background and Bhakti traditions, contributed to Indian Christian theology especially Christology (Sundar Rao, Joseph). He composed hymns covering the whole Christian calendar from annunciation to ascension, and also liturgy that included exhortation, praise, confession, absolution, benediction, and eschatology. It would not be an overstatement to say that no other native Christian poet could demonstrate such a wide range.

Besides *keertanas* he produced works in many Telugu literary genres such as *sataka*, *prabandha* and *kavya*. Purushottama Choudhari is perhaps the earliest Christian poet to write in *sataka* genre. *Sataka* is a verse form that is usually made up of hundred (*sata* in Sanskrit means 'hundred') poems that may or may not be interrelated. Each poem is autonomous and complete in meaning. Two of his *satakas*, *Yesu Nayaka Satakamu* and *Kreestunayaka Satakamu* are highly valued among Telugu *satakas* by some critics (Gopalakrishna Rao)

His most outstanding work is *Rakshana Charitra* which is a poetic retelling of the story of Man's fall, redemption through Christ, and the second coming. Though its theology is Christian, it is articulated in the language of native literary and religious traditions. It is a highly imaginative work and is far superior to Joshua's *Kristu Charitra*. Joshua's poem lacks genuine poetic feeling, and gives the impression that it is more a product of mechanical cerebral exercise than an expression of genuine feeling.

Purushottama Choudhari and the Question of Caste

Caste in postcolonial studies is seen as a colonial invention consequently missionaries engagement with caste is viewed as a part of the colonial strategy. Since the postcolonial position is influenced by diasporic 'upper caste' academics the relationship between colonialism and missionary interventions in the sphere of caste is seen within the framework of 'civilizing mission' not taking into account the perspective of the victims of caste oppression into account. As a corrective it is necessary that caste, to use the Saidian argument, must be seen from the 'standpoint of its victims' (Said 1979)

Nicholas Dirks eponymous work on caste and colonialism is illustrative of the pitfalls of post-colonialist framework in interrogating caste in the context of colonialism. He argues that the missionaries who produced a great deal of knowledge of caste saw it as an integral part of Hinduism rather than a social practice and were responsible for introducing a split between the religious and the secular which was later picked up by the colonial administration (Dirks 2001). Dirks asserts (for he never succeeds in demonstrating his thesis) that caste was: 'refigured as a religious system, organizing society in a context where politics and religion had never before been distinct domains of social action. The religious confinement of caste enabled colonial procedures of rule through the characterization of India as essentially about spiritual harmony and liberation' (1993: xxvii).

Dirks's contention that the missionaries in fact were instrumental in viewing caste as a religious rather than a social institution is derived from his selective reading of the *Minute of Madras Missionary Conference on Caste* (1850:305). A closer look at the *Minute* reveals that the concern of the missionaries was the prevalence of caste among the converts, its divisive nature within the native church and its debilitating effect on the spiritual growth of the nascent native congregations. According to Dirks, the missionaries post 1857 revolt exploited the idea that the revolt was sparked by caste practices and impressed on the colonial administration to initiate measures against such practices. In Dirks view the knowledge produced by the missionaries resulted in the reification of caste and was used by the colonial administration to indirectly control the natives. Much of the postcolonialist scholarship on caste hinges upon this thesis (Copely 2000; Pennington 2005; Mani 1998)

The early protestant missionaries who arrived in South India in 1706 at Tranquebar were confronted with the enigmatic entity called caste (Roberts 1847). They were faced with the challenge of first

understanding it in terms of the religious and social traditions of the natives and then formulating a doctrinal position in the light of the gospel teachings. Beginning with Ziegenbalg the missionaries produced literature that attempted to describe, understand, critique caste. The missionaries at Tranquebar (Tarangambadi) much to their consternation found that the converts did not renounce caste after their conversion but continued to practice it within the church also. Initially the missionaries tolerated caste among the new converts out of an erroneous assumption that it corresponded to the idea of social rank in European societies. Like their Roman Catholic counterparts they saw caste as a social practice, something external and not part of "heathenism". Despite their adherence to the church doctrine regarding the equality and oneness of men it could not succeed in removing the practice of caste in the native congregations. The native converts from "upper castes" did not give up their caste privileges and continued to practice caste rituals and markers. In the earliest protestant congregations the converts continued to follow caste practices not only in their social life but in the church as well. The 'untouchables' and 'lower castes' were segregated during the service and the 'lower caste' clergy could not administer communion to the 'upper castes'. Separate cups were used to administer communion to different castes. Inter-dining and inter-marrying were not allowed. Attempts by some missionaries to stem this practice were met with resistance from the 'upper caste' converts. G.U. Pope's *Letter to the Tranquebar Missionaries* (1853) documents the problems of caste in the native church.

By the early 19th century the protestant missions become more vocal and firm in denunciation of caste. Bishops Wilson, Heber, Corrie and Spencer declared in their 1847 (Roberts 1847) document that caste practice was incompatible with Gospel teachings. *The Enquiries Made by the Bishop of Madras Regarding the Removal of Caste Prejudices and Practices in the Native Church of South India* (1868) provides insights into the missionary attempts to put an end to caste practice. The *Minutes* of the Madras Missionary Conference on caste 1850 put an end to the dilemmas and articulated the position of mainline protestant denominations, i.e., incompatibility of Christian faith with caste practices (*Missionary Herald*, 1850).

Unlike their counterparts in the Tamil country the LMS, SPG and Baptist missionaries in the Telugu country were firm in their opposition to caste practice from the beginning i.e early 18th century. It is important to note that the Telugu Brahmin converts renounced their caste completely unlike some famous converts from other regions like Ramabai,

Nehemiah Goreh, Narayan Vaman Tilak, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay who could never make a complete break with their Brahmin past. Native critiques of Hindu religious systems produced by some of these converts skirted around the question of caste. In this context Purushottama Choudhari's critique of caste *Kulachara Pareeksha* (An Examination of Caste) which appeared in 1833 has the distinction of being the earliest native denunciation of caste that was to find an echo many years later in the writings of Mahatma Phule. However it remains an obscure text, almost unknown among scholars of caste, colonialism and Indian Christianity. It can be contrasted with the works of Choudhari's older contemporary Vedanayagam Sastri, the famous Tamil Christian poet whose *Saditerattoo* (Explaining Caste) and *Jatitirttulin Payittiyam* (Foolishness of Amending Caste) put up a defense of caste while decrying missionary interventions in the native cultures (Dayanandan 1998).

Drawing upon native writings like those of the popular 17th century poet Vemana, the bhakti poets and Hindu sacred texts Choudhari exposes the falsity of the practice of caste³. Unlike other native Christian polemics this work is more an expose of the strategies the Brahmin priesthood invented to keep others in a state of subjection. The tract begins with the creation narrative in Genesis where the only difference ordained by God is that of sex. Choudhari considers the *purushasukta* origins of caste as an invention of the Brahmins to justify their claims to superiority. How can the progeny of Brahma who is without caste, he asks, be divided into castes. Further he questions the existence of thousands of *jatis* where as textually only four varnas are recognized. Using the analogy of a tree and its fruit he argues that just as a tree cannot bear different fruits one being cannot give rise to different unequal beings. Choudhari presents various illustrations from texts like the *Bhagavatha*, *Upanishads* and *Puranas* to undermine the brahmanical ideas of pure origins and superiority by birth. He makes copious use of the verses of Vemana to demonstrate the hollowness of rituals, notions of the high and the low, and caste practices. Choudhari demystifies the sacred origins of caste and goes on to take on the apologists of caste who try to explain untouchability in terms of "polluting" practices like carcass removal and beef eating. He argues that if one's caste were to be determined by the nature work (karma) than many "chandals" perform works designated as "noble" and hence must be considered superior to the Brahmin. He further argues that many consume products of cow—such as urine, milk, butter, do they then, he asks, become untouchables?

Choudhari, thus, sees caste as an invention of the Brahmin priests and denies it any theological base. Towards the end of the tract he takes

up the evangelical theme appealing to the readers to repent for their sins and turn to Christ for salvation. He describes Christ as the 'true light' that dispels the 'darkness of caste'. Humanity, he says, consists of only two castes: one consisting of people who turn away from sin, are saved and called children of God and the second named 'Satan's caste' consisting of those who do not give up the sin of caste pride and are "cast into hell fire". A striking feature of this tract is that it is free from acrimony or indictment of Hinduism but is persuasive drawing on traditions which perform what Partha Chatterjee called an "immanent critique" of caste. By treating caste synonymous with sin Choudhari makes the tract perform the twin functions of reform as well as evangelism. It can be said that Purushottama Choudhari's voice is the earliest instance of colonial modernity in Telugu culture.

The life and career of Purushottama Choudhari reveals the dynamics of colonial encounter and the complex ways in which Christianity negotiated with native traditions in a colonial context. It is illustrative of the native negotiations with colonialism and brings to the fore the creative response of a language and tradition to an altogether different belief system.

Notes:

1. Very little is known about the work of Rev William Dawson. The LMS records and reports and contemporary missionary magazines contain only some information about his ordination and missionary work. Some of Dawson's papers are with the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) archives but nothing containing his literary work in Telugu.
2. A.V. Timpany for instance contested Hay's translation from a doctrinal perspective. What role Purushottama Choudhari played in the controversies is not known.
3. There is no consensus concerning the period in which Vemana lived. C.P. Brown places him in the 17th century.

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