Translation and the Christian Conversion of Women in Colonial India: Rev. Sheshadri and Bāḷā Sundarābāī Ṭhākūr

Deepra Dandekar
Center for the History of Emotions, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT
This article foregrounds the interstitial and hybrid third voice of a nineteenth-century Christian convert in colonial India. Bala Shundoree Tagore, a Bengali woman and wife to the esteemed Gyanendra Mohan Tagore, was declared spiritually Christian by missionaries, even though she died before being baptised. Bala’s narrative production by her biographers and translators obfuscated and transformed her voice, writing her into the history of Indian missions as a success story. Refashioned as a gendered symbol for Indian Christian women from the nineteenth century, Bala’s narrative was utilised by missionaries by divesting her of the agency she possessed.

KEYWORDS
Bengal; Christianity; colonialism; conversion; English; Hindu; Marathi; mission; translation; women

Translation from English into the vernacular constituted a powerful hermeneutic strategy for Christian missionaries and converts from Brahman backgrounds in nineteenth-century Maharashtra. Indian converts expressed personal experiences, theological beliefs, opinions and convictions about Christianity through translations that reframed English missionary texts in the vernacular. For example, upper-caste Brahman converts often utilised Indic tropes of devotion and bhakti when translating Christian texts, as evident from the devotionals and Christian poetry written by Narayan Waman Tilak, which followed the abhanga devotional poetry format. This devotional vernacular Christianity or Krista-Bhakti by local Marathi converts was not dissimilar from other forms of bhakti, wherein devotional surrender to a personal deity, conceived as ‘saviour’ and exemplified by saints such as Mira Bai, was of paramount significance. The use of Marathi and Indic categories within vernacular Christian literature from the nineteenth century allowed converts to reedify their social fabric, caste belonging and participation within regional nationalism.

The East India Charter Act of 1813 that legalised missionary evangelism in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, however, produced Christianity differently from

CONTACT  Deepra Dandekar  dandekar@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

1. J.C. Winslow, Narayan Waman Tilak: The Christian Poet of Maharashtra (Calcutta: The Association Press, 1923), pp. 40–51.
2. Generally translated, bhakti is a nativist and Indian convert’s expression of Christian piety that expressed personal emotions and relationships with a redeeming deity; also cf. Wendy Doniger, ‘bhakti’, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., (13 Mar. 2015) [https://www.britannica.com/topic/bhakti, accessed 11 Dec. 2017].

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
The mission context ensconced Christianity within colonial modernity, English education and Anglican charity, which necessarily separated converts from their Hindu families and their practices of caste purity and idol worship. This separation produced missionary Christian devotion as distinctive in two ways. It led to the theological production of monotheism as Christian, and produced the criticism of caste and idolatry as missionary. It must be said that the criticism of caste was not confined to Christianity and Marathi bhakti as it was also strongly espoused by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century. Missionary discourse on Christian devotion therefore not only socially isolated converts, but effected epistemic separations between Christianity, bhakti and Indian family life that located conversion at its centre. It also necessitated discursive engagement with the denouncement of heathens, accompanied by virulent critiques of caste and idolatry. This emphasis on denouncing caste and idolatry diverted attention from piety or Krishna-Bhakti and its vernacular rearticulation, accompanied by the espousal of caste identity and national belonging. The rearticulation of Christian bhakti characterised vernacular Christian literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Though Protestant missionaries considered ‘conversion’ theologically untenable (the notion that true Christians could not be made, and true conversion of heart was nearly impossible), they continued to present Indian converts as trophies, and conversion in India as a symbol of missionary success. While Protestant missionaries constantly doubted converts, and considered vernacular Christian devotional expressions and translations as possibly blasphemous, they also documented conversion narratives and Christian biographies by encouraging new converts to write Christian witnesses. These witnesses were later translated as trophies harvested from the native mission. Missionaries made enormous efforts to learn the vernacular and to replace convert vernacular expression with vetted Christian writings and translations of their own. While European missionaries were trapped in the double hermeneutics of highlighting and denouncing heathenism, and simultaneously rediscovering the object of Christian piety in foreign lands, the discovery of the convert subjectivity allowed for the formulation of a third and hybrid voice. English-educated, upper-caste Brahman Christians gradually became powerful social agents and missionaries, whose writings produced an extensive and independent vernacular, native Christian genre. The primary subject of this article, the Rev. Narayan Sheshadri Paralikar (figure 1), also earned trust and status within the Free

3. Cf. Rosalind O’Hanlon, Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
4. The Christian biography written by Rev. Aghamkar concentrates primarily on experiences of caste and conversion in Vidarbha; cf. Y.T. Aghamkar, Kudhchya Jhopdhatn Svargiya Mahatlakade: Atmacharitra... Jase ghadle tase lihile (From a Hut Made of Mud to the Heavenly Palace: An Autobiography... Written as it Happened) (Pune: Continental Prakashan, 2005).
5. Although missionaries were aware of convert castes, they referred to this identity as residual. D.S. Sawarkar, writing in 1898, reasserts caste identity together with Christian devotion and piety in a novel that describes his father’s conversion to Christianity; cf. Dinkar Shankar Sawarkar, The Subhedar’s Son (Bombay: Bombay Tract & Book Society, 1898); also, Rev. D.S. Sawarkar’s own Christian autobiography restates convert caste belonging; cf. Rev. Dinkar Shankar Sawarkar, Ayushya Kahan (The Story of My Life) (Bombay: Bombay Tract & Book Society, 1967).
6. Cf. Debendra K. Dash and Dipti R. Pattanaik, ‘Missionary Position: The Irony of Translational Activism in Colonial Orissa’, in TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction, Vol. 182 no. 2, 2e (2005), pp. 89–113.
7. Cf. ‘Report of the Divinity Class at Nasik for the Terms of 1850’, 19 Oct. 1850, Church Missionary Society Archive, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, CMS/B/OMS/C13/O61/346B.
8. Cf. Mrs. Farrer, Chamatkarik Goshti: The Ayah and Lady (Bombay: Bombay Tract & Book Society, 1835).
9. Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 94–120.
Figure 1. Rev. Narayan Sheshadri in Hearth and Home, a New York daily newspaper. Source: Deepra Dandekar's personal collection.
Church of India mission (Bombay) by converting and enthusiastically participating in missionary campaigns that included translating and rewriting English missionary texts.10 This article examines the hybrid inter-textuality and erasures that translating conversion across region and gender presents within vernacular Christian literature. Exploring the interweave between three Christian texts, I examine how writing women’s conversion became a hermeneutical exercise, when narrated, written and translated variously across regions (Bengal and Maharashtra) by men and women, Hindus and Christians, Europeans and converts, husbands and missionaries.11

Rev. Sheshadri published a Marathi translation in 1868 (without reference to the original) titled partially in Marathi and transliterated as Bala Sundarabai Thakur, followed by the English title Bala Soondree Tagore: A Narrative of the Conversion of a Hindu Lady to the Christian Religion, which was published by the Bombay Tract and Book Society.12 His translation was based on Mrs. Maria Murray Mitchell’s work, Bala Soonderee Tagore: A Narrative of the Conversion of a Hindoo Lady to the Christian Religion, which was also published by the Bombay Tract and Book Society in 1856, and which itself had altered and paraphrased the original.13 The original book written by Edward Storrow, an English missionary in the same year, in 1856, was titled The Eastern Lily Gathered: A Memoir of Bala Shoondoree Tagore, with Observations on the Position and Prospects of Hindu Female Society.14 Published in London, Storrow’s text described the conversion of a Hindu woman, as recounted by her husband, Gyanendra Mohan Tagore, which was contextualised within the missionary discourse of eradicating Hindu heathenism in Bengal. Bala Shundoree Tagore’s biography was therefore organised in four narrative layers that were chronologically inhabited by her husband recounting his wife’s conversion, a British missionary writing on Christian conversion in Hindu-heathen Bengal, a British missionary wife recounting a woman’s independent religious choice to eradicate Hindu patriarchy from Western India, and a Marathi missionary translation that produced Bala as a proto-nationalist and anti-colonial icon.

Acts of paraphrasing, modifying and translating by native converts and missionary wives exemplified the gendered hybridity of Bala’s narrative that was recounted by Gyanendra Mohan, Storrow, Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri as part of their own sublimated emotions, as subjects encountering and transformed by the Indian Christian mission.15 Their hybrid third voice emerged from within the interweave of this deeply ambivalent

10. Mitch Numark, ‘Translating Dharma: Scottish Missionary-Orientalists and the Politics of Religious Understanding in Nineteenth-Century Bombay’, in Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 70, no. 2 (2011), pp. 471–500.
11. Tanika Sarkar, Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban—A Modern Autobiography (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).
12. Narayan Sheshadri, Bala Soondree Tagore: A Narrative of the Conversion of a Hindoo Lady to the Christian Religion (Bombay: Bombay Tract & Book Society, 1868).
13. Maria Murray Mitchell, Bala Soonderee Tagore: A Narrative of the Conversion of a Hindu Lady to the Christian Religion (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, new ed., 1892), pp. 3–4.
14. Edward Storrow, The Eastern Lily Gathered: A Memoir of Bala Shoondoree Tagore: With Observations on the Position and Prospects of Hindu Female Society (London: John Snow, 1856).
15. Cox writes a history of the first British missionary encounters in North India in areas that had not experienced Christianity. He outlines the multiple ways in which race and religion became complicated with the advent of the mission, which consisted of a significant population of women. He documents how missionary ideas about Hinduism and Islam underwent deep change as a result of these missionary encounters. And though Cox’s work does not take either Maharashtra or Bengal into its ambit, his research is useful when analysing Storrow’s obsequious relationship with Gyanendra Mohan Tagore. This change brought about through the first colonial and missionary encounter was steeped in the growing ambivalence of the metropole that expected to disseminate civilisation to peripheral colonies: cf. Jeffrey Cox, Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
textual web,\textsuperscript{16} characterised by silence on their own subjectivity behind producing/writing them. This combined and intermingled third voice of unmarked writers presents a concealed and conflicted narrative that is simultaneously stereotypical and challenges the often symmetrical colonial fantasy of divine rule.\textsuperscript{17} While the native convert’s power is yoked to the mission, he enjoys the pleasure of rearticulating his own individual transformation that is often expressed in the vernacular. At the same time, the native convert remains characterised by the pain of conversion, and the social ostracism and suffering that separation from family entails. Finally, the missionary wife is yoked to both mission and husband in India, though she enjoys the power born out of colonial superiority. But, again, her powerlessness lies in her isolation and separation from friends and family back home in England.\textsuperscript{18} Both native convert and missionary wife are, therefore, gendered and hybrid figures who mirror each other in the Indian mission, rediscovering faith and its articulation by scripting subaltern agonies and transformations in their own voices.\textsuperscript{19}

**The Eastern Lily Gathered and subsequent renditions**

_The Eastern Lily Gathered_ is divided into four segments, beginning with a lengthy preface provided by Rev. James Kennedy on the importance of women’s conversion in India. This is followed by Storrow’s Orientalist introduction on the position of women in Hindu society. These are followed by Gyanendra Mohan’s memoirs of his wife’s conversion to Christianity, written by Storrow. The book ends with a commentary on Bala Shundoree’s predicament, and on the larger questions of Christianity, conversion and the success of Christian missions in India. Kennedy’s preface can be described as a eulogy dedicated to Indian women who struggle against ‘heathen’ conservatism by converting to Christianity. He appreciates Bala Shundoree for detecting the follies of Hinduism, despite its antiquity, and for separating herself from her own ancestral and familial associations. Both Kennedy and Storrow write of women converts like Bala as trophies, congratulating them for emerging from the shadows of the Indic/Hindu harem, customary law and zenana seclusion. Kennedy also declares Bala’s conversion as redemptive for European missionaries, who feel sad at witnessing the degradation of Indian women. Storrow describes various Hindu life-cycle rituals, festivals and the importance of child-bearing among Bengali women, while declaring the seclusion of zenanas as universal. It becomes clear that Storrow describes only the upper-caste (kulin) exemplification of social rules, especially when describing how zenana rules made it impossible for women to meet outsiders, gain an English education and acquire knowledge of Christian and Western philosophy. Without these, uneducated women remain ‘heathen’, superstitious, absorbed in ribald entertainment, and busy with housework and child-rearing. Lamenting the fate of women like Bala, who had diminished chances as a woman professing conversion, despite men from her family being favourably inclined towards the Gospels, Storrow asks his audience to

\textsuperscript{16} Uma Chakravarti, _Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai_ (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 1998).

\textsuperscript{17} Nandini Bhattacharya, ‘Behind the Veil: The Many Masks of Subaltern Sexuality’, in _Women’s Studies International Forum_, Vol. 19, no. 3 (1996), pp. 277–92.

\textsuperscript{18} Indrani Sen, ‘Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-nurses, and Memsahibs in Colonial India’, in _Indian Journal of Gender Studies_, Vol. 16, no. 3 (2009), pp. 299–328.

\textsuperscript{19} Joyce Grossman, ‘Ayahs, Dhayes, and Bearers: Mary Sherwood’s Indian Experience and “Construction of Subordinated Others”’, in _South Atlantic Review_, Vol. 66, no. 2 (2001), pp. 14–44.
consider the comparative plight of ordinary women. Kennedy’s and Storrow’s tenor squarely situates the audience for *The Eastern Lily Gathered* in European, Christian and missionary circles. This audience, however, shares significant overlap with Christianised and Westernised readership among native converts and missionary wives in India, who transformed these Christian texts from the periphery of European and Christian literary circles.

Storrow’s narrative about Bala’s conversion begins with details of her birth in 1833 and her marriage to Gyanendra Mohan Tagore as a young girl. Storrow reassures his readers from the outset that Gyanendra Mohan Tagore and his family were liberal, cultured, educated, esteemed and exposed to Western learning. While describing Bala’s husband as a man of vast superior knowledge and education, Storrow seems anxious to emphasise that he could never have deliberately perpetuated patriarchal oppression, in contrast to the first section of the book, where Storrow describes women’s degradation in *kulin* Bengali families. Storrow congratulates Gyanendra Mohan repeatedly over the latter’s English and scientific education, which allows him to criticise Hinduism and make new enquiries into Christianity, and Storrow documents how Gyanendra Mohan Tagore was finally baptised after the death of his wife.

Storrow describes Bala’s childhood wedding, the amount of dowry she brought, and further ascribes Bala’s subsequent intellectual and spiritual development to Gyanendra because he allegedly opened her eyes to Western learning and Christianity, dissuading her from Hinduism. Storrow describes Gyanendra’s convictions about Christianity as intellectual; he laments that a love of Christianity was unable to enter Gyanendra’s heart due to the latter’s rationalist views and scientific learning. While Gyanendra’s intellectual leanings allowed him to teach Bala the moral and historical portions of the Bible, he evaded the prophetic and miraculous parts. As a result, sensing English to be the language of Christianity, Bala began learning English independently with the help of books, until Gyanendra began instructing her in English as well. They discovered the beauty of the Christian scripture together, as Gyanendra brought Bengali translations of Christian texts such as Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted* and Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* for Bala to read. This influenced her deeply and transformed her into a different and introspective woman. Storrow commends Bala for her dissimilarity to the frivolous and vacuous women of her time who were brought up on licentious entertainment and zenana gossip.

However, Bala’s new learning caused suspicion among other household members, and she was forced to worship the Shiva Linga (the symbol of Lord Shiva). But she soon displayed her hostility to Hinduism, incurring the displeasure of friends and relatives. They put her through various trials and punishments that, in Storrow’s words, came to characterise the transitive life-stage of a convert. As Bala’s deviant behaviour became more suspect, she was burdened with humiliating household duties as punishment. Gyanendra, however, continued to instruct his wife late into the night, and later arranged for her to be educated by an English governess to whom Bala often confessed her desire to convert to Christianity and renounce her riches in order to lead a simple life. Bala was also instructed in Sanskrit, and she wrote sophisticated Bengali poetry, although she destroyed it. According to Storrow, Bala was very talented, learned languages well and developed a deep Christian devotion.

Soon, however, Bala began urging her husband to be baptised, a decision he hesitated to make due to fear of social conventions and because of a letter he had signed disavowing
his association with Christianity. However, Bala refused to sign such a letter, even though a religious festival in her home was drawing closer in which she was expected to participate. Finally, with a heavy heart, she was forced to sign the letter, but she performed the Hindu rituals only half-heartedly and without kneeling to the deity. This caused pandemonium among her relatives and friends. Finally, in 1850, due to domestic arrangements, Bala and her husband found an opportunity to explore Christianity, religious philosophy and ‘experimental piety’\footnote{Storrow, *The Eastern Lily Gathered*, p. 72.} which left her more confident about renouncing Hinduism and embracing Christianity through baptism. But this was not to last because Bala fell ill in 1851. Though she had wanted to be baptised as soon as possible, she died before it could take place. Storrow portrays her death as full of pathos, as she marked her favourite passages in the Bible as those describing Jesus Christ’s suffering at his death and the prophecies that foretold the final triumph of Christianity over false religions. Storrow also describes Bala as elegant, graceful, kind-hearted, cheerful, intelligent, sincere, dignified and free from all vices, and her face as beautiful, symmetrical with chiselled features, large black eyes, and a fair and ‘pure’ skin.

In the last section of the book, Storrow highlights issues such as differences between gaining knowledge, renouncing heathenism, and converting to Christianity. Since not all those who became rational and secular, like Gyanendra, adopted Christianity, the proof of Christian success, as cited by Bala herself, lay in Christianity reaching her within the seclusion of her zenana despite the absence of Western education. Storrow’s disappointment with English education not resulting in conversion aligns closely with the criticism of Macaulayism, which points to the disconnection between education and conversion. Storrow instead highlights the modern outlook enjoyed by converts when compared to heathens and Hindus, and claims Bala’s conversion to be the first and only one of its kind for a woman of her status. The last section of Storrow’s book contains another poignant conversion story in a longish footnote. One of Bala’s companions, a widow called Moheshwari Devi, who was under Gyanendra’s father’s care, became devoted to Christianity under Bala’s positive influence. Bala had given Moheshwari Devi the Bengali Bible, and Storrow enthusiastically evokes the image of the two women studying the Bible and other Bengali Christian texts together in the seclusion of the zenana. Moheshwari Devi was sent away to relatives in Benares after Bala’s death, but she did not lose touch with Christian teachings in ‘idolatrous’ Benares, but began learning Nagari from a young boy called Mohun Chand in her household. She procured the Nagari Bible from a servant girl working at a nearby mission and continued in her devotions. When she heard of Gyanendra Mohan’s conversion to Christianity in 1851, Moheshwari Devi convinced her relatives to allow her to visit Calcutta and she spent many months trying to contact Gyanendra Mohan. Finally, a successful escape from her relatives to his house resulted in her baptism by Rev. K.M. Banerjee at the Old Church in Calcutta.

*The Eastern Lily Gathered* was rewritten by Mrs. Maria Murray Mitchell in 1856, the same year that it was published by Storrow. Her book was originally published by the Bombay Tract and Book Society, and later republished in Madras in 1892 as part of the Zenana Series by the Christian Literature Society.\footnote{Mitchell, *Bala Soonderee Tagore*, pp. 3–4.} The brief introductory note in the book by her husband, Rev. John Murray Mitchell, points to the importance of Bala’s story.
for Christian women in Maharashtra. Differently organised from Storrow’s book, Mrs. Mitchell describes Bala’s birth, conversion, trials and death, accompanied by additional and modified features. Mrs. Mitchell’s version disregards Storrow’s and Kennedy’s introductory and concluding sections and instead gives primacy to the relationship between Bala and Moheshwari. The story of their friendship was retrieved by Mrs. Mitchell from the footnotes of *The Eastern Lily Gathered*, and woven together with the main question of women’s transformative Christian journeys. Mrs. Mitchell embellished every chapter with emotional poetry ascribed to Bala’s Christian devotion, shifting focus away from the primacy accorded to the Tagore family and to Gyanendra by Storrow. Her rewriting transformed Storrow’s tract by changing its genre—from Gyanendra’s memoirs about his wife to Bala’s own story of a Christian struggle, recounted from a woman’s perspective.

Sheshadri’s Marathi translation follows Mrs. Mitchell’s version closely. He embellished his account with artistic sketches and additional translated poetry replete with devotional *bhakti* tropes that extended and surpassed Mrs. Mitchell’s own poetry. Sheshadri also added his own ‘Afterword’, which issues an impassioned call to Marathi women to live independently, grow powerful and convert to Christianity as a modern and anti-colonial act of feminine agency.

Mediated between three missionary texts and four hermeneutic layers—those of Gyanendra, Storrow, Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri—Bala’s story encompassed the spatial and cultural intermediation between the Bengal Mission, the Bombay Presidency Mission and the United Provinces Missions, complicated by Englishmen and missionaries writing Christian memoirs for grieving Indian husbands and influential new converts. While Storrow’s text published in 1856 claimed to redeem grieving Christian husbands and native converts, it glorified the Tagore family and Gyanendra, who had converted in 1851 and who proved influential in Bengali and English circles. Storrow’s multivalent agenda in writing the text constitutes a strategy for extending solidarity to the India missions, and Mrs. Mitchell’s rewriting of Bala’s narrative foregrounds the role played by women missionaries in India, who assumed enough power to accord native women converts the individual agency of pursuing independent religious learning. Finally, at the vernacular level, Sheshadri’s translation perpetuated Mrs. Mitchell’s narrative of Bala. The Marathi text written by him is full of *bhakti* poems, which additionally calls on Marathi women to modernise, Christianise and unite as Indian women. Sheshadri’s translation, promoting Mrs. Mitchell’s version, produced Bala as their joint proto-feminist and modern object, while positing *The Eastern Lily* as a narrative instrument applauding Gyanendra’s conversion, but redundant outside Bengal.

**The subject, writers, translators, texts and translations**

Bala Shundoree’s conversion and its importance to Macaulayism have been discussed by scholars along with the emergence of modern genres of biographical writing in nineteenth-century Bengali society. Borthwick describes Gyanendra Mohan’s withdrawal from baptism as a matter of exigency, and Chattopadhyay presents Bala as a model convert from an English-educated, elite and *kulin* Bengali background, who was daughter-

---

22. Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 43.
in-law to the illustrious Tagore family. Remaining concerned with the documentation of the conversion ritual, however, Chattopadhyay claims that the ritualistic moment of ‘crossover’ or conversion remains elusive in Bala’s narrative. I would add to Chattopadhyay’s claim by asserting that Bala never converted ritually to Christianity at all; she died before her baptism. The absence of her ritual conversion remains important since it adds to Bala’s piety. Her husband’s withdrawal from baptism, and her own final and fatal illness before baptism, locate Bala within the ‘real’ Protestant domain: Christian conviction of heart and its otherworldly and divine recognition. Bala’s spiritual conversion was also produced by Gyanendra’s memoirs; his affected perspective, mediated by Storrow’s desire to please an esteemed convert, provided her story with an additional Christian layer—of the victimised, virtuous, heroic and martyred saint.

The categorisation of missionaries that included independent, critical, female/native elites and converts like Bala or Gyanendra produced by Macaulay’s educational policies seems untenable with the view of colonialism that is often imagined as contiguous and uniform. Social divisions between religious and racial categories in colonial Calcutta could have, in pragmatic terms, been ambivalent. Storrow, from the London Missionary Society, posted to Calcutta between 1848 and 1866, was perhaps invested in eliciting Gyanendra’s support, since, as a missionary fresh from England, he may have depended on the patronage provided by English-educated, elite Bengali converts. This is evidenced by his displacement of Bala’s suffering and death into a framework of piety that almost produces her as Gyanendra’s personal saint who provided spiritual impetus to his conversion.

Mrs. Mitchell’s transformative effect on Bala’s narrative became the basis for Rev. Sheshadri’s even more elaborate vernacular version. This was encouraged by Mrs. Mitchell’s husband, John Murray Mitchell, who significantly influenced Sheshadri’s missionary activities at Poona and Jalna. John Mitchell began as a leading Scottish missionary in Bombay, who led the Free Church Mission in Poona and Jalna after the dissolution of the Church of Scotland in 1843. The Mitchells later shifted to Calcutta in 1867, by which time Mrs. Mitchell’s rendition of Bala was already well in circulation. From the marginal treatment accorded Gyanendra in Mrs. Mitchell’s rendition, it becomes obvious that the Mitchells did not socially cultivate Bengali elite converts such as Rev. K.M. Banerjee and other Anglicised kulin families such as the Tagores. Instead, the Mitchells maintained their interest in Western India and Maharashtra, as evident from their support of Sheshadri.

Known as a firebrand Christian reformer at Indapur and then at Jalna, where he converted many lower and depressed castes to Christianity, Sheshadri’s earliest biographer,
Rev. G.R. Navalkar, describes him as belonging to a wealthy Brahman family from the nizam of Hyderabad’s territory. Praising Sheshadri as the ‘Brahmin of Brahmans’, Navalkar describes him as a man whose ‘natural excellences and disposition had been sublimated by Christian grace’.27 According to another biographer, Rajaiah Paul,28 Sheshadri first arrived at the Poona Sanskrit College in the 1830s and was deeply influenced by Rev. John Murray Mitchell and Rev. Robert Nesbit. Sheshadri studied English and other subjects such as Western philosophy and history, which allowed him free interaction with the missionaries. However, he had not considered Christian conversion initially. At this time, he was joined by his younger brother Shripat. The brothers moved to Bombay where they lived and studied together, and while Sheshadri’s own faith in Hinduism dwindled, Shripat’s conviction in Christianity was strengthened and proved a catalyst for his brother. It was finally due to Shripat’s lively presence and interaction, and Dr. John Wilson’s encouragement, that they both planned to convert to Christianity. They were baptised by Rev. Nesbit in 1843. But tragedy struck. Though Narayan Sheshadri was an adult and legally allowed to convert, Shripat was deemed underage at the age of twelve and legally banned from converting, despite his conviction. He was thereafter forcibly returned to his parents, and a habeas corpus was imposed on Rev. Nesbit, disallowing him from baptising Shripat. Shripat was subsequently ritually ‘purified’ amidst raging debates about the purification of his caste and questions of him re-entering Brahmanism.29 Although Shripat was forced to remain a Hindu, he had lost his caste purity due to his close interactions with Christian missionaries and Europeans. He was subsequently denounced as an outcaste in his Brahman family, which had paradoxically struggled to retrieve him from conversion. He was painfully ostracised for expressing the wish to convert and fed separately and kept outside the home.30 As a result of ill-treatment, Shripat finally succumbed to an untimely and tragic death in 1856, the same year that The Eastern Lily Gathered and Mrs. Mitchell’s rewriting of it were published. If we contextualise Sheshadri’s protective rage for his brother against Hindus, we have to also read Shripat’s experiences from Sheshadri’s perspective as gendered. Denied agency, oppressed, betrayed by family, helpless and subjected to clan and caste hierarchy, Shripat’s underage and sub-masculine body succumbed to religious hegemony and physical torture, and presented itself as the material ground for patriarchal action. It was this pain for young and gendered converts that perhaps attracted Sheshadri to Bala’s narrative, providing the impetus for translation.

Narayan Sheshadri’s separation from Shripat, and the latter’s death, turned Sheshadri’s Christian rhetoric into a fierce diatribe against Hindu society, its cruelty and superstitious conservatism. His anger is evident from tracts co-authored with Dr. John Wilson in 1853, such as The Darkness and the Dawn in India,31 where Sheshadri’s vicious shaming and castigation of Hindus can be read as deeply personal. The translation of The Eastern Lily Gathered was Sheshadri’s only Marathi text and, in contrast to his usual style, it is

27. G.R. Navalkar, The Rev. Narayan Sheshadri, D.D., Late of Jalna, Nizam’s Dominions (Bombay: Family Printing Press, 1893), p. 1.
28. Rajaiah Paul, Chosen Vessels: Lives of Ten Indian Christian Pastors of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century (Madras: The Christian Literature Society & the Senate of Serampore College, 1961), pp. 168–94.
29. Richard Tucker, ‘Hindu Traditionalism and Nationalist Ideologies in Nineteenth-Century Maharashtra’, in Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 10, no. 3 (1976), pp. 321–48.
30. Navalkar, The Rev. Narayan Sheshadri, p. 7.
31. Narayan Sheshadri and John Wilson, The Darkness and the Dawn in India: Two Missionary Discourses (Edinburgh: William Whyte & Co, 1853).
unusually tender and full of Christian bhakti. Refining Mrs. Mitchell’s narrative of fierce individualism further, Sheshadri explores the loving submission, piety and devotion of a budding convert with great sensitivity. He combines piety adroitly with women’s individualistic spiritual expression, and joins it with the question of modernity and its contribution to the nation. There are more than a few similarities between the obstacles and betrayals faced by Bala, who was unable to convert before dying, and Shripat, who was prevented from converting and died as a result of discrimination. It was in the vernacular that Sheshadri revealed his emotional response to Shripat’s experience, by placing it within the translation of Bala’s story.

Rev. Narayan Sheshadri’s translation

Sheshadri’s translation of Mrs. Mitchell’s version was published in 1868 and is replete with emotional poems of Christian bhakti. It must be clarified, however, that before bhakti emerges as an analytical concept for Indic religions, it remains an emotion expressed by Hindu converts to translate their Christian devotion. Therefore, there are no fixed methods available for identifying bhakti within the literal use of Marathi terms. The vernacular translation of Christian devotion necessitated the use of bhakti terms and tropes reflective of emotions. Terms such as swayāṃbhā ishwar (ingenerate God), stuti (praise of God), prīti (love of God), bhakti-bhāvanā (emotions of devotion), bhakta (devotee), parmeśwar (eternal God) and sāṣṭra (scripture) are liberally sprinkled throughout Sheshadri’s poems and translation, similar to many Christian authors of the time. And, yet, the use of these terms within vernacular Christian texts cannot be reduced to Hindu devotion; it must instead be viewed as the vernacular communication and translation of Christian devotion.

Sheshadri’s linguistic and political location in Maharashtra however impacted the text’s vernacular form, which is immediately evident from the way he writes proper nouns, with Bala’s name becoming emblematic of this change. While Storrow calls Bala, ‘Bala Shoon-doree Chukkerbutty Tagore’, using the Anglicised–Bengali version of what was accepted in high-society Calcutta in the mid nineteenth century, Mrs. Mitchell translates Bala’s name to mean a ‘beautiful girl’ in Bengali. Sheshadri’s Marathi transcription of her name, on the other hand, identifies her as Bālā Sundarābāī Ṭhākūr. Not only does the shift from Bālā to Bālā change the aesthetics and connotation of the name, from that of a beautiful girl to a child, the names Shundoree and Sundarābāī are differently aesthetic too. The latter Marathi name is located within the domains of domestic respectability rather than feminine beauty. Sheshadri, therefore, transforms Bālā the beautiful girl into Bālā the respectable child who exercised her free will, in accordance with his own internal narrative about Shripat. Also, he translates her surname as Ṭhākūr, a name which is only identified in Bengal as Tagore; outside Bengal, the name Ṭhākūr only indicates the feudal landowning castes. Spelling Bala’s name to mean child, translating her name from Shundoree to Sundarābāī, and removing her from the cultural image that an Anglicised name such as Tagore enjoyed in nineteenth-century Bengal, rendered Bala unrecognisable to the elite social context in Bengal. Perhaps Sheshadri felt that this translation brought her closer to

32. Rev. D.S. Sawarkar’s biography of his father’s conversion is also infused with similar emotions and bhakti terminology: cf. Sawarkar, The Subhedar’s Son.
33. Mitchell, Bala Soonderee Tagore, p. 4.
convert life among ordinary Marathi women, enabling Bala’s narrative figure to symbolise the universal category of Indian Christian women across region and culture.

Sheshadri’s narrative abjures all association with Storrow, instead following and enhancing upon Mrs. Mitchell’s version, which was written for an audience in Western India. But while Mrs. Mitchell writes Bala’s narrative by foregrounding a woman’s perspective, Sheshadri rewrites Bala’s narrative from a convert’s perspective. Even as he follows Mrs. Mitchell’s chapter plans of describing Bala’s birth and childhood, attraction to Christianity, difficulties and death, he adds demonstrative sketches and elaborate poems that enhance themes of piety, bhakti and the path to conversion; his elaborate poems are, moreover, more than just a translation of Mrs. Mitchell’s poems. Sheshadri lengthens his translation by extending an exhortation to all Marathi women at the end. He asks Marathi women to resolve regional differences and learn from a Bengali lady’s story of conversion, and imbibe her courage and grace in their own lives, as they advance towards conversion.

Both Mitchell and Sheshadri write of Gyanendra in ambivalent ways, referring to him as an impressionable youngster hailing from a grand family and well-renowned educational institutions. For them, he was to be pitied for being influenced by the battle-winds of his time. Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri also remain uninterested in absolving Gyanendra, in contrast to Storrow. In fact, they condemn Gyanendra in strong words for the sin (pāp) of abandoning Bala when she needed his support. That they were distanced from the Bengali mission is also evidenced in the way Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri often switch important names. Therefore, while Storrow writes of the widow Moheshwari Devi being under Gyanendra’s father’s care, Mitchell and Sheshadri declare her to be under Krishna Kumar’s (Gyanendra’s uncle’s) care. Since Krishna Kumar is not even mentioned in Storrow’s original text, it becomes clear that Mitchell and Sheshadri had little interest in Bengali elite genealogies. While Marathi missionaries like Sheshadri were interested in expressing bhakti, gendered narratives among British missionaries such as Mrs. Mitchell remained interested in highlighting women’s experiences. For Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri, their portrayal of Moheshwari Devi, translated into Marathi as Maheshwaribai, was far more intimate than Storrow’s depiction, which used formal and respectful Bengali terms. Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri both recount the theme of Maheshwaribai’s separation from home on Bala’s death far more poignantly than Storrow, describing the separation between the women as personal. While Mrs. Mitchell tells the story as a suffering widow’s struggle to follow her religious passion, Sheshadri describes it as a convert’s struggle. The suggestion that all converts necessarily undergo the same struggle reveals Sheshadri’s opinion about converts forming a gendered and oppressed social category reminiscent of Shripat, depicted in narrative hues of pathos, longing, injustice and suffering. This was obviously untrue in many cases since Gyanendra underwent no such suffering. He converted to Christianity after Bala’s death, and he married Kamalmani, the daughter of his convertor, Rev. K.M. Banerjee. He subsequently won a court case that restored his rights to Tagore ancestral property and to Bala’s dowry, and moved to London in 1859 to subsequently join the staff of the University of London.

34. Uma Chakravarti, ‘Gender, Caste and Labour: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood’, in Economic & Political Weekly, Vol. 30, no. 36 (1995), pp. 2248–56.
35. Rakhal Das Haldar, The English Diary of an Indian Student, 1861–62: Being of a Scribbling Journal (Dacca: The Ashutosh Library, 1903).
Sheshadri’s exhortation to Marathi women titled ‘Maharashtra Deśātil Strīyāms Bodh’ (lit. awareness for women from Maharashtra)\(^{36}\) constitutes his book’s most important para-text. In the form of an independent chapter, it is situated at the end of the translation and posited as a conclusion authored by the ‘translator’. Sheshadri asks Marathi women to participate with women like Bala in the modern project of nation-building, as women from every region in India can unite under the banner of ‘Swadeshi’. He writes of how modern women have increasing opportunities for gaining education and schooling in comparison to Bala, despite her belonging to a wealthy and liberal family. He blames the lack of education among Indian women on corrupting and oppressive Hindu principles encoded within the Manusmṛti, which denigrate Hindu women. For Sheshadri, sin is genderless and equally present among both men and women. It can only be rectified through conversion to Christianity, and by following Bala’s example. Sheshadri demarcates four criteria important for women that can free them from Hindu oppression and take them forward on the path of Christian enlightenment: 1) the importance of intelligent discernment: thoughtful awareness about oppressive Hindu religious practices, even if Hinduism constitutes ancient and traditional culture in India. Sheshadri requests women to use their own education, learning and intelligence to undertake an independent journey that explores true religious pathways; 2) decision-making: exercising staunch loyalty, whereby women remain on the true path once they discover it with the help of independent and intelligent thinking, that is, as a product of educated discernment. Bala resisted her husband’s withdrawal from Christian baptism even though she was devoted to him because of her own intelligent and educated decision to convert; 3) choosing happiness: Bala was happy with her decision to convert, especially with the thought that Christ would wipe all her sins away and provide her with eternal peace in the next world. She was convinced and overjoyed to be forgiven her sins and lost all fear of death the moment faith entered her heart. She derived comfort and security from the knowledge that her soul would find God’s love; and 4) gaining respect: Sheshadri exhorts women to remember that Christian faith and society in India treats women as respectful equals.

According to Sheshadri, only enlightened and educated men, whose eyes were opened to Christ, knew how to treat their wives as equals. Christians consider women’s souls to be as immortal as the souls of men. Sheshadri points to how the country required enlightened and educated women like Bala, who would lead their sisters on the right path. In the end, he quotes Napoleon Bonaparte, who had blamed France’s lack of development on its lack of educated and enlightened mothers. Sheshadri concludes with a few lines on how motherhood has played an important role in Christian women’s lives, and requests Indian women to help consolidate a bright future for India and avert it from a fate similar to that of France.

**The hybrid and third voice**

All the three texts, written by Storrow, Mrs. Mitchell and Sheshadri, establish Bala’s or Moheshwari Devi’s presence in their narratives as a third or hybrid voice. While Bala’s presence at the interstices of these narratives is encountered through the lens of the

\(^{36}\) Rev. N. Sheshadri, Balā Sundarābāī Thākār: Bala Soondree Tagore, A Narrative of the Conversion of a Hindoo Lady to the Christian Religion (Bombay: Bombay Tract and Book Society, 1868), pp. 46–54.
authors, she is simultaneously silenced. Her own voice does not assert itself without mediation from those who wrote her, across overlapping identities and interests.

Storrow, who was closest to Bala’s narrative space in Bengal, presented her through the emotional lens of her husband, Gyanendra, whose conversion and importance to the Bengal Mission reconciled Storrow’s interest in Bala as a half-convert, whom Storrow declared to be spiritually Christian. By associating Gyanendra’s conversion to Bala’s last and dying wish, Storrow sidestepped two dangers. He avoided accusing Gyanendra of heathenism and patriarchal oppression by not positing Bala as Gyanendra’s direct victim. Storrow wrote her as a martyr instead, whose Christian sacrifice gained Gyanendra’s conversion for the mission. Storrow’s text is circuitous and ambivalent. He demonstrates women’s burdens associated with conversion, and links them curiously to the exoneration of men like Gyanendra, who, despite oppressing women and converts, are presented as victims of patriarchy. Storrow projects his own ambivalence onto Gyanendra by conveniently recounting the latter’s guilt as repentance, so as to absolve him of it.

Storrow portrays Bala as pure and saintly, a martyr whose education at Gyanendra’s behest inaugurated a further dimension of spiritual awakening within her. But at the time Gyanendra was teaching her, her spiritual preparedness and wish to convert were unknown to him. Therefore, Gyanendra’s superior position as husband in a Hindu marriage mingle ambivalently with the image of the selfless Christian teacher painted by Storrow. Storrow’s (and Gyanendra’s) narrative depicts Bala as an oriental feminine object civilised by the mission, who was simultaneously characterised by a spiritual fecundity and heathenness, redeemed by her longing to be spiritually awakened by Christian knowledge. She subsequently awakened the masculine but still heathen Gyanendra, urging him towards true spiritual and physical knowledge. She was then like the heathen Eve in the mission garden, whose longing for Christian knowledge ultimately led to the death and expulsion of the Hindu within her, according her everlasting Christian life. Storrow’s tolerant depiction of Bala and Gyanendra’s Hindu marital alliance, despite his criticism of Hinduism, depicts a story of ambivalently competitive but transformative piety, rife with marital politics. He further presents this as the perfect Anglican mix of Catholic and Protestant virtues by hailing the feminine Bala as the first true Christian yet, despite this, disallowing her from taking precedence over the intellectual Gyanendra.

Mrs. Mitchell, too, fashioned her own transformation of Storrow’s text into a woman-centred narrative, to mirror Bala’s power of transforming her marital life with Gyanendra. And though Mrs. Mitchell did not use her woman-power to derail men or husbands, her articulation of this woman-power is suffused with the poetics of religious self-determination and the condemnation of masculine sin. Similarly, it is uncertain whether Sheshadri’s anger and helplessness at Shripat’s death reflected Gyanendra’s guilt at being unable to help Bala. Also, since Sheshadri joined Mrs. Mitchell in condemning Gyanendra as a sinner, it is doubtful that Sheshadri ever stopped blaming himself for Shripat’s tragedy. Sheshadri’s translation of Bala’s name as ‘Bālā’, instead, introduces the narrative trope of innocence within the story, resonating with his own emotions for Shripat. Therefore, though Sheshadri controlled Bala’s narrative by using her story as an exemplar for a didactic para-text about women, modernity, education and nationalism, in the end her narrative exerted power over him too. The link between Bala and Shripat perhaps became an instrument of repentance for Sheshadri, as it had for Gyanendra. Similarly, while Mrs. Mitchell’s woman-centred narrative exerted power over Storrow’s exoneration of a
convert husband’s guilty memoir, Bala’s gendered subjugation by both Storrow and Gyanendra perhaps reflected Mrs. Mitchell’s own powerlessness as a missionary wife in India. It is clear, for example, that Mrs. Mitchell’s text posited a hierarchy between Bala and Gyanendra, in which Bala was depicted as a helpless victim.

Coming to a discussion about foregrounding Christian piety or bhakti, it is difficult to ascertain whose bhakti the three texts describe: the piety of the authors and translators? Bala’s piety? Shripat’s piety? Or Gyanendra’s piety? Or were these texts organised around an unquestioned acceptance of Christian piety that then served to conceal other voices, especially Bala’s voice. While hierarchical layers between the experience and teaching of piety put Sheshadri on par with Gyanendra and Mrs. Mitchell on the one hand, it establishes parity between Storrow and Gyanendra on the other. This isolates and silences Bala and Moheshwari Devi. It is difficult to ascertain, for example, whether Bala’s response to Christianity was a romantic response to her husband. We can only suggest that her attraction to Christianity could also be dedicated to fostering intimate companionability with her husband, who discussed modernity, philosophy, religion and English with her till late into the night—a companionship that other women of her age and kulin society did not experience. It is also unknown whether her urge that he convert was more a wifely control over marital intimacy or Christian passion sealed with a dying kiss. It is true that Bala resisted her husband’s withdrawal from baptism. But whether she was fighting for Christian conviction or to reinstate security for their newly established conjugalty is impossible to determine. Similarly, Christian reform, and modern religiosity in Bengal, accepted and advocated widow remarriage. It is therefore unclear whether Moheshwari Devi, suffering a kulin widow’s life, responded to Christian reform because it raised her social position, and perhaps introduced the possibility of remarriage. She was Bala’s ardent friend and they studied Christian texts together. However, it is difficult to ascertain what Moheshwari Devi really admired Bala for when she considered the Bible to be more precious than rubies. Was it the intimacy of the late night lessons that Bala and Gyanendra’s marital life encompassed that imbued Moheshwari Devi’s Bible with a ruby sheen—perhaps a dream she wanted to replicate with a Christian husband? Also, it is difficult not to associate Gyanendra’s conversion with K.M. Banerjee’s daughter, who Gyanendra later married.

The impoverished are often denounced for converting to Christianity for material gains, and therefore condemned as religiously inauthentic. However, could Christian piety be conceived any differently than prayers or vows to deities, expressing the desire to be saved and praying for rescue from oppression? Why would piety be pure only if it were already replete with material fulfilment and privilege? Also, was not a Christian devotee definitionally meek, impoverished, sick and sinful? Why could therefore a Christian devotee not request her Christian deity to remove her sorrows? Viswanathan writes of conversion as a possible form of dissent. Since it is this dissent that entails the convert’s separation from one religious group and simultaneous integration into another, Viswanathan foregrounds conversion to suffer from an absence of language, wherein piety is obscured by the communal production of conversion.

---

37. Cf. Nathaniel Roberts, To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).
38. Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. xi–xvii.
imagined as a communal binary, Viswanathan’s identification of its obscured language may be addressed through vernacular articulations of bhakti that became an instrument of dissent. One could view Bala’s journey towards an independent and Christian relationship with her husband or Moheshwari Devi’s efforts to break free from widowhood as marks of dissent against Hindu patriarchal family oppression.

Storrow’s critique of Hinduism carefully avoids accusing Gyanendra. This paradox reflected the strategic importance of promoting opinions held by the Mission, and the careful avoidance of missionary interest in friendships with rich and powerful Hindu patrons. Mrs. Mitchell’s critique of Hindu masculine sin, on the other hand, is a missionary proto-feminist appeal that ‘saves’ women trapped in abusive Hindu relationships, presenting the conversion of Indian women as a critique of Hinduism. First-generation Christian converts and missionaries like Sheshadri critiqued Hinduism based on their personal experiences, experiences that were often expressed in the vernacular and largely out of reach for most Europeans. Furthermore, convert Krista-Bhakti drew encouragement from indigenous piety that was historically inaccessible to the British. Sheshadri’s condemnation of the Manusmrti is, for example, far more detailed than Storrow’s own ideological denouncement of heathenism promoted by the Mission. For convert texts and translations, therefore, a critique of Hinduism was combined with personally painful experiences and expressions of bhakti to Krista, wherein Christ was considered a personal deity. Ideas of a personal deity were moreover not alien to the historiography of bhakti. Devotion to a personal deity remains a historic characteristic of bhakti-based distinctions between Shaivites, Vaishnavites and Jains, even in times preceding the Christian mission. Sheshadri identifies the importance of women’s happiness in his final section, exhorting his audience to allow women informed, valid and rightful decisions in a journey towards Christian piety. Returning to Viswanathan’s thesis of conversion as dissent, Sheshadri’s appeal to approach modernity as bhakti, or considering bhakti to be an instrument of modernity, was a call to express dissent against Hindu patriarchy through integration with Christianity. As a language of social rebellion and reform, Sheshadri’s combination of Krista-Bhakti and feminism became prescriptive for Christian women and their claim to nation-building, accompanied by an alliance with anti-colonial and anti-Hindu Swadeshi.

The last point concerns language, since both Storrow and Mrs. Mitchell agree on Bala considering English as the ‘original’ Christian language. It is evident that Bala considered English to be a religious language equalling Hebrew, Greek, or perhaps Arabic. She learned English to read the ‘original’ Bible since Gyanendra, as a rationalist, refused to teach her the prophetic and miraculous portions. It is however difficult to discern whether she learned English believing it to be a ‘revealed’ language or whether she learned English to impress Gyanendra. What constituted the border between a language of intimacy in an unusual marital union and spiritual expression? It is therefore difficult to qualify Bala’s learning of English either as an expression of marital intimacy or as spiritual attraction to

39. Cf. Meera Kosambi, Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words: Selected Works (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
40. Cf. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, ‘Sramanas Against the Tamil Way: Jains, as Others in Tamil Saiva Literature’, in John E. Cort (ed.), Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 163–85.
41. Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold, pp. xvi–xvii.
revealed language. Though predictable relationships between English, missionary and colonial hierarchy foreground oppression, the almost-erotic empowerment of the ‘Word’ as constituting dissent cannot be erased. Bala, as a young bride, not only received her first Christian learning and the Biblical word within an unusual variety of first love with her charismatic and much older husband, but both she and her husband received Christianity in colonial India as elite and well-educated Indians who knew British missionaries and English teachers as friends.

Conclusion

Storrow and Mrs. Mitchell’s categorisation of the mutually pleasurable language of friendship and power as a revealed and religious language oppressed the vernacular expression of Christian piety, as if recognising it as dissent. Sheshadri, too, finally controlled Bala’s narrative by scripting her story as an example of nationalist and Christian Swadeshi women, rendering her unable to withdraw from Christianity, express doubts about her husband’s convictions, or think and write poetry in Bengali. Her identity was translated into that of a non-woman and a child, a non-Bengali, and a non-Anglicised symbol of an Indian Christian goddess, who exemplified the ideal mother within emerging ideas of Indian nationhood. The Marathi translation therefore reduces Bala as much as her English biographies by casting her in a role embedded within Indian belonging that Sheshadri perhaps wanted to accord Shripat. Sheshadri’s use of devotional poetry served only one purpose: to open avenues for a nativist expression of Indian Christian-ness among women converts. This was an opportunity foreclosed to Bala, whose Christianity and conversion remained ensconced within the bhadrakul cultures of Macaulayism. Though each version of Bala’s biography represented different purposes and effects, such as the foregrounding of feminist missionaries, and the importance of conversion, and missions, Sheshadri’s Marathi translation added yet another layer to it: that of anti-colonial nativism among Christian women. This new layer of being Swadeshi Christian women had not been articulated earlier by British missionaries such as Mrs. Mitchell or Storrow.

I would like to conclude by pondering briefly on the presence of Bala’s own agency, which was usurped by her biographers. Anagol presents women’s life histories in her feminist treatise on Maharashtra and Karnataka, describing how converts and women enjoyed a sense of their own internal agency without recreating patriarchy or reproducing colonialism. Women’s agency, an agency situated at the fulcrum of Indo-British interactions, led to the formation of many civic and modern cultural institutions led by Indian women.

Applying Anagol’s ideas about women’s internal agency at the interstices of colonial presence to Bala brings us to the essential question underlying all her three biographies: Bala’s independent and transformative decision of converting to Christianity that opposed husband, family and society, and ultimately escaped mission control. This, Bala’s own agential decision, is the essential component that remains independent of all her narratives, and yet anchors together all her biographers who attempt to rewrite her. Her agency shines out at times from the overlapping folds of her inadequate biographies to subvert narrative agendas underlining the importance of Christian virtue, the significant

42. Cf. Padma Anagol, The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 1–55.
achievements of Indian missions, Indian women’s conversion accorded primacy by British missionary wives, and the emergence of nascent upper-caste Christian nationalism expressed through vernacular tropes of *bhakti*.

**Acknowledgements**

I want to thank the *South Asia* reviewers of this article for refining my arguments. I also thank Hephzibah Israel for providing me encouragement to write on conversion and translation in Maharashtra.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.