

Examining Missionary Writings: Promoting or Subverting Imperialism

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial studies have focused much of their attention on critiquing imperialism and its repercussions. In this process charges have been levelled not only against the imperialists, who are the primary agents in establishing this colossal exploitative enterprise, but also on informal agents like missionaries who were also present at the scene during that period. This study aims to analyse the persistent debate over the part played by the missionaries in the consolidation of the empire by analysing select missionary writings to prove whether these incriminate them or stand antithetical to colonialism as a digressive mechanism. For this purpose, the paper closely scrutinizes *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement*, the autobiography of John Everett Clough an American Baptist Missionary, to investigate whether or not missionary writings extend as imperialist discourses. The surfacing of multiple conflicting impulses in these writings, problematise a simplistic categorisation of it as a pure imperialistic discourse.

KEYWORDS

Missionary writings; Imperialism; ambivalence; subversion.

This study aims to analyse the persistent debate over the part played by the missionaries in the consolidation of the colonies, by analysing select missionary writings to prove whether these incriminate them or stand antithetical to colonialism as a digressive mechanism. For this purpose, the paper closely scrutinizes *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement*, the autobiography of John Everett Clough an American Baptist Missionary, to investigate whether or not missionary writings extend as imperialist discourses. The surfacing of multiple conflicting impulses in these writings, problematise a

simplistic categorisation of it as a pure imperialistic discourse.

Postcolonialism is an approach which deals with analysing the aftermath of suppression and abuse experienced by the colonised people at the hands of the colonisers during an imperial encounter. Postcolonial studies have focused much of their attention on critiquing imperialism and its repercussions. In this process charges have been levelled not only against the imperialists, who are the primary agents in establishing this colossal exploitative enterprise, but also on informal agents like missionaries who were also present at the scene during that

period. Missionaries have been regularly upbraided for being hand in glove with the colonialists working to further the empire and its interests. They have also been charged with destruction of the culture of the indigenous communities and their portrayal in such a manner that they are “othered”. Hence, an attempt is being made to decipher the complexity of the role played by the missionaries in consolidating the empire and their involvement in the construction of ‘otherness’ by examining their writings. For this purpose, the paper closely scrutinizes *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement*, the autobiography of John Everett Clough an American Baptist Missionary (1836-1910), who worked in the region of Andhra Pradesh among the Madigas to investigate whether or not missionary writings extend as imperialist discourses. The argument affected is that, these texts display ambivalence and hence, cannot be labelled as unequivocally imperialist. The surfacing of multiple conflicting impulses in these writings, problematise a simplistic categorisation of missionary as a pure imperialistic discourse.

John Everett Clough (1836-1910)

John Everett Clough was popularly known as an Apostle to the Madigas and is credited to be the man behind the genesis of mass exodus movement of the Madigas who belonged to the lowest stratum of the society, to an alignment with the Christian faith. Clough who was passionate about preaching the gospel to all the communities he came in contact with, found that the upper castes people refrained from interacting with him, on account of his associations with the Dalits. Soon he was convinced that his calling was indeed to serve the Madigas. Beginning in 1869, the number of converts and baptisms grew substantially and it marked the beginning of the deluge which was about to follow. Other than Clough,

Yerraguntla Periah, a leatherworker, along with some early converts, played a crucial role in spreading this movement all over the Telugu state. Upon baptising, the Madigas from a village or a community, Clough assigned the caste elders to take up ecclesiastical leadership in the local churches. Hence, this strategy was a pioneering attempt at indigenizing and training the local people for church leadership, rather than depending on Western institutions for help.

The next stage was fuelled by the great famine which occurred in 1876-1878, which had a debilitating effect on the entire Telugu population in general and the lower caste people in particular, who were permanently dwelling in poverty in the best of circumstances. Clough’s response to the famine was laudable when he came to rescue the victims by providing them cholera pills and garnering financial aid from all possible sources to alleviate their suffering. Soon he undertook, the supervision of digging the three and a half mile Buckingham canal to provide food for the starving, penury stricken Madigas. In spite of repeated requests for baptisms during that time, Clough refused to do so, because he did not want to harbour a church full of “rice Christians”. It was only after the famine was over and being flooded with repeated request for baptisms that he consented for the same. This marked the second phase of the mass conversion movements among the Madigas. In the third and final stage, conversions resulted due to the visible “demonstration effect”, which was an evident alteration in the life and standards of the Madiga converts. Webster presents this as follows:

Dalits could now see in Christianity the possibility of human betterment, of education, of concern and help in the crisis of famine, of friends in court. They could also begin to see, as time went on, the differences becoming a

Christian did, and did not, make in the lives of those who had converted. These perceptions in turn affected the motivation of subsequent inquirers and converts. (70)

The motivation behind these mass conversions have always been under the scanner and these converts have been derided as “rice Christians” and their motives labelled as mercenary and their decisions temporal and superficial. However, the persecutions the Dalits underwent on renouncing their faith was so severe, the ostracism so complete and the repercussions so formidable that a shallow convert could never withstand it. In most of the cases, it was observed that conversion did not result in emancipation but immense oppression. Clough substantiates this as:

The village washermen were told not to work for (the Madiga converts); the potters were told not to sell pots to them; their cattle were driven from the common grazing ground; the Sudras combined in a refusal to give them the usual work of sewing sandals and harness; at harvest time they were not allowed to help and lost their portion of grain. (78)

Further, there were not only physical persecutions, but these were combined with public humiliations, burning of prayer houses and being arrested on fabricated charges unjustly levelled against them. But in spite of these deprivations, conversions flourished and masses were drawn to this faith. After each phase, conversions would reach a point of saturation and that time would be invested in training and consolidating the local leadership. This would be followed by fresh outreach initiatives and an expansion thereby. Such dynamics of “expansion and consolidation” would keep alive these movements over the years (Webster 71).

These movements had revolutionary effects and impacted certain socio-political patterns irreversibly. The preliminary impact was a demographic shift, which increased the Christian population, particularly in Ongole and areas in and around Punjab. As a result, it riveted the attention of the missionaries towards the pathetic socio-economic deprivations to which these people were subject to, causing them to initiate social reform movements. Moreover, because of these conversions the newly baptised members were united to the universal body of Christ, which included the ruling Europeans, whose identity they were entitled to share. Considerable transformation which was evident in the life and mannerism of the Dalits was heightened by the new self-respect and dignity which became their hallmark.

Christianity in and around Ongole became Madiga Christianity. Clough no longer listened to by ‘caste’ peoples, was stigmatized for associating with such polluted peoples and became the ‘Madiga Missionary’ (Frykenberg 23).

Examining the Writings of John Everett Clough

It has been a postcolonial refrain that missionary writings played a significant role in creating a larger-than-life image of the missionaries as pioneer risk takers and the natives were “othered” and represented as barbarians passively awaiting rescue and relief. Although, the relation between missionaries and the empire has been the subject of much debate and deliberations, this paper attempts to analyse select missionary writings to prove whether these incriminate them or stand antithetical to colonialism as a digressive mechanism. In this intricate and refined understanding of the phenomena of imperialism, it would be very fruitful to examine the relationship between missionary enterprise and the

empire-by examining critically the essence of their writings and the quintessential practices embedded in them. In this paper, *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement*, the autobiography of John Everett Clough, a missionary in India during the colonial period, will be subject to scrutiny.

Missionary Writings as Imperialist Discourses

Missionary texts generally present scenes of confronting people of newer cultures as strange and barbaric who need to be “civilized”. For instance, Clough mentions his first encounter with the natives as, “Some fisher-men came alongside the ship on catamarans with fish for sale. They were repulsive in appearance” (70). Their way of living, dressing and mannerisms offends the Western sensibilities of health and hygiene, and simultaneously gives the Western readers an occasion for introspection, comparison and superior reflections. Further on in these works, the readers are presented with instances where the mastery of the missionaries over these natives is openly displayed. Clough for instance recalls a humorous incident, when he and Dr. Jewett, were on a preaching tour.

One day in those early months in Nellore, we went to the riverside together. People came there toward evening, and he found an audience. A young man began to dance and laugh and clap his hands, trying to disturb Dr. Jewett. I soon could stand no more of that. I walked up near to that fellow, and next he found himself in the river, shallow in that place, but the cool water made him sober. (Clough 75)

Clough is unapologetic about chucking the young man into the river on account of him disturbing the meeting. He rather, recalls the entire episode in a matter of fact manner, which any forces which thwart or

hinder their progress shall invariably be dealt likewise. In multiple cases, we read of instances in which the missionaries dispense with advices, admonitions and paternal influences to the naïve natives, while they go on with their business of living. For instance, Clough advises the Madiga believers to refrain from eating carrion.

The Madiga hamlet was full of filth. Going hungry many a day in the year produced a willingness to eat what no one else would have touched. The consequence was that the men and women had poisoned blood in their veins. The children were full of sores. The Madiga hamlet was a place which no one wanted to enter. (Clough 164)

And, since these people heeded to their Dora’s advice, “Clean family life and clean hamlets were the result” (Clough 166). In this manner, Clough places himself as a teacher, dispelling darkness and bestowing the benefits of civilization to the eager recipients. Besides this, analysing accounts of conversions by these missionaries exposes how their texts were implicated in the hegemonic domination of the mind and consciousness of the natives. It has been observed that as compared to any other genre of missionary writing, it is the stories of salvation that have invariably entrenched missionaries’ reputation as ‘agents of empire’; and these have served as tools instrumental in forming and sustaining images of “other” societies as pagan at best and barbaric at worst. For instance, John Everett Clough’s- *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement*, the very title of this narrative directs our attention towards the singular mission of a man, who has arrived to deal with the Oriental population, to pioneer a movement which would affect the social milieu of the region. The very title gives us a broad hint into the nature and practices which will be discussed herein and its indicative of their

attitudes towards the natives. Besides, presenting their superiority directly, at times these texts sometimes granted space to those natives who tend to be ruthless and disruptive to their ministry, because this serves dual purpose of presenting the believers as victims of unjust opposition and at the same time it casts a negative hue towards native resistance to such movements. Clough speaks of a time when he fell victim to native wrath:

Once I was mauled with bamboo sticks. I had bought ground adjoining our compound on which to build houses for our helpers. To have Christians living so close to them angered the people of the neighborhood. I went to direct some coolies in clearing the ground and those people fell upon me with long bamboos. My umbrella was smashed out of my hands my pith hat protected my head a little. (175)

Also seen in these narratives is the subtle approval of the abandoning of caste practices and idols by the new believers. Clough records his construction of a baptistery by demolishing shrines, while the villagers surrounded him.

They looked on, expecting me to fall dead before their eyes, stricken by the demon which they said had its abode in that shrine. Nothing happened to me. The place was cleared, and we built our baptistery, in which since then many thousands have been baptized (Clough 155).

Nicholas Thomas precisely diagnoses that conversion accounts fundamentally mandate a narrative stroke that juxtaposes “former savagery with a subsequently elevated and purified Christian state”. Missionary writings incline to endorse such evaluation, depending on ‘before and after’ stories; to illustrate the change heralded by the arrival of Christianity. “Clough has converted all the cattle-thieves of this region” (113), was an allegation

levelled against John Clough. After his arrival and mission work, the Madigas underwent a radical moral conversion, gave up a life of thievery and lying. Besides all these reasons, missionary writings are unequivocally branded as imperialist discourses on account of their overt support directly or indirectly towards imperialist machinations and agendas.

Missionary Writings as Ambivalent Discourses

Though missionary writings can be implicated as imperialist to some degree, this argument appears slightly lop-sided and needs a more balanced analysis. The perception of a univocal binary discourse, as advocated by Edward Said has been challenged by Homi Bhabha’s ground breaking treatise on ambivalence and hybridity. In Bhabha’s view, it is regularly seen that “denied” knowledges arrive upon “the prevailing discourse and disenfranchise the basis of its authority” (162). To be more precise,

[t]he effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions (Bhabha 160).

The argument is based on the premise that the subversive existence of the ‘other’ invades the colonizer’s discourse; such a situation destabilizes the hegemonic hold of the colonizer and allows the repressed to overthrow the yoke. Hence, a close perusal of these texts reveals, the seeds of ambivalence in all their activities, which though concealed in the rhetoric of narration, keeps popping out from time to time in spite of being discursively bridled. Most of the rhetoric which placates imperial eyes springs up out of a need to cater to the home audience’s expectations. Even though, the writers are thwarted on this count, yet they do not fail to utilize this platform to whip their conscience and critique their own cultures. For instance,

Clough so completely identified with the untouchable Madigas that he became known as the “Madiga Dora”. However, his identification with these people, was a process, which began with his active attempts at dissuading them from being converted. He is quite candid about his disappointment and frankly confesses:

Nor did I realize that by opening the door to the Madigas we were closing it against all others. When it dawned on me what we had gained by the coming of the Madigas and what we had lost it was too late to change. At this time, while I was walking straight into the bitterest disappointment of my whole missionary career, not knowing what I was doing ... (Clough 84)

Though his is an imperialism which is ambivalent, yet he cannot be absolved fully from his imperialistic leanings, which is quite evident in the above quoted passage. “It all meant that a bitter cup was held to my lips, and that I would have to drink it to the dregs” (128). Such instances of ambivalence can be seen scattered all over these texts, this maybe concerning education, medical aid, sanitation etc. Whenever and wherever, the native practices are derided, the tendency is to position it along with imperialist texts. But at the same time, we find a contrasting aspect in the same texts, which expresses utmost recognition with the natives, and an empathetic attitude towards them, which almost constrains them to stand with the natives in their struggles, and this qualifies it to be a “dissident discourse”, which raises voice against the native oppressors as well as the ruling imperialists. Thus, the dissident chords interspersed with imperialist symphony, make it an ambivalent composition.

Missionary Writings: Subversive Elements

Also seen in these texts are the elements of subversion which surface time and again in

those flashes of moments where local derision is evident, which can estrange, and make the common look uncanny. Humour surfaces several times when for instance, the encountered people find Clough putting forward several questions to the natives about their cultural practices and it is said, “Often the people from the villages wondered that a white man should be so ignorant of all that constituted their real world” (111). For them it was so absurd and unimaginable-the inability of Clough to fathom their simple ways of living, and this would invariably evoke laughter. The repetitive incidence of such humour is of striking concern in the wake of the vast study conducted in postcolonial theories regarding the nature of laughter in repressive colonial conditions. This school of thought, following Bakhtin, has concentrated on its latent agency and subversive influence. Laughter which emanates from the margins should not be assumed to be a mark of frivolity, but instead as something that has serious repercussions, to the extent that it can destabilize the centre. Hence, such incidents, highlighting humour function to disconcert the readers and evokes in their mind an uncertainty and anxiety produced on account of the ironic response of the natives, which is entirely unprecedented.

It is accepted that conversion narratives, depend on the presentation of barbarity and vile customs to justify their presence among the natives, yet this is not the only feature in it, ambivalence, hybridity and subversion keep surfacing in these narratives. Even though the portrayal of communities is prejudiced, yet in these texts the depiction of individuals is more hopeful and positive. For instance, Clough speaks of a convert Yerraguntla Periah who “was a personality; a man with a spiritual history. He had taken more distinct steps in his religious experience than falls to the lot of most white men to take” (92). Even before his conversion, he displayed a deep spiritual legacy that kept

him constantly in the quest for truth. Eventually, Clough concedes that the native Periah, became a right-hand man for him such that “he and I were influencing each other a good deal in those first months in Ongole. He regarded me as his teacher, and I, in turn, always wanted to know what he had to say...” (92). This depiction is so unlike Madison Grant’s 1922 Introduction to *The Rising Tide of Color* (1922), in which he argues that Orientals were invariably inferior and incapable of progress or advancement. Such views were not typical of a few individuals here and there but indeed an entire body of polygenic anthropologist in the post- Darwinian era subscribed to these views and propagated that different races represented different species altogether. The missionaries who came enthused and purpose-driven to dismantle all the gross evils, idolatry and abominable customs in the Eastern lands, are seen to pause and reconsider the information that was supplied to them and the ideologies that were indoctrinated, for they were soon able to realize a disparity between the two. It is this moment of epiphany, which then brings about a shift in their attitudes, and the dawning of realization that East and West can and have to work together, dismantling the doctrine of “either/or” and replacing it with “both/and”, which is a desirable blending. The synchronization between the West and East becomes the springboard for all mission work. As Clough rightly puts it:

If I had been lacking in elasticity the efforts of us all would have been crippled. I did not try to make Americans of those men. The effect would have been grotesque. They would have been neither Hindu nor American, and their own mothers would have been puzzled about their status. As it was, they remained simple, humble Madigas but Christianized. (188)

Although the missionaries, did express their racial prejudices in the initial days of their encounter with the natives, yet resistance to stereotyping is simultaneously interspersed in these texts. Their lived experience dissuades them not only from physical labelling, but also intellectual and personality profiling, merely based on racial differences. These writings also served as a receptacle, where the ‘others’ are presented to the readers in such a way that they are familiarized rather than ‘othered’. Such aspects of these texts cause one to reconsider their static imperialistic labelling and accord them a more dynamic and progressive status. The typical attitude fostered by most Westerners was that the Orientals were incorrigibly savage and barbaric. Even Clough confesses to being prey to these teachings initially. He recounts:

At that time little was known of the Oriental races. Christian people took it for granted that the older religions were wholly bad, and that their scriptures contained nothing but evil. It distressed many thoughtful men and women in Christian lands to think that the rest of the world was given over to sin, and that unless the heathen heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, and accepted it, they would be eternally lost. This was my opinion, too, when I went to India. It formed my missionary motive. I looked upon the Hindus as simply heathen; I wanted to see them converted. (73)

But even though he began thus, eventually, his attitude towards the caste people changed and he became more benign and humane towards them. “As the years passed, I grew tolerant and often told the caste people, if they could not, or would not, receive Jesus Christ as their Saviour, to serve their own gods faithfully” (Clough 73). During his visits to America, he would tell the American audiences that the Hindus were in some respects better than

them. Thus, it is evident that these missionary writings were written as Ross puts it “an attempt to undermine the ignorance and the positive prejudice in Britain and to combat the racialism that ran counter to these evangelical notions” (qtd. in Livingstone 55)

Conclusion

The argument is that missionary writings are capable of being variously interpreted. It is not very surprising that the same text can have so many divergent discourses contained within it, discourses which are contrasting yet interwoven. All these examples undoubtedly show that these

missionary texts which have been charged as imperialist discourses are in reality an amalgam of disparate experiences like cross-cultural encounters, an attempt towards identification with the encountered groups, confronting racial prejudices head on and being a platform for the hitherto suppressed native voices. These writings also serve as a receptacle, where the ‘others’ are presented to the readers in such a way that they are familiarised rather than ‘othered’. Such aspects of these texts cause one to reconsider their static imperialistic labelling and accord them a more dynamic and progressive status.

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