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Kristapurāṇa: Reshaping Divine Space

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Divine space

If a place is simply a physical location, the word space can be used for something shaped by mental processes. Physical places influence our lives by putting limits to the physically practicable, whereas spaces exercise their influence through mental processes like shaping our beliefs, values and sentiments. A space may be a mental superstructure based on an actual place, but, since its power is mental, it is not necessary that this place physically exists. One such space, with power to affect the lives of human beings, is heaven. Belief in heaven has had and still has great impact on many people’s thinking and acting. Heaven can be regarded as a part of a more general conceptual space inhabited by (ideas of) the divine and/or spiritual. I will refer to this as divine space.

Language has the power to create new spaces and reshape old ones, but also to close doors to unwanted spaces by making it difficult to speak about them. By means of language, some are convinced of the existence of heaven, and by means of language others are convinced of the falsity of the same idea, and its power loses hold of them.

Catholic mission in early modern Goa

The early Catholic missionaries, who came to the then Portuguese colony Goa from the early years of the sixteenth century and onwards, found a divine space already defined by an impressive Hindu vocabulary. Wishing to see people embracing the Christian faith, they needed strategies for convincing people to change their beliefs about the divine and leading them to a perception of divine space that was in accordance with Christian views. In due time the official Catholic Church chose a strategy of closing the door to spaces that we can call Hindu, by repression of indigenous languages and religious practices and by opening an analogous space defined by Portuguese and Latin words. This was done partly by campaigns of destroying temples and Hindu scriptures from 1540 onwards, partly by a decree in 1684 (by Viceroy Francisco de Tavora) that all official church communication must henceforth be in Portuguese, and Goans must abandon their

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mother tongue, and another decree in 1704 (by
the apostolic legate Charles Thomas Maillard de
Tournon) which seriously restricted the
possibility of letting Christianity embrace
indigenous cultural practices.³ Because of the
padroado system, by which the Portuguese kings
got the right and duty to deploy clerics and run
the churches in their colonies, the Portuguese
authorities controlled the Catholic mission in
Asia throughout the early modern period.⁴ This
knit state and church tightly together and
limited the scope for the Church to act as an
independent force in relation to the Portuguese
colonial power.

**Thomas Stephens and his purāṇa**

There was, however, another significant
trend in the early modern Catholic mission in
Goa, namely that of inculturation, exemplified
by Stephens and other Jesuits. Most notable
among these is Thomas Stephens (1549-1619),
the author of the well-known Marathi epic
known as Kristapurāṇa. Stephens “fled from
England” in his twenties, due to harassments he
faced because of his Catholic faith,⁵ and joined
the Jesuits in Rome with a wish to be sent to
India. His wish was granted and he reached Goa
in 1579, when he was 30 years old.⁶ Stephens
became an important person in the Jesuit
mission in Goa, where he stayed until his death
in 1619, except for a year at Basein College north
of Mumbai.⁷ Stephens’ work was followed by a
wave of Christian literature in various dialects of
the closely related languages Marathi and
Konkani,⁸ but he may also have influenced both
the structure and vocabulary of works of the
Italian Jesuit Robert de Nobili, who wrote in
Tamil.⁹ Apart from his big Kristapurāṇa, Stephens
wrote a few letters to family members and
religious superiors in Europe, a grammar of the
Konkani language in Portuguese – _Arte de Língoa
Canarim_ – and a little catechism for children –
_Doutrina Christam em língoa Bramana Canarim_ –
both printed posthumously in Rachol in 1640
and 1622 respectively.¹⁰ Kristapurāṇa is written
in a language that Stephens himself as well as
most scholars identify as Marathi.¹¹ Stephens’
desire, as he wrote in a letter to the General of
the Society of Jesus in Rome, was “to see in this
province some books printed [...] in the script of
the place, as was done in Malabar, with great
profit for the Church in that region”,¹² was not
put into effect. Instead, Kristapurāṇa was printed
in Roman script three times during the
seventeenth century – 1616, 1649 and 1654, all in
Goa – but none of these seem to be available
today.¹³ The analysis and references in this
paper rely on Nelson Falcao’s edition from 2009,
which is based mainly but not exclusively on two
manuscripts in Devanagari script, found in 1923
in the William Marsden collection in London.¹⁴

Kristapurāṇa is a Christocentric retelling of
the Bible in more than 10,000 verses, a biblical
epic in two parts corresponding to the Old and
New Testaments. In the prose preface in
Marathi, Stephens expresses his hope that “[...] through that story, everybody will come to
know the true God (paramesvara) and his only
son Jesus Christ, the Jesus apart from whose
name there is no other name under heaven
(svarga) through which one gets salvation
(mukti).”¹⁵

Each chapter of Kristapurāṇa forms a sort of
dialogue sermon, where the voice of the priest is
often interrupted by questions and
commentaries mainly from Brahmins in the
audience. In the first chapter, Stephens
describes how a priest (probably himself) was
teaching children in Salcete the catechism on a
Sunday evening, when a Brahmin came to him
with a request to give them a Christian puraṇa in Marathi. Now when the old puraṇas are forbidden, he says, people may otherwise resort to gambling for pastime. The priest was pleased with the request and promised to start telling what would become the Kristapurana part by part every Sunday.16

In the Portuguese dedication to the archbishop of Goa, Stephens explains that the work is written as a sort of catechism in the style most pleasing to the natives.17 The style and language is explained in more detail in Stephens’ Marathi preface:

All this is written in Marathi. Seeing that Marathi is the most fitting language among the languages of the land for the message about things related to God, but that people do not understand pure Marathi [...] I left out several difficult words of past great poets and, in the manner of present [...] great poets, mixed it with a number of easy words from the language of the Brahmins and so made the poetry easy [...]. And those who still sometimes miss the elegance and beautiful language of the old poetry will enjoy reading this poetry [...].18

Kristapurana is written in the same ovi metre as had been used several hundred years earlier by Mukunda and Jñanadeva,19 as well as by Stephens’ contemporary Ekanatha and his grandson Mukteśvara.20 Thus, Stephens embraced the literary form used in and associated with a Hindu (predominantly Vaiśṇava) religious and literary tradition. He also embraced the Hindu vocabulary of these authors and tried to redefine the divine space that they had defined and make it compatible with the Catholic faith. Kristapurana is full of idiomatic expressions with deep Hindu connotations, such as vaikuṇṭha for heaven and vaikuṇṭharājā (“King of vaikuṇṭha”) for God. In Hindu usage, vaikuṇṭha is the name of Viṣṇu’s heaven and vaikuṇṭharājā an epithet of Viṣṇu. In Stephens’ usage, the words refer to the God of Christianity and his heaven. In this way, Stephens used words familiar to the people of Goa, but gave them partly new meanings.

Signal and signification

To understand what Stephens does in order to reshape or redefine divine space, I will rely on Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of a sign as “combination of a concept and a sound pattern.”21 A sign in this sense the unity of a word and the concept it expresses or stands for. A sign thus consists of two parts, the concept and the sound pattern, also referred to as signification and signal respectively.22 Since “the link between idea and sound is intrinsically arbitrary”,23 any signification can be represented by any signal.

Applying this idea and terminology to Stephens’ usage of “Hindu” words like vaikuṇṭha and vaikuṇṭharājā, his strategy can be described as keeping the signal but altering the signification. The signal Vaikuṇṭharājā is the same sound pattern as used by the Hindus for talking about Viṣṇu, but in Stephens’ usage its signification is the God of Christianity. A sign being the combination of signification and signal, i.e. of concept and sound pattern, altering the signification means altering the sign as a whole. The vaikuṇṭharājā of Kristapurana is therefore not the same sign as the identically pronounced and written vaikuṇṭharājā of a Vaiśṇava discourse, since it signifies a different concept. Nevertheless, the concepts of Viṣṇu for Vaiśṇavas and God for Christians are so similar that they, so to speak, hold analogous places in their respective linguistic systems, both
containing the concept of Supreme Being. Therefore, Stephens could use the signal vaikunṭharāja for the Christian concept of God and thereby form a new Christian sign related to the old Hindu one, but with a meaning fitting better in his message.

In Saussure’s structuralistic theory, a language is “a system based entirely on the contrasts between its concrete units” which means that a sign is defined by being what the other signs are not. If all signs are defined by their mutual differences, changing the meaning of one sign has consequences for the entire linguistic system. In view of this, what Stephens does can be described as entering a new linguistic system and trying to reshape it by changing the significations of certain signs and to a lesser extent introducing new signs, primarily Portuguese loan words like pāḍrī for a priest and spīrītu sāṁtu for the Holy Spirit.

Reshaping divine space

To show how Stephens does this, I will begin with words used for heaven and then move on to the related concept of salvation. The most common words for heaven in Kristapurāṇa are svarṇa and vaikunṭha, both used independently as well as in compounds like svarṇasthāna (“place/land of heaven”), svarṇamāndira (“house of heaven”), different versions of svarṇa rājya (“kingdom of heaven”), and vaikunṭhīcā rāja (“kingdom of heaven”). In Marathi, svarṇa is generally translatable as ‘sky’ or ‘heaven’, whereas vaikunṭha exclusively refers to heaven. More specifically vaikunṭha is a name of Viṣṇu’s paradise in Hindu mythology, whereas svarṇa sometimes but not exclusively refers to Indra’s heaven.

Kristapurāṇa often seems to treat svarṇa and vaikunṭha as synonyms. Jesus’ ascension to heaven is described as an ascension to svarṇa and vaikunṭha alike. Still the terms are not entirely synonymous. For example, Stephens tells us that Jesus ascended through ten svarṇas before he reached the gate of vaikunṭha:

So ascending ten svarṇas,
Everything was under his feet.
Then he reached the gate of vaikunṭha.

The impression that vaikunṭha is higher than svarṇa is confirmed later in the same chapter, when Jesus is exhorted to establish his throne “above all svarṇas in the holy vaikunṭha”. So Stephens treats vaikunṭha as a name of the highest heaven or highest realm of svarṇa, which is in accordance with Vaiṣṇavaite terminology, which places vaikunṭha above all other worlds or loka.

It is interesting how Stephens handles the fact that vaikunṭha is a sign borrowed from a Vaiṣṇavaite language system, where it implies the concept of Viṣṇu as Supreme Being and king of vaikunṭha. Indeed, Stephens accepts and uses many divine epithets that would normally be understood as epithets of Viṣṇu. Nelson Falcao, maybe correctly, interprets this as an appreciation of the underlying monotheism of Hinduism. He writes that Stephens “accepts the whole of the Vaiṣṇavaite tradition and attributes names like Vaikuṇṭhanātha, Vaikuṇṭharāṇa, Vaikuṇṭharājī, Vaikuṇṭhanāyaka, Vaikuṇṭhārājī and others for God the Father and the Son of God.” However, I would argue that the Vaiṣṇavaite attributes
that Stephens uses for God are not names, but epithets with meanings like “king of vaikuṇṭha”. Stephens never uses any proper name of Viṣṇu or any other Hindu god. Using epithets like vaikuṇṭharājā for God is a subtle way of saying that it is really not Viṣṇu but the God of Christianity who is king of vaikuṇṭha.

In Christian theology, heaven is a realm of eternal life and unparalleled joy, where those who are saved from sin, death and the devil, will live in communion with God. Stephens’ principal Marathi words for salvation are mukti and mokṣa, and he treats vaikuṇṭha as the place where the blessed enjoy mukti/mokṣa. Only a few verses after the one quoted above, with Jesus standing in front of the gate of vaikuṇṭha, Stephens paraphrases the famous passage in Psalm 24:

Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. In Stephens’ version, Jesus is not King of glory but King of mukti and mokṣapada:

They say: Listen, kings, Open your gates, And, O Gates, give place For the invincible Soul! The King and Emperor of mukti

Then those guards ask: Who is that King of mukti?

The answer is:

This Lord of angels, the life of the world, King of mokṣapada! Thereafter Jesus enters the house of mokṣa (mokṣa āśrama) accompanied by the blessed bhaktas or pious ones:

Telling such things, Lord Jesus, Together with the blessed bhaktas, With great laughter into the house of mokṣa He entered.

As the gate through which he enters is the gate of vaikuṇṭha, the house of mokṣa is obviously the same as vaikuṇṭha.

Hindu mukti means liberation from saṁsāra, this world. Saṁsāra implies punarjanma (rebirth), which does not fit into Christian ideas of what man needs to be liberated from. Christianity has no concept of rebirth in that sense, but the word punarjanma reminisces of the biblical idea of being born again. Stephens draws on this idea in the eighth chapter of Kristapurāṇa, but avoids the word punarjanma. Instead, he speaks about a navā janma (new birth) in this saṁsāra through the grace of the Holy Spirit, by means of baptism, and firm faith.
Now the new birth  ātāṁ navā janma begins.
Without human intercourse
It comes through  isphirita sāṁtāṁce krupe the grace of the Holy Spirit
In the world  saṁsārā āṁtu (saṁsāra).
That is the birth of  to janma jñānaschānāṁcā baptism
And firm faith.  āṁ druḍamanaṁabhāvācā It is the holy birth  to svāṁyāṁce krupecā Of the Lord’s grace.  pavitra janmā43

Like the Hindu concept of punarjanma, this navā janma takes place in saṁsāra. But if every new birth in a Hindu worldview by implication means at least temporary deprivation of mukti, this navā janma is rather a birth out of saṁsāra and into the state of mukti.44 Those who are born with this navā janma will not get the inheritance of saṁsāra, but the supreme inheritance of svarga:

God does not give  devā tayā lekuravāṁsiṁ those children The inheritance of  saṁsārice dājja nedisi saṁsāra.
An excellent  utama dājja desīṁ inheritance he gives Of the world of  svarga bhuvanicem svarga.
The joy of vaikuṁṭha vaikuṁṭhici  sukhapraśpti
Together with the angels  āhmāṁ boḍavyā sāṁgāti

The Lord will let us  tayā bhogāvayā akhaṁḍitī
Enjoy it endlessly.  desila svāṁyāṁ45

In this way, Stephens almost completely ignores the word punarjanma, but introduces the similar word navā janma and gives it a very different meaning. Described with Saussure’s terminology, he introduces a similar signal and provides it with a new signification. The Hindu punarjanma signifies continued confinement in saṁsāra, but the Christian navā janma signifies liberation from saṁsāra. When the word punarjanma is finally used in II.43/44.28, it stands for the resurrection of the body at the time of the last judgement.46

Stephens ignores the Hindu concept expressed by the signal punarjanma, introduces the similar signal navā janma, and gives it an opposite signification, and finally introduces the sign of punarjanma with a signification that is different from the one current in Hindu contexts but applicable in a Christian message.

Conclusion
The analysis in this article has treated words for heaven and salvation used in Thomas Stephens’ Kristapurāṇa. The analysis has focused on how Stephens treats words linked with concepts in the Hindu/Vaṁśnava language system from which they are taken, concepts difficult or impossible to accommodate in Stephens’ Christian worldview. Such word-concept links are vaikuṁṭha as the abode of Viṣṇu, and mukti/mokṣa as liberation not only from death, but also from rebirth. In the case of Viṣṇu and vaikuṁṭha, Stephens handles the problem by using epithets like vaikuṁṭhāriyā for God, but never uses any of Viṣṇu’s proper names. It is not what he says about vaikuṁṭha as
such that most dramatically alters the concept expressed by the word, but what he says about its king, vaikunthārājā. The king of vaikunththa that Kristapurāṇa refers to is not Viṣṇu, but the triune God of Christianity. Similarly, the most dramatic altering of the concept expressed by mukti/mokṣa is not brought about by what is said about mukti/mokṣa as such, but through tinkering with words that express what mukti/mokṣa are understood as liberation from. Stephens rids saṅsāra of punarjanma and gives punarjanma a new meaning, significantly different from the unwanted concept of rebirth. By altering the concepts expressed by words less crucial for his message, Stephens manages to alter even the central concepts without explicitly redefining them, and also without criticizing or refuting the concepts expressed by the same words in Hindu usage. His work can be read as an attempt to reshape what I have referred to as divine space. By giving familiar words the capacity to express new concepts, he made it possible to imagine divine space in a new way. From another perspective, it can of course be seen as an attempt to obscure or rid the same words of the capacity to express competing Hindu ideas.

Although the Christian literary activity in Marathi and Konkani was seriously impeded by the above-mentioned decrees in 1684 and 1704, and although using words with strong Hindu connotations in a Christian context may seem radical, vaikuṇṭha, svarga, mukti and mokṣa all seem to have been in use throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. It seems that mukti was more used than mokṣa and svarga more than the stronger Hindu sounding vaikuṇṭha. Stephens’ own Konkani catechism, printed posthumously in 1622, using svarga, vaikuṇṭha and mukti, seems quite representative in this regard. The Jesuit Antonio de Saldanha, in both his mid-seventeenth century works about Saint Anthony of Padua, one in Marathi and the other in Konkani, used mukti and svarga.

The Konkani-Portuguese dictionary that, as the title says, was composed by Jesuits and revised by Diogo Ribeiro S. J. in 1626 has variants of all these words. It translates ‘Suārgu’ as Cēo, ‘Vāincuttā’ as Paraizo celestial, ‘Mugti’ as Bem-aventurança or Salvação and ‘Mokhe’ as Bem-aventuraça. Vaikuṇṭha and svarga are both used in Christanchi Sastrazza Catheixismo, a catechism written in a Marathi dialect spoken around present day Mumbai by an anonymous author and printed in Roman script in 1778. The same is the case in a long passion poem in Marathi published by Anant Kakba Priolkar as Kristaçeit yāțanāgīta. According to a remark in the manuscript that he found in Goa, it was composed by a Father Manuel Jaques de Noronha, born and living in Goa, and written down by a Manuel Saluador Rebellu, living in Madgaon, in 1768.

On the Hindi or Hindustani side, the French Capuchin missionary François Marie de Tours, chose Persian words for heaven and salvation instead of using the Sanskrit vocabulary adopted by the Marathi and Konkani authors. He composed a Latin-Hindi-French thesaurus in 1704 and a sort of outline for a catechism in Latin and Hindi with supplemented vocabulary, known as Fragmentum Fabrionianum. As per my knowledge, none of them was ever printed. Instead of using the Sanskrit vocabulary of the Marathi and Konkani authors, de Tours’ thesaurus has āśmāṁn for caelum, bacht for paradisum, khālasī and salāmat(i) for salvatio.
choice is beyond the scope of this article. It may be due partly to the languages having different stocks of words or the missionaries different target groups, but might also be the outcome of different theological or linguistic ideas.

Whereas Nelson Falcao and others have praised Kristapurāṇa as an example of successful inculturation of Christianity in India, Alexander Henn has insisted that it must be understood in light of the violent campaigns against Hinduism in Goa that preceded it. Thomas Stephens was a child of his time, and as a Catholic priest in Portuguese Goa, he was inevitably a part of a repressive system where the Catholic Church was tightly knit to the colonial power. Nevertheless, Stephens’ work testifies to a high esteem of Indian languages and literary art. I will let this article end with an excerpt from a passage in the first chapter of Kristapurāṇa, where Thomas Stephens praises the Indian language that he had so painstakingly made his own:

Like the jasmine jaisī puṣpāmāṇī puṣpa
blossom among mogāri
flowers
Or musk among ki parimalāṁmāji
perfumes, kasturi
So graceful among
languages
Is Marathi. marāṭhiyā

Notes

1 A similar idea is expressed in Romans 10:17: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” All Bible quotes in this article are taken from NIV.


3 Henn, Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa, p. 73.


8 Cf. Tulpule, pp. 379-386.


Falcao (ed. and trans.), *Phādar Thomas Stiphanskṛta Khristapurāṇa*, pp. 1586-1656.

15 Falcao (ed. and trans.), *Phādar Thomas Stiphanskṛta Khristapurāṇa*, p. (75): “[…] tiye kathēvarauṇu samastāṃsi satyavartā paramesvarā vā teyācē yekākā putra jesa kruṣṭi voḷakki hoṇēvēyā, jeyā jesuvaṅcōna añikeka nāṁva jēce varaunā prāṇīyāsi mukti jode aiser āṃsvaragakhāluteṃ namele.”

16 Kristapurāṇa I.1. 126-181.

17 Falcao (ed. and trans.), *Phādar Thomas Stiphanskṛta Khristapurāṇa*, (pp. 83)-(84): “[...] uma obra composta a modo da terra, e no estilo de que os naturaes mais gostam, a qual contém uma instrução e como cathecismo [...].”

18 Falcao (ed. and trans.), *Phādar Thomas Stiphanskṛta Khristapurāṇa*, (p. 78): “heṃ sarva marāṭhiye bhāṣena lihileṅ ahe. heṅ desīnačēn bhāsāṁbhiturā hi bhāṣa paramesvarācē vasta niropāṃsi yogā aisi desī mhanauṇa, pana sudha marāṭhi madhīma lokāi nakale dekhunu [...] māgileṅ kavesvarāṇcē bahutekēm avaghādeṅ utareṅ sanḍunā sāmpucenīyāṁ kavesvarāṇcīye ritupramāṇeṅ añikeken soniṅ bhāraḥmaṇaṅcē bhāsećēń utareṅ thāṅīṅ thāṅīṅ misarita karunā kavitva somęṅ keleṁ [...].” All translations from Marathi are my own.


22 Saussure, p. 67.

23 Saussure, p. 111.

24 Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 105


26 Kristapurāṇa II.37/38.113.

27 Kristapurāṇa II.35/36.51.

28 Kristapurāṇa II.32/33.80, II.29/30.58.

29 Kristapurāṇa II.42/43.45.


31 Kristapurāṇa II.57/58.43, II.57/58.54.

32 Kristapurāṇa II.58/59.25.

33 Kristapurāṇa II.58/59.52: “sakaḷa svargā varute/pavitra vaikunṭhateṁ”.


36 See e.g. Kristapurāṇa II.32/33.98, II.2.62, II.1.9, II.2.34, II.7.2, II.5.8, II.58/59.45.

37 Psalm 24:7-8.

38 Kristapurāṇa II.58/59.31-32.

39 Kristapurāṇa II.58/59.37.

40 Kristapurāṇa II.58/59.42.

41 Cf. also Kristapurāṇa II.48.94, where Jesus tells the criminal hanging on the cross besides his own: “Today you will be with me in muktipadi” (āji mājhe savari/muktipadi). The verse corresponds to Luke 23:43 and the locative form muktipadi obviously stands for Vulgate’s *in paradiso*, “in paradise”.

42 Cf. the story about Jesus and Nikodemus in John 3.

43 Kristapurāṇa II.8.40-41. Here Kristapurāṇa differs slightly from the corresponding text in John 3:5, where the new birth comes through “water and the Spirit” only.

44 Cf. Romans 6:3-14; Galatians 2:19-20.

45 Kristapurāṇa II.8.42-43.


47 More precisely, vernacularized variants of these words were in use. The following account gives transliterations of standardized Marathi forms rather than the variants used in the early modern texts.
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50 T. Maruyama (ed.), *Vocabulario da Lingoa Canarim feito pelos padres da Companhia de Jesus que reside na Christandade de Salcete e novamente acrescentado com varios modos de falar pelo Padre Diogo Ribeiro da mesma Companhia*. Anno 1626, Nagoya, Nanzan University, 2005, p. 312

51 Maruyama (ed.), *Vocabulario da Lingoa Canarim*, p. 207

52 Maruyama (ed.), *Vocabulario da Lingoa Canarim*, p. 204.


54 A. K. Priolkar (ed.), *Kristāṃcī yātaṇāgīṭa*, Mumbai, Marathi Samshodhana Mandal, 1959, no. 52, 71, 102 (*bhūmīn vaikûnṭhî for “in the garden of Eden”*), 111, 145 (Jesus is given the epithet *mugtipati*, “Lord of mukti”), 63, 79, 150.


58 E.g. Henn ‘Kristapurâṇa: Translating the Name of God in Early Modern Goa’.

59 *Kristapurâṇa* I.1.123.

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