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**Words Taken for Wonders: Conversion and Religious Authority among the *Dalits* of
Colonial Chhattisgarh**

Chad M. Bauman

Butler University

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

At the beginning of his influential essay, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, Homi Bhabha relates the story of an early Indian Christian catechist who, in 1817, comes upon a group of people gathered in a grove outside of Delhi. He asks them who they are and they reply, ‘We are poor and lowly, and we read and love this book...The book of God’. The catechist is surprised to learn that the book is indeed the Bible. Pointing to the name of Jesus, the catechist asks, ‘Who is that?’ The people reply, ‘That is God!’ After further inquiry, the catechist learns that they received the book at the Hurdwar (Haridwar) fair from a *pandit* they called an ‘angel of God’. Concluding that the people must have encountered a missionary, he tells them that the book taught ‘the religion of the European Sahibs’, and that these Europeans had printed it in the vernacular for the use of Indians.

The people could not accept that such a fine text had come from a race of meat-eaters, and would not believe the catechist, preferring to hold on to the notion that the text had been sent directly from God. The catechist finally concluded, ‘The ignorance and simplicity of many are very striking, never having heard of a printed book before; and its very appearance was to them miraculous’ (Bhabha, 1995: 29-30). I must admit to finding the rest of Bhabha’s article

baffling and cryptic, and yet I have always found this particular passage significant for the way it portrays those (as the catechist puts it) ‘ignorant’ and ‘simple’ people who had, like the Satnamis I studied in colonial Chhattisgarh, India, taken ‘signs’ (in this case, printed words) for wonders.¹

Early in the *nineteenth* century, an illiterate *Chamar* from what eventually became the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, Guru Ghasidas, returned from a pilgrimage to the Jagannath temple with a novel message for his followers. The message was similar to that of many other Hindu reformers. Ghasidas told his followers to abandon the worship of *murtis*, to avoid eating meat, to reject replace *brahman* priests with religious functionaries from within their own *Chamar* caste, and to devote themselves in heart and mind to the one and only formless (*nirgun*) deity, ‘Satnam’ (i.e., the True Name). The Guru’s following slowly grew, and by his death in 1850 he claimed 250,000 disciples. By the end of the century, nearly all *Chamars* in the region had joined his *panth* (a community of followers) and had begun calling themselves *Satnamis*.²

Eighteen years after Ghasidas’s death, in 1868, the first western missionaries in the region, sent by German Evangelicals living in the United States, arrived in Raipur and later set up camp in a ‘tiger jungle’ they renamed Bishrampur. In 1885, they were joined by Disciples of Christ missionaries (also from the United States), whose headquarters for the region were in Bilaspur. Given the low-caste status of the *Satnami* community, these American missionaries assumed that all *Satnamis* would respond very positively to their message of love and equality, and would soon convert. Only a small percentage of *Satnamis* in the region ever did convert, but the great majority of today’s Christians in the plains of Chhattisgarh can trace their ancestry to the Satnampanth.

This chapter argues that Satnamis, *Satnami*-Christians, and their American Christian interlocutors all perceived the written word to possess an enigmatic power. Among these communities, the written word functioned in two primary ways. First, the existence of a sacred text was taken as a mark of religious authenticity. The fact that Satnamis had no text they could call their own, therefore, was a source of some communal insecurity. Christians and Christian missionaries at times exploited this insecurity for their own gain, and some Satnamis converted because they believed the association of Christianity with books, and in particular with the Bible, proved its superiority to the faith of the Satnamis. Second, the written word functioned as a sign of epistemological authority. Consequently, the ability to write and publish texts gave Christians an advantage in their religious debates with Satnamis. The chapter argues, therefore, that texts were not merely lifeless pieces of paper, but sacred and potent religious objects.

Introduction: Learning to Think (and Read) Like a Christian

Though it is clear that Chhattisgarhis altered and transformed the faith presented to them by foreign missionaries and native evangelists, it is equally clear that those who became Christian underwent a significant cultural transformation. They did come, in various ways, to assimilate the cultural prejudices and presuppositions of their evangelical interlocutors, and in particular their methods of determining truth (cf. Snow and Machalek, 1983: 170 ff).

Religious affiliation, after all, entails not only the acceptance of an ultimate perspective (i.e., a worldview) but also commitment to particular forms of authority (Keyes, 1993: 262).

Conversion to Christianity in Chhattisgarh therefore involved the assimilation of a new epistemology. Many, including but not limited to those who eventually became Christian,

internalized this epistemology in ways of which they themselves were perhaps not entirely aware.³

The missionaries were, after all, modern individuals, confident in the inevitability of 'logic', and the ineluctable 'rationality' of their own religion. With the Basel missionaries, who in 1899 contrasted the 'fancies' and cognitive 'rubbish' of Indian religions with the 'plain and chaste truths of the unadulterated Gospel' (Sebastian, 2003: 22), missionaries in Chhattisgarh did not consciously recognize the ways in which their 'logic' and 'rationality' were reticulated with their own culture's broader assumptions regarding authority and proof.

In Chhattisgarh, the carriers of Christianity did understand, however, if only in an unconscious fashion, that their religion made little sense according to indigenous criteria. Nevertheless, despite that inkling of incongruity, they attempted, with various degrees of 'success', to replace those criteria with their own. It was not that they understood the socially constructed nature of plausibility and reasoning. Rather, as modern individuals, they believed that they were in possession of universal 'reason', while most Indians were not. They attempted, accordingly, to overcome this obstacle to conversion by inculcating the kind of 'reason' necessary to ensure the desired result.⁴

The following parable, recorded by an Evangelical catechist about a convert to Christianity on the Evangelical mission field, evocatively describes the process by which Chhattisgarhis came to accept the missionary epistemology:

[Jawal Pershad told a story about] a man [who] found a white pebble, [and] thinking it to be a diamond went to a jeweler to sell it for 10,000 rupees[. The] jeweler thought that the man was deceived by somebody and [that] if he

would say that its value was nothing [the man] would be disheartened and would not believe anyone, [or] he would think that the jeweler wanted to cheat him, so he asked the man that if he consented to work at his shop he would give him sufficient wages per mensem...The jeweler taught [him] the distinction between a real diamond and a false one, this he learnt in a year or two, when he was able to distinguish a real diamond from a false one, then [the jeweler] asked him to see his diamond, on seeing it he at once knew that it was a false one and showed no sign of sorrow. Jawal Pershad said that he loved the false religion which appeared to him to be true, but when he went among Christians, they taught him to distinguish between a false religion and a true one, [and said,] when I learnt this then I gave up the false one and embraced the true one which is Christianity.⁵

Like the ill-informed prospector who is able to distinguish false diamonds from real ones only after learning the jeweler's criteria for doing so, Pershad comes to determine the 'truth' of Christianity only after accepting Christian criteria for distinguishing 'false' from 'true' religions.

Christian missionaries and evangelists taught Chhattisgarhis to distinguish 'false' from 'true' religions by a variety of methods, of which the most important was education. Disciples of Christ missionary Homer Gamboe wrote in 1918 that, 'The training of natives in secular education is a great essentiality in heathen lands. It is necessary to supply the individual with the tools of thought with which he is capable of forming conceptions of Christian faith before he can understand that faith' (Gamboe, 1918: 72). By the 1930s, over four hundred students were enrolled in Evangelical mission institutions, and two thousand attended Disciples of

Christ mission schools (McGavran, 1931: 28; Pickett et al., 1956). Twenty percent of *Satnami*-Christian children attended school on the Evangelical mission, as compared to only 1.3 percent of Satnami children.⁶

The association of Christianity with education and literacy was reinforced at every opportunity. The entryway of the Disciples church in Bilaspur, completed in 1901, contained a prominent teacher's desk on which was displayed an open Bible, and around which were places for learners to sit.⁷ Missionaries understood the power of their educational institutions. For example, Disciples missionary Donald McGavran was known for saying that he considered the children of converts, who would be educated in mission schools and become the 'true' Christians, more important than the converts themselves. McGavran's colleague, George E. Miller, wrote, 'When villagers become Christians, the chief question is not what can be made of them, but what can be made of their children?' (Miller, 1922: 28). These educational institutions imparted an epistemological lens through which both Satnami and *Satnami*-Christian students came to interpret their world, a 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967), and socialized them into western ways of thinking and reasoning such that—as it was put by Evangelical missionary 'Sadhu' Hagenstein—they would be 'more sympathetic listeners to the Gospel' (Davis, 1930: 140).

The most salient of all effects of the missionary educational program was to significantly increase literacy in Chhattisgarhi and Hindi among both Christians and members of other communities. Convinced Protestants that they were, missionaries and evangelists among the Satnamis feared that illiteracy would prevent their converts from being exposed to 'The Word' in the Bible, tracts, and hymnbooks (Menzel, 1943: 32). Missionaries expended a large portion of their resources, both human and financial, on teaching people to read. They produced magazines for mass consumption, and published books, tracts, and pamphlets,

mostly in Hindi and Chhattisgarhi, at a feverish pace. Sales of mission publications on the Evangelical mission rose from four thousand in 1932 to nearly twenty-eight thousand in 1936.⁸ Even those Christians who could not read were required to memorize texts such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Twenty-Third Psalm, and the Apostles' Creed (McGavran, 1990: 41).

The Christian effort to eradicate illiteracy produced tangible results. By 1943, 28 percent of Christian women on the Evangelical mission field could read and write (Menzel, 1943: 69). At roughly the same time, Evangelical M. P. Davis figured that 40 percent of *Satnami*-Christians were literate (as opposed to 8 percent of Chhattisgarhis and 13 percent of Indians) (Davis, 1947: 59-60). In 1952, an unnamed Disciples missionary reported that 93 percent of adults in the Mungeli congregation, most of them with Satnami ancestry, were literate.⁹ These percentages were even higher than the average among all Christians in Chhattisgarh.¹⁰

Particularly among those who had been Christian for some time, the 'value' of education and literacy seemed obvious, and *Satnami*-Christians were known to go to great lengths to get their children educated. The change was most pronounced among women and girls. Satnami converts and Christian evangelists assimilated the missionary epistemology and accepted the importance of education.¹¹ While literacy rates remained deplorably low, literacy itself came to be universally valued.

Historically, *Satnamis* and other *dalit* communities had been denied access to traditional forms of education, and were even generally barred from learning, reading, or writing Sanskrit, the language of Hindu scriptures and learning. Upper-caste Hindus such as Shankara (c. 788-820), and like-minded nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars were loathe to educate members of communities whose low birth, they believed, was a mark of karmic retribution. The *dalits* had no karmic qualification for Vedic learning. Egalitarian

access to the sacred text was, in this context, the most radical element of Christian teaching, and it is therefore not surprising that Satnamis who became Christian should so earnestly embrace the possibility of education.

Many non-Christian Satnamis, however, either did not consider education useful or recognized (and wished to avoid) the epistemological effects of missionary education. It was rumored, in fact, that Ghasidas had at one time forbidden education to his followers (but that he eventually withdrew the objection). An Evangelical, formerly *brahman* evangelist, Ramnath Bajpai, reported that in the early twentieth century, some Satnami leaders had told a government official who wished to encourage their education, ‘We do not require these black letters, as [God] has ordained us to mind our work with the stick called Tutari [a stick with which one drives bullocks]’ (Davis, 1933: 429). Even into the 1930s, Satnami gurus discouraged members of the Satnami community from attending mission-run schools (Davis, 1933: 429). Nevertheless, as I will argue below, the Satnami suspicion of education had more to do with their intuition about its epistemological effects than with a distaste for knowledge per se. And what seems absolutely clear is that even non-Christian Satnamis held the written word in high regard—but more on that below.

Part 1: Religious Authenticity and the Aura of the Written Word

The authority of written texts, as above that of oral traditions, was one distinctive aspect of the missionary epistemology. In this regard, the missionaries were merely exhibiting a bias which had been around since the Enlightenment. After all, David Hume wrote in the *Natural History of Religion*,

An historical fact, while it passes by oral tradition from eyewitnesses and contemporaries, is disguised in every successive narration, and may at last retain but very small, if any, resemblance of the original truth, on which it was founded. The frail memories of men, their love of exaggeration, their supine carelessness; these principles, if not corrected by books and writing, soon pervert the account of historical events; where argument or reasoning has little or no place, nor can ever recall the truth, which has once escaped those narrations. (Hume, 1992: 112)

For the *Satnami*-Christian community, the Bible, a written, stable (by this era) text, became an evocative symbol of distinction and status. Attempting to convince Satnamis to join their community, Christians frequently contrasted their own literacy and access to a holy book with the illiteracy of Ghasidas, the ‘booklessness’ of the Satnampanth, and the Satnamis’ lack of access to Sanskritic Hindu scriptures.¹² The Satnamis, for their part, claimed (and still claim) the *Ramcharitmanas* as ‘their’ book, and read other vernacular-language Hindu texts as well, though many were uncomfortably aware that these books reflected neither the perspective of their Guru nor that of their *jati*.

The facts that Ghasidas had not written a book, that the scriptures the *panth* claimed as its own contained no mention of Satnam, and that the community was denied access to the scriptures of Sanskritic Hinduism made the community vulnerable, as will be discussed below, to manipulation by Christian authors who, in written, *published* texts claimed to know the ‘true’ history of Guru Ghasidas and to possess the ‘book of Satnam’ (i.e., the Bible), the coming of which Ghasidas had allegedly predicted.¹³ Christians played upon Satnami insecurities regarding the community’s general illiteracy and lack of a sacred text. An unnamed author (presumably Indian) argued, for example, that ‘The Satnamis of

Chhattisgarh must be followers of a *pothi* (book). □ That *pothi* must be the *pothi* of Satnam, which means it must be the Bible'.¹⁴

Tularam, born a Satnami but educated at mission schools, later chose to convert to Christianity in part because, unlike the Satnampanth, the community possessed a *book* that contained its main doctrines and tenets. According to one Satnami I interviewed in 2004, Tularam:

‘called all the big people in the [Satnami] community and in the panth and in his family, with a Christian *padri* and Dr. [Donald A.] McGavran [to meet with him]. He said, ‘I am a Satnami, but I am going to convert; I am going to become a Christian. If you oppose me, then show me some religious book, some holy book of the Satnamis. If any Satnami book is present, show it to me, and I will not become a Christian. But because there is a book I am becoming Christian’.

Later, according to other informants, in the role of Christian evangelist, Tularam often emphasized this distinction between Christians and Satnamis as a potent symbol of the former’s superiority.

Given the fact that Satnamis had traditionally been denied access to Hindu religious texts, it is perhaps not surprising that the *Satnami*-Christian community’s reverence for the Bible was perceived, at times, to border on idolization. Disciples missionary Donald McGavran, for example, was once greeted by a villager saying that there were in the area a few other people who, like him, ‘worshiped the book’.¹⁵ Though few *Satnami*-Christians appear to have

considered the Bible an image to be worshipped, it did become something of a symbol of their superiority and status as a literate community. Bibles were valued gifts and prized possessions, even (or perhaps especially) among illiterate members of the community (Gamboe, 1930: 26). The same can be said of Satnamis and other non-Christians in Chhattisgarh, who purchased evangelical texts and tracts at a rate far higher than their own literacy or their interest in converting. The aura that attached to these texts was quasi-talismanic, and for *Satnami*-Christians they were potent symbols of newfound status and authority (cf. Kooiman, 1989: 190). Non-Christian *dalits* also revered texts, particularly Sanskritic texts, but from a distance and *because of their lack of access* to them. *Satnami*-Christians, on the other hand, valued the Bible as an unmistakable symbol of the fact that they were not only literate, but were also encouraged to read the religious texts of their new community. Like education itself, reading and access to sacred texts symbolized one aspect of what they considered to be an appealing social vision.

Non-Christians understood that the reading of texts, religious or otherwise, somehow affected the reader in fundamental ways. In the 1940s, an Evangelical missionary reported that some non-Christian leaders had instructed their followers not to purchase Christian literature because they believed it ‘did something to them’ (Davis, 1947: 19). The very act of reading, of being in intimate contact with the aura of the written word, was a momentous one imbued with the power to change people’s minds and—more worrisome to these non-Christian leaders—one’s religious affiliation.

Part 2: Epistemological Authority

From the very beginning, missionaries in Chhattisgarh attempted to forge connections between their faith and that of the Satnamis. They did this in a variety of ways, but the most

important was their attempt to portray Christianity as the culmination and fulfillment of Guru Ghasidas's message.¹⁶ The portrayal required a selective editing and rewriting of Satnami history, and the conscious and unconscious re-mythologization of Ghasidas. Christians forged this link between the Satnampanth and Christianity in two ways: First, by emphasizing Ghasidas's alleged prophecy regarding the coming of a white-faced man and, second, by claiming that on his pilgrimage to Jagannath, Ghasidas had come into contact with Christian missionaries.

Early in his career, the first missionary in Chhattisgarh, German-American Evangelical Oscar Lohr heard that a Satnami guru had prophesied the coming of a white man. The story, from an evangelical perspective, was almost too good to be true, and in part because of it missionaries in Chhattisgarh became obsessed with converting the Satnamis. Lohr sent home reports predicting that Christianity would spread quickly through familial ties and that very soon the 'whole tribe' would 'embrace Christianity'.¹⁷ Inspired by Lohr's glowing missives, a number of energetic young Evangelical men set off for India to join the work, only to return again after a short period, disillusioned by the slow pace of conversions (Seybold, 1971: 26-27).

In one of his first reports from Chhattisgarh, which was published in *Der deutsche Missionsfreund*, Lohr wrote (in German):

Here I have to point out the reason of my favorable reception. The late guru (teacher) of the Satnamis, who was the third descendent of the founder of the sect, had at a certain occasion given the promise to his disciples, in a kind of prophetic excitement when there were ten thousand of them together, that their salvation would be brought to them by a sahib, or a white man and that they

would be guided by this person on the right way, and that they should join with him with hope and trust. (Lohr, 1869a: 5)

Later, in an autobiography, Lohr declared that, ‘The Chamars accepted me as the teacher whose coming their leader had predicted, who would proclaim to them the way of salvation in a better way than he himself could do’.¹⁸ It seems clear that Lohr had intentionally postured himself as this prophesied one—could he have resisted the temptation to point out that he was a white man with a message similar, in some ways, to that of Ghasidas?

Whereas Lohr’s version of the account attributes the prophecy to the third Satnami guru, later versions of the story suggest that Ghasidas himself had uttered the prediction.¹⁹ I trace the development of the Christian version of the story elsewhere (Bauman, 2008: Chapt. 3), but suffice it here to say that the Christian version of the Ghasidas legend eventually, and somewhat spontaneously in later versions (Gordon, 1909: 5; Madsen, 1914: 57; Saum and Saum, 1935: 3), developed new and far more specific details, such as the fact that the white man would come from a western country, would be red from sunburn, would wear boots and a hat, would have an office, would not use water to clean himself after using the toilet, and—most importantly—would be carrying a book under his arm. These accounts, particularly the later ones, appear to combine Satnami legends about Ghasidas’s prophetic abilities with the creative embellishment of Christians and missionaries who wished to claim the prophet’s mantle, along with the allegiance of his followers.

There is no evidence from Satnami sources that such a prophecy ever occurred. Only older Satnamis educated by missionaries seem to have any knowledge of it. For example, one Satnami I interviewed reported that Ghasidas had prophesied the arrival of white-faced people with golden hair who would come from the East (the closest area of missionary and

British strength was in and around Cuttack and Puri, to the East) with books under their arms, preaching about '*satya*'. When asked where he had heard the story, he said, 'The *padris* [missionaries] told it like that'. He later insisted that both missionaries and older Satnamis told the story in this way.

Whereas the Christian account of Ghasidas's prophecy may have been drawn from some 'real', if insignificant element of the Satnami tradition, Christian accounts of the Guru's pilgrimage to Puri, and what happened along the way, appear to be largely imagined, the inventions of Satnami converts and their Christian leaders. But though they may be fictions, they are *plausible* fictions, and therein lies their power to evoke a past (i.e., the legacy of Ghasidas) and to invoke a present (i.e., continuity with Christian history). The most common traditional Satnami version of events suggests that Ghasidas encountered *Satpurush* ('true, primordial man'), a mysterious spiritual being, while on a pilgrimage to the Jagannath temple in Puri. Early British reports of Ghasidas's inspiration, such as that in Grant's 1870 *Gazetteer of the Central Provinces*, follow this account and mention no connection between Ghasidas and missionaries (Grant, 1984). This suggests that before the arrival of missionaries the *panth* itself did not believe there to be a connection between Ghasidas and Christianity.²⁰ Likewise, British ethnographic texts and gazetteers (Nelson, 1909; Russell, 1916) published well into the twentieth century follow this traditional version of the story. So do contemporary Satnami accounts.

Christian recensions, which assert that Ghasidas acquired his message from Christian missionaries whom he encountered on his pilgrimage to Puri, first emerged around the turn of the century. A pamphlet written by missionary Mary Kingsbury is typical, and is among the earliest archival records of the emerging Christian version of the story:

There is a tradition that [a *Chamar*] went on a pilgrimage to the famous shrine of Juggernaut, and while there he heard a white *Guru*, or teacher, who spoke about the sin of idolatry, saying there was only one true God, and that He alone should be worshiped. When this man, who was named Ghussee Das, returned to his country, he determined to establish this new religion among his people. In order to do this, he separated himself from them for a while, going into the jungle to live, and telling his people that God would give him a message, and he would come again and deliver it to them...When, after about six months, he did appear, the people received him as a prophet....You will judge aright from this account, that Ghussee Das must have listened to a missionary preaching when he was at Juggernaut, and that although many things were confused in his mind, he had received a little of the truth which remained with him and bore some fruit. (Kingsbury, n.d.: 5)²¹

In 1909, Disciples missionary E. M. Gordon echoed Kingsbury's account, asserting that it was 'more than likely that during his stay in Jagganath [Ghasidas] heard the preaching of the early missionaries' (Gordon, 1909: 4).

Like the story of Ghasidas's prophecy, the Christian account of the guru's encounter with missionaries accumulated greater detail over the following decades. Already by 1897, some Evangelical missionaries (Richter, 1906: 251) were asserting that the encounter between Ghasidas and missionaries occurred in Cuttack (not Jagganath). In 1934, H. C. Saum wrote to a certain Rev. Lazarus, pastor of the Baptist Church at Cuttack, asking whether Lazarus could verify the 'tradition' regarding Ghasidas's visit to the city. No record exists of a reply from Lazarus, but Saum's letter indicates

that by that time another detail had been added to the traditional Christian version of the story—that the missionaries were Baptist (no other missionaries were active around Cuttack at that time).²² In a book published in 1990, but based primarily on his experiences in the 1930s and '40s, Disciples missionary Donald McGavran, an inveterate mythologizer, suggested that Ghasidas might have, in fact, met William Carey himself—a possibility, of course, but a long shot based on little more than McGavran's own desire for it to be so (McGavran, 1990: 1, 12).

The reinterpreted, Christianized Ghasidas provided the *Satnami*-Christian community with a link not only to its past, but also to the larger Christian story. The Guru was portrayed as both a conduit of the Christian message and as a precursor of Christian missionaries.

According to the Christian version of events, conversion to Christianity became not only the logical choice for those wishing to abide by Ghasidas's quasi-Christian message, but also represented a return to the newly discovered Christian roots of his inspiration. Rather than abandoning their tradition, Satnami converts to Christianity were returning to the mythic past.

Consciously or unconsciously, leaders of the *Satnami*-Christian community began to fashion Ghasidas in the image of John the Baptist. Ghasidas made it easy for them; he fit the bill.

Like John the Baptist he was an eccentric character, a bit wild and wooly; he preferred to spend his time in the wilderness, and his unrefined and unlettered nature contrasted dramatically with the literate purveyors of the dominant religious orthodoxy. According to a missionary author, Ghasidas said:

...a day will come when the True Name will make his people pure. When my elder brother comes (or one *greater* than I) he will teach the old Book from house to house and in that day there will be drinking from the same pool the

lion and the cow (—meaning that they will not devour each other as does the caste system). I, the prophet, am not the true name, nor do I have the old book of the True Name. I am not able to give you the entire secret, but he who will come in the future, will reveal the true God to you....A WHITE MAN WEARING A HEAD COVERING (helmet). HE WILL HAVE THE OLD BOOK IN HIS HAND, AND WILL TELL YOU THE SECRET OF THE TRUE BOOK [emphasis in the original].²³

In this striking *mélange* of religious mythologies, the missionary puts into Ghasidas's mouth the words of John the Baptist, 'There cometh one mightier than I after me' (Mark 1:7 KJV, see also Matt. 3:11 and Luke 3:16), and places him squarely within the Hebrew and Christian prophetic tradition by having him utter a localized version of Isaiah's prophecy: 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them' (11:6 KJV). This missionary was not alone in portraying Ghasidas as a Christian precursor and Christian missionaries as the fulfillment of his prophecies.²⁴ A tract written around 1920 by the Evangelical catechist and pastor, Ramnath Bajpai (who added 'Simon' to his name when he was baptized), says:

As Ghasidas told you that white sahib would come and would bring along with him the name of [Truth] or True name, [so you should] open your eyes and see that the white faced sahab[sic] have come, and they really preach about Jesus Christ the True name....Get hold of him and come out of the mud. Ghasidas told you that when those white sahebs [sic] come there will be the

dawn of [a] True age with the effect that tigers and cows would drink water from the same drinking place or ghat together. Is it not true? Yes, it is true, Brahmins and the Chamars drink water from the same pipe.²⁵

After forming Ghasidas in the image of John the Baptist, leaders of the *Satnami*-Christian community went on to assert that the Satnami community had fallen from the standards set by its guru. The source of Ghasidas's message, after all, had been pure, and whatever slight differences there may have been between Christianity and the message preached by Ghasidas were attributed to the brevity of his exposure to Christianity, his illiteracy, or his simplicity. It was his successors, especially Balakdas, who debased a movement Christian leaders regarded as positive overall, and who had drug the Satnami community down once again into polytheism and—referring to an occasionally performed fertility rite called *satlok* which involved ritualized sexual intercourse—immorality.²⁶ Though the scabrousness of the Satnami's alleged sexual profligacy provided an evocative foil on which the Christian community's relative chastity and sexual fidelity appeared all the more striking, it was the movement of Satnamis away from their founder's rejection of image worship that most provoked the consternation of Chhattisgarhi Christians and missionaries.

After the 1920s, while Satnami leaders were attempting *rapprochement* with upper-caste Hindu leaders and were sanskritizing their rituals and beliefs, Christians attempted to convince them that they were *not* Hindus,²⁷ and reminded them that Hindus had formerly considered them 'outside the fold'. As Christians presented the choice, Satnamis could either embrace Ghasidas's prohibitions against image-worship by becoming Christian, or reject Ghasidas's instructions in order to seek the approbation of oppressive upper-caste Hindus. By asserting that the Satnampanth had fallen away from the unspoiled message of its founder,

Christians were able to portray conversion to Christianity not as a rejection of the Satnampanth, but, as one *Satnami*-Christian put it, a return ‘*back* [emphasis added] to Satnam’.²⁸ Joining the Christian community was about rediscovering and embracing the original, but now vitiated, message of Ghasidas, about digging through the detritus of a corrupt religion and returning to its unspoiled source.

As the preceding discussion suggests, leaders of the Disciples’ Christian community appear to have been far more interested in the history of Ghasidas than their Evangelical leaders. Nevertheless, in no single text is the Christian reinvention of Ghasidas and the Satnampanth more clearly, more comprehensively, or more coherently laid out than in *Satyanami panth: Shri Gosain Ghasidas of Girod*²⁹ (1937), written by M. M. Paul, an Evangelical catechist and pastor working (at the time) in Pithora.³⁰ But it was not the first text of its kind. I have already mentioned Simon Ramnath Bajpai’s earlier text, *Some Facts about Satnamis* (ca. 1921). Paul’s text shares much in common with Bajpai’s and at times the two are nearly exact replicas, from the fundamental arguments they make, to the account and interpretation of Ghasidas’s story, to the quirky idiomatic expressions they employ (such as their admonition that Satnamis should ‘get out of the mud’ and follow the true Satnam). Paul’s claim to have heard his version of the story from an early Satnami convert notwithstanding (Bajpai does not make this claim), it is clear that he was either familiar with Bajpai’s earlier tract, or that both drew upon an as-yet undiscovered *Ur*-text, whether a written work or a fairly common oral account. Bajpai and Paul both worked for the Evangelical mission, and it is therefore entirely plausible that Bajpai’s work was passed along to Paul for updating and publication.

Though it is nearly impossible to ascertain how many, and what kind of people read the tract, M. M. Paul’s *Satyanami panth* established the standard Christian version of the Satnami

story, and most subsequent accounts of the events, on both the Disciples and Evangelical mission fields, follow the outlines of his narrative. The text drew authority from the fact that it was *written*; it was a tangible, durable, stable document. The importance of this fact, in a context of low literacy but high regard for literate specialists, cannot easily be overstated.

In fact, *Satyanami panth* and Bajpai's *Some Facts about Satnamis* contributed to the standardization of the previously diverse and more fluid oral tradition from which they had been drawn. During an interview I conducted with Christians from Ganeshpur, all accounts of the story of Ghasidas roughly followed the shape of Paul's version of events, but the interviewees were divided on whether they had heard the story from elders or read it in 'some book'. Similarly, during his field research, Saurabh Dube encountered a Christian whose oral history of Ghasidas also closely followed Paul's account. When asked where he had heard it, the man appeared upset and said, 'It is the true thing', adding that it was *likhit itihas* (written history) (Dube, 1998: 204).

Even Satnamis, particularly those who had contact with Christians or were educated in their schools, were influenced by this written 'history' of their *panth*. In the 1950s, Satnami leaders were still concerned about the effects of *Satyanami panth* on the Satnami community. Naindas and Anjordas, leaders of the Satnami Mahasabha, both testified about the text before the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry, also known as the Niyogi Committee, which investigated claims of induced conversion to Christianity for the Madhya Pradesh state government. Anjordas told the committee that missionaries had been saying that Ghasidas met missionaries at Cuttack and that Ghasidas had become a Christian. Anjordas then referred to Paul's *Satyanami panth* as evidence of missionary wrongdoing, saying:

A book [alleging that Ghasidas had been inspired by Christian missionaries] has been published and widely circulated amongst the Satnamis. On such type of preaching many Satnamis have become Christians....To my knowledge, about a thousand Satnamis became converts after the story was circulated. I do not know how many Satnamis actually read the book containing the story of Ghasidas. Many Satnamis who are in possession of the book...have not read it. (Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee, 1998: vol. 2, part B, 98)

Clearly Paul's text and the version of events it contained influenced far more Satnamis than merely those who had become Christian.

Conclusion

Though *Satnami*-Christians had clearly assimilated a certain reverence for reading and the written word from the modern missionaries, it is clear that long before the arrival of European Christians there had been in Chhattisgarh, as elsewhere in India, a veneration for writing, for words, and for those who could interpret them. The fact that the *dalit* Satnamis were excluded from the world of words served only to make those words all the more mysterious, and therefore potent as symbols of status and authority. Some Satnamis, therefore, converted to Christianity in part because Christians were encouraged to read and become literate. Education and literacy would, of course, have had economic advantages, but more importantly, access to words, and particularly *sacred* words reflected a more egalitarian social vision that many Satnamis found attractive. Moreover, the mere fact that Christians

possessed a sacred book, unlike the Satnamis, who had no book they could truly and convincingly call their own, was enough, as shown above, to persuade some of the superiority of the faith. Words, therefore, served as a marker not only of status, but also of religious authenticity.

But words also, and especially the ability to *print* words, allowed Christians, both missionary and Indian, to reinvent and reinterpret the story of Ghasidas in such a way that conversion to Christianity seemed like a fulfillment of Ghasidas's vision, rather than a rejection of it.

Because it was printed, this reinterpreted story supplanted earlier, probably more accurate oral accounts of Ghasidas's life. Printed words, in this case, thereby became a sign of epistemological authority. As early as 1908, some non-Christian Satnamis had developed a modicum of skepticism towards the texts distributed by their Christian neighbors. Some villagers responded to a catechist's claim that he had books that would disprove their religion by saying, '...these books have been printed by you, you may insert whatever you like...' ³¹ Nevertheless, even many non-Christian Satnamis, like those quoted above, came to accept the Christian account as the 'true' one. In this context, therefore, words—printed words—were more than ink on paper. They possessed a certain power, undefined and yet undoubtedly real; they were words taken for wonders.

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¹ Portions of this chapter appeared first in Bauman, 2008.

² In this chapter, '*Satnami*' refers always to the caste, and 'Satnami' (without italics) refers to a follower of Ghasidas.

³ Jean Comaroff (1985) makes the same claim regarding the Tshidi in South Africa.

⁴ The assertion is, of course, not new. Evans-Pritchard (1965: 14) claimed as much for the missionaries he observed: 'Much of what [missionaries] teach natives is quite unintelligible to those among whom they labour, and many of them would, I think, recognize this. The solution often adopted is to transform the minds of native children into European minds'. American missionaries in Chhattisgarh were not the first missionaries in India to believe in the superior rationality of their faith. Francis Clooney (1990: 32) asserts that Roberto de Nobili, the early-seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary to India, believed that by

‘appropriating the truths accessible to reason, humans remove obstacles which prevent them from being ready to accept the higher truths of Christianity; a truly reasonable person can have no objection to Christianity’. What makes de Nobili so important in this connection is that in so many other respects he accommodated himself to (*brahmanical*) cultural norms.

⁵ Entry in diary, unnamed catechist, 16 February 1909, found in the journal of S. J. Scott, Mahasamund catechist, Archives of the Evangelical Synod at Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri (hereafter AES), 83-5 Di54 #1.

⁶ Davis, M. P., ‘A Study of Christians [*sic*] Descendants from Chamars and Satnamis’, 1943, AES 80-1 Sat8.

⁷ Gamboe (1918: 72) drew the distinction between Christian churches, which encouraged education, and Hindu temples, which did not: ‘No such idea prevails in temples. They are without Bible, rostrum, or auditorium. Teaching is not in their plans’.

⁸ See P. D. Gottlieb, ‘Annual Report for 1931-32’, AES 82-13a Pr91, Annual Reports, no. 17, 1932; and ‘Report of the President, 1935-36’, *ibid*, no. 21, 1936.

⁹ ‘Brief Report on the Christian Church, Mungeli’, ca. 1952, Disciples of Christ Historical Society (hereafter DCHS), United Christian Missionary Society Records, Division of Overseas Mission, India, box 14 (folder: India-Orientation). These and earlier figures do not distinguish between those who were literate in Hindi and those who were literate in Chhattisgarhi.

¹⁰ Christianization did not always entail great increases in literacy, and due to mass movements in other parts of India in the 1920s, which brought large numbers of illiterate Christians into the fold and overwhelmed missionary institutions, Christians, who had previously ranked first in literacy, fell to fourth after the Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists (Anonymous, 1924).

¹¹ On Nehemiah Goreh, a prominent nineteenth-century Indian Christian convert whose ‘transition from Hinduism was affected by his perception of how Christians think as much as what they think . . .’, see the work of Richard Fox Young (2002: 54-5).

¹² See, for example, H. C. Saum, ‘Who Are the Satnami?’ 1936(?), DCHS, H.C. Saum Files, box 2 of 4 (folder: Dr. Don Sat Mss.); and M. M. Paul to F. A. Goetsch, 29 November 1937, AES 89-2c3 Dev49, carton 1, #3. Evangelists could not distinguish Christians from Hindus in the same way, as Hindus could legitimately and without reservation claim the Vedas as their own. When preaching to Hindus or Kabirpanthis (who also possessed their own scriptures), at least one unnamed Evangelical catechist argued for the superiority of Christianity based on the more manageable size and language of its scriptures. See his journal, entries for 26 June and 6 November 1908, found in the journal of S. J. Scott, Mahasamund catechist, AES 83-5 Di54 #1.

¹³ Christian authors claimed that Ghasidas had not only prophesied that missionaries would come and bring ‘the book of Satnam’, but also that because of this book *brahman* scriptures would be destroyed and ‘eaten up by worms’. See Ramnath Bajpai, *Some Facts about the Satnamis*, ca. 1921, HCS, box 2 of 4 (no folder). Similarly, M. M. Paul (1937: 7, 21) wrote that Ghasidas predicted that because of the missionary Bible, the knowledge of the *brahman*s would ‘become useless’, and their books would ‘become meaningless’.

¹⁴ The author went on to say that ‘The Satnamis have no scriptures [*shastra*], no definite tenets [*nishchit bat*], and no proper statements’. ‘*Satnam panth aur satnam ki pothi* [The Satnampanth and the Book of Satnam]’ undated, found in HCS, box 1 of 4 (folder: Satnami Mss.).

¹⁵ Donald A. McGavran, ‘The Spread of the Word in India’, 1939, HCS, box 2 of 4 (folder: Personal Letters and Memories).

¹⁶ Christian leaders in Chhattisgarh thus placed Christianity in the same position in relation to the Satnampanth as Farquhar (1913) did in relation to all of Hinduism, that is, as its *fulfillment*. On Farquhar, see Sharpe 1965.

¹⁷ ‘Third Annual Report of the Chutteesgurh Mission, 1871-72’, AES 82-13a Pr91, 1870-93 (Annual Reports). See also Lohr O. (1869b) Von Darchoora. *Der deutsche Missionsfreund* 4: 1-2.

¹⁸ ‘The Autobiography of the Rev. Oscar T. Lohr, in 1900’, AES 84-5 Lo78.

¹⁹ To my knowledge, the earliest assertion that Ghasidas uttered the prophecy appears in Tanner 1894.

²⁰ See also *Notes on the Sutnamee Chumars of the Raepore District from Information Gathered Orally from the Gooroo, Agur Dass, and His Disciples, and from Chumars Generally in 1868*, unsigned supplement to Temple’s 1867 *Gazetteer of Central India*, DCHS, H. C. Saum files, box 3 of 4 (no folder).

²¹ The text, unfortunately, is undated, and Kingsbury worked nearly continuously in Bilaspur from 1885 until her retirement in 1925. But internal evidence, including the spelling of ‘Ghussee Das’ suggests a publication date between 1895 and 1905.

²² H. C. Saum to Rev. Lazarus, 20 November 1934, DCHS, H. C. Saum Files, box 4 of 4 (folder: Satnamis). It is unlikely that Baptist missionaries would have remembered a visit from an unknown Satnami who had not yet been established as a powerful Guru, so even a negative response would not necessarily have ruled out the possibility of an encounter with Ghasidas. For one text which identifies the missionaries as Baptist (but which gives no specific names), see Saum and Saum, 1935:3.

²³ ‘The Christian Approach to the Satnami’, undated (ca. 1935), probably written by Donald A. McGavran, DCHS, United Christian Missionary Society Records, Division of Overseas

Mission, India, box 41, McGavran, Donald A., Mr. and Mrs. (folder: India II—McGavran, Mr. and Mrs. Donald).

²⁴ McGavran (1990: 42) claimed that when he and others preached to Satnamis, they would say ‘Your own guru, Ghasi Das, foretold a hundred years ago that there would come a red-faced man with a big hat and a big book in his hand. Well, this is the red-faced man and this is the big book. Listen to what it says. It *amplifies* what Ghasi Das proclaimed’.

²⁵ *Some Facts about the Satnamis*, 1921(?). The tract, which I discovered in the files of the Disciples missionary H. C. Saum, is a typescript English translation of an originally Hindi text. It is undated and unsigned. But in a letter from H. C. Saum to Evangelical missionary Dr. Jacob Gass (25 May 1935), Saum quotes from the tract and attributes it to ‘your man, Rev. Ramnath Bajpai’. See also Seybold (1971) reports that Bajpai was ordained on 25 April 1920 and died on 16 December 1922. Therefore, the text could have been written no later than 1922 and, assuming Saum was correct in designating Bajpai a ‘Reverend’, no earlier than 1920. Both the tract and the letter were found in DCHS, H. C. Saum Files, box 2 of 4; the tract was loose (no folder) and the letter was in a folder entitled ‘Bishrampur History Data’.

²⁶ See, for example, Patros, 1954: 43. For more on *satlok*, see Dube, 1998.

²⁷ One Evangelical catechist who complemented Satnamis on their monotheism, reported, ‘They take great pleasure to hear that they are higher than Hindus, because they have given up idolatry and worship the one true God ...’ Entry in diary, unnamed catechist, 22 February 1908, found in the journal of S. J. Scott, Mahasamund catechist, AES 83-5 Di54 #1.

²⁸ Hira Lal, *Satnam ke pas laut ao* (Come Back to Satnam, ca. 1938), published tract (with no publication details), found in DCHS, H. C. Saum Files, box 2 of 4 (folder: Tularam).

Missionaries also sounded the theme of fallenness (see, for example, Alexander, 1946 Melick, 1930; and Menzel, 1943). British officials shared with missionaries an evolutionary

sense of monotheism as the highest form of religion, and therefore of polytheism as a corruption. Nelson (1909: NEED PAGE NUMBERS HERE) asserted, ‘The crude myths which are now associated with the story Ghasi Das...furnish a good instance of the way in which a religion, originally of a high order of morality, will be rapidly degraded to their own level when adopted by a people who are incapable of living up to it’. See also Grant, 1984:582.

²⁹ The Hindi text spells it ‘Giraud’, but ‘Girod’ is the spelling more common today.

³⁰ ‘Shri’ is a customary mark of respect, and ‘gosain’ is an honorary title, the latter usually given to holy men. All translations of the text, which was written in Hindi and Chhattisgarhi, are mine. Special thanks to Dr. Manish Tiwari for help with thorny passages.

³¹ Entry in unnamed catechist’s journal for 26 September 1908, found in the journal of S. J. Scott, Mahasamund catechist, AES 83-5 Di54 #1.