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# Can Christians Be Bhaktas? A Sanskritic View from Central India, c. 1850

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MY essay focuses on an undeservedly obscure individual, Somanath Vyas, whose name hardly registers among South Asia scholars. Recently, however, Somanath's writings have elicited interest among Sanskritists in Central India where he lived. Of these, I focus on the *Kalandikaprakasa*, composed between 1847 and 1850. A major treatise in *wissenschaftliches* and *religionswissenschaftliches* Sanskrit, it discusses knowledge, scientific and religious, that the author, a traditionally-educated Hindu pandit, deemed worthy of knowing. Importantly, this knowledge included a knowledge of Christianity. For an era rife with interreligious polemics, to advocate on behalf of Christianity as a religion worth knowing in relation to its own self-understanding seems to me remarkable in light of the fact that Somanath at one time had endeavored to counteract Christianity.

That Christianity might be a religion worth knowing for its own sake, apart from its claim to be *the* true religion, seems an unlikely response to the frictions and incongruities that missionary propagation of Christianity almost invariably produced. That, however, is the response Somanath exemplifies. The text's *religionswissenschaftliches* features are of interest because it was the kind of response to Christianity one hears little about, the reason being that many scholars, myself included, pay more attention to individuals who converted to Christianity than to the many who remained Hindu while allotting to it a place in their

understanding of things religious. To broaden the purview, one needs to go beyond the routine boundaries of 'encounter' studies into India's larger intellectual response to Europe.

## From Religion to Science and Back Again

Somanath Vyas (1807-1885) was a Nagar Brahmin from Gwalior. His father, Omkar, had become a sannyasi, and Somanath would too, in the time-honored pursuit of salvific knowledge. For him, however, the knowledge worth knowing was worldly and empirical as well as other-worldly and transempirical. Until 1839, fragments from Somanath's past are few. That year he left for Sehore, a town where the East India Company's political agent oversaw British affairs with Bhopal. Somanath had been invited there to teach Sanskrit in a school that had been established a decade earlier by a Major Hendly. At the time, the school was under Lancelot Wilkinson of the Bombay civil service, who became Somanath's patron, friend, and religious 'other.'

A pragmatic visionary, Wilkinson (1804-1841) was an 'improver' whose projects reflected Christian values and Enlightenment ideals. Wilkinson went out to India after being trained at Haileybury (the Company college), to which he had gone from the Cumbrian village of Crosby-Ravensworth where he was reared. The first trace of Wilkinson in India comes from South Konkan where he was a clerk in the

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*kaccheri* of the Collector, Thomas Best Jervis, a great advocate of 'useful knowledge.' On a proposal to establish a school society Wilkinson's signature has been affixed. Throughout his career, Wilkinson was a proponent of Indian-language education, and when Anglicists enjoyed the upper-hand with the Governor-General, William Bentinck, Wilkinson was one of their most ardent opponents. As he moved from post to post, Wilkinson mingled with local scholars conversant with the sciences of Indian antiquity, astronomy (*jyotihsastra*) in particular. From such individuals, an endangered species, he acquired a knowledge of Bhaskara's 12th-century *Siddhantasiromani* [Crest Jewel of Astronomical Systems], an example of Indian science at its most sophisticated.

Wilkinson convinced himself that the distance from Bhaskara to Copernicus, from geocentrism to heliocentrism, was insignificant scientifically, and that progress could be effected from within the scientific traditions of India without rejecting India's antiquity for Europe's modernity. Standing in the way, however, were the imponderables of religion, just as dogma had impeded scientific progress in Europe. In India, the obstacles were similar: popular cosmology, grounded in sacred texts – the Puranas especially, which, besides being geocentric, perpetuated the notion of the earth as a flat, circular plane – differed diametrically from the cosmology of the exact sciences. Bhaskara's rehabilitation and the traditions of scientific rationality he exemplified became Wilkinson's driving obsession; in this, his endeavors were remarkably successful. From here, I concentrate on the religious and cultural dynamics engendered in Sehere by Wilkinson's project, since these dynamics had few parallels elsewhere.

It needs to be said that Sehere was hardly a backwater. Though distant from the metropolitan epicenters of change, Benares and Mathura were nearby in the east, Ujjain and Jaipur in the west. In the eighteenth century under Sawai Jai Singh, such places had been noteworthy for communities that cultivated the sciences. An in-between-somewhere-and-somewhere-else sort of place, Malwa, as the surrounding area is called, was a crossroads on

the Indian information highway (Bayly 1996: 259-60).

When Wilkinson arrived in 1832, however, Sehere was nearly deserted; with the Maratha collapse came depopulation and unrest. Wilkinson's predecessor had founded a school for the children who remained, but this was dysfunctional when Wilkinson arrived. Taking the situation in hand, he dispatched his *kaccheri* accountant and court clerk, both Muslims, to teach Urdu, Persian, and Arabic at the school in their off-hours, while he himself taught the rudiments of mathematics, astronomy, and geography. He also busied himself promoting the school by petitioning the General Committee of Public Instruction in Calcutta for assistance. The Committee tired of hearing from him and granted a small subsidy. With diplomatic arm-twisting, Bhopal and several Rajput principalities (Narsingarh, Rajgarh, Khilchipur) made up the deficit. The Sehere school still exists; in 1998, I found that locals refer to its foremost patron reverently as "Lar" (Lord) Wilkinson.

A contemporary report to the Committee in Calcutta mentions that 159 students were enrolled in 1836, of which only eight studied the sciences of Indian antiquity, while the majority studied the languages of Islam. In its heyday, the school was perceived by outsiders as a Sanskrit *pathasala*, a traditional academy of Hindu learning, although it was more like a Muslim *madrasa*. To top it off, the school had a Christian as its headmaster, or *guru*. It was not for its ecumenism, however, that the Sehere school is remembered, but for its revitalization of science and the integration of Indian and European astronomy. In this pursuit, Wilkinson was imaginative but occasionally ruthless, and his actions give some credence to the idea of 'colonial science.' An example would be his dismissal of a "teacher of Hindoo mathematics" who proved to be

wholly ignorant of the true bearing and shape of the sciences he professed. He knew how to calculate an eclipse, but he had learned the calculations by rote and believed the earth to be an immense circular plane 400,000 miles in width and that the moon was twice as far from

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earth as the sun is, as asserted by the Poorans. *This entailed upon me the trouble of teaching him the rationality of his own science from his own books and as much of our system as he could be made to comprehend.*<sup>1</sup> [emphasis added]

*Here we have an instance of a pedagogical maxim I find emblematic of Wilkinson's pragmatic Enlightenment Orientalism: to effect modernity one must first invoke antiquity.*

As Wilkinson made Sehere a clearing house for the Copernicanized sciences of Indian antiquity, he began to exercise influence over Anglo-Indian institutions such as the Benares Sanskrit College. To that institution he sent a Sehere graduate, Bapu Deva Sastri (Nrsimha Deva Parafijpe, 1821-1890), its first professor of Indian and Western astronomy. When candidates for the professorship in astronomy at the Pune Sanskrit College were screened, essays had to be submitted on Bhaskara's *Siddhantasiromani* that Wilkinson and his pandits evaluated. Sehere wielded so much influence that pandits were wary of getting on Wilkinson's bad side, knowing that his blessing could affect their livelihoods – and his curse. There are also Wilkinson's intemperate criticisms of the semi-sacrosanct Puranas. It might be politically correct to dismiss all this as 'colonial science,' but that would overlook how much actual science education was being done at Sehere dialogically, with no other coercive means than India's own traditions of rational enquiry.

In the early years of the Sehere school, 'conversions' to Copernicanism were gradual and usually occurred over a period of years. That was the case with Soobajee Ramacandra Bapoo, the preeminent advocate of heliocentrism in the circle Wilkinson assembled. Soobajee was an Alladi brahmin from Andhra who had officiated at a temple in Chandrapur (Chanda, in Maharashtra) where the *Bhagavata Purana* had been recited by his Vaisnavite forebears. Familiar with the *Bhagavata's* cosmology but ignorant of India's sciences, Soobajee was able to "touch every prejudice" of his coreligionists "with the soft hand of a friend" when he finally embraced the new paradigm and composed a

commentary on Bhaskara's *Siddhantasiromani* to demonstrate its updatability and compatibility with Copernicanism.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, there was the "iron fist" of Omkar Bhatt, an Audambar brahmin whose forebears had migrated from Gujarat. Over-awed by Europe and its sciences, Omkar denounced the Puranas in a treatise on terrestrial geography, the *Bhugolsar*, in which he argued that the Puranas were full of lies (*jhuth*).

Either way, the demythologized and detheologized science propagated by the Sehere Copernicans provoked protest from traditionalists who worried that transempirical verities were being endangered. Wilkinson's pandits were threatened with expulsion from caste, their books were banned, debates were held, and the anti-Copernicans of Benares and Pune campaigned to defend the non-contradictoriness of the Puranas and the sciences of Indian antiquity. In these frictions, nothing was essentially new; India's own domestic dialogue over religion and science had been conducted from antiquity in similar ways. Although it was India as its own "other" that India was confronting as much as Europe itself, standing at the point of tangency between two traditions of rational inquiry enabled the Sehere circle to see both sets of sciences – India's and Europe's – better than if they had studied only one. What they saw was that science is essentially the same, regardless of cultural context.

The anti-Copernicans who bedeviled Sehere were astute at least in recognizing that transempirical verities are indeed affected when paradigm shifts occur. Wilkinson's agenda in fact went beyond empirical matters to faith, morality, and reform, and in this his inner circle could only go so far. Wilkinson crusaded against female infanticide, rampant among Rajputs, and enlisted Omkar Bhatt, who in his "iron fist" fashion composed a tract that assailed "their avarice in killing their daughters to save the expense of giving a dowry."<sup>3</sup> When Wilkinson's attention turned to widow remarriage, Soobajee fired off a broadside in favor of it for girls who had not yet reached puberty.

When it came to attacking caste, Soobajee balked. Wilkinson had distributed copies of an ancient anti-brahminical tirade, the *Vajrasuci* (attributed, inaccurately, to the Buddhist

Asvaghosa) because he envisioned a science-induced leveling of society that would insure access for all communities to the knowledge emanating from Sehere. Let non-brahmins have all the science they want, Soobajee argued; science cannot make anyone a brahmin, any more than neighing will make a donkey a horse. And with this disappointing sarcasm from an otherwise fascinating figure, I turn to Somanath Vyas after a final comment on Wilkinson.

Wilkinson was a social egalitarian, but his Sehere projects were plainly riddled with hubris. After all, India's antiquity was being invoked to effect Europe's modernity. Some bought into this and were overawed by Europe; others registered dissent. Nevertheless, Wilkinson's efforts were rewarded with so much success – his Sehere circle called him the *yavanacharya*, the "barbarian teacher" – and his influence over institutions and appointments so far-reaching that he aspired to also become a *dharmacharya*, a teacher of morality and religion whose invocation of Hindu antiquity might affect India's conversion to Christianity. Still, Wilkinson was a Christian theist, not an evangelical, and his concerns were mainly ethical; he was also a gradualist who envisioned a Christianization of India from within, without invoking Jesus Christ, just as India's astronomy had been Copernicanized without invoking Copernicus: "The strange things we [Christians] teach, not also taught in their own books," he declared, "are but few": "I always argue as far as possible within the range of Hindu comprehension." The following quotation tells us that Wilkinson intended to invoke the *Sant* traditions to effect India's spiritual regeneration:

The works of Kubeer, of Dadoo Punth, of Ramdas, Soor Dur Das, Nanuck and Gobind Singh and other sectarians ought to be more studied by gentlemen having the moral improvement of our Hindoo subjects at heart, than they are. They give us exactly that assistance in the moral department which the *Siddhants* do in the intellectual and mathematical departments. They decry rituals and ceremonies and pilgrimages and the ordinance of caste as Christ did and attach merit only to that which deserves

the name – universal charity ... – a code of morality, the Christian's code, might and ought to be formed, from Hindoo authorities – old or new – and used as a schoolbook.<sup>4</sup>

### Christianity in the 'Circle of Knowledge'

Wilkinson never wrote that schoolbook. Instead, a treatise of anti-Hindu Christian apologetics in Sanskrit, the *Matapariksa* [Examination of Religions, 1839] by John Muir (1810-1882), a Scottish civil servant, was put into the hands of Sehere pandits. Muir's *Matapariksa* exemplified the classic 'civilizing mission' justification for colonialism by attributing Europe's scientific progress and technical prowess to Christianity. Correspondingly, Muir argued that India's (alleged) stagnation in these respects was the fault of Vedanta, which he characterized as world-denying. Unsurprisingly, the *Matapariksa* conjured up an image of India as a madhouse of naked, enstatic gymnosophists, unlike industrious Britain where people prospered because they were Christian and worked hard. In short, Vedanta (viz. monistic/non-dualistic Vedanta) lacked the 'practical utility' that Christianity had (Young 2006).

Already enrolled in Wilkinson's Copernican advocate corps and the author of texts popularizing heliocentrism, Somanath attempted to refute the *Matapariksa* in a Sanskrit rejoinder called the *Mataparikhasiksa* [A Lesson for the *Matapariksa*], which upheld Dharma as the ground of India's identity. In his perspective, Dharma was a better ground of identity than technology, as was the case in Europe. As a religion, Christianity might be a good fit for the average "skilled mechanic," the engineers and entrepreneurs who came out to India from England to build the steamships that ply the Ganges and hot-air balloons that fly in the sky to the amazement of spectators on the ground; Christianity might be a match for people in public administration (*niti*) – a dig, perhaps, at Muir (and Wilkinson?) – but it was ill-suited for Hindus like himself who discerned in all religions, including Christianity, an overarching, transempirical unity (*mataikya*) and non-contradictoriness (*matavirodha*). That is to say,

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where Muir saw an interreligious discord of doctrine, Somanath saw a concord of function; and on the capacity to discern that higher, transcendent concord Somanath staked his claim to having superior religious insight.

At the point of tangency, this was how Somanath reduced frictions and incongruities to matters of insignificance. It is a way of resolving the manyness of religions that has a good deal in common with later Neo-Hinduism. Somanath, however, evinced no interest in the particularities of Christianity; his energies were invested in demonstrating that Christianity is merely a form without content that one would need to know in order to understand it.

Despite his antipathy toward Muir, Somanath felt profound respect for Wilkinson as a *bhakta* (devotee) of the Lord Jesus Christ, as he called him in the colophon of a treatise on the earth's revolution around the sun.<sup>5</sup> Over time, he also began to think it important to have a knowledge of Christianity's concrete particularities. Whether this change of mind came about because of his long acquaintance with a European who had widened the horizon of his awareness in many other respects, or because Christianity seemed less threatening and the Dharma more resilient, I am unsure. Whatever the reason, this was a *volte face*. No other individual of the time went as far as Somanath in presenting Christianity on its own terms without succumbing to it, ridiculing it, or using it as a basis for reconstructing the Dharma.

To illustrate, I adduce Somanath's *Kalandikaprakasa* (Sharma 1993), an encyclopedia of empirical and transempirical knowledge which allots a sizeable niche to Christianity. The *Kalandikaprakasa* purports to be a *vidyacakra*, a 'circle of knowledge' circumscribing all knowledge worth knowing. One might call it 'systematics,' but more is involved than theology; the sciences of Indian antiquity are there and those of Europe too. At the center are the revealed, transempirical verities of the Veda; toward the periphery, however, knowledge becomes more empirical. It is there that one finds Western sciences (*gatavidya*, 'physics,' *rasayanasastra*, 'chemistry,' etc.). Structurally, one might say that knowledge at the center 'saves,' while knowledge at the periphery 'edifies' or

'improves' (i.e., *paramarthikavidya* versus *samsarikavidya*).

Far from the *Kalandikaprakasa*'s vedic core, one finds Christianity under the rubric "Religions of the Barbarians" (*mlecchamata*); it appears there as an addendum to Somanath's discussions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Materialism, borrowed from the standard texts of Hindu apologetics. The passage also refers to Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism, which Somanath regarded as emerging from a common matrix. I enter this discussion at the point where he describes Judaism's transformation as it spreads throughout the Roman empire and interacts with Mediterranean religions, giving rise to new forms of religion (*mata*):

All over the Roman empire there were wise men learned in all kinds of religions. But, seeing the contradictions between them, they were unable to distinguish truth from falsehood. Atheistic materialists became prevalent throughout the land. There was a hope, however, that the Messiah would descend into the world to make known the way of salvation (*moksamarga*). [...]

Without delay, Jesus descended into the world and was conceived in the miraculous womb of a young maiden, Miriyam. Saying "I, Son of God (*isvarasya putrah*), teacher of the way of salvation, King of the Jews, will make atonement for sin (*prayascitta*) with my body," he began propagating his own religion among the people. When this religion began spreading, the Jewish authorities, thinking him opposed to Judaism out of envy, put him on a cross. On the third day, he went to heaven, having revealed his form (*rupa*) to his disciples in that country, saying "I will return to judge [the world] with your help."

In the form of Almighty God (*visvesa*), a Trinity (*trika*) can be discerned: God the Father (*pita*), his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (*sadatma*). The substance (*vastu*) of the Trinity,

however, is godhood (*isvaratva*). Godhood is absolutely unitary, in the same way that Brahman is.

In Christianity, two rituals are performed. One is called *baptisma*, the distinctive feature of which is immersion in water (*varmajjana*) of the body of the convert (*svikara*) to Christianity. The other is called *yukarista*, meaning "Our salvation will come from Jesus," from which the word "gospel" (*harsavarta*) comes. Originally, [*yukarista*] was the food and drink that Jesus gave [his disciples] before he ascended the cross. [*Yukarista*] is also understood as eating Jesus' flesh (*mansa*) and drinking Jesus' blood (*rudhira*). The Christians teach that *yukarista* should be taken on entering their religion and regularly at other times when they assemble. Moreover, a Christian always prays to God like this: "Give each of us food and drink. Forgive our sins. May we be diligent in performing our worldly duties," and so forth. [...]

As time passed, many discrepancies arose between the paths (*patha*) being propagated by the many followers of this religion. The Greeks among them say that Jesus is the *buddhi* [lit., mind, intellect, reason; = Logos] of God. To this, however, they add that neither the *buddhi* nor the *atman* are superior to, or identical with, God.

The language is apropos and comes close to being *religionswissenschaftliches* Sanskrit, the Sanskrit symptomatic of a descriptive, empathetic approach to religion as a datum of human experience worth knowing on its own terms and in the believers' idiom. Consider Somanath's ascription to the Christian God of the very names Christians themselves had appropriated for their own vocabulary of faith, which are indicative of divinity in highest theistic perspective: *paramesvara*, *paresha*, *isvara*, *prabhu*, *jagadisvara*, etc. Somanath does not question this, or *moksa* and *mukti*, which

likewise signify his recognition that Christians present themselves as aspiring to nothing less than absolute (*paramarthika*) salvific ends. I submit, therefore, that even though Christianity was relegated to the outer reaches of Somanath's circle of knowledge, it had become for him a religion worth knowing in its concrete particularity. This is a remarkable change from the 1830s when Christianity as portrayed by Muir had seemed to him a pushy religion that had to be stopped.

As one who instinctively understood that *religionswissenschaft* should be differentiated from normative theology, Somanath knew that his beliefs should not impinge upon his descriptive discussion. Yet, as one might expect, the *Kalandikaprakasa* subsequently addressed the problem of religious plurality theologically. The manyness of religions Somanath resolved in one bold stroke: "The possibility that even barbarians (*mlecchas*), heretics (*pasanda*), and others can be saved is hardly strange if we consider that, like us, they worship Him [viz. Visnu or Rama] whose powers (*sakti*) are infinite and unfathomable, who is their God (*isvara*) and their *atman*." In short, salvation outside the Veda is possible – everyone can be saved through *bhakti* and anyone can be a *bhakta*, including Christians.

It seems odd, therefore, that Somanath's discussion ends on a note of discord; while the Christian *bhakti* he had in mind is not categorically different from Hindu *bhakti*, neither is it altogether the same as Hindu *bhakti*: "Glory to you, Lord Visnu! By taking refuge in you, even sinners such as the Kiratas, Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Puskasas, Abhirakankas, Yavanas, and Khasas are purified!" The names listed are the names of castes and tribes customarily considered fallen or debased by the brahminical elites of Somanath's era; as such, they are the indigenous 'other,' corollaries to the 'pagans' and 'heathens' spoken of by Christians. Still, Somanath recognizes in them and in Christians a capacity for *bhakti*, and Christianity thus elicits his empathy and imbues his quest for an understanding of its particularity with a notable urgency, perhaps in no small part because he recognized Lancelot Wilkinson to be a kindred spirit – a Christian *bhakta* whose

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interest in science had not diminished the

intensity of his devotion to God.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, 05/06/1836, Sehore School, Board's Collections, f/4/1635, no. 65465, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson to General Committee of Public Instruction, 10/06/1836, Sehore, Misc. Vols., 1834-40, West Bengal State Archives.

<sup>3</sup> W.H. Wathen, Secretary to Government, undated memorandum, Bombay Political Proceedings, 1834, Z/P/3347, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, 10/06/1836, Sehore, to General Committee for Public Instruction, Misc. Vols., 1836-40, West Bengal State Archives.

<sup>5</sup> The reference to Wilkinson as a "bhakta" occurs in a Sanskrit text by Somanath, the *Ramasiddhantantaka*. A drama, it revolves around Rama's return to Ayodhya from exile. Another kind of 'revolution' becomes evident in the earth's revolution around the sun on the Copernican principle of terrestrial motion (*bhumibhrama*). Exactly how science was interwoven into Rama's story I cannot say – only a fragment of the text survives. The drama was apparently intended to popularize the 'new' knowledge emanating from Sehore.

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