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Mission At and From the Margins Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives

Peniel Rajkumar

University of Edinburgh, ir_rajkumarp@csl.edu

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam

University of Edinburgh, ir_dayamj@csl.edu

I. P. Asheervadham

University of Edinburgh, ir_asheervadhmi@csl.edu

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Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series

VOLUME 19



Mission At and From the Margins Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives



Edited By

Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam

and I P Asheervadham



REGNUM EDINBURGH CENTENARY SERIES
Volume 19

Mission At and From the Margins
Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives

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REGNUM EDINBURGH CENTENARY SERIES

The Centenary of the World Missionary Conference of 1910, held in Edinburgh, was a suggestive moment for many people seeking direction for Christian mission in the twenty-first century. Several different constituencies within world Christianity held significant events around 2010. From 2005, an international group worked collaboratively to develop an intercontinental and multi-denominational project, known as Edinburgh 2010, and based at New College, University of Edinburgh. This initiative brought together representatives of twenty different global Christian bodies, representing all major Christian denominations and confessions, and many different strands of mission and church life, to mark the Centenary.

Essential to the work of the Edinburgh 1910 Conference, and of abiding value, were the findings of the eight think-tanks or ‘commissions’. These inspired the idea of a new round of collaborative reflection on Christian mission – but now focused on nine themes identified as being key to mission in the twenty-first century. The study process was polycentric, open-ended, and as inclusive as possible of the different genders, regions of the world, and theological and confessional perspectives in today’s church. It was overseen by the Study Process Monitoring Group: Miss Maria Aranzazu Aguado (Spain, The Vatican), Dr Daryl Balia (South Africa, Edinburgh 2010), Mrs Rosemary Dowsett (UK, World Evangelical Alliance), Dr Knud Jørgensen (Norway, Areopagos), Rev John Kafwanka (Zambia, Anglican Communion), Rev Dr Jooseop Keum (Korea, World Council of Churches), Dr Wonsuk Ma (Korea, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies), Rev Dr Kenneth R. Ross (UK, Church of Scotland), Dr Petros Vassiliadis (Greece, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), and coordinated by Dr Kirsteen Kim (UK, Edinburgh 2010).

These publications reflect the ethos of Edinburgh 2010 and will make a significant contribution to ongoing studies in mission. It should be clear that material published in this series will inevitably reflect a diverse range of views and positions. These will not necessarily represent those of the series’ editors or of the Edinburgh 2010 General Council, but in publishing them the leadership of Edinburgh 2010 hopes to encourage conversation between Christians and collaboration in mission. All the series’ volumes are commended for study and reflection in both church and academy.

Series Editors

Knud Jørgensen	Areopagos, Norway, MF Norwegian School of Theology & the Lutheran School of Theology, Hong Kong. Former Chair of Edinburgh 2010 Study Process Monitoring Group
Kirsteen Kim	Leeds Trinity University and former Edinburgh 2010 Research Coordinator, UK
Wonsuk Ma	Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, UK
Tony Gray	Words by Design, Bicester, UK

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Mission At and From the Margins
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Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar,
Joseph Prabhakar Dayam
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CONTENTS

Foreword	
Deenabandhu Manchala	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Preface	xiii

INTRODUCTION

Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives: A Critical and Constructive Contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 Conference	
Joseph Prabhakar Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar	3
Harmony, Polyphony, Cacophony: Voices of Dissent and Unfamiliar Vocabulary	
S. John Boopalan	10

THE PATTERNS OF MISSION

Malas and Madigas: Their Life and Livelihood (c.1860-1932)	
Geoffrey A. Oddie	23
The Nature and Pattern of Christian Church as a Reflection of Christian Missions in Andhra Pradesh (1884-1960): A Critique	
Pramod Rao	45
The Phenomenon of Bible Mission: Exploring the Features of a Local Church on the Margins	
James Ponniah	55
A Critical Study of the Bakht Singh Movement and the Challenges it Poses to an Ecumenical Understanding of Mission	
M. Santha Kumari	68
Caste Identity and Combating Marginality: A Village Lutheran Church in Coastal Andhra	
Ashok Kumar M.	82
Camouflaged Dalithood: Telangana Experience and the Churches' Mission to Strive to Sustain, Renew and Safeguard the Integrity of Creation	
Praveen P.S. Perumalla	97

THE PROTAGONISTS OF THE MISSION (HI)STORY

- The Dalit Search for Christianity in the Pre-Independent Era in Andhra Pradesh: A Study of the American Baptists and American Mennonite Brethren Missions from the Dalit Perspective**
I.P. Asheervadam 113
- Blurring the Boundaries: Telugu Bible Women, Itinerancy and Social Mobility**
James Elisha Taneti 127
- Revisiting the Missional Engagement at Parkal: A Recovery of the Role of the Dalit Christian Community**
Bethel Krupa Victor 142
- Stories of Women in South Andhra Lutheran Church: Feminist Theological Reflections**
N.G. Prasuna 160

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MISSION

- Why Make it a Big Deal! Seeing the Widow Beyond Her Two Coins (Mark 12:41-44): A Dalit Feminist Perspective**
Surekha Nelavala 173
- Dalit Interpretation of the Wisdom Literature with Special Reference to the Underprivileged Groups in the Hebrew Society: A Mission Perspective**
K. Jesurathnam 179
- Decoding the Politics of Lukan Discipleship: Discipleship, Discrimination and Dalit Christians in India**
Rebecca Sangeetha Daniel 200

PERSPECTIVES ON/FOR MISSION

- Mission At and From the Margins: The Dalit Church's Response to the Ecological Crisis**
Motupalli Chaitanya 215
Copyrighted Material
- Mission as 'Opening the Roofs' in the Context of Globalisation and Marginalisation**
Raj Bharath Patta 226
- Positive People: Seeking Strength from Stigma**
Devahi Selina 242
- Hunting Using Hoax: Dalits, Caste and the Conversion Debate in India**
Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar 248

Postscript

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam

261

Bibliography

263

List of Contributors

279

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FOREWORD

Deenabandhu Manchala

'Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter!' Thus holds an African proverb. The story of Christian missions in India evokes different responses from different people, largely determined by their social locations. But one common feature of all the mission efforts is the influence of the distinct cultural perceptions, besides theological and ecclesiological flavours, of their contexts of origin. As such, most of these smack of not only Christian triumphalism but also paternalism, with mission primarily as actions done from positions of power, privilege and possession. The result is that the recipient is objectified and 'othered' with his / her identity seen as defective, insufficient and inferior to that of the giver. One serious aberration in the case of the Dalits and other oppressed communities has been the reiteration of what the wider society has always told them that they are inferior, incapable of emancipating themselves, as ones always needing help, and therefore they can only receive but not do mission. Unfortunately, such attitudes still have their hold over many Christian expressions.

This contribution *Mission At and From the Margins* by CODECS, by a team of progressive younger theologians who have opted to pursue their theological vocation through a steady engagement with the struggles of the Dalits, is a bold attempt to interrogate and redefine some long cherished models of mission. By reflecting on mission from the physical and social locations of the Dalits, they offer new signposts by throwing light on the forces that cause marginalisation rather than reaching out in paternalistic compassion to those who have been pushed to the margins. The Dalit experience of marginalisation, to that extent, is distinct in that it is not merely an experience of degrees of exclusion from certain possibilities for participation, power or opportunities but their right to exist as human beings, with dignity and access to basic needs and justice.

This collection of experiential reflections explore a basic question: If mission is the inevitable vocation of every Christian, and that mission, as we have been conditioned to believe, requires giving, offering and effecting change in the other, what would be the mission of those who are not only poor and disadvantaged but also despised and dehumanized?

These reflections attempt to do this not in reaction to what mission has been to them in the past but as what they imagine God intends for the whole world and creation today by understanding the meaning and purpose of their faith in God in the context of their struggles for dignity, justice and life. By holding that God who opts for the poor not out of paternalistic compassion but in order to assert that God stands in solidarity with those

who are sinned against, the victims of all systemic injustice, those who are taken advantage of, and those made vulnerable, these assert that the marginalized are the most preferred partners of God in mission. The mission of the church, these essays claim, therefore, begins with the mission of God that Jesus lived out among the poor and the marginalized. This implies that God's mission is beyond the confines of the churches' interests of stability and expansion but is directed towards the transformation of the world through the values of justice and love. Such transformation is not possible through mere acts of charity but only by exposing the sinfulness of the world and confronting the forces that deny life and justice to them and others. The Dalits and similar communities are already in this struggle for transformation through their lives and of witnessing through their resistance and hope. Through this understanding, they call churches and others to recognise the subjecthood of the Dalits and to join them so that God's will for the world may be fulfilled. To sum up, these reflections in a very powerful way convince that the mission of the marginalized people is mission in Christ's way, the mission of God for a new, just world!

This contribution by CODECS has been a major resource to the process of reflection on "Foundations for Mission" that informed the work of the Edinburgh 2010 Conference, a global gathering to commemorate the historic World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Done in collaboration with the Just and Inclusive Communities programme of the World Council of Churches, it held forth context and experience as decisive and deeply foundational along with scripture and tradition for any reflection on mission. The Just and Inclusive Communities programme brings together the concerns and contributions of those who are discriminated and excluded in the church and society with a view insist that the churches' efforts towards unity, witness and service will be incomplete if these do not proceed from or formulated from the vantage point of the marginalised. WCC is grateful to the efforts of these friends from CODECS, for this unique contribution to the ongoing search for authentic and relevant forms of being church and the ecumenical movement.

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Deenabandhu Manchala
Programme Executive
Just and Inclusive Communities,
World Council of Churches, Geneva

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The authors are indebted to several people without whose efforts and support this volume would have remained a distant dream. We are particularly thankful to Kirsteen Kim the study process coordinator of Edinburgh 2010 and to Tony Gray for their unwavering interest in this project and persistent patience. Our gratitude is due to Regnum Books for their willingness to include this book in the Edinburgh Conference Series of publications.

Since a major portion of this book emerges from the colloquium conducted in the Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad, our appreciation and gratitude are due to several people whose encouragement and cooperation were instrumental in the organising of the colloquium. We are particularly grateful to the Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala, Programme Executive of the World Council of Churches, who not only envisaged this project in its initial stages and entrusted it to us for implementation but also unstintingly supported this project through the Just and Inclusive Communities Programme of the World Council of Churches. The willingness of the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College, Shamshabad to partner these efforts by taking up the administrative and financial responsibilities is deeply appreciated.

We also remember with gratitude the support received from Dr. Daryl Balia the former International Director of Edinburgh 2010 during his visit to India. The presence of the Rev. Andrew Anderson, the Chairperson of the Edinburgh 2010 Committee, the Rev. Dr. Sunil Bhanu Busi, President of Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church; the Rev. Dr. P. B. Arnold, President of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church during the colloquium was a source of inspiration. Their presence and participation truly enriched our conversations. We were also greatly blessed by the daily bible studies led by Rev. Dr. Jione Havea, Rev. Dr. Monica Melancthon, Rev. Dr. Daniel Prem Kumar and Rev. Eddie Makue, who opened up new vistas in reflecting upon biblical texts in the context of the margins and highlighted how biblical stories help us to listen, share, and be open to the experiences of other people whom we often tend to ignore. The presence of the Living Letters Team was a great encouragement especially in the context of WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence. Their presence thus helped all of us to recall and reaffirm our solidarity with one another in God's mission.

We are particularly grateful to Dr. Ajit Prasadam, General Secretary, India Sunday School Union, for his valuable advice as we prepared for our ethnographic research and to Ms. Daisy Prasadam who meticulously and painstakingly drafted the proceedings of the colloquium. The erudite and enthusiastic guidance of Professor Geoffrey Oddie who participated with us in the field work in Vegeswarapuram village as well as the editorial help

that Mrs Nola Oddie extended to us is gratefully acknowledged. Their accompaniment throughout the process has been a great source of inspiration for us. This book is greatly indebted to Rev. Bapanaiah and the elders Mr. John Victor, Mr. Anandham, Mr. Devanandham, Mr. Benji of Vegeswarapuram village which was the locale of our ethnographic research. We are also grateful to Rev. Absalom, Rev. Nelson Babu and Rev. Jayaprakash, of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, who extended their whole-hearted support for this venture.

We were indeed privileged to have Mr. Sunder John Boopalan as our research assistant throughout this research project. He is among the few people who have the rare combination of academic rigour, eye for detail, effective administration skills, indefatigable energy and passion for the cause and the enviable ability to extract written work from the most procrastinating quarters. It has not only been a luxury to have his assistance throughout the process but a true joy and the enthusiasm that he has inspired within us deserves special mention. Finally to our family members who have been reservoirs of patience and understanding we remain indebted.

It is our hope that this particular effort to understand 'Mission At and From the Margins' will stir further thought and action in the ongoing efforts to understand the general through the particular, and the particular through the general.

**Cover picture by Ebenezer Arnon,
a student of Ecole Liotard, Geneva:**

The picture which is full of margins highlights the ubiquitous and unexpected nature of the margins... margins are everywhere... and they 'entwine' our world and our lives, shaping them in ways which we never expected.... One of the reasons for choosing an abstract picture, rather than a more detailed picture, is the space that the picture will occupy on the covers in this series. By primarily highlighting the idea of the margins, I thought that this picture would be more evocative. Moreover, it is from a picture painted by a six-year-old child... so in a way from the margins....

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Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar

PREFACE

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to let the oppressed go free
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV)

The Edinburgh 2010 study process made it clear that the growth and influence of World Christianity obligates mission theology to be attentive to the dynamics of Christian mission practice in particular contexts. In continuity with such thinking this volume explores the dialectics between 'Mission and Power', one of the nine study themes of Edinburgh 2010, from the perspectives of churches and communities on the margins in a particular context, namely the Dalit churches in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. This volume gathers together empirical and historical studies as well as theological reflections on mission presented in a colloquium on mission held at the Henry Martin Institute, Hyderabad, India under the auspices of the Edinburgh 2010 conference. Along with this it also brings together briefly the fruits of a research project 'Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives' which is briefly mentioned in the first chapter of the Edinburgh 2010 Pre-Conference Publication as an example of how experience can serve as both a valid and necessary foundation for mission. In significant ways this volume also falls within the ambit of the transversal theme 'subaltern voices' as it is intended that this volume will throw further light on the role of the experiences of the margins in envisaging and engendering mission.

The Context

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Previously notoriously known as the 'untouchables' the Dalit communities are those communities who have over the years suffered the worst exploitation and oppression under the Hindu caste system, the world's longest surviving hierarchy. In spite of the ongoing atrocities against them, Dalit communities today are increasingly asserting themselves. This assertion manifests itself in naming themselves as Dalits, writing themselves into history, converting to religions which they perceive to be egalitarian, celebrating their religion and culture, reclaiming Dalit rights as human rights and engaging actively in the political processes of the country.

The church in India today is predominantly comprised of the Dalit communities. This can be attributed, to a great extent, to the positive influence of the Christian missions on Dalit communities in their struggle for identity and emancipation. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the growth of the modern Dalit movement in South India in general and the state of Andhra Pradesh in particular has been facilitated to a great extent by the educational and pastoral ministry of the various Missions. Thus, Christian Missions have played a significant role in the social empowerment of the Dalit communities.

While Christian missions have played a significant role in the social empowerment of Dalit communities, the way in which the missionaries encountered these communities and the way in which this encounter challenged the then existing understandings of mission and led to the review and re-articulation of mission, and how the imagination of mission continues to be shaped by these communities has so far been an area that has been left largely untapped. The present volume seeks to fill this lacuna.

The Rationale

There is no doubt that the establishment of the missions provided the condition for social change. However, as the missionaries encountered these communities, they were challenged to review and rearticulate their understanding of mission. Sometimes it called for a conversion on the side of the missionary. In this process the missionaries, the native evangelists and the masses had to come to terms with the position of the power of the missionary and the position of powerlessness of the masses. In the interaction of these two positions (of power and powerlessness), the Dalit communities creatively navigated their quest for the reclamation of identity, self-worth and rights. These communities actively participated in the proclamation and practice of the gospel, imagined creative modes of carrying the mission through and set the agenda of the mission. The native evangelists, catechists and the masses were the protagonists of the story of the mission of the church among the Dalits.

It is in this context that the 'Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives' study project envisaged a phenomenological, historical and theological study of the features of mission of churches on the margins, as a critical and constructive contribution to Edinburgh 2010 Conference. The endeavour was based on studies from the perspective of subaltern churches in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. This study project sought to understand the protagonists, patterns and perspectives of mission both past and present from a subaltern perspective as an attempt to recover the subaltern agency and agenda in Christian missions in Andhra Pradesh and draw the implications of this agency for the ecumenical imagination of the church's mission in the world today.

The church in Andhra Pradesh today, which comprises of several denominations, evolved as a result of a transition – (from being a mission to becoming a church) – with a significant numerical growth of believers. Several paradigmatic shifts have shaped this transition, the most significant being that the church no longer continues to be the only space through which the Dalit communities could realise their aspirations for emancipation. In the post-independence context the state also began to assume responsibility for the education of the Dalit communities because of the safeguards provided by the constitution framed under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar an iconic Dalit leader and the architect of India's constitution. In such a context the Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh found a 'post-Christian' secular space (the constitutionally accorded educational and employment opportunities) to carry on their struggles for emancipation, with a distinctively socio-economic focus. Further, the rise of the Ambedkarite Movement which found its expression through the formation of Dalit student associations, Dalit employees associations, Dalit agricultural labour and trade unions and political parties also emerged as another alternative space to articulate the Dalit quest for emancipation, with a pronouncedly political focus. In such a context characterised by the emergence/presence of several other agencies of emancipation a study of mission at and from the margins necessarily entails a critical engagement with the implications of this interface between the church, the state and the Ambedkarite movements exploring the dialectical tensions within this interface.

It needs to be acknowledged that the state of Andhra Pradesh is an exciting terrain for a study of this sort as it has witnessed the historical Dalit mass movements of the nineteenth century, the growth of 'mainline' denominational churches and the emergence of several indigenous church and mission movements as well as an incipient and inchoate interaction between the church and secular Dalit movements. Moreover, being a predominantly Dalit church the conceptualisation of mission of the churches in Andhra Pradesh has been distinctly centred around the theme of God's engagement in the struggles for Dalit identity, dignity and liberation. In spite of all the richness of resources that churches in Andhra Pradesh offer for any research on mission, they have been hitherto unexplored as being significant for the articulation of an ecumenical theology of mission. This study therefore is an attempt to redress this shortcoming.

The Purpose

The research project on which the present volume is based sought to:

- 1) Examine the historical processes of mission among the Dalit communities with a particular focus on the role of the native evangelists in the proclamation of the gospel and the Dalit communities in appropriating it and being subjects of the mission.

- 2) Discern patterns of mission, evangelism and social change among the Dalit communities and derive implications in crafting out a mission theology today by studying the continuity and changes in mission approaches.
- 3) Study the changing role of the native as the administrator of missional activity/engagement of the church and its impact as the Missions transformed themselves into churches.
- 4) Critically review the emergence of national missions/churches like the Bhakth Singh movement, the Bible Mission church, and the emerging Shudra churches and the challenges these phenomena pose to contemporary understanding of mission.
- 5) Offer insights on mission from biblical, theological and ethical perspectives as an attempt to envision a more relevant and holistic theology of mission.
- 6) Explore the inter-relationship between pastoral practice and mission by analysing the development of the idea of the pastoral office and the ecclesial role of the laity historically. It will also look at the self-understanding of the pastors, lay leaders and members of the church today and its impact upon their ecclesial and societal involvement.
- 7) Understand how mission is interpreted, understood and expressed in the subaltern imagination.
- 8) Understand the contours and content of the interface between the contemporary Dalit movement and the Andhra churches.

The Process

The present volume culls together the fruits of research projects comprising of field studies and archival research by various scholars from different denominations, theological institutions and the secular academia, who presented and discussed their findings and perspectives in a colloquium. The main research project – an ethnographic study – was carried out jointly by CODECS-AP (Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars of Andhra Pradesh), Hyderabad and the Just and Inclusive Communities Programme of the World Council of Churches, whereas the other contributions are based on individual research.

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The Structure

The *Introduction section* will introduce the reader to the theme of the study ‘Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives’ and its relation to the context of the South Indian State of Andhra Pradesh and analyse it in relation to the theme of ‘Mission and Power’, one of the nine study themes of the Edinburgh 2010 Conference. Further, it will elaborate on how a Dalit perspective helps us to understand mission from the perspective of the margins and the possibilities that such

an exercise offers for an ecumenical theology of mission. This section will consist of two essays based on the ethnographic study conducted in Vegeswarapuram namely:

- Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives: A Critical and Constructive Contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 Conference
- Harmony, Polyphony, Cacophony: Voices of Dissent and Unfamiliar Vocabulary

The second section of this volume on *The Patterns of Mission* will offer a historical perspectives on mission and will include essays dealing with the history of the Baptist mission; the Mennonite mission (American and Russian); the Parkal mission (started by the then Anglican Diocese of Travancore–Cochin; now the Church of South India, Madhya Kerala after 1947); and also other indigenous church movements like the Bible Mission and the 'Bakht Singh Assemblies.' It will consist of the following chapters:

- Malas and Madigas: Their Life and Livelihood (c.1860-1932)
- The Nature and Pattern of the Christian Church as a Reflection of Christian Missions in Andhra Pradesh (1884-1960): A Critique
- The Phenomenon of Bible Mission: Exploring the Features of a Local Church on the Margins
- A Critical Study of the Bakht Singh Movement and the Challenges it Poses to an Ecumenical Understanding of Mission
- Caste Identity and Combating Marginality: A Village Lutheran Church in Coastal Andhra
- Camouflaged Dalithood: Churches' Mission/Telangana Experiences to strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew

The third section of the book on *The Protagonists of the Mission (hi)Story*, will seek to understand Dalits as protagonists of the mission story. The efforts of the essays in this section are to highlight Dalit agency in missions. This section will consist of the following chapters:

- The Dalits' Search for Christianity in the Pre-Independent Era in Andhra Pradesh: A Study of the American Baptists and American Mennonite Brethren Missions from the Dalit Perspective
- Blurring the Boundaries: Telugu Bible Women, Itinerancy and Social Mobility
- Revisiting the Missional Engagement at Parkal: A Recovery of the Role of the Dalit Christian Community
- Stories of Women in South Andhra Lutheran Church: Feminist Theological Reflections

The fourth section of the book will consist of *Biblical Perspectives on Mission*. Based on biblical studies in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels and other biblical literature, the essays in this section will focus on how biblical insights enrich, challenge and shape deliberations on mission,

especially as it happens at the margins. This section will include the following chapters:

- Why Make it a Big Deal! Seeing the Widow Beyond Her Two Coins (Mark 12:41-44): A Dalit Feminist Perspective
- Dalit Interpretation of the Wisdom Literature with Special Reference to the Underprivileged Groups in the Hebrew Society: A Mission Perspective
- Decoding the Politics of Lukan Discipleship: Discipleship, Discrimination and Dalit Christians in India

Recognising that all mission efforts are theologically driven, and new theological perspectives offer new ways of imagining mission, the fifth section of this volume on *Perspectives On/For Mission* will deal with critical contemporary perspectives. This section is multi-focal, and will contain essays with various important and contemporary perspectives that address issues of ecology, sociology, globalisation and communalism that have come to hold a very important place in the ongoing debates in the Indian socio-political context. These perspectives help us to think of imaginative ways of participating in and doing Christian mission both globally and locally. This section will comprise of the following chapters:

- Mission At and From the Margins: The Dalit Church's Response to the Ecological Crisis
- Mission as 'Opening the Roofs' in the Context of Globalisation and Marginalisation
- Positive People: Seeking Strength from Stigma
- Hunting Using Hoax: Dalits, Caste and the Conversion Debate in India

It is our hope that these chapters, though fragmentary in nature, will provide glimpses of how the 'margins' can both inform and re-form missiological thought as we build further upon what has happened since Edinburgh 1910. These fragments are offered with the hope that they will not only feed and nourish but also provoke hunger for working towards God's kingdom of justice and righteousness.

INTRODUCTION

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**MISSION AT AND FROM THE MARGINS:
PATTERNS, PROTAGONISTS AND PERSPECTIVES:
A CRITICAL AND CONSTRUCTIVE CONTRIBUTION
TO THE EDINBURGH 2010 CONFERENCE**

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam and
Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar

Introduction

The study project 'Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives' was an ethnographic, historical and theological study of the features of mission of churches on the margins, and was intended to be a critical and constructive contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 Conference. The endeavour was primarily based on empirical studies with and among Dalit churches (i.e. those churches which are predominantly Dalit in their composition) in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The Dalit communities, previously known as the 'untouchables', are those communities which are considered 'out castes' on the basis of the caste system, a unique form of rigid hierarchical social structuring based on notions of purity and pollution. They have historically faced and continue to face some of the worst forms of social discrimination, cultural subordination and economic exploitation.

The uniqueness of this study project was that it sought to understand the patterns, perspectives and protagonists of mission, both present and past, from the perspective of the 'margins' – the margins connoting the marginalised yet resilient Dalit communities. The field study for the study project was undertaken at a village called Vegeswarapuram, a village 30km away from the town of Rajahmundry in the West Godavari District of the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The primary attempt of the project was to recover the Dalit agency and agenda in Christian missions in Andhra Pradesh and draw the implications of this agency for the ecumenical imagination of the church's mission in the world today. The following are the major findings of the study:

Understanding Mission from the Perspective of the Margins: Mission as the Creation of Conditions which Facilitate Empowerment

Understanding mission from the experiences of the people sometimes causes fundamental shifts in our perspectives on mission. One such fundamental shift in perspective which emerged during the course of our study was to understand mission as creating *conditions* that facilitated the empowerment of people at the margins. A few specific illustrations drawn from our field study can help us to further understand mission as *'the creation of conditions'* that facilitated empowerment and emancipation and provide us with glimpses of the various patterns of mission which emerge from the margins.

Mission as an Alliance

Communities on the margins found in the establishment of the mission station and the presence of the missionary (the *Dora*) an advocate of their rights and used it as a springboard to further their own attempts for emancipation from the caste system. They saw in the *Dora* an ally with whom they could further their own efforts for emancipation, not the least because of the access that the missionaries had to the colonial administration. This colonial connection coupled with missionary establishments like hospitals, schools and hostels prompted the Dalit communities to shift their allegiance from their traditional landlords to these new *Doras*. They did so because in this new *Dora*, they found a patron who fanned the flames within for liberation and stood by them in situations of struggle.

A popular story which was recounted in various different versions during the course of our field work was the story of a missionary (a *Dora*) who pointed a gun at the local landlord for abusing a peasant (in some cases abusing a boy attending to his 'nature call'). It was interesting that the story of this *Dora* who pointed a gun at a dominant and abusive landlord was recounted in a recent pamphlet produced by local Christian leaders. Thus, through weaving these positive images of the missionaries – as being their allies in the struggle against caste-based oppression – into their narratives they created new symbolic systems which funded their initiative to move away from their casteist feudal landlords and embrace more fully their vision of a new reality of autonomy and self-reliance. In this effort the various conditions which the missionaries provided, most importantly access to education and job opportunities, played a facilitative role.

Mission and Transformative Education

Much of the transformative effect of Christian mission can be traced to the education ministry of the Christian missions. Creating access to education

for the Dalit communities, who were denied education under the caste system, was a strategic intervention which fostered the empowerment of the Dalit communities. The location of schools in Dalit colonies, training Indian leaders to take up responsibilities and including vocational training in the curriculum made an impact. The teacher played an important role in the life of the church.

A prominent church leader of Vegeswarapuram Victor mentions that there was a *rotcha banda* (officially, where the village disputes are settled; otherwise, a place of gathering located in the centre of the village usually under the cover of the large canopy of a tree) in the *peta* (the Dalit colony, which is separated from the main village where the caste communities live). This was their meeting place where they discussed community issues. There were about 10-20 of them who used to meet. All of them had completed secondary schooling. These meetings played an important role in facilitating the involvement of the Dalits in social and political issues. Victor remembers the 'two-glass system' (the practice of having a separate glass for Dalits due to the practice of 'untouchability') which was widely prevalent even in the year 1946 when he was a secondary school student and recounts how they rebelled against this system as Christians and confronted the Kaapus (caste communities). He also mentioned that even as school-going children they rebelled when they were made to sit separately and away from the caste-Hindu children when they started attending the government high schools for their higher secondary classes. According to him access to education created in them an awareness of justice issues and inspired them to confront oppression effectively. He says, 'The missionaries gave us education and told us, "you have blood, they have blood; it's the same blood". This triggered in us the confidence to challenge injustice whenever we confronted it.'

Mission and the Relocation of Sacred and Secular Spaces

Making strategic topographical changes to the village geographical structure by relocating the sacred and secular places was also an important way in which mission facilitated emancipation. Mission as the relocation of geography is a matter of great significance in the Indian context. A typical Indian village is divided into two parts. The main village or the *voor*, which is one part, is inhabited by the caste communities, while the other part, the Dalit colony, is segregated from the *voor* and is situated at a distance. Fields in between usually segregate the two parts. The village school, the temple, the administrative offices are all situated in the *voor*, thus ascribing social, religious and political importance to the *voor*. Since the village topography is implicated in the social and cultural polity it has a role in sustaining status quo and perpetuating hegemony. Thus village topography and any changes within need to be understood politically.

In this light one can understand the relocation of the sacred and secular geography of Vegeswarapuram as having a liberative missiological dimension. In our field study at Vegeswarapuram, we were told that initially the Dalit colony was more than a kilometre away from the *voor* (or the part of the village inhabited by caste communities). Mission work saw the relocating of this space by bringing the Dalit colony nearer to the *voor* that today it is only a road which separates the two. The demarcation is not very distinctive for the untrained eye to observe. From our interviews it emerged that this relocation is a matter of great pride and assertion as it upsets (both negatively and positively depending on the perspective that we take) the geography of the village and the socio-economic and cultural relationship between the various caste and Dalit communities. Further by constructing a church building in the Dalit colony, there was a de-inscribing of the Dalit colony as the 'polluted' in which there was no space for the divine. Symbolically for the Dalit communities having such a significant landmark as the church in 'their' locality, was not only a relocation of the divine, rather it was a source of collective affirmation of identity, which also gave them an opportunity to play host to the other caste Christians.

The Polysemic Relationship between Mission and Social Justice

Though the popular understandings of *church-centred* mission which emerged in most of our interviews and meetings with focus groups were proclamation (seen in terms of numerical growth) and pastoral care, *along with this* social justice and resistance to casteism were recognised as *God's mission given to all people*. There seems to be a polysemic (multi-layered) dimension in the understanding of the people when it comes to spirituality and activism. In our interviews it became clear that the church and the pastor are seen as facilitators more of pastoral care than social change, though this may be a crude distinction.

Interestingly Dalit Christian leaders of the village expressed discomfort in using the premises of the church for talking about social justice, though they discussed issues of social justice in the Dalit colony and were actively involved in issues of social justice, *which they affirmed as God's work*. One reason for this was the community's preparedness to take up force as a means of self-defence to resist the caste-based violence against them. For them violence and Christianity were incompatible. Yet, adopting forceful means of resistance and threatening to take up violence if violated were inevitable as a powerful deterrent to caste-based atrocities against them. This was evident in the example of Rev David Nelson Babu, one of the previous pastors of Vegeswarapuram. In the narration of his experiences as a pastor at Vegeswarapuram he begins by recalling the incident of an atrocity against a Dalit Sub-Inspector of Police. When the Sub Inspector was killed because of caste animosity, Rev Nelson organised a protest and

brought Malas and Madigas together, who made it clear that they would resort to retaliation if attacked. According to him it proved to be a powerful deterrent which prevented further atrocities against the Dalits. Hence proclamation, pastoral care and social justice are all recognised as part of the mission of God. The agency for this mission extended beyond the church.

The Natives as the Protagonists of Mission

This study project also helped us to recover the role of Dalits as the agents of Christian mission, which is an often-overlooked fact. Regarding the agency for mission it became clear that in the past overseas missionaries with their position of power played the role of primary agents of mission. However, though the mission stations were established by the foreign missionaries the actual proclamation of the Christ story, establishment of the congregation and the nurturing of the faith community were carried through by the native catechist/teachers and pastors. For example, the native catechist-teacher as the name indicates had a dual role which focused both on nurturing the faith community and in ensuring educational opportunities to as many children as possible and even initiating the efforts of the community in building a church in the *peta* (the Dalit colony). They did this with a great enthusiasm because it meant to them a promise of restoration of their sense of self-worth and a greater sense of meaning in their own lives.

Hence, we can speak of the local Dalits as being the agents of mission and not merely the objects of mission. Dalit communities had their own way of dealing with caste hegemony which was not one of passive acceptance of the system that kept them at the margins. In the realm of culture and religion they exercised their agency through conversion and it is in this realm their aspirations for liberation found symbolic expression. What is significant about the agency of the Dalits is that they appropriated the '*conditions of mission*' set up by the missionaries like education, indiscriminate access to schools, hospitals, hostels and 'holy spaces' like the church, which had symbolic value, to navigate their quest for equality, enhance their self-dignity and social status and further the mission of proclamation and pastoral care. Hence we see that the native communities were not passive, but, on the contrary were active in appropriating the conditions of mission to navigate their own quest for liberation as the following story of Undadu reveals.

The story of Undadu (who later became Abraham and found a church in his village) is illustrative of how mission was used as a *condition* for liberation. Undadu was a leader of the community who went around to different villages to settle disputes amongst his own people (Madigas). It was his association with Dasaris (priests among the 'outcaste' communities) and the Mastins (wandering bards who went around telling the stories of the community) that prompted in him religiosity which found greater expression when he became

a Christian. Though he never had a formal education, he learnt to write and read through his association with these communities. When the mission arrived, he found a greater and a more organized opportunity for his community to realize their aspirations.¹

Perspectives of Mission

Foregrounded in these experiences one can understand mission as involving a midwifery role – a role which involves both *creating* those conditions which give birth to new realities which people yearn for as well as *eliminating* the various impediments which impose constraints on the flourishing of the communities on the margins.

Understanding mission as having a midwifery role in a pluralistic context like India has significant implications because primarily mission does not become the monopoly of ecclesiastical Christianity. Mission transcends being an enterprise which can solely be in the service of the church. Rather, understanding mission as creating the conditions for liberation helps us to understand mission as a process which offers itself to further the liberative agendas of other organisations, groups and bodies which may have their base outside the church but yet are involved in the issues of justice. It becomes a catalyst in forging alliances. The Dalit movement in India has gained momentum to a large extent because of a culture of reciprocity of support. Dalit theology, Dalit literary and social activism and the various Dalit movements have drawn impetus for their work and have grown in confidence and in their persistence in this culture of convergence and mutuality.

Mission as the creation of conditions needed for liberation thus helps us to understand mission as hospitality – where the fruits of missional activity are offered to others in the service of their agendas in so far as they serve liberative purposes and where other groups and forces are invited to partake in what has been achieved and give it further shape and direction.

The study project also helped us to understand the importance of adopting a nuanced approach towards understanding the interplay between colonialism and the Dalit communities. This is because in the study process it emerged that Dalit entanglements with missionaries are much more complex than patron-client or coloniser-colonised relationships. The conditions created by mission were seen as a liberative-transformative space by Dalit communities for self-assertion and reclamation of their place in society than as components of the colonising process. Dalit communities, which had no stakes in local power, viewed those in their own country who had power as ‘colonisers’. For them, their conversion to Christianity – an experience of which they were the primary agents – helped in their quest for freedom from oppression. In this the conditions of mission played and continue to play the role of midwife.

¹ Interview with Absalom.

In any study of mission across the globe, we get several glimpses of the rich variety which exists in the understanding of mission. The field study mentioned above has been one such glimpse, which hopefully has the potential to contribute to a more complete and richer understanding of world Christianity and further enable the world church to engage in mission in a way that it will be truly 'mission in Christ's way'.²

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² The title of Leslie Newbigin's book of bible studies (Geneva: WCC, 1987).

HARMONY, POLYPHONY, CACOPHONY:¹

VOICES OF DISSENT AND UNFAMILIAR VOCABULARY

S. John Boopalan²

Introduction

Communal ideologies often draw on history and doctor a history that never was, making a part the whole, and distorting what is left. The past thus calls for an analysis that scrutinises details and verifies facts sufficiently. This in turn necessitates different perspectives that will offer a counter to the supposed legitimacy of those events and happenings of the past that are used for propaganda by communal ideologies and structures. As Thapar avers, ‘the communal distortion of history, when it is widely propagated, percolates into the popular consciousness and the dislodging of this distortion becomes a Herculean task. The analysis of popular perceptions of the past, therefore, also enters the historian’s agenda.’³

In any study of the past, we are faced with many competing voices that seek to establish themselves as the meta-narrative. ‘Facts’ become myths, ‘myths’ become facts, sometimes they are neither, and sometimes they are both. What has been taken to be harmonious erupts into a cacophony amidst a variety of voices. Nevertheless, this analysis of different perspectives is an imperative for a better and fuller understanding of *what really happened*. In the re-writing of history from alternative perspectives, which is a continuous process, a researcher brings new methodological and ideological insights and presents facts that have been sidelined or unknown, in a particular framework after analysis.⁴ This paper shall try to do some of that. Firstly, we shall first consider the issue at hand with a bird’s eye view, taking into consideration the larger context of the hegemonic doctoring of history and the ways in which such doctoring is contested; next, we shall

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¹ I owe this part of the title to an article by Rudolf C. Heredia titled ‘Subaltern Alternatives on Caste, Class and Ethnicity’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 34.1 (2000), 37-62, where he uses these terms to refer to voices of dissent that help us to imagine new ways in ushering in a new world free of hegemony.

² S. John Boopalan is currently a Research Associate working with CODECS (Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars).

³ Romila Thapar, ‘Communalism and the Historical Legacy’, in K.N. Panikkar (ed) *Communalism in India: History, Politics and Culture* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 32.

⁴ K.N. Panikkar, ‘Outsider as Enemy: Politics of Rewriting History in India’, in *ICHR*, 36.2 (2002), 73.

take a 'worm's eye view' of the issue with some insights from the particular case of Vegeswarapuram, a village about 30km from the town of Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh which was the site for a study on the theme 'Mission and Power' which significantly is one of the nine themes for the Edinburgh 2010 conference.

Hegemonic discourse talks and writes itself into history producing a history that is doctored and leading in turn to false popular perceptions.⁵ The following are some examples: Christians and Muslims are anti-national because they did not take part actively in the struggle for Independence; colonialism and Christian mission went hand in hand; missionaries focused their energies on marginalised sections because they were the easiest to gain and could not think for themselves; history is either a collaboration or opposition of religious groups. These views have taken hegemonic proportions and many people, including some Christians have passively accepted these accusations.

Right wing groups, particularly those who state their allegiance to the notion of Hindutva, and other groups that associate themselves to the Sangh Parivar are involved in the re-writing of what they call history. Ever since the BJP came to power in 1998, individuals from these groups have infiltrated educational bodies like the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and alleging that much of Indian history has been written with a colonial perspective, have sought to re-write and have re-written history texts that downplay and undermine the contributions of religious faiths other than 'Hinduism'.⁶ This Hindu communal perspective further portrays those outside the 'Hindu' fold (most often

⁵ Hegemony as a concept was developed by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s. In cultural studies, it refers primarily to 'the ability in certain historical periods of the dominant classes to exercise social and cultural leadership... the crucial aspect of the notion of hegemony is not that it operates by forcing people against their conscious will or better judgement to concede power to the already-powerful, but that it describes a situation whereby our consent is actively sought for those ways of making sense of the world which 'happen' to fit in with the interests of the hegemonic alliance of classes' [Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery and John Fiske (eds) *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 1994), 133]. These studies focus on those forms and institutions which are usually taken to be impartial or neutral; for example, the family, education, state and law which are 'producers of sense, knowledges and meanings' [*Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, 134].

⁶ These groups have further essentialised what was originally a diverse faith into a monolithic religion called 'Hinduism'. This can further be understood when we examine the *via negativa* that is taken to define 'Hindu' in legal terms; that is, one who is not a Christian, not a Muslim, not a Jew and so on, so that all other internal diversities are glossed over.

Christians and Muslims) as enemies and often highlight the 'foreign hand' behind conversions and associate it with all sorts of sinister agendas.⁷

Dalit Christians, many of whom share the heritage of the 'mass movements,' are often at the receiving end of popular prejudices that arise from such hegemonic discourses. 'Mass movements' are stigmatised and denounced as allurements and 'proselytism'.⁸ The agency of Christian individuals and communities is thus ridiculed, making them seem as mere objects for manipulation. The capacity for self-reflection and spirituality and the power of choice is thus taken away from those who exercised choice, and thus asserted their right to choose what they saw as freedom and self-determination.

The Margins Perspective

As Edward Said argues, when we take the perspective of people on the margins and try to recover their agency as subjects, there is always a struggle. He says that since the dominant pattern is already set to a large extent, reading against it causes the reading/reader to get into a *theirs-versus-ours* process. This process in turn gives rise to what Said calls 'effects', 'errata' and 'counternarratives'; and thus 'whenever we try to narrate ourselves, we appear as dislocations in their discourse.'⁹ Nehring argues that marginalised groups insist on their 'subject-position' and often posit their identity as a counter to the centre. He draws from Spivak's observation that this is not an easy claim because of a process that changes relations between the centre and the margin, and where perspectives that take the subject-position of marginalised groups offer counter-narratives that upset dominant narratives that almost claim a meta-narrative status.¹⁰

So we see that there is a constant exiling to the margins, of perspectives that were hitherto unheeded but now begin to surface.¹¹ In spite of this, these perspectives at and from the margins offer new ways of understanding, and these perspectives, though we may think as obvious from critical readings of mission and history, have to be told and re-told again and again, especially at a time when words and thoughts are no longer sufficient.¹² When hegemonic discourses are read against the

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⁷ Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937: Contending with Marginality* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 196.

⁸ T. John Ratnam, *Church Growth in Andhra Pradesh* (Hyderabad: The Christian Dynamics of India, 1983), 74.

⁹ Andreas Nehring, 'Collecting Culture: Marginalia in the Mission Archives', in *ICHR* 41.1 (2007), 31.

¹⁰ Nehring, 'Collecting Culture', 31.

¹¹ Nehring, 'Collecting Culture', 31.

¹² Like Heredia (37) cautions, "We have been in a continuing and deepening multi-dimensional crisis for so long that we might easily slip into mistaking it for a normal situation.' Heredia, 'Subaltern Alternatives on Caste', 37-62.

perspectives of Dalit Christians and churches, we see a conflict of ideas, and the emergence of perspectives, often previously ignored or neglected, that offer a different view of history.

Dalit Contributions and their Ridiculing: The Case of B.R. Ambedkar

B.R. Ambedkar became ‘a new issue for a war of words’ between the dominant political parties, the BJP and the Congress, in April 2009. When certain sections in the BJP praised the contributions of Ambedkar, certain other circles from other political parties pointed out that if one wanted to know the real views of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-backed BJP, one only has to read Arun Shourie’s book *Worshipping False Gods*.

Without taking the side of any political party, it must be said that this book attempts to exile Ambedkar back to the margins. In Arun Shourie’s words, a serious consideration and privilegeing of Ambedkar’s perspectives is nothing short of ‘worshipping false gods.’ Saying this about Ambedkar, he goes on to add that Ambedkar is part of those who had ‘striven for decades and decades with its enemies to keep it in subjugation.’¹³ In the book, the constitution is also dismissed as a heinous project that was engineered by a vile Ambedkar. Ambedkar statues which for Shourie ‘unfortunately and wrongly outnumber the statues of Gandhi’, ‘dressed in garish blue,’ are an indication of this sort of false worship.¹⁴

In the context of the subtle but continuous and consistent doctoring of history, we find that Dalit perspectives are often dismissed and demonised. Shourie’s book makes the Dalit communities which have taken pride in erecting statues of Ambedkar because of its symbolism seem stupid for not recognising this ‘false god.’ But the pertinent question is, from whose perspective? The immature way of handling Ambedkar’s idea of the national movement, like Gopal Guru argues, has failed ‘to situate Ambedkar in a proper historical and nationalist perspective [and] has left the ground wide open for people like Arun Shourie to launch vitriolic attacks on Ambedkar.’¹⁵ This is where perspectives at and from the margins

¹³ Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar, and the Facts which Have Been Erased*, 1st edition (New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 2004), xii.

¹⁴ *Worshipping False Gods*, xii.

¹⁵ Gopal Guru, ‘Understanding Ambedkar’s Construction of National Movement’, *EPW* 33.4 (1998), 156. Guru (156) points out how, after protests, the RSS and other Hindutva forces said that it had nothing to do with Shourie’s book, while the Sena-BJP government rationalised it as freedom of expression. Coming to the present, though not for the book, even in spite of the many recent tussles within the BJP, Arun Shourie, a current MP, was ‘singled out for praise’ [*The Hindu* 1 September 2009, 10]. It shows how much the RSS and the BJP value Shourie in spite of the uproar he created within the party, while other dissenting members were warned. Interestingly, the BJP could have said that it had nothing to do with Jaswant Sinha’s

offer a counter-narrative. At a time when the Congress claimed to represent the entire 'Hindu nation' Ambedkar and similar such Dalit movements rightly undercut the Congress' claim to represent the whole, and 'rebuffed the Gandhian argument that untouchables should subordinate cause to the nation's unity.'¹⁶ Nigam avers that for Ambedkar, freedom for the whole did not mean freedom for each part.¹⁷ He highlights 'the abandoned commitments and continuing atrocities which had prompted Ambedkar to threaten to burn the Constitution¹⁸ that he drafted.'¹⁹ It is this context that Shourie chooses to ignore. Ambedkar then, like dalits today in different parts of India, including Andhra Pradesh, made use of multiple spaces for negotiating the Dalit quest. The whole question of the colonial enterprise being the totally other and as the enemy in the light of a dalit perspective becomes a simplistic and an elitist reading of history. Hence those who accuse Dalits of siding with those who kept India under subjugation for decades, only need to care to hear the polyphony.

The Controversy of the 'Independence' and the Periodisation of History

One method used in promoting communalism is *periodisation*; dividing Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods.²⁰ This is a distortion when we take a perspective from the margins. Wiebe, in talking about the Andhra Pradesh context, notes, 'At a very general level, it is possible to argue, in fact, that even while many of India's social and political patterns were modified dramatically in transitions from Moghul to colonial British to Independence times, the basic framework of India's socio-political system – particularly as this has to do with the gulfs that separate the

recent book on Jinnah, but rather chose to expel him because the book went against the core ideology of the party. Hence, logic tells us that if one is not warned, it does not upset the ideology of the party.

¹⁶ Aditya Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular-Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131.

¹⁷ Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves*, 131.

¹⁸ Dhavan (46) brings out the fact that even at the 'very initial stage when three drafts were made of the proposed chapter on Fundamental Rights, K.M. Munshi's draft was skillfully prioritised over the Ambedkar and Harnam Singh versions. The record of the Constituent Assembly displays a tussle between many factions' (Rajeev Dhavan, 'The Road to Xanadu: India's quest for Secularism', in K.N. Panikkar (ed) *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism* (New Delhi: Viking, 1999), 46. The ensuing compromises are reflected in the Constitution. For example, Dhavan points out that untouchability is abolished while making it a punishable offence. Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism are all brushed under the blanket of Hinduism; and Swami Narayans were annoyed at the Supreme Court's attempt to categorise them as Hindus despite them protesting that they are not.

¹⁹ Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves*, 138.

²⁰ Thapar, 'Communalism and the Historical Legacy', 19.

country's elites from the majority of its people – has never been radically altered.²¹ This applies to Dalits in India in general. Being part of a nation-state that remained 'ontologically and politically inaccessible to its own citizens,'²² Dalit communities could not make any significant meaning and purpose of the struggle for Independence and other events which happened around that.

Talking about how the Independence struggle and the popular discourse of migration and partition did not make sense to these communities, Ravinder Kaur brings to light a popular story that is told about two *Chuhras* (a Dalit community):

Two *Chuhras* were busy sweeping the roads of Lahore during the Hindu-Muslim violence. While the Hindus were trying to flee away from the violence, Muslims were pouring into the city from India. One sweeper asked another if he knew why people were running here and there. The other answered that the 'Hindus are running to India while Muslims are looking for Pakistan. But we don't need to escape to another place and nobody is going to touch us.' And they continued sweeping the empty streets.²³

More than anything else, this story points out how the experiences and perspectives of marginalised communities upset dominant views of history and the periodisation of history. The Indian church, largely constituted by Dalit communities, did not take part in the political struggle for freedom from British rule, though a sizeable number of Christians did. Hindutva forces thus accuse Indian Christians of being denationalised and alienated from Indian culture because of their 'foreign' faith.²⁴ But in a context where oppression was not so much an external factor as it was internal, the powerless welcomed a religion that helped them to have power, power to bargain and negotiate. The relation between religion and power thus becomes a thing of significance. Nationalist narratives, as Guru notes, 'remained deliberately vague on the subject of power and resources'.²⁵

Nationalism in India is often thought to be the condition that arose out of 'the uprising of an oppressed "people" against their colonial oppressors,'²⁶ a picture that suggests a change from oppression to self-assertion. And

²¹ Paul D. Wiebe, *Christians in Andhra Pradesh: The Mennonites of Mahbubnagar* (Madras: CISRS/CLS, 1988), 153-154.

²² Ronald B. Inden, cited in Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves*, 126.

²³ Ravinder Kaur, 'Narrative Absence: An "Untouchable" Account of Partition Migration', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 42.2 (2008), 281. Further, Kaur (305) points out: 'While Pakistan wanted to retain Untouchables in order to avoid losing traditional menial labour, Indian liaison officers lobbied hard to make them leave their homes in order to "prove" that they were suffering at the hands of the Pakistani state. In this process, the Untouchables who would, otherwise, have remained socially marginalised were nationalised.'

²⁴ T. John Ratnam, *Church Growth in Andhra Pradesh*, 70.

²⁵ Gorringer, "The Caste of the Nation", 147.

²⁶ Gorringer, "The Caste of the Nation", 125.

anyone who is not seen as having played a role in this 'uprising' is termed an enemy and an anti-national.

It must be stated that though there is a relation between colonialism and mission, and that at times there was a mutual relationship, it is not something that happened in the same way, at all times, and in all places. But this insight is often brushed aside to make it seem that colonialism and mission went hand in hand, and were one and the same. This is the prejudice that lies behind the accusation that Christianity is a 'foreign religion'. The relation between the two involved both cooperation and parting of ways, disagreement and debate. For instance, sending missionaries to India was something that happened after much debate and opposition as it was seen as being a potential threat to British rule. The idea was resented by many and the motion passed after a 'bitter opposition'.²⁷ These facts have to be told and re-told time and again in a context where history is being re-written in a manner that wrongly emphasises the collaboration or opposition of groups, depending on the desired end of such doctored histories.

Also, Simon notes that 'the missionary enterprise in the Andhra Desa was not mainly directed towards direct evangelisation.'²⁸ All these little details are significant because the changing nature of mission over time due to self-reflection and the many challenges that caused a change in the very outlook of what mission was²⁹ is most often left out of doctored histories and who seek to make whole what is only a part. History thus defies simple categories of periods and events.

The important question thus becomes, Independence for whom? For many Dalit communities 'colonials' were saviours; 'insiders' were colonials, and have become neo-colonials. When both independence and nationhood actualised, finally, in the transfer of power, the generation for whom these had been essential of a future beyond colonialism felt cheated.³⁰ Addressing the constituent assembly, Ambedkar said, 'On January 26 we are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man [sic] one vote

²⁷ K. B. Simon, *The Andhra Churches* (Bezwada: L. V. Ratnam, 1942), 2-3.

²⁸ Simon, *The Andhra Churches*, 21.

²⁹ For example, Oddie (18) notes that during the 19th century missionaries never concealed that their ultimate aim in establishing schools was for conversion, but that during the end of the 19th century there was a growing interest in the social aspects of Christianity. Intellectual and physical education was then seen not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. Oddie (34) highlights the idea that 'though "secular" they must be held "sacred"' that began to emerge. See G. A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms 1850-1900* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 18-34.

³⁰ Quoted in the Introduction, in Ranajit Guha (ed) *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

value. In our social and economic life, we shall by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man [sic] one value. How long can we continue to live a life of contradictions? How shall we deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we do so only by putting our political democracy in peril.³¹ This voice is also from history; it is a perspective that is often not talked about in communal agenda and propaganda.

The Particular Case of Vegeswarapuram

Kaur attributes narrative absence to 'caste-based experiential differences and discursive distances.'³² When we consider the perspectives of the marginalised, 'those ordinary people in whose name contemporary historians like to speak but whose actual beliefs they often choose to discount,'³³ counter-narratives emerge. In resisting dominant history, perspectives from Dalit communities are making a space for themselves in history by subverting these caste histories by narrating caste histories that highlight self-respect and assertion.³⁴ We will now consider certain such perspectives from Vegeswarapuram.

Over and against the notion that it was the missionaries that went to dalit communities to convert them, we see that many dalit communities approached the missionaries and made a place for themselves by associating themselves with them. When asked how they became

³¹ Harish S. Wankhede, 'The Political and the Social in the Dalit Movement Today', *EPW* (9 February 2008), 51-52.

³² Ravinder Kaur, 'Narrative absence', 282.

³³ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 3.

³⁴ Badri Narayan, 'Inventing Caste History: Dalit Mobilization and National Past', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38.1-2 (January-August 2004), 216. Yet, as Narayan (216) says, even in this resistance we can find traces of Sanskritisation. These 'residual sanskritising features' are made use of by Hindutva groups like the RSS, BJP and VHP to reinterpret Dalit myths, histories and symbols in order to project the Dalits as those who defended the Hindu dharmic order and as 'nationalists'. Some dalit communities succumb to this hegemonic process (though of course it may be a way of asserting themselves [for example, see G.K. Karanth, 'Replication or dissent? Culture and institutions among "Untouchable" Scheduled Castes in Karnataka', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38.1-2 (2004), 137-164]. Hence, resistance and dominance take different forms and each calls for an analysis of the process. Like Narayan (217) highlights in this connection, the Pasis of Uttar Pradesh privilege their martial role in their stories and festivals; but Hindutva groups reconstruct this to say that the Pasis were the warriors and gatemen of the Hindu temples during the Muslim rule in India. However, some other Dalit communities, like the Chamars do not glorify their martial status but emphasise instead their work ethic and Brahminical oppression.

Christians, a church leader said that in a neighbouring village to Vegeswarapuram, there was persecution by caste Hindus. Wondering what to do, they decided to approach the *Doras* at Vegeswarapuram who helped them to establish a church and bought land to be used as a burial ground.³⁵ We see that power relations were altered in this process. Another pastor recalled that in Gopalapuram, both Malas and Madigas were at the far end, and said, 'now we are at the centre.'³⁶

A prominent leader, Devanandam, who played a vital role along with others in the self-assertion of the Dalit community at Vegeswarapuram narrated an instance where because of '*peta maamsam*' (referring to the cutting and selling of beef in the Dalit colony) the Kaapus used to beat the dalits. In this context, he mentioned that missionary Kirshik fired two rounds in the air and threatened the Kaapus. He also said that both in the Malapalli and Madigapalli, there was 'no place to grow' and the Dalits asked for some of the adjacent land. Devanandam's father and others chalked out a plan and placed the issue before the Sarpanch; Devanandam followed it up after his father's death.³⁷

What is important to note here is that, firstly, the idea of centre and margin is not something foreign to them, but very much part of their discourse about their history and that they were already in the process of negotiating their space in the margin-centre structure; secondly, their stories highlight the initiative that the Dalit communities took in negotiating their space and making a place for themselves within power structures and acknowledge the power of the missionary which was further reinforced by the missionary's association with the British state that provided a better space for bargains on behalf of Dalit communities. As Manor observes, 'Lutheran missionaries interceded successfully with the authorities on behalf of their converts.'³⁸

Education was one of the central programmes of the mission. After identifying defects in the educational system, one of the things that missionary educators did was to work towards a more rapid spread of primary education. In addition to this there was a 'keen interest shown by missionaries in the extension of elementary education for the poorer classes'.³⁹ In the realm of primary education, around 1882, that is three years before the building of the Lutheran church in Vegeswarapuram, the

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³⁵ Interview with pastors and Church Representatives (CRs) on 3 July 2009 at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Vegeswarapuram.

³⁶ Interview with pastors and CRs on 3 July 2009 at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Vegeswarapuram.

³⁷ Interview with Devanandam, aged about 80 years on 2 July 2009.

³⁸ James G. Manor, 'Testing the Barrier Between Caste and Outcaste: The Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guntur District 1920-1940', *Indian Church History Review*, 5.1 (1971), 32.

³⁹ Sushil Madhava Pathak, *American Missionaries and Hinduism: A Study of their Contacts from 1813 to 1910* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 137-138.

Hunter Commission constituted by the government did not make any drastic change in primary education even though it acknowledged its need.⁴⁰ In 1922, we see that the Executive Committee of the Council of the United Lutheran Church which met at Guntur, frustrated by the lack of initiative by the government towards education, took proactive steps to set up schools and medical buildings by drawing from its own sources without waiting for the government.⁴¹ We see here a picture of the mission overriding the interests of the colonial government. And so, education to Dalits in certain places was an activity that was undertaken against all odds, nevertheless making use of its connection with the government.

The educational work undertaken by the mission had caused tremendous change in and around Vegeswarapuram. Many in the village acknowledged the role of education in their empowerment. Many of these schools over time were handed over to the government, which the members of the community resented. Over time, the schools became less accountable due to the influx of caste Hindu teachers. Even today, the Eleventh Five Year Plan acknowledges that children from marginalised backgrounds 'face overt and covert forms of rejection in schooling.'⁴² This reflects badly on today's 'Indian' government even as accusations are leveled against 'foreign' missions.

In Conclusion: Mission, Christian Education, and Deconstruction

Mallampalli brings to our attention that towards the end of the 20th century, there is a new form of violence that is emerging. He says: 'A network of organisations pushing for the establishment of an officially Hindu Nation diverted their hostility away from Muslims, their usual targets, and launched a campaign of violence against India's Christian minority'.⁴³

From the beginning, the RSS has had a strategic focus in the sphere of education. Its strategy is two-fold: one, to infiltrate already existing educational institutions; and, two, to have a network of RSS-run schools. It has placed RSS academics in the governing councils of several research organisations, even with the connivance of the state, when Murli Manohar Joshi was Minister for Human Resource Development.⁴⁴

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⁴⁰ Pathak, *American Missionaries and Hinduism*, 139.

⁴¹ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Council of the India Mission of the United Lutheran Church in America, Stock Memorial Church, Guntur, April 1922, 6. An analysis of the budget prepared for this year shows that a large portion of the finance was allotted for education, especially for primary education. This is a trend that we see in the budgets prepared around this time.

⁴² Eleventh Five Year Plan, 2007-2012, II [Planning Commission, Govt. of India] (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

⁴³ Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life*, 4.

⁴⁴ K.N. Panikkar, *Before the Night Falls: Forebodings of Fascism in India* (Bangalore: Books for Change, 2003), 78.

In this context, it becomes all the more important that we examine the prejudices behind the rationalisation of such violence against Christians. For example, when churches and Christians were attacked in different parts of the state of Karnataka, the Chief Minister tried to offer a rationalisation of the violence by suggesting that it was a retaliation that arose from those sections that were angered by 'forced' conversions. In the light of such fallacious rationalisations of what really happened, Christian mission at the margins, those sections which are the usual victims of such violence⁴⁵, ought to involve a critical and in-depth analysis of mission history, Christian pastoral and social practice and the highlighting of the key events and issues involved in and around such events, all of which are largely shared by the Christian community. This aspect of Christian education must take prominence in all dimensions of the ministry of the church, including taking concrete forms in Sunday School lessons and youth ministry. It is hoped that this paper will be a contribution in this regard in some way.

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⁴⁵ For instance, Manoj Pradhan, a BJP candidate and an RSS *pracharak*, accused in the anti-Christian riots in Orissa, won the Assembly elections from the Udayagiri constituency in Kandhmal district. Also, Ashok Sahu, a former police officer whom the BJP fielded for the Lok Sabha seat, in his hate speech, apart from holding them responsible for the assassination of Lakshmananda Saraswathi, has blamed Christians in his hate speech for fuelling insurgencies in the North-East, Jharkhand and Orissa (*The Hindu* 11 April 2009, 14).

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MALAS AND MADIGAS: THEIR LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD (C.1860-1932)

Geoffrey A. Oddie

Why should we the Pariah scorn
When his flesh and blood were born
Like to ours? What caste is he
Who doth dwell in all we see’.

(19th century translation of a Telugu folk song)

The purpose of this paper is to explore some aspects of the life and changing conditions of Malas and Madigas in Telugu speaking areas during the period of British rule from about 1860 to 1932.¹ This was a period of considerable change and development, not only for the higher castes, and especially for elites more closely associated with British rule, but also for the ‘depressed classes’ or ‘untouchables’ as they were commonly called – not the least of these developments being the emergence of group movements into the local Christian churches.

While some papers in this volume explore the history of particular Christian movements in various parts of what became Andhra Pradesh, our main concern here is to explore, as far as possible, the context in which these movements developed. Indeed there is a wealth of material about life among the Madigas and Malas in census reports and also in other types of ‘colonial’ as well as missionary comment. However, it is important not to take this material and comment at its face value, but to attempt to assess its value and reliability as data providing genuine insights into the life of the common people – a people who were, by and large, illiterate² and who, from the point of view of Europeans and higher caste Hindus, can only be described as ‘the other’.

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¹ The two outcaste groups in Andhra Pradesh were known as Malas and Madigas, the term ‘Dalit’ coming into vogue only during the post-colonial period. For questions of terminology see especially Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

² On the literacy of Malas and Madigas in about 1930 see especially the *Census of India* (Madras, 1931) v.14, and Part 1, *Imperial and Provincial Tables* (Madras, 1932), table 14, 276.

Accessing ‘The Other’?

There are two major types of source material on the social, economic and religious life of Madigas and Malas (a) British administrative material such as the census and district manuals or handbooks, and Edgar Thurston’s voluminous work on *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*³ and (b) missionary material, including letters and reports. A third minor and totally untapped source, and one which could capture the voice of the people themselves, are folk songs if recorded at the time and possibly also family histories reaching back into the 1930s or even earlier.

Official Data: Including the Census and Edgar Thurston’s Ethnographic Survey

The Government of India introduced and carried out a series of censuses after the Indian uprisings of 1857–58, producing census reports which they hoped would provide a picture of the ‘progress’ of British rule.

Leading census organisers such as W.R. Cornish and successive Census Commissioners in Madras, as well as prominent commissioners in some other parts of India, were concerned with two main issues. One of these was the role which the census could play in the development of effective administration. Commenting on this aspect of what became a decennial India-wide enquiry, H.H. Risley, Census Commissioner of India in 1901, remarked that:

The relations of different castes to the land, their privileges in respect to rent, their relations to trade, their social status, their internal organisation, their rules as to marriage and divorce – all these are matters intimately concerned with practical administration. For instance, the marriage and divorce customs of the lower castes are constantly coming into the courts, and it would be a decided advantage to judicial officers if accurate information could be made available on the subject. Again, the distribution of the various castes in each district has a direct and important bearing on the relief of distress, as different classes of the population may require different types of relief. In order to deal effectively with a famine, we want to know what is the characteristic occupation of each caste in the distressed area, what is their social status, and from whose hands they can take cooked food or sweetmeats, respectively without losing caste.⁴

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The second major and related reason for the census and, indeed, for district manuals and gazetteers was ethnographic research including the acquisition of knowledge more generally. And this was also quite clearly the main reason for the compilation of Thurston’s volumes on the castes and tribes of southern India. Interest in ethnographic and anthropological

³ Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909).

⁴ H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (Calcuta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), I, vii–viii.

studies was fast developing in Britain and Europe, and in 1901 the Government of India established what was known as the Ethnographic Survey of India. Thurston, a government official and director of the Madras Museum⁵, was appointed Superintendent of the Survey in the Madras Presidency with the assistance of K. Rangachari who was placed in charge of the survey for a short period during Thurston's absence in Europe.

In the scheme for the Ethnographic Survey, superintendents were asked to supplement the 'information obtained from representative men' by their own enquiries and researches into the considerable mass of information which lay buried in official reports, in the journals of learned societies and in various books. The research involved extensive reading, correspondence with experts (including missionaries) and travel in the countryside. Somewhat frustrated at being tied to his desk in Madras for nine months in the year, Thurston made the most of his short visits to the Mofussil for the remaining time available. And for him, as well as for Risley, research was all the more urgent because he believed that 'civilisation' was already bringing about 'a radical change in indigenous manners and customs and mode of life' of India's people.⁶

Missionary Commentary

One of the problems facing government officials in attempting to obtain information from people belonging to different classes in the population was the latter's suspicion of government motives. Thurston's enthusiasm for anthropometry, involving the use of various instruments to measure stature, height and breadth of nose, and length and breadth of head sometimes created considerable difficulty and reveals a high degree of suspicion of government motives. In carrying out the anthropometric portion of the survey,' he wrote, 'it was unfortunately impossible to disguise the fact that I am a Government official, and very considerable difficulties were encountered owing to the wickedness of the people, and their timidity and fear of increased taxation, plague, inoculation and transportation.'⁷ Few officials investigating the state of the people used anthropometric measurement as one of their techniques of social research; nevertheless there were concerns about official intentions. As yet there has not been adequate research on precisely how census takers or volunteers obtained all their information. It appears, however, that one of the practices was to consult heads of *panchayats* about the number and condition of families in village communities⁸, and, if this method was followed in acquiring information about Malas and Madigas in their hamlets, then there

⁵ For these and other details see Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, preface and introduction.

⁶ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, Preface and Introduction p.xiv.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, xiii.

may be little reason to doubt information respecting their numbers and life-style.

However, even if official returns in the census are reasonably accurate, they lack the intimacy of direct personal and detailed accounts that are often found in missionary sources. The fact of the matter is that many of the missionaries lived among depressed class people, while government officials including Indian subordinates (invariably of a higher caste) paid occasional visits to some particular place or maintained their headquarters at a distance in a nearby town.

The contrast between the luxury and distance of officialdom and the life-style and availability of the missionary is clearly reflected in comments of the Rev A.H. Arden, a CMS (Church Missionary Society) missionary working near Masulipatam in the Kishna district in 1874:

There is very little in common between the tent life of a Collector or any other Government official, and the rounds of a Missionary in his district. Still less between the latter and the few weeks of tent life which many ladies thoroughly enjoy in the cold season in the company with their husbands. A Collector's tent allowance about equals the whole of the Missionary's salary. The best site (often in a tope of mango trees) is selected and countless officials are dancing attendants and only too glad to have the opportunity of adding anything by their exertions to the required supplies.

Sometimes a Missionary does take out his family with him, but in the case of children it is not very easily managed on a small allowance. For the most of the year the rounds are made alone and the wife and children left at home... The District Missionary's time is chiefly spent in the Pariah villages, and as it would often be impossible to take a tent, both on the score of delay and expense, his time is often passed in some little hut in the Pariah hamlet attached to some well-to-do caste village. The people are as a rule very poor and consequently the villages are exceedingly dirty.⁹

While missionaries often made comments about the social, economic and religious condition of Mala and Madiga it is important to recognise that some were keener observers and more enlightened commentators than others. Indeed, differences in their background, length of stay, location and experience while in the region together with their familiarity with the local language were all factors which could affect the type and quality of comment. In view of the varied nature of the land and conditions in the Telugu speaking areas it is especially necessary to place missionary and other comments in their proper context, recognising that what applied in one part of the country may not have applied in another. For example, missionary comments about the condition of Malas in the Kistna district, may not have been true of their state in Nellore or in parts of what is now known as Telengana.

A third type of source, but one which needs to be used with great care for the period c.1860-1930, is comprised of post-colonial village and other

⁹ *Madras Church Missionary Record*, [Henceforth *MCMR*] 41 (May 1874), 142.

studies.¹⁰ While it is important to recognise that these studies apply to a very different period, they often include references to local history, provide insights and raise questions about the life of the people or about customs or traditions of an earlier era.

These three categories of source material as mentioned above – the official governmental sources and missionary and post-colonial commentaries clearly reflect something of the life and struggles of marginalised people in what is now Andhra. The possibility of an additional source, reflecting even more clearly the voice of the Malas and Madigas themselves, has already been mentioned; and if traditional Mala and Madiga folksongs and their own accounts of family history, even for the 1930s, could be recovered then this would enrich still further the range of material for an understanding of their life and livelihood during the period under consideration.

Telugu Country: Then and Now

Before the creation of Andhra Pradesh state in 1956 the Telugu speaking areas of India comprised the north-eastern districts of the Madras Presidency and the eastern part of the Nizam's dominions of Hyderabad, in the Deccan and in what was known as Telengana.

There were also pockets of Telugu speaking peoples scattered in some other parts of south India outside of present-day Andhra Pradesh, but these scattered communities, largely the result of migration, lie outside the parameters of the present study.

The Landscape

The present-day state of Andhra has three main physiographic regions: the coastal plain to the east, extending from the Bay of Bengal to the mountain ranges; the mountain ranges themselves, known as the Eastern Ghats, which form the western flank of the coastal plain; and the plateau to the west of the Ghats.

The coastal plain runs almost the entire length of the state and is watered by several rivers, flowing from west to east through the hills into the Bay. The deltas formed by the most important of these streams – the Godavari

¹⁰ For insight into village life on the plateau in more recent years and in what is known as Telengana see especially: S.C. Dube, *Indian Village* (Allied Publishers First Indian Edition 1967 (first published 1955)). Paul G. Hiebert, *Konduru Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971). For recent studies of Christians in the same part of Andhra Pradesh see P.Y. Luke and John B. Carman, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture. Study of a Rural Church in Andhra Pradesh South India* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968) and Paul D. Wiebe, *Christians in Andhra Pradesh. The Mennonites of Mahbubnagar* (Madras: CISRS, CLS, 1988).

and the Krishna rivers – comprise the central part of the plains, an area of fertile alluvial soil.

The Eastern Ghats which do not form a continuous range, being broken by the great river valleys, are part of a larger mountain system extending from central India to the far south and running parallel to the east coast.

The plateau to the west of the ranges has an average elevation of 1,600 feet above sea level. As a result of erosion, this is a region of graded valleys, with red, sandy soil and isolated hills, which support a thorny vegetation. Black soil is found in certain parts of the area.

Vegetation

Near the coastal plains mangrove swamps and palm trees are found, while the deltas constitute a rich agricultural belt where food crops, fruit and tobacco are grown. The soil on the plateau and the uncertain rainfall allow only dry crops, such as millet to be raised, although with the extension of irrigation, rice and sugar cane are also being grown.

Village Organisation

The nature of the soil, rainfall, type of crops, extent of grazing land and other geographical factors all affected the way in which village life was and is organised.

Continuities and Change Among the Malas and Madigas, c.1860-1931

Family Networks-Extended Families and Family Cohesion

Evidence relating to the importance of extended family relationships among both Malas and Madigas during the colonial period can be found in missionary comment, for example, on the situation in Raghavapuram mission area in the Krishna district and on family relationships further south in Nellore. While the Raghavapuram missionaries frequently commented on how Christianity among the Malas was spread through family occasions and relationships, Emma Clough, an experienced missionary with the American Baptist mission in Ongole (Nellore) also emphasised the importance of these same family connections in the Madiga community:

In going back to the earliest days of the Ongole mission [she wrote] I found several centres from which the influence [of Christianity] radiated, they were family centres. The man who first brought the tale of the strange new religion had to be identified as belonging to such and such Madiga family; he was invited to the evening meal, and the family listened to him as a family in the hours of the night. There was family deliberation as to whether this religion

was true and right, and the family stood together to meet the petty persecutions that followed so surely in many a case.¹¹

Malas and Madigas in Cultivation

Malas and Madigas were both involved in agricultural operations – the Malas, in many cases, supplementing their income by weaving cloth for local consumption, while Madigas increased their earnings by making leather goods often for their landlord or others members of the local caste community.

While as we shall see, the Madigas were living in a state of what was usually described as ‘semi-slavery’, the Malas’ relationship with the land, as well as conditions of employment, could vary considerably even within the confines of a single district.

Indeed, in the Kistna district in the 1860s and 70s, and possibly in some of the other more fertile parts of the Telugu speaking region, it is possible to identify at least four different ways in which Malas had rights in land and were comparatively better off than other members of their own community. Firstly, the land in the vicinity of Raghavapuram was settled in what was known as ‘joint Ezaru’.¹² According to this arrangement, sometimes known as the village system, a tax of a certain amount was rated on the village as a whole. The farmers, including the Malas, divided the land as they wished, making up the sum by paying tax in proportion to the land they held. Secondly, in what was known as the *ryotwari* system (which functioned on the assumption that there were no intermediaries between farmer and government) there were *mala ryots* or farmers who were responsible for paying their taxes directly to the government collector. Thirdly there is also evidence that some Malas during this period had the status of *ryots* responsible for paying rents directly, not to the government, but to large landlords or *zamindars* in what was known as the zamindari system – one which had been especially favoured by the British in Bengal; and lastly there were others who were somewhat less fortunate, being sub-tenants (renting from *ryots*) but who were still relatively independent cultivators being able to work the land for themselves.

However, it should not be assumed that having some kind of rights in land meant that Mala cultivators were always protected and treated fairly in practise – especially if they wanted to join the Christian movement. *Zamindars* were notorious for raising rents, and commenting on the treatment of Christians under his care in 1872, the Rev Darling remarked that when the village happened to be in a *zamindary*, ‘our poor people have

¹¹ Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals: Tales of a Telugu Tribe* (New Yor: Fleming H Revell Company), 6. The close links between different Madiga hamlets as a result of marriage and other family connections is also stressed in Hiebert’s postcolonial study of *Konduru*. Hiebert, *Konduru*, 37.

¹² F.N. Alexander, *MCMR*, 27 (June 1860), 256.

to endure cruel hardships and annoyances from the *zamindar's* village officials. Their taxes are increased to a sum which they could ill afford, and next the lands are taken from them and given to others: and all because they had become Christians'.¹³ Furthermore, the village system was sometimes manipulated by *karnams* or village accountants. When, for example, the Mala participants in the village system at Raghavapuram became Christian all the other cultivators 'turned their backs on them'¹⁴, and, had it not been for the intervention of the collector, the village *karnam* would have prevented them from buying further land and also raised the rents illegally on what land they already had.

But even if they had their troubles these Malas were comparatively well off compared with some other members of their own community who, in the opinion of the CMS missionaries, lived in a state of semi-slavery. For example, the Rev J.E. Sharkey writing from Masulipatam in March 1866 noted that some of the Malas were farm servants to the higher castes:

Their masters... are afraid lest the gospel should alienate their servants, slaves, rather, for such they virtually are, from them. A respectable Brahman mentioned this to me with respect to his own farm servants ... It is true that he lends them money when they require it for the celebration of their marriages, and the births of their children; it is equally true that he does so to tighten his grasp on them; and as the account of such debts is kept by the master alone, his servants are completely at his mercy; for, by means of a little juggling the debt becomes doubled and trebled to the dismay of any poor wretch that may evince the slightest desire to exchange masters or better himself.¹⁵

Referring once again to the Malas in his report on CMS mission work in and around Ellore in 1871, the Rev J.E. Padfield remarked that 'One of the first things we demand of our people is that they shall keep the Sabbath.' And this, he pointed out, immediately became 'a source of trial' in the case of those who were 'mere serfs' to the higher castes:

The latter [the higher castes] at once say, Well, if you will not work on that day, you shall have no food either for yourselves or families. In vain the enquirers assert their willingness to give up all the old holidays which they had been accustomed to have at their heathen festivals, and also their hope to show by their conduct that the master is rather the gainer in the end by having more sober and honest servants. These and such like arguments have little weight at first with the angry farmer, and much bitter though petty persecution has to be endured.¹⁶

The situation among the Madigas employed as cultivators was more uniformly difficult for them. They seem to have had even less access to land than the Malas, and almost all of them (at least in the CMS and

¹³ *MCMR*, 40 (February 1873), 56.

¹⁴ *MCMR* 27 (June 1860), 256.

¹⁵ *MCMR*, 33 (August 1866), 210-211.

¹⁶ *MCMR*, 32 (June 1866) 211. See also 61 (May 1874).

American Baptist missions) appear to have been in a state of bondage, like those less fortunate Malas as mentioned as above.

Referring to the early days of the Baptist mission at Ongole in the Nellore district, Emma Clough (displaying an unquestioned and somewhat cynical view of Brahman motives) remarked that:

The relation of the Madigas to the Brahmins was, and is, serfdom, without the relieving feature of a paternal interest. The Sudras, on the other hand, though they have every opportunity for oppression, take the parts of friends and protectors. The Madiga family that does not bear to some Sudra-landholder the relation of serf to master is considered unfortunate, and finds it difficult to get food sufficient to ward off starvation. The Madiga serves the same Sudra family from generation to generation. When there is a marriage in the Sudra family, the Madiga celebrates the event by a marriage in his own hamlet. The Madiga does not go upon a journey, nor does he enter upon any serious undertaking, without consulting his Sudra master. He is at the Sudra's bidding day and night. In turn for his labours he is paid, not in coin, but in kind. The measures of grain are meted out to him according to the plentiful or scant nature of the harvest.¹⁷

Other Employments (Leather Work and Weaving)

While both Malas and Madigas were employed together with other villagers in cultivation, they were often engaged in at least one other income-earning occupation – many Madigas finding further employment in leather work, while a considerable number of Malas, in addition to working in the fields, were also involved in weaving.

In the preface to her book Clough described the Madigas as the leather workers in the Telugu country:

For centuries [she wrote] they have tanned hides, sewed sandals, prepared leather buckets for the wells of the Sudras, and made trappings for their bullocks... leather work for the Sudras is done on the principle of mutual service. When among herds of cows and goats, kept by a Sudra landlord, a head of cattle dies, the Madigas are called. They secure the hide, and in turn, they tan the leather, sew the sandals for the Sudra, make the trappings for his bullocks, and do any other leather work that is required. In parts of the country where the soil is hard and dry, the Sudras dig deep wells in their fields and with the help of bullocks, draw water to the surface, where,

¹⁷ Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals*, 39-40. Commenting on the wretched plight of the landless 'depressed' classes, including Malas and Madigas, in the Nizam's territory in 1931, the census states that 'With a view to escaping privation they [the depressed classes] engage themselves, whole families, under the landholders, for any service and on any terms of remuneration. Payment is made in kind. The landlord accommodates them for marriage and other occasional expenses and thus secures the services of the families from generation to generation. The labourers themselves choose to serve their masters under such conditions rather than go out into the world and starve.' [*Census of India 1931* (Hyderabad, 1933), 258].

through little channels, it irrigates the whole field. For this purpose large leather buckets are required, and the Madiga community finds frequent employment in making them and keeping them in repair.¹⁸

Similar descriptions of the Madiga involvement in leather work appear in other accounts of their activities written in the late 19th or early twentieth centuries. Commenting on their activities in the industry in the Godavari district in 1907 Francis Hemmingway, author of the official district manual, remarked that ‘Coarse leather for the manufacture of country shoes is made by the Madigas all over the low country.’ Their method of tanning, was, according to the same commentator, ‘very elementary’. The hides and skins were soaked in a solution of *chunam* to remove the hair, then in clean water for a day, next for ten days in a decoction of the bark of the babul (*Acacia Arabica*) tree, and finally they were stitched into bags, which were filled with babul bark and soaked for a week in water.¹⁹ Linked with this activity was the task of collecting the bark of the appropriate tree – a task which was carried out only by Madigas (and mainly, if not exclusively, by women) ‘as other classes’ thought it beneath their dignity to do it.²⁰

A writer of the appropriate section in the Madras census of 1921 suggested that the quality of the skins the Madigas turned out was ‘fair’, and that the state of the development of the native leather trades compared ‘very favourably’ with other trades such as blacksmithy and carpentry. The Madiga’s sandals, were, according to the same report, ‘strong, comfortable, and sometimes highly ornamental.’

As the period under discussion progressed there were changes in the way in which some of the leather was treated and sold – more enterprising *ryots* taking advantage, not only of improvements in communications and marketing, but in the option they increasingly had, of getting the tanning and final treatment of leather done elsewhere. ‘Of late years,’ wrote Thurston in 1906, ‘there is a tendency for Madigas to poach on each others’ monopoly of certain houses, and among the *ryots* themselves to dispense with the services of family Madigas, and resort to the open market for their necessities. In such cases, the *ryots* demand payment from the Madigas for the skins of their dead animals. The hides and skins, which remain after local demands have been satisfied, are sold to merchants from the Tamil districts, and there is generally a central agent to whom the various subagents send their collections, and by him they are dried and salted and sent to Madras for tanning.’²¹

¹⁸ Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals*, 41.

¹⁹ *Manual of the Godavari District* (Madras, 1907), 107.

²⁰ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 309. Quite a high proportion of Madiga women appear to have been involved in the collection of bark (See *Census of India 1921* (Madras) 13, Part 1, 219.

²¹ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 310.

Weaving

There is still something of an unresolved debate about what happened to the cotton industry in India during the course of the 19th century as a result of the import of cheap Manchester cotton cloth. One popular view, espoused especially by supporters of the nationalist movement, has been that the import of cheaply produced British products destroyed the Indian industry, putting local weavers out of work. However, authors of the *Cambridge Economic History of India* (1984)²² and some other more recent writers have argued, quite correctly in our opinion, that what happened was more complex than realised. Part of the confusion has arisen through the failure to distinguish between members of the traditional weaving castes who produced finely woven cotton cloth for export, and the outcaste (often part-time) weavers who produced a less refined product for local consumption.

There can be no doubt that the import of cheap Manchester-produced cotton cloth did have a devastating effect on the Indian export industry, and that the effects of this foreign competition were felt in the Telugu country as well as in other parts of the subcontinent. According to Hemmingway, for example, 'The abolition of the Company's cloth trade had a most prejudicial effect on the weaving industry, and so on the prosperity of the [Godavari] district as a whole. The value of the piece-goods exported in 1825-26 was over fourteen lakhs, in 1842-43 it was less than two'.²³ Furthermore, there is some evidence of the plight of weavers in missionary records – Edwin Lewis declaring in a letter addressed to supporters of the London Missionary Society on the situation in Bellary in 1879, that 'we have frequently had occasion to urge upon some classes, especially the weavers, the necessity of their seeking some new employment, as their own trade was so depressed; but they seem immovable'.²⁴

However, as the authors of the *Cambridge Economic History* have suggested, and as is confirmed by further detailed evidence of the situation in what is now Andhra, the production of coarse cloth continued, possibly unabated, throughout the 19th and into the early decades of the 20th century. And it was, by and large, the Malas who kept the industry going.

In his correspondence with Thurston, probably round about 1906, the Rev S. Nicholson, an LMS missionary who had spent nearly ten years in the Cuddapah-Ananthapur region,²⁵ reported that:

In the east [of the Telugu country] weaving is the staple industry, and it is still carried on with the most primitive instruments. In one corner of a room

²² *Cambridge Economic History of India* (Orient Longmans and Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 1984), esp 68-70.

²³ Hemmingway, *Madras District Gazetteer, Godavari*, 103.

²⁴ Edwin Lewis, *The Missionary Chronicle* (1879), 160.

²⁵ J Sibree, *Register of Missionaries, Deputations et.c. from 1796 to 1923*, 4th ed (London: LMS [n.d.]).

stands the loom, with a hole in the mud floor to receive treadles, and a little window in the wall, level with the floor, lights the web. The loom itself is slung from the rafters, and the whole can be folded up and put away in a corner. As a rule weaving lasts for eight months of the year, the remainder of the year being occupied in reaping and stacking crops etc. Each weaver had his own customers, and very often one family of Malas will have weaved for one family of Sudras for generations. Before starting to weave the weaver worships his loom, and rubs his shuttle on his nose which is supposed to make it smooth.²⁶

Bishop Whitehead who visited Jammalamadugu in the Cuddapah District round about the same time remarked that:

At present the thread used for the hand-shuttle is spun by the Mala women from the ordinary cotton produced in the district. The Mala weavers do not provide their own cotton for the clothes they weave, but the Kapus give them the cotton from their own fields, pay the women a few annas for spinning it, and then pay their men a regular wage for weaving it into cloth.²⁷ But the cotton spun in the district is not strong enough for the fly-shuttle, which can only be profitably worked with mill-made thread.²⁸

The country cloths worn by the women of the black cotton country of Cuddapah were, according to the author of the district manual of 1915, 'mostly manufactured by the Malas'.²⁹ They were sometimes coloured, but generally white with red or black. In the Bellary district nearby the coarse white cloths for men were made in considerable quantities, again by the Malas, and were apparently disposed of in the village where they were made or at 'the nearest weekly market'.³⁰

Mala-Madiga Conflict

There was continued conflict between Malas and Madigas in different parts of the country, and from time to time, during the period under consideration. The rivalry and bad feeling between the two communities was reflected in the distance they kept from each other physically by living in separate hamlets and also socially in their customs and way of life. Referring to a situation which was much the same in other parts of the

²⁶ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 350. mSee also the Rev Fenn's description of his visit to a Mala weavers's home in Ragahavapuram in 1875 (*MCMR*, 27 (1875), 125)

²⁷ Referring to traditional relations between weaver and landlord at Ragahavapuram, the Rev Alexander remarked that 'It is always customary for journey-men weavers to cut off a certain portion of their master's web for the benefit of their wives and children' (*MCMR*, 27, 250).

²⁸ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 351.

²⁹ C.F. Brackenbury, *Madras District Gazetteer, Cuddapah* (Madras Governemnt Press, 1915), 9-10.

³⁰ W. Francis, *Madras District Gazetteer, Bellary* (Madras Government Press, 1904), 103.

Telugu country, the Rev Darling, describing the situation in the Kistna district, noted that the Malas exercised 'almost the same proud bearing and exclusiveness toward the Madiga as the Sudras do towards them. They will not consequently eat food cooked or touched by a Madiga, not intermarry with him, and they will not even use water from the same well.'³¹

The rivalry between communities was exacerbated by incidents such as the wider left/right hand caste disputes, competition for recognition through ritual performance and by economic survival factors including the need for food and employment.

The nature of the left/right hand caste disputes which continued into the 19th century has been a matter of considerable puzzlement to historians and other scholars of south Indian history.³² Here it is suffice to say that the middling level of caste society, in at least some of the Telugu districts, was divided into two main groups. These comprised the *panchaman* castes (carpenters, blacksmiths, braziers, goldsmiths and stone-cutters) and their supporters on the left-hand side who were vying for special honours and supremacy, over and against certain other middling castes and their supporters on the right. That Malas and Madigas were drawn into the disputes, and involved in them on opposite sides is apparent from the missionary and other evidence. The dispute in the Kistna district in the 1840s which drew in the Malas and presumably the Madigas as well, was over the right of the left hand artisan castes to ride on horseback at marriages or other festivals; and, according to the Rev Alexander, this 'disability' was a 'source of continual contention between them and the other castes, the one, seeking to obtain their purpose, the other, to defeat it.'³³ Referring to the right /left hand disputes in Kurnool, N.G. Chetty, author of the district manual, remarked that the Malas who belonged to the right and the Madigas to the left hand faction 'often quarrel'.³⁴

A second cause of dispute between Malas and Madigas was their quarrel over origins. The Malas claimed they were born from Parvati's garland or 'mala' and that the sword dance, which was a reminder of this, and was performed in honour of the village goddess, was really their invention. When Madigas continued to perform the ritual with sword, red cloth and ankle bells this was seen as an insult and form of theft and was deeply resented by Malas.³⁵

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³¹ *MCMR*, 41 (May 1874), 143.

³² For a recent study of these conflicts in south India see especially Niels Brimnes, *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

³³ *MCMR*, 27 (September 1860), 246

³⁴ N.G. Chetty, *Manual of Kurnool District* (Madras Government Press, 1886), 141.

³⁵ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 294-5. For a more recent reference to this primordial dispute see, N. Subba Reddi, 'Community Conflict Among the Depressed Castes of Andhra', *Man In India*, 30 (October to December, 1950), 2.

But perhaps more important than any of these rituals as a root cause of disputes was the economic condition and plight of both communities. For much of the time Malas and Madigas performed many of the same tasks everywhere – in cultivation, ritual and village service. And for people who were on or at the margins of society, living in poverty and facing starvation, there can be little wonder that they competed for employment and the rights and privileges that ensured their survival.

The special privileges each of the parties claimed and immediate causes of dispute probably varied somewhat in the different districts. For example, Brackenbury, describing the situation in the Cuddapah district in about 1915, remarked that there enmity was kept alive by disputes regarding the division of the flesh of dead cattle. ‘The rights of the Malas and Madigas in this respect are immemorial, the Madigas taking the skin and one share of the flesh, and the Malas taking two shares of the flesh’.³⁶ But while this may have been the cause of quarrels in Cuddapah, we cannot assume (without further evidence) that this was the usual or frequent cause of conflict in other parts of the Telugu speaking region.

The potential for some kind of conflict over economic rights and privilege was however often there. A glance at the district figures on Malas and Madigas (as given in the census reports for 1921 and 1931³⁷) shows clearly the general numerical superiority of Malas over Madigas in the British part of the Telugu speaking region. But significantly the tables also show variations in the proportion of Malas to Madigas in the different districts, the losses and gains – changes in the numerical balance – as between the two communities over the ten year period. During the period 1921 to 1931 the proportion of Madigas rose by 16 percent in the Kistna district, 11 percent in Bellary and 8 percent in Chittoor while the proportion of Malas increased by 3 percent in Guntur. These shifts in population were bound to have some economic and social consequences, increasing the pressure on members of one or other of the communities to defend what they saw as their existing rights in cultivation or in village service, for example, as ritualists and grave diggers and as village servants more generally.³⁸ Commenting on the way in which village authorities used either caste, and whoever was available, for village employment in the 1860s, the Rev A.H. Arden remarked that ‘In villages where there are no Madigas, the Malas do the Vetti work, and they eat carrion too.’³⁹ The

³⁶ Brackenbury, *Cuddapah*, 168.

³⁷ *Census of India 1921* (Madras), v.13 part II, table 13, ‘Territorial Distribution of Principal Castes’, 121; and *Census of India 1931* (Madras) v.14, part 11, table 18, ‘Territorial Distribution of Principal Communities’, 308-9.

³⁸ *MCMR*, 41 (May 1874), 145.

³⁹ The special privileges each of the parties claimed and immediate causes of dispute appear to have varied in the different districts. Describing the situation in his district C.F. Brackenbury remarked that in Cuddapah enmity was kept alive by disputes regarding the division of the flesh of dead cattle. The rights of the Malas

question was then what happened when Madigas returned to find that the Malas had taken over their own privileged position and methods of subsistence?

Gods, Spirit Possession and Ritual

Brahmanism and Bhakti Movements

In the mythological accounts of their origins, Malas and Madigas linked the story of their beginnings with stories about the lives and deeds of brahmanical gods and goddesses – with what is sometimes called ‘the great tradition’.⁴⁰ How, when and why this process occurred we have no way of knowing.

In the 19th century, a number of Madigas (what proportion is unclear) were followers of gurus of the Ramanuja sect – Vaishnavite reformers who placed considerable emphasis on the importance of *bhakti* and on the creation of a casteless society.⁴¹ The influence of these teachings on the Madigas was not only apparent in and around the American Baptist centre at Ongole, but also further south where Madigas performed rituals at the famous Venkatesvara temple at Tirupathi⁴² – one of the most sacred and important shrines for followers of the Ramanuja tradition.

While some of the Madiga caste were followers of Ramanuja’s teachings others were disciples of gurus of the Raja Yoga (Royal Yoga) sect. Practitioners of one of the traditional and dominant forms of meditation and self-control, they too placed an emphasis on the values of a casteless society.

However, while there is evidence of the influence of the Brahmanical tradition and of the *bhakti* movement among madigas in particular, both groups, Malas and Madigas, were heavily involved in the worship and propitiation of village and local deities. It was this type of activity which was seen as more urgent and important for the well-being of the local village community than the rituals or worship of the more remote gods associated with the brahmanic tradition.

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and Madigas in this respect are immemorial, the Madigas taking the skin and one share of the flesh, and the Malas taking two shares of the flesh.’ (Brackenbury, *Cuddapah*, 68.)

⁴⁰ See especially W.T. Elmore, *Dravidian Gods of Hinduism* (Madras: CLS, 1925).

⁴¹ John E. Clough, *Social Christianity In The Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), esp 92-100; Rosenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals*, 116-7

⁴² Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 310-11.

Village Deities and Rituals

The names of all these local gods and goddesses, sometimes described as tutelary or guardian deities, even when well known, are too numerous to mention.

Many of them appear to have had a purely local origin in some unusual historical event and were then given names which incorporated them into a wider pantheon of village (mostly female) deities. The temporary nature of some of them is clearly apparent. As well as appearing and becoming well established, some of them went out of fashion or disappeared especially in times of crisis. For example, commenting on village worship in a part of the Masulipatam Collectorate, the Rev F.N. Alexander, remarked in 1860 that some of the deities he saw on his travels seemed to be 'of very recent origin', and that they had won celebrity 'as recently as the great famine' and were 'now worshipped' under the title of 'Perantalu'.⁴³ In a further comment he remarked that in one village he visited the people told them that, earlier in the year, the cholera had made fearful ravages among them, and that on that occasion 'the whole village' came and paid 'these stones' solemn worship hoping for relief, but the malady seemed to increase and 'they reviled these worthless gods'.⁴⁴

According to Thurston the tutelary or guardian deity of the Madigas was 'Mathamma or Mathangi',⁴⁵ while Hemmingway, who was writing at about the same time, observed that Malas in the Godavari district worshipped 'a variety of deities' including Gurappa, Subbarayadu, Gunnathadu, Sunkakannam Pollerama and Gangamma.⁴⁶ While some of these divinities may have been special caste favourites, what is also clear is that both Malas and Madigas were also involved, with other castes, in the worship and propitiation of a whole range of other village spirits. Among the more important of these were Peddamma ('the great mother'⁴⁷), Mariamma (the goddess of small pox), Mahalakshmi, Pollerama, Gontiyamma, Chinnamma and others.

If the elaborate ceremonies and rituals associated with these deities were to be effective in appeasing or pleasing the deity, they required the active participation of members of different castes, including, on many occasions, the involvement of Malas and/or Madigas. In other words, the participation of these castes was essential if the village people were to enjoy a healthy and prosperous life. If some special functions essential for the conduct of the ceremony (performed by Malas or Madigas or any other caste) were neglected then this could cause great difficulty for the village communities

⁴³ MCMR, 27 (September 1860), 257.

⁴⁴ MCMR, 27 (September 1860), 253.

⁴⁵ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 317.

⁴⁶ Hemmingway, *Madras District Gazetteer, Godavari*, 386.

⁴⁷ Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 39.

as a whole. An example of this was the employment of the Madigas not only to make the drums but to beat them at village festivals – the beating of drums being used to scare away evil spirits. If, after becoming Christian, the Madigas refused to perform this ‘office’ then this caused considerable disruption, resentment and opposition.⁴⁸ Those who performed ritual functions were usually given some reward for the part they played in these and other activities. Madigas, who performed the ritual sacrifice of different animals (pigs, sheep, buffalo etc.) might, for example, be permitted to take away a part of the carcass.

The importance of the Madigas in performing these rituals can be further illustrated by reference to the practice of animal sacrifice in Masulipatam.

Referring to the part played in village ceremonies, Bishop Whitehead remarked that after the head of the buffalo was cut off by the chief Madiga of the town:

the blood is caught in a vessel and sprinkled over some boiled rice, and then the head, with the right foreleg in the mouth, is placed before the shrine on a flat wicker basket, with the rice and blood on another basket just below it. A lighted lamp is placed on the head, and then another Madiga carries it on his own head round the village, with the new cloth dipped in the blood of the victim tied round his neck. This is regarded here and elsewhere as a very inauspicious and dangerous office; and the Brahman of the village has to offer considerable inducements to persuade a Madiga to undertake it. Ropes are tied round his body and arms and held fast by men walking behind him, as he goes round, to prevent his being carried off by evil spirits, and limes are cut in half and thrown into the air, so that the demons may catch at them instead of at the man.⁴⁹

During the period before it was finally banned in 1894 Madigas in particular were often involved in hook-swinging. This practice, which is sometimes performed surreptitiously in remote villages even today, is a practice involving suspension of the body by hooks from a cross beam attached to an upright pole. Once the ‘celebrant’ was hoisted up and in place, he or she was swung in rotation, lifted or lowered from the end of the cross beam several times, or made to bounce by being hung at the end of the cross beam attached to a pole fixed, not in the ground, but on the back of a temple cart – the latter being pulled or dragged towards the deity’s temple some distance away.⁵⁰

Describing this practice in an official report in 1853 the Magistrate of Masulipatam noted that:

Swinging is not practised exclusively at any particular festival. It takes place generally at those held about the full moon, from December to May, and forms part of the attractions and shows of processions on such occasions. In

⁴⁸ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 308-9.

⁴⁹ Whitehead, *The Village Gods*, 62.

⁵⁰ Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-Swinging and Its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800-1894* (Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

these cases the Vetties or Pariahs [Madigas] of the village are the performers and receive from 1 to 2-3 or 4 rupees from a general fund subscribed by the villagers or granted for the purpose by some public spirited individual. In one report it is mentioned that once the party who had been accustomed to pay the swingers having left, the villagers afraid lest a discontinuance of the practice should be productive of calamity have taken to swinging sheep and pumpkins.... In the case of famine, cholera or other calamity, a swinging exhibition takes place for the purpose of propitiating the deity, and at the same time a slaughter of animals consisting of goats, sheep, pigs, fowls, or if there be any parties sufficiently wealthy, of male buffaloes, takes place. It is also practiced in expiation of vows; but if the parties are of the higher castes and can afford it, they usually swing by low caste proxies, to whom they pay a sum of from 1 to 4 rupees.⁵¹

The difficulty higher caste participants in the practice could face, and their dependence on the collaboration of the Madigas, is well illustrated by a missionary account of the practice at Weyoor – a village not far from Masulipatam. It appears from this and other evidence that many different caste members of the village community participated in different ways in the swinging event, and that the Madigas, who were always the ones who swung, not only provided the hide ropes which were used, but were also employed to raise and lower the beam. The Rev J.E. Sharkey who attended the swinging on two separate occasions, was told that ‘it was customary for the village treasury to pay five rupees to any Pariah [Madiga] of the village that is willing to undergo this torture and that the object of this was to ensure the favour of the goddess on behalf of the village’.⁵² However, on the occasion of his second visit, the performance did not go quite according to plan, as uproar ensued when the Madigas refused to lower the beam and complete the ritual until there was absolute assurance that the swinger would be given correct remuneration.

While both Madigas and Malas were officially at the margins of society, this incident, as recorded above, suggests that they were not totally without any form of power and control. Indeed, almost the entire village community was dependent upon them, not only because they buried the dead, and, in many cases, supplied the villagers with cheap leather and cotton goods, but also because they had vital roles to play in ritual. And if, for example, they became Christian, would they continue to perform their usual tasks? Would the Madigas continue to swing at hook-swinging festivals? Would they continue to sacrifice sheep and goats for the benefit of the whole village? And who but they could dispel pollution, carry the blood or beat the drums to drive evil spirits away?

⁵¹ *Official Report of the Magistrate of Masulipatnam*, 20/9/1853, p.14.

⁵² Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 175-185.

The Women's Position in the Mala and Madiga Communities

There are perhaps three main factors suggesting that the position of women among Malas and Madigas was somewhat better than it was among higher caste Hindus.

In the first place, lower caste women were more important economically and as 'bread winners' compared with higher caste women, a higher proportion of the latter not being engaged in income earning occupations. For hundreds of years Mala and Madiga peasant women had played a key role in agricultural operations – in collecting seeds, planting, weeding, irrigation and harvesting. While Mala women helped support their families by spinning (as the Census of India in 1921 so clearly shows),⁵³ many Madiga women collected bark for the process of tanning and preparing the leather.

The economic importance of women at this level (a factor which enhanced their power and status) is reflected in some of the figures on male and female wages in the Nellore district from 1921 to 1951. This material suggests that female workers engaged in weeding and harvesting were sometimes paid a near equivalent or even higher wages than the men engaged in similar operations.⁵⁴

Secondly, the Mala and Madiga woman's superior position compared with that of many high caste Hindu women was reflected in marriage customs. Certainly at the end of the 19th century and probably later, Malas and Madigas followed the custom of the bridegroom's family paying a dowry or bride price.⁵⁵ According to the Rev. Nicholson who described marriage customs among the Malas in considerable detail, irrespective of whether the bride had already been given jewelery, the groom was also supposed to give 'a necklace of silver and beads, and a gold nose jewel'.⁵⁶ Furthermore, it was likely that even before preparations for the wedding were complete, 'all the money' the bridegroom's people had saved would have been spent. 'But', continued Nicholson, 'there is seldom any difficulty in obtaining a loan. It is considered an act of great merit to advance money for a wedding, and people of other and richer castes are quite ready to lend the amount required.'⁵⁷ Furthermore, instead of the bride being immediately cut off from her parental home, the 'the married pair usually remained in the house of the bride's mother for a month.'⁵⁸

⁵³ *Census of India 1921* (Madras) part 2, table 21, 'Occupation of Selected Castes', 253-260.

⁵⁴ M. Atchi Reddy, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 20 (January – March 1983), 74-5.

⁵⁵ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 320.

⁵⁶ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 354.

⁵⁷ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 355.

⁵⁸ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 365.

A third indicator, especially of Madiga women's power and authority, is reflected in the *basava* system, as well as in ritual practices at the village level.

In different part of Telengana it was a custom among the lower castes, including the Madigas, of dedicating one of their daughters to a temple as a 'Basavi' or 'Nandi', the bull of Shiva. In some cases, parents without male issue, instead of adopting a son in the usual manner, dedicated a daughter by a simple ceremony to the god of the temple. In this way, and through immemorial custom, she acquired the right to inherit her parent's property and perform their funeral rites as if she were a son. She did not marry, but lived in her parents' house with any man of equal or higher caste status whom she selected, while her children also obtained the right of inheriting her father's property.

According to W. Francis, compiler of the *Handbook of the Bellary District*:

The children of a Basavi are legitimate and neither they nor their mother are treated as being in any way inferior to their fellows. A Basavi... from the fact that she can never be a widow, is a most welcome guest at weddings. Basavis differ from the ordinary dancing-girls dedicated at temples in that their duties in the temples (which are confined to the shrine of their dedication) are almost nominal and that they do not prostitute themselves promiscuously for hire. A Basavi very usually lives faithfully with one man, who allows her a fixed sum weekly for her maintenance.⁵⁹

The religious power and influence of Madiga women in the Telugu speaking region more generally is reflected in accounts of what was known as the Matangi.⁶⁰ She was an unmarried woman of the Madiga caste chosen, after a number of tests, to represent the goddess Matangi – a favourite goddess. Her business was to preside at the purificatory ceremonies that precede all festivities – whether these were for Malakshmi, Poleramma or Ankamma or any other of the village deities. Describing one of these ceremonies N.G. Chetty, writing in the *Manual of the Kurnool District* in 1886 remarked that after she had donned a special ceremonial necklace:

The master of ceremonies, his male and female relations, then stand in a line, and the Matangi runs round them, uttering what appear to be meaningless exclamations, spitting upon all of them, and touching them with her stick. Her touch and saliva are believed to purge all uncleanness of body and soul, and are invited by men who would ordinarily scorn to approach her, and it passes

⁵⁹ W. Francis, *Bellary* (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1904), 66-7 and *Anantapur* (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1905), 37. See also Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 129-130. For a more recent account of the system see P. Rajyalakshmi, M. Suryanarayana and D.P. Mukherjee, 'The Basavis in Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh', *Man in India*, 4 (October – December 1976), 340-348.

⁶⁰ See especially Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals*, 63-70.

one's comprehension how she should be honoured with the task of purifying the soul and body of high class Reddis and purse-proud Komatis.⁶¹

Writing in the *Madras Christian College Magazine* for 1906, A. Madhaviah, describing his visit to a village in the Kurnool district, noticed a 'curious shrine' dedicated to Matangi. 'There are some permanent *inam* (rent free) lands belonging to this shrine', he wrote, 'and there is always a Madiga 'vestel virgin' known as Mathangi who is the high priestess, or rather the embodied representative the Brahman-chuckler goddess, and who enjoys the fruits of the inams.'⁶² The narrator who witnessed the Matangi's 'possessed dance' noted that there were local Mathangis in other villages, but that they were said to be subordinate to her.

Conclusion

In our discussion focussing on the life and livelihood of the Malas and Madigas we have incidentally documented some of the factors which acted either as a deterrent or facilitated the Christian movement during the period under consideration. Large numbers of Malas and an even higher proportion of Madigas were locked into a social system and dependent for their livelihood on the goodwill and collaboration of landlords and *ryots*. And while they were not technically slaves legally bound to their masters, any decision to join the Christians could have serious consequences for them, such as loss of occasional benefits, loans, shelter or even employment. And even for those who participated in the co-operative village system, and who could normally work and extend their own plots for cultivation, there were problems and opposition especially from the village *karnams* if they joined or were thinking of joining the Christian community. Added to these deterrents was the pressure of the village authorities and the wider village community for Malas and Madigas to continue to conform to tradition, and to continue to play a necessary, even key part in village rituals, such as hook-swinging, the beating of drums to drive away evil spirits and animal sacrifice. Ironically, if these so-called powerless castes were really powerless, and had no power or influence within the village community, then there probably would have been less resistance on the part of village authorities to let them, the Malas and Madigas, cross over and join the Christian fellowship. But it was because of the essential role that they played in the village, and also in cultivation, that any move to join the Christians was looked upon by their masters and other caste Hindus with alarm and suspicion, and a fear that some such move would lead to their emancipation.

A further impediment to Christian conversion was something of the Malas' and Madigas' own making. This was the traditional rivalry between

⁶¹ Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 296.

⁶² Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, IV, 303.

them, one group tending to remain outside the local Christian community if their rivals joined. This, however, was not always a problem as sometimes there was the possibility for either party of joining or forming a different congregation (made up of one's own caste group) or even of joining a different mission.

However, in some respects (and as some of the papers which follow will demonstrate) Hindu attitudes towards Christians were slowly changing, at least in some parts of the Telugu speaking region. For example, once the landed classes realised that Christianity was not a threat to agricultural operations (even if Sunday was observed as a day of rest) then, in some cases, the master's attitude towards his employees began to change, especially if the Christian workers proved to be more diligent and reliable than they were before their association with the mission. Indeed, changes in the lifestyle and attitude of Christians were beginning to have a favourable effect,⁶³ not only on their masters, but also on their middle- and higher-caste neighbours as well. It was these changes in their way of life, in their attitude, in cleanliness and in their determination to improve themselves and their families (further demonstrated by a rapidly increasing literacy) which impressed Kapus and many others, so that they too became interested in what Christianity could do for them, as well as for those at and from the margins of Hindu society.

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⁶³ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion among Non-Brahmins in Andhra Pradesh, with Special Reference to Anglican Missions and the Dornakal Diocese, c.1900-1936', in G.A. Oddie (ed), *Religion in South Asia: Religious Reform and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times* (Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 95-124.

THE NATURE AND PATTERN OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AS A REFLECTION OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN ANDHRA PRADESH (1884-1960): A CRITIQUE

Pramod Rao¹

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the caste system continues in the church as in society. If it is existing in the church what is the place and identity of Christian Dalits in the church? Were they treated any better in the church or did they have the same treatment in the church too?

A section of this paper also will deal with the way the missionaries treated Dalit Christians. How did their theological understanding of Christian Dalits influence the growth of Christian understanding and the nurture of the church?

Before accepting Christianity, caste played a major role in the Dalit communities. They were affected in socio-religious areas which led to their educational disability and economic handicap; consequently they were even affected in their psyche. They understood that they had no hope. At this point, Christian missionaries, government and other agents tried to uplift them with various projects and subsequently Dalits opted for conversion to Christianity. In this paper we would like to concentrate on the post-conversion status of Christian Dalits. This means by now they have become members of the church. The question is, even after their conversion to Christianity, did real transformation take place, and are they really treated equally in the church along with other members? Their status in the church needs a careful study.

With regard to the above issues, James Massey expounds a four-layer colonisation as the fundamental cause for the continual suffering and the oppression of Dalits even within the church. These layers were Aryan, Muslim, British and the high caste internal colonisation.² This is how he summarises his position:

¹ Rev Dr Pramod Rao, was formerly a lecturer at Bishop's College Calcutta; Hindustan Bible Institute Chennai; and All Nations Nazarene Bible College, Auckland, New Zealand. Currently he is the Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at Auckland City Hospital, Auckland, New Zealand. He is also a pastor (Honourary) of the Telugu Church of New Zealand, Auckland, New Zealand.

² James Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), 3. See also in Walter Fernandes

...the colonization of the Dalits, which began with their defeat at the hands of the *Aryans*, was internalized through religious myths and stories and finally by introducing a fixed social order based on a caste system dependent on one's birth. Neither the centuries during which India was successively dominated by Muslims and the British nor the arrival of the other religions, including Christianity, succeeded in overcoming the influence of this caste system; indeed it was the effect of Muslim and British colonization, to strengthen the status quo. With independence, the rule of the country went back in to the hands of the so-called upper caste, the original colonizers of the Dalits and the oppressive system of caste continues in the Indian society as well as in the Indian church.³

The caste status ascribed at birth remains unchanged during one's lifetime. Ideally, caste⁴ is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group, having traditional association with an occupation and a particular prestigious position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the conception of pollution and purity, and generally maximum commensality occurs within the caste.⁵

Now, a question that has been raised again and again both by anthropologists and missionaries who had to deal with the caste phenomenon is whether it is a secular hierarchy or a religious phenomenon. And it is equally important to study here, whether caste distinction continued in the church or not.

While Bailey considers caste as purely a secular factor in the Western sense, Louis Dumont on the other extreme views it as purely religious. This discussion is of crucial importance to our subject because missionary attitudes were, to a great extent, conditioned by their understanding of caste and its implications for their evangelical needs. Obviously, this understanding itself depended also on the missionaries' background and country of origin. The Lutherans, mostly Germans, either considered caste as irrelevant, as such its existence is to be ignored, or as a secular institution, that can be maintained. The Catholic missionaries viewed it by and large in terms of the European Estate's system while the Anglicans and Presbyterians, especially those in North India, considered it as a religious feature and opposed it. However, many of those working in the South had begun their career with the Lutherans and were influenced by their views.

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(ed) *The Emerging Dalit Identity: The Re-Assertion of the Subalterns* (New Delhi: ISI, 1996).

³ Massey, *Down Trodden*, 27-28.

⁴ N.K. Dutt, *Origin and Growth of Caste in India* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 1986), 60; S.V. Ketkar, *History of Caste in India* (Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 1979), 22.

⁵ D.N. Trivedi, 'Caste, Modernisation and Institutionalisation of Change', *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 26.3 (July-September 1973), 235.

Ultimately evangelical needs would force even those in the north into a compromise.⁶

If fact and value are so closely intertwined for the scholar whose dominant motive is understanding, if what one sees is so deeply influenced by the values one brings to one's study, we need not be surprised if missionaries, who were so much more openly critical in their approach, saw some aspects of caste with quite unusual clarity, and were singularly blind to others.⁷ One of the points that led to this misinterpretation was the lack of knowledge of the sources of status and power in the caste hierarchy. Most missionaries took for granted that all power was with the Brahmins. They were not aware that in the Indian situation, status could not always be identified with economic power. When we deal with the question of caste status in the Indian church we are always misled by people with this misconception.

19th and early 20th century European Christian missions to India were a cultural and missiological fact. European missionary awakening had indisputable connections with colonial expression. However, the mission history written during this period was in fact, written with an air of romantic notion in a spirit of triumphalism.⁸ There were times, that the missionaries exaggerated their achievement and over calculated their results.⁹ And also, 19th century Indian mission history lacks coherence and does not form a coherent whole. Indian historians such as T.V. Philip and S.K. Das argue that the recorded mission history is incomplete and that it has to be re-read and re written from the postcolonial perspective.¹⁰ The missionaries could not understand how the people of India would adopt a seemingly contradictory colonised stance, with their long historical religious backgrounds, Indians would externally adopt European values in education, science and technology¹¹ because Indian religious life is entirely different from Western cultural values. Therefore J.R. Chandran observes, 'The image of Christ which such missionary enterprise projected was that of the imperial Christ rather than that of the servant Christ of the Gospels.'¹² But, 'if we use critically and with common sense much of this

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⁶ Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Mission in India* (Londo : Centre of South Asian Studies, University of London, 1980), 3-5, 13-19, 139-46.

⁷ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, 5.

⁸ Jacob S. Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Post-colonial Reflections* (New Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), 1993), 11.

⁹ Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, 11.

¹⁰ Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, 11.

¹¹ Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, 11.

¹² J.R. Chandran, *National Council of Churches Review (NCCR)* (June 1994), 352.

type of missionary material, it is of considerable value to the writer of Indian socio-religious history.¹³

However after saying this, we cannot simply neglect the missionaries and their great work in India. In the history of Christian Dalit movements, the missionaries played an important role as the agents who brought the new form of religion.¹⁴ In some parts of our country, the missionaries were the first to admit Dalits and non-Dalits into mission schools. Neither the government nor the Hindu reformers took much interest in the uplift of the Dalits until the Dalit movements were in progress.¹⁵ Other agencies worked on behalf of the Dalit classes in a limited way, with their own vested interests and philosophies. Christian missions too had a vested interest in working among the Dalit classes and that was to evangelise them. Here it was not just to convert them but it was much more than conversion. The Christian missions in their involvement with the Dalit classes became a movement of the Dalit classes. Dalit classes in this process of interaction between Christian missions and Dalit classes became the image and anguish of the church.¹⁶ The Churches' mission took up the challenge to uplift them.

The first step in the mission involvement with the Dalit classes began with their mass conversion to Christianity in the latter half of the 19th century.¹⁷ Dalit masses wanted to come out of the Hindu caste system and to gain a new sense of worth, dignity and self-respect which came along with conversion.¹⁸ The primary motive of the Dalit Christians was not economic benefit but social and psychological benefits. Gladstone calls it a social liberation.¹⁹ Therefore the Christian mission worked for an awakening among the Dalit classes through education, farm settlement or colonies, and co-operative credit societies. The Christian missions on the whole, tried to ameliorate their condition and also appealed to the government and got many concessions and privileges for the Christian

¹³ Robert A. Bickers & Rosemary Seton, *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 209.

¹⁴ Gladstone, Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and People's Movements in Kerala: A Study of Christian Mass Movements in Relation to Neo-Hindu Socio-Religious Movements in Kerala, 1850-1936* (Kerala: Seminary Publications, 1984), 423.

¹⁵ John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 71.

¹⁶ G.E. Philips, *The Out Castes Hope* (London: Young Missionary Movements, 1912), preface.

¹⁷ Webster, 'From Indian Church to Indian Theology: An Attempt at theological Construction', in A.P.Nirmal (Ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, n.d.), 93-127.

¹⁸ John C.B. Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in 19th Century North India* (Delhi: Macmillan Press, 1976), 60-64.

¹⁹ Gladstone, '19th Century Mass Movements in South Travancore a Result of Social Liberation', *Indian Church History Review (ICHR)*, 53-65.

Dalits and Dalits.²⁰ Highlighting the missionary's work in India, Gandhiji points out:

...in the past, mainly as the outcome of the desire for social justice and all-round uplift (and) the Christian mission has succeeded in helping large sections of converts from these communities to a higher standard, moral and spiritual and to real transformation in the life and character of individual and groups belonging to these classes.²¹

It is to be noted that the Edinburgh concept of mission was largely world evangelisation and conversion of non-Christians.²² And by 1910 missionary operations were spread all over the country²³ and by the year 1914, eighty five percent of the world was under European colonisation, and Europeans could freely travel to establish their mission base anywhere in the colonised lands without hindrance.²⁴ From the beginning the Christian missions were interested in Dalits. Therefore the question is why were these people interested in Dalits and why were Dalits attracted to it, and why did they accept the religion of the missionaries? These questions need to be answered.

In Andhra Pradesh all the missions there became involved in the emancipatory and transformational work.²⁵ Oddie points out in his book on *Social Protests in India* that, the missionaries were concerned about the deplorable conditions within India, which made the task of spreading Christianity difficult. However, they were also moved by humanitarian consideration.²⁶ It is true because their religion had given them a feeling of urgency.²⁷

Missionaries were concerned about the conditions of the Dalits and the missionaries had a special burden for the people, to uplift them. Most of the early 19th century missionaries came to India with a heritage of social activism, particularly in the struggle for emancipation, the campaign to abolish slavery.²⁸ Though their chief aim was evangelism, they combined this with zeal to reform and regenerate Indian society. They conceived of

²⁰ M.S.A.Rao (ed.), *Social Movements in India: Studies in Peasant, Backward Classes, Sectarian, Tribal and Women's Movements* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1984 2nd Edition, Reprint), 235.

²¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions* (Ahmadabad: Navajevan Press, 1941), 135.

²² Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, 119.

²³ *Indian Social Reformer* (22 January 1910), 245.

²⁴ Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, 120.

²⁵ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 40.

²⁶ Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Social Protests in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1979), 246-47.

²⁷ Kenneth Ingham, *Reformers in India 1793-1833* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 47.

²⁸ James P. Alter, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity in Anglo Saxon Protestant Missions and the Church in Northern India 1800-1914', *Indian Church History Review* 7 (June 1974), 38.

the missionary as a great liberating force, called into being by God to liberate men and women through the power of the gospel from sin, ignorance, false religion and oppressive social customs and practices.²⁹ The missionaries, coming from a revolutionary background, a background in which they were convinced that the missionary movement was an emancipating force, saw the oppressive conditions of the Dalit classes and therefore they were interested in them. This missionary movement was in part an expression of a far wider development of the social emancipation of the underprivileged classes. As this awakening came from the evangelical revival, and also through the various developments that came along with industrial revolution, the missionaries were predisposed to interest themselves in the Dalit classes. Therefore they were also interested in developing the Dalits' socio-religious and economic conditions.

Theological Understanding of Missionaries and Christian Dalits

The missionaries considered the gospel as something intended for the whole of the human body, mind as well as soul. Therefore we see a combination of theology and ideology. The theology of the missionaries also led to their involvement with the Dalit classes.³⁰ As children of God, all are equal in his sight. The missionaries were convinced that men and women should evolve towards the true likeness of God and that the personal and social transformation of human beings is God's intention in God's creation of the human.³¹ The Bible says that all are equal in the sight of God and that the church is the true union of believers. Therefore they believed that God is interested in the human. God is concerned about their worth and wholeness whatever their condition may be. As children of God all the people are equal in God's sight. Wherever human's worth is not recognised, wherever his/her equality and brother/sisterhood is denied, there conversion should take place. Conversion here meant God's love and his concern for the lowest of the lowly should be established here and now. This seemed to be the theological understanding of the missionaries who came to India. However, the Evangelical missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, for example, considered caste incompatible with Christianity.³² In their understanding caste sustained hopeless slavery and cuts at the roots of fraternal love against the true union in the church.³³ Therefore they strongly opposed caste and social evils like *sati*, *nautch* dance, opium traffic etc., which was based upon their theology. Oddie observes with reference to the missionary's concern for the Mala and Madiga segments of the Dalit

²⁹ Alter, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', 38.

³⁰ Oddie, *Social Protests in India*, op.cit., 27.

³¹ K. Thenzauva, 'Conversion as the Basis of a Social Transformation', *The Asian Journal of Theology*, 6.1 (April 1992), 74.

³² Oddie, *Social Protests in India*, 27.

³³ Oddie, *Social Protests in India*, 27.

classes. The idea of expressing God's concern for the whole human and of embodying the spirit of the gospel in humanitarian and social reform activity was reflected specially in connection with the Dalit classes.³⁴ Thus the Christian church and Christian missionaries were interested in integral human development or humanisation, and all-round liberation, promoting the emergence of a new society at personal and communitarian levels.³⁵ The Christian doctrine as well as the work of the missionaries raised fresh challenges to society. Christian doctrines such as the brotherhood of men or women, the fatherhood of God, a tendency towards monotheism etc. attracted the whole society³⁶ and they started to look at this theology from the perspective of their religions. Thus we see the combined operation of theology and ideology in the Christian mission's involvement with the Dalit classes.

Christian missionaries came with this theological base and this theology was operative in their involvement with the Dalit classes. Therefore there is no doubt that Christian missionaries were concerned about, interested in and had deep sympathy for the Dalit classes. This is true with most of the Protestant missionaries who worked in Andhra Pradesh.

The Nature and Pattern of the Christian Church in Andhra Pradesh

After careful investigation we were able to find out that caste system continued within the church as in the previous life of the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. This is evident in the Roman Catholic Church as well as in Protestant Christianity. Dalit Christians were treated the same as they were in their previous life. However, we cannot deny the fact that there was a little improvement if they were moved to a different location. So the identity of the Christian Dalits after their conversion is almost the same. With regard to treatment from the landlords in the village, they expected the same jobs which they were doing in their previous life. But there were incidents when Christian Dalits protested with regard to the worshipping of idols and performing sacrifices to the village deities.

With regard to relation with the family and with society there was not much change. For example, when there was a question of marriage, they looked for their own people from the previous caste group. They did not want to marry from any other group in the society, and a similar thing happened with inter-dining – for example Christian Malas and Christian Madigas practised the same inter-dining practices as in their previous life.

³⁴ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 69.

³⁵ Kuncherian Pathil (ed) *Mission in India Today* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1988), 342.

³⁶ Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity*, 416.

With regard to the rejection of the old customs, Christians Dalits in the church continued to practise some of their old customs. Whenever there was sickness or an epidemic, they went back to the village deities directly or indirectly to venerate them. This they did because of the fear that the deities might get angry and punish them. Therefore, simultaneously they worshipped Jesus as well as the village deities.

Christian Dalits in the church were also forced to conversion because when the *jajmani* system ceased, some Christian Dalits had no other way but to change to Christianity for their survival.

In other words the legacy of missionary work can be seen in the transformation of a large section of the marginalised. They expected conversion movements would set in motion a way of emancipation from the caste system for the Dalits, and conversion was thus seen as the only possible way out of this problem. But in reality it did not bring expected change to the Christian Dalits in Andhra Pradesh.

However, the converts who entered the church began to question some of its policies that maintained inequality, injustice, segregation etc. The church however has continued to struggle with these issues even after the missionaries left, as it is guided by a philosophy of love and justice. In spite of these drawbacks, Dalits who converted have felt dignity and status in the new life to some extent.

Conversion movements during our study period brought many people to Christianity to escape the agony of the dreaded, treacherous caste system and the agony of untouchability. Conversion was and is the most available form of awakening for the most downtrodden in Andhra Pradesh. In spite of these conditions, the status of Dalit Christians remained a key issue in deliberations on liberation when there was no great difference between the conditions of the Dalit poor and the Christian Dalit poor.

However, these large conversions brought a lot of problems to the church because the new converts began asking questions, demanding radical and more equitable approaches from within the church itself and the church could not fulfil its promises in regard to Dalit issues. Can we affirm that conversion to Christianity has met the expectations of the sections that converted to escape the scourge of caste and untouchability? And has conversion liberated large sections from the plague of untouchability? However, it is also a fact that, the church itself could not escape the clutches of the Hindu caste system. The church did not take its own theology very seriously and also because it was not able, or did not want to address the deep-rootedness of the curse of caste. After the missionaries left, sections of the Indian church got sucked into the caste system that catered only to the rich.

However, while critiquing the church we must always remember that the critical mass of the church's functionaries has always worked guided by the philosophy of love and justice. That is part of their faith, as they understand it, guiding them to areas no one else goes. However the caste system's

continuance within the church is a wrong signal to the total community and it is unfortunate for the Dalits who converted to the Christian faith. However the fact that Dalits could get some relief and peace through the contribution of the missionaries has to be acknowledged.

Christian Dalits' Impact on the Churches

However, the most obvious impact the Dalit mass movement had upon the churches was demographic,³⁷ because during the time of the Dalit movements, membership of the church increased. The life of the Christian Dalits influenced other Dalits and even non-Brahmins in the society. Estborn observes that Christianity changed the lives of the people; otherwise social evils such as untouchability would have continued.³⁸ And Hindus practiced the pattern of Christian life and others followed the mission's ideology at a later stage in admitting Dalits into the mission schools and this challenged the government schools.³⁹ Bishop Whitehead observes that, 'everywhere I hear the same account, that the lives and houses of the Christian Malas and Madigas are far purer, cleaner, and brighter' and adds, 'Christianity was exerting a positive and distinctive effect on the life of the society specially in Khammamett District'.⁴⁰ And the impact of the Christian Dalit movements changed the course of the history of Christianity in India and pushed the Dalit movements on to the next stage. Therefore it should be noted that the socio-religious structure in India oppressed a section of society through the centuries, though they were the original people of this land. But the advent of Christianity in the lives of the Dalits and its socio-religious impact changed partially or fully many of the 'high caste' people as well. The lives of Christian Dalits were a challenge to these 'caste people' to change their life style.

Therefore the impact of the conversion of untouchables, as reflected in what happened in the Dornakal Diocese, also raises questions about the way in which other changes have taken place in the society. It is well known, for example, that patrons and political leaders respond to the pressures and perhaps even the ideas of castes and classes below, but what happens to the celebrated notion of 'Sanskritisation' which presupposes that the lower sections of the community imitate the life of the higher, more dominant, castes? Clearly in the case of Christianity the reverse has also been true – higher castes, as we have seen, adopting a style of life, beliefs and practices, which first became apparent among untouchables.

³⁷ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, op.cit., 59.

³⁸ Cited in Geoffrey Oddie, 'Christian Conversion in the Telugu Country, 1860-1900 – A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in Godavery-Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (12:1, 1975) (61-79).

³⁹ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion'.

⁴⁰ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 73.

Conclusion

Missionary sources are essential to illuminate and uncover the local-level encounters between Christianity and indigenous religious and social beliefs. They help us to understand the status of the Dalits and the emancipatory work of the missionaries by highlighting how the conversion of Dalits to Christianity brought changes in the society as well as in the Church.⁴¹ According to Oddie, missionaries were the social commentators; however, the biases of the missionary reports were often clearly acknowledged and better known than those of other writers, which add to their usefulness to highlight the changes in the church and society. Once their prejudices and assumptions are recognised, he argues, missionary sources offer valuable insights into social and religious developments.⁴² However, the ideology and the beliefs of missionaries which were introduced to Christian Dalits during their conversion became foundational principles for the mission of the churches in later years.

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⁴¹ Geoffrey A. Oddie, 'Missionaries as Social Commentators: the Indian Case', in Robert A Bickers and Rosemary Seton (ed) *Missionary Encounters* (Richmond Surrey: Curzon, 1996), 4.

⁴² Oddie, 'Missionaries as Social Commentators', 4.

THE PHENOMENON OF BIBLE MISSION: EXPLORING THE FEATURES OF A LOCAL CHURCH ON THE MARGINS

James Ponniah

Introduction

The study of Pentecostal sects has been a focal point of academia not only because it is a fast growing religious phenomenon across the countries, especially in the third world countries, but also because it can be immediately related to the process of globalisation.¹ While both these approaches have been useful in exploring the origin, function and development of Pentecostalism in India² in ways informed by the cultural and epistemological interests of the elitist and Western mindset, it has also contributed to a lack of description of this phenomenon as a distinct Indian entity in most cases and a subaltern phenomenon in some cases.

In these discourses, I am afraid the debates on Pentecostalism were more about the defects of institutionalised Christianity and the possibilities of new splinter groups, than about the subjecthood of the marginal people. The main focus of such studies was not the interests of the marginal people but the survival and reincarnations of the religious traditions. An authentic representation of subjectivity of the marginal people is hardly found in such discussions. The common individual persons become sites on which various versions of scripture, tradition and religious actions were elaborated and contested.

For this paper, I want to focus on one such Pentecostal phenomenon called Bible Mission (henceforth BM), still a vibrant sect today and ever since its inception in the last century. The paper will interpret the phenomenon with the key of subaltern agency drawing upon the description of this phenomenon as a folk Christianity by Solomon Raj through his research work entitled *A Christian Folk-Religion in India: a Study of the*

¹ Joel Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (October 2004), 117-43.

² Gary B. Mcgee, '“Latter Rain” Falling in the East: Early Twentieth-Century Pentecostalism in India and the Debate over Speaking in Tongues', *Church History*, 68 (1999).

*Small Church Movement in Andhra Pradesh, with a special reference to the Bible Mission of Devadas.*³

Subaltern Perspective and Religion

In the first place, subaltern perspective lays great emphasis on subaltern agency. It unfolds the subtle and innovative ways through which the marginal people realise their potentiality as historical beings and actualise it to determine their lives and shape their destiny. Subsequently, subaltern perspective values people's subjectivities and holds that the marginal people re-imagine, reinvent and shape their subjectivities on their own terms. While this approach calls for exploring and identifying the signifiers of marginal peoples' subjectivities in their spaces and locations, it demands us 'to enter into the subjectivity as far as possible'⁴ if we want to engage in the process of theorising about them. Secondly, subaltern perspective calls for ways and means of exploring the emergence of the autonomous consciousness of the people in which the production of inner subjectivity takes places. But it is conditioned and relativised by the external forces that are appropriated in line with the subjectivity of the people. Hence subaltern analysis while revealing the 'subject(s) with the distinct mind and energy of its own'⁵ also should make us aware of the impact of then prevailing worldviews, beliefs and practices on the domain of subaltern identity markers, as we will soon see the influence of the Hindu worldview on the Bible Mission. Thus the faith articulations of the subalterns 'are many a time products of hybridity and mutuality'⁶ in which 'attributing a collective consciousness with an agency of their own for the subalterns'⁷ is both possible and necessary. This takes us to the point we are most concerned about in this essay, to the understanding of religion as subaltern agency in the subaltern perspective. This understanding investigates how the subalterns make use of religion in their struggle for human emancipation, to negotiate power with the religious and caste hierarchy, to acquire new identity in some cases, to safeguard and protect newly acquired social and economic statuses in other cases, to display and celebrate it at the same time in a few other instances. In all of these people make use of the symbols, myths, rituals of the religious domain, and feel empowered by it to interrogate, defy and to negate the existing social structures.

³ P. Solomon Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India: A Study of the Small Church Movement in Andhra Pradesh, with a special reference to the Bible Mission of Devadas* (New York: P. Lang, 1986).

⁴ George Oomen, 'Historiography of Indian Christianity and Challenges of Subaltern Methodology', *Journal of Dharma*, 28.2 (April-June 2003), 226.

⁵ Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies V* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 234.

⁶ Oomen, 'Historiography of Indian', 227.

⁷ Oomen, 'Historiography of Indian', 227.

Since the subalternity of the marginal people is materialised, sanctioned and sanctified by religion, and made more tolerable – and even desirable – by tradition,⁸ the religious realm becomes one of the effective means through which the subaltern prefer to exercise their human agency for interrogating, subverting and redefining the traditional structures of domination and subordination both within and without religion. It is against this background that the subaltern religious phenomenon like the BM needs to be looked at as a subaltern religious initiative that calls for an analysis to take into account the paradigm shift introduced by the Subaltern Studies Project and its worldview. This paradigm shift consists in not only taking very seriously the religious belief systems and the spiritual dimensions of human existence of the marginal people but also in locating the agency of change among the subalterns and their autonomy to speak a language of protest, resistance and negation.⁹ In this connection one must note that for the subaltern perspective, myths, popular religious practices and even rumours are significant because they all can be put to critical use to unearth the rebellious consciousness¹⁰ of the marginal people. Having said this let me move on to the origin of the BM first and to the investigation of subaltern agency in this phenomenon, and then take the discussion to a wider debate of the relationship between subalternity and history.

The Birth of the BM

The Bible Mission was founded in Andhra Pradesh (AP), India in the 20th century by a Dalit man, Mungamuri Devadas, popularly known as Ayyagaru (Father) Devadas who never held any ecclesiastical office. He served in the Lutheran Mission both as a teacher and a warden of the Boarding for Boys at St. Paul's church, Rajamundry. He was very much appreciated and loved, and kept in great esteem by the authorities and students, spent most of his time in private prayers, prayer-fellowships and preaching exercises. Devadas was a powerful preacher and attracted a good number of young men in the school and later in the seminary. But the trouble started when he openly talked about his dreams and visions which the Lutheran church did not approve of, as they were not widely accepted doctrines of the church. After several warnings and arguments, his services of forty six years as a touring evangelist in the American Evangelical Lutheran Mission were officially terminated from March 1 1938.

Having been excommunicated from the Lutheran church in 1938, the followers of the BM believe that in the same year during the bright daylight God wrote two words – Bible Mission – in the air and showed them to Devadas. The Lord called Devadas by name and asked him 'to come out as

⁸ Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

⁹ Oomen, 'Historiography of Indian', 224-25.

¹⁰ Oomen, 'Historiography of Indian', 229.

a prince of an army.’ This was mentioned by Devadas himself, and the reference to daylight is a way of emphasising that this was not a mere dream or hallucination. Officially, Devadas established the BM on 15 May 1938, and on the same day he ordained Viyaya Ratnam and appointed him as the president of the governing body.

Once he left the Lutheran church he started travelling to several places in AP, preaching, praying, conducting special Bible conventions and healing campaigns. He never insisted on re-baptism for those who were already baptised in other churches. In fact, no formal change of membership was important for the BM but all that was expected was fellowship in prayer and an assent to the teaching. One of his well-to-do followers, Raja Rao, supported him, gave his spacious house with a wide-open area around – where Devadas stayed and preached until he died. His mango grove outside Guntur in a village called Kakani became a real spiritual centre for the BM, and the mortal remains of Devadas are buried there, and that place continues to be a kind of famous pilgrim centre in that area.

The BM: A True Indigenous Church?

Solomon describes the BM as a true indigenous church because the teachings of Devadas and some of the practices of the BM were congruent with the folk worldview of Andhra and India. For instance, in his preaching and writings, Devadas spoke extensively about the demons and evil spirits. Devadas gave mantra-like prayers to his followers in the BM to be used as exorcist spells to cast out demons. Interestingly, the BM has a practice of writing a divorce letter to the devil. In a society where marriages are taken very seriously, this practice was a deliberate attempt to make it known to the society and to the devil the seriousness of one’s ending of relationship with the devil. In a society which is frequently bothered by unknown evil powers and in a culture which for generations had believed that sickness is caused by demons, people did appreciate these kinds of chants and spells, prayers and formulas to conquer these fears. It is to be noted that the simple Christians in India live in two worlds; one the Hindu world (of wider community with its belief systems, social practices and cultural overtones) and the other Christian world which they have inherited through their faith in Christ. The belief in the devil and evil spirits of the common Christian people had roots in the Hindu world. Devadas responded to this folk sensibility from a Christian point of view, inspired by the apocalyptic worldview of the Bible, and informed by the practices of popular Hinduism.

He believed in visions, dreams and in the fellowship of the departed spirits. He believed that the spirit of Sunder Singh and that of Kailash Maharisi, the great old Christian hermit whom Sunder Singh is reported to have seen somewhere in the Himalayas, and those of other saints are wandering around the earth and at will can appear to God’s people in

visions and prayers to speak to them and bring them to God. He told his followers many stories from his own experience where the Lord and his angels and the spirits of the departed saints, and the living saints had visited him many times in his prayers. These experiences and the teachings of Devadas made people believe that Devadas himself would appear and talk to them after his death. Thus the BM people strongly desire the constant fellowship of the spirit of Devadas. So today wherever they meet for prayer, they keep in a corner an empty chair carefully covered with white linen for the spirit of Devadas to come and sit with them. Communication with the departed souls and receiving a message from the departed souls especially from the founder Devadas himself is a common practice in the BM. This to them is the real fellowship of the saints. To determine if the message from the departed souls is genuine, Devadas said 'ask God in prayer' and test it if it is in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

The BM: A Subaltern Phenomenon?

The church of Bible Mission was born in a situation of subordination and marginality when its founder, Devadas was excommunicated from the Lutheran church after forty six years of service. Devadas was a true subaltern not only because he was born as a Dalit, but also because he opted to be in a position of subordination and inferior rank when he refused in 1911 a call from Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC) to be ordained for pastoral ministry—which he rejected saying that he did not have an 'inner call' for ordained services. But later he did express his subaltern agency when he said 'God ordained me in a vision in 1918 and gave me the work of pastor. So I am eligible to administer ordination, baptism and Lord's supper to the deserving.' His subaltern agency came straight from God and was ingeniously intertwined with divine agency. It could not be easily interrogated as it was perceived to be sustained and sanctioned by the divine power. Though it was a subjective experience articulated by an individual, yet it was believed in by the community because of the credibility that Devadas enjoyed among the people. The credibility of Devadas came from the values of 'simplicity, poverty and celibacy'¹¹ that he pursued in his lifetime. As a Lutheran Sanyasi (celibate) he was held in high esteem as the protestant church in India had produced only a few Christian Sanyasis like Sadhu Sunder Singh. Devadas in his teaching gave great importance to the ideal of poverty, and advocated self-supporting churches. 'Even today the BM pastors live by the offerings

¹¹ 'These values' need not always be associated with the assertion of Dalit identity in modern India. For instance, Dalit groups today, by putting up mega hoardings and spectacular media advertisements, show that ostensibility, not simplicity, is the value that they need to practise if they want to assert their identity in the public sphere today.

brought by the worshipers to the church...They generally get what they need for their daily life in the form of rice, fruits and vegetables.’¹²

Further, knowing well that the subordination of the low castes was caused by the stigma of impurity ascribed to them by the high castes, Devadas laid great emphasis on ‘cleanliness’ through his idea of ‘personal holiness and community holiness’ for his followers: Devadas taught that God’s children should be holy as God is holy. Hence he called for strict moral codes, inculcated a sense of high esteem for celibate life, made the clean surroundings for worship mandatory and insisted on personal cleanliness such as wearing washed clothes for prayer and washing feet before going to worship. This is in line with the spirit of a piece of Telugu folklore: ‘A clean pot for cooking food, a clean body and a clean heart to worship God.’¹³

Commenting on this, Solomon observes, ‘In fact some of these holiness codes have so separated the so-called bride group that their members kept themselves separate from the rest of the society and for that reason they are also misunderstood by others; But on the positive side, this is how the non-Christians had identified them.’¹⁴

A similar kind of emphasis on cleanliness is also found in other subaltern religious phenomena such as Satnami movement in Chattisgarh and the Ayva Vazhi movement in Tamilnadu. In such initiatives, the organic intellectuals and their followers demonstrated their intuitive understanding of the relationship between values and power, because, in a highly structured hierarchical society some values have been systematically appropriated and monopolised and publicly displayed by dominant castes as the identity markers of high caste status. Thus certain values such as the notion of purity and cleanliness came to possess that element of power which permitted the dominant high castes to subjugate subordinate classes and became a potent means for the control of the supposedly impure subordinate classes of India. By appropriating the values of cleanliness and purity, the subalterns have not only challenged and subverted the monopoly of these dominant groups over these values, but they have also demonstrated their subaltern agency in democratising such values, inventing a new symbolic capital and depriving the dominant groups of the weapon of symbolic violence against them on the basis of impurity. Here agency is exercised ‘within the realm of culturally and socially given possibilities in one’s perceived best interest (whether individual or communal)’¹⁵ and does not result so much in the total rejection and

¹² Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India*, 45-46.

¹³ P Solomon Raj, ‘The Influence of Pentecostal Teaching on Some Folk Christian Religions in India’, *International Review of Mission*, 75.297 (1986) 44.

¹⁴ Raj, ‘The Influence of Pentecostal’, 44/

¹⁵ Chad Bauman, ‘Redeeming Indian Christian Womenhood? Missionaries, Dalits and Agency in Colonial India’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 24.2 (2008), 25.

overthrow of a dominant and restrictive cultural order. Here we must note, as Mahmood observes that ‘if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in term of what constitutes “change” and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori¹⁶ but must be permitted to emerge from the possibilities and resources available to the historical subjects.

However, in their efforts to assert their subjectivity, the subalterns are not totally sold over to the dominant culture. They also tap the cultural resources from the popular worldview – which is easily identifiable with the beliefs and practices of the marginalised people. For instance, as in the case of the BM, we see how Devadas endorsed the then prevailing popular view of visions, dreams and beliefs in demons etc. of Dalit culture with his reading of the Biblical worldview, and made it a ‘contact zone’¹⁷ between Christianity and popular Hinduism. By doing this he opened up a new social space, especially among the Dalit Lutherans, where the disparate religions of Christianity and Hinduism can meet and give birth to a new religious phenomenon. This new phenomenon shows how a subaltern religious leader can exercise his agency by selecting and inventing cultural materials transmitted by his native tradition to create his own ‘Christian tradition’ (the BM) upholding the subaltern (Dalit) culture and tapping their own cultural resources of power to tackle the exigencies of life faced by the subalterns. By doing this, he reinstated people’s agency in their midst and showed that they are capable of possessing their native sources of power to resolve their problems, instead of depending upon the mediation of religious power through the church hierarchy. Thus he created subaltern strategies to oppose and distort the initiatives of the church hierarchy to impose on the subalterns the traditional ideas and ideals of Lutheran Christianity, which had probably become a tool of domination by then.

The Immediacy of Subaltern Experience and Agency

As in the case of the BM, Christian spiritual lay leaders like Sunder Singh, Devadas and Subha Rao claimed to have had direct experience with God which gave them authority for the legitimation of their teaching and activities that involved exploration of new ways of being a church in India. Thus they not only interrogated the age old foundations and the institutionalised models of mediated experience of the divine through the religious leadership in Christianity but also showed the common folk in

¹⁶ Saba Mahmood, ‘Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival’, *Cultural Anthropology* 16.2 (2001), 212.

¹⁷ Gunnell Cederlöf, ‘The Agency of the Colonial Subject: Claims and Rights in Forestlands in the Early Nineteenth-Century Nilgiris’, *Studies in History* 21.2 (2005), 250.

India that each one of them can have one's direct relationship with God and non-mediated experience (*anubhava*) of the Christian God, and validate it with the resources immediately available to them. Devadas' introduction of a new practice called *Sannidhi* – by which he meant the practice of the presence of God – is related to the practice of waiting for the Holy Spirit; but God's *Sannidhi* was perceived as something that visibly transformed people.¹⁸ These *Sannidhi* groups working actively in the towns and villages in the area constantly pray and intercede for the whole world. Such practices not only punctured the hyperbole of the religious hierarchy and its ideology, but also explicated new mechanisms of creating religious vitality among the common folk and innovated alternative keys to the divine energies directly accessible to them. Thus these religious leaders functioned as organic intellectuals – to employ the Gramscian terminology, who through their alternative voices, posed a threat to the mainline churches on the one hand, but used the same resources, on the other, to realise their potential as historical agents. Thus they innovated a new religious reality for themselves and for their followers to create, to spread and to be a different church at a particular point of time in history but according to their own terms – not according to the norms of the institutionalised religions.

It is to be noted that in the formation of new religious phenomenon like the BM, there is an appeal to immediate experience as a basis for counter-hegemonic identity-formation. For some authors like Nancy Frazer and Rita Felski, it is by investigating the basis of identity and agency in immediate experiences that one can 'locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals.'¹⁹ For Ireland, the counter-hegemonic potential of experience resides in its pre-discursive immediacy.²⁰ And the immediacy, given its nature of spontaneity, is capable of becoming an ideologically uncontaminated common ground that constitutes a guarantee of a group's authenticity.²¹ When this happens, experiences cannot be discursively differentiated from one another and, as a result, the criteria for group specificity end up being those elements that unite groups in non-discursive ways.²² 'And such non-discursive elements, in turn, can as readily be those of a group's shared non-mediated experience, say, of oppression.'²³ Thus, in subaltern experience oriented theories, the group's immediate experience is sought 'as a means to inductive construction of counter-histories, which in turn, will empower a group by articulating its interests and enabling its

¹⁸ Raj, 'The influence of Pentecostal', 45.

¹⁹ As quoted in Ireland Craig, *Subaltern Appeal to Experience* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 17.

²⁰ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 17

²¹ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 18.

²² Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 18.

²³ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 18.

agency.²⁴ Thus a resistance to dominant mediation is mustered 'by an appeal to, and certainly not the appeal of, immediate experience.'²⁵

Further as we see in the case of the BM's experience of communication with the spirits of the dead, the perceived immediacy of experience becomes 'readily endowed with the palpable concreteness of materiality, the very resilience of which is seen as a source of resistance to the meddlesome ways of temporally extended dominant discursive regimes.'²⁶ Here, apparently, it is the immediate experiences such as vision, talking with the dead spirits and dreams that entitle the subalterns to invoke a counter-discursive and counter-hegemonic ground for resistance. It can reveal 'how the experiential process can indeed potentially change the given, informed as it is by the disruptiveness of the unexpected.'²⁷ The change of the 'given' is capable of transforming not only the lives of the people (both collective and individual) but also the course of micro histories of the marginal people, unfolding new trajectories for alternative historiographies.

Subaltern Religious Experience and History

For Chakrabarty,²⁸ such explorations into the subaltern life-world are not only another way of conceptualising the human agency in the life of subalterns but they are also accounts of alternative subaltern historiographies. Such historiographies pose not only ethical and political questions but also epistemological questions. They interrogate the ways in which modern historiography would normally process, validate and register knowledge.

The religious experiences of the subalterns should not be only translated into categories comprehensible to modern Western historiographical consciousness. Instead, Amy shows that for Chakrabarty it is a call for a truly subaltern history to 'stay with the heterogeneity of the moment,' both the heterogeneity of the subaltern's self-understanding to the historian's own and the one which exists between two different kinds of historical projects: One is that of historicising the subalterns in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy; and the other, that of refusing to historicize and of seeing the subaltern as a figure illuminating a life possibility for the present.²⁹ Taken together,' Chakrabarty would dare to argue, 'the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that

²⁴ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 168.

²⁵ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 168.

²⁶ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 168.

²⁷ Craig, *Subaltern Appeal*, 177.

²⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. chs 1-3.

²⁹ Amy, 'Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography', *Journal of Religion* 84 (October 2004), 521.

make up our own present.³⁰ Subaltern pasts render visible the disjunction that exists within the present by making other modes of being intelligible.

According to Chakrabarty, modern liberatory narratives cast time as ‘secular, empty, and homogeneous’ and Chakrabarty wonders what happens to this conception of time when it encounters other modes of temporality, particularly those that posit a supernatural time and agency.³¹ Western historicist narratives cast this alterity as ‘medieval’ or ‘pre-modern’ thus attempting to render it other, past and no longer intrusive on the contemporary world. Secular history, then, routinely translates supernatural agents into terms intelligible to it.³² Hence we need another way of conceptualising history itself to understand the historical experiences of the subalterns.

In order to do so, Amy notes that one needs to differentiate between what Chakrabarty calls ‘History 1’, which stands in an objectifying relationship to reality (comparable with Heidegger’s account of the ‘present-at-hand’) and ‘History 2’, in which an everyday, pre-analytical, unobjectifying relationship to reality comes to the fore (comparable with Heidegger’s ‘ready-to-hand’).³³ The distinction unfolds the existence of different kinds of life-worlds and different conceptions of temporality itself. ‘For those whose world is imbued with supernatural agents, time itself operates and is experienced differently than it is for secular, post-Enlightenment Europeans and Americans.’³⁴ For Chakrabarty History 1 constitutes ‘a past posited by capital itself as its precondition’,³⁵ whereas History 2 is the multiple possibilities that History 1 must subjugate or destroy in order to render its logic inevitable. Chakrabarty argues that ‘History 1 is always already disrupted by the traces of History 2 and that a truly subaltern historical practice must render that interruption visible. Only in this way can the historian approach the reality and force of life worlds other than those of capitalism.’³⁶ It is from this perspective that subaltern historians must both recognise the legitimating function of divine authorisation in the phenomena like the BM, and take seriously their claims to divine agency within these experiences. Such endeavors would help the subaltern thinkers interrogate and investigate History 1 for the ways in which History 1 sabotages and subjugates History 2 so that everyday experiences of the subalterns are taken seriously and viewed as laboratories in which the formation of subaltern subjectivity and agency takes place – a process that would prevent future occurrences of subalternisation.

³⁰ As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 521.

³¹ As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 522.

³² As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 522.

³³ As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 522.

³⁴ As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 522.

³⁵ As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 523.

³⁶ As quoted by Amy, ‘Gender’, 523.

The BM: A Subaltern Construction of History in the Name of God

In one of his path breaking articles entitled ‘The Subaltern Numen: Making History in the Name of God’, Novetzke makes insightful observations as regards the religious experience of the subalterns.³⁷ Firstly, it can be identified with Rudolph Otto’s idea of the ‘numinous, derived from the word *numen* that indicates ‘non-rational feeling’ of divinity that cannot be put into concepts because it is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other mental categories. Like any other primary or elementary datum it can only be discussed but cannot strictly be defined. Secondly, Otto considers the possibility of religion entering into historical process. Otto observes ‘plainly then, religion is only the offspring of history in so far as history on the one hand develops our disposition for knowing the holy and on the other is itself repeatedly the manifestation of the holy.’³⁸ Thirdly, in subaltern studies, ‘religion has entered into the streams of history by enacting its own agency, by acting through people, in a way not too dissimilar from Hegel’s notion of the realisation of Spirit or Providence in the unfolding of history; history is the proof of religious belief.’³⁹ As in the case of Otto’s understanding of *numen* as *sui generis*, the experience of the subalterns is ‘within the course of history, their history, the history of their religion made manifest in the world.’⁴⁰

However, Solomon, Lewis⁴¹ and Mary Keller⁴² show how people on the periphery by claiming that God speaks directly through them construct their own theological language to enable and mask their own agency. Can we take it as a legitimate claim? If we do so, do we thereby undermine subaltern’s agency in ways inimical to the project of subaltern historiography? To put it conversely, by emphasizing subaltern agency too much, are we bypassing what subaltern religious leaders like Devadas claim about their own religious experience?

By ascribing their teaching to God, subaltern Christian leaders like Devadas were engaging in a project of self-authorisation and religious insurgence. They claim that they receive authority only in so far as what speaks through them is not their own will but that of the divine, thereby challenging predominant contemporary assumptions about religious authority, religious experience and their effects. In doing this did Devadas dismiss his own historical agency by invoking that of his deity? Novetzke, raising a similar question about the Santal’s invocation of the Thakur god, holds that such an act does not negate the human initiative. It only

³⁷ Novetzke, ‘The Subaltern Numen: Making History in the Name of God’, *History of Religions*, 46.2 (2006), 122-23.

³⁸ As quoted by Novetzke, ‘The Subaltern Numen’, 123.

³⁹ As quoted by Novetzke, ‘The Subaltern Numen’, 123.

⁴⁰ As quoted by Novetzke, ‘The Subaltern Numen’, 123.

⁴¹ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁴² Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

reinforces it with greater force. To put it in Otto's terms, it is an encounter with the numinous, which is an activity, not a passive occurrence. When the subalterns 'claim authorisation of action on the part of their deity they are embracing this dissolution of self and deity, so perennially a subject of Indian devotional work, either Bhakti or Sufi, from the Advaita of Shankara to the ecstatic states of contemporary gurus.'⁴³ This is another way of 'being in the world' as Chakrabarty and Novetzke strongly propose which poses a problem for historians. Much of what Devadas and his followers claim as God's extraordinary revelation to them through dreams and visions is an attempt to explain the inexplicable as they felt a strong osmosis between the subject and the deity. But the outcome is the beginning of a new era, a definite proposal for a break with official ways of thinking (within the church worldview) about the divine and its revelation to the humans. This in fact is 'a break with older histories and the creation of new ones – that is one of the signs of "the modern", that is, its self-proclaimed newness.'⁴⁴ In such religious experiences of charismatic leaders, the encounter with the divine and the new is so intense that the subject in question is ready to take any risk or face any eventuality. In another context of the Iranian revolution, Foucault observes 'The action of the man who revolts is necessarily a tearing that breaks the thread of history and its long chains of reasons so that a man can genuinely give preference to the risk of death over the certitude of having to obey.... The man who revolts is thus "outside of history" as well as in it, and since life and death are at stake, we can understand why revolts have easily been able to find their expression and their mode of performance in religious themes.'⁴⁵

Here the subaltern employs the agency of religious consciousness to innovate, inscribe and describe a rupture with history to give birth to the eruption of the autonomous. Thus there is an articulation of a new time based upon a new subject. For Foucault, it is a means by which 'subjectivity introduces itself into history and gives it a new breath of life.'⁴⁶

In such new subaltern religious phenomena like the BM, religion becomes the site of the inexplicable, a problematic location for any historian, as Novetzke notes, and goes to suggest that 'it may invoke the same threshold of Otto's *numen*. Religion in this context might yield unto theory simply the character of irreducibility, but with historical sensibility, nonetheless.'⁴⁷ It can become both a point of convergence between the field of religious studies and that of subaltern historiography, and the vanishing point where explanation fails while description succeeds. The numinous for both the fields becomes 'a limit point a vista on the immense space of life-

⁴³ Novetzke, 'The Subaltern Numen', 124.

⁴⁴ Novetzke, 'The Subaltern Numen', 125.

⁴⁵ As quoted by Novetzke, 'The Subaltern Numen', 124.

⁴⁶ As quoted by Novetzke, 'The Subaltern Numen', 125.

⁴⁷ As quoted by Novetzke, 'The Subaltern Numen', 125.

worlds inaccessible to scholarly inquiry and hence a compelling destination.⁴⁸ Here as Novetzke puts it ‘religion comes to occupy this position of uncertainty, of a kind of ineffable and positive agency’ and it becomes ‘the point at which historiography finds itself describing a numinous epicenter of insurgency.’⁴⁹

Conclusion

The description of the phenomenon of the BM founded by Devadas as we have seen raises more questions than it answers for various fields: for the study of Pentecostal movements in India, which has to pay attention to the role of indigenous or folk forms of Christianity intertwined with the Western or global Christianity; for the study of subaltern agency which has to focus on the eruption of the autonomous among the subalterns masked by the shrouds of divine agency within the frameworks of a particular religious experience; and for the study of relationship between subalternity and historiography which has to explore the subtle and innovative ways by which the subaltern individuals and collectivities attempt to reconfigure the trajectories of history-making with the help of the supernatural. At the heart of all this is the convergence of the divine and the human at the site of marginality of the subalterns that is capable of giving birth to a new phenomenon like the Bible Mission which is increasingly making its presence felt in the contemporary history of Andhra Pradesh in South India.

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⁴⁸ As quoted by Novetzke, ‘The Subaltern Numen’, 125.

⁴⁹ As quoted by Novetzke, ‘The Subaltern Numen’, 126.

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE BAKHT SINGH MOVEMENT AND THE CHALLENGES IT POSES TO AN ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING OF MISSION

M. Santha Kumari

Introduction

When the word (*logos*) became flesh and dwelt (pitched his tent) among us, 'that particular flesh', as Sobrino mentions, 'is a flesh of poverty and historical weakness.'¹ God always sided with the poor, oppressed, weak, and the marginalised. The body of Christ (church) in India comprises of people predominantly from the Dalit communities, who, for a long time, have been suffocated because of oppression, poverty, ignorance and evil forces like caste and class. The gospel offered not only freedom and hope to these captives, but helped them to recover their identity and dignity as the image bearers of God. Large numbers of people embraced Christianity as it affirmed the dignity of the oppressed and empowered the so-called 'untouchable' communities with the light of the gospel that has power to transform individuals, communities, cultures and nations. The Indian Theological Association declared in a statement in 1998 that 'in recent times, India has witnessed the rise of many subaltern groups that find in Jesus a new inspiration and empowerment to carry on the struggle for their liberation.'²

Andhra Pradesh perhaps is one of the most fertile regions for the spread of the gospel in India. The mass movements in the 18th century and the early part of the 19th century can be said to be triggered by the works of the missionary societies from Germany, UK, Sweden, USA, and Canada. Today, while the mainline churches which are the products of foreign missions have become somewhat stagnant, the small mission, national mission churches and charismatic churches are growing day by day. Most of the members of the national churches are from the Dalit, poor, and illiterate backgrounds.

¹ As quoted by K.P. Kuruvilla, *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 7.

² Statement by Indian Theological Association entitled, 'The Significance of Jesus Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism in India', *Third Millennium: Indian Journal of Evangelization* 1.4 (October – December, 1998), 88-96.

There are two different strands of Christianity existing in India – 1) ‘Great Tradition’ churches that are a product of missionary Christianity and 2) ‘Little Tradition’ churches that are a product of indigenous Christianity.³ The churches of Andhra Pradesh illustrate the tension between the ‘Great Tradition Christianity’ and the ‘Little Tradition Christianity’.⁴ The ‘Little Tradition’ comprises of churches of indigenous origin that are less known and overlooked by historians and research scholars. Hence, very little is written about them, when compared to the other churches.

Drawing from Peter Wagner, P. Solomon Raj identifies some of the features of the ‘Little Tradition Churches’ of indigenous origin as follows: They are small to start with, seminary training for leaders is optional or nil, lay leadership is valued highly, there is no formal church dress, participation in worship is more bodily than cognitive, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are affirmed, here is a Bible-centred teaching, there is more compassion for the lost souls, there is earnestness in prayer, there are new worship styles and there is more interest in outreach.⁵

In addition to the above characteristics, these indigenous churches would also have the following features: Non-compromising ethics, a non-negotiable authority of the Bible and only Christ making the difference between heaven and hell. In order for a church or mission to be called really indigenous and independent, a church or mission should be: Financially independent of foreign money, completely relying on Indian leadership and able to raise all its cultural, financial and leadership resources in India.⁶

Many of the above mentioned qualities are found in the movement that emerged out of the work of Bakht Singh. He is undoubtedly one of the key figures in the history of Christianity in India during the 20th century and the articles written on him in different dictionaries and other publications bear witness to this.⁷

³ Roger Hedlund, *Quest for Identity: India's Churches of Indigenous Origin* (Delhi: MIIS/ISPCK, 2000), 3.

⁴ ‘Little Tradition’ is a term used by Robert Redfield and applied to India by Milton Singer. Redfield states, ‘In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many.’ The two traditions intersect and are independent. One is the tradition of the philosopher; the other is that of the little people. One is literary, the other is oral. Great and little tradition can be thought of as two currents of thought and action, distinguishable, yet ever flowing into and out of each other. Here the term ‘little tradition’ is applied to the churches of independent and indigenous origin in contrast with the ‘great tradition’ churches of missionary Christianity or denominations. Refer to Hedlund, *Quest for Identity*, 1-7.

⁵ P. Solomon Raj, *The New Wine-Skins: The Story of the Indigenous Missions in Coastal Andhra Pradesh, India* (Delhi: ISPCK/MIIS, 2003), 5.

⁶ Raj, *The New Wine-Skins*, 5-6.

⁷ There are at least five such articles that are referred to in this chapter and there are many more in existence.

In this paper, our focus will be on the contribution of Bakht Singh and his church movement that has contributed significantly to the liberation of the Dalits and women, and also has set some new trends in the mission work.

Bakht Singh Movement

Bakht Singh was born in Punjab in 1903 and was raised as a Sikh. He hated Christianity vehemently during his school-college days, but converted to Christianity in 1929 while travelling on a ship from England (where he was studying) to Canada. He returned to India in 1933, started preaching the good news of Jesus Christ and establishing churches that were called 'assemblies'.

David B. Barrett, in his 1982 *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, names the assemblies started by Bakht Singh as one of India's fastest growing branches of the Christian church.⁸ A survey done on the churches in Hyderabad and Secunderabad shows that this movement was indeed growing rapidly at that time.⁹

The indigenous church planting movement¹⁰ that Bakht Singh had started has more than 2,000 Churches in India and other parts of the world by the time of his death in September 2000.¹¹ Today assemblies are found in many parts of India especially in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The main centre is in Hyderabad and the church there is called Hebron. The written history of Christianity in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India would be incomplete without an account of this movement being written as a part of it.

The History

The movement that emerged out of the ministry of Bakht Singh in different parts of India sprang up in a historical context¹² with two important aspects. First, it was the India of colonial presence and rule

⁸ David B. Barrett (ed), *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 380.

⁹ This data is secured from the findings of Rev P. Devaprakasam, 'Hyderabad-Secunderabad City Churches Survey', Kilpauk, Madras, Church Growth Research Center, 1984.

¹⁰ A church-planting movement focusses on establishing new churches by preaching the Christian gospel and teaching the Bible.

¹¹ Moses Premanandam, 'God-Chosen Movement for India', in Roger Hedlund (ed), *Christianity is Indian: The Emergence of an Indigenous Community* (Delhi: ISPCK/MIIS, 2004), 338.

¹² Colin F. Blair, 'The Assemblies in India: A Study of the Believers in Fellowship with the Ministry of Brother Bakht Singh', unpublished class paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, December 1984, 3-4.

where nationalism was very strong. Leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah were leading the movement to get the British out of India on the political front.

Secondly, a spirit of nominalism accompanied by low standards of morality or Christianity pervaded the Christian churches in India. The Christian community did not reflect the values of the gospel that they were supposed to be witnesses of. Christ-likeness in character that should be the mark of every disciple of Christ¹³ was not seen as much as it should have been among the Christians at that time.

In this kind of a context that was prevailing among Christians in India, Bakht Singh observed many things in the churches that were neither cultural nor scriptural. This resulted in Bakht Singh becoming very critical of the work of Western missionaries and other Christian workers. T.E. Koshy notes

Bakht Singh had spoken fearlessly about the unscriptural practices taking place among them in the Name of Christ. He spoke against the inconsistencies and hypocrisies prevalent among Christian leaders and nominal Christians, and challenged them to do all things according to the Word of God rather than on the basis of men's traditions and their man-made constitution.¹⁴

Bakht Singh's examination (repeated reading and reflection on) of the New Testament led him to the belief that the church was a group of elect people gathered out of the world rather than as a group of covenant people who could be regarded as a total community that was moving on slowly as a community to perfection. This was a significant theological difference between the established churches and the belief and teaching of Bakht Singh. It got expressed in adult baptism by immersion rather than infant baptism. Bakht Singh taught that only those that understood the gospel and responded to it by making a personal choice should be baptised. These factors led to a distancing of this new movement from regular missions. Daniel Smith comments on some of the factors that drove him to the scriptures and led to the distancing of Bakht Singh and his movement from the other denominational churches:

In 1942, after seven years of evangelism in cooperation with denominational Churches he felt the Indian leadership so weak that converts were not getting the adequate care he desired for them. This drove him to the scriptures for a better pattern of building, and soon he was founding assemblies in which he believed there was a distinctive New Testament pattern and simplicity.¹⁵

¹³ It was the people who observed the life of the disciples of Jesus Christ that called them 'Christians' for the first time in Antioch in the 1st century (Acts 11:26). 1 Jn 2:5-6 teaches that those who claim to be in Christ or belong to Christ must walk as Jesus did and that this is the proof of their relationship with Jesus.

¹⁴ T.E.Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India: An Account of Twentieth Century Apostolic Revival* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2003), 206.

¹⁵ Daniel Smith, *Missionary in the Orient* (Vancouver: Accent Press, nd), 87.

This distancing enabled the group to grow up standing on its own feet and developing often an unconscious integration into the culture of India through seeing things in the scripture and then contextualizing them into the Indian environment.¹⁶

The Methods

The growth and spread of the assemblies in Andhra Pradesh is phenomenal. Ken Newton says that more than 200 assemblies were formed during the first 20 years of his ministry.¹⁷ Prof. Vern Middleton, a Canadian Missionary in India in the 1970s, in a research paper on 'Church Growth in India' that he submitted to Yavatmal Theological Seminary mentioned that the assemblies founded by Bakht Singh and his team were the fastest growing churches in India, particularly in the state of Andhra Pradesh.¹⁸ In certain parts of Andhra Pradesh, in every 10-15 kilometre radius we can find one of the assemblies of Bakht Singh.¹⁹

George Peter of Dallas Theological Seminary once visited Bakht Singh in Hebron and told him that he had visited many foreign mission fields in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world but had never seen such work as he had seen at Hebron. He then asked Bakht Singh, 'Tell me what is your secret or strategy?' Bakht Singh responded,

I have no strategy or method.

I and my co-workers had no extra qualifications.

We are simple people without much education.

We decided to do all things by prayer and in oneness and total obedience to the word of God without any compromise.

The Lord works if we honor God's word.²⁰

Koshy, a co-worker with Bakht Singh and one of his biographers, says on Bakht Singh's methods: 'Bakht Singh did not use any human methods to attract crowds, but totally depended upon God through extraordinary prayer, often praying throughout the night. Prayer was one of the hallmarks of his life and ministry from the very beginning.'²¹

Although Bakht Singh said that he had no strategy or method, when we observe closely we can find that there are certain things that are unique to his ministry. The following are some of the unique methods and strategies that were followed by him and his assemblies in their work.

¹⁶ Blair, *The Assemblies*, 5.

¹⁷ Ken Newton, *Glimpses of Indian Church History* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1975), 57.

¹⁸ Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 275.

¹⁹ The researcher has done this survey in some areas (Prakasam and Guntur Districts) of the state of Andhra Pradesh and found this to be the case.

²⁰ Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 275-276.

²¹ Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 193.

Distribution of Gospels and Tracts and Open-Air Preaching

In order to evangelise people more effectively, Bakht Singh organised Gospel Campaigns, Processions and Raids, door-to-door visitation, open-air preaching and street evangelism. From the mid-sixties onwards he teamed with Operation Mobilisation, a large global mission started by George Verwer to evangelise various parts of India from Kerala to Kashmir. In all these events Bible were sold, gospels were sold at a nominal price and tracts were distributed free of cost. The gospel processions were unique to his ministry. In these processions large numbers of people (men, women and children) go out in a procession holding their Bibles, displaying Bible verses on placards, singing praises to Jesus with the accompaniment of Indian musical instruments and distributing gospels and tracts to those who showed interest. The lay leaders would shout aloud Bible verses and they would stop at strategic points on the way, kneel on the road, pray and preach the gospel. In a context where people are accustomed to political processions and riots, this kind of religious procession was unusual and captivating.²²

Holy Convocations

The Holy Convocations were one of the hallmarks of Bakht Singh's ministry. Based on Leviticus 23:4, since the founding of the ministry in Hyderabad he organised them once a year at the ministry headquarters. Scattered believers from all over India and other counties attended these special gatherings and even Christians from other denominations could attend them. These convocations contributed much to break the walls of separation and build bridges of relationship among people of various castes, colours, backgrounds, regions and languages. Daniel Smith made the following observations about the Holy Convocation at Jehovah Shammah: 'The Holy Convocation is an amazing fellowship of love – for while largely to do with one country, yet there are people of many races, languages and customs here from within the one country. It is the kind of thing which one dreams of as ideal but which one seldom hopes to see in actual demonstration. But here it is and there is amazing joy in the camp.'²³ These convocations would last for 7-9 days and the number of participants ranged from 4,000 in the beginning to 20 000 later on. The singing was in many Indian languages and the sermons were translated from English to Telugu, Tamil and Hindi. During the all India convocation times people lived in temporary booths together as one family and food was served

²² See Kuchipudi Clement, 'Bakht Singh', in Scott W. Sunquist (ed), *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 52-54.

²³ Quoted in Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 484.

thrice a day for free and for many of the participants these convocations were a reminder of the 1st century church.²⁴

Vacation Bible Schools

Vacation Bible Schools were started by a couple, Mr and Mrs Abbiss in the year 1964 to cater to the spiritual needs of the children in the assemblies. This ministry was very effective in reaching the children from different faiths and backgrounds who attended these schools. Often through these children even their parents came to know Jesus Christ. Some that became Christians in these Vacation Bible Schools went on to become full-time servants of God in different assemblies. Thus these schools also contributed a great deal to the growth of the assemblies and Bakht Singh took personal interest in this aspect of the ministry of the assemblies.

All-Night Prayers

The ministry of Bakht Singh, in a sense was born out of much prayer, particularly all-night prayers. He was a great man of prayer. His life was saturated with prayer and people often found him on his knees irrespective of the time of the day. It is his legacy not only to the assemblies but also to the whole Christian community. Bakht Singh led people in these all night prayers and that caused these prayer meetings to become a part of the movement that resulted from his work.

All the methods employed by the assemblies of Bakht Singh are not totally unique to them. Other independent and indigenous churches like the Indian Pentecostal Church, Laymen's Evangelical Fellowship, Brethren Assemblies, the Bible Mission, also have some of these practices. But the emphasis the assemblies laid on and the way they practiced their spiritual life with a sense of dedication and consistency has a ring of uniqueness and this is one of the factors that contributed to the rapid expansion of the movement. Kuchipudi Clement says, 'Bakht Singh's assemblies have had a great impact in India for two basic reasons. First, they have sought to be indigenous. Second, they have focused on the basics of the gospel: prayer, Bible study, holiness of life, Christian fellowship, concern for the poor, and the Great Commission.'²⁵

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Distinctive Features of the Assemblies

Bakht Singh's concept of a church was the result of his personal encounter with the living Christ and his constant study and meditation of

²⁴ The researcher interviewed several of the present leaders who participated and ministered in these Holy Convocations and gathered this information.

²⁵ Clement, 'Bakht Singh', 54.

the scriptures, as we can gather from his writings. Whatever he found in the New Testament church he wanted to incorporate into the assemblies. He made sure that some of the practices that were seen in other churches were eliminated, because they were neither biblical nor culturally relevant. He thus ensured that the foreignness (because of Western practices) was removed from his assemblies.

No Official Hierarchy

In the assemblies of Bakht Singh there is no official hierarchy like in many other denominational churches. He rejected the ecclesiastical order on the basis of the biblical teaching.²⁶ Bakht Singh believed and taught that all believers were equal and shared equally in the gift of salvation and the work of the church. This set this movement apart from the established churches that had very clear and often rigid hierarchical structures in place. In the assemblies there is recognition that different people have different gifts and thus have different kinds of ministries, but there is no hierarchy as such, because of the belief that all are important in the life and ministry of the church. Even the elders are not elected but are chosen prayerfully and set apart for the work they do together with God's servant (the equivalent of a pastor in other churches).

No Clergy and Laity Distinction

Bakht Singh believed in the priesthood of all the believers (1 Peter 2:9) in the body of Christ, the church. He rejected the distinction between clergy and laity.²⁷ Irrespective of the responsibility and position people had either in the assemblies or outside, all men, including himself (he was and is always called Brother Bakht Singh) were called brothers and all women were called sisters. Although there were and are full-time workers who are called 'servants of God' and some 'elders' from secular backgrounds who discharged different responsibilities in the assemblies, there was no official distinction between clergy and laity and all people worked together and shared in the different aspects of the work. Newton says, 'The assemblies practice a corporate ministry of the laity, male and female. There is no clergy. The ministry would be non-professional, the assembly being the accepted place for preparation of future teachers.'²⁸ The elders who are not full-time Christian workers are also entrusted with the responsibilities of counselling, preaching and most importantly the conducting of the communion service, which in most other denominations is done exclusively

²⁶ Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 433.

²⁷ Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*. Also Lal Rosem, *Brother Bakht Singh* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 173-175.

²⁸ Newton, *Glimpses of Indian*, 57.

by the clergy. Kuchipudi Clement says, ‘There is no ordained ministry, for every spiritual elder who has a good testimony is accepted to solemnise baptism and the Lord’s Supper.’²⁹

No Rich and Poor Distinction

In the assemblies the majority of the members are from the not so well-to-do backgrounds. Some are from high social, economic and professional backgrounds. But all of them mix and work together and worship together without any rich and poor distinctions. The poor and underprivileged people also feel at home in these assemblies. One of the reasons for this sense of equality seems to be the repeated biblical teaching and preaching of Bakht Singh that each believer in Christ is equally precious, important and necessary from God’s point of view. Another reason seems to be the fact that Bakht Singh practised what he preached – treated all people as equal irrespective of their economic and social status and welcomed all people in the same way. He was accessible to the rich and the poor alike. We can see these elements most prominently and clearly in two of Bakht Singh’s books.³⁰ Kuchipudi Clement observes, ‘Bakht Singh’s assemblies tended to be heterogeneous. He loved the poor and the rich, and so the congregation constituted the rich, the poor, and the middle class without any caste distinctions. Since all sat on mats, this has become a very powerful demonstration of church unity in social diversity.’³¹

No Literate and Illiterate Distinction

In the assemblies we find many illiterate and not so educated people, particularly in the rural areas. In the rural areas and small towns more than fifty percent of the members of the congregations are illiterates. But in those settings as well as in the towns and cities we also find moderately and highly educated people in the assemblies. Just as all other distinctions are discouraged in the assemblies, this distinction too is discouraged in the teaching and preaching of the Bible and we can find all the people, irrespective of their educational background mixing and working together and enjoying all the aspects of the community life. Bakht Singh encouraged even the illiterates to carry their own Bibles and this encouraged some of them to learn how to read.³²

²⁹ Clement, ‘Bakht Singh’, 54.

³⁰ Bakht Singh, *Come Let Us Rebuild* (Hyderabad: Hebron, 1975) and Bakht Singh, *God’s Dwelling Place* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1957)

³¹ Clement, ‘Bakht Singh’, 54.

³² The researcher met an illiterate woman by the name of Mariamma, in the Varagani Village Assembly near Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, who testified that she bought the Bible because everybody was encouraged to have a personal copy and that she learnt how to read because of her interest in reading the Bible. The

No High Caste and Low Caste Distinction

Caste system has been one of the social evils and curses of India. Low caste people are treated as the scum of the earth. Caste system is maintained even among Christians, particularly in denominations established by foreign missionaries.³³ There are certain churches in India that do not allow members of certain castes to become members. There are others who separate various castes at the communion rail. Bishop V.S. Azariah (1874-1945), the first Indian Bishop of the Anglican Church at the Dornakal Diocese in Andhra Pradesh mentioned about the reality of this problem in the church in some of the diocesan magazines.³⁴

Quite contrary to the prevailing situation in the different traditional and denominational churches, in the assemblies of Bakht Singh there are many from the non-Christian backgrounds, particularly from the Hindu caste backgrounds, along with the Malas and Madigas. It is of great significance to see that people from different caste backgrounds, both high and low got integrated into these assemblies without any distinctions.³⁵ In these assemblies one can find believers from the highest to the lowest caste living together in harmony, sitting, eating, and serving God together. At the time of the communion they all drink from the same cup (rather than drinking from different small cups separately, as can be seen in many traditional churches) that is passed from one to another. On this, the great missionary leader and statesman, George Verwer, the founder of Operation Mobilisation has this to say: 'According to Billy Graham, Bakht Singh is doing what needs to be done in India,' and 'Bakht Singh's ministry broke down the caste system, in that respect he was ahead of his time.'³⁶ In these assemblies there have been many inter-caste marriages that took place and continue to take place also.³⁷

researcher learnt that there are many more people like this in the assemblies in the rural areas when she interacted with the leaders at Hebron and other places.

³³ Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 480.

³⁴ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma, Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 254-257.

³⁵ The researcher met a number of people, including some leaders of the assemblies in places like Hyderabad, Guntur, Ongole, Chirala, Bapatla and Tenali and found out that the members of these assemblies and other assemblies come from Kamma, Reddy, Brahmin, Vaishya, Mala, Madiga, Yerukala, Velama, Yadava and other castes. She also found out that the leaders, God's Servants are also similarly from these different backgrounds.

³⁶ As quoted by Koshy, *Brother Bakht Singh of India*, 510. Also Clement, 'Bakht Singh', 54.

³⁷ The researcher met the God's Servants and elders as well as 15 couples who got married across the caste lines in six different places and found out that it was the biblical teaching of Bakht Singh that motivated them to marry people from other castes, knowing that in Christ all are one. The names of the couples are withheld because they did not want to be identified.

No Male and Female Distinction

Bakht Singh believed that men and women are co-heirs in the gift of eternal life that gives as the Bible teaches. This belief is reflected in the practice of individual worship where men and women participated equally. He also encouraged the active participation of women in the various ministries of the assemblies like witness processions, distribution of the gospels and tracts, intercessory prayers at the churches, full-time Christian ministry, Sunday school ministry and personal witness for Christ.³⁸ The equality and dignity with which women were positively affirmed through all these is quite remarkable and this is also to a great extent unique to the assemblies of Bakht Singh.

Bakht Singh also recognised that God calls both men and women for full-time Christian ministry and he made arrangements for the training of such women at the headquarters, Hebron and also at Jehovah Shammah and other centres. The ministries in which women were involved might have been different from those in which men were involved, but women also were given opportunities to serve in and through the assemblies.

Understanding and Practice of Mission

Since the beginning, the assemblies of Bakht Singh have been missionary oriented with keen interest in reaching out to the outsiders. They do not talk much about 'mission', but they are driven by an evangelistic urge. Evangelism was one of their preoccupations, so much so that they seized every opportunity to preach the gospel (even in wedding ceremonies, birthday parties, house-dedication, etc.). This was their mission. The other aspects of the ministry of the church were given secondary place.

Contribution to the Spiritual, Moral and Social Upliftment of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh

This movement has taken the gospel to many interior villages in Andhra Pradesh. People from the Dalit and other backgrounds responded to the gospel. The biblical teaching and practice of Christianity in these assemblies brought about great change in the spiritual, moral and social thinking and upliftment of Dalits. Top government officials and people of all caste backgrounds served when the community meal was eaten week after week and this broke down barriers. Many inter-caste marriages took place across castes from the Dalit and other backgrounds. Everybody was given an opportunity to worship God audibly and involve in the ministry of

³⁸ The researcher observed this when she visited Hebron, Hyderabad several times and also the assemblies in six other places and checked with the 'sisters at Hebron' (the women that dedicated their lives to the service of the church and lived at Hebron), over 10 of them in personal interactions.

the church in different ways. All this brought about a new sense of identity and dignity to people in Christ. People came out of many oppressive habits and learnt to work hard and diligently and they contributed generously to the work of the church and they themselves were blessed even in their financial matters.

Liberation of Women

Bakht Singh was ahead of his times in equipping and empowering women for ministry. He brought women along with men to Hebron for training and involvement in the ministry of the church. Women were given equal opportunity to worship God audibly in the Sunday services. They also went out for the open air preaching sessions and other such activities. Except for preaching from the pulpit and being on the leadership team as elders and deacons, the women were given opportunities together with men to serve the Lord in different ways. All this lifted up their confidence levels and liberated them, because their understanding of God, his character and what he has done for them in Christ was all given expression in worship and thus their theological framework was formed and contributed to their liberation. The women who dedicated themselves fully for service and remained single contributed significantly to the ministry and nurturing of children and young people in the whole state of Andhra Pradesh.

A Critical Evaluation of Bakht Singh's Movement

There are both positives and negatives and we will consider both in critically evaluating the movement.

Positives

1. One of the principles that Bakht Singh and his co-workers practised was 'living and serving by faith', which meant that they would never ask anyone for any of their needs this is something that sets them apart from many others and a very positive one.
2. Keeping the church buildings very simple demonstrated that their priority was not on building physical buildings, but on building the people of God and thus the kingdom of God. The practice of everybody leaving the footwear out, sitting down on the floor and filling the whole place with Scripture verses created a devotional atmosphere and was in line with the Indian '*bhakti* tradition'.
3. Ashram-like training for men and women at Hebron also was a very positive thing. It was mostly practical training and not much of theological education. Importance was given to character development and spiritual growth based on the models that they

could see and emulate as they lived and worked together with their seniors.

4. These churches mostly depend on believers but not on institutions, structures or properties. Members are attracted to these churches because of the spiritual nurture that is available and the opportunities to serve God in the mission of the church.
5. Poor are not comfortable when they come to the mainline churches, because they feel out of place in the company of the affluent and elite. But in these assemblies people are encouraged to be very simple and modest. They refrain from wearing jewellery and expensive clothes, and wear white clothes instead, so that everybody feels comfortable and contributes whatever they are able to in the church and its mission. The dedication of the servants of God (pastors), their prayer life, personal piety and availability is appreciated by their members. Pastoral visits also encourage the members to be faithful in attending the church and contributing to the work of the Church.
6. The members contribute liberally. Even daily labourers are faithful in tithing and giving gifts and offerings and so the Church does not depend on funds from somewhere else, but draws from its own resources and thus the mission work gets done more effectively.

Negatives

7. There is a very unhealthy 'holier than thou' attitude that the members of these assemblies maintain towards the other churches and their members. This leads to total isolation and separation from the other Christians and Christian missionary work. They do not co-operate with other Christian missionary agencies and the missions of the other churches at all. So they are totally closed to anything to do with the ecumenical movement or relationships.
8. Because there is no proper hierarchy or leadership structures, often accountability is missing. This leads to either of two problems: the God's servant thinks he is accountable only to God and becomes the sole authority or the elders try to take total control and not allow the servants of God to function properly. Thus the churches are ridden with problems of leadership and groups fighting for supremacy. The situation right now is very sad in these assemblies with court cases and infightings.
9. They have an unduly negative view of anything traditional that the denominational and ecumenical groups are associated with. They do not allow their members to participate in anything other than their own programmes. They neglect the truth about the 'universal body of Christ' and do not care for the traditional Christian liturgy and calendar. They treat the ecumenical movement almost as

compromised and diluted Christianity and not as genuine biblical Christianity.

10. They seem to be generally against any formal theological training and give the members an impression that such training spoils the spiritually oriented people. They teach that the only or at least the best way to learn is to sit at the feet of the Lord and learn of him.

Conclusion

These new churches in Andhra Pradesh can be seen as authentic attempts to respond to the local worldview and culture by addressing the weaknesses in the Christian traditions inherited from Western missionaries, filling gaps and meeting certain specific needs that were waiting to be met. Arising from the soil, they express the theology of the common people. They do not know the theological controversies that Luther, Calvin and others faced and debated. But they addressed the issues faced by people in the villages of Andhra Pradesh like the need for identity, dignity and security, poverty, dealing with demons and spirits, sickness, and so on that are not addressed by text books of theology. However, their negative attitude towards other Christians and churches is not in line with the biblical understanding of the church and its identity and they themselves are facing problems that the other churches were facing and because of which these assemblies looked down upon them. In spite of the negatives, it has to be admitted that this movement has played a significant role in taking the mission of the Church to new areas, new communities and in liberating the Dalits and women and in drawing many of them into the church and the mission of the church.

CASTE IDENTITY AND COMBATING MARGINALITY: A VILLAGE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN COASTAL ANDHRA

Ashok Kumar M.

Introduction

Undoubtedly caste is an everyday reality for an overwhelming majority of Indians irrespective of their age, gender, region and political and religious affiliations. The question of caste in Christianity and among Christians is as old as the Christian mission itself in India. There were sharp differences of opinion both in understanding caste and dealing with the issue of caste among Indian Christians during the colonial rule; Catholic missionaries and Protestant missionaries were quite opposite to each other in their opinions with respect to caste among Indian Christians.¹ Despite its seriousness, inadequate sociological attention has been given to understand the ideological underpinnings of caste among Christians in India and south Asia. The question has become increasingly important since the 1860s as it was the starting point of 'mass movements' to Christianity in the subcontinent. It was reported that people mostly from the lower strata of Indian society embraced Christianity to get self-respect, social mobility, human dignity and above all to avoid caste based discrimination in their everyday lives.

The event of the mass movements, as named by the missionaries at that time was the beginning point for the rapid growth of Christianity in India. It began in the 1860-1870s particularly among the Protestant missions and, in the course of time, it spread itself to nearly all the existing denominations. These group conversions or the mass movements were something that Protestant missionaries neither sought nor expected; therefore they were puzzled over this new social phenomenon as they were not prepared to handle a situation of that sort. Interestingly, the mass movement was largely confined to people from the lower strata of Indian society for a variety of social reasons; they accepted Christianity as a group and above all the decision to adopt a new religion/faith was usually taken by the caste headmen or elders instead of individuals. Since the possibilities of mobility through 'Sanskritisation' were effectively blocked to untouchables,

¹ Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London: Curzon Press, 1980).

therefore they consciously preferred Christianisation instead. Srinivas,² a noted anthropologist of India, points out that Sanskritisation results only in positional change in the system and does not lead to structural change.³ Christianity became one among the most preferred options for those who wished to enhance their social status or record an upward mobility outside the framework of Sanskritisation.

During the mass movement time converts preferred Protestant missions over the Catholic missions as the latter were more tolerant to the caste system and regarded it as different from the Hindu religion. As a result, the caste structures in the Catholic church made the lower castes feel uncomfortable. For instance, De Nobili's mission in Madurai accepted the idea of having separate churches for high-caste converts. Such tolerant attitudes to caste by the Catholic missionaries made conversion to Catholicism a less plausible escape from the caste oppression than conversion to Protestantism (see Forrester 1980). Practically, Protestantism has remained a more desirable choice for many during the mass movements in India and Andhra society is no exemption.

The Lutheran church in Dravidapuram, which is under study, is a 'caste church' and was a result of a mass movement in Andhra. The main thrust of the paper is to highlight how the village Lutherans used their caste identity to articulate socio-political interests against the structures of domination and also against structurally imposed marginality. In the process the paper focuses on how Lutheran pastoral care generated a sense of 'we' feeling among the Dalit Christians. In the next section, the paper vividly deals with marriage ceremony to prove caste identity, its dynamics associated with the Lutheran church and their relevance in day to day life. The vitality of caste identity is minimised here in the socio-political context of Lutheran marriage practice. Finally, an argumentative account is provided on how marriage becomes a substitute for baptism to prove their religious identity, particularly Lutheran identity in Dravidapuram.

History of Lutheranism in Andhra

The English had taken over the old Tranquebar mission by 1842; as a result many mission centres had come under English authority in Andhra. Soon the American Lutheran church was given the responsibility to establish the first permanent mission centre among the Telugus. Although initially the Lutheran church thought of sending a young man to start a Lutheran mission, for them 49 years old Rev Christian Frederick Heyer remained the only reasonable choice. He was born in Helmstedt on July 10 1793 in Germany. He came to America when he was fourteen years old to help his

² M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Bombay: Allied, 1972)

³ M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, 7.

uncle who was working in Philadelphia.⁴ Having a profoundly religious family background, soon he became active in the Zion Lutheran church in Philadelphia. He joined the choir and also started to teach in Zion's Sunday school. He was also a member of the young men's German and Bible study groups. He studied theology under the guidance of Dr Helmuth and he went back to Germany to study at the University of Goettingen in 1815.

Following his return to America, he was licensed to preach and sent out to northwestern parishes in Crawford and Erie counties. Soon he realised the importance of learning English as he started to preach on the frontier where Lutheran groups spoke only English. It was said that Heyer not only mastered the art of winning the souls for the Lord but also won the friendship and respect of many of his erstwhile opponents. After his ordination at Lancaster in 1820, he was selected as a travelling preacher in parts of Kentucky and Indiana.⁵ Later he was appointed as the home missionary of the 'central missionary society' when it was organised in 1835. He preached in the principal segments of the Mississippi valley and in all German settlements. He took a tour covering parts of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Mississippi; as a result he founded at least fifty centres that were ready and eager to have home missionaries. After this tour, he was sent to Pittsburgh where he founded three congregations in a few years; out of those three congregations, one was English and two were German speaking. The newly built Trinity Lutheran church in Pittsburgh was dedicated on April 5 1840. After a month, Heyer was called by the Foreign Missionary Society of the Evangelical German Churches in the United States to be its foreign missionary to India.⁶

Heyer arrived at Tuticorin, a port town in Madras, on March 23 1842. Upon his arrival in Madras on April 16, he was advised to be in Madras for few months to learn Telugu and also get acquainted with the Telugu people living in Madras; at the same time he was asked to look for a place for the proposed mission. On May 19, he travelled north till Pulicat in an open boat and it took four days to travel from Madras to Pulicat on the canal. There he was cordially received by the resident Baptist missionaries Stephen van Husen and Samuel Day when he reached Nellore. Due to excessive heat he could not continue his journey and decided to halt for a few days. In Nellore he got an opportunity to study the schools, preaching methods and also to practise his Telugu. Travelling northward, he found Ongole a definite possibility to start his proposed mission but wished to travel further.⁷ Heyer reached Guntur on July 31, 1842 without knowing that he would start a mission centre over there.

⁴ Martin Luther Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa: The Telugu Territory of India, 1842-1920* (Board of Foreign Missions, the United Lutheran Church in America, 1959), 41-42.

⁵ Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa*, 43.

⁶ Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa*, 44.

⁷ Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa*, 46-48.

Heyer was received cordially at Guntur by Mr. J. Henry Stokes, collector of the Guntur district, who was keen on securing a resident missionary for Guntur. Heyer preferred Guntur over Ongole to set up a new mission centre with the help of the Mr Henry Stokes. It was he who was instrumental in setting up a Lutheran mission centre at Guntur. Heyer himself speaks about a warm reception by Collector Stokes, who, he says was 'an ardent friend of missions and missionaries, as well as very exemplary Christian gentlemen. According to Heyer, 'The inducements which Mr. Stokes held out, and the kind of offers of assistance which he made, were far preferable to anything that I could expect at Ongole. Hence I decided in favour of Guntur, and after prayerful consideration concluded to commence missionary operations forthwith'.⁸

The actual mission work started with the first Sunday in August 1842 when a worship service was held in a building provided by Mr Stokes on his compound. Initially Heyer used to conduct services with the help of an interpreter. Two Telugu medium schools and one English-Telugu school which were under the guidance of the collector and other English residents were formally moved to Heyer's care. Undeniably, a lot of groundwork was done by these devoted Christian officials in the region and also with large contributions coming from them. Despite inadequate provisions from America, it is no wonder that the missionary work advanced very fast in Guntur. After six months, Heyer could report that 'as far as I am acquainted with the history of modern missions, I know of no society that has attained such a sphere of operation in so short a time, and with such small means as ours.'⁹

The period from 1900-1920 in the Guntur mission was marked by a rapid growth of baptised members; they increased from 18,664 in 1900 to 63,370 in 1920. The period witnessed a great deal of interest among the Sudras and the outcastes to accept Christianity as a result of the mass movement. In 1927, Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC) was formally constituted and Guntur remained its headquarters. Indeed, it is the Indian successor to the United Lutheran Church in America which was started as a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating church in the Telugu country. Though the former Lutheran mission became the AELC in 1927 it took almost seventeen years for the church to get the first Indian president; Rev Dr E. Prakasam was elected as the president of AELC in 1944.¹⁰ A major reason for AELC to take a long time to get the first Indian president was that missionaries showed a great hesitation to hand over responsibilities to Indians. The dominant feeling among the

⁸ Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa*, 49.

⁹ Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa*, 49.

¹⁰ Solomon Raj described the origin of Lutheran missionary work in Andhra in his work *A Christian Folk-Religion in India: A Study of the Small Church Movement in Andhra Pradesh, with a Special Reference to the Bible Mission of M. Devadas* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986), 35

missionaries was that 'the Indians were too poor, uneducated and weak in faith to take on the responsibility'.¹¹

Lutheran Pastoral Care vs. Hindu Brahmin Priesthood

With the help of an historical perspective it is imperative to comprehend significant factors in the domain of 'priesthood' during pre-Lutheran times in order to contextualise the Lutheran pastoral care among the Dalits. Though Lutheranism had its presence in the village since the 1920s, it was said that it began to establish itself only in the 1960-70s when the caste headmen decided to adopt Lutheranism as their religion. When the Malas were practising Hinduism, it was the Brahmins and the Mala Dasulu,¹² an ex-untouchable caste, who delivered priestly responsibilities during life-cycle and calendar rituals for Dalits. The Brahmin priests used to make themselves available only for the marriage rituals but other life-cycle rituals were spearheaded by the Mala Dasulu holding the priestly responsibilities. Categorically, there exists an overriding social difference between these castes who were into priestly jobs and the Malas; their caste positions in the hierarchy demonstrate the same point. They do not intermarry, never dine together and there is no substantial social interaction between them in the village. Their strongly believed religious ideas do not allow them to have active social interaction between them. As a result, the Brahmins priests occasional and religious oriented relationship with the Malas remained thoroughly professional in character.

Having multiple social hurdles imposed upon them by the caste system, the Malas were never active agents of the Hindu religious practice. Their religious association or affiliation with the so called Hinduism was either negligible or insignificant. It is evident from the field data that they had a sort of mechanical affiliation with Hindu religion as it was confined to celebrating a few festivals and life-cycle rituals; if at all their financial condition allowed them. As Oddie argues in the context of Tamil Nadu, a sense of 'no crisis' existed in the religious life of the upper castes then and, by contrast, untouchables were almost always in a state of 'minor crisis' in their religious life.¹³ The fact remains the same for the Malas in Dravidapuram. The socio-economic and political factors that the Malas were facing fed into this sense of crisis in spiritual life; their poor economic conditions, low levels of education, lack of political power and above all the structurally imposed caste stigma upon them.

¹¹ Dolbeer, *A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa*, 121.

¹² Mala Dasulu actually is a sub-caste among the Malas. Their involvement in priestly works made them socially higher than Malas in the village. Besides, there were few who did practice medicine for quite some time. These two factors helped them claim higher status over the Mala caste.

¹³ Geoffrey Oddie, *Hindu and Christian in South East Asia* (London: Curzon, 1991), 223.

Besides, the Malas must thoroughly prepare themselves to host a Brahmin priest during life-cycle rituals. On each occasion, the presence of a priest creates certain constraints for the host family. They had to ‘manage impressions’, attend to his demands and perform their assigned roles smoothly. Incidents or disruptive factors must be avoided – all the materials for the ritual must be available and the time and space managed properly. There should be no ‘scenes’, ‘unmeant gestures’ or ‘performance disruptions’. The host family would have to be properly dressed, the home or other venue properly prepared, all ritual substances properly laid out. There is no room for lacunae.¹⁴ The host family will feel the pressure of keeping up appearances on such occasions when the priest is present. Except on such rare occasions, there is no room for the Malas and the Brahmins to have any other form of social interaction. Sociologically speaking, both the Malas and the Brahmins remained ‘other’ to each other in their respective social worlds.

Lutheran Priesthood With a Difference: Dalits Preaching to Dalits

Kinship network has been playing a significant role towards strengthening Lutheran priesthood in the village. Lutheran priesthood has immensely reduced the levels of discomfort and Mala’s efforts to ‘manage impressions’ when life-cycle rituals take place since the overwhelming majority of Lutheran pastors belong to ex-untouchable castes who came to be known as Dalits in modern India. However, it was not a targeted outcome. The existing socio-political conditions facilitated this phenomenon. Besides, the way in which Lutheran pastors conducted themselves in relation to villagers had a profound impact on rethinking about priesthood and the priestly roles in the discourse of spirituality and everyday life. People began to sharply compare the Lutheran pastors with the Hindu Brahmin priests; Lutheran pastors went out of their way to comfort the Malas due to caste affiliation and duly established close-kin networks. The whole question of caste identity, kinship attachments and shared social status made these Lutheran pastors to be lenient in terms of expectations towards the Malas with respect to conducting religious rituals.

As a matter of fact, Lutheran pastors stayed in the same residential locality where the Malas lived. Easy access, having strong non-spiritual social relations, willingness to dine together and inter-marry – finding such characteristics in a priestly figure impressed these Dalits, besides the fact that they shared the same caste origins.¹⁵ All such characteristics were unprecedented among those people who were in priestly roles till then. It

¹⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Double Day, 1959), 212.

¹⁵ People in the field say that though some are not Christians by belief they still used to invite a Lutheran pastor for life-cycle rituals and family functions to look after priestly responsibilities.

has introduced a new trend in the discourse of priesthood by breaking away from the existing caste based professional relations between the Brahmin priests and the Malas. The new trend could be named 'Dalits preaching to Dalits'. The presence of a Lutheran pastor, who is a Dalit, does not demand much from the hosting family to prepare itself as both know each other very well. It could be very well observed in the words of a respondent:

Lutheran pastor is 'our man' as he belongs to our caste group and is familiar with all our caste customs. We can inform him and arrange a function whenever we want; and of course he is always available to us. It has been repeatedly demonstrated by Lutheran pastors in the village that they go out of their way to comfort/facilitate their caste people.¹⁶

The socio-political ideology of the Lutheran pastors is not quite separate from that of the local people and often both pastors and people are in tune with each other with respect to the Dalit movement. Community members began to accept the Lutheran pastors due to their caste origins before accepting Christianity itself. With the help of caste, kinship networks and political ideologies Lutheran priesthood had generated a sense of 'we' feeling among the Malas in Dravidapuram.

The Notion of Healing and Lutheran Pastoral Care

The norms of tolerance and acceptance of others' viewpoints dominated the pastoral care among Lutherans. While understanding pastoral care among the Lutherans in Dravidapuram it is important to pay attention to the relationship between the caregivers and caretakers. When somebody falls sick in the caste, they used to approach a Brahmin for a *Thayathu*,¹⁷ going to a doctor in a nearby town was considered a costly affair that fell beyond their financial limit. To get this *Thayathu*, they had to shell out some money since it was not free of cost. Visiting famous temples, doing required pujas or meeting up with spiritual gurus all proved costly affairs for them. Here, the relationship between the Malas and the Brahmin priests remained quite materialistic in nature. The whole scenario got a different turn with the rise of Lutheranism and the active presence of Lutheran pastors. Contrary to the Brahmin priests, the Lutheran pastors frequently do house visiting and pay special attention to those who are down with sickness. His/her name would be mentioned in church gatherings and they would make a public appeal to the entire church community to pray for their speedy recovery and God's blessings upon them. Members of the church visit those people, and quite often kneel down to pray near the ailing person's bed.

¹⁶ Interview with local Christians.

¹⁷ A kind of coloured yarn made of cotton, available in red and black colours, is generally provided by Hindu priests or gurus when somebody falls sick in the village. It is tied preferably at the upper part of bicep.

The act of a Lutheran pastor visiting people who are unwell is a vital reason that feeds into their sense of moral encouragement and raises levels of social comfort too. A priest figure, of any religion, coming down to visit their families for a non-spiritual reason was something they did not expect. Here, the Lutheran pastor visits their homes to pray for the unwell, to encourage them spiritually and console them. As I have mentioned earlier, besides their caste identity, the way Lutheran pastors conducted themselves in the village made a huge impact upon the Malas to accept the Lutheran pastoral care against the Hindu practices. At present, people hardly approach Brahmins in the village to collect *Thayathu*. In fact, the *Thayathu* is replaced by the *Yesuraktham*,¹⁸ it is meant to cure illness and can only be applied on the forehead and the chest. For all the school going children, their parents apply *Yesuraktham* before they go to bed.

Marriage, Baptismal Records and Subaltern Tactics Among Lutherans

In south India, marriage is considered one among the most prominent and costliest events organised by a family. Both kinship and friendship networks play an important role when contemplating a connubial alliance among Lutherans. Significance of caste affiliation is the fundamental qualifier in the matrimonial game which facilitates things to proceed further. In our present context, caste identity of Lutherans i.e. Mala identity, foregrounds their religious identity (Lutheran) and their Dalit identity too when considerations are in progress for an alliance. The preference of Lutherans in this regard makes a clear cut demarcation between their Dalit identity and that of caste identity; they are not one and the same. In Dravidapuram, there are two caste groups besides Malas who are Dalits and as a matter of fact they usually do not intermarry. Oddie mentions that the social difference between these ex-untouchable castes is strong.¹⁹ Hereby, what I would argue is that Dalit identity and Mala identity are not one and the same as these identity questions and associated politics are articulated differently in different domains.

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¹⁸ It is strongly believed that the *Yesuraktham* (literally blood of Jesus) which is oil blessed by the pastor and used for anointing, is as powerful as the blood of Jesus which had cleansed all the sins of humanity. So it has been valued high among the Christian community especially when they fall sick. *Yesuraktham* is often filled in small glass bottles which would not be larger than 100 grams. It is like a panacea for all sorts of health problems.

¹⁹ See Geoffrey Oddie, 'Christian Conversion in the Telugu Country, 1860-1900 – A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in Godavery-Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (12:1, 1975) (61-79). And also the presently ongoing struggle for classification of scheduled caste reservation in Andhra Pradesh is a strong point that demonstrates strong social differences among these two castes.

Besides caste affiliation, the concept of 'good family' – *manchi kutumbam* – occupies a prominent position while considering marital alliances. The language, essence and, meaning of the concept 'good family' differs from high class to low class. The same idea is well articulated by Caplan in the context of the urban Protestant community in Madras. He mentions that for rich Christians, the concept meant that the head of the household must be a prominent clergyman, literary figure, a high caste convert, a famous scholar, someone who is into highly respected professions like a doctor, engineer, lawyer or a civil servant. In sharp contrast with rich Christians, 'the poor do not employ the language of prosperity and public fame but of what may be described as Christian values'.²⁰ Andhra Lutherans seek those 'Christian values' in addition to a set of required factors. In the understanding of a good family, relative financial stability by means of owning a piece of agricultural land or holding a government job at any level would figure. Apart from the positions held by the senior members of a family, enough attention is paid to the accomplishments (real or potential), attainments, abilities and potential of the individuals being considered as prospective spouses.²¹

The most suitable time for wedlock among youth differs for those who are pursuing their studies from that of those who began to work in the agricultural fields. The range between 25-30 years is the suitable time for those who pursue their studies and their number is marginal. The majority of Lutherans discontinue their studies after schooling and begin to work in agricultural fields as labourers. For them, the marital age falls somewhere between 21-24 years. In the case of girls, it is a matter of serious concern among Lutherans. In the same context Caplan quotes the words of an anxious parent, I quote: 'If she has not been found a husband by the time she reaches 25 years, people will suspect there is some problem with the girl or the family'.²² Marriage of a girl is viewed as the most prominent social responsibility to be delivered by the parents and in the absence of parents the whole responsibility of looking after her is placed upon the elder son. In an arranged marriage, family elders decide upon the patterns of marriage and post-marriage rituals in and outside the church.

After preliminary consensus regarding an alliance, a formal meeting is arranged wherein the young man gets a chance to 'view' the prospective bride at her home. In fact, she appears briefly to view in formal wear, particularly sari or half-sari. Family elders from both sides are present at the event. There is no chance for these young people to exchange a word on this occasion. This event is called '*PELLI CHUPULU*' in the colloquial language of the region. It is a widely practised custom among south Indian castes. Every woman remembers it, as Caplan describes, 'as one of the most

²⁰ Lionel Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 122.

²¹ Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India*, 119.

²² Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India*, 120.

frightening experience of their lives'.²³ Women are afraid of being rejected on the day of *PELLI CHUPULU* and also about how their image socially would construct itself in the neighbourhood after denial.

Even now, caste remains the chief concern while contemplating marital alliances and of course the question of denomination does receive a moderate amount of attention. At the same time, it can not be said that Lutherans practise denominational endogamy which one could spot among a few Christian groups in Kerala. In her work on Christians of Kerala, Viswanathan mentions about strictly maintained denominational endogamy. Those who broke the code had to pay a fine to the church.²⁴ Apparently for the majority of Lutherans, religious faith is significant but not as much as caste. The argument holds true with reference to the church of south India as Paul, a church historian, points out 'old social ties (i.e. caste) have everywhere proved to be much stronger than newly accepted denominational convictions'.²⁵ Unarguably, I assert that caste ties appear stronger than denominational affiliations with reference to Andhra Lutherans.

Kinship arrangement among the Malas confirms with characteristics of south Indian patterns of kinship network. There exists a radical distinction between 'cross-cousins' and 'parallel cousins' which is in consonance with preference for cross-cousin marriages. Cross-cousins are seen as prospective spouses whereas marriage among parallel cousins is considered a taboo. The whole kinship terminology corresponds with expected kinship conduct and roles which deal with ideas about marriage and affinal relations. Another aspect of enormous importance in a marital alliance is the dowry amount. The practice of dowry is a deep rooted system among Mala Lutherans like other caste groups in the region; though the amount may not be as high as in the case of Reddy and Kamma castes.

To mention further, caste affiliation and dowry practice go hand in hand for Lutherans. Kapadia writes with respect to dowry practice in south India that 'today men no longer marry women, rather they marry money! They only ask one question: how much money and gold will you offer.'²⁶ In either of the way, the amount of money offered or received is considered as a matter of pride and social status in their respective village/neighbourhood. Along with caste, dowry has become a bottom line for finalising affinal relationships among Lutherans, no dowry no marriage. In effect, the whole idea of dowry practice is closely connected with people's understanding

²³ Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India*, 132.

²⁴ Susan Viswanathan. *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 103.

²⁵ R.D. Paul, *The First Decade: An Account of the Church of South India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1958) cited in Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India*, 126.

²⁶ Karin Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 46.

about masculinity, family and individual status. If a man prefers to opt outside the dowry system people would go even to the extent of raising doubts about his masculinity and health.

Different scholars have different views on motives behind and reasons for dowry practice in India. For instance, Tambaiah and Goody argue that dowry signifies the females' rights to property which is transferred at a woman's marriage as a sort of 'pre-mortem inheritance'.²⁷ But for Madan dowry has a different meaning altogether as 'substitute for women's lack of rights of inheritance equivalent to those of men'.²⁸ Field data evidently suggests that in rural Andhra, the superiority of an alliance is directly proportional to the dowry amount offered. It feeds into the fact that financial capacity to offer a high amount of dowry has a direct correlation with the better quality of groom you get. With no second thought, therefore, dowry amount constitutes a major share of expenditure on a wedding ceremony. Rao writes that 'the cash given the bridegroom is usually the largest item of expenditure on a wedding'.²⁹ To rationalise the very practice of the dowry system, each region has its own point to prove in their defense. Some families accept dowry or bride-wealth and utilise the same amount to get husbands for their daughters.³⁰

Marriage Preparations

To meet marriage expenses, people use multiple sources like relatives, friends, neighbours, and finally local money lenders to borrow money from. Local money lenders charge heavy interest rates on an annual basis. For brides' parents, it is quite common to borrow money from money lenders or get a loan from a bank in order to meet marriage expenses. Lutherans being poor always look up to local money lenders, instead of banks, for financial needs. And paying them back could be in cash or kind like paddy, black-gram, jowar, corn and so forth. Wedding invitations/cards of Lutherans, in this village, offer us a variety of interesting elements to understand and analyse. Among the urban rich in south India, it is quite obvious that wedding invitations will identify fathers of the bride and bridegroom by their current and pre-retirement positions; sometimes, their mother's as well if they are successful in a career.³¹

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²⁷ Jack Goody and Stanley J. Thambiah, *Bridewealth and Dowry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1973, 64.

²⁸ T.N.Madan, 'Structural Implications of Marriage in North India: Wife givers and Wife takers among the Pandits of Kashmir', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (vol.9, 2, 1975) (217-244), 237.

²⁹ M.S.A.Rao, *Urbanization and Social Change: A Study of a Rural Community on a Metropolitan Fringe* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970), 136.

³⁰ Goody and Thambiah, *Bridewealth and Dowry*, 62.

³¹ Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India*, 119.

It has been a customary practice among Lutherans to read banns at church consecutively three weeks before the marriage date. Though there is no direct help sought from a Brahmin priest to decide upon the marriage date and other auspicious dates, Lutherans certainly consider some astrological calendars before finalising the dates. Once banns are read at church for the first time, haldi ceremonies when the bride and bridegroom are given a ritual turmeric bath, begin to take place for both bride and groom at their respective places.³² But the first haldi ceremony must be hosted by the *menamama* i.e. mother's brother; who may not necessarily be staying in the same village. To highlight the importance given to *menamama* in the kinship network, he is always given the first opportunity to conduct the haldi ceremony. Once the first haldi ceremony at their respective *menamama*'s place is over, bride and groom are not permitted to step outside of the village jurisdiction considering that it would be harmful. The groom can move across the village boundary only after his marriage but for the bride it is only on her way to get married. To note, among the Malas in this region marriage takes place at the groom's place. This pattern differs from region to region and more so with respect to castes.

Besides caste endogamy, the domestic rituals for a marriage disclose how closely the Lutheran community is in consonance with Hindu cultural practices especially in the use of ritual substance, Viswanathan points out the same idea in the context of Syrian Christians of Kerala.³³ The use of haldi, coconut, rice, areca nuts, betel leaves, date and so forth is in common with Hindus in the region. Among Lutherans, it is quite evident in two important events i.e. *pasupu kumkuma* and *pradhanam* that happen before the marriage. The first one *pasupu kumkuma* could be identified as engagement. In this event, the groom's parents and relatives present a few gifts to bride as a sign of accepting her into the family that consist of sweets, areca nuts, betel leaves, turmeric, banana and a sari which she has to wear at the ceremony. It is a symbol of an admission of two families into an affinal relation with each other. This event is governed by a very formal, ceremonial and stringent code of behaviour.³⁴

On approaching the church for the marriage ceremony, both bride and groom arrive together into the church premises and occupy seats simultaneously. It may not be the case with other Christian groups, especially Syrian Christians of Kerala for whom, unless the groom

³² The number of haldi ceremonies to be conducted is always decided by the elders based on their customary rules. It differs from clan to clan. But the commonality is that they must go for an odd number beginning from five and preferably less than twenty. The most attractive element in this event is a form of folk-singing called *perantalu* by two groups of women, who stand opposite each other and sing Christian folk songs during the *Haldi* ceremony. The tone, rhythm and content are peculiar in that they remind people about upcoming marriages in the village.

³³ Visvanathan. *The Christians of Kerala*, 102.

³⁴ Visvanathan. *The Christians of Kerala*, 103-104.

occupies his seat, the bride cannot enter.³⁵ For Lutherans here, there is no protocol to follow regarding who must reach first but it is mandatory for her to occupy the seat on his left and facing the altar. Marriage is held in analogy to the spiritual bond which links Christ and the church. And exchange of garlands, gold ornaments, if any, taking marriage oaths are followed with meticulous attention. Though it is a Christian marriage it is compulsory to tie the *thali*, a necklace, usually made up of cotton string covered in turmeric which is tied around the bride's neck by the groom to symbolise marriage. In fact, the *thali* remains a chief symbol of her marriage. The final step in a marriage event is to sign on the marriage register, first the groom and the bride follows. Then the couple would be taken to the groom's house where the marriage function takes place. The couple is expected to sit on a dais to receive well-wishers who bring mostly cash gifts that are documented in a book.

Baptism and Lutheran Marriage

The most significant event that goes unrecognised during a marriage ceremony is 'Adult Baptism'. The eligibility to get baptised in a Lutheran church is not purely based on an individual's religious faith but is based on caste. The most dominant eligibility criterion to get baptised is to be in tune with the customs of the Sangham.³⁶ As a matter of fact, the Lutheran church in this region does not baptise children rather it offers adult baptism just a few days before the marriage. If somebody prefers to go for Christian marriage, he/she must be baptised only after the marriage dates are fixed. The village church does not maintain the baptismal records in order to place itself in a politically correct position. Availability of baptismal records could be potentially problematic to their official Scheduled Caste (SC) status, and associated benefits of reservation policy for Scheduled Castes in India, as Christians legally do not qualify for the same. In the words of the resident pastor in Dravidapuram, I quote:

There are incidents of police inquiring about the present religious status of few youth in the community who are selected for the post of police constable. I am compelled to say that they are Hindus and I have never seen them attending the Lutheran church. If I say that they are Christians then they will lose their job for sure. On the other hand, the Lutheran church cannot afford to give basic education to its adherents. Since they are poor, they need to make use of government facilities under Scheduled Caste (SC) category, and church must not stand on their way. On anticipation of such practical problems, we are not keeping the baptismal records. As a result, I also feel

³⁵ Viswanathan, 106.

³⁶ Sangham is a customary body that represents collective unity among the Malas in Dravidapuram. It is governed and operated by their caste elders.

unhappy to say that, baptism lost its noble importance among the village Lutherans.³⁷

Though it is considered compulsory to get baptised, not many take it seriously. As a result, the 'noble' importance of baptism goes unrecognised by giving extra-importance to the marriage ceremony. It is clear now; the social base of the Lutheran church in Dravidapuram is not the moral community *per se* but it's the caste i.e. Mala caste. Since baptism lost its 'noble' importance to socially construct their religious identity, marriage is the only way through which they can prove their Lutheran identity. Here, I argue that marriage becomes a substitute for baptism to prove their religious identity particularly Lutheran identity in Dravidapuram. The emergence of such social equation is an outcome of different patterns, tactics and practices employed by the Malas of Dravidapuram village to fight against structurally imposed marginality and stigmatised identity.

These practices are not supported by their religious belief though, but they stick to them in order to fight against structures of social domination and with a zeal for social change. Here my submission is that Lutheranism had provided a platform for Dalit Christians to fight against structures of domination even to the extent of compromising on baptism. It is only a representative tip of an iceberg. Different methods must have been practised by the Dalit Christians who practise Lutheranism in their struggle against imposed marginality. Though the Dalit Lutheran Christians of Dravidapuram oppose caste discrimination, they had to use the same caste categories to fight against oppressive social structures.

From the above description of marriage among Lutherans of Dravidapuram, one could see the co-existence of caste moral order and a modified version of Christianity with a high degree of co-ordination between them. It is partially a product of uncritical acceptance of caste practices at the Lutheran church and also the liberal attitude of resident Lutheran pastors towards 'non-spiritual' activities of the church.

Concluding Remarks

The village Lutheran church in Dravidapuram is a significant example that depicts the state of Lutheran churches in Andhra Pradesh; people are financially poor, illiterate, lack quality education and experience low levels of awareness and are driven by numerous superstitions. Their socio-spiritual practices must not be understood in isolation but rather understood against the backdrop of the larger socio-cultural scenario of Andhra society. Being a single caste church, it was uncritical about caste practices of its members in and outside the church. Such uncritical attitudes to caste practices made the Lutheran church depend on caste foundations so much that caste became the solitary social base for the Lutheran church in the

³⁷ Interview with local resident pastor of Dravidapuram.

village. Marriage practice among the village Lutherans is quite strongly in consonance with south Indian close-kin marriages. With respect to the ritualistic material being used in marriages there is a close correspondence with Hindu beliefs and customs followed by people of Andhra.

Interestingly, Lutherans are not keeping baptismal records in order to deal with their officially declared religious identity being Scheduled Caste on the one hand, and personally professed religious identity being Christian to combat structurally imposed socio-economic marginality upon them on the other. I think not maintaining baptismal records is a tactic to handle legal complications involved in their dual religious identity. Lutheranism had provided Dalits with an assertive space to reduce or at times avoid caste discrimination in their regular interaction with other castes. This paper concludes by establishing a point that Lutheranism among the Dalits of Dravidapuram has been immensely helpful in cutting down possible discrimination as well as the Brahminical presence in life-cycle rituals. Here the operation of caste identity is based on caste consciousness and the realisation of subordination within the caste hierarchy. Lutheranism has created a new assertive identity – which has enabled Christians to self-identify themselves as Christian in socio-cultural realms, while at the same time providing them the space to deal with legal issues associated with their official identity being Scheduled Castes. Therefore, it has helped the Dalits of Dravidapuram to combat caste marginality in nuanced ways.

CAMOUFLAGED DALIHOOD: CHURCHES' MISSION TO STRIVE TO SAFEGUARD THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION AND SUSTAIN AND RENEW TELANGANA EXPERIENCES

Praveen P.S. Perumalla

Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterises the exploitation, suppression and marginalisation of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahminical ideology.¹

Introduction

Dalithood is not a thing of the past. Though it has been the life experience of Dalits through the ages, yet it has been camouflaged. This paper attempts to explore the various ways in which Dalithood has been camouflaged in the region of Telangana, South India. This region witnesses various developmental projects from the 18th century, under Asafj.² Correspondingly a governing system, a kind of bureaucratic administration, was started. Marwadis, Kayasthas, U.P. Muslims and Tamil Brahmins occupied positions in such administration.³ The Muslims were placed to look after the military and the Hindus to look after revenue village administration. For this purpose, the region was divided into a number of 'Jagirs',⁴ a territory ruled by a Muslim called Jagirdhar, who takes care of

¹ Ambedkar, cited in Gopal Guru, 'The language of Dalit Bahujan Political Discourse', in M. Mohanty (ed.), *Class, Caste and Gender: Readings in Indian Government and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006) (256-267), 259.

² He was a general to King Aurangzib. He was sent to the Deccan region by the king in 1713. With the weakening of the Delhi Darbar, Asafj declared the region his own state. Ever since the Asafjahi dynasty started.

³ Inukonda Thirumali, *Against Dora and Nizam: People's Movement in Telangana 1939 – 1948* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2003), 2.

⁴ There were six types of Jagirs namely 1. Paiga Jamiath Jagir, 2. Al Tamgh Jagir, 3. Jath Jagir, 4. Tanakha Jagir, 5. Mhruti Jagir and 6. Madarmash Jagir. Gadavarthi Venkateswarlu, 'Poratalaku Dariteesina Boodamasyalu', in *Eenadu* (daily Telugu news paper) (10 September 2008), 16.

For a thorough discussion see Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2007), 95-100.

the expenses of the cavalry contingent and other expenses as seems best to him. The land that was under Jagirs as well as under the crown was 40 percent of the total land. The remaining 60 percent was under 'Devan Khalsa'. Devan Khalsa lands were for revenue administration. To collect revenue and to look after the village administration, intermediary power structures were placed such as 'Zamindar'⁵ to assist Jagirdars and later 'Deshmukh', 'sir Deshmukh', 'Deshai' and 'Sir Deshi'.⁶

Under the Prime Ministership of Salarjung-I aggressive peasantisation took place. He was influenced by the British developmental model as announced by A.J. Dunlop. Administrative changes were made by abolishing the intermediary power structures, striking out tax structures,⁷ and introducing new tax structures based on land measurement. The Deshmukhs of the old administrative structure were retained as tax collectors assisted by 'Patwari' for revenue and 'Patels' for other related administrative jobs. Since then land was viewed as property and surplus land was made available through commodity circulation such as usury and exchange of property. Utsa Patnaik explained such colonial capital as 'antediluvian' that has never allowed Indian agriculture to take capitalist form.⁸ With the weakening of the Hyderabad state the Deshmukhs became more powerful rulers controlling villages, and even the Patels and Patwari became landlords.⁹ These developments were explained by Irfan Habib as the decay of monarchy and appearance of 'feudatories' of various grades.¹⁰ A comparison can be made between Salarjung-I's and the 'feudatories' approach to land; the former had a more urban-centred approach and the latter was rural centred. This can be further elucidated.

During this period land was plentiful; much of it was forest land. The *girijans*/tribes and Dalits were free to use lands in the absence of bureaucracy and domination. But once land had been measured, they were all brought under a tax scheme. In order to include more land under cultivation *girijan* lands and Dalits along with their lands were included. They were strategically placed in caste village for their services. The land measurement was to improve productivity and taxation purposes. But, the prevalent social relations were caste-dominated. Both of these had different purposes in land administration that were irreconcilable. Into this structure, Dalits were placed strategically in such a way that Dalits came under caste

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⁵ These were rulers over villages, in possession of fort, enjoyed the support of their caste, clan and exercised domination over land and people. A category of Hindu kingdoms. Later Zamindar was called Taluqdar under Mughal rule. See Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, 103-104.

⁶ Venkateswarlu, 'Poratalaku', 16.

⁷ Collection of tax through land auction/arras was abolished.

⁸ Utsa Patnaik, 'On the Mode of Production in Indian Agriculture: A Reply', *EPW, Review of Agriculture* (September 1972), 146-47.

⁹ Thirumali, *Against Dora*, 2.

¹⁰ Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, 75.

domination and exploitation, and yet, the same was camouflaged. Some aspects of land and caste will be studied by way of explanation.

What is Dalithood?

As quoted earlier, Dalithood characterises the vulnerability of Dalit life. However, it also exposes caste domination and does not just adhere to Dalit suffering or 'victimhood'. To bring out the heterogeneous nature of Dalithood the structures of caste domination need to be studied. Through this Dalithood can be problematised to serve the purpose of a concept. The concept of 'internal colony' explains the structural aspect of caste domination.

Colony and Internal Colony

The colonisers from different nationalities, with a motive to conquer and plunder the wealth of others, have reduced every land they conquered into 'colonies'. Theoretically colonies can be explained in terms of 'periphery'. The function of each periphery was to feed the centre.¹¹ For this purpose existing land labour relations were distorted and replaced by new forms of land labour relations. In it the natives were reduced to agricultural labour, and also slavery. Correspondingly land concentration took place in the hands of the powerful, finally emerging as 'Landlordism'. The relationship between the colonisers and colonies was that of the predator and the prey.

The concept of 'internal colony' denotes the formation of colonies within the nation, by its members. In every social unit, such as a household, all the labour that went in was for its utilitarian value, required for sustenance of life and development of that unit. To make such social units vulnerable for domination and exploitation constitutes 'internal colony'. Internal colony had to satisfy both the masters at the periphery and at the centre.

Internal colony denotes double exploitation and for women as part of the internal colony it was triple exploitation. I infer it from Maria Mies and other feminists. They explain that capitalism embarks upon formal social relationships, where there is subsistence labour. Subsistence labour with its exclusive use value operates outside of the market. Simultaneously it creates a base for the realisation of exchange value. Such labour was preyed upon and subsumed by capitalism. Formal social relationships were spared unless they resisted capitalist exploitation. The study of internal colony opens up structural forms of domination and exploitation. It was also part of the debate on the modes of production and was used to analyse

¹¹ For further discussion see A. Gunter Frank, *On Capitalist Underdevelopment* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

patriarchy in India.¹² This paper applies the concept of internal colony to study caste.

A Narrative from Telangana

‘He squatted impassively under the neem tree. He sat there but appeared to be far away. The District Revenue Officer was asking about the economic condition of Dalits in Dalit colony at Kadavendi village in Jangaon taluk of Warangal. The discussion somehow veered round to the 1940s and those days of upheaval. A flicker appeared in his deep-set eyes. He seemed interested. He told us that he had carried the dead body of Dudi Kumariah, who was shot dead on that July afternoon while resisting the attack of the hired hoodlums of Vishnur Deshmukh and the Razakars. The village was set on fire and all the houses were razed to the ground. It was 1946.

Today it is 27th April 1975. There are two hundred families in this Dalit colony. Forty families do not have any houses. They live with others. Fifty families have between a quarter to half an acre of land. Six families have irrigation facilities which come under the command area of a community well. All the others depend on hiring out their labour during the agricultural season. This area is slightly prosperous as compared with others. Due to tube-well and deep well facilities farmers raise two and a half to three crops a year. There has been, therefore, an increase in the days of employment for the agricultural workers per year. All working days put together come to 270 days per year. The daily wage of agricultural labour was just sufficient enough to meet the expenses on food for that day and nothing for the next day.

In view of their future, all Dalits wanted land to cultivate. When the big landholding of Vishnur Deshmukh was broken up the land was grabbed by the village rich and Dalits did not get any land. Five years ago some Dalit families occupied ten acres of government land in the neighbourhood of the village. But the whole village combined against Dalits and forcefully threw them out. Since then Dalits made no more attempts to get any Government land.

In 1946 Dalits had no land. They had a dream. They joined the movement (Telangana movement against *vetti*, against Dora and Razakars). Dudi Komariah died. In 1975 they had no land. They have no dream... perhaps Dudi Komariah died in vain.¹³

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Perspective from 1970s

This life narrative portrays Dalit life under the Nizam and almost 30 years after Independence. The perspective of the 1970s was based on a shift by

¹² Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), 13-23.

¹³ This tale adapted from D. Bandyopadhyay, *A Tale from Telangana* in Arvind Das and V. Nilakant (eds), *Agrarian Relations in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1979), 11-13.

the state from dominant castes to Dalit and *girijans* to be empowered through land reforms. Credit goes to the late prime minister of India Smt. Indira Gandhi's twenty point programme.¹⁴ Dalits were encouraged to occupy *poorambok* lands/uncultivated government lands and surplus lands. To oversee land reforms the District Revenue Officer visited that village.

To redress Dalit empowerment through landownership the castes of ritual superiority allied with the Sudra caste and forcefully halted land reforms. At the same time Dalits' consciousness of their right to landownership grew. Dalits revolted against the caste nexus and struggled to keep their lands.¹⁵ Dalit resistance was frowned upon and regarded as a law and order problem and a problem of regional backwardness. Before enquiring into camouflaged Dalithood it is imperative to study the nature of internal colony.

Land and Caste in Telangana: Internal Colonies

Land Concentration: Domination

Land concentration with the castes of ritual superiority was an important factor that infused domination over Dalits. Even though the relationship between land concentration and domination is known, its distinctive features in Telangana need to be explained. The concept of '*Dora Rajyam*', a term used by the masses rightly, explains the situation.¹⁶ *Dora Rajyam* refers to the concentration of land with Deshmukh, Patels and Patwari, who became autonomous, powerful and exercised domination through a system of power relationships. They were even recognised by the colonial state as required for village governance. To accumulate land they indulged in land records manipulation. A huge area of land under one survey number reflects this. According to the Agricultural Indebtedness Committee (1937),¹⁷ in Mahabubnagar Taluq 56 percent of the total land was in the possession of Patels and Patwari. The Tenancy Committee (1940) reported similarly. In an autobiographical work, Mandamula Narsinga Rao mentions

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¹⁴ G. Ram Reddy, 'Caste, Class and Dominance in Andhra Pradesh', in Francine R. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds), *Dominance And State Power In Modern India: Decline of a Social Order* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 284-85.

¹⁵ Case studies of similar nature on Dalit land struggles were published. See Estharla Krishna Rao, *People's Initiatives for Access to Land – Case Studies*; Fr. Thomas Pallithanam, *Rethinking Hope? Access, Retention and Development of LAND: A Dalit Perspective*, AP Social Watch Report 2007, 109-162.

¹⁶ Tirumali, *Against Dora*, 17-43.

¹⁷ A. Satyanarayana, *Society, Economy and Polity in Modern Andhra* (Hyderabad: Kanishka Publishers, 2007), 14.

that in his village his father and village power centres possessed around 75 percent of the total land.¹⁸

Such history of land concentration was also the history of land alienation. *Girijans* and Dalits were robbed of their lands in the process of peasantisation. I am unable to produce qualitative data on this as the data pertaining to it has been in the form of folklore that needs to be analysed scientifically. Yet, some data from Machherla, Gudur taluk and Warangal district is available. A local ruler Nadikuda Raja brought in the Reddy castes to manage Jagir land. After the Bhupati Revolt of 1882 the Raja's powers were weakened and Reddys declared themselves as the landlords. They forced *girijans* to abandon their traditional lands and to work in village lands. With the introduction of 'massive revenueisation'/peasantisation process *girijan* lands were falsely declared as barren by the Patwari and they were annexed to the lands of the Reddys.¹⁹

Land alienation signifies a change in labour. From 1901 to 1941 as per the census data, population increased by 31 percent whereas the agricultural labour increased by 78 percent in the state. In Telangana alone the increase was 72 percent. In Nalgonda district the increase was 473 percent and in Warangal district it was 234 percent.²⁰ What was the nature of labour market?

Change in Labour: Vetti system

In early medieval India the farmers used to pay tax to the state in the form of labour known as 'Vetti' or 'Vetti chakiri'. But at the 'Agraharam' (land gifted to Brahmins), temples, and monasteries, the nature of *Vetti chakiri* was to with labour for the local lords and not the state. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, viewed as Hindu dharma instructions, seems to provide the rationale for such practices. With the feudalist formation in India the *Vetti* as labour tax from farmers was turned into *Vetti* as corvée/labour rent.²¹

Vetti practices were prevalent until laws were enacted to abolish it. A cursory look at it explains the nature of internal colony. The Dora used to make land gifts to sudras as well as to a few Dalits for an exchange of labour. Labourers with vetti were called 'Vettivadu', 'Vettodu'. A

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¹⁸ Referred in A. Satanarayana, *Land, Caste and Dominance in Telangana*, working paper, Centre for Comtemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Second Series, Number LXXVIII, July 1993, 11-12.

¹⁹ B. Janardhan Rao, *Land Alienation In Tribal Area* (Warangal: Kakatiya School of Public Administration, 1987), 103-6.

²⁰ Census of Hyderabad 1901, table XV and 1941 table VIII cited by Tirumalli, *Against Dora*, 48.

²¹ Marlene Njammasch, 'From the Ancient labour Tax to the Feudal Corvée: A Marxist Approach to the Study of Visti', in Bhairabi Prasad Sahu (ed), *Land System and Rural Society in Early India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Contributors, 2004), 263-75.

distinction has to be made between a *Sudra Vetti* and *Dalit Vettis*. *Vetti* Madigas were assigned to do unclean works for all caste communities in the village. They should make firewood ready for cooking, carry the luggage of the *Doras*' relatives or the government officials, work as a peon, and as the bodyguard of the *Dora* which included running before his cart. At the same time they had to depend upon the *Dora* for any work at any time. *Dalit vetti* had to work in the fields of the *Dora*, to herd, and to do household jobs. In short *Vettivadu* was labour bound to the *Dora* and to the village. Different layers of administrative powers meant different layers of exploitation without any rest. Domination and exploitation were multi-faceted. *Dalit* exploitation and caste domination was captured in the songs of Telangana.²² The novel *Chillara Duvulu* is a literary work which conceptualises Dalits as being internally colonised.²³

Change in Labour: Jeetagadu

Jeetagadu (literally paid labourer) was a form of labour extraction and exploitation that, in a way, bonded slavery. According to Hussain a *Jeetagadu* was 'the labourer contracted to serve his employers for an indefinite period on low subsistence wage in repayment of a loan advanced by the employer to the labourer'.²⁴ Any debt by the *Jeetagadu/ bhagela* means a transferable debt for generations. It was prevalent mostly in the district of Warangal and Nalgonda.

An important aspect of this labour was increased child labour. The changing system required new forms of labour that included children. Children had to start working at a very early age to supplement the *Dalit* family income.²⁵ When children failed to pay complete attention at work they were beaten up by the *Dora* and also by *Sudra* castes.

Having made a brief survey to understand the Dalits as the internally colonised the process of camouflaged Dalithood will be examined.

Camouflaged Dalithood

The Dalithood concept, as studied above, explains the structural form of domination and the processes of caste consolidation and caste perpetuation. Camouflaged Dalithood denotes the hiding of such oppressive processes in order to give a different colour to it.

²² Suddala Hanumanth's song was analysed by Tirumali, *Against Dora*, 49-53.

²³ Dasarathi Rangacharya, *Chillara Devundlu* (Hyderabad: Hyderabad Book Trust, 2003 [1969]).

²⁴ Quoted in Tirumali, *Against Dora*, 53-54.

²⁵ Tirumali, *Against Dora*, 55.

Land Gifts

Land gifts were practised since the Vedic period. The proponents of such practice like Kautilya of *Arthashastra*, seem to have taken an anti-landlordism stance; this is, however, debated. Whatever the case may be, Kautilya is said to have taken several steps to favour the growth of peasant proprietors.²⁶ Along with the peasantisation the caste system also flourished. Gifting lands also meant bringing more land and labour into the caste village or to form a new village. Land was gifted to Brahmins, to temples and monasteries. The Brahmins provided the required intellectual means to perpetuate caste and intern peasantisation. However, caste perpetuation and caste consolidation worked differently at different places.

Keeping the logic behind land gifts as a means to consolidate and perpetuate the caste system, giving lands for tenancy has worked towards depeasantisation of Dalits and peasantisation of Sudras. And yet, there was no uproar over it. The dominant castes have preferred Sudra castes over Dalits to work in their respective lands as tenants at will. In the course of time these tenants were recognised as farmers. Under the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1950 (promulgated on June 10) 600,000 tenants have benefitted. The 'tenanted' land was 6,700,000 acres or 25% of the total cultivated area. It was said that Hyderabad state had the unique distinction of enacting a tenancy law before it was enacted in any other state of the Indian union.²⁷ But, Dalits were deprived from celebrating the same. The Andhra Maha Sabha, wing of the communist party, took the lead to distribute land through the 'Panch Committee' at a village level. In a self critical report of the communist party it accepted that the land distribution has favoured 'upper-caste' peasants and not the lower caste, the Dalits, in spite of the fact that Dalits provided strength and militancy to the movement.²⁸

Dalits with *Vetti watans*/gift lands were infused with a new kind of value that distinguished them from Dalit *jeetagadu*/bonded labourers and Chillarajanam/the one without *Vetti watan*. It worked according to the logic of reward and punishment. The very thought of holding land given by the *Dora* has blindfolded them to their incessant exploitation. In fact the *Dora* demanded vetti at any time with a threat to confiscate the gift land if they do not comply. But, *Vetti* Dalits were never given the required time to work in their respective *Vetti watans*. They hardly had any document to show landownership. These *Vetti* Dalits failed to be the prophetic voices and it was Chillarajanam that demanded just wages and even boycotted labour at

²⁶ Sibesh Bhattacharys, 'Land-System as Reflected in Kautilya's Arthashastra', in Sahu, *Land System*, 62-63.

²⁷ Reddy, 'Caste, Class and Dominance', 293.

²⁸ C.V. Subba Rao, 'Land, Caste and Politics in Andhra Pradesh', in Gail Omvedt, *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States* (Delhi: Dept. of Political Science, University of Delhi, 1982), 161.

times. The caste system emphasised one's duty to caste and not one's rights in society.²⁹ Thereby it kept the Dalit labour force divided structurally.

Temples, pilgrimages, Jatra and different forms of religious socialisation have brain washed many Dalits through the notion of dharma. Dalits were brainwashed to oblige the *Dora* to mark their caste obedience to God with a hope of rebirth into castes of ritual superiority. It needs to be explored how religious persuasion by the corporate bodies such as temples played role, as a beneficiary of land gifts.

Counter Movement: Bhoodhan

Telangana struggles were responses from internal colonies for liberation and empowerment. But, they were watered down by the 'Bhoodan movement'. The Bhoodan movement was initiated at Nalgonda district by the ruling classes of the dominant castes. They ethically persuaded the landed gentry to give up some lands. The lands that were given were not fit for cultivation. Much of it had been already alienated once again by the dominant castes. The land distribution was not aimed at the sharing of resources and power for a just society. Moreover, the Telangana struggles were portrayed as backward regional problems. Thereby, it was reduced to some special economic packages for regional development. This shift was to sidetrack the issue on caste and to show salvation in something else.

To conclude this section, a quote from Sahu will be appropriate:

(T)he consolidation of caste society was inextricably related to the emergence of a permanent stock of landless agricultural labour, usually within the fold of the untouchables.³⁰

How does the perception of land differ between caste and class societies?

Concept of Landownership: A Class Perspective

The British conceptualised land in the framework of development. Two concepts took prominence namely 'estate' and 'landlord'. Land was measured in units and grid maps were created. Each unit reflected 'a unit of thought' and land signified 'units of thought'. Each idea in relation to land was related to many other ideas and activities which served as primary postulates in the system of thought. A particular kind of social structure was an outcome of such thoughts and activity. 'Estates' were the final outcome of it. To administer estates it required a landlord. The landlord exercised control over land and labour in the interest of developing the land and to develop personal wealth. It was assumed that development of the

²⁹ Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship And Democracy: Land and Power in the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 340.

³⁰ Sahu, *Land System*, 32.

landlord meant development of the nation. In the absence of church interference in such matters, estates and landlordism were viewed 'secular' in their objective. The parliamentary system was created to provide legal assistance to the landlord.

The philosophy behind it was the idea of *pater familias*, a Roman-European law where propertied family members interact with members of other propertied through the agency of *pater familias* that involves decisions to use or augment power.³¹

To summarise, society was divided into landlords vs serfs; the estate reminds us of the landlords' power to control. The objectives were to generate wealth through production from land. The individual was regarded as the most important part of society, and therefore, individual development was viewed as national development.

Concept of Land Ownership: Indian Caste Perspective

Arthashastra provides the conceptual basis for land and organisation of the village. It views land as the basis for wealth and power; hence every effort has to be made to increase land possession.³² Land was never measured for grid maps. Instead land was identified by the name of the village or dominant castes in that village. Therefore, land signifies caste social relationships. The concept of *jajman* helps to study the Indian perception of land.

Jajman was the one to head the helm of affairs of household as per caste prescriptions. The word *Jajman* denotes patron, unlike the guild masters. Its Sanskrit root is a participle with reflexive force, and it has the meaning of 'sacrifice'. *Jajman* was the one that has a sacrifice performed and is a custodian of the caste system.³³ The work of *Jajman* seems to relate with '*Janapada*'/country. *Janapada* needs to be integrated through proper revenue to the government, industrious farmers with wise masters and a huge number of obedient and honest castes of lower ritual status.³⁴

In summary land denotes the process of integration³⁵ of lands, castes of less ritual status, caste consolidation and perpetuation. For this purpose land gifts were prescribed to temples and monasteries. The secular notion of land thus does not have much relevance in India.

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³¹ Walter C. Neale, 'Land is to Rule', in Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (London: Wisconsin Press, 1969), 6-7.

³² Sahu, *Land System*, 13.

³³ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1999 [1970]), 97.

³⁴ Bhattacharya, *Land-System as Reflected*, 67.

³⁵ Burton Stein, 'Integration of the Agrarian System of South India', in Frykenberg, *Land Control*, 179-196.

Caste-Class Interface

The interface between caste and class emerges in the background. Class supersedes caste through the assumption that caste no longer exists. There have been more similar false assumptions. The British imposed its land administration on India based on such assumptions. Sir Henry Summer Maine, a British administrator, assumed similarity between the European unit of thought and the Indian unit of thought. He further assumed the raja/king as the closest approximate to pater familias, based on which he equated the estate with the Indian village and the landlord with the raja or zamindar.³⁶ Politically the British allied with the raja/zamindar and bestowed legal rights over lands that were already under his control. It was called the Rythwari system.³⁷ When the exploited natives approached the British for justice the British preferred to leave the village matters to the zamindar. Village matters were regarded as cultural by the British. The caste and class interface has not changed caste social relationships in villages. Instead, it consolidated the caste system. According to Viegas,

Although, the terms mentioned above, namely raja, Zamindar etc, exists today only as part of Indian feudal history, the concepts, ideology and rationale underlying these are still glaringly prevalent particularly in rural India....³⁸

The debate on caste prevalence in spite of the capitalist course of developments seems to be further coloured only to hide caste realities. For instance, the inconsistency between theories on Indian village differs from certain real-life situations. Thorner and others have critically viewed such literature.³⁹ Thorner emphasises that new administration has come into India from the West, new laws and land reforms were made, but, the old relations of a caste village did not change much. In other words, the caste elite benefited out of the new administration, laws and land reforms but Dalits were excluded to a greater extent. Such a scenario complicates any attempt to identify internal colonies. The dominant caste always points to the democratic nature of the state and hides the caste realities underneath. To find legal acceptance does not necessarily mean social acceptance. In such a context once again the *Vetti* is reemerging in Telangana; this was

³⁶ Sahu (ed) 2004, 7-8.

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³⁷ The British wanted to bring as much land as possible into cultivation, of commercial crops. On the other hand, ever since 1857, the British wanted to avoid any form of revolt for which they were in need of a good ally. They identified the zamindars as potential allies and gave ownership rights to them and made them ryths. D.N.Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1983), 30-4.

³⁸ Philips Viegas, *Encroached and Enslaved: Alienation of Tribal lands and its Dynamics* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute; 1991), 63.

³⁹ Daniel and Alice Thorner, *Land and Labour in India* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2005), 42. Also see Bhowani Sen, *Indian Land System And Land Reforms* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1955).

brought to light by Ankitha, an NGO from the district of Nalgonda.⁴⁰ Sakshi, an NGO from Hyderabad, reports on intensive Dalit struggles over their right to own lands; it does indicate the coexistence of caste social relations as well as emerging democratic social relations. Discourses on the democratic fabric of India coupled with the complex dynamism in the caste-class interface results in camouflaged Dalithood. The reality of Dalit exploitation vis-à-vis land rights is thoroughly camouflaged.

Ministry as Mission of the Church

The kind of approach various mission societies have taken towards the Indian caste practices has to do with the kind of theological and egalitarian values they acquired back at home. Almost all the mission societies were from the West. Conversion as mission of the church seems to have come closer to the Dalit aspirations to move out of caste system. But the Dalit mass movement seems to have frustrated missionaries on the question of imparting training, for those to whom formal education was denied. Ever since, the mission to preach and convert was transformed into ministry among the Dalits. Among Dalits educational, health and vocational training ministries were started. For instance, the missionaries of the Methodist mission society were overwhelmed by the drought conditions in Telangana and they initiated a 'food for work' programme at Medak. Under this project many Dalit communities were rehabilitated irrespective of religious affiliation along with different castes. Along with it medical and educational ministries were carried on. It was the ministerial work that imbued faith in Christ. It was ministry with human touch.

Unlike in the Nizam's times of missions, the Indian church has been confronted by the most difficult question related to land and labour. For ministerial purposes enough land and infrastructure were procured and used by the missionaries. The Indian church inherited it and stands as 'landed gentry', but, its members remained predominantly agricultural labourers, mostly landless. They were caught up between caste and class dynamics and issues of identity as well. It raises practical questions relating to the church and property matters.

The state government has done an experiment in terms of co-operative farming in the district of Karimnagar with the help of some non-governmental organisation from the West. Similarly, the state has initiated

⁴⁰ Under liberalisation and privatisation, a case from Nalgonda district reports as follows: In a village called Molaka Cherlla, Damarlacherlla Mandal, Miryalaguda region, Mr Eruganti Saudullu borrowed money from Narayana Reddy, a landlord towards medical expenses for his sister. Because he could not pay it back he had to stop his son Anjaneyulu from schooling and put him for *Vetti*. There are around 16 youth under *Vetti* from this village. Similarly from that region there are around 244 Dalits who are under *Vetti*. An NGO called 'Ankitha' works for their emancipation. Reported by Mallapelli Laxmaiah, January 2004.

land distribution among landless Dalits, even though such lands were not arable. The state has also initiated land development programmes. How can the church work together closely with the state for Dalit empowerment?

It need not be emphasised that the state has a role to play in Dalit empowerment. The church as a theological as well as a civil society institute needs to work with the rest of the civil society organisations, in a spirit of ecumenism, and continue to negotiate with the state on justice concerns, in particular for Dalit empowerment. At the same time the church needs to demonstrate alternate values in social relationships.

On administrative grounds it requires a framework of 'Public and Private Partnership' in the tradition of the Non-Alliance Movement [NAM], 1955, Bandung, Indonesia. It was an historical movement in the life of newly independent nations to come together, 23 Asian countries and 6 African countries, to make an 'import substitute policy', a self generative, self governance policy, for reconstruction. This requires theological commitment to walk another mile. It further requires not being quite content with missionary works alone. Without ignoring the first mile taken by the missionary movement, it requires the Indian church to go the second mile.

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**THE DALIT SEARCH FOR CHRISTIANITY IN THE PRE-
INDEPENDENT ERA IN ANDHRA PRADESH:
A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN BAPTISTS AND
AMERICAN MENNONITE BRETHERN MISSIONS
FROM THE DALIT PERSPECTIVE**

J.P. Asheervadam

The 19th and early 20th century witnessed substantial Dalit conversions to Protestant Christianity in Andhra Pradesh. Studies have shown that the present state of Andhra Pradesh has witnessed the highest percentage of group conversions to Christianity in India.¹ This remarkable success of mission activity was attributed to missionaries alone and not to the underlying Dalit Christians' role. Dalit Christians were the co-workers and heroes in the conversion movement but the missionaries were glorified for the success of mission work leaving out the contribution of the Dalit Christians. In some cases, a few Christians who belonged to the high caste groups were placed on a high pedestal, but not the Christians of Dalit origin. The Dalit Christians equally and even more effectively carried the gospel to their own people. However, their efforts were neglected and placed at the 'margins of the history and historical writing'. This is to say that history was written from an elitist perspective. As a result, the mass conversions of Dalits to Christianity were 'relegated to the margins of this

¹ See J.W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movement* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1933). John E. Clough, *Social Christianity in the Orient* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 96-97. G.A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion in the Telugu Country, 1800-1900: A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in Godavery Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 12 (January-March, 1975), 61-79. G.A.Oddie, 'Christianity in the Hindu Crucible: Continuity and Change in the Kaveri Delta, 1850-1900', *Indian Church History Review*, XV, 1 June 1981, 48-72. Peter Hamm, *India Mennonite Brethren Church Statistical Report* (Shamshabad, 1970). Peter Hamm, the then executive secretary of the Mennonite Brethren Mission Board, organised field survey on all AMB Mission fields in Andhra Pradesh in 1970. In his study he concludes that the origin of 99 percent of the Mennonite Brethren converts were from Dalit background, either of the Mala or Madiga caste group. See Hamm, *Statistical Report*, 70. B. Benjamin, *The History of Churches in Andhra Pradesh (Telugu)* (Secunderabad: The Telugu Theological Literature Board, 1976).

history and historical writing on this subject did not move beyond the “mass movement” discourse commenced by the missionaries and perfected by Pickett in the 1930s.² Thus ‘it had fallen into the same trap of the secular national histories ...glorifying the role of the elites and the dominant groups.’³This was also true for the American Baptist Mission at Ongole (ABM) and American Mennonite Brethren of Mahabubnagar in Andhra Pradesh. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate Dalit Christians’ contribution in the founding of the American Baptist and American Mennonite Brethren Churches in Andhra Pradesh. Thus this study is from the perspective of Dalits.

Historical Beginnings of American Baptist Mission (Ongole), Russian Mennonite Brethren (Nalgonda) and American Mennonite Brethren (Mahabubnagar) Missions

American Baptist Mission (Nellore-Ongole)

The Baptist Mission in India began with the coming of William Carey in 1793. The American Baptists for many years were supporting the Baptist mission in Burma, Bengal and in other places, but they did not have their own mission. The General Missionary Convention of the Baptists was formed in America in 1814 to undertake foreign missions. Adoniram Judson and his wife were the first foreign missionaries for the ABM. Samuel S. Day who is considered as the founder of the American Baptist Mission among the Telugus established a mission station at Nellore in February 1840.⁴ John Everett Clough, who was considered an ‘Apostle of

² George Oommen and John C.B. Webster (eds), *Local Dalit Christian History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 1.

³ George Oommen, ‘Historiography of India Christianity and Challenges of Subaltern Methodology’, *Journal of Dharma*, 28 (2 April-June, 2003), 213.

⁴ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 61. The first Christian missionary to bring the gospel to the Telugus was a Father Louis, a Franciscan priest. He is said to have come in 1535 A. D. Later, Don Francisco Manco went to the Golconda Mission in 1641, made Machilipatnam and Bheemunipatnam the centre of Christian activity. Then the Jesuits undertook more missionary activity in the Chittoor region in the early 18th century. The first Protestant mission to open the work in the state was the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The CMS began its work in Viska in 1805. Initially, the Danish-Halle Mission or Tranquebar Mission was the first Protestant mission to begin its work among the Telugu speaking people from Madras as early as 1716. Benjamin Schultze learnt Telugu and translated Luther’s Shorter Catechism into Telugu. But the main work of this mission was among the Tamil speaking people and among the Telugu it was more incidental; therefore the mission faded out among the Telugus after Schultze. The London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries arrived and began their mission among Telugus in 1805. The LMS mission opened their mission activity in Visakhapatnam and Cuddapa. They

the Madigas', arrived in 1865. At the time of his arrival this mission had only one station at Nellore, called the 'Lone Star Mission' with the church membership of just 30 people.⁵ John E. Clough who reached Nellore on April 22 1865 moved to Ongole in the following year.

Clough undertook a food for work project to build a canal, for famine relief; this was part of the Buckingham Canal construction work initiated by the government. Clough took a 4-mile canal digging work for food project when a Hindu contractor discriminated against outcastes in the employment of labour. Clough took a contract, organised a camp, and trained Christian preachers as foremen of labour gangs. Christians and non-Christians were employed, a grain store was opened, a health service was established and recreation and Christian instruction were supplied in regular religious services. Clough stopped all baptisms. With the coming of the rains in October 1877, work on the canal came to a close, the labourers returned to their villages and resumed agricultural operation.

The mission in Ongole was very successful. Soon the AB mission achieved tremendous success among Dalits and the church membership grew in thousands. After this success at Ongole, the Baptist mission concentrated on the expansion of their mission work. Then the A B mission established stations at Ramayapatnam, Allur, the sea coast area between Nellore and several other places.⁶ The mission also decided to start their work in Secundrabad (Hyderabad) which was about 200 miles from Ongole. W.W. Campbell was assigned for this task. As a result he moved to Secundrabad in December 1874 taking eight men and women as his helpers from Ongole.⁷

Russian Mennonite Brethren Mission at Nalgonda

The era of the Mennonite Brethren mission in India began with the coming of Abraham Friesen and his wife from Russia in 1889. In fact the Mennonite Brethren Church was born in Russia in 1860. By 1889 the

were followed by CMS 1841, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) 1852, the American Baptists in 1840, German Lutheran Mission 1842, Canadian Baptists 1871, Methodists in 1872, the Wesleyan Methodists in 1879, the Mennonite Brethren from Russia in 1889 and American Mennonite Brethren in 1899. During the 17th and early 18th centuries these Protestant missionaries sought the high caste people, but in the second half of the 19th century when the Dalits began to search for Christianity and began to knock at church doors, the whole approach and mission patterns changed to incorporate Dalits.

⁵ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 52.

⁶ Some of the main stations were at Athmakur, Bapatla, Donakonda, Gurujala, Hanmakonda, Kanigiri, Kavali, Kumbbam, Kurnool, Kandukuru, Markapuram, Madira, Narsaraopet, Podhili, Satnapalli, Suryapet, Udayagiri, Venukonda, Nandayal.

⁷ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 228-229.

Russian Mennonite Brethren Church that had a membership of only 1800 members, in less than three decades after its founding, had sent their first missionaries to Hyderabad, India. They arrived at Secundrabad on October 2 1889. Clough's success at Ongole had attracted young Friesen to opt for India and the Telugu region.⁸ Since the young Russian Mennonite Brethren church was not in a position to start their own field due to lack of resources, Friesen began his work with the collaboration of the American Baptists.⁹ In May, 1890, Friesen with five native missionaries from Ongole Baptist mission moved to Nalgonda, to take over the station which was started by Campbell as an outstation in 1885. Friesen and his native preachers established the first congregation with 120 converts, and it was reported that a total of 325 baptisms were given by the end of that year.¹⁰ Abraham Friesen, after baptizing the first converts attributed the success to the dedicated preachers and the Bible women.¹¹ The Russian Mennonite Brethren (RMB) mission had sent around half a dozen missionary couples to meet the growing needs of the mission. They established stations at Suryapet, Bohnigir and Janagam.¹² By 1910, these stations had about 3,000 members.¹³ They carried on their mission until the First World War and the Russian Revolution. After that, it became difficult to receive funds from Russia. The Baptist mission organisation in Boston took over these three mission stations. By then they probably had a membership of about seven to eight thousand people. The American Mennonite Brethren mission, which began their mission work in the same area, did not show any interest in adopting these stations, due to their own interests and reasons.¹⁴ However, the important contribution of the RMB mission was motivating the American Mennonite Brethren (AMB) to come to India to establish their mission work in the region. As a result, the AMB mission sent their first missionaries Nicolai and his wife Sue Wiebe Heibert in 1899 and they chose Hughestown, Hyderabad to start their work.

⁸ Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans and Telugus: The Mennonite Brethren Mission in India* (Hillsboro, Kindered Publications, 1997), 4.

⁹ B.Z. John, *Mennonite Brethren Church History – India* (Shamshabad: The Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute, 1978), 41-42.

¹⁰ Friesen's report, *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 72 (March, 1892), 84.

¹¹ Penner, *The M.B. Mission in India*, 3.

¹² Ravela Joseph, *Samavesam of Telugu Baptist Churches: A Brief History and Baptist Doctrinal Distinctives*, 33-34, Paul Toews ed., *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation* (Michigan: Kindred Press, 1993), 133-140; and see Paul Wiebe, *Mennonites of Mahabubnagar* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society and Christian Literature Service, 1988), 67.

¹³ Bhoompag Aaron George, *The History of the Mennonite Brethren Church A.P. India, 1889-1989* (Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, India: 1990), 16.

¹⁴ See Peter Penner, 'Baptist in All But Name: Molotschna Mennonite Brethren in India', *Mennonite Life* (46/1), 1991, 17-23.

AMB mission in Mahabunagar

Abraham Friesen during 1897-99, went to America, where he played an important role in encouraging the American Brethren Church to start the mission work among Telugus. In fact there seemed to be a considerable interest among the Mennonite Brethren Churches in America for the foreign mission work as early as 1883. Moreover, for several years their members had contributed privately and through the conference to various missionaries in India and Africa.¹⁵ The American Mennonite Brethren Church therefore was searching to begin overseas work independently. Subsequently the American Mennonite Brethren Church motivated by Friesen decided to start their own mission. The conference had no hesitation in choosing India and the Hyderabad area as their destination. Choosing India was made easy by the example of Friesen's successful work at Nalgonda and moreover the American Brethren had heard of the Dalit conversions (Madigas) under John Everet Clough at Ongole during the previous decades.¹⁶

Mennonite Brethren were not the pioneers in bringing the gospel to Mahabunagar district. According to the agreement of 'Comity', this whole area belonged to the American Baptists. As noted above, in 1874 the Baptist mission opened a new station at Secundrabad under the leadership of W.W. Cambell. Albert Chute who pioneered mission work to the Mahabunagar district was sent to help Cambell at this station. Albert Chute with native evangelists had undertaken evangelistic tours to Mahabunagar district before they had moved there permanently in 1885. So, Chute of the American Baptist Mission established the first station in the district in 1885 at Mahabunagar town. By 1904 their second station was opened at Gadwal. Since this was a larger area for Chute to handle he invited the American Mennonite Brethren who had arrived in Hyderabad in 1899 and were looking for an appropriate field to advance their work. As a result in 1906 the American Mennonite Brethren pioneer missionary Daniel Berghold entered this district.

American Baptists and Mennonite Brethren simultaneously carried on their activities till 1937.¹⁷ In 1937 the two big Baptist mission stations, Mahabunagar and Gadwal were added to the American Mennonite Brethren Mission. This purchase of Mahabunagar and Gadwal mission stations also included 65 acres of land at Jedcherla. The oldest Church at Jedcharla had been started by the SPG (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel). After organising the church they handed it over to Chute of the

¹⁵ *Our Mission Among the Telugus* (Hillshore, Kansas: Board of Foreign Mission of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1939), 3.

¹⁶ Penner, *The M. B. Mission in India*, 4.

¹⁷ During this time the American Mennonite Brethren established four stations in Mahabunagar district. They were at Nagarkurnool, Wanaparthy, Kalvakurthy and Janampet whereas the Baptists had two stations at Mahabunagar and Gadwal.

Baptist mission.¹⁸ The Baptist mission had used the land in Jedcharla for industrial training. The policy of the Mennonite mission was not to enter into industrial training. Therefore, in 1952 they started medical work there, and there is still a famous hospital in that district. Their next mission station was added in 1954. This was the 'Telugu village mission' at Makthal and Narayanpet. D.P. Musabaye of Sri Lanka had started independent mission work here with the permission of Chute in 1913. After serving for seven years Musabaye decided to go back to his home. At this juncture he came to know through an advertisement that Billington of CMS was interested to come and start ministry in India. Musabaye wrote to Billington to come and carry on the work which he had started. Thus Charles Billington came and occupied the field in 1921 and named his mission 'The Telugu Village Mission'.¹⁹ Within a period of 15 years, this station had substantial conversions.²⁰ With the addition of this 'Telugu village mission' to the Mennonite Brethren, the whole district had come into their account. Later the South Indian missionary churches in the Adoni area also joined in the ABM.

Thus, the present Mennonite Brethren Church is the culmination of the work of American Baptists, SPG, Telugu village mission and the South Indian missionary church. Though the Mennonite Brethren mission was late to reach the district, today it enjoys supremacy as the sole major denomination in the Mahabubnagar district. Now the Conference of the American Mennonite Brethren Church mission and ministries has spread in districts such as Hyderabad, Ranga Reddy, Mahabubnagar, Nalgonda, Cuddapa and Nizamabad districts of Andhra Pradesh, and in Maharashtra, Karnataka and New Delhi.

Dalit Conversions into the ABM Mission

John C.B. Webster writing about the features of the mass movements to Christianity asserts that, 'The mass movements were Dalit movements, initiated and led by Dalits; missionaries did not lead the Dalits, but responded to them.'²¹ The Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop, Thoburn, who pioneered the mission work in the Bidar and Raichur area, observed similarly in 1890 that it was not because of the efforts of the missionaries that Dalits were joining the church but it was the Dalits' own initiative, the missionaries had only responded to the situation.²² For the AB mission it is quite evident.

¹⁸ See Profile of Late Rev Jonnalagadda John, IMB Historical Commission, George, *The History of Mennonite Brethren*, 109.

¹⁹ A.R. Jaipal, 'Telugu Village Mission', *El-Shaddai: A Spiritual Monthly*, 1 (September-October, 1989), 4-10.

²⁰ Jaipal, 'Telugu Village Mission', 7.

²¹ John Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1992), 71.

²² James Mills Thoburn, *Indian and Malaysia* (Cranston and Cortis, 1893), 404-405.

Before the group conversion, the AB mission had one station with 30 members at Nellore, but with the beginning of the movement the number rose to a thousand and their stations increased at great speed. Yerraguntala Perraiah, a Madiga, and his wife Nagamma played a very significant role in this conversion movement for the AB mission. According to Clough, Yerraguntala Perraiah and his wife Nagamma were powerful factors in Christianising the Madigas in and around Ongole for the ABM church. He further wrote that without them something might have gone wrong with that movement.²³ They travelled thousands of miles on foot preaching the gospel. Thus the mass movement among the Madigas at Ongole gained its momentum in the 1870s. As a result thousands of Madigas marched into the church. It was reported that on one day in 1868, 2,222 Madigas were baptised near Ongole and thereafter the mass baptisms of nearly 9,000 were reported in six weeks in and around Ongole.²⁴ In 1882 alone 20,086 baptisms took place.²⁵ Eventually, the mission in Ongole became a Madiga mission. At one point Clough stopped baptisms thinking that these Madigas are marching into Christianity for the sake of food and material benefits. In response to that, the Madigas raised their voices and said 'we do not want help. By the blisters on our hand we can prove to you that we have worked and will continue to work. If the next crop fails, we shall die. We want to die as Christians, Baptise us, therefore!'²⁶ This incident seemed to have changed the attitude of Clough towards Dalit conversions to Christianity.

Perraiah, one of the significant leaders of the Dalit conversion movement was about 50 years of age when he accepted Christianity. Before he became a Christian he was a follower of the teachings of Yogi Pothuluri Veerabrahmam. After dissatisfaction with this teaching, Perraiah was in search of a religion which could satisfy his soul. In this search for truth he went to Ellure, about 100 miles north east of Ongole, to get some firsthand information about Christianity from missionary F.N. Alexander of the Church of England mission.²⁷ About their meeting, Clough writes 'It was not necessary to teach Perraiah that there is one God and he is spirit. He had learned this much else when on the path of Yoga. He wanted to know about the divine incarnation of Jesus Christ.'²⁸ After searching this truth, Perraiah said that, 'this religion is true. My soul is satisfied.' Then he wanted to be united with the Christians. Learning this, Alexander advised him to unite with the Christian mission which would be nearest to his home.²⁹

²³ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 107, 97.

²⁴ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 5.

²⁵ R. Joseph, *A History of the Telugu Baptist Churches: American Baptist Telugu mission (Telugu)* (Hyderabad: ACTC, 2003), 33.

²⁶ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 279.

²⁷ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 96.

²⁸ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 96.

²⁹ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 97.

Having returned to his village Tallakondapadu with this search of profound truth, Perraiah was engaged in preaching and witnessing about Jesus Christ in his village. He waited for some time for the arrival of the missionary to Ongole but then he could not bear the waiting any longer. So he walked 40 miles to Ongole. From there, on the direction of Obulu, he went to Nellore and met Jewett. Perraiah also met Clough who had just arrived and was stationed at Nellore. After such a meeting with Perraiah, Clough moved to Ongole to respond to the mass movement which followed later. Therefore, Perraiah claimed that in fact he only called Clough to come to Ongole station and Clough also confirms it.³⁰

Who prepared the ground for Perraiah and other Dalits to search for the Christian gospel in Andhra Pradesh? According to Stephen Fuchs and M.E. Prabhakar, the Messianic Movements prepared the ground for the acceptance of Christianity among the Madigas in Andhra Pradesh.³¹ Messianic Movements are characterised by 'faith in a savior or messiah, who is expected to arise at the end time.'³² In Andhra Pradesh, two persons who taught these teachings were Yogi Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and Yogi Nasraiah.

Veerabrahmam belonged to a carpenter's family. He lived in the first half of the 19th century. He was a devotee of Shiva and was said to have performed many miracles before he entered his grave alive.³³ He preached mainly against the caste system and promoted millennial expectations of a coming time when the caste system would be destroyed and the equality of all men and women established.³⁴ Thus Veerabrahmam is said to have inspired thousands of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh with a hope which in some of its features resembles the millennial hope in the mind of the Christian who looks forward to a speedy second coming of the Lord.³⁵ Therefore Fuchs says that thousands of his converts embraced the Christian faith finding fulfillment of their yearning for a messiah in Jesus Christ.³⁶ Yerraguntala Perraiah and many others at Ongole were the followers of this teaching before they accepted Christianity.

The other person was Yogi Nasraiah. Yogi Nasaraiah was a Muslim. His original name was Nasar Mohammed. He too lived in the first half of the 19th century, in the present 'Narasaravapeta' area. People called him 'Guru

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³⁰ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 98.

³¹ Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 260. M.E. Prabhakar, 'Caste-Class and Status in Andhra Churches Implications for Mission Today', *Religion and Society*, 28.3 (September 1981), 25.

³² Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, ix.

³³ Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, 261-262.

³⁴ Emma Rouschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals or Tales of a Telugu Perriah Tribe* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1899), 119.

³⁵ Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, 261.

³⁶ Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, 263.

Nasaraiah' instead of Nasar Mohammed. He preached the doctrine of one God, love and forgiveness. He had also preached that idols are useless and advocated equality of the sexes. One of his earliest converts was a Madiga, therefore many Madigas became his followers. Hence Emma R. Clough writes, 'when the movement towards Christianity began among the Madigas, the men and women who had sought salvation in Nasaraiah sect were among the first to open their hearts to the divine life that is in Christ. The followers of Nasaraiah later became the disciples of Christ.'³⁷

Thus, followers of both sects Veerabrahmam and Nasaraiah were expecting the realisation of a religion which their gurus prophesied and promoted. When Christianity arrived and Christians preached about the Messiah who was the expected liberator, about the equality of the sexes, about one god, it was a natural choice for the Dalits to turn to the religion which offered the same kind of hope which the Messianic Movements prophesied and for which they had hoped. According to Fuchs, Veerabrahmam's philosophy was more prevalent among the Dalits of Andhra Pradesh, so it could be very possible for the Dalits in this region to show a positive attitude towards Christianity as it was preached by Veerabrahmam which offered them the same hope of improvement in their socio-religious conditions. Thus, the group conversions into Christianity were supported by this revolutionary sentiment of which the Christian missionaries were probably quite unaware.³⁸

Perraiah and his wife Nagamma were baptised in 1866 and Clough arrived at Ongole in 1867. As soon as Clough came to Ongole, Perraiah met him and said that there were people ready to accept Christianity in his village Tallakondapadu. Further, he urged Clough to come and baptise them.³⁹ The mass movement among the Madigas followed. In 1878 within one week over 9,000 Madigas were baptised. After the ordinance of baptising 2,222 persons, Clough himself wrote in the following way:

I did not baptize anyone myself during those days. Someone with authority had to be there to direct, and to see that order prevailed. I stood on a bank, ten feet high, overlooking the baptismal scene... Our six ordained men were there. They took turns, two officiating at a time... As one preacher pronounced the formula: 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost', the other preacher had a candidate before him and was ready again to speak those words and to baptize him likewise.⁴⁰

Therefore Emma Rauschenbusch Clough, who was actually the biographer of the book *Social Christianity in the Orient*, asserts that Clough 'believed in a large use of native agency in evangelism.'⁴¹ So, Perraiah and several other Dalit patriarchs like Tulipi Laxmaih, a Mala, came in a

³⁷ Clough, *Sewing Sandals*, 157-166, 165.

³⁸ Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, 264.

³⁹ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 99.

⁴⁰ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 286.

⁴¹ Clough, *Social Christianity*, ix.

similar way to Clough to ask for baptism.⁴² Some others like A. Subbaiah, Kanakaiah and Tulipi Rangaiah among others were persons behind the success of the AB mission at Ongole.

The other Dalit patriarchs for other missions among the Telugus were Pogula Venkayya, a dacoit become disciple, who triggered the mass conversion of the Mala community in Raghavapuram in the 1860s.⁴³ Taleru Maraya Gabriel, a Mala, is another Dalit patriarch who led his community towards Christianity for the Canadian Baptist mission.⁴⁴ Nanchari, a Mala in the Cuddapah area, made the real breakthrough in evangelism in the north of Cuddapah for CMS.⁴⁵

Dalits Marching into the AMB Mission in MBNR

The early history of the district was the period prior to the coming of the Mennonite Brethren mission in 1906. In this period Chute of the Baptist mission established his mission work in the Mahabubnagar district along with some of the prominent Dalit Christian preachers who were borrowed from the older Ongole Baptist mission.⁴⁶ Thus in one way, the mission work at Mahabubnagar was an extension station of the mission of Ongole and early heroes in the district like Samson Rangaiah and Ambrose, were from the Ongole mission. Even after the arrival of the Mennonite Brethren, the mission depended heavily on native preachers.⁴⁷

After Chute moved to Mahabubnagar on 31 May 1885, conversions followed from the different castes, of course, the majority being from the Dalit groups. Chute in the same year reported 17 baptisms in Mahabubnagar town, and organised the first church on 20 June 1885 with 27 members.⁴⁸ Chute reports that people themselves started to come from long distances to see him, get to know about Christianity and to be baptised:

Soon after arriving here, believers from the district began to come to me requesting baptism. I baptized seventeen in Palmur (Mahabubnagar). At the

⁴² Joseph, *A History*, 24

⁴³ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 61-79; Paul D. Rajaiah, *Triumphs of His Grace: Lives of Eight Indian Christian Laymen of the Early days of Protestant Christianity in India* (Madras: CLS, 1967), 87.

⁴⁴ Malcolm L. Orchard and Katherine S. McLaurin, *The Enterprise: The Jubilee Story of the Canadian Baptist Mission in India, 1874-1924* (Toronto: The Baptist Foreign Mission Board, nd), 174.

⁴⁵ F.F. Gledstone, *The C.M.S. Telugu Mission: Being a Short Account of the Hundred Years, 1841-1941* (Mysore, n.d.), 31.

⁴⁶ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 82 (July 1893), 297.

⁴⁷ Some of the prominent preachers and teachers who came from Ongole and worked with M. B. Mission were, J. Levi, G. John, Aaron Kelly, Dalvai's families, Ongole Basavaiah, etc.,

⁴⁸ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 66 (July, 1886), 278.

close of the year I was able to make a short tour of three weeks, when I baptized six others, making in all, twenty-four baptized during the year. I hear of several others who are believing and wish baptism... there are now Christians planted in eight different villages in the district. Some of them are the leading men in their Palems, full of zeal, and have already began to publish the word of life to the perishing ones around them.⁴⁹

Such peoples' initiative of coming from different parts of the districts for the ordinance of baptism and to know about Christianity appears in Chute's annual reports of 1886-1889.⁵⁰ In the 1887 report, Chute wrote that at the close of afternoon service, 'six intelligent and rejoicing believers' were baptised. They came from villages which were about 40 miles distant. They told Chute that many others also believed in their villages, and if they would go and preach there, they were certain that not less than one hundred would receive baptism.⁵¹ Chute regularly reported that crowds of people continued to come to them from different parts of the districts to know about Christianity and to be baptised.⁵² There were 731 baptised members in the district according to his 1901 report.⁵³ Such Dalits' initiative of coming from different parts of the district for the ordinance of the baptism cannot be attributed fully to the work of Chute.⁵⁴

Chute reported that he had baptised the most influential Madiga in the entire district in 1893 that had much influence not only with Dalits but also among caste people. He says that a number of his friends and relatives were baptised due to his influence.⁵⁵ But Chute did not mention either his name or his native place. This Madiga Christian could have played a somewhat similar role like Yerraguntala Parraiah of the Ongole mission in the conversion movement in this early period in Mahabubnager. Further, Madiga converts from Ongole were engaged in the mission of spreading their new faith. W. Jacob, Madiga, became a Christian and wanted to tell his relatives about this new faith. So he came to Mahabubnagar area to

⁴⁹ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 66 (July, 1886), 278.

⁵⁰ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 66 (July, 1886), 278.

⁵¹ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 67 (March 1887), 78.

⁵² *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 69 (March 1889), 135, 68 (July, 1888), 274.

⁵³ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 81 (July, 1901), 133-34.

⁵⁴ The spread of the news is possible because the Ongole district was famous for producing a fine breed of cattle and the town of Ongole used to hold a big cattle sale once a year. Thousands of people from different regions and the cattle traders used to attend this. There are evidences of such in the district in the 1890s that the cattle dealers from Ongole came to Mahabubnagar to collect money and spread news of conversation about the movement towards the Christianity at Ongole. See Florence R. Weaver, 'A Cattle Show at Ongole', *Missions*, Vol. 9, Sept 1918, p 665; *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 73 (March 1893), 71.

⁵⁵ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 83 (March 1893), 73.

share his faith.⁵⁶ Madigas who were in the cattle trade from Ongole also shared their new faith in Jesus where ever they went for trade.

The native preachers who were brought from Ongole were on their heels carrying the gospel to different parts of the district, while Chute was occupied with the construction of the big bungalow and compound for him. Chute wrote that he did not make use of the opportunity to preach to the people even to those who came to see him from different places. As a result, evangelism done by the these preachers and evangelists. These two quotations make this clear:

After arriving here... I kept the native workers preaching in Palmur (Mahabubnagar) and surrounding district. Soon the natives from villages and all parts of the district began to come to the bungalow in crowds to see us and inquire about the new religion. (As a result) believers from the district began to come to me requesting baptism. I baptized seventeen in Palmur.⁵⁷

This shows that the first converts were the result of the preaching of the Dalit Christians themselves. Two years later, that is in 1888, Chute in his annual report writes:

Crowds of people, from all parts of the districts still continue to visit us at our bungalow and wander through our compound as if they thought it a public park. But I have not been able to improve these opportunities for preaching the gospel and sending the truth into distant parts of the field, as much as I wished, being at present so much occupied with the building of the bungalow. . . (after the completion) I look forward with joyful anticipation to the time when I hope to be able to enter the work of evangelism more effectively.⁵⁸

The heroes of Mahabubnagar are Ambrose, Dianah, Bible women, Samson Rangaiah etc. Both Ambrose and Rangaiah were ordained in 1900. Samson Rangaiah became the first local pastor of Mahabubnagar church and he was also in charge of the boarding school there⁵⁹ whereas Ambrose remained as an effective and powerful touring evangelist. About these two Chute writes that 'they are excellent men well grounded in the word of truth.'⁶⁰ Other locals who served in the American Baptist mission in the district were R. Paul, Bopper Chelamaiah, Bopper Lazarus, Pasham Chandraiah, A. Sunkaiah, Bheema Reddy, Madari Husnaiah, Madari Nathaniel, Pathuri Balaiah, Nandhipeta Balaiah Velpula Nagaiah and Bhoompagu Paul.⁶¹

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⁵⁶ Anna W Hiebert (Mrs. H. T.) Esau, *First Sixty Years of M. B. Missions* (Hillsboro: The MB Publishing House, 1954).

⁵⁷ Chute Report, *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 66 (July 1886), 278.

⁵⁸ Chute Report, *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 68 (July 1888), 274.

⁵⁹ George, *The History of the M.B. Church*, 102.

⁶⁰ George, *The History of the M.B. Church*, 102.

⁶¹ John, *M.B. Church History*, 107 and George, *The History of the M.B. Church*, 106.

The American Mennonite Brethren were attracted to India by the success of Clough's mission among the Madigas at Ongole.⁶² Consequently Bergthold and others reached Nagarkurnool which is also the first American Baptist station and concentrated on the Dalits.⁶³ Bergthold had depended much on the local preachers. He writes in connection to their wages that '...we pushed them (Preachers from Madiga background) into evangelism among their own people and paid them to do so.'⁶⁴ Thus the American Mennonite Brethren Mission, after occupying the mission field in the district, had adopted the strategies of the American Baptists. J.B. Toews, comments that during the first part of the 20th century 'our theology of mission, strategy, and methods and church planting, were largely an adoption from the Baptists.'⁶⁵

The missionaries came as white sahibs during the British rule so even though they came with the aim of uplifting Dalits, preached equality and justice, many missionaries had adopted the style and methods of colonisers. So, the missionaries were concentrating on the institutional and administrative work,⁶⁶ Dalit ministers were faithful in carrying on their mission, particularly the evangelists, villages preachers and Bible women. Even though they received very low financial assistance,⁶⁷ they were faithful in carrying out the gospel and witnessing to Christ in and around villages.⁶⁸ Therefore J.H. Lohrenz, a missionary who was in different stations over a period of 40 years from 1920 onwards, asserts, 'Indigenous Christian workers – evangelists, villages preachers, helpers, Bible women,

⁶² Penner, *The M.B. Mission*, 4.

⁶³ Penner, *The M.B. Mission*, 39. Quoted from Bergthold letter 31 January 1906.

⁶⁴ Penner, *The M.B. Mission*, 147.

⁶⁵ Penner, *The M.B. Mission*, 141.

⁶⁶ The pioneering four AMB missionaries, Pankratz, Bergthold, Voth and Janzen, as soon as they arrived, these missionaries were concerned about building huge bungalows and compounds. Peter Penner calls them 'Master Builders'. These so called 'Master Builders' as soon as they arrived, wanted a separate station. When they got it they would start constructing comfortable bungalows leaving the work of evangelism to the native preachers. Bergthold had started building the first bungalow in Nagarkurnool as soon as he moved there in 1906. Construction of huge compounds consisted of a school, boarding and a hospital. This diverted their attention on to the administration of these institutions rather than concentrating on evangelism. Therefore A.E. Jenzen, the then executive secretary of the Mission Board, who visited India in 1948 after the investigation of the work in India, felt missionaries were too much engaged in the institutional work rather than evangelism. Thus the evangelistic work was left to natives. See Penner, *The M.B. Mission in India*, 121; A.E. Janzen, *Survey of Mennonite Brethren Missions* (Hillsboro, Kans., 1950), 25.

⁶⁷ They received less than Rs. 5 before 1942, only the 56th M.B. Conference in 1942 recommended Rs. 7 to be paid to those who complete three years' bible course, that too, until they find other means of livelihood.

⁶⁸ A.A. Unruch, 'The Ministry of the Local Church', *Indian M.B. Church at Cross Roads* (FULL REF?: 1972), 81.

teachers – have had an important part in the early activities in the mission and of the church. The Lord has wonderfully provided these workers in the beginning and throughout the years'.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Thus it becomes clear that the Dalits initiated and led the conversion movement at Ongole and Mahabubnagar and missionaries responded to it. The native Dalit preachers could have made a remarkable impact because they had easy access to their own community. They were once Dalits who had no education or social status and were forbidden even to enter the temples. Such persons after the conversion came to their own people with the power of the gospel, a message of equality and with the message that the God whom they found would love all of them equally. This might have made a significant impact on other fellow Dalits, because it was not just a verbal message but the message with visual changes such as change of clothing (which they were once denied), reading the Bible (education), having associations with missionaries (status) and foremost the message of equality and love brought by them (they are now pastors and preachers in the temples and churches). Thus Andhra Pradesh has experienced massive group conversions of persons from the Dalit background to Christianity. So it becomes clearer that Dalit Christians always played a remarkable role in the conversion movements in Andhra Pradesh. However, their history was not given proper attention. Therefore, historians studying the history of Christianity in Andhra Pradesh have to grapple with the issue of the marginalised Dalit Christians' role in the formation of the churches in Andhra Pradesh.

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⁶⁹ J.H. Lohrenz, 'The AMB Mission and the Beginning of the Andhra M.B. Church', *The Andhra MB Church of India: Fifty Years in Retrospect 1904-1954* (Hillsboro: BFM, 1954), 5. In 1921 Nagarkurnool station alone had 32 native men preachers and 5 Bible women. By 1929 the whole AMB mission had above 200 native mission workers. The strength of the local evangelists grew to 300 in the mission by 1945.

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: TELUGU BIBLE WOMEN, ITINERANCY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

James Elisha Taneti

Introduction

Christianity among the Telugus spread mostly as a result of the Dalit conversions in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Dalit women converts played a crucial role in introducing Christianity to their communities. They practised Christian mission in various roles as Bible women, nurses, schoolteachers or housewives. Telugu Bible women, professional evangelists, visited Telugu homes and invited women to Christianity. Through their mobility, Bible women not only carried the Christian faith to different communities but also renegotiated their social status.

Christian missionaries, who arrived in the Indian subcontinent during the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, had to depend on the native women in their Christianising efforts. They realised that native communities could be Christianised only through local women as missionaries' access to native homes was limited.¹ Missionaries knew that even local male preachers did not have access to native homes. They were aware that they would have access to Telugu homes only when accompanied by native women. Moreover, Telugu women's familiarity with climatic conditions, native language and local culture made them indispensable to the missionaries' plans.² Telugus were better equipped to face the hot climate of Andhra than missionaries. Their natural ability to communicate with their compatriots in the vernacular made them vital to the missionaries' agenda. The Telugu language that missionaries learned from *munshis*, mostly Brahmins, was not intelligible to Dalits and Shudras who were receptive to the Christian message. Hence, missionaries needed native women to mediate their worldview to the Telugus.

¹ Irene H. Barnes, *Behind the Pardah: The Story of CEZM's Work in India* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1898), 82.

² Jane Haggis, "'Good Wives and Mothers' or 'Dedicated Workers'?" Contradictions of Domesticity in the "Mission of Sisterhood", Travancore, South India," in Kalpana Ram and Margaret Jolly (eds) *Maternities and Modernities: Colonialism and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99.

Telugu Christian women, on their part, had an agenda in collaborating with missionaries. Without doubt, like missionaries, Bible women wanted to introduce Christianity to the local communities and encourage conversions towards Christianity.³ But they also found in Christianity theological resources that justified their social aspirations and religious activism. Telugu women, who were already active in religious affairs of their communities, utilised the avenues available in the missionary movement to reassert their religious leadership. They did so even when the institutional church denied them certain opportunities of service, such as ordained ministry. By mastering the Christian scriptures and disturbing spatial arrangements of the Telugu society, they redrew the social landscape of Telugu society. They found cultural disruption created by colonial and missionary interventions conducive in their struggles for improved status.⁴

However, not all Telugu women collaborated with Christian missionaries nor was everyone eager to convert to Christianity. Most Hindu women resisted the proselytising efforts of the Christian missionaries and discouraged their men from converting to Christianity.⁵ They saw themselves as custodians of native cultures as much as missionaries portrayed them as ‘stumbling blocks’. On the other hand, Christianity appealed to many Dalit and some Sudra women. Caste did play a significant role in their attitudes to Christianity as much as gender. Even while protesting the values that discriminated against them on the basis of caste and gender, many Christian women sought to climb the social ladder by emulating the customs of the ‘high-caste’ communities.⁶ While many Christian women became schoolteachers and nurses, some chose a career as Bible women. The latter defied many patriarchal social norms while complying with some.

During the second half of the 19th century, women preachers visited mostly ‘high-caste’ Hindu and Muslim women. They taught literacy to

³ Geoffrey Burkhart, ‘Danish Women Missionaries: Personal Accounts of Work with South Indian Women’, in Leslie A. Flemming, *Women’s Work for Women: Missionaries and Social Change in Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 60.

⁴ Eliza Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

⁵ Mirinalini Sebastian, ‘Mission without History? Some Ideas for Decolonizing Mission’, *International Review of Mission*, 93.368 (Jan 2004), 75-96. See also my essay, ‘Empowering Mission or Enslaving Enterprise? Women’s Missionaries’ attitudes to Telugu Women’, *Bangalore Theological Forum* 39 (June 2007), 161-172.

⁶ Chad Bauman, ‘Redeeming Indian “Christian” Womanhood: Missionaries, Dalits, and Agency in Colonial India’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 24.2 (2008), 5-27; Eloise Hiebert Meneses, ‘The Birds of the Air: The Christian Challenge to Culture in Defending the Marginalized’, *Missiology: An International Review*, 32.3 (July 2009), 379. Meneses identifies the Dalits’ eagerness to give and take dowry as part of sanskritisation. See also Kent, *Converting Women*, 9.

women in their homes in order to gain access to Hindu and Muslim homes. Inviting these women to become Christians was their agenda. Missionaries categorised these visits to 'high-caste' and Muslim women as *zenana* missions, which literally means mission to the 'secluded cells'. British missionaries were the earliest to engage in the *zenana* mission. The Church of England *Zenana* Missionary Society, whose origins date back to 1852, was the first to undertake the *zenana* mission in coastal Andhra.⁷ The need for such *zenana* visits was not as prominent among the Telugus as it was either in Calcutta or Lahore. Telugu communities did not confine their women in 'dark cells' as much as caste Hindus of other provinces did. Nor were Telugu men and women of 'higher caste' origins so interested in acquiring literacy from the Christian missionaries.

Gradually, during the second half of the century, as Dalits converted to Christianity in groups, women missionaries' attention turned to Dalit hamlets. Many Dalit women themselves became Bible women. Besides introducing Christianity to non-Christians, their work focused on encouraging new converts and teaching them biblical stories. Initially, women missionaries trained the Bible women as apprentices.⁸ During the second and third decades of the 20th century, Protestant missionaries organised specialised Bible Training schools to prepare Bible women. American Baptist missionaries founded a Bible Training School for Women in Nellore in 1913 while Canadian Baptist missionaries started one in Palakonda in 1922, which was shifted to Tuni two years later. The first group of students from Charlotte Swenson Memorial Bible Training School, founded by American Lutheran missionaries in Rajahmundry, graduated in 1927. While missionaries paid most of the salary for the Bible women, women's societies in local fields or synods contributed a portion. In becoming Bible women, these women preachers acquired literacy and mastered a set of scriptural verses, rights denied to women in their pre-Christian cultures. They travelled, blurring the physical boundaries and disrupting the social structures of Telugu society even while seeking social respect.

Telugu women's social and religious aspirations shaped their mobility as much as the norms of social respect regulated their movements. They did not itinerate long and far as their male counterparts did. Nor did they confine themselves to their homes and hamlets as their Telugu sisters did. Through mobility and literacy, Telugu Bible women preached Christianity and, at the same time, blurred the social boundaries of gender and caste in colonial India. This essay analyses the social significance of Bible women's itinerancy, especially during the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. In Telugu society, where spatial arrangements regulate social

⁷ Mary Weitbrecht, *The Women of India and the Christian Work in the Zenana* (London: James Nisbet, 1875), 76.

⁸ Flora Clarke, *Sisters: Canada and India* (Moncton, N.B.: Maritime Press, 1939), 70.

relationships, women's conscious and constant blurring of the geographical boundaries had its social agenda. Through mobility, away from home but not too far from it, and the violation of the geo-social boundaries, Telugu Bible women oscillated between social dissent and cultural conformity.

This essay, however, does not presuppose a static India where people did not travel until British colonisers and Christian missionaries intervened during the 19th century. Instead, I argue that the marginalised groups, such as women and Dalits, sought and found means and justification for their social mobility during the colonial era. Telugu women found the alternative worldview that missionaries brought useful in their social and religious pursuits. They did not abandon one worldview for another but worked with both in order to improve their social status.

Physical Boundaries and Social Structures

The dominant Telugu society regulated social interactions between individuals of different castes or communities. Demarcating boundaries between neighbourhoods was one of the ways of preserving and perpetuating what Peter Berger calls its cultural 'nomos'.⁹ Despite its limitations, Berger's 'nomos' provides a way to explain how territorial restrictions controlled cultural nomos and social groups.¹⁰ The villages were divided and inhabited according to the communal identities.

The practice of endogamy prohibited sexual interactions between individuals of different castes and thus ensured that distinctions between castes remained intact.¹¹ Telugu culture proscribed members of one caste to eat with individuals from other castes.¹² Caste communities forbade their members from entering the neighbourhoods of other castes. The social world or nomos that the dominant created and the victims to some extent appropriated survived because of the moral policing of the communities, which were its 'plausibility structures' or social bases.

⁹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 4. Berger defines nomos as the social world that a community creates for itself and orders its experience. A community in return allows itself to be governed by the nomos. The nomos is vulnerable to social engineering and rests on the community, which is its plausibility structure. The authority of the nomos or the set of meanings are attributed to a cosmic frame of reference. The myth of emergence of different castes from parts of Purusha provided the justification and support for the *varnashrama dharma*.

¹⁰ An assumption that two worldviews cannot exist in one locale or territory is one of the limitations.

¹¹ Dalit leaders, such as B.R. Ambedkar, advocated inter-caste marriage as an antidote to the caste-system.

¹² The practice of Holy Communion when converts from different communities dined together was thus socially subversive.

The *varnashrama dharma* or the nomos that the dominant created not only specified what a particular caste should do (division of labour) but also decided where it should be (geographical boundaries). According to Berger, a nomos or a social world can survive only when situated in a geographical locale.¹³ Caste rules defined their members' social relationships and fenced their geographical boundaries.¹⁴ Each Telugu village was clearly divided into separate locales, *petas* or *palles*, according to the caste identity. Brahmins, the *agravarnas*, who were ranked 'highest' in the social ranking, lived in *agraharams*, higher in altitude. The Vaishya subgroups, such as *komitis* or *shavakars*, lived adjacent to the main bazaar of each village or town. The *kamma* or *reddy veedhis* were (and continue to be) the power centres. Malas and Madigas lived in hamlets called *peta* or *wada* at the fringes of a village. Popular religious shrines, weekly fairs and water bodies¹⁵ were exceptions to these spatial boundaries.¹⁶

A community kept a complete vigilance over the physical movements within its locale. They fenced themselves from outside influences, minimizing disruption of the nomos. Breaching of the territorial boundaries was considered defiling both to the trespasser and also to the violated space. Mobility thus both blurred the physical and community boundaries and also threatened the 'purity' of the communities.¹⁷ The dominant prohibited travel: (i) overseas (ii) between the villages and (iii) between different caste-based neighbourhoods. Travel across the seas to foreign communities exposes an individual to another nomos and the return home can open the possibility of competing social worlds. Mobility between the caste-based neighbourhoods potentially subverts the social distinctions upon which the *varnashrama dharma* rested. Prohibition of travel across the shores aimed at preventing the disruption of the nomos while the one on mobility between the neighbourhoods was to preserve the social hierarchy.

Most Hindu communities in the subcontinent believed that travel to a foreign country would defile an individual and disrupt her worldview.¹⁸ Brahminical propriety required that an individual who travelled overseas

¹³ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*. Inderpal Grewel's *Home and Harem: Nations, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). See also Timothy D. Hall's *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*. 50.

¹⁵ Wells were not shared in most cases though.

¹⁶ The old maps of Samalkot, my hometown, illustrate how clearly the neighbourhoods were divided according to the caste identities. Although the ponds and wells were shared, Dalits were not allowed to fetch water or walk into the pond when a member of 'caste' background was bathing or fetching water. For more on village architectures, see also J.W. Pickett *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1933), 63-64. Hereafter, Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements*.

¹⁷ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*. 50.

¹⁸ Grewel, *Home and Harem*, 139.

should undergo the rites of *shuddhi* or purification in order to be welcomed back into the community.¹⁹ A traveller who crossed the oceans is considered defiled for two reasons. First, some Hindu mythologies identified the seawaters as defiling monsters. Second, the traveller associated herself with aliens who were born outside the Hindu social structure of caste.²⁰

Brahminical social order also restricted travel of an individual, especially of the marginalised, among the villages. While the travel of 'extended' families to sacred sites as part of a pilgrimage was permissible, the travel of individuals, especially Dalits and women, was restricted. This restriction on mobility denied the enslaved the flavour of freedom, which travels away from the hometown offered. Dalit men and women passed by the village boundaries, *polimera*, to work in the agricultural fields. It is a space where they could sing songs of freedom but always under the vigilance of landlords. Dalits also travelled across the villages in order to carry news of someone's death, a task that did not await a kind reception. The auditors of the message often vented their grief, shock and anger either with a stare or a slap. Women, especially those of caste origins, could not cross the village boundaries unless accompanied by a male member of the family, even if it is a small boy. It was believed that malevolent spirits that reside at the outskirts defiled women if they crossed the village boundaries. Women of caste background were required to purify themselves after returning home.

A third restriction was on the mobility between different neighbourhoods within a village. As mentioned earlier, each community was assigned a space to live in the traditional village architecture. The phenomenon of members of two or more castes living in a locale is relatively new. It emerged during the colonial era and followed thereafter when a centralised power beyond the village arbitrarily secured a piece of land and distributed it to the homeless families of various castes. Certain 'high-caste' families did not need to live in such 'mixed' terrains, as they owned lands or their caste communities accommodated them. Dalit families were not welcomed even in such colonies.

In a highly demarcated society, caste and outcaste communities strictly barred people from other castes entering their territory. When such spatial arrangements were violated, both the trespasser and the transgressed were considered defiled. While the community of the trespasser ritually purified the individual, the owners of the desecrated space cleansed the site with turmeric waters. Even Malas and Madigas washed their streets if a Brahmin

¹⁹ The ritual involved either burning one's tongue or shaving one's head or a ritual bath.

²⁰ Even the so-called great soul, Mohandas Gandhi of Gujarat, had to undergo such ritual of purification when he returned from South Africa in 1914. See Grewel, *Home and Harem*, 139.

passed by their streets, as a sign of protest but in conformity with a custom that victimised them.

Travel, Mobility and a Disrupted Nomos

The socially marginalised groups were not mere recipients of this nomos or social world. They appropriated this social order even while subverting it, a process which Peter Berger calls ‘social engineering’.²¹ Pilgrimages were exceptions to the taboos concerning travel. Grewel construes travel to sacred shrines more as part of *bhakti* spirituality than of Brahminical propriety. Thus pilgrimages were part of the counterculture or an alternative social world that the subalterns were creating. Some Dalit women took up life-long pilgrimages wandering from one shrine to another, commanding respect and dignity that their social locations denied them.²²

The British colonial mechanism and its judiciary, which often intervened and arbitrated, made the moral policing by the dominant castes difficult. The transportation facilities, motor vehicles and buses, blatantly obliterated the geographical boundaries and challenged the native constructs of time and space. The roads that the colonial Public Works Department built sometimes vitiated these boundaries, often amid the protests from the local elite. The cash economy necessitated Dalits to seek customers beyond their village boundaries. The recruitment of Dalits as village peons took them to streets as announcers that otherwise were closed to them. Their mobility disrupted the traditional economy and social structures.

The Dalit leaders, who travelled across villages, led the series of massive Dalit conversions to Christianity. Those who converted, in turn, journeyed to other villages, inviting other Dalit communities to convert. The highways and byways of the Krishna district were Pagolu Venkayya’s work place, as he earned his livelihood by looting travellers. Venkayya from Raghavapuram later went to Vijayawada and met Thomas Y. Darling, a Church Missionary Society missionary, inviting him to his village.²³ Yerraguntla Periah from Tallkondapaud, near Ongole, heard about Christianity and met F.N. Alexander, a Church Missionary Society missionary in Eluru. He visited a kin while travelling from the north on his leather business.²⁴ Taleru Marayya, who was born in Gunnapudi, near

²¹ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 45.

²² Joyce B. Flueckiger, ‘Wandering from “hills to valleys” with the goddess: Protection and Freedom in the Matamma tradition of Andhra’, in Tracy Pintchman *Women’s Lives, Women’s Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35-54.

²³ F.F. Gledstone, *The CMS Telugu Mission: Being a Short Account of the Hundred Years, 1841-1941* (Mysore: Wesley Press & Publishing House, 1941), 19.

²⁴ John Clough, *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914), 84.

Machilipatnam, studied in Rajahmundry and eventually started a tannery in Kakinada. While travelling to Chennai, he visited the Ramapatnam Seminary and invited the McLaurin family, Canadian Baptist missionaries, to Kakinada.²⁵ Other Telugu Dalit leaders geographically crossed their village boundaries before their conversion to Christianity.²⁶

The marginalised groups, Dalits and women, violated all three restrictions of territorial mobility. Inderpal Grewel in her fascinating work, *Home and Harem*, analyses the culture of travel during the colonial era. She argues that travel, for the affluent sections, was identical with modernity while it meant livelihood for those at the social margins.²⁷ Men and women of 'lower' castes travelled as servants, sailors and unskilled laborers during the colonial period.²⁸ While some travelled to England, Africa or the Caribbean, many ventured across the shores to Burma or Sri Lanka looking for employment, especially during the times of drought and famine. Telugu Dalits from the coastal district often travelled to Burma.²⁹

Women also travelled across the oceans, though not often. Americus Timpany, a Canadian Baptist missionary, travelled with two Telugu Christian women aboard a ship from New York in 1867.³⁰ Though their social identity and travel motive were not specified, one was identified as Krishnalu. Both women earlier allied with American Baptist missionaries after their conversion. They were recorded to have taught Telugu to Timpany.

The marginalised crossed the village *polimeras* more often. As agricultural workers Dalit women walked out of the residential area every day during the seasons of sowing, weeding and harvest. Dalit women went to neighbouring villages to sell their products, such as baskets and mats, or vegetables, challenging relationships of dependence in the traditional village economy. A few of them walked across the villages and entered Hindu neighbourhoods as soothsayers, claiming to know the futures of caste people. They claimed to have possessed the very spirit world that the dominant used to threaten them. Besides pilgrimages to sacred shrines,

²⁵ John Craig, *Forty Years Among the Telugus: A History of the Mission of the Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, Canada, to the Telugus, South India 1867-1907* (Toronto: John Craig: 1908), 34.

²⁶ See my essay on 'The Beginnings of Christianity among the Telugus', *Indian Church History Review* (December 2008).

²⁷ Grewel, *Home and Harem*, 160.

²⁸ Grewel, *Home and Harem*, 160.

²⁹ Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements*, 81. The British colonial officials encouraged such immigration in the empire. See the story of John Rangiah in Agnes Baskerville, *Radiant Lights and Little Candles: Being a Group of Stories of Indian Characters for Children* (np: nd), 13.

³⁰ M.L. Orchard and K. McLaurin, *The Enterprise: The Jubilee Story of the Canadian Baptist Mission in India, 1874-1924* (Toronto: The Baptist Foreign Mission Board, nd), 151. See Shenston, *Teloogoo Scrap Book* (Brantford: Expositor Book and Jobs Office, 1888), 47.

Dalit priestesses led ritual processions on an annual basis and in the times of disease and natural calamity.³¹ Dalit women subverted the rules and converted what were seemingly exceptions into 'rules'.

Sudra women, on their part, participated in this social engineering. Sudra women, such as Bandikatla Veeramma, itinerated and preached in 'messianic' movements, such as those led by Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and Yogi Nasraiah in the late 19th century.³² Veeramma not only crossed the village boundaries but also social division by visiting Dalit hamlets. Though we are not aware of any Telugu Brahmin women who travelled across the subcontinent, the movements of Pandita Ramabai³³ and Chandra Leela³⁴ attest to the travel practices of 'high-caste' women. However, we are not sure of the frequency of such 'pilgrimages' in Telugu speaking regions.³⁵

Christian missionaries encouraged mobility and celebrated travel. The missionary literature from the period celebrated the people who travelled. Flora Clarke, a Canadian Baptist missionary in Vizianagaram, acclaimed the visit of Rajaram Mohan Roy who, according to her, was the first caste man to have crossed the ocean.³⁶ She located this landmark within the reign of the late 'Queen Empress'. Clarke implicitly held that such culture of travel was possible only because of colonial intervention.

However, not all missionaries praised travel. A few viewed travel as a threat to the status quo and hence echoed the nationalists' critique of it. Adam D. Rowe, an American Lutheran missionary, shared the sentiments of the editors of 'the Hindu', a newspaper published in Chennai, who in an editorial, entitled 'The Travelled Hindu', criticised Hindus who travelled abroad and adapted a Western lifestyle. Rowe flayed Mary Joseph alias Adilakshmi, a matron in the Girls' Boarding School in Guntur, for adopting Western culture.³⁷ Joseph was a maid in a missionary's family and accompanied them on a foreign tour. After staying in Europe for several

³¹ Wilber Theodore Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1925), 25.

³² Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals: Tales of Telugu Pariah Tribe* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 2000 [1899]), 119.

³³ Most postcolonial writers find the life of Pandita Ramabai fascinating. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 147-49; Uma Chakravati, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: STREE, 2003). See also Grewel, *Home and Harem*, 178-87.

³⁴ Ada Lee, *An Indian Priestess: The Life of Chundra Lela* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1903).

³⁵ Grewel interprets Ramabai more as a teacher than as a pilgrim herself, Grewel, *Home and Harem*.

³⁶ Clarke, *Sisters*, 144.

³⁷ A.D. Rowe, *Every-day Life in India: Illustrated from Original Photographs* (New York: American Tract Society, 1881), 322.

years, Joseph returned to Guntur with a European lifestyle. Rowe ridiculed Joseph as a 'full pledged native Christian lady.'³⁸ The ascendancy of an 'ayah' to be a matron of a school and a colleague with similar culture and equal claims would have provoked Rowe's sarcasm. Rowe hardly served for seven years (1874-1882) in Guntur and Bapatla and was thirty-three years old when he wrote this book.

But for the most part, missionaries translated and distributed stories of travelling women. Anna Kugler, an American Lutheran medical missionary, published and sold biographies of two Brahmin women who traversed the subcontinent, at her hospital in Guntur. Bible women in the hospital were asked to sell John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a Puritan classic, and biographies of Ramabai, a Marathi Brahmin, and Leela, a Nepali Brahmin.³⁹ All three classics highlight mobility. The latter two recount journeys of two Brahmin widows who covered all the directions of the subcontinent. According to the narratives, Ramabai and Leela not only travelled but also mastered Hindu scriptures only to find them irrelevant. Chandra Leela visited the Jagannath temple in Orissa, Ramanath temple in Tamilnadu, Dwarakanath temple in the west coast, and Amarnath temple in the north. Ramabai did not lag behind Leela in covering different directions of the subcontinent.

The missionary literature produced to educate the children in Europe and North America also focussed on natives who journeyed.⁴⁰ These travel stories argue that salvation could not be found anywhere in the subcontinent except in the mission bungalow. They depict a static people who were stirred to move by colonial presence and missionary intervention. Travel symbolised discontent and restlessness. These tales also celebrated travel as a remedy.

Besides publishing literature, Christian missionaries themselves demonstrated mobility, but only partially. Missionaries' travel was a variance from the Evangelical preachers' practice of itinerancy. Unlike the Methodist preachers of the late 18th century who itinerated on horses for hundreds of miles in the nascent United States of America, missionaries

³⁸ Rowe, *Every-day Life*, 322.

³⁹ Ann Kugler, *Guntur Mission Hospital, Guntur, India* (np: The Women's Missionary Society of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1928), 44.

⁴⁰ *Pictures of Hindoo Life; or, India without the Gospel, and India with the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, nd); *Shesh Achurjya: The Young Brahmin Who Wanted to See God* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, nd); *Heathen Sacrifices, the Hindoo Girl, and Little George* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, nd); *Mr. Moffett and the Bechuanans and the Little Hindoo Baby* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, nd); *Cousin Rosa: The Little Girl from India* (New York: Sunday School Union, 1857); Mary Martha Sherwood *The History of Little Henry and His Bearer* (Wellington: np, 1816) and *The Last Days of Boosy, the Bearer of Little Henry* (London: Houlston & Stoneman, 1842); Jamie Gordon's *Jamie Gordon; or, the Orphan* (London: 1851).

established their mission ‘stations’.⁴¹ But missionaries in India were not completely stationary; they toured different villages but always returned to the station from which they operated. They took tents on the bullock carts or horses, camping in different villages or ‘outstations’ and staying away from the station for several days.⁴²

As mentioned earlier, given the practical needs in the subcontinent, missionaries themselves adapted a stationed lifestyle. Family needs and the upbringing of children, in particular, necessitated that they live in mission compounds. They also had to live in one locale to establish rapport with and credibility among the community that they sought to Christianise. For the strategic reasons of avoiding conflict and wastage of resources, missionaries drew boundaries to their sphere of activities except in the urban areas of India. They established interdenominational courts to arbitrate between the offenders who violated these geographical boundaries. However, in most cases, there were at least two mission societies in one village, to work among rival communities. For example, Wesleyan missionaries in the Telangana region, who were working among the Mala converts, invited American Episcopal Methodist missionaries to start work among the Madiga communities.⁴³ Missionaries themselves had to make spatial divisions based on the social stratification. The practice of ‘comity’ was not only a point of co-operation among the missionaries but also an accommodation based on native spatial arrangement. Thus missionaries who promoted mobility also had to adjust the ideal to local conditions. Meanwhile, many Telugu male preachers practised itinerancy. Puroshottam Choudary, a hymn writer, travelled around 2,000 kilometers (1,300 miles), debating in market places and inviting non-Christians to convert.⁴⁴ But Bible women’s practice of travel differed from that of celebrated ‘high-caste’ preachers and Western missionaries.

⁴¹ Hall, *Contested Boundaries*.

⁴² John E. Clough, *From Darkness to Light: The Story of a Telugu* (Boston: W.G. Corthell, 1882). Clough describes the Telugu culture in this semi-fiction written in the genre of travel journal. See also Jacob Chamberlain, *In the Tiger’s Jungle: And Other Stories of Missionary Work Among the Telugus of India* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1896), in which Chamberlain reported some of his journeys. In one of his tours, Chamberlain traversed the Nizam’s Dominion and the Northern Circars, taking more than four months and covering 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles). Such long evangelistic tours by missionaries were exceptions though.

⁴³ Colyer Sackett, *Out of the Miry Clay: The Story of the Haidarabad Mission to the Outcastes* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 1924), 38.

⁴⁴ Eustace Bromley, *They were Men Sent from God: A Centenary Record of Gospel Work in India among the Telugus in the Godavari Delta and Neighbouring Parts, 1836-1936* (Bangalore: The Scripture Literature Press, 1937), 10. The travel stories of Sadhu Sunder Singh also illustrate this culture.

Bible Women and Mobility

Almost all Bible women itinerated. They carried a Bible and wore a white sari, seeking acceptability in the society. While one gave them legitimacy, the other made them less threatening to the community. The norms of social respect conditioned their itinerancy even while their aspirations for social dignity fuelled their practices.

Not all Bible women had to travel. A few of them were stationed in hospitals, where they visited patients, sold Christian literature and introduced Christianity both to the patients and the family members who attended them. Given the taboos regarding cooking and a strong possibility of Dalit chefs preparing food in the hospital cafeteria, most families of Hindu background accompanied patients with a stove and lived in the hospital until the patient was discharged. After healing, they went to a Hindu shrine and took a sacred bath, purifying their bodies 'defiled' due to their association with Dalit nurses and missionary doctors.⁴⁵ In many cases, Bible women functioned also as nurses. The roles of a nurse and Bible woman overlapped so much that in Medak Hospital, Abishekamma, a Nursing Superintendent, functioned also as Chief Bible woman.⁴⁶ Esther and Parvathamma were among those appointed as Bible women in the Guntur Hospital.⁴⁷ Every hospital needed a nurse and a Bible woman. It is likely that missionaries required their native women to play both roles whenever there was a shortage of personnel.

A few Bible women taught literacy in schools whenever there was a dearth of teachers. Teaching literacy too was part of Bible women's job description and the Bible Training Schools equipped them with the necessary skills.⁴⁸ Esther, a Bible woman at Guntur Hospital, is acclaimed to have taught literacy to six ayahs in one year.⁴⁹ Neela, a Biblewoman at Bobbili, was appointed a Bible woman as well as the matron of the boarding school.⁵⁰

But appointments in hospitals and schools were a few exceptions to the rule. Most Bible women were located in towns and villages and visited homes. They either stood on street corners or sat on verandahs, singing Christians hymns and retelling biblical stories. Not many Bible women violated the prohibitions on sea-voyage. Saramma, who was a missionary

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⁴⁵ Kugler, *Guntur Mission Hospital*, 64.

⁴⁶ Arley Munson, *Jungle Days: Being the Experiences of an American Woman Doctor in India* (New York: Appleton, 1913), 43.

⁴⁷ Kugler, *Guntur Mission Hospital*, 42-44.

⁴⁸ Eaton, *Among the Telugus: Canadian Baptist Foreign Missions Annual Report* (Toronto: Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1924), 51.

⁴⁹ Kugler, *Guntur Mission Hospital*, 44.

⁵⁰ Matilda F. Churchill, *Letters from My Home in India* (Toronto: McClelland Goodchild & Stewart, 1916), 283.

in Burma during the late 19th century, was an exception.⁵¹ She was appointed a Bible woman only after migrating to Burma. However, most Bible women breached the restrictions on crossing the village and community boundaries, but sought legitimacy from both the existing nomos and the alternative social world that they preached.

The Bible women's ability to read and recite biblical verses offered them religious authority. With a few exceptions, Bible women, mostly of Dalit background, acquired literacy, which only a few of their Hindu sisters of their day did. Their mastery over religious scriptures earned them respect among the 'high-caste' women.⁵² Mastery over religious scriptures was the prerogative of Brahmin men in traditional society. By memorising and reciting scriptures, Bible women earned admiration from their compatriots. Katherine S. McLaurin, writing a short biography of Addepalli Mariamma, a Dalit Bible woman from Vuyyur, recalled that Brahmin women felt 'galloped' by her 'wonderful memory'.⁵³ Familiarity with the Scripture, which occupied a prominent position in the Protestant tradition, offered legitimacy to Bible women whose identity was associated with the Bible.

The uniform of white saree played a strategic role. Bible women wore a white mull blouse and a white sari. Eaton interpreted the choice of white as a symbol of purity, protection and witness.⁵⁴ Nowhere did the Bible women expound on why they wore white and what role it played in their visits. The dominant Telugu culture might have shared the missionaries' identification of white with purity, as most Hindus are as racist as Christian missionaries and demonised anything that is dark. There is little to explain why white epitomised protection and witness.

Kent, who studied the practices of Tamil Bible women, offers a convincing explanation. According to Eliza Kent, a white sari made a Bible woman 'asexual and ascetic'. According to the Telugu culture, widows are required to wear a white sari. The choice of a white sari for Bible women indicates their eagerness to look modest and sexually less threatening to their hosts, although most men were outside their homes during the day when Bible women visited. Moreover, most Bible women either lived with

⁵¹ Sarahamma, *Sarahamma: Telugu Bible Woman, Rangoon, Burma* (Boston: Woman's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, nd). See *United Baptist Women's Missionary Union (UBWMU) Report, 1941-1942*, 35.

⁵² Katherine S. McLaurin, 'Addepalli Mariamma: A Black Pearl', *Telugu Trophies: The Jubilee Story of Some of the Principal Telugu Converts in the Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission in India from 1874-1924* (Toronto: Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board, 1925), 135. This compilation of biographies has been edited by John Craig, J.R. Stillwell, Mrs I.C. Archibald and Agnes E. Baskerville. This story has been cited by Orville Daniel in his book, *Moving with the Times: The Story of Baptist Outreach from Canada in to Asia, South America, and Africa* (Toronto: The Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board, 1973), 47.

⁵³ Daniel, *Moving with the Times*, 47.

⁵⁴ Eaton, *Among the Telugus*, 1931, 90.

their husbands or outlived their husbands. According to the roll in 1951, there were 81 Bible women employed by the Canadian Baptist mission in India. Of the 48 Bible women whose marital status is recorded, 22 were widowed and 23 married, while three remained single.⁵⁵ Two of the three single Bible women were placed in mission institutions.

Bible women's itinerancy both defied the cultural norms and in some ways complied with it. It conformed to the social norms of respect even while challenging a few. They visited hamlets and homes but always returned home at the end of the day. They cycled too, but not too far. They did stay from home beyond dusk to attend professional development programmes, such as a refresher course, but only once or twice a year, a practice not encouraged but tolerated. They were caring mothers as well as dedicated workers. While their profession took them out, their maternal responsibility brought them back. While the former defied the cultural norms of mobility, the latter complied with the tradition and earned them respect. Thus the Bible women were balancing between existing cultural norms while engineering a new *nomos*.

As part of the training, the prospective Bible women at the Eva Rose York Bible Training School, Tuni, went to neighbouring villages as teams on bullock-carts or walking and camped for two days, i.e. Friday and Saturday.⁵⁶ During the 19th century, missionaries used slow means, such as ox carts, bicycles, boats and horses.⁵⁷ In the first half of the 20th century, they began to use jeeps and cars, which were more challenging to the local idioms of space and time.⁵⁸ However, Telugus gradually adapted to faster transportation systems. The Telugus themselves thronged public buses which operated towards the middle of the 20th century.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Christianity in India, as it is in many other non-Western regions, is a religion of the marginalised. The church in modern India is constituted mostly of Dalits, women and indigenous communities. Protestant Christianity found roots or branched out with the initiative of local

⁵⁵ Undated typed manuscript probably written around 1951 available at the Baptist Archives at the Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

⁵⁶ Laura Bain, *Tidings* (Yarmouth, NS: United Baptist Woman's Missionary Union of the Atlantic Provinces) (February, 1927), 2. See Laura Bain, *Among the Telugus*, *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 1927, 99. They left the campus on Thursday and returned on Saturday evening. Sometimes they travelled by train as well.

⁵⁷ Swan Swanson, *Foundations for Tomorrow: A Century of Progress in Augustana Lutheran World Missions* (Minneapolis: Board of World Missions of Augustana Lutheran Church, 1960), 48. See Clarke, *Sisters*, 288.

⁵⁸ Clarke, *Sisters*, 402. Helen Bailey, *Jeep Tracks* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954).

⁵⁹ Bailey, *Jeep Tracks*, 79.

Christian women who practised mission as housewives, Bible women, schoolteachers and nurses. Many Christian women practised their mission as care givers, healers, schoolteachers and Bible women. Bible women itinerated and preached. Telugu Christian women's engagement with Christianity appropriated the gospel in native terms and subverted it to serve the interests of the marginalised. It also impacted the status of women in the Telugu cultures.

The impact of the Christian message on the social status of Bible women cannot be construed in linear terms. While introducing Christianity to the Telugu communities, Telugu Bible women also asserted their religious leadership. In their mobility, Bible women defied cultural restrictions. But in their seeking social respect, they also adhered to some cultural norms. However, Telugu women's deliberate blurring of the socio-geographical boundaries resulted in their social mobility.

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REVISITING THE MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT AT PARKAL: A RECOVERY OF THE ROLE OF THE DALIT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Bethel Krupa Victor

Introduction

In general, mission refers to the concept of sending someone to accomplish something. Mission was primarily aimed at ensuring the salvation of souls through proclamation and baptism. The modern discussion on mission clearly shows that the concept of mission could be discerned at two levels of meaning – the broader and the more specific. In a broader sense mission is understood as the participation of Christians in God's activity. In a narrow and more specific sense, it refers to the church's specific and deliberate activities to communicate the reality of God and God's salvation in a particular situation. However, Christian mission today is in search of a renewed identity. It becomes more evident and challenging in the context of the indigenous peoples' constant struggle for reclaiming their cultural identity. For the past 85 years, the missionaries from Kerala were able to carry out a fruitful missional work at a village called Parkal, Warangal District, Andhra Pradesh. It is obvious that the subjects of mission – the Dalit Christian community of the region, have played an enormous role in the origin and development of missional engagement along with the missionaries in this area.

A closer look at the mission reports and letters of the mission clearly shows the fact that often mission histories highlighted the role played by the missionaries in the proclamation of the gospel. Not much is said about the role played by the recipients of the gospel and thus *it continues to be a history of the mission but not of the people*. It is in this context it becomes imperative to examine how the Dalit Christians of the Parkal Mission have understood or perceived and continue to perceive the 'mission' in the light of their life situation and to recover and reconstruct their role in its success. Therefore the task at hand is to revisit the missional engagement at Parkal through the eyes of its subjects and to recover the Dalit agency and agenda in the Parkal Mission, Andhra Pradesh. The aim of this paper is to examine the historical processes of mission among Dalit communities focussing on the role played by the native evangelists in the proclamation of the gospel

and the Dalit communities in appropriating it by being subjects of the mission. So this is both a historical and missiological survey.

Parkal Mission: A Mission of the Church

The missionary work in the Parkal area was started by the then Anglican diocese of Travancore-Cochin (now Church of South India (CSI) Madhya Kerala Diocese after 1947) in 1924 and was carried on in partnership with CSI Dornakal Diocese in the beginning. At present it works in partnership with CSI Karimnagar Diocese since the formation of the diocese in the year 1978. The mission was named after the village where the missionaries finally established their mission headquarters to carry on their evangelistic work. Missionaries have been working in this place for the past 85 years covering more than 250 villages surrounding its headquarters. Today this mission area has more than 26,000 Christians.¹

Origin of the Mission Work

The late Bishop V.S. Azariah of Dornakal was the guest speaker at the centenary celebrations of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1916 in Kerala. It was the challenge of Bishop Azariah at the centenary celebrations that inspired the then Anglican Diocese of Travancore-Cochin to open a 'Foreign Mission' in the then Nizam State, the present Andhra Pradesh, Telengana Region.² Bishop Azariah also promised that he would show a place in his Diocese of Dornakal as a missionary field. As a response to that challenge, in 1917 at a meeting of the Anglican Men's Union it was decided to adopt some unevangelised districts in a more backward area of India as a mission field.³ Bishop Gill warmly welcomed the idea, deputations were sent out to the parishes and assured of sufficient support, the plan began to materialise. In 1924, the Anglican Diocese of Travancore and Cochin had sent two young men A.J. Thomas and K.E. Eapen and his wife as the first missionaries (nationals) from the Diocese to start the mission work in this area. They reached the Dornakal diocese on 22 of February 1924 to learn the Telugu language and thus the 'Foreign Mission', now 'Parkal Mission' was started. It was Mallela Davidu, who wrote many devotional songs and was known as the protagonist of lyrical evangelism who was helping them to get acquainted with the local culture and

¹ As per the information displayed at 'Mission House cum Parsonage of the Mission, in Charge of Parkal Mission', Parkal.

² Eira M. Dalton, *Fellow Workers with God: A Triple Jubilee Publication of Madhya Kerala Diocese* (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1966), 52.

³ Dalton, *Fellow Workers*, 52.

language. Due to ill health A.J. Thomas had to return to Kerala and his place was filled by T.M. Thomas.⁴

These new missionaries were stationed at a place called Katrapalli village and started the missionary work on 15 October 1927. They stayed in a small hut and visited surrounding villages preaching the good news. Katrapalli was a very remote place and no proper road infrastructure was available to reach the village, although recently the road infrastructure was improved by the local Panchayat. Knowing the difficulties involved in travelling, two pioneer missionaries decided to stay and start mission work in this place because, 15 kilometres away from Katrapalli, there was a place called Mulugu where missionaries from the Krishna Godavari diocese⁵ were already working. It was later that the late Rev A.J. Somasunderam (1910) from Krishna Godavari diocese taught the local language (Telugu) to the pioneer missionaries. The missionaries of Krishna Godavari diocese (Mulugu Mission) have helped the new missionaries in Katrapalli in many ways. In 1935 the mission centre was shifted to the village called Parkal, with an intention to extend and provide constant spiritual nurture to the believers. Within no time the surrounding villages were reached with the gospel. The congregations in the Central Kerala diocese extended prayer and financial support for the work in the Parkal Mission.

Development

Parkal was the game sanctuary of the then Nizam of Hyderabad, especially famous for hunting wild animals. The inhabitants of Parkal had been untouched by civilisation and hence lived in primitive conditions. About 85 percent of them were agricultural labourers and were uneducated. Into this economically backward region, missionaries from Kerala came in the year 1924. It is an undeniable fact that the mission stands as a witness to the remarkable contribution made by the CSI Madhya Kerala Diocese for the past 85 years for the liberation and empowerment of the Dalits and other communities in this region. In this mission field large numbers of Madigas and Malas and Sudras were added to the Dornakal diocese under the auspices of the CSI Board of Mission at a later stage. In addition there were other missions which continued the work under the patronage of the Dornakal diocese, such as the Church of England, Zenana Mission in 1899, Indian Missionary Society of Tirunelveli in 1903, Singareni Mission founded in 1911. Later the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) also started its work in this region. But gradually all these missions

⁴ Dalton, *Fellow Workers*, 52.

⁵ Mathews P. Oommen, 'Parkal Mission History', *30th Anniversary Souvenir* (Karimnagar: Diocese of Karimnagar, 2008), no page number.

amalgamated into the CSI Diocese of Dornakal after its formation in 1947, including the CMS mission.⁶

Recollecting his first contact with the gospel, Bochu Yohan says that from his memory it was the Baptist missionaries, who were stationed at Hanamkonda (45 km away from Parkal), Warangal District who were the first ones to start the evangelistic work at Parkal, and later on when the missionaries from Kerala came they handed over the responsibility to them.⁷ From 1930 a continuous stream of baptisms has taken place and always there were unreached villages asking for teaching. Medical work was carried on, and boarding schools were started. This was a period of Dalit awakening in this area. The search for social recognition, justice, human dignity and freedom found expression in religious protest movements. For the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, Dr B.R. Ambedkar was a symbol of Dalit aspirations. The Christian conversion movement in this area can be looked at as part of the religious movements of the Dalits' quest for a new social identity.⁸ Consequently, the mission work spread and mission centres were started in different villages.

By 1947 there were 23 villages in the Mission and 1638 baptised Christians and women workers had begun a branch of the Bethel Ashram there. In 1951 there were 2,200 Christians in 31 villages. In March 1961 a church for the Mission – St Paul's Church Parkal, was dedicated with much joy. The year 1966 was the year of triple jubilee and of the golden jubilee of youth work. In connection with these historical events the youth of the CSI Madhya Kerala diocese opened another mission in this same region. This mission field called the 'Andhra Mission' was stationed at a village called Mogullapalli, and sponsored solely by the youth of the Madhya Kerala diocese.⁹

Andhra Mission: Origin and Development

Seeing the scope for education, the favourable response from the villagers and the vision they had to gain many for the kingdom of God, the Madhya Kerala Diocese commission selected Mogullapalli as the centre for the Andhra mission field. Mogullapalli is 60 km from Warangal and 20 km away from Parkal. History records that an invitation to this village was given by Franklin, an English teacher of the Government High School, through the missionary the Rev I.C. Kurian when he visited this village. In

⁶ Oommen, 'Parkal Mission History'.

⁷ Interview with Mr. Bochu Yohan, Evangelist, Parkal Mission, Parkal, on 4 July 2009.

⁸ M.E. Prabhakar, 'Rural Telengana: Socio-Economic Situations, with particular Reference to the CSI Karimnagar Diocesan Area', *Religion and Society* 29.1 (1982), 3-28.

⁹ Binju Varghese Kuruvilla, 'Brief History of Andhra Mission', *30th Anniversary Souvenir* (Karimnagar: Diocese of Karimnagar, 2008), no page number.

the year 1967 the first missionary along with his family reached this village. Missionaries conducted night schools, educated people and provided medical care and started technical institutions teaching tailoring and typewriting to uplift the poor and the marginalised. They started many centres, constructed churches and educated the poor, especially the Dalits. At present there are two homeopathic hospitals functioning, mainly treating snakebites and scorpion stings irrespective of religion or caste, and a primary school (English medium). The missionary methods followed were preaching, education, training of native agents and medical work. Most involved in these missions and churches are Dalit Christians – Malas and Madigas and small pockets of tribal Christians such as Lambadis, Gonds and Koyas and other tribal groups. Today Parkal Mission stands as a mission moulded and sustained by the Dalit Christians of the mud houses.

While interviewing and discussing with the people or beneficiaries of the mission, it became very clear that the pioneer missionaries perceived conversion of the local people as their primary task. The missionaries were thought of as the representatives of the church and the agency which sent them into the field. Such a perspective of mission divides the community into saved/unsaved, reached/unreached and seeks to convert people into a particular understanding of the Christian faith where Christians and ‘non-Christians’ are separated into disparate Christian communities in a manner which is neither consistent with the gospel message nor facilitates the liberative transformation of the situation and the people.¹⁰ According to this view, the mission of the church includes expansion of the church, proselytism and propagation of the gospel. Mission was an attribute of the church. The church possessed the mission, in the sense that she had a mission, since she was the kingdom. God’s mission was directed to the church which in turn tried to salvage men and women from the world by bringing them within its fold.¹¹

Contrary to the above mentioned view, the purpose of God’s mission is to seen more as enabling human beings to establish relationship with God, with others and with the creation. It is holistic mission and it becomes clear in Jesus’ words in Luke 4:18-19. It is a mission oriented towards the satisfaction of basic human needs, including not only the need for God, but also the need for food, love, housing, clothes, physical and mental health and a sense of human dignity. Love for God is inseparable from the love for neighbour (Mt. 22:40).

This argument becomes further clear when we look at David J. Bosch’s comment in his book, *Transforming mission*, when he says that proselytising is very similar to church extension. In this program, he says, ‘Evangelism became the expansion of the church through increased

¹⁰ Jacob Kavunnkal, ‘Mission and Raising Ecclesial Communities’, in Joseph Mattam and Sebastian Kim (eds), *Dimensions of Mission in India* (Bombay: St. Paul’s Press, 1995), 51-66.

¹¹ Kavunnkal, ‘Mission and Raising’, 54.

membership. Conversion was a numerical affair. Success in evangelism was measured by counting the numbers of baptisms, of confessions and of communions.’ He goes on to say that the focus of evangelism should not be on the church but on the irrupting reign of God.¹²

According to him, ‘Conversion is not the joining of a community in order to procure “eternal salvation”. It is, rather, a change in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and centre of one’s life. A Christian is not simply somebody who stands a better chance of being “saved”, but a person who accepts the responsibility to serve God in life and promote God’s reign in all its forms. Conversion involves personal cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in order to become a participant in the mighty works of God.’¹³

On the other hand, the Dalit communities understood the concept of ‘mission’ in a different and a unique way. They perceived mission to the margins as becoming participants in the mighty works of God, not just as conversion and expansion of the church. Through their active involvement and partnership with the missionaries in the missional engagement at Parkal the Dalit community was able to transform the whole missional endeavour at Parkal – *from a mission of the church into a mission of the Dalits*. In the following sections, we will discuss how the Dalit Christian community was able to transform the missionary understanding of ‘mission’ and thus found their first converts in the missionaries themselves.

Parkal Mission: A Mission Woven and Moulded in Mud Houses

Here the aim is to underline what the Dalit Christians have done with the gospel and Christian missionaries. My task is to bring out the experiences and the role played by them in the missional engagement at Parkal. This section is drawn from personal experience and also from material which was shared by the Dalit protagonists when I met and interviewed them personally in the month of July 2009.

Dalitisation of Mission: Deconstructive Agenda

Dalit experience in this region is predominantly one of oppression, dehumanisation, poverty, slavery, bonded labour and other forms of oppression. The fear of the oppressive powers of society haunted and paralysed the minds of the Dalits. They were deprived of their rights to live and to be; these human deprivations were expressed through myths, symbolic stories, folklore and other ways. Their human rights and constitutional rights were withheld. Into this context the pioneer missionaries of the Parkal mission entered with the gospel and started their

¹² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 415.

¹³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 419.

missional engagement focussing on dominant castes with an assumption that the conversion of the dominant caste people would ensure a smooth stay and peaceful mission work in the foreign region. To a certain extent the dominant caste people were receptive to the gospel preached but no conversion took place until the year 1930.¹⁴ Sr Thankamma Satyanadan says, though the dominant caste people were not very receptive to the gospel, there were no objections from upper caste people to the mission and evangelistic work carried on by both male and female missionaries. A possible reason for the absence of noticeable attacks on missionaries and mission could be due to the fact that the missionaries were from our own country – Indians or Indian missionaries and the mission carried by them was an indigenous mission. The missionaries perceived conversion as an interior experience of an individual. As they were more interested in personal evangelism, they utilised the opportunities such as people's need for medication, education and other basic needs. Often the personal evangelism became effective through the night school for adults and children.¹⁵

It was in this context that members from the Mala community in the village called Chinna Kodepaka (3 km away from Parkal) came to hear about the new faith called Christianity through their relatives from the neighbouring village Koppula near Katrapalli and decided to convert to Christianity. From here it spread to their relatives at Parkal (big number of Madiga and few Mala families), Dammannapeta (Madigas and Malas) and to Sultanpur (Malas). This news was a surprise and an act pointing to a new direction in the mission endeavour and challenged the traditional understanding of mission and evangelism. Consequently the first baptisms of the Parkal mission took place in January 1930 and 45 members from the Mala community got baptised. Later on the movement spread among the Madiga community at Parkal.¹⁶ There were series of mass conversions among Dalit communities (Madigas and Malas) and tribal groups such as Lambadis (Banjara) especially at Katrappalli and of a few Sudra groups such as Golla, Gounddlla, Yerukalla, Mangali Vadlla, Waddera, Chakali and others.¹⁷ It was the social aspirations of the Dalit communities and the religious quest of the Dalit youth (along with their families) such as Bochu Samuel, Bochu Yohan, Bochu Sathyanandam and Madiconda Satyanandam, Madiconda Neelambaram, Botla Anandam (the first deacon

¹⁴ Interview with M. Simon, worked as an Evangelist in Parkal Mission for a long time, on 4 July 2009

¹⁵ Sr Thankamma Satyanadan, Bethel Ashram, Parkal, interviewed on 3 July 2009.

¹⁶ Interview with Rev Binju Varghese Kuruvilla, Missionary-in-Charge, Parkal Mission, Parkal, on 4 July 2009.

¹⁷ Geoffrey A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion among Non-Brahmins in Andhra Pradesh with Special Reference to Anglican Missions and the Dornakal Diocese 1900-1936', in Geoffrey A. Oddie (ed), *Religion in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1977), 14-33.

and presbyter of Parkal Mission) along with their illiterate parents and several other unnamed youth and elderly men and women in different villages in this Taluk, that initiated the group conversion movement in this region.¹⁸

Along with the above mentioned and a host of others who were brought up by the Parkal Mission, all of them were and still continue to be mission workers. Through their act of conversion into Christianity, the Dalit communities in this region Dalitised the Christian message of love. Thus it was these simple, uncivilised, dehumanised people who recovered the social dimension of Christian faith. Therefore, even today Christianity is perceived as a religion of the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, especially in the Telengana region. This becomes further clear by looking at the comment made by A. Maria Arul Raja, in the article entitled, 'Inner Powers with Emancipatory Agenda: A Probe into Dalit Roots,' where he says, 'being-excluded-in-this-world' of Dalits is upheld by the dominant-other as the moral order but the victimised Dalits count it as disorder. The alternative, then, envisaged from deep within the wounded Dalit consciousness, as victims of casteist hierarchy, is their 'being-related-to-the other.'¹⁹ It is the very 'thrown-away-ness' experienced by Dalits that becomes the ontological foreground that encounters all reality and protests against their 'being-excluded-in-the-world' in 'mild or wild forms'.²⁰ Thus we say that in the face of ruthless exclusion, Dalits wanted to be included and in the face of imposed inclusion, they demanded to be excluded. Through these collective or personal acts of deconstruction of the hegemonic agenda, Dalits were able to construct their path of liberation.

Conversion as Liberative Transformation and Sign of Social Protest

The feudal system in Hyderabad state was severe with the Nizam's rule in this region. The news of mass conversion and baptism of 45 members on the same day was spread all over the area. The rival missions of Samajams and Islam saw the mission work among the downtrodden as a threat to their existence and promotional work. So they began to create problems for missionaries and harassed the Madigas in this area, persecuted the converts, and this continued until the year 1937-38. Even in such a threatening context, hundreds of Madigas from surrounding villages were added daily

¹⁸ Interview with Mr. Bochu Yohan, Evangelist, Parkal Mission, Parkal, on 4 July 2009.

¹⁹ A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Inner Powers with Emancipatory Agenda: A Probe into Dalit Roots,' in James Massey, S. Lourdnathan, and I. John Mohan Razu (eds), *Breaking Theoretical Grounds for Dalit Studies* (New Delhi: Center for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2006), 151-160.

²⁰ Raja, 'Inner Powers', 153.

into the church.²¹ It was into this kind of communal structure that Christianity came as the means of liberation to this area.²² Conversion as liberation was considered as a valid approach by both the Dalit converts and also the missionaries. Looking at the movement from the point of view of the Dalits, the efforts of early missionaries to identify themselves with the Dalits in their poverty have a new significance. They perceived conversion as a change of a community's religious identity in pursuit of upward social mobility. The Dalit Christian communities in this mission did not abandon their traditional community identity even after adopting Christian identity by conversion. The mud houses became the privileged locus of missionary activities. Thus so-called untouchables of the society became the privileged people in whom God began touching people of all faiths. Often the socio-economic and educational activities of the missionaries were called 'indirect missionary work', but the Dalits viewed these as a real missionary liberation from the forces of oppression.²³

Therefore, it was the Dalits or the downtrodden, more than the missionaries who made deliberate efforts in spite of all odds against them to foster mass movements. We need to note that the lack of well-documented studies does not enable one to make generalisations about group conversion, which took the form of mass movements among the Dalits and the downtrodden of this country.²⁴ However, in the context of the oppressive and inhuman caste system and its evil consequences of untouchability, getting converted to another religion that promised equality and human dignity appears to be logical.²⁵ But the heart of the matter is that it is not the missionaries who consciously planned and programmed for mass movements, rather as Webster says, forced by the situation the missionaries were challenged to accept the 'mass movement as work of God.'²⁶ Thus conversion to Christianity is one of the many weapons that the Dalit Christians in this region employed in their search for social dignity and found Christianity to be a viable alternative in their struggle against Hinduism, which threatened their identity.

Rev Madiconda Neelambaram, one of the Dalit patriarchs said, the pioneer missionaries, Rev K.E. Eapen and Rev I.C. Kurien, maintained a very strict discipline. The new converts were asked to live out the true

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²¹ Paul Kommal Rotte, 'Missionary Work in Parkal: A Survey', BD Thesis (Hyderabad: Andhra Christian Theological College, 2001), 12.

²² M.E. Prabhakar, 'Rural Telengana', 3-28.

²³ Interview with Mr B. Johnson, Secretary, CSI St Paul's Church, Parkal, on 4 July 2009.

²⁴ Louis Prakash SJ, 'Liberative Mission among the Marginalized and the Oppressed' in L. Stanislaus and Alwyn D'Souza (eds), *Prophetic Dialogue: Challenges and Prospective in India* (Delhi: Ishvani Kendra/ISPCK, 2003), 49.

²⁵ M.E. Prabhakar, 'Andhra Christians: Some Demographical and Ecclesiastical Issues', *Religion and Society* 37.1 (1990), 4-28.

²⁶ John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 33.

marks of the Christian and affirm their faith in Jesus Christ. So it was a mandate for the new converts to abstain from drinking alcohol, eating carrion, working on Sundays, playing drums before the village deities, engaging in activities such as divination and witchcraft, black magic and other anti-social behaviour to prove their allegiance to Christianity.²⁷ They were even fined on account of absence from the church on Sunday; they used to pay 12 paise as a fine for one absence.²⁸ The Dalit Christian communities in this region felt it difficult to observe the above mentioned rules and regulations. There was evidence that they took efforts to follow a few of them such as refusing to play drums, and dance before the Hindu deities, quarrelling, speaking bad words, shouting, taking part in Hindu festivals etc. Rev Bochu Yohan and Rev Bochu Satyanandam, another protagonist of the Dalit Christianity says, they continued eating the meat of the dead animal shared by their caste group, but on the other hand refused to clean the carrion from the villages. This act shows that the Dalit Christian community chose the markers to challenge their oppressors. It is to be understood that the Dalit Christian communities of Parkal Mission have used both their religious affiliation with Christianity and their Christian piety as part of their social protest.

Re-Articulation of Christian Faith, its Content and the Methods of Proclamation

The converts from both Mala and Madiga communities in the mission field began to recover the social dimension of the Christian faith by opting to get converted to Christianity and by opposing the social structures of the caste ridden Hindu society. It shows that their articulation of the gospel incorporated their pre-Christian understanding of religion as inseparable from the social life of the community. They perceived religious conversion as a communitarian experience and they strived towards strengthening that bond.²⁹ It becomes clearer when they narrated an incident which took place in the mission field. In the year 1939 when a terrible cholera outbreak had swept away 1/3 of the people in some villages like Mallakkapeta, Damaranchepalli and Parkal, it was Bochu Samuel, a Madiga convert along with his wife who tried to instill faith in Jesus Christ in the face of trials and temptations. He used to wake up at 3 am in the morning and go around the village street by street in the Dalita *wadas*, or Harijana *wada* holding a torch light made out of dried palmera branches and leaves, singing loudly,

²⁷ Interview with Rev M. Neelambaram, Presbyter, CSI Karimnagar Diocese, Parkal, on 5 July 2009.

²⁸ Interview with Rev M. Neelambaram, Presbyter, CSI Karimnagar Diocese, Parkal, on 5 July 2009.

²⁹ M.E. Prabhakar, 'Mission and the Dalit Issue', in Sunand Sumithra and F. Hranghkuma (eds), *Doing Mission in Context* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1995), 83-115.

reciting bible verses and asking the people, both men and women, not to be disheartened, but to trust the Lord and seek his favour at this time of difficulty. Bochu Yohan says it sounded just like the blowing of the trumpet. It was told that Bochu Samuel did it in resemblance to the story of the capture of Jericho wall that we read in the Bible.³⁰ It was a creative move that addressed their social and spiritual needs.

This was the method used for a long time to enable people to stand firm in their new faith. Bochu Samuel was an energetic young man who was very helpful to the missionaries. He was an adviser to the missionaries and played a remarkable role of mediator between the government, local people and the missionaries when the missionaries had to face difficulties in the purchase of land for a mission field and opposition from rival missions of the Samajams and Islam which had arisen in 1937-1938. He worked as an evangelist in the mission field until he died. His eldest son is also an evangelist in the mission field and one of his daughters worked closely and associated with women missionaries in those days.³¹ He was called '*Panthulu garu*' which means itinerant preacher. Along with him, his wife was able to do tremendous work among the poor and illiterate Dalit women; she used to sing devotional songs composed in traditional tunes, which contained a biblical story in them.

There was another person called Bandaru Rajaratnam who played a larger role in the evolution of social Christianity in this place. The pioneer missionaries who sought conversion from dominant castes were perplexed when the Dalit community, both Malas and Madigas swept into the church, shattering their expectations and dreams. Consequently, the missionaries had to re-organise, review and add new methods to the old. New methods of evangelism adopted were deeply rooted in the local culture, more appealing to the illiterate village flocks. The Dalit heroes were experts in performing street theatre. Open air preaching, *chiruthala bhajan*, *kolatam*, *kathakalakshepam*, *burrakata*, singing *uyyalapatlu* and *gummi* became effective modes of communicating the gospel in this region. Sr Mary Thomas and Sr Annie Thomas, the pioneer women missionaries to Parkal to work among women of the region were able to succeed in spreading the gospel by the constant use of the indigenous methods mentioned above in their ministry among the local women, which is remembered and admired

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³⁰ Interview with Rev B. Satyanandam, Parkal, on 4 July 2009. He was one of those who got converted to Christianity at the initial stages of the mission endeavour. When the missionaries arrived into this place, he was at the age of 15 years and was working as a bonded labour for a landlord. By attending night school, he was educated and later on he left working for the landlord and worked as an evangelist for a long time and a few years back he was ordained as a presbyter of CSI Karimnagar Diocese. At present he stays in Parkal after his retirement from ordained ministry.

³¹ Mr D.K. Cornelius, *A Brief Report on the Life of Late Rev K.E. Eapen, The First Missionary to Parkal-Madhya Kerala Diocese* (Parkal: Parkal Mission, 2009), 1.

even today. Sr Saramma John, a missionary to Parkal, who is now in charge of Bethel Ashram, has been working in this area for the past 35 years. She says, “along with the senior Sisters, the pioneers of extending mission work among poor girls and women, were trained to present the gospel in indigenous forms such as open air preaching, performing *burrakata*.”³² The content of the gospel preached reflected the aspects of Jesus’ mission – healing, loving, caring, touching and feeding, which met the physical and emotional needs of the people.

On the other hand the Dalit Christian communities in the mission field persisted in retaining their traditional organisational structures to organise their church life, thus community elders, the *Peddha Mala* or *Peddha Madiga* became the church elder or deacon in the local congregations. The duties of the *Sangha Peddha* or community elder are to oversee matters of discipline, lead worship, administer and organise church programmes It also included social work in times of difficulty and need. To my knowledge and experience of working with rural congregations in the Diocese, these community elders are responsible for administering the contracts of village development programmes such as laying out the village road, *Paniki Aaharam* – food for work – and other such measures initiated by the Government. This is being practised even today in the local congregations of the mission field and also in rural congregations of CSI Karimnagar Diocese. Thus the above description clearly indicates that for the Dalit community, conversion was both affiliation and at the same time disassociation.

Reversal of the Traditional Paradigm of Mission: Periphery vs Centre

Dalit communities live in hamlets (*wadas, cheris, palems, pallis* etc.) attached to the main villages. Pollution, poverty and powerlessness are the Dalit issues. In religious terms they are the people who are destined to live outside the gate, or city. Their mobility is limited and confined to limited areas, places and events in the society. Doing mission with the Dalits would involve understanding afresh their spatial location/geographical dispersion and caste-equations in their populations. However, the Dalit Christian community in this region, through their conversion into Christianity have reversed the traditional understanding of mission. The traditional understanding of mission as we read in the Old Testament was that the mission of Israel was to be a showcase for the nations to see. Israel was the centre of the world (Ezek. 5:5) and Jerusalem its holy mountain (Ps 6:2) the place where the nations had to come in order to be saved (Mic. 4:1 ff). The mission of Israel was to be the priests of Yahweh’s holy mountain. Thus, mission was understood primarily as an activity of bringing periphery to

³² Interview with Sr. Saramma John, Missionary to Bethel Ashram, Parkal Mission, Parkal on 4 July 2009.

the centre. But in the New Testament understanding of mission, we notice a radical shift in the whole understanding of the mission of the church. This idea can be further elaborated by looking at the comment made by Orlando E. Costas, in his book *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* in which he says, 'The death of Jesus on the cross not only changed the location of salvation, but also clarified the nature of mission. By shifting salvation to the periphery, the mission of the people of God has undergone a complete about-face. Thus Mission is no longer "coming" but "going".'³³ He continues, 'Bearing witness to God's saving grace means going to the crucified Son of God, outside the gate of our sacred compounds, to share in his suffering death for the world.'³⁴ It is not to say that we have now a new fixed salvific centre but, rather, a permanent, moving centre in the periphery of life.³⁵ Through the death of Jesus outside the gate, mission has become the crossing of the walls and gates of our secured and comfortable compounds. It requires a continuous movement towards him to bear the abuse he endured for the world. It is only in this continuous movement towards his cross, identifying ourselves with him and his cause, participating in his suffering death outside and for outsiders we become authentic witnesses of God's saving grace. That is the only way through which one can lift him up and enable both men and women to be drawn to him (Jn. 12:32). Therefore, if Christian mission means encountering the crucified Christ in the world of the outsiders and sharing in his suffering for the sake of the rejected and outcaste, then all its traditional aspects must be reinterpreted from the perspective of the periphery. It requires a permanent commitment to the 'outcastes'.

It was this act of appropriation of the Christian message with their paradigms of mission as empowerment, conversion as communal social protest and the ministry as permanent commitment to the outcastes who live in the periphery that enabled the Dalit protagonists to bring transformation and an inward regeneration in the missionaries. Thus they could find their first convert in the missionaries. Consequently, the missionaries were able to reframe and redefine their agenda of mission of 'expansion of the church' to a mission of 'empowerment of the oppressed'. The missionaries were able to modify their understanding of religious conversion and the Dalit Christian community leaders dominated transmission of the Christian message. Thus Christianity in this region was no longer a system of knowledge to legitimise the status quo, but was constructed to be a subversive message that fulfils the social and religious aspirations of Mala and Madiga communities. On an assessment of the missional engagement at Parkal and the Dalit Christian community's role in it, we notice a transition in their state from being to becoming. Thus it is a

³³ Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 192.

³⁴ Costas, *Christ Outside*, 192.

³⁵ Costas, *Christ Outside*, 192.

movement into becoming self-organised, self-supported and a self-propagated mission endeavour.

Parkal Mission – the Role of the Local Women

As the missionary work was progressing the need for work among the women was urgent. The Diocesan Women's Board gave an invitation to the women to come out as women missionaries to Parkal. In 1947 the Diocese sent two women missionaries, Ms Mary Thomas and Ms Mary John to the Parkal Mission. Later the Bethel Ashram Tiruvalla took the responsibility of women's work in Parkal Mission. Ms Mary Thomas and Ms Mary John came under the fellowship of the Bethel Ashram and continued their work in Parkal. They joined the CSI Order for Sisterhood in 1948. After a few years of service Sr Mary John left for Rayalaseema and Sr Mary Thomas continued in Parkal until her death. In due course, Sr Annie Thomas joined her in the place of Sr Mary John. They both did a tremendous work among women in terms of providing education for both children and adults. Sr Annie Thomas and Sr Thankamma Satyanadhan were trained nurses so they were effective in medical work, treating leprosy and tuberculosis and other contagious diseases. Sr Annie Thomas died recently in the year 2008 after extending faithful service for nearly 45 years. Later on Sr Saramma John, Mrs Mariama Chacko and Sr Anna John joined the Bethel Ashram and are continuing their services in the mission till today. As I was talking to the old people, and in my childhood memory as a child who grew up in the mission, I can say that it was the Dalit women who were more helpful and always upheld and risked their lives to work in solidarity with the women missionaries. Sr Mary Thomas and Sr Annie Thomas started a training centre for women. Here the local women were taught how to read and write and they learned the Bible. Often the training was for leadership and for equipping women for effective evangelism. The women trained here were advised to marry the local evangelists and encouraged to work in partnership with their husbands. Mr Bochu Samuel's wife falls into this category along with other local women such as Elizabeth Ammagaru, who looked after the boarding children, Elisha Panthulamma from Krishna Godavari, B. Salomi a trained nurse who looked after the children in the home for orphan children, B. Devakaruna (w/o B. Zachariah, teacher) who was in charge of running the nursery school which was adjacent to the CSI church until her death, Mrs Deva Dattam, wife of late Devadattam (Chinna Kodepaka) a blind evangelist (who was able to do a fruitful ministry by singing songs), who used to help her husband in carrying out the responsibility of the evangelist to a village. There were a few more unnamed women, who worked as part of a preaching, teaching, healing and admonishing ministry that was carried out by the women missionaries. Consequently, Parkal Mission has women evangelists, Bible women, medical workers and teachers who are working along with male evangelists

till today. These women were bold and very helpful and often safeguarded the women missionaries.

Towards an Understanding of 'Mission' from the Dalit Perspective in the Present Context

Christian faith understands mission, both conceptually and contextually, as the process of 'reconciliation' of broken relationships between God, humans and nature and the renewal of all creation to become integrated and whole in accordance with the purpose of God's will. The Dalit issue concerns the millions of 'broken' victims of the unique system of 'caste-class oppression' in Indian society and the thousands of them who find themselves discriminated against even within our churches. Christian vocation for mission today has to be done amidst this Indian reality, with the realisation of our 'disjointedness', both as Indians and as Christians – Indian Christians set in the context of our fragmented church and nation. Thus in this section the material is drawn from the expectations and future agenda of Dalit Christian communities of the mission. This is based purely on words uttered by the younger generation of the mission. What follows is their hope for the mission.

Empowering the Dalits as Doing Mission

According to Rev M. Neelambaram,³⁶ the mission of the church is empowerment of the Dalits. Mission is God initiated, God's kingdom oriented, therefore it is transformational. Mission transforms people and conditions because mission is witnessing to God's rule through words and deeds. Rev B. Satyanandam³⁷ perceives the goal of mission to be to seek the Kingdom of God and work towards the reign of God under which every one may have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10). According to M. Kamalaker³⁸ a youth member of the CSI St Paul's Church, Parkal, the aim of the mission of the church is to bring total liberation for the realisation of the kingdom of God. The church's missionary activity ought to be modelled after the mission of Jesus and should emphasise all aspects of Jesus' ministry of empowerment. True evangelisation includes both spiritual enrichment and social involvement for liberation which leads into betterment of human life. Jesus came to this world to work out the mission of the Father. Therefore, he was engaged in acts of freeing the poor and

³⁶ Interviewed on 4 July 2009. He says, the missionaries were like an opened textbook, and it is we the Dalit Christians who have appropriated the gospel preached by them by utilising the open text book as a watchtower which guided and continues to guide us in participating with God in the realisation of the kingdom promised and for which Jesus risked his own life.

³⁷ Interviewed on 4 July 2009.

³⁸ Interviewed on 4 July 2009.

oppressed masses from clutches of all kinds of bondages, irrespective of caste, creed, class or religion. He was all to all. In John 4:1-42 we read about the freeing and empowering act of Jesus. The method Jesus followed was to identify himself with the poor and empower them by enabling them to 'drink from their own well'; consequently this led them to be empowered to free themselves and others from all bondages.

In this perspective of the Dalit Christian communities, the church becomes God's agent of integral liberation of the poor and the oppressed. When we analyse the life of Jesus and his ministry we notice that Jesus came into this world and died on the cross for the salvation of humanity, with the preferential option for the poor and the oppressed Dalits. If this was the mission of Jesus, it cannot be different for the church today. Hence empowerment of the Dalits, the women, children and the poor and other vulnerable sections of society is a large part of doing mission. Today the following of Jesus Christ in India will mean to preach the life giving words of Jesus to the poor, oppressed and the Dalits, who are denied their human dignity and human right and empower them in solidarity with equality and human dignity by working in collaboration with people of goodwill and people's movements.

*Mission is Building a 'New Community'*³⁹

The church is God's and we are received into God's church by gracious invitation. This idea becomes clear when we look at 1 Peter 2:9-10; in his letter to the Christian converts, Peter applies the Hebrew concept of election documented in Exodus 19:3-6 and welcomes believers into a new community and a new home. As I was trying to reflect upon this I came across the words of John H. Elliott, he sees this new home as 'not an ephemeral "heaven is our home" a form of consolation but the new home and social family to which the Christians belong here and now.'⁴⁰ It is a 'supportive circle of brothers and sisters and status here is gained not through blood ties nor by meeting social prerequisites; it is available to all classes and races... as a divine gift.'⁴¹ This supportive community is summoned in the power of the word and Holy Spirit to bring the servant form of ministry of Christ to the world, to witness to the structures of the society, to live as a sign of the presence of the kingdom and a promise of its final coming. The task of the church today, therefore, is holistic, both to preach the gospel and to work for justice, peace and reconciliation. Mission from a Dalit perspective demands the reconstruction of the identity and dignity of the Dalits, where they begin to affirm their selfhood as a gift

³⁹ This title was used by Mr O. Prem Kumar, the church Secretary and very active participant of the mission and evangelistic work of the mission and the local church.

⁴⁰ John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 127, 130-31.

⁴¹ Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 127, 130-131.

from God by being inclusive and open to receive and accept all as created in the image of God. It is the triune God who initiates the mission, and the church is invited to participate in that mission. According to David J. Bosch, 'to participate in mission is participating in the movement of God's love towards people, since God is the fountain of sending love.'⁴²

Therefore, this missionary vision of the Dalit community of the mission field must be carried out not just by professionals but by the entire church. 'Our missionary practice is not performed in unbroken continuity with the biblical witness; it is an altogether ambivalent enterprise executed in the context of tension between divine providence and human confusion. The Church's involvement in mission remains an act of faith without earthly guarantees.'⁴³ We need the Spirit and power of Jesus who had the guts and courage to bring the 'Dalits' of his time from the periphery to the centre.⁴⁴ This was the mission of Jesus and this is the mission of God for all the followers of Jesus Christ in India today and significantly, this was the mission which the Dalit Christian community of Parkal Mission perceived.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that as Dalit communities, both Malas and Madigas in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh aligned with Christianity of the poor and the marginalised. Consequently, Christianity till today is identified as a Dalit religion in the whole of Andhra Pradesh irrespective of the denominations and mission traditions. The Dalit communities that converted to Christianity used the new religious identity as a political weapon and an agency for liberation in their social struggles. Their conversion to Christianity was a group activity with a social agenda which did not dislocate them from their original community but rather enabled them to forge community solidarity. Through the group conversion of Malas and Madigas into Christianity, the message of Christianity has received a new outlook and meaning. It was the Dalit communities in this region that redefined the gospel story and found fulfilment in their social and religious aspirations. Indeed it is indigenous mission and a mission by the Dalits and of the Dalit Christian communities in the region.

It is evident in this paper that, whatever the models Dalit Christian communities have used to understand and practise mission, their practice combined evangelism and social concern. Thus, they were able to appropriate the gospel message and redefine the missionary paradigm of mission, conversion, church and ministry in their social pursuit. It was their re-articulation of the gospel that enabled them to recognise the liberating

⁴² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

⁴³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 9.

⁴⁴ A. Alangaram, *Christ of the Asian Peoples* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998), 50.

power of the gospel and underlined the social, emotional and physical dimensions of Jesus' ministry on this earth.

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**STORIES OF WOMEN IN SOUTH
ANDHRA LUTHERAN CHURCH (SALC):
FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

N.G. Prasuna

The title of this paper implies that the work engages in two dimensions. The first confirms that it is rooted in the academy; the latter indicates that it is deep-seated in the life situations and not only limited to academy.

For a Dalit feminist theologian, the contexts of academics and Dalit women are central in theologising. My argument is that a Dalit feminist theologian, who claims to be committed to liberation, has to take into account her/his communities of faith and their connection with the interpretation of the Bible.

No one can deny that distance exists between the academic world and the day to day life of Dalit women. In this work I hope to seriously challenge this distance and to bridge the gap. Dalit feminist scholarship in India is opening room to deal with the issues of gender, caste and class, as Dalit women suffer triple disadvantages of being women and of belonging to lower caste and lower class. I admit the fact that both Dalit theology and feminist theology in India have brought tremendous transformation in Indian society by their contextual interpretations of the Bible. However, these theologies have remained as an academic exercise to the majority in India. Most of the debates still take place at the theoretical level.

The aim of this paper in simple terms is to read stories of Dalit women from a feminist perspective that will enable gender-social transformation and liberation for women in the faith community.

Proceeding with the assumption that the role of the interpreter is of central importance in the process of theologising, it is necessary at this point to state my own location. I am a third generation Christian¹ woman

¹ My experience as a Dalit Christian Lutheran woman becomes imperative for doing theology from the perspective of SALC women. The missionaries told my grandmother to believe in Christ so that God will bless her with child. My experience as an insider of SALC becomes a tool and the norm for my research. Conversion from Hinduism to Christianity is a key element in shifting women from lower class to middle class. My great grandparents were 'no people.' But a drastic shift from 'no people' to Christian community took place with the conversion of my grandparents. Scholars give various reasons for the mass conversions from

born into a middle class home which was rooted in Lutheran Christian faith, reared in a middle class socio-economic set up as my parents are teachers. Currently, I am married and I have two sons. Both my spouse's secular as well as theological education and my own allow us to lead a fairly middle-class lifestyle. The early childhood metaphors of the experiences of faith,² confrontation with the caste system³ and improved status in the socio-economic field,⁴ built in my house have been of significance to me in my self-comprehension and in articulating theology.

Hinduism to Christianity among the Dalit communities. Reasons may differ from person to person. It is important to acknowledge John C.B. Webster's observation; the dynamics of the mass conversions was the quest for dignity, and respect that Christianity offered to them. My grandmother (father's mother) did not give birth even after four years of her marriage. While she was in crisis, some people came to her and prayed for her. She conceived and delivered a boy baby and she named him Devashayam which means 'God's help', as she believes that Christ helped her. She then took baptism and became a Christian. Along with my grandmother, her entire family took baptism. My mother's parents were also converted to Christianity, seeing the miracle as my grandmother (mother's mother) is a sister to my father's father. When my mother was born, her parents named my mother, Devadanamma which means 'God's gift'. The transformation began with the conversion of my grandparents. Since then a great change is observed in their lives as their children were put up in mission schools and were educated and acquired dignified possessions.

² Most of my childhood was spent in rural villages where the caste system was predominant. As there were no churches in villages, our home would be turned into a church where my parents used to conduct Sunday worship services. We as children were nurtured in Christian faith. We used to have regular family prayers both in the morning and evening. Our parents taught us to have regular personal devotions.

³ As my parents were teachers they rented houses in the main villages and we lived along with the caste people. We escaped the stigma of untouchability to a great extent. Christmas and birthday celebrations used to be great occasions for other religions and castes as well to dine at our home. One day it so happened that I carried fish curry with *idly* (a South Indian dish) to school to have during the time of break since those days were summer days and we used to have morning schools. I had a friend from Vishya caste and they are pure vegetarians. Since there was only gravy in my box, I convinced her to believe that it is vegetable curry and she ate fish curry with me. Afterwards I shared with her that she ate fish curry. Fortunately we had no misunderstandings.

⁴ To mention one of my experiences, when I was in the 8th class, my parents were working in a village called Dhamanellore which had schooling only up to upper primary level (7th Grade). Therefore my parents sent me to a nearby town and placed me in a girls' hostel. The hostel had only basic facilities, I did not like the hostel, particularly the food served in that place. My father arranged for me to eat food in a small hotel which was close to the hostel that was run by a Brahmin lady. The bills were paid during the first week of every month. I was the only person who had that facility and enjoyed better socio-economic status among 25 girls because my parents were financially stable.

These experiences have been fixed in my mind and later have taken an academic shape due to my theological education. This is the current context out of which I write.

The theological struggle that I am encountering is that children at present are not given such opportunities which I mentioned above to live in a healthy atmosphere in their families. Hence the paper is more concerned with the importance of the family communion.

Methodology

The paper is based on the survey carried out over a 12 month period in the state of Andhra Pradesh for my doctoral dissertation. The research has helped me to understand that it is important to tell our stories from our perspectives because they speak for us. Analysing the past helps us reflect on our experiences, so that we begin to see our past with the new lenses to make a difference. I find that the stories shared by Dalit women are essential for Dalit feminist theological reflection. The stories are daily experiences of life which connect church and society. They reflect that the business of theology in India is to deal with the issues of pain and joy, struggles and victories of the marginalised. Mercy Oduyoye argues, "Story was a traditional source of theology, which seems to have been superseded by analytical and deductive forms. It has taken the feminist movement to bring back the personal into academic studies, and thereby revive the importance of story."⁵

As Oduyoye argues, it is important to go back to our stories which will inspire other women who struggle together in faith. In this paper, I share stories of a few women in order to remember the pain and joy and struggles and victories of those women, and also to envision new ways in doing theology for the liberation of Dalit women in India.

Selected Stories

Story 1

Nirmala Kumari comes from Mutchalagunta in Nellore District of Andhra Pradesh. She is married and has two sons. She comes from lower class as her parents were illiterates. She is born into a Lutheran Christian family. Her mother died when she was 10 years old. She was put up in the mission school at Naidupet where she had her schooling up to 10th class. Her father remarried. However, Kumari has no sad memories of her stepmother. She claims that her step mother looked after her very well. Her step mother

⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 11.

gave birth to a son. In spite of giving birth to a son, Kumari says, 'my mother did not treat me differently.' But she had many sad memories about her father. Her father's drunkenness pushed the family still further into poverty. To cite one example, she was taught tailoring after completing her 10th class, and the mission school gave her a sewing machine. She says, 'After I returned from my school, I thought I can support myself by tailoring, but my father sold that sewing machine for his drinking purpose.' Later on her father arranged a marriage against her wishes and she married another drunkard. Only after her marriage she and her people came to know that he was already married. Her life became miserable after her marriage. Her husband was not earning but snatched away Kumari's hard earned money. Her tears were rolling down as she remembered that, 'she gave water mixed with sugar for her child instead of milk when the baby cried out of hunger.' 37-year-old Kumari recollects her experiences as a child. She continued, 'Even after education I worked as an agricultural laborer. I was living in utter poverty.'

Kumari's eyes brightened when she shared that her husband left her after giving birth to two children. He went to be with his first wife. She said, although she was sad that he left her, she is happy to lead an independent life. Therefore she decided not to go to him any more. She exclaims, 'My life is changed when my aunty put me as a care taker in an orphanage, where my children's studies and other needs are taken care of and I am given food and accommodation with pocket money of Rs.1000/- per month. I am happy now. It is good he left me. I am in peace.'

Story 2

Devi (only part of the name is given to protect her identity) was born into a good Christian family and brought up in good discipline. She worked as a teacher and is now retired. She is a widow, mother of two married children and also a grandmother. She tells her sad story. She was married to her relative who was a bus conductor and has two children and grandchildren. While narrating her story, tears were rolling down from her cheeks. As I knew about her alcoholic husband, I asked her to share, how she resisted him? She said she used to fight with him, stop talking to him and pray and cry every day. But he never changed his lifestyle. She demonstrated the horrific result of her violent alcoholic husband. She opened her mouth and showed me the false teeth and carried on. 'I am married to my cousin who was a bus conductor by profession. After his duty, he always comes home heavily drunk. In that condition, he does not know what he was doing. He beats me black and blue. He beats the children. He abuses neighbours. He forgets even the relationships. It used to be a kind of nuisance to the neighbours even in the mid night. I could not lead a peaceful life. Being a teacher I could not lead a life of dignity because of my husband.' She said, 'One day, he came home fully drunk. He took the swing (which is made up

of iron and it is used to draw water from the well) which was kept near the well and hit me on my mouth. My mouth started bleeding. I suffered terrible pain the whole night and went to hospital in the morning. The doctors declared that my teeth were badly affected. As a result, I had to replace my tooth with the false one. What else can I say about my husband and my life?’ was the question she was repeating. She continued saying that she had great dreams to educate her daughter well but she could not because of her alcoholic husband. But only after her daughter’s marriage, she found out that her son-in-law also drinks. She says, ‘There is no end to the drinking habit.’

Along with a sad part, there is another side of her story which is a joyful one. On one fine early morning, she found that her husband was no more. He committed suicide by consuming poison. She said, ‘Maybe God wants me to have peace, so at least now he took him off. Now I am free, in peace and joy,’ she declared saying, it is because of her education and employment she is able to manage her life and she is able to meet the needs of her physically challenged son.

Story 3

Chengamma from Aravaperide says her dreams were shattered when she had decided to get married. She is a twenty-five-year-old Hindu convert. She is the only daughter to her parents and now she is a widow and has a daughter. She carries painful memories of growing up in a *Harijanawada* (Dalit colony) experiencing harassment and prejudice for being a woman and belonging to outcaste and for being a widow. She was dreaming to have good education and to marry an educated man. She was hoping to settle down in a nearby town and lead a moderate life. Her dreams were shattered, while she was in her 10th class. Her father approached her with certain sentiments. She was asked to marry against her wishes. She said, ‘my father proposed an illiterate man to me, since we have agricultural fields, my father wants me to marry an illiterate man so that my husband can look after our fields. As I am the only child to my parents, I was convinced and agreed to marry against my vision.’ The sad part in her life is that her husband died after she gave birth to a daughter. He was diseased before marriage and it was known to the family only after marriage. Widowhood entered in her life as an unwelcome guest. She is bitter, with feelings of anger. Later, her father regretted over the misfortune of his daughter.

She continued her story which was turned into a joyous one. One fine day she was invited by her friend to attend church and she was firmly convinced that God will give her peace and make her dreams come true through her daughter. She took baptism and changed her name to Sampurnamma. With the strength she received from God, she says, ‘I woke up from my tears, and applied for a job in Podupu Lakshmi (a Self Help

Group or SHG).’ She was overwhelmed with joy to state that she passed in her examination and interview. Now she is working in a few villages in education and organises campaigns to empower both Dalit women as well as caste women as well as in helping them to save money.’ She claims, it is Christ and the Christian community that blessed her with peace and hope in life.

Story 4

The story of Devadanamma is the real story of a dream. It is the dream of Dalit parents of educating their children. Devadanamma tells her story. She is the firstborn into a Dalit family. Her parents belong to lower class illiterates, living in the *Harijanawada* of Rosanoor. They were converted to Christianity seven decades ago. They faced all kinds of humiliation as the caste oppressed them. Devadanamma’s father’s name is Yosephu, but caste people, even their children, address him ‘yosephuga’ which is very much humiliating, she exclaims.

Her parents had a dream. One fine day her father announced that ‘my daughter and sons will study’. Some of the villagers from his community asked him meekly and pointed out that there was no school in the village. He sharply replied that he would put them in Naidupet Mission School. The next morning he set off with his daughter and sons to Naidupet Mission School and the missionary gave her admission in the girls’ hostel and her brothers were put up in the boys’ hostel. Devadanamma asserts that, she is the first woman to study Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) from her village, and trained as a teacher, posted in her own village. ‘How wonderful it is!’ she says, ‘to teach to Kshatria caste people, who treat us as untouchables!’ As days passed by some of the caste people fell in love with her and she earned a good name in teaching. She also had training in tailoring and so she did embroidery on saris and sold them to the caste women. She claims that she is very much industrious. She married her cousin who is also a teacher. She says, ‘My husband and I as teachers made a tremendous impact on the villagers wherever we taught.’ She says, ‘We are blessed with four children and I am proud that my two daughters became theologians. My both sons are in the line of teaching like us in making an impact on the people.’ She says, ‘My parents are bold enough, who had dreamt about their children that they should be like one among the caste people. Their dream came true.’ She is so strong that one should have a dream, hope, boldness, education and the fear of God. All these things will transform the life. It is challenging to listen to such success stories of Dalit women.

Theological Reflections: Feminist Perspectives

After writing a few living stories, I feel I am exhausted with too many questions. What is my purpose in narrating these stories? Will they make an impact? As I reflect, I feel very much depressed to see the oppression and torture that mothers, sisters and daughters of my community undergo. They submit themselves silently without questioning the oppressive culture although they admit that they experience pain. Yet, I am overwhelmed with joy and new hope that women are able to express themselves and to narrate their experiences with a bold voice which in itself is resistance to oppression.

I believe, these stories convey volumes of message to the larger community. As these stories are therapeutic and liberative in nature they will remain as tools of transformation. The Dalit women's experience of the past, present and future as well as bondage and freedom, pain and joy, healing and wholeness is a basic foundation for Dalit feminist theology.

Liberation Leads to Transformation

Dalit women bristle with the quest for life in its fullness. The redemptive reality of which Christian faith speaks, is not something apart from the daily realities of Dalit women; it is part of their daily living. In the process of liberation, the way we embrace our life must lead to radical changes. Our theology should be firmly rooted in our daily experiences.

Stories of Kumari and Devi reveal that 'marriage was never a salvation and joy to them rather it was bondage and a place of tears.' The stories clearly indicate that husbands never served as protectors of the family against caste and patriarchal teachings. Dalit women claimed liberation after they were freed from their husbands. Kumari feels that she gained her identity and dignity after she was separated from her husband. Devi claims 'to be happy being a widow than being a wife' to her husband. Unlike caste women, Dalit women claim liberation after the separation from their husbands. Surprisingly, in spite of violence they faced, they did not abandon God and church. They were hoping that God would give them peace and joy one day. Prayer was their instrument in resisting violence. Devi's statement, 'Maybe God wanted me to be in peace and so God allowed my husband to commit suicide' reveals that Dalit women worship God who was on their side and it was their hope that God would liberate them from their pain.

Stories of Chengamma and Devadanamma disclose that the Lutheran Christian identity has granted them a dignity through baptism. Chengamma boldly declares that she received peace and joy through Christ and the Christian community. She being a widow came out of her oppressed status as impure and misfortunate, towards a dignified status as Lutheran Christian with a new hope. All four women pointed out that they always prayed to God and they are regular churchgoers. The stories affirm the

ways of God. God continues to choose the poor and the church for doing God's will. God's intervention in the lives of many people becomes a challenge to the listeners today. Chengamma was victimised, yet she received new hope through baptism.

God's voice is communicated in the stories. The experience of Devadanamma is a clear indication that God's involvement in the lives of women of SALC in the past becomes an educative process. The stories indicate that God is at work from the past. God works in the present and in future in the lives of the marginalised in order to liberate them and to make them as people with honourable identities.

Their poverty stricken life has been transformed due to their education. Devi asserts that, 'women need education and economic independency for their liberation.' Although Chengamma was oppressed due to her caste, she did not take revenge on the caste women who treated her as inhuman. As a transformed Dalit Christian woman, she helps caste women with loans. She invited her parents and her cousin's family to attend church and she could find total transformation in their lives. She witnessed her cousin being liberated from alcoholism which results in peace.

Dalit Feminist Response

Anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, despair, grief and trauma of violence were found to be the strong features in the stories of Kumari, Devi and Chengamma. Yet they did not lose hope. They were bold enough to name the perpetrator and they, against the norms of caste culture, were able to speak out in saying that they are happy to be independent. In the patriarchal culture, women were always identified with men and it was imposed on them that they need a man's protection throughout their lifetime. Against that dependent identity, Dalit Christian women claim peace and joy in their independence.

The scriptures teach us that Jesus is uniquely incarnated in the lives of the poor and lost ones. Jesus is incarnated in the lives of Dalit women too by listening to their pains and by having communion with them. Therefore, I believe that 'hermeneutics of listening' and 'hermeneutics of family communion' are crucial elements in articulating Dalit feminist theology. I am convinced, if we listen to the stories of Dalit women, we can hear God's calling through their pain and suffering, and through their resistance. By rooting ourselves in the contextual experiences of Dalit women, we are compelled to wrestle with appropriate theological articulations. The stories serve as a critical paradigm for the interpretation of the Bible.

Hermeneutics of Listening

We live in a world of competition. We have no time to listen to each other. Listening to stories has enabled me to understand that women wanted ears

to hear them. Hermeneutics of listening is an essential element to Dalit feminist theology. In doing Dalit feminist theology listening to the stories of Dalit women on the one hand, and listening to the story of God on the other hand are of vital importance.

Listening to stories has created a sense of hope and healing in the lives of the victimised. Remembering and telling stories can be cathartic many times. Listening to the world around us is not often consciously practised in the church. Compassionate, active and engaged listening can help us to better understand others. The more we listen the more we will engage in the liberation activity.

Hermeneutics of Family Communion

Marriage is part of God's creative plan for the world. Through living together wife and husband grow into a unity of mind and spirit as well as body. This partnership in communion is the foundation for a new family. Families make a church. Family is the basic unit where we are nurtured in Christian education, love, peace and joy, which become a distant dream for many children. Children take pleasure in listening to stories. What about children listening and experiencing stories of torture, poverty, pain and violence in their day to day lives? What does God mean to them? The stories of Kumari and Devi give a warning signal to theologians and to the church that family is in unrest.

Family is the God-given unit where communion begins. Domestic violence is a serious issue to be discussed in Dalit feminist theology. It is necessary that pastors are equipped to deal with such a situation and counsel not only the oppressed but also the oppressors. The church needs to give special care to the families where our children are nurtured. Our children's rights need to be protected. Communion in the family has to be given primary importance in our academies. It is important that the church needs to minister to the specific family needs. Space must be given to the victims to share their stories and to express their needs.

It is the child metaphors built in my psyche that play a major role in my theological articulations as I already said in the paper. As a person belonging to the Dalit Christian Lutheran community, I feel that our children are lacking such Christian love, security, opportunities and discipline. For example, Devi being a retired teacher regretted that her daughter could not be well educated. She felt insecure to continue her daughter's education and she wanted her to get married. Kumari's children grew without their father's love and nurture and the basic picture that they had in their mind about their father is of one who is an alcoholic and is violent. The Christian nurture, discipline, and confrontations with caste system that I received, force me to express solidarity with the little children who lose these in my faith community. Therefore the paper recommends that children of our community need to be nurtured in communion.

Conclusion

The wages of sinful patriarchal violence is death in the family union and communion. The family unit is in flux. Some of the stories reveal that women wanted to be away from their husbands. Children are experiencing violence, hatred and insecurity. From day one children are exposed to alcohol addiction, insecurity and poverty in Dalit families. The church being a product of Christ's communion needs to see that this situation does not continue.

This work identifies the need for listening to Dalit women and to develop a theology to protect communion in the families. It is discovered through a few stories that, the strength of Dalit Christian women lies in their Christian nurture which they received in Christ and the church. Transformation of Lutheran women is found due to their education, employment and increased economic status. It is also discovered that individual liberation has led to gender-social transformation. Stories express that the storytellers are liberated. The stories give a clear picture that Christianity has given Dalit women new identity as Lutheran Christian women. They were lifted up from lower class to a middle class. They were accepted in the society as Christians. There is inter-dining between caste people and Dalit women. Dalit women are able to empower caste women by organising saving schemes and loans through Self Help Groups. Their houses are turned into churches. They are regular to worship services. They are regular in reading and interpreting the Bible. More stories such as these can perhaps be found in the South Andhra Lutheran Church. However, while stories of Kumari and Devi show their encounters with domestic violence, how they felt liberated when they were separated from their husbands; the stories of Chengamma and Devadanamma are stories of empowerment, individual liberation and social transformation. In these stories we see glimpses of a theology of life.

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BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MISSION

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WHY MAKE IT A BIG DEAL! SEEING THE WIDOW BEYOND HER TWO COINS (MARK 12:41-44): A DALIT FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Surekha Nelavala

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them: 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.' (Mark 12:41-44, NRSV).

Introduction

The story of the widow with two coins is significantly known for its prominence in Christian tradition in the context of 'giving' and 'mission'. In this story Jesus upholds the Woman's offering over above the others and Jesus' words are significantly emphasised to comfort the poor, if not romanticise poverty. But reading as an Indian Dalit feminist, my attention falls beyond her offering. In these few verses of the Markan story, the poor widow appears and disappears too quickly. However, the story becomes prominent in the interpretive tradition mostly in terms of Jesus' unconditional praise for her offering. Much has been said about her offering and her good intention in giving away all that she has. The story of the poor widow somehow brings us into complacency, first, because it is too sweet of the widow to give away all that she has, and she stands out by her virtue, and second, it is 'nice' of Jesus to call attention to this, thus glorifying her action. The woman of the text is once again praised for her sacrifice, adored for her selflessness as a person who gives away everything and she is admired for being virtuous as a woman.¹

¹ Addison G. Wright SS, 'The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament? A Matter of Context' *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol.44, 1982 (256-265), 257; Mario DiCicco OFM, 'What Can One Give in Exchange for One's Life?: A Narrative-Critical Study of the Widow and Her Offering, Mark 12:41-44', *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 25/6, 1998 (441-449), 441.

I appreciate what Jesus does with the woman and how the story has been interpreted in glorifying the poor woman's goodness, but at the same time, first, I find myself dissatisfied and uneasy with the objective appreciation of the widow's offering. Such a reading simply leaves a reader to compliment her act rather than resonate with her in mission context. Second, the reading based on objective appreciation alienates the woman from her historical context of poverty and widowhood even though these two realities are prominent in the text. Therefore, as a Dalit feminist reader from India, influenced by my imperial condition, I take a point of departure from previous readings that primarily sought after the meaning of Jesus' words in the text, and those that reiterated Jesus' compliment.

Therefore, my questions to the text are not so much in terms of wondering how could she possibly give away all that she had; nor am I interested in simply reiterating Jesus' words of praise for the widow, but I find myself rather asking, What is there left with the woman to give, except those two coins? What creates such a disparity in the society that she only has two coins left with her, while others could have large sums of money? What does it take to give away everything that she had? What does the widow's act in the story imply in the Dalit feminist context of mission.

What are the experiences of this woman as a widow? Is her poverty a result of her widowhood? Why is this role model of 'giving all' praised in and expected from a woman, who has to sacrifice it all, even though she is left with almost nothing as a widow in the patriarchal society? I will address these questions using a lens shaped by the actual experiences of an Indian widow, which brings particular insight into my reading of the story. Thus my lens and response to the text comes primarily from my experience, and from witnessing the life situations of Indian women as wives, widows and poor who very possibly have only two coins, if any at all. Thus I resonate with the experience of the poor widow who had no choice but to live in poverty, the one who has only two coins.

Experience of Radha, an Indian Widow

In the Indian context, the widowhood of a woman is regarded as a curse from God. It is considered as the most unfortunate situation in a woman's life. Though the society is sympathetic to the woman, she is often seen as a bad omen, one who may pass on her curse to others around her. Seeing a widow's face first thing in the morning is believed to be a bad omen. It is a great calamity in a patriarchal and traditional society on several levels. The widows generally face serious economic, social, cultural and emotional deprivation, the first and foremost of these being economic deprivation. Further, the external socio-cultural experiences of widowed women, whose psyche is already wounded as the result of internalisation of patriarchal values, create a drastic vulnerability in addition to causing much grief on many levels, and may eventually lead in many cases to a 'lost' life.

Along with economic deprivation, when a woman becomes a widow, a stringent 'socio-moral' code is imposed on her. She is expected to remain inside the home and is forbidden to take part in any joyful occasion both in family life and in the society. The vulnerability of the widows is increased by the restrictions imposed on her residence, inheritance rights and opportunities for remarriage and employment. This is especially significant in situations where they have been completely dependent on their husbands as wives. The virtuous widow is expected to shun all desires, and live with meeting only her very basic needs.

For instance, on several occasions the dependent widows cannot return to their parents' homes even though they are often victimised by their in-laws. Such is the condition of one of my friends, named Radha who became a widow when she was 28 years old. Radha, who belonged to a high middle class, upper caste family, is not educated beyond high school, as it is deemed in her family that girls need not have higher education – after all they need to be married on time and sent away from home which is a glorious occasion for the family. As is the case with many marriages, Radha's too was an arranged marriage. Thus, she had no clue as to what kind of a husband she was getting. Radha did not have a happy marriage with her husband, who had many addictions. Her husband died 5 years after her marriage, leaving her with a son, who can proudly inherit his father's property. To secure and protect her son's future and the financial security for her son, Radha stayed with her in-laws, where her status is not much beyond a cook and a caretaker of her ageing in-laws. Even though she is young and beautiful, she ought to remain single, and it is shameful for her to be even thinking of another marriage or a settlement in a different way. Being completely dependent on her in-laws, Radha may have access to enough food, and clothing, thanks to the kindness of her in-laws, but she remains poor as she owns nothing in the house.

Radha was made vulnerable as a girl who was denied education, she was made doubly vulnerable by being married to a man who did not love her, she was made triply vulnerable when she became a widow and had to be contented with an inferior status; in sum, she was made vulnerable in multiple ways and an enormous amount of social and religious restrictions were appropriated to sustain and force her to stay in her victimised status. Today, Radha continues to make a choice to continue to stay in her in-law's place, living in total submission to them, for the sake of a better future for her son. When I asked Radha about her welfare and well-being, she says that she needs to seek her in-law's permission even to visit her diseased father; they do not like her to visit her parents too often, because there would not be anybody to serve her in-laws during her absence. When I asked why she could not leave them as her husband was alive no more, she said, 'My life is spoiled anyway, there is not much difference whether I live here or in my parents' house, except that I may be loved more there at my parents' house, but if I stay here, at least my son will inherit some property

from his grandparents. I myself am ready to sacrifice my life for his better future.’

I have heard praising comments about Radha, for her strength and persuasiveness, tenacity to survive her life in her in-laws’ house. Her parents praise her, her friends adore her and her neighbours admire her for her strength and how good a mother she is. But in reality Radha hates every day of her life. She says that her soul is so ruptured and her mind is dead. She has no hope in her life. Radha also said that she has been encouraged by some others who care about her to leave her in-laws and start a different life. She says, ‘given all the circumstances, I have decided to lead my life the way I have chosen it to be. I am in some ways liberated because I get sympathy from people, and I am liberated from my husband’s harassment. It was worse when I was a wife. I could have left, but I chose to live like this for the sake of my son. He gets both love and security because of my sacrifice.’

Radha shares some very compelling similarities with the widow in the text who also sacrifices all that she has. But my question to both widows here is, what is really left with them to be the most generous givers? Haven’t their lives and everything they have, been snatched away from them by cruel social customs and conditions? Does not the woman in the text become a victim by her widowed status? Is it not so because she happens to be a female in a spouseless status? What is obvious in both the stories is that the gender specific status of a widow and her ensuing economic conditions are interconnected and caused by the social, moral and religious grounds and norms that organise the world they live in. Therefore, the victimisation of the widow in the text is multifaceted, although her ‘victim status’ has been masked and denied with the showers of praises, beginning with Jesus. Just like in the case of Radha, the woman in the text also was elevated for her sacrificing of her two precious coins. Women for ages have been victims of the status quo of a particular kind of victimisation that comes from ideals under which women are praised for giving up all they have, or who for the sake of praise give up all they have. I am asking, does a woman need to give up all or lose herself in order to be praised? Should she turn into a victim in order to be noticed and adored? Does not the example of this widow once again lead others into the same patriarchal pattern of offering and sacrificing that is actually not necessarily praiseworthy from a woman’s point of view? Why should it be that only a woman has to give up all that she has? It seems that the whole idea of giving in Christian interpretation is problematic and based on a premise that is either blind to gendered experiences and gender perspectives in the same way that it is blind to the woman in the text.

In addition to their vulnerability as women, and as women without means of their own, in both of the stories these widows demonstrate independence and freedom of choice in the midst of victimisation and ‘social imprisonment’. The widow is actually able to give away all that she

has, and does so for the reasons of her own; similarly, Radha was able to make her own choice that is best for her son, a choice she made, considering all her options. She defined her own 'giving', even if that happened within the parameters set for her. Both widows act for themselves and by themselves and claim for themselves particular freedom here, even if they are both female examples of women whose lives have been fundamentally 'normed' by *kyriarchal* expectations that demand women to be willing to sacrifice in order to be noticed and praised. Do the *kyriarchal* structures of their respective societies give them any hope that they also can be liberated without needing to give up all that they have? When will she be liberated? Is it only when she is noticed and praised for her sacrifice or is it when she struggles against being victimised, and when she challenges the circumstance that made her fatally dependent and vulnerable as a woman in particular? How do we define liberation – socially or theologically? – in the contexts of women like the widow in the New Testament and the widow from today's India named Radha, who both demonstrate independence while conforming to the patriarchal impositions and expectations?

My second stream of thought comes from imperial condition and analysis and its influence. It is not difficult to imagine that the widow of the text is more of a victim of her society rather than a superwoman as she has been projected. Although we can project the widow as a positive role model, there are certainly serious questions to be asked about how to interpret the text and the ambivalence that readers tend to imply in their reading.² The widow's act is positively used in the traditional interpretations that did not take into account either the prevailing cultural factors or the gendered experiences of women, but glorified the widow to be a superwoman, and yet ironically distanced themselves to either emulate her or resonate with her. Readers have carefully mimicked Jesus in reiterating what he said, although the story, somewhat, calls for mimicking the widow. It is fair to ask, finally, what may be the interpretive agenda of the scholars who tend to make her a good role model, while distancing themselves from her example? Is there a deliberate choice on the part of the readers not to explore the experience or actual status of the woman of the text?

In the neo-colonial context of the readers which gives prominence for economic status, is it not a 'shame' to identify with a woman even when she stands out as a morally superior person? What is the place of a widow who has nothing of her own in the neo-colonial context of today or the

² Stephen D. Moore uses the tool of 'ambivalence' to demonstrate Mark's anti-imperial attitude in the imperial context of Mark, by giving an example of the widow with two coins which stands as a challenge. See Stephen D. Moore, 'Mark and Empire: Zealot and Postcolonial. Readings', in Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (eds), *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St Louis: Chalice, 2004), 134-48.

widow in the imperial context of the woman of the text? The stories of real women call us to ask: What is the significance of this story beyond its literary importance in the narrative of Mark? Is there an unidentified struggle that continues to exist with feminist readings in its intersections with post-colonial readings? What are the barriers to bring post-colonial readings to intersect with praxis oriented-liberative readings?

Acknowledging the multifaceted marginalisation of the woman of the text, as a reader I ask some additional questions – what makes the woman so independent that she is not dependent on money but gives it away? How could she make such an expensive decision that she hurts herself? Or does it really hurt her after all? When used to having nothing what difference does it make to give away the last two coins, which is almost nothing? On a couple of occasions, both in church gatherings and classroom settings, I have asked different groups to imagine having only two pennies, or having two million dollars. I asked them, if they were to give away everything that they had, when, if ever, would it be possible for them to give away all of what they had. Every one of the people I asked this question said that they can imagine giving away all of what they had, when they had only two pennies. Why is it possible for others or the woman in the text to give away the last two coins? The woman makes her sacrifice not at the treasury but already in her life by detaching herself from money and the so called security that it provides. Being able to have only two pennies demonstrates the woman's courage to have nothing, as opposed to the insecurity of the rich, when they will have to lose all that they have. But on the other hand, the woman at the treasury, shamefully standing with two coins, embraces her shame, while others follow the status quo by bringing large sums of money in honour. Methodologically, how do we define and what do we do with what is shame and what is honour in biblical scholarship? Is it shame for a post-colonial reader to be more praxis oriented and honour to be more theoretical?

**DALIT INTERPRETATION OF THE WISDOM
LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE
UNDERPRIVILEGED GROUPS IN THE HEBREW
SOCIETY: A MISSION PERSPECTIVE**

K. Jesurathnam

‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom’ is the dictum by which Israelites reworked their God’s great deeds, unique and vital to Israel’s own context in the midst of several international wisdom propositions. The entire creation is praised, because by wisdom Yahweh created it. God established the foundations of the earth, by divine wisdom and might and has caused everything to come into the earth and to play its active part. Yahweh is not only the creator but also the sustainer of this beautiful creation. By wisdom and insight human beings can learn to live in right relationship with God and his creation. Hebrew wisdom presented to us in the three canonical books of the Old Testament¹ concerns informed observations regarding life and its challenges, rather than formal instructions by scribes or others. Hebrew wisdom encourages readers not to limit themselves to mere study, but to practise discretion. This leads to equating wisdom with righteousness and with religiosity. In distinction from their neighbours Israel’s wisdom literature: (a) granted less priority to the privileged classes, (b) remembered familial obligations in connection with its tribal roots and (c) understood itself in terms of Yahweh’s demands. The wisdom teaches on the whole the value of worthy living by means of practical observation and gaining prudence by building on insights derived from lived experiences. Although there is a general complaint that wisdom writers unlike the prophetic utterances do not talk much about social justice concerns it is not altogether true that they are

¹ By canonical we mean the books of the wisdom literature proper like: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes accepted by the Protestant canon. At the purely literary level, the designation ‘wisdom writings’ is not an adequate term because of the wide variety of wisdom material found in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Very few books like the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes can be called sapiential in the sense of imparting instruction or addressing themselves to broad issues of a philosophical or theological nature. For some details on this point see, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

indifferent to the social concerns. In fact their class ethic comes very strongly in that they share the pain and oppression of the marginalised and oppressed communities in the Hebrew society. They in fact trained their students to take a strong note of disparity existing in the society between rich and poor and thus to be concerned about the social structures that promote the disparity.²

In the light of the above discussion the task of this presentation is to underscore the importance of the social justice concerns in the writings of wisdom books, to situate their socio-economic milieu by which we can discern their concern for the marginalised and underprivileged groups of the society. The overarching concerns of the wisdom writers in relation to the oppressed masses of their society will be taken into account to see how such issues raised by the biblical wisdom writers will be of help to the Dalit Christian communities in discerning God's mission to the vulnerable and downtrodden in the Indian society. The main focus would be placed on how God's mission is operative for the people at the margins, like Dalits and other such alienated communities. Before actually venturing into the dynamics of the socio-ethical concerns of the biblical wisdom writers we shall deal with a few preliminary matters concerning the genre of Hebrew wisdom.

I

Wisdom is the ability to 'cope' with everyday life; wisdom is the quest for understanding (self-understanding) and for the mastery of the world. Wisdom asks for what is good for the people, believes that all the essential answers can be learned in experience pregnant with signs about reality itself. The human responsibility is to search for that insight and then to learn to live in harmony with the cosmos. Israel's wisdom teachers were first and foremost students of the universe. They studied Yahweh's creation to determine order and command human conduct which would sustain that order socially and cosmologically. Wisdom teachers understood and lived very close to 'concrete, daily reality and give to Israel a sense that Yahweh is present in, with, and under daily, lived experience.' The sages also present to us a new understanding of the involvement of Yahweh that is hitherto not known to us. 'They were secularists in ancient Israel, but their secular ways of discernment and speech continued to reflect on lived reality as the carrier of Yahweh in the world.'³ The sages are of the firm view that Yahweh is reliable and the name to be trusted, because Yahweh is the one

² For a more detailed discussion on this point of view see, Bruce V. Malchow, 'Social Justice in the Wisdom Literature', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982), 120-124.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 688.

who created orderly and coherent and ethically reliable creation and continues to protect that order despite changing circumstances.⁴

With regard to the identity and setting of wisdom Norman K. Gottwald⁵ suggests the following stages based on its historical epochs: First, the wise were parents in families or elders and counsellors in clans and tribes. Second, the wise were government officials, scribes and possibly priests who kept the records of the state, counselled kings and trained future political leaders. Third, the wise were non-priestly authorities in the collected and venerated law of Moses who interpreted its meaning and present application and who passed on their skills in legal scribal schools. While some hold on to the older view that wisdom had its origin in the Jerusalem court, it is no longer a tenable opinion.⁶ Obviously Israel did not wait until Solomon to have its share of experiential wisdom.

With regard to the sociological setting of Hebrew wisdom we have hardly any evidence to argue for its clarity. It is a more difficult question to argue how the wisdom is connected to the society at large in the Israelite context. Leo Perdue postulates two paradigms in relation to wisdom to Hebrew society at large.⁷ *First*, order and conflict. The book of Ecclesiastes, with its pronouncements to submit to God and king, followed the model of order, as did Proverbs, with its emphasis on righteousness and discipline. By contrast the book of Job presents God's creative forces in struggle with nihilistic forces. Proverbs, Psalms, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon endorse ideas of prosperity for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. This represents the orthodox view of wisdom. Job and Ecclesiastes are critical about such common assumptions regarding the basis of divine reward and punishment and so question human capacity to predict or induce God's favour. The critical question thus arises: Does wisdom teaching primarily enforce or challenge prevailing cultural and religious attitudes? Interpreters remain divided on the issue. Central to the question is the interpreters' choice of Proverbs/Job/Ecclesiastes as normative wisdom. The direct opposition of the claims (the righteous do/do not suffer: the wicked do/do not prosper) makes such divisions inevitable. *Second*, the perspective on the social setting of wisdom is analysed in terms of ethics. Ecclesiastes shows little concern for the poor, unlike Job. Rather than emerging with compassion, Ecclesiastes suggests a few relatively rigid patterns for behaviour in what approximates a 'least resistance' philosophy.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 688.

⁵ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 564.

⁶ Roland E. Murphy, 'Wisdom theses and hypothesis', in J.G. Gammie et al (eds) *Israel's Wisdom: Samuel Terrien Festschrift* (New York: Scholar's Press, 1978), 35-42.

⁷ Leo G. Perdue, 'Cosmology and social order in the wisdom tradition', in John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (eds), *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 457-78.

The book advises the reader to find the measure of enjoyment amid life's confusion. Proverbs mixes concern for following rules and showing human concern. Wisdom serves as a tool which could be used either to reinforce or challenge the consensus depending on the perspective of the thinker and the situation of the community. R.N. Whybray⁸ shows that no one has succeeded in positioning the sages in any distinct social group except some general observations made on the social setting as done above. Scholars used several phrases to refer to the sages like: 'elite class', 'intellectuals', 'urban owners of landed estates', and 'professional counsellors or teachers'. In addition interpreters usually acknowledge an early period when wisdom's origin and transmission occurred within family units, and a late epoch during which teachers administered their own private schools, with a possible intermediate stage associated with the royal court. Andre Lemaire⁹ analyses the complex system of education during the monarchy embracing most cities in Israel and extending to many remote villages.

Therefore it would be appropriate to conclude that the wisdom tradition has a way of explaining the contradictions in one's life by means of practical observations. What can be learned is only possible by way of first hand experience and in no other way is it possible. Practical living is the only option available in order to live and cope with life in this world. The sages are of the view that the experience lived as the reality of the people is indeed an experience of Yahweh and there should be no distraction from this dictum.

II

With regard to the vocabulary and the ethos of wisdom writers and their support to the underprivileged groups in the Israelite society, it would be appropriate for us to capture their concerns as reflected in each of the books.¹⁰ Before venturing into that task we shall make a few general observations on this point. We must take a general note that for wisdom the sphere of the world is very broad ranging from 'natural environment, historical events, social relations, political order, family affairs, daily work and religious belief and practice.'¹¹ In this sense wisdom tries to learn from all walks of life and for that purpose human beings are at the centre of wisdom learning. The ultimate goal of this exercise is to develop a practical and comprehensive ethic and behavioural style which is necessary and adequate to all the hard situations that life moves along. It will also help to

⁸ R.N. Whybray, 'The social world of wisdom writers', in R.E. Clements (ed), *The World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 227-50.

⁹ Andre Lemaire, 'The Sage in School and Temple', in Gammie and Perdue, *The Sage in Israel*, 165-81.

¹⁰ We limit our discussion to the three canonical books of wisdom viz., Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes.

¹¹ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 566.

interact with one another with the necessary shrewdness and skill to live up to any situation. Moreover wisdom tradition is firmly anchored in the royal court and its associated institutions. Gottwald points out two major and important lines of thinking that are pursued by the wisdom writers:

Some of the wisdom literature... focused... on the cultivation of a pedestrian ethic of obedience to superiors and the refinement of proper court manners which were highly self-protective of the precarious position of lesser officials under arbitrary rulers. On the other hand, the wise officials have family and tribal ties, as well as wider socio-religious concerns, and their literature also reflects a pronounced concern to preserve the integrity of rural communities against predatory wealth and suborned legal institutions.¹²

It was also believed that some of the wise men who had concern for the just social order had contact with prophets, priests and elders who had similar concerns. It is possible that like-minded people formed a 'wisdom circle' and that circle consists of all the categories of people as mentioned above.

With regard to the class and social ethic of the wisdom writers Crenshaw has the following to say:

Observation about the intrinsic relationship between human and divine truth marks the arrival of the third facet of wisdom's legacy which will be emphasized: wisdom enabled people to cope. The secret of Wisdom's appeal lay in the reward which she bestowed upon those who followed her path. No situation arose in which sages found themselves unprepared, for they addressed every eventuality. Their goal was to know what to do or say on any given occasion. To this end they gathered information and perfected their powers of drawing analogies between different realms and categories. Through centuries of experience the sages acquired valuable insight into personal and human character.¹³

The sages instead of launching an attack on the social order that is lying in corruption always take up the view that its inner dynamics are observed in such a way that it will teach us a lesson for us to live wisely in any skewed situation. Gerhard von Rad rightly states:

All the more important and all the more interesting to the teachers is *what* happens in this given, social sphere and *how* it happens. Their observation of men's activities, of their behaviour in the most varied situations, of their peculiarities and of everything paradoxical, is acute in spite of a marked tendency to didactic standardization. Their judgments are on the side of extreme sobriety, often strongly accentuated, in form often solemn. If one must mention something which appears to be characteristic of the concept of life in many didactic sentences and which is definitely also to a certain extent sociologically determined, then it is a tendency towards caution, towards wariness. Here, reticence, caution in action, is esteemed more highly than

¹² Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 570.

¹³ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 210.

overzealous enthusiasm. Everything hasty, anything that is acquired quickly, such as 'hastily won wealth', hasty speech, is suspicious from the outset.¹⁴

The sages warn their readers of the lapse that can happen due to their sin. The word for sin is *peša'* which does not mean sin in terms of moral default; rather it was always meant as a violation of property or an offence against one's fellow human being. Among the twelve occurrences¹⁵ in the book of Proverbs none of them talk about 'crime' as a sin of man against God, but as a failure of relationship between man and man.¹⁶ The social order that all the books of wisdom literature take up has some legal basis from the Torah. Each book approaches this problem in a particular way although the wisdom writers base their arguments depending heavily on the Torah principles.¹⁷

The importance of the role of women in the wisdom writings and the opinion of the sages on different roles of the women is another matter to be examined and how the patriarchal values have been perpetuated by the wisdom writers. At the same time the sages are very creative in portraying the positive and potential role of women in the Hebrew society.¹⁸

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs seriously takes note of the major concern that Yahweh is the creator or maker of the poor and therefore they should not be despised or oppressed. As noted earlier the book of Proverbs, in spite of its strong ties with royal elite schools does 'preserve the integrity of rural communities against predatory wealth and suborned legal institutions.'¹⁹ The process of transferring wealth from many to few is noted in the book of Proverbs in the form of admonitions. For instance one admonition warns the people that they should not move the boundary marks of the fields of orphans and widows (23:10-11). This makes it clear that the book of Proverbs is concerned about the rural and poor populace who are under constant threat to their survival. During the post-monarchic period the absence of a king created a great vacuum in sustaining the ideas as mentioned above. But the book of Proverbs begins to note the change that

¹⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 85.

¹⁵ Proverbs 10:12,19; 12:13; 17:9, 19; 19:11; 28:2, 13, 24; 29:6, 16, 22.

¹⁶ von Rad, *Wisdom*, 88.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion on this point see Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (trans. J. Daryl Charles; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

¹⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the details of this issue. For an elaborate discussion on this and related issues see, Carole Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

¹⁹ See n.12 above for the same quotation. See Proverbs 14:21, 31; 17:5; 23:10-11 for the explanation of this view by the author of Proverbs.

took place with the emerging family and society as stronger than before. The idea of God as creator and the one who maintains the order in the community began to re-emerge.²⁰ The author of Proverbs no longer satisfied with the status quo that rampantly creates a division among the rich and poor, thus moves on to offer his critique against the system and admonished the heavens to respond to God, who maintains order in the society. In Proverbs 14:31 the author advanced his argument by making use of earlier traditions in Old Testament concern for the poor. The word *dāl* is used in relation to the word *śh* which means ‘maker’, creator who has special concern for the poor. While the concern for the poor is an earlier concern even in the pre-exilic period, the term maker could be a later word used for the creator as in Job 4:17; 35:10; Isaiah 51:13; 54:15 and Psalm 95:6.²¹ Thus the creator and the poor are closer to each other and everyone who hears the wisdom admonition is expected to take heed to this instruction. In this regard Ceresko summarises the position of the book of Proverbs as follows:

The book of Proverbs describes, often in vivid terms, the disorder and unjust socio-economic conditions during this (post-exilic) period. These conditions resulted both from the exploitative demands imposed by the successive imperial regimes and from self-serving practices of those Jews who collaborated with the foreign rulers and/or took advantage of the disorder for their own selfish purposes.²²

Another proverbial admonition mentioned in Proverbs 23:10-11 is intended to protect the rights of the oppressed or underprivileged or those whose rights are violated by the greedy and wealthy people. The concerns expressed by the poet in these two verses once again reflect an order (social order) to be maintained among the human relations, which is also intended by God. Since God is the one who intends such an order, God hates the violation of the legal rights of the community in which the rights of the poor and underprivileged are protected in particular. The removal of the boundary stones of the poor widows is one such legal violation, to which God files the suit against those who were involved in violating regulations set by God. The intervention by Yahweh is explained here by means of the word *gō’el* when the rights of the poor are denied, and this *gō’el* strengthens the weak who can be exploited with wrong accusations.²³ The

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²⁰ For more details on this point see Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 244-248.

²¹ C.T. Fritsch and R.W. Schloeb, ‘The Book of Proverbs’, in *The Interpreters Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), 867-68.

²² Anthony R. Ceresko, ‘The Function of “Order” (SEDEQ) and “Creation” in the Book of Proverbs, With Some Implications for Today’. *Indian Theological Studies* 32 (1995), 228.

²³ Here the word *gō’el* would appear as a helper in a lawsuit to see that justice was done to his protégé. For more details on this point see Helmer Ringgren, ‘gā’al,

intervention by Yahweh as a *gō'el* is explained by legal terms and is further attested by the word *rib* here. This word is generally used as Yahweh's adjudication on behalf of his people which is carried out in legal terms (Pss. 68:6; 146:9; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6; 22:3).²⁴ In the prophetic *rib* pattern we find a somewhat different kind of structure, wherein the prophets act as summoners to the *rib* of Yahweh, where the mountains and the foundations of the earth are summoned as witnesses (cf. Mic. 6:1-8). But here Yahweh directly intervenes and no witnesses are summoned, but the adversaries are confronted directly. There is no mediation here as in the prophetic lawsuit, but Yahweh acts as a powerful advocate who will fight the case of the poor and orphans and take a legal action against those who violate the laws set by God. The motivation *kî* in v.11 refers to the result of behaviour mentioned in v.10; therefore God would want to take the case by himself. Since God maintains the order in the society, God will act as the patron of those whose rights are denied. When the rights of the underprivileged are denied, the created order is disturbed, thus God intervenes as a judge in the law court and restores the order again.²⁵

Since this admonition from the wise men consists of an appeal to order, it may have a reference to the cosmic order 'which interpenetrates the entire world of all life and which joins behaviour and consequences with the sanction of the creator's unsearchable wisdom.'²⁶ Therefore the practice of injustice is the result of disorder, foolishness and also sin against Yahweh.²⁷ The overall concern of the wisdom writers expressed in the book of Proverbs is well summarised by Pleins:

Assisting the poor through giving – charity – was an important concern to the wise. The student is warned against neglecting the poor (*dal*, Prov. 21:13). It may be that one day the student might be in distress and the neglect of others would rebound to leave the student naked before disaster, with no one to assist. The wise person shares food with the poor (*dal*, Prov. 22:9). The defining feature of just rulers is their treatment of the poor (*dal*) in legal contexts (Prov. 29:14) ... to the wise the just treatment of the poor is a mark of righteousness.²⁸

These texts express God's immediacy to the poor in creation and redemption and thus the wise men are expected to show similar concern

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gō'el, *ge'ullah'*, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 350-55.

²⁴ Otto Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos* (Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 272.

²⁵ Philip Johannes Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 33-34.

²⁶ Brian W. Kovacs, 'Is There a Class-Ethic in Proverbs?' in J.L. Crenshaw and J. T. Willis (eds), *Essays in the Old Testament Ethics* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 185.

²⁷ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 574.

²⁸ J. David Pleins, 'Poverty in the Social World of the Wise,' *JSOT* 37 (1987), 70.

towards the poor as they are responsible to their creator in their dealing with the poor and underprivileged.

Job

Job overlaps more with the prophetic materials in terms of dealing with the concern for the poor. By the use of choice words like: *'ebyôn*, *dal*, and *'ānī* Job understands poverty as a condition resulting from social injustice (see Jb 24:4, 9, 14; 29:12; 30:25; 31:16; 34:28; 36:6, 15).²⁹

The term *'ebyôn* is translated as 'powerless' and it is found in many places in the book of Job (5:15; 24:4, 14; 29:16; 30:25; 31:19). In these verses there is a twofold concern of the author of Job in using this term. It talks about the relationship of the powerless to the wicked and also Job's relation with the powerless. Job as the representative of the oppressed and the powerless laments bitterly for his pathetic condition. Job's friend Eliphaz portrays God as the champion of social justice and the same God also created the foundations of the earth with the same principle. God is directly involved in executing his justice as the creator of the earth on behalf of the poor and powerless in the society.³⁰

In another passage of Job 24:2-12 and 13-17 the author speaks of exploitation of the downtrodden and the reign of miscreants. Job points out the widespread exploitation in the world during his time, caused by many evil and wicked deeds. For example, the removal of landmarks as a means of appropriating a portion of the weaker neighbour's property. Maintenance of landmarks was necessary to preserve one's inheritance as a trust from God clearly mentioned in Deuteronomy 19:14; 27:17. Whenever the property and possessions of the poor and underprivileged are appropriated illegally, they are compelled to leave the mainstream of the society and go to hidden corners and strive for their sustenance like wild asses. Their only source of food material is barren wilderness (Jb 24:4-5).³¹ The misery of the hungry poor is further intensified by their lack of clothing and shelter and they cling on to their only source of help, God. Thus the intention of Job in using the term *'ebyôn* is very clear that these are the underprivileged and marginalised of his society who are the victims of economic and political injustice. Also by using this term Job wants to communicate that he had to fight against the institutional evils like the judiciary, and the political and economic system in order to safeguard the rights of *'ebyôn*. The evil forces who oppress this powerless community are greedy influential people existing in his day in the Israelite society.³² Job here takes the position of an

²⁹ Pleins, 'Poverty in the Social', 70.

³⁰ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 133.

³¹ Francis Madanu, *Understanding of the Poor in Job: In the Context of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Hyderabad: St. John's Regional Seminary, 1997), 113.

³² Madanu, *Understanding of the Poor*, 144.

advocate of the underprivileged class of his society and Job takes a clear position to defend them at any cost.

Use of the term *dal* is very important in the context of the book of Job and it further intensifies Job's concern for the marginalised sections of his society. This word is used six times in the book of Job in 5:16; 20:10, 19; 34:19, 28; 31:16. In most cases the word is used in the context of how the poor are treated in different spheres of societal life. Job used this term with the sense that the *dal* are the vulnerable, although they are better than the *'ebyôn* they are still subjected to exploitation and oppression. Because of their vulnerability they are always helpless people. In 22:5-9 Eliphaz accuses Job of exploiting the *dal* and Job spends a lot of time in his final testimony speech refuting the allegation made by Eliphaz. The main conclusion of Job is that Job's friends, by defending this class of people, affirm that God is the righteous ruler who will bring justice to the *dal* and punish miscreants who are working against the helpless people.³³

The use of the term *'ānī* which is translated as 'needy' needs some discussion in relation to Job. This group consists of those who have basic needs like food, shelter, but who are in need of social and political protection. This word is used seven times in the book of Job. The needy are described in the context that: they are forced into hiding (24:4), their children are seized as a pledge (24:9) and they are murdered (24:14). Job talks about the condition of the needy in two levels. First, the needy are exploited as described in 24:2-11. The rich oppressors are very shrewd to remove the boundaries of the needy. The miscreants are so powerful they pasture the stolen herd, on the land of the needy gained by the miscreants by illegal means. The miscreants take the children of the needy by payment or in a pledge. This is done with the view to get maximum profits with minimum costs paid for the children. Second, the unrequited criminal acts are conducted by the miscreants on the part of the needy. Misery and abuse are rampant in the city and urban contexts. The victims groan and cry out for help against their oppressors. The victims of the murderous miscreants are powerless and needy, the innocent citizens who are unable to muster any resistance. Since they come from the lowest rung of the society, no one cares about their problems. The murderous miscreant has no fear of being caught for his criminal acts. They walk like a thief coming at night to rob. After achieving the target, he digs through the mud-brick wall to get an undetected entrance. Then they watch for dusk in order to get a victim. Thus the author describes the criminal act of the miscreant towards the needy person.³⁴

In all this vocabulary Job clearly argues that Yahweh is the one who maintains order and justice in his created order and that nothing could go wrong against that created order. However Job is also of the view that 'God

³³ Madanu, *Understanding of the Poor*, 168.

³⁴ Madanu, *Understanding of the Poor*, 172.

does not have evil and suffering totally under control and thus God also suffers.³⁵

Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes is very interesting in terms of its radical propositions that question the traditional patterns of wisdom thinking. The author is popularly called Qoheleth or the preacher who has some interesting things to say about the poor and needy and the underprivileged classes of Israelite society in comparison with other wisdom writers. The preacher while affirming the older traditions of wisdom questions them as well. For example, in ch.6:7-8, it is written in v.7 that 'all human toil is for mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied' which is a traditional wisdom saying. But v.8 reads: 'for what advantage have the wise over the fools? And what do the poor who know how to conduct themselves before the living?' This saying is an innovation of the preacher that departs from the traditional understanding. Although the book of Ecclesiastes does not deal with the poor and underprivileged directly like other wisdom books, yet there are some texts that describe the poor and powerless reflecting the biblical tradition. The preacher was very much aware of the existence of the poor – oppression, injustice and discrimination meted out to poor in the world and refers to this in several passages like: 3:16-4:3; 5:7; 7:15; 8:9-14; 9:14-16.

The preacher talks about the life that is not worth living due to the following reasons. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. According to the Stoic teachers, the wise would discern good times either to act or abstain from acting. This act is also determined by the specific circumstances. These timely acts would therefore be available to wise people to act accordingly. While Qoheleth may agree with this view in principle, the only problem, as he sees it, is that the knowledge which would enable us to bring our actions into coincidence with what is predestined to happen is just not available to us. To make it even more clear Qoheleth goes a step further in his thesis that: whatever occurs has already happened; what is to happen in the future has already happened in the past; God seeks out what has been driven away, i.e., God recalls occurrences which have moved from the future into the present and then into the past so that they may be recycled eventually in a new present, the circle is closed; there is no room for novelty, the time spoken by Qoheleth is present on this circuit knowledge, however, it is denied to the human agent. The 'circle of destiny' and 'ideal living' according to the times and seasons are well within the teachings of Stoics. Qoheleth is well aware of this but departs from this by proposing: God has an all-encompassing temporal perspective within every human mind.

³⁵ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, p. 578.

Human beings have the capacity to transcend the transient moments of their absurd lives, although there is some ceiling on it that no one can breach. In this sense, Qoheleth is cognisant of the enduring permanence of divine providential involvement.

For the preacher power belonged to the wicked and they wield it ruthlessly to oppress the powerless. The twin problems of corruption of justice and the oppression of the helpless lead Qoheleth to conclude that the dead are better than the living, and that the unborn are more fortunate yet, to have been spared from the undeserved suffering (4:2-3). For Qoheleth life is hardly worth living because of the wretchedness of the poor. The preacher brings about a straightforward attribution of ubiquitous oppression and injustice to the hierarchic organisation of the state.³⁶ The word of the preacher is a clear indication that the corruption prevailed from top to bottom in the hierarchical structure. This is reflected in Qoheleth 5:7:

If you see in the province the oppression of the poor and violation of justice and the right, do not be amazed at the matter, because an official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them.

It is normally expected in ancient Israel that the judicial system is to be kept without any corruption and that in turn would help to maintain an uncorrupt system where the poor and their rights are safeguarded. Instead the entire judicial and bureaucratic system was corrupt thus working to the disadvantage of the poor and underprivileged in the society. The higher officers extract as much revenue as possible from the lesser officers, who in turn extract from the common poor in the form of taxes. The preacher observes the way authorities exercise their power to hurt others (8:9). The wicked went about in holy places unquestioned. Punishment for evildoers was delayed. This encouraged them to commit more atrocities against the poor (8:10-11). This perversion of justice is so dreadful that it made the preacher challenge the traditional doctrine of retributive justice mentioned in Deuteronomy and later supported by the prophets.³⁷

Through another parable in 9:14-16 the preacher reflects and depicts the discrimination and disparity existing in the society. The predicament of the poor man, even if he is wise, is explained here as against the dominant in the society. Even the wise man who lacked wealth was despised, if so what would have been the condition of the poor man?

If we agree for a later date of the book of Ecclesiastes then what was described above in 5:7-9 depicts the situation of Ptolemaic administration in Palestine. By presenting a ubiquitous situation of corruption and by offering a strong critique against the corrupt system the preacher radically

³⁶ Frank Crüsemann, 'The Unchangeable World: The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth,' in Willy Scottroff et al (eds), *God of the Lowly* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 70.

³⁷ Francis Madanu, *Understanding of the Poor*, 73.

questions the remoteness of God and his protection to the poor and underprivileged in the society. Gottwald conveys this idea clearly:

The socioreligious situation of this astute sage is a setting where *God and government are distanced from the people*. He presupposes the reality and absolute power of God and state, though the former is vaster than the latter. Both the divine and secular authorities work in unfathomable ways that cannot be contested. Their decisions and deeds are consequential for human life, but they are not approachable or swayable in their doings, except perhaps through what modest voice the sage might have in his writings and in the counsels of state when he is consulted for his views.³⁸

Thus the wisdom writers captivated by the wonders of nature, believed that their God was responsible for the order in creation and order in the socio-economic realms of life. Dianne Bergant captures this idea beautifully:

This creator was not only the primeval architect of the universe and provident sustainer of reality but also the demanding judge who preserved established order. Since Israel believed that social order was but a reflection of the natural order of the universe, creation theology quite possibly played a more significant role in its worldview than was previously thought.³⁹

III

The last two sections above have considerable impact on what will be discussed in this section and the conclusions we draw from the overall study. Wisdom social ethic is very much diversified as noted above. But even in such a diversified presentation of the wisdom social ethic we can draw some important concerns and implications for our contemporary situation. The underprivileged classes of our day will be discussed in this section and their relationship to our sages' concern will be examined in order to see how the liberative mission of the creator God is understood in our contemporary world. God's mission for and to those who are in the margins will be the main focus of our discussion in this section.

God's Mission to and for Dalits

Dalits are the most vulnerable and marginalised section of Indian society along with other marginalised groups like women, children and tribals. The Christian mission is to work towards restoring justice and peace to this troubled community in India. Deenabandhu Manchala describes the predicament of Dalits in a comprehensive way:

³⁸ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 582.

³⁹ Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 12.

They are (Dalits) the poorest of the poor and remain mostly as unorganised working classes, bonded labourers, sanitation workers, unemployed or underemployed, slum or pavement dwellers, homeless people, etc. They are the most malnourished, illiterate, or less educated, sick or die early, and are brutalised and killed when they demand fair treatment. They are denied justice, protection, assistance, education, health care, and any possibility of mobility. For centuries, they have been victims of barbarity, rape, assault, scorn and rejection. Threats to survival, a stigmatised identity and a state of utter powerlessness are the main features of Dalit predicament. ... This reveals that caste is one of the key social mechanisms through which this sort of social and economic injustice is sustained in India. ... The predicament of the Dalits within the church is no better. Their experience of rejection, discrimination and marginalisation exposes the shallowness of the Church's commitment for justice.⁴⁰

Mission from a Dalit perspective is not simply to be understood as a mission to the Dalits as if they are at the mercy of others to sympathise with them and need some acts of charity to relieve them from their predicament. Rather the mission of the church should be a way of life as mission with and mission from Dalits. Mission with and from and also for Dalits should include redefining the identity of Dalits to restore the lost image of God to them. This means that the oppressive and dehumanising structures of the church and society must be challenged and radically changed. In this context Kothapalli Wilson affirms the need of the hour as follows:

Dalits need a humanizing Christ, not simply a social reformer or an economic Uncle Tom. Today Dalits became the centre of attraction for all kinds of exploiters. Politicians, religious messiahs, social reformers and last but not the least the so called economic redeemers – all have an eye on them. Interestingly, it is these sections that raise a hue and cry on the plight of the Dalits and Dalit Christians. Plans are drawn, funds are received, and success stories of the development are abundantly told, but Dalit sections find themselves where they were centuries ago. Here Dalits and Dalit Christians are used as an alibi for the self promotion of various vested interests. What Dalits really need is human development the essence of which is awareness of their dignity, potentiality and ability to become what they think it best in their view. ... What they need is a force which can create conditions for their renaissance. Whoever struggles for their humanization will be considered as the Christ.⁴¹

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What Wilson and others mentioned above are for a humanising mission of Christ for the total development of Dalits in India, Dalit Christians in the church, not just cosmetic treatment to superficially address their age old

⁴⁰ Deenabandhu Manchala, 'Mission as Struggle for Justice: From the Perspective of Those Who are Denied Justice;', in W.S. Milton Jeganathan (ed), *Mission Paradigm in the New Millennium* (Delhi: ISPCCK, 2000), 283-284.

⁴¹ Kothapalli Wilson, *The Twice Alienated: Condition of Dalit Christians* (Hyderabad: Indian Institute of Cultural Studies, 1996), 67. 2nd edn.

problems. It is within this gamut of concerns that we shall see how the biblical sages help the Dalit Christians in articulating their concerns for the most vulnerable and underprivileged of their society.

Wisdom Ethic of the Social Order

As noted above the sages are concerned about the orderliness of the society on daily matters and that order is something derived from God's creation itself. The sages always affirm that there is inherent order in everything that is created by God. Whenever relationships are skewed among human communities, the sages initiate discussion on the creative order of God. It is expected that no one has the right to go against that created order. If anyone transgresses it that is a blatant sin against God, the creator. Every human being is thus treated equally in the sight of God and there is no possibility for any discrimination. In the ancient Near East the deities like *šamaš* are expected to maintain order in the creation, the failure to maintain it will result in chaos and disorder whereas in ancient Israel the order is not divinised. Every citizen is expected to maintain the order of creation by maintaining a right relationship with his or her neighbour. In this respect it is affirmed that all are equal in this order created by Yahweh. There is no disparity among different classes of people. This is precisely the point that we need to affirm in relation to Dalits in India. Dalits are discriminated in the name of their low caste origin which also dehumanises them. The Hebrew sages are of the firm view that anyone who mistreats his or her neighbour is violating the order set by the creator, that disrupts the social, political and religious order, that will result in chaos. In the New Testament we see Jesus' mission to the Samaritans is just the fulfillment of the Hebrew sages' expectation. Raj Irudaya makes this point clear:

Jesus' mission with the Samaritans as a marginalized people has been a life-giving one in order to make them all the children of God. The Samaritan woman as a marginalized person has experienced the liberative, revelatory, missionary and testimonial facets of the Samaritan mission of Jesus. In the backdrop of the hatred-filled, divided and intolerant socio-religious context of the Jews and Samaritans, Jesus' singular mission has opened up a new epoch of respect, dignity and unity for the Samaritans and Jews as the children of God and has ushered in a ground-breaking mission of universal fellowship of all peoples and nations. ... Even in the twenty-first century India continues to be confronted with the problem of casteism and untouchability. The Dalits are caught up in the throttling tentacles of this dehumanizing problem and so they are oppressed and marginalized economically, socially, politically and culturally. ... Therefore all Christians should endeavour wholeheartedly to work relentlessly for the eradication of untouchability still existing in and among us in several forms overt and covert. Jesus, who reached out with his life-giving mission to the marginalized and untouchable Samaritans, transcending the ethnic and religious barriers to include them in his wider community of New Israel, is an ever challenging model to us all. ... The Samaritan mission of Jesus to the marginalized has shown us the way par

excellence. Therefore the deep-rooted and well perpetuated casteism demands of the Churches today ongoing concerted, sincere and indefatigable efforts to rid themselves of this age-old problem so that they may continue to be a witness to the Body of Christ in whom there is neither Dalit nor caste, neither slave nor marginalized but in whom all are the children of God.⁴²

The mission of Jesus to the marginalised communities of his own time is relevant to the Dalits' contemporary predicament. If we take seriously the dictum of the Hebrew sages that God's creative order is to protect all people in the community, then there is a hope for Dalit communities in India to live as worthy human beings irrespective of their class and caste.

Powerless, Needy, Helpless and Underprivileged

As was noted earlier the wisdom writers used several terms to describe the underprivileged sections of the society. The prophetic insight is further strengthened by the wisdom writers by upholding the lost dignity of the underprivileged sections of the society. Dalits in India are always made powerless and treated brutally if they claim their rightful place in the society. Like many other international fora of the Christian church the Vatican II of the Roman Catholic Church has redefined the mission of the church as preferential option for the poor and marginalised communities. The following statement affirms the same holistic mission:

The holistic mission of the Church consists of proclamation of the good news to all strata of people, evangelization of culture, dialogue, option for the poor, solidarity with others, commitment to God and man and concern. The challenge to the holistic mission of the Church is to create an atmosphere of a just community (a kingdom of God) where the Dalit Christians and other Dalits can feel human persons and everyone can relate and live with fraternity and fellowship (as in the first Christian community) without impact of caste system and the discrimination from the Government and the traditional Church.⁴³

The underprivileged classes are in particular addressed by the Hebrew sages. These classes are already well protected according to the covenant and other legal codes. There is nothing new that the sages are adding in their concern towards the marginalised communities. The use of significant words relating to the poor and powerless is an indication that the sages are concerned about the pain and pathos of the majority of the oppressed groups in the Hebrew society. These vulnerable groups are particularly

⁴² Raj Irudaya, *Mission to the Marginalized: A Subaltern, Feminist and Interreligious Reading of John 4:1-42* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2007), 248-249.

⁴³ Francis Paravila, 'The Holistic Mission of the Church Among the Dalit Christians', in Selvester Ponnunmuthan and Shaji Jerman (eds), *Mission and Conversion: Towards a New Ecclesiology* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008), 444.

favoured by the creator God according to the sages. Dalits are in particular made powerless and are reduced to depend on the mercy of the dominant caste groups who control all the resources. The biblical paradigm for liberation consists of God leading the powerful and marginalised community of oppressed people Israel out of the bondage by seeing their misery and giving ear to their cries. They are the Dalits of the Bible who were once non-people made God's people. Dalits need freedom from the oppressive and dehumanising caste system so that they can live with self-respect and human dignity. Thus all the terms employed by the Hebrew sages are appropriate to the Dalit situation in the contemporary Indian situation. The sages remind us that God has special concern for these marginalised communities and the Christian church should take this mission from God seriously in its talk and walk.

Wisdom Life Based on Observations of Misery and Oppression

God is the God of the universe and everything is brought under his control. While this is the general understanding of the sages, there are certain matters that are beyond the purview of human observation and knowledge. However no fatalism operates in the wisdom thinking. The preacher teaches how to make the best of a bad situation, how to look inward to discern and resist the pleasures that come to us and to exercise whatever wisdom we are granted. By realising our slender faltering powers, we become most fully human and, perhaps, happy. This is the message of Qoheleth (Eccles. 11:7f). Qoheleth calls us to take up a variety of good things and recommends them in various maxims: being young and smart (Eccles. 4:9), peaceful sleep (Eccles. 5:11), companionship (Eccles. 4:9), reputation (Eccles. 7:1) etc. Though for Qoheleth justice is often violated, it is unquestionably the way things should be; Righteousness, which is the foundation of justice, is indisputably good. It is within this area of concern the preacher posits a very optimistic future that is not subjected to fatalism. But human beings can't have direct access to it; it is God who is in control of it. Nevertheless human beings can learn from the misery and oppression that is carried out in the present life.

Karma and caste are the twin principles that operate in a Hindu and Indian context as resources to keep Dalit Christians under the banner of untouchables and inculcate an 'inferiority complex'. Dalit Christians along with their Dalit partners in general are made to think that it is their karma to suffer in this world and their birth is nothing but the result of their past karma coming from their previous births. The Hebrew sages, particularly the preacher, is clearly against this view. No human agents have any control to impose fatalism on any other human neighbour, especially if they are vulnerable and marginalised sections of the community. It is God who is in control of every human destiny and his uncompromising siding with

the oppressed and underprivileged communities is the message of the Hebrew sages.

Tsedeqah as a Cardinal Virtue of the Wise

Wisdom writers talk about the righteousness of God as a cardinal virtue that the wise can possess. The righteousness is also defined as something inherent in the created order of God that is responsible for the order of all things and that no human force should attempt to skew this order. Already the prophets in their message of justice and righteousness affirm the importance of *Tsedeqah*. Concerning *ṣ̄ e dāqā* and its dynamism James L. Mays states:

ṣ̄ e dāqā is the quality of life displayed by those who live up to the norms inherent in a given relationship and thereby do right by the other person or persons involved. The two most important spheres for righteousness were the relationship between Yahweh and Israel defined in the covenant and expressed in the cult, and the relationship of man in the social order of the folk ... In Amos *ṣ̄ e dāqā* applies to the relational life of the social partners in the people of Israel. Of course Yahweh is regarded as the patron and enforcer of the social order, but what is in view is the righteousness of Israelites in relation to each other.⁴⁴

The Hebrew sages not only affirm what is stated by the prophets but also go one step forward to describe why there is a need to defend the marginalised sections of the society. Since Yahweh is the patron of the weak in the idea of Hebrew sages no one can oppress his people. This is what we need to affirm in the Dalit situation in India today.

Retributive Justice

Wisdom deals with the very important concern of the retributive justice of God, theodicy of God, that is most pertinent for our contemporary application to the Dalit situation in India. The wisdom writers, particularly Job, question the retributive justice of God presented by the traditional writers: God rewards the just and punishes the wicked. Job vehemently protests against the blind acceptance of such affirmation.⁴⁵ The preacher also questions the mechanical operation of retribution unless wisdom can clarify the ever-changing present.⁴⁶ Speaking on the demythologisation of karma theory based on the book of Job, Devasahayam argues that in the story of Job the myth of karma theory is exploded when God finally

⁴⁴ James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 92-93.

⁴⁵ For some discussion on this point see, R. DeSmet, 'Job's "Insufferable Comforters" and the Law of Karma', *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 58 (1994), 308-318.

⁴⁶ Richard J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 20.

answers Job quashing the judgment of Job's friends, whose main contention with Job was that Job is suffering because of his guilt or sins. Job becomes very frustrated when his friends maintained that God is a just God and that God rewards or punishes according to merit. Reward is symbolised in riches and health, and punishment in poverty and sickness. But towards the end Job's friends are proved to be wrong when the accusers become the accused and the accused is acquitted. The myth that God punished Job for his sins is totally shattered.⁴⁷ As was noted earlier Dalits are made to suffer using and imposing the Hindu doctrine of karma. But it is very clear that the wisdom writers of the Hebrew Bible squash such a traditional and mechanical understanding of retributive justice and point out that God indeed will pay heed to the innocent sufferers like Job and Dalits.

Mission Reread and Redefined

Mission for the marginalised and underprivileged communities was at the heart of the biblical wisdom writers and it is in the core of Dalit theological discourse. The Hebrew sages present the underprivileged of their society as active subjects of God's emancipatory action not simply the passive objects. For this to be inculcated in the mission to and for Dalits, we should reread the work of Jesus as a Dalit, whose liberative praxis will help us to reread and redefine our mission in today's Indian context. The praxis of Jesus revolutionised his own society. He challenged the traditional attitudes and behaviours that perpetuated inhuman practices of rejection, insult, exclusion and elimination of certain marginalised communities. In this respect he chose to be like a Dalit and suffered as a Dalit, thus cast out of Jerusalem, who moved with sinners and outcasts, who broke the traditional laws of purity-pollution.⁴⁸

Poor are the Wise

It has often been argued that the authors of the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible present the social class of the wise as elite who belonged to the upper strata of the society. But this may not be a very conclusive argument if we see on the other hand some references like: Ecclesiastes 9:14-16, where the writer in a short parable presents the discrimination prevailing in his own time based on the social class of an individual, especially in v.16 the writer states: 'wisdom is better than might, but the

⁴⁷ V. Devasahayam, 'Job: Demythologization of Karma Theory', in V. Devasahayam (ed), *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity* (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 227-31.

⁴⁸ L. Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church Among Dalit Christians* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 381.

wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heard.’ While this is the clear perception of the author about the domination of a particular social class, it is often noted that the wisdom writers indisputably shared their concerns of social justice and justice for the poor with biblical prophets. This leads them to offer a strong critique against the discrimination in their social structure.

Dalits in the Indian context in the past were denied access to the sacred Hindu scriptures citing their low caste birth as the main reason. But it is now the fact that their rich past and heritage is sufficient to infuse and reinforce courage and confidence in Dalits to articulate their oppression and claim for their rights in a more vigorous manner. This resulted in rousing their self-respect and dignity. It gives them a positive consciousness to affirm their lost identity. This is the wisdom of the Dalits, who in the sight of the dominant caste people were treated as non-beings for several centuries. Thus the poor and Dalits are the wise in God’s sight. Anthoniraj Thumma confirms:

In the process of their struggle and reflection, the people, especially the Dalits and Tribals, rediscover their roots, and their historical and cultural moorings, affirm the greatness of their cultural ethos, moral bearings, value-system, world-view and the meaning of their religious traditions. ... They affirm the sacredness of the personhood and peoplehood of the dominated Subalterns who are treated as non-beings and dehumanized as non-people.⁴⁹

IV

On the basis of our foregoing study we now make the following concluding observations and remarks:

1. Wisdom writers are very much concerned about the weak and marginalised communities of the society in which they lived and practised their wisdom. They uncompromisingly took the side of the marginalised groups to teach their students about the miseries of life that can result in the form of poverty and hunger as social evils. All the steps are thus taken to help the underprivileged social classes.
2. The wise affirmed that God is the creator of the order which is social as well as cosmic. The social order is not to be disturbed by anyone. No human agents should skew the order created by God where there is no disparity and discrimination among various groups based on caste, class and other socio-economic positioning.
3. The mission of the Hebrew sages is to refute and at times rebel against the mechanical operation of God’s justice. The traditional

⁴⁹ Anthoniraj Thumma, *Wisdom of the Weak: Foundations of People’s Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 249.

understanding of retributive justice is refuted by the Hebrew sages for the reason that no fatalism should result in that understanding.

4. The Dalit discourse will benefit from the insights of the Hebrew wisdom writings as the latter affirm a God who is concerned about the underprivileged communities and expects that it is a set created order and no one has the right to rearrange or redefine that order. In that set order God has a special and privileged place for the marginalised sections of the community. That order will define the character, conduct and identity of the community where skewed relationships against God's order will not be tolerated and entertained.⁵⁰
5. Hebrew sages not only expressed their expectations but wanted their learning communities to practise God's mission to the most vulnerable in the margins of the society. This mission to the margins finds fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus the Dalit. The sages confirm that the underprivileged classes in their society are God's children and they are to be given a special place in God's created order. If this is true then they are the wise even when they are the poor and marginalised. Thus Saint Paul's theology of the cross is congruent with the wisdom theology that supports the weak of the society: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25).⁵¹

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⁵⁰ William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 15-16.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 693.

DECODING THE POLITICS OF LUKAN DISCIPLESHIP: DISCIPLESHIP, DISCRIMINATION AND DALIT CHRISTIANS IN INDIA

Rebecca Sangeetha Daniel

Introduction

The Bible plays a major role in shaping Christian thinking about Christian mission. Several paradigms of Christian mission are derived from the Biblical texts. Dominant among such paradigms is the widely accepted Lukan paradigm of mission as liberation and mission as liberative solidarity with the marginalised. The gospel of Luke is considered to be a socially minded gospel in both popular and certain scholarly circles. The Lukan texts on discipleship are often thought to be very progressive showing a preferential option for the people at the margins. The commonly held assumption that Luke pays 'attention to and evident concern for the oppressed and marginalised persons in society,'¹ is generally argued in terms of the following points:²

1. That Luke has more passages dealing with rich and poor (Lk. 4:18; 6:17, 24; 7:22; 12:13-21; 14:15-24; 16:1-31; 18:18-29; 21:1-4).
2. The prominent role of women in the gospel in general and in following Jesus (Lk. 1:26-56; 1:36-38; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; 23:27-31; 4:38-39; 8:40-48; 13:10-17).
3. The argument that the Lukan Jesus befriends social and religious outcasts and makes them positive examples (Lk. 7:36-50; 10:29-37; 17:11-19; 18:9-14; 19:1-10).
4. Healing ministry is an important component of Jesus' and his disciples' ministry (Lk. 4:31-44; 5:12-26; 8:2-3; 9:1-4, 37-43; 10:1-24; 13:10-17; 14:1-4; 17:11-19; 18:35-43; Acts 3:1-11; 9:32-41; 14:8-10; 16:16-18; 19:11-17; 20:9-12).
5. The frequent reference Luke gives to examples of almsgiving and the general exhortation for almsgiving as a criterion for 'discipleship' (Lk. 11:41; 12:33; Acts 9:36; 10:1-8, 31; 24:17).

Most of these points – like the exhortation for almsgiving as a criterion for discipleship, the role of women and the religious and social outcasts as

¹ F.B. Craddock, 'Luke', in J.L. Mays (ed), *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 1014.

² S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 16.

‘followers’ of Jesus – can be related to the general Lukan theme of ‘discipleship’. Therefore the argument that can be made is that the Lukan texts on discipleship are mission texts, where mission is understood primarily as liberative solidarity with the marginalised or as preferential option for the poor. But are the Lukan texts on Christian discipleship really texts of a liberative mission when understood in the Indian caste context? Do they really reflect a preferential option for the marginalised as their mission mandate?

This paper interrogates the liberative missiological dimension of the Lukan concept of discipleship. It argues that the primary criterion for discipleship in Luke is renunciation. Further, the paper points out that though Luke is stringent in his proposal of renunciation as a criterion for discipleship, what emerges in the Lukan text is that the disciples do not rigidly follow the practice of renunciation. Investigating this discrepancy in the Lukan treatment of the motif of discipleship the paper posits that contrary to popular opinion, renunciation in Luke is about the language of conversion.

In such a context the paper explores the social-mindedness of Luke’s gospel. It uses the conversion stories of the caste and Dalit communities as hermeneutical tools to evaluate the social concern of Luke. Texts in Luke will be read contrapuntally with conversion stories to evaluate the Lukan theology of mission as the theology of liberation for the poor and marginalised.

Discipleship and Luke

Understanding the concept of discipleship in Luke is a very complicated issue. Luke not only mentions several different groups which can be loosely related to the theme of discipleship like apostles, disciples, followers, crowds, multitudes, but also mentions several different and even contradictory criterion for discipleship, especially with regard to the theme possessions. The only passage in Luke, which offers sufficient clarity on what it entails to be a disciple, is Luke 14:25-35. The criteria for discipleship are mentioned here in the negative. Therefore they are about those who *cannot* be/become Jesus’s disciples (26, 27, 33). According to Jesus, the one’s who cannot become his disciples are:

- a. Those who come to Jesus and do not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even life itself. (v.26)
- b. Those who do not carry the cross and come after Jesus. (v.27)
- c. Those who do not give up all their possessions. (v.33)

Taking this passage as the focal point, if we analyse all the other Lukan passages related to the theme of discipleship the most important criterion of discipleship is to give up all your possessions. It is through the definitive act of renouncing allegiance with economic, social and familial ties that the disciples embark on the path of discipleship. We can agree with Green’s

comment that with regard to ‘laying out the conditions of discipleship’, 14:33 which talks about *giving up all their possessions* (renunciation) in fact summarises all the other conditions.³

However, the problem with Luke is that while renunciation emerges as the only unambiguous criterion for discipleship in Luke, there are inconsistencies within Luke about whether this was strictly practised by Jesus’s disciples. There are several instances where the disciples are shown as having some possessions and where Jesus asks them to share what they have. In such a context the renunciation mentioned in Luke doesn’t seem to be a strict injunction but an ideal which is fluid and not consistently rigid. It is worth mentioning one example at this point: In Luke 16:1-10 we have a parable which is specifically addressed to the disciples (16:1). The moral of the parable is explicated by Jesus as follows, ‘And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.’ The image of the disciples which emerges is of those who have access to power and even to dishonest wealth, but of those who will lose this access and will have a tough time in the future. This passage needs special consideration when drawing out the connection between discipleship and renunciation, which can, so to speak, be called the ‘Discipleship-Renunciation’ axis of Lukan theology. In such a context of contradictoriness it is important to investigate why Luke is so flexible and inconsistent about renunciation.

Re-visiting the Hellenistic God-Fearer Thesis

One of the arguments that has been made is that – Luke is flexible in his treatment of the theme of possessions and renunciation because he wanted to write a gospel for Hellenistic God-fearers who were considering Christianity as an option. It is worth revisiting this thesis. David P. Secombe who is a leading proponent of this Hellenistic God-fearer thesis, in his book *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts*,⁴ argues for a fascinating thesis of Luke being addressed to ‘well-to-do Hellenistic God-Fearers who were attracted to the Christian Movement, but were hesitant as to whether such a newcomer on the scene could possibly be authentic, and afraid of what might be the cost to them socially and economically if they were to declare themselves publicly and unreservedly for Christ and his Church.’⁵ This argument helps us make sense of why the criteria of renunciation in Luke in spite of its seeming harshness of leaving home and family, is not posited as one which is to be strictly followed in practice by Luke. This is because Luke seeks to be persuasive to encourage the Hellenistic God-

³ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 567.

⁴ David P. Secombe, *Possession and the Poor in Luke-Acts* (Linz: Fuchs, 1982).

⁵ Secombe, *Possession and the Poor*, 229.

fearers to turn to Christ. Thus Luke's language of renunciation is actually about conversion.

This interpretation also helps us to make sense of passages like Luke 16:1-10 discussed earlier, which is clearly addressed to the disciples, but has an ambiguous connection to the issue of having 'present access to power and position'. The disciples here are those with access to power and position, who may have to face challenging circumstances in the future because of their conversion. No other interpretation can help make sense of the way in which Luke actually refers to discipleship in relation to access to power, position and authority, a point which is often overlooked by interpreters. This Hellenistic God-fearer thesis also helps us make sense of positive and favourable references to Roman officials and the apologetic attitude towards the Roman authorities in several places in Luke-Acts.⁶

The thesis of the Hellenistic-god-fearer is further supported by Turid Karlsen Seim, who also draws attention to a group of 'God-fearers' who are considered to be of particular interest to Luke:

Attempts at proving that 'God-fearers' is a Lukan construction and that there was never such a group of people has now been defeated especially by new epigraphical evidence in Asia Minor. The God-fearers probably were well off citizens who were attracted to the Jewish way, especially in Monotheism; they were affiliated with the synagogue, attended the services, and supported it financially. But they stood back from becoming proselytes, which in the case of males involved circumcision. Because they were not obliged to follow the full set of Jewish requirements, they could uphold their public responsibilities to the city.⁷

Further, support for the argument that Luke's intention of shaping the discipleship material in the way he does was to convert people to Christianity can be gathered if we consider Michael Lattke's insightful essay, 'The Call to Discipleship and Proselytising', where he unprecedentedly but convincingly links the themes of Renunciation and proselytising together. Lattke argues for a 'clear indication of early Christian proselytising', with regard to a key 'call to discipleship' text Luke 14:26-27 which we discussed earlier. Lattke focuses on Jesus' teaching regarding the leaving of home, which includes house, brother and sister,

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⁶ Turid Karlsen Seim, 'Approaching Luke: Glimpses of a Gospel', *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 27.6 (December 2000), 445. Herod is portrayed as a key player in the Passion narrative where 'he becomes, together with Pilate, a witness to Jesus' innocence'. Therefore when analysed in the light of the overall portrayal of Roman personnel by Luke, who also shows other Roman officials and their relatives (Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza in 8:3) as being receptive to (or) favourable towards Jesus [like Pilate during Jesus trial (23:13-22), the centurion whose slave Jesus healed (7:1-10), the centurion at the crucifixion (23:47)] this interpretation seems to offer more convincing answers as to why Luke portrays Roman officials in a positive light when compared with the other gospel writers.

⁷ Seim, 'Approaching Luke', 445.

son and daughter, mother and father, wife and children in the light of Philo's writings and argues for a link between Jesus' call to discipleship and Philo's definition of a proselyte in *De specialibus legibus*.⁸ Lattke focuses on Philo's definition of a proselyte. In this work Philo paraphrases texts like Leviticus 19:33 and Deuteronomy 10:18-19 and places the following definition of a proselyte in the mouth of Moses (one of the characters in his work). The proselytes according to Philo's Moses are those who, '(h)ave left... their country, their kinsfolk and their friends for the sake of virtue and religion'.⁹ Lattke's argument is that this Hellenistic Jewish definition of a proselyte (which seems more important to Philo than the 'adoption of circumcision and of the whole law' by the full proselyte), which was pre-Markan would have been well known in the Graeco-Roman world. Thus, when Luke is using this language of giving up all, Luke's readers must have understood it clearly as referring to conversions.

Lattke's thesis is especially important to us as we seek to locate the Lukan understanding of renunciation which emerges from the Lukan text into its milieu. It helps us to reinforce our argument that Luke's treatment of the theme of renunciation as the primary criterion for discipleship could also have been rhetorically addressed to convert the Hellenistic God-fearers and those in some power and authority in the Roman world. That is why though there is a seeming harshness in Luke's depiction of discipleship it is not consistent in the way in which it is practised by the disciples.

The Relevance of Lukan Concept of Discipleship for the Indian Church

Having argued in the previous section that the Lukan concept of discipleship can be related to Luke's own intention of reaching out to possible converts (which is why we find that there is a tension in Luke's treatment of the theme of renunciation, where on the one hand we see stringent criteria set for discipleship whereas on the other hand we also notice that these criteria are not seriously adhered to by those specifically identified as the disciples in Luke's gospel), we move on to analyse the implications of the Lukan concept of discipleship to the caste Christians and Dalits within the Indian churches. We interrogate whether the Lukan concept of discipleship is liberative for the caste Christians and Dalit communities.

At this point a brief note on the hermeneutical methodology employed would be pertinent. Reading the Bible from the perspective of the subaltern communities is more than mere interpretation of the text. Talking about people's readings of the Bible Carlos Mesters says:

⁸ Michael Lattke, 'The Call to Discipleship and Proselytising', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 92.3 (July 1999), 360.

⁹ Lattke, 'The Call to Discipleship', 361.

The people's main interest is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible. They try to be faithful, not primarily to the meaning the text has in itself (the historical and literal meaning), but to the meaning they discover in the text for their own lives. The growing interest in the literal meaning grows out of the concern to reinforce or criticize the meaning they have discovered in the Bible for their lives and struggles.¹⁰

The relationship between Dalit hermeneuts and the Biblical texts and the contexts of the Biblical texts is also important for Dalit Biblical hermeneutics. The most important methodological consideration for Dalit Biblical interpretation is the commonality between the marginalised communities in the Bible and the Dalit experiences. It is necessary to build the hermeneutical premise on the basis of the points of convergences between the two worlds.¹¹

Dalit readings of the Bible take the context of the interpreter as a valid point of departure for reading the scriptures. This emphasis on the context declares that the text does not have a single and timeless being, but that it gives rise to new and fresh meanings when read in the light of the context of the Dalits. Dalit theologian Anthoniraj Thumma says that the purpose of people's hermeneutics is 'to gain enlightenment on their existential problems'.¹² In such a context '(t)he harsh reality' which people 'live today becomes a criterion of interpretation of the ancient text and gives it a sort of connaturality which enables them to grasp the literal sense (of the Bible) in its full extent'.¹³ Therefore, as we seek to grasp the significance of the Lukan context of discipleship we will pay attention to the subaltern context and see how this context can form the 'sub-text' on the basis of which the relevance of the Lukan texts on discipleship for the Indian Dalits can be evaluated.

Renunciation and the Hating of One's Family

One of the primary criteria of discipleship for Luke is renunciation of the family – hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. This criterion for discipleship would be contradictory to the experiences of Dalit Christian converts to Christianity and would be more compatible with 'upper-caste' Hindu conversions. It would be pertinent to bring out the conversion experiences of certain Dalit and certain 'upper-caste' Christians to demonstrate the convergences and divergences which they may have with the Lukan criteria to hate one's family.

¹⁰ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* (New York: Orbis Books and London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1991), 9.

¹¹ K. Jesurathnam, 'Towards a Dalit Liberative Hermeneutic: Re-reading the Psalms of Lament', *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 34.1 (June 2002), 1-34.

¹² Anthoniraj Thumma, *Wisdom of the Weak: Foundations of People's Theology* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 163.

¹³ Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, 8.

S.C. Dube, on the basis of his study of the *Satnami* community of Chattisgarh who comprise predominantly of the *Chamars* (a Dalit sub-caste of leather workers), points out that kinship ties with an initial convert was a crucial factor for the subsequent group conversions which took place.¹⁴ If we read the stories of the group conversion movements of the Dalit communities in different parts of India we find that these movements spread through kinship ties.

Kinship ties were essential for Dalit conversions especially in the Andhra region. In the case of the Madiga movement which took place around Ongole in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, mainly through the efforts of another Dalit a Madiga convert called Yerraguntla Perraiah, we see Perraiah being baptised along with his wife Nagamma in March 1866.¹⁵ According to historian Prof. Geoff Oddie, one of the distinctive features of the mass movement in Andhra Pradesh was that while individual converts were converted first, 'the rest of the immediate family and even the more distant relatives tended to follow.'¹⁶ Oddie also mentions how baptismal records 'clearly confirm the importance of immediate family ties in the conversion process.'¹⁷ Rev John E. Clough, the Baptist missionary who was involved in the group conversions in Ongole, brings out how the phenomenal increase in Christianity among the Dalit Madigas around Ongole followed the pattern of 'family' and 'kinship conversions':

The movement, as it swept over the Madiga community, had picked up the best first – those who were ready to respond to the Christian appeal. The leaders had made the beginning. Then those followed who had been under their direct influence. Then came the wider circle of those with whom there were ties of family relationship. If it was within the memory of anyone that at some time a marriage had been contracted between two families, it constituted a claim... those related families again had branches of their own. The appeal, carried along with the impetus of clannish, tribal life, moved like an avalanche, gathering up as it went along.¹⁸

In the context of Dalit conversions Dalits were not isolated or ostracised from their families. The initial Dalit converts wanted their family members to convert.

In contrast to this the conversion experiences of the caste Hindus were different. Prof. Oddie's historical study of group conversion movements in Andhra also shows how 'upper-caste' converts to Christianity would be

¹⁴ Saurabh Dube, 'Issues of Christianity in Colonial Chattisgarh', *Sociological Bulletin*, 41.1-2, 103.

¹⁵ Dube, 'Issues of Christianity', 42.

¹⁶ G.A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion in the Telugu Country 1860-1900: A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in the Godavery-Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 12 (1975), 69.

¹⁷ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 69.

¹⁸ John E. Clough, *Social Christianity in the Orient* (New York, 1914), cited in John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 43.

spurned by their relatives and friends, treated as outcastes and only on very rare occasions would 'ever re-establish any kind of contact with their family members'.¹⁹ 'Generally speaking, "high caste" converts were effectively isolated, and Hindu society, having ejected the affected member, sealed itself against the possibility of further contamination'.²⁰ Therefore 'upper-caste' conversions involved renunciation on both sides – renunciation of the convert by the convert's immediate family and vice versa. Prof. Oddie goes on to note that 'while... Brahmans and other caste converts were generally forced to break ties with their families and former caste associations, no such separation took place between Christians of untouchable origin'.²¹ This feature of the family's place in the conversion process is what differentiates Dalit conversions from other 'upper-caste' conversions.

Research in Tamil Nadu conducted by Andrew Wingate also reveals that, as the 'upper-caste' Hindus had firmer and a more rigid caste-dictated ties/relationships to relinquish, the 'upper-caste' converts would usually be excommunicated by their communities and disowned by their families for giving up their caste (though not always – exception is not the rule here). According to Wingate in the case of Subramanyam, 'an orthodox Brahmin from Tanjore district', conversion meant removing his sacred thread which signified his caste identity as well as refusing 'the request of his mother to remain a Hindu until her death so that he could perform her funeral rites'.²² According to Wingate, Subramanyam was firm in following the text 'let the dead bury the dead'.²³ It also meant facing other hardships like torture by his relatives and being disowned by the family to the extent that a mock funeral was conducted for him using a 'reed corpse'.²⁴ Taking into consideration the case of Subramanyam, Wingate says:

The attitude of his family is an extreme example of what is usually faced by an individual high caste convert. The women are notably softer towards him but, overall, no quarter is given, as the public reputation of the family is at stake. He breaks caste both because he is outcaste by family and has no alternative, but also because the implications of the new faith are clear that he has to live and work with untouchables (sic).²⁵

Similarly, George Henry Trabert writing about the conversions in the Rajahmundry region says, 'To become a Christian is to break caste, which

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¹⁹ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 64.

²⁰ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 64.

²¹ Oddie, 'Christian Conversion', 69.

²² Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion: A Study of Recent Conversions to and From Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 10.

²³ Wingate, *Church and Conversion*, 10.

²⁴ Wingate, *Church and Conversion*, 11.

²⁵ Wingate, *Church and Conversion*, 11.

means as much as to become an outcaste from society and to be regarded as dead by friends and relatives'.²⁶

Therefore if we analyse the pattern of the Lukan call to discipleship in the light of these conversion experiences of the Dalit Christians and caste converts, we may be able to interpret the incidents where Jesus asks his potential followers not to worry about their families as being a prophetic call addressed to the caste converts to identify themselves with the Dalits and renounce any ties which linked them with casteist practices.

Therefore the Lukan criterion of giving up family when understood in the light of the conversion stories of the caste converts has a liberative dimension because it calls the 'upper castes' to identify themselves with Dalit Christians and renounce caste ties. Following Christ which bears resonances to the Lukan concept of discipleship can be of relevance to the Dalit struggles because it breaks the barrier of caste exclusivism. It is also prophetic in the sense that 'upper-caste' people are urged to forego ties that hinder them from engaging with the Dalit communities in an egalitarian manner. This has been one of the dimensions of Dalit theology's challenge to the caste communities as well which is to break the exclusivism associated with a casteist identity and forge inclusivism and egalitarianism. This becomes clear in James Massey's article entitled 'The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue'²⁷ where Massey argues for an incarnational model for the church's ministry to the Dalits. According to Massey:

In the incarnational model we meet a real 'Dalit' who became himself the poorest of the poor as a human being (a Dalit) to make all the Dalits of this world rich (II Corinthians 8:9). This model challenges us (and this includes the Churches) to re-discover the lost identity of God which he took upon Himself... Rediscovering or agreeing with this model means taking part in the struggle of Dalits. *It also means taking a risk, losing our own identity and also shunning our inherited understanding of the Christian faith.*²⁸

Therefore the challenge of discipleship which is posited here by Massey involves the church giving up or losing something which is significant. It could be the relinquishing of caste identity which could be added to the list of things which are meant to be given up. This challenge bears resonances with the Lukan criterion of discipleship at several points, not least when Jesus says that he has no place to lay down his head and that following him would entail his disciples to partake in hardships. This dimension of the disciple having to give up one's family especially in the context of

²⁶ George Henry Trabert, *Historical Sketch of the Mission of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Among the Telugus of India* (Philadelphia: Jas B. Rodgers Printing, 1890), 93.

²⁷ James Massey, 'The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue', *Religion and Society*, 41.1 (March 1994), 44-50.

²⁸ Massey, 'Role of the Churches', 45.

conversions can be related to the issue of giving up of caste in the Indian context, as our examples above have proved.

*Discipleship as Giving up Everything,
Taking up the Cross and Following Jesus*

Upon initial analysis it would seem that those who fall under the discipleship category by virtue of giving up something would not belong to the Dalit communities but would only be from those who are in a position to *give up something*. This is because Jesus' disciples in Luke are those who have recourse to power, property and wealth. Dalits are not partners in Jesus' ministry here since most church-going Dalits do not have any power or prestige to renounce. Thus if we analyse this dimension of the Lukan concept of discipleship from a subaltern perspective we can say that it reduces the subalterns into passive recipients of the effects of 'upper-caste' discipleship rather than recognising them as partners in discipleship. Specifically targeting those with resources and power has proved counterproductive for the Dalit cause in the history of Indian conversions.

Contrary to popular understanding, if we pay attention to the conversion experiences of the Dalit communities it becomes clear that they have also renounced many things in taking up their cross and following Christ. For example the Baptist missionary Clough made three requirements for the Madiga converts in Andhra Pradesh, which were – not to work on Sundays, not to eat carrion and not to worship idols.²⁹ These three requirements, which were absolute, would have affected the very livelihood of the Madigas whose main work was concerned with the removal of dead cattle from the village as and when necessary, which must have included Sundays. Moreover, part of the remuneration they received for their job was the carcasses of the dead cattle, the flesh of which they ate and skin of which they converted into leather goods. Therefore 'the prohibition against eating carrion meant a renegotiation of rates for their hides with landowners and with hide dealers, as the meat could no longer be part of the bargain.'³⁰ This was a risky proposition given their highly constrained bargaining status in the social set-up of the village. Further 'the prohibition against idol worship meant that Christian Madigas would no longer carry out such traditional functions at village religious festivals as beating the drums or dancing before idols taken in procession.'³¹ Therefore all the three requirements that Clough made of Madiga converts would have meant giving up everything that in a way 'sustained' the Madigas in the village. Of course these jobs were imposed on them, but in a context where other options were closed to give up these traditional roles were risky. Webster is

²⁹ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 159, cited in Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 44.

³⁰ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 159, cited in Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 44.

³¹ Clough, *Social Christianity*, 159, cited in Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 42.

right in pointing out that ‘these changes did not occur without conflict, retribution and persecution.’³²

We also need to be cautious about accepting the arguments that Dalit conversions were ‘conversions of convenience’ and Dalits are merely ‘rice christians’ who converted to Christianity for monetary benefits.³³ However the research of Oddie reveals that the Dalits faced both physical violence as well as economic deprivation upon conversions.³⁴ Webster also points out that Dalits had to undergo a period of initial persecution after their conversion as they continued to work for the same landlords and live in the same villages.³⁵ Therefore conversions to Christianity were not simply a means of escapism for the Dalits. As Webster rightly points out, ‘the epithet “Rice Christians” thus flies in the face of the facts Dalit converts had to confront’.³⁶ Even today Dalit Christians have much to lose if they convert to Christianity. The stories of the recent atrocities against Dalit Christians by the Hindu Fundamentalist groups in the state of Orissa bear testimony to the fact that they have actually taken up the cross and left everything to follow Jesus. Thousands of Dalit Christian homes have been razed to the ground. About 52 Dalits have been massacred for being Christians. The Dalit Christians face threats to their lives and are not allowed back to their villages unless they convert. On a general level Dalit Christians in India lose the benefits that other Dalits are entitled to under the positive discrimination policies of the government reserved for the Scheduled Castes (the official name for the Dalits). Not being given the privileges of reservation is used as a powerful incentive to hinder the Dalits from converting to Christianity. In spite of all this Dalits are steadfast in their acceptance of the Christian faith. John Clough’s recording of the petitions for Baptism of certain Madiga converts from Ongole reveals that Dalit conversions were far from being motivated by material benefits:

We have learned about Jesus Christ, we now believe in him as the only God and savior. We are very poor; our huts are fallen down, and we have not much to eat but leaves; but we do not ask you for money. We will not ask you for a pie, even though we starve to death; but we believe in Jesus, and, as he commanded us, we want to be baptized. We can die, if it be God’s will; but we want to be baptized first.³⁷

Here we find convergences with Jesus’ command to hate even one’s life and take up the cross and follow Jesus.

³² Clough, *Social Christianity*, 159, cited in Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 44.

³³ Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre [NBCLC], 2007), 148.

³⁴ Oddie, ‘Christian Conversion’, 75, cited in Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 58.

³⁵ John C.B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 29.

³⁶ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 58.

³⁷ Clough, ‘Social Christianity’, 238, cited in Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 46.

Conclusion

This article sought to explore the relevance of the Lukan texts of discipleship for the Dalit communities in their struggles against casteism. The primary question which was explored was whether there is a liberative mission paradigm in Luke's gospel which is relevant for the Dalits. When we read the Lukan concept of discipleship, understood as renunciation, in the light of the conversion stories of both the Dalits and caste converts to Christianity we can argue that the Lukan concept of discipleship challenges the caste Christians to recognise and relinquish any casteist ties or casteist tendencies as a sign of their acceptance of Christ. What is needed is a true '*metanoia*'. The Indian church which has been prejudiced in understanding Dalit conversions to Christianity can also be challenged to move beyond all stereotypical and essentialising tendencies in understanding the motives behind the Dalit conversions to Christianity and recognise and acknowledge Dalit agency and struggle in the conversion narratives. This is the need of the hour in a context where Dalit conversions and the issue of according Scheduled Caste reservations to Dalit Christians have become an important issue in Indian identity politics.

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MISSION AT AND FROM THE MARGINS: THE DALIT CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS¹

Motupalli Chaitanya

In the final third of the twentieth century, 'the social question' has been joined by 'the ecological question'. The degradation of Earth's life-forms and life-systems threatens the habitats of human and other creatures, habitats all of us depend upon for every breath we take, every morsel we chew, every song we sing, every right we claim, every enjoyment we cherish.²

Larry Rasmussen

Introduction

The saying, 'history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes,' indeed seems true with respect to Christian mission. Accepting the Great Commission of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20), as the early Christians continued the mission of God, they had to face new challenges. In response to these new challenges, the church had to constantly reinterpret the message of Christ, and every new challenge in turn has opened new avenues of service and offered a newer understanding of what the mission of God is. The spectre of global ecological crisis is one of the more recent and severe challenges that the church has had to face and this crisis has broadened the purview of Christian mission. So, in addition to anthropological, geographical, socio-cultural, political and economic issues, now the Church needs to address ecological issues too. Ecological issues are more significant because they are life threatening – of all life forms and of the earth itself.

At the international level, the World Council of Churches (WCC) had responded to the environmental³ crisis, although indirectly, as early as in

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¹ Paper submitted by Chaitanya Motupalli, a doctoral student at Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, USA for the Colloquium 'Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives' held at the Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad during 22-27 September 2009.

² Larry Rasmussen, 'Global Ecojustice: The Church's Mission in Urban Society', *Mission Studies*, 17.31 (1999), 126.

³ Although there is a difference in meaning and implications between the terms ecology and environment – the former represents the relationship of plants and animals to their physical and biological environment, the latter represents human

1966. The Church and Society sub-unit of the WCC represented by Africa, Asia and Latin America held the powerful nations responsible for the environmental concerns of the third world countries.⁴ That was a significant period because it was soon after the publication of Rachel Carson's classic *The Silent Spring* (1962), which is considered as the beginning of the present form of the environmental movement. So, the WCC responded to the environmental crisis even at a very initial stage, and ever since it has been continually responding to this crisis through its various programs and consultations.⁵

At the national level, as George Matthew Nalunnakkal observes, one has to admit that the voices of ecotheology were less heard.⁶ However, Indian theologians have been addressing the concerns of ecological crisis from various points of view. For instance, A.P. Nirmal in a paper on the relation

interaction with their environment – here I use them interchangeably so that both the meanings are implied.

⁴ Pradip Das, 'The Historical Development of Ecological Thinking in Mission', in Krickwin C. Marak and Atul Y. Aghamkar (eds), *Ecological Challenge and Christian Mission* (Delhi: ISPCK/CMS, 1998), 88.

⁵ In a more direct fashion, WCC took up the task of exploring the theological implications and roots of the environmental crisis in the sixth assembly held in Vancouver in 1983, where the topic 'the integrity of creation' became a new concern. It was in this assembly that it was pointed out that the church's mission cannot be restricted to human beings excluding nature; rather salvation was understood to apply not only to human beings in their socio-political contexts, but also to physical life and the world of nature. Further clarification on the concern for 'the integrity of creation' was sought in a significant WCC sponsored a consultation on the topic in 1988 in Granvollen, Norway. This was followed by the 1989 Conference on World Mission and Evangelism by the WCC held in San Antonio, Texas, USA, where under the theme: 'Your Will be Done: Mission in Christ's Way', it was recognised that the stewardship of God's creation and the responsibility of the church towards the earth was important for the mission of church. Then it was in March 1990, during the Seoul World Convocation the issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation (JPIC) was discussed extensively resulting in the final document – 'Now is the Time'. The presupposition of the document is that 'threats to justice, peace and creation are interrelated, that responding to these threats is a matter of urgency and that these responses must take concrete forms and express solidarity.' So, at the seventh assembly at Canberra, Australia in 1991, the focus was on economic and ecological sustainability. The theme was: 'Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation' and 'the concern for creation were reflected throughout the addresses, reports and liturgies.' Later, with the aim of providing space 'for encounter at the local level and allowing ecumenism from the grass roots to challenge and inspire the national, regional and world levels', in 1994, the WCC committee approved the program 'Theology of Life: Justice, Peace and Creation'. For further details see: Douglas L. Chial, 'The Ecological Crisis: A Survey of the WCC's Recent Responses', *The Ecumenical Review* 48 (Jan 1996), 53-61; and Das, 'Historical Development', 85-93.

⁶ George Matthew Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation: Towards an Integral Ecotheology* (New Delhi: ISPCK/NCCI, 2004), xii.

between 'Ecology, Ecumenics, and Economy' presented at the Conference on 'Ecology and Development: Theological Perspectives' held at Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in 1991, exhorts 'the theological community in India to move forward and break with the anthropocentric treatment of theology and to move from the "human face of theology" towards the "cosmic face of theology."' ⁷ During the same time period, K.C. Abraham, in one of his essays 'Emerging Concerns of Third World Theology', points out that the Third World theologians in the past have not paid sufficient attention to developing a theology of creation as important for the struggles of the poor. ⁸ As far as the indigenous theologies are concerned, in 1999, it is observed that despite the fact that there has been a strong impact of indigenous theologies like feminist theology, Dalit theology and tribal theologies, 'all of them have failed to see the ecological dimensions of theology.' ⁹

After having read this, it is easy to wonder: at a momentous time period when the environmental crisis was rightly judged as 'the beginning of a life and death struggle for life on this earth', ¹⁰ how could the Indian church or the Dalit church (since 90 percent of the Christian population in India is Dalit ¹¹) be so indifferent? Hasn't the Indian church done anything in the past to address the ecological crisis? Or, have we been using the wrong criteria or parameters to understand the Indian church's contribution in addressing the ecological crisis? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions. Towards that end, first I would like to locate the problem of ecological crisis and then address it from a social ecological point of view and then analyse the Dalit church's contributions in that regard. In connection to the ideas and conceptions of social ecology, I would

⁷ Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation*, 8.

⁸ K.C. Abraham, *Paradigm Shifts in Contemporary Theological Thinking and Emerging Concerns of Third World Theology – Two Essays by K.C. Abraham* (np: nd), 9-16. In 2005, again, considering the need of the theological developments in India, K.C. Abraham reminds that the liberation theology has yet to develop a theology of creation as important for the struggles of the poor. 'A new awareness about the interconnectedness between the renewal of the earth and the struggle for justice,' he maintains, 'has now set the state to bring about a dynamic understanding of God's liberation act.' See Joseph George (ed), *God of All Grace* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation and United Theological College, 2005), 400.

⁹ Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation*, xii-xiii.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (trans. Margaret Kohl, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), xiii.

¹¹ Martin Robra, Deenabandhu Manchala and Sarah Anderson-Rajarigam, 'Affirming Life for the Disregarded Many', in Dieter T. Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (eds) *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustices and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 90.

primarily use the works of Murray Bookchin,¹² who is the chief proponent of social ecology, and in order to understand the state of Dalit church and its contributions, I would be using the unpublished doctoral thesis of Deenabandhu Manchala, 'Re-visioning Ecclesia in the light of the Dalit Experience: An Attempt towards an Indian Ecclesiology with the Experience of the Malas and Madigas in Dommeru and Jonnada in Andhra Pradesh as a point of Engagement' (2001).

Locating the Problem

In his thought provoking book, *Green Liberation: Towards an Integral Ecotheology*, George Matthew Nalunnakkal, while rightly pointing out the need for an integral ecotheology in the context of the progressive theologies in India, analyses and points out the drawbacks and possibilities of Dalit theology in the light of the ecological crisis.

In that context, he maintains:

As the cause (*sic*) of the Dalits are integrally interrelated with the issue of land in India, especially among the tribals, with whom the Dalits are forging a common ideological bond, it is to be viewed as a serious neglect on the part of Dalit Theology to have overlooked ecological concerns. The main reason why ecological concerns have been left out in Dalit Theology is the same anthropocentrism which liberation theology also adopted.¹³

In addition, Nalunnakkal also claims that in its hermeneutics, due to apparent anthropocentrism, 'Dalit Theology overlooked some highly relevant ecological thrusts present in its paradigm, the Deuteronomistic Creed, itself presented in an ecological setting.'¹⁴ Furthermore, it is also maintained that an evident anthropocentrism characterises both liberation theology and Dalit theology; and therefore it is suggested that both liberation theology and Dalit theology need to complement a theology of 'liberation' with a theology of 'creation'. In his opinion, for the aforementioned theologies to be oriented towards ecojustice, 'these theologies need to undergo comprehensive revisions in the areas of theological exposition of their themes and doctrines, hermeneutics, and social analysis.'¹⁵ In other words, these theologies need to move away from 'anthropocentrism' (human-centred) and 'accept ecology as the fundamental category.'¹⁶

In a similar line of thought, in the broader context of ecumenism, K.C. Abraham in his essay 'Ecology and Ecumenism: A New Paradigm'

¹² Murray Bookchin, 'Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology' in David Schmitz and Elizabeth Willott (eds), *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

¹³ Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation*, 194.

¹⁴ Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation*, 284.

¹⁵ Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation*, 283.

¹⁶ Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation*, 285.

observes that the concept of ecology calls for a paradigm shift in our thinking and practice. He notes that the concept of wider ecumenism is still human centred and that '[O]ur thinking and theology is totally anthropocentric.'¹⁷ Taking clues from Boff and *Readings From the Perspective of Earth*, ed., Normal C. Habel, K.C. Abraham concedes that anthropocentrism in the interpretation of biblical texts and the development of theology is anti-ecological.

The intention of Nalunnakkal and K.C. Abraham and their proposal to consider ecology as the fundamental category is well taken. However, considering anthropocentrism (or, more exactly, androcentrism – male-centred) as the measuring rod or as a criterion to assess a particular theology's ecological bent or reliability in addressing ecological issues is not acceptable. Certainly, anthropocentrism is a problem in the sense that it alienates human beings from nature and obscures them from responding to the environmental crisis in the necessary manner. Looking at the crisis from a religious point of view, and given that the reinterpretation of the biblical texts and theologies from an ecocentric/biocentric point of view helps in fostering the idea of interrelatedness of human beings and the environment, and checks human beings' arrogant attitudes towards the earth, it seems fair to welcome a shift in theological explorations from an anthropocentric perspective to a biocentric/ecocentrism (humans as a part of the environment/ecosystem) perspective. However, the implicit anthropocentrism/biocentrism dichotomy that operates when we use the principle of anthropocentrism is inadequate in dealing with the present ecological crisis in its entirety.

Basically the dichotomy of anthropocentrism/biocentrism falls into the Deep Ecology¹⁸ framework, and one of the basic tenets of Deep Ecology is the shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective.¹⁹ In the context of Deep Ecology, when we shift the focus from anthropocentrism to biocentrism, it is possible that we would reduce 'people from social beings to a simple species – to zoological entities that are interchangeable with bears, bison, deer, or, for that matter, fruit flies and microbes.'²⁰ Also, we tend to ignore 'the social nature of humanity and the social origins of

¹⁷ K.C. Abraham, 'Ecology and Ecumenism: A New Paradigm', in P. Jegadish Gandhi and K.C. John (eds), *Upon the Wings of Wider Ecumenism: Essays and Tributes in Honor of Rev Dr M.J. Joseph* (Delhi/Bangalore: ISPCK/ECC, 2006), 18.

¹⁸ Deep ecology is a somewhat recent branch of ecological philosophy (ecosophy) that considers humankind as an integral part of its environment. The philosophy emphasises the equal value of human and non-human life as well as the importance of the ecosystem and natural processes. Source: Wikipedia

¹⁹ For a criticism on Deep Ecology see, Ramachandra Guha, 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique', in *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North South* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 92-102.

²⁰ Bookchin, 'Social Ecology', 130.

the ecological crises.²¹ These are very significant criticisms of the framework that we have been using in reinterpreting Christian theology in India and abroad to make theologies ecologically more inclusive and relevant. These criticisms are all the more important in the Dalit context, where Dalits, over a very long period of history, have been considered as no-people. So, any interpretation – directly or indirectly – or any solution to the ecological crisis that may reduce the humanity of Dalits is a violation of the mission of God, and thus unacceptable. Although the shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism is done with a good intention, it has to be remembered that in addition to being a part of nature (as exemplified in Job 38), human beings do have a unique place in creation, the same way every creature has, and we do have a unique role to play in addressing the environmental crisis. So, we cannot compromise on this aspect of the human role.

Furthermore, this anthropocentric/biocentric dichotomy, observes Ramachandra Guha, one of the leading environmental historians of the world, is ‘of very little use in understanding the dynamics of environmental degradation.’²² In Guha’s opinion, the two fundamental ecological problems facing the globe are ‘(1) overconsumption by the industrialised world and by urban elites in the Third World and (2) growing militarisation, both in a short-term sense (i.e., ongoing regional wars) and in a long-term sense (i.e. the arms race and the prospect of nuclear annihilation). Neither of these problems has any tangible connection to the anthropocentric/biocentric distinction.’²³ So, by locating ‘anthropocentrism’ as a major problem area, we might miss the mark in addressing, or even understanding the ecological crisis. Considering Guha’s insights seriously, it seems best to go beyond the anthropocentric/biocentric framework and place the issue of ecological crisis in a framework that would look at the issues of ecology along with other issues of humanity.

Social ecology offers such a framework wherein we would be able to locate the ecological problem in the broader context of human problems. However, it doesn’t accept the concepts of ‘biocentricity’ and ‘anthropocentricity’ because ‘biocentricity’ ‘essentially denies or degrades the uniqueness of human beings, human subjectivity, rationality, aesthetic sensibility, and the ethical potentiality of humanity,’ and similarly, ‘anthropocentricity’ ‘confers on the privileged few the right to plunder the world of life, including human life.’²⁴ Moreover, it is considered that ‘centricity’ is a new word of hierarchy and domination; and since social ecology opposes all sorts of hierarchy, the language of ‘centricity’ also is opposed.²⁵

²¹ Bookchin, ‘Social Ecology’, 130.

²² Bookchin, ‘Social Ecology’, 130.

²³ Guha, ‘Radical American Environmentalism’, 95.

²⁴ Bookchin, ‘Social Ecology’, 135.

²⁵ Bookchin, ‘Social Ecology’, 135.

Before going any further, a quick comment to dispel any unwarranted impressions. Although I have used the arguments of Nalunnakkal and K.C. Abraham to drive my point home, it would be unfair on my part if I do not mention that Nalunnakkal and K.C. Abraham have in fact looked at the issue of ecological crisis from a broader point of view. My contention, however, was only with the way anthropocentrism was used as a benchmark to test Dalit theology's ecological bent. In any case, Nalunnakkal's attempt in proposing 'an integral ecotheology' in the Indian context and his use of Marxian analysis in his work endorse his broader social outlook. K.C. Abraham, in the same manner, is one of the first and the most passionate Indian theologians who has long been insisting that '[O]ur ecological crisis should be seen as a justice issue.'²⁶ Going in line with these theologians, we may now turn to relocate the ecological crisis in the framework of social ecology.

Relocating the Problem and the Dalit Church's Response

Social ecology insists that social and ecological issues are interconnected and that ecological problems are rooted in deep-seated social problems. In other words, 'the ecological crisis results from a destruction of the organic fabric of society and nature.'²⁷ The same idea is being sustained by Murray Bookchin, as he maintains, '[A]ll our notions of dominating nature stem from the very domination of human by human...[T]he domination of human by human *preceded* the notion of dominating nature. Indeed, human domination of human gave rise to the very *idea* of dominating nature.'²⁸ So, for him, ecological degradation is, 'in great part, a product of the degradation of human beings by hunger, material insecurity, class rule, hierarchical domination, patriarchy, ethnic discrimination, and competition.'²⁹ Therefore, according to social ecology, in order to address the ecological crisis, first we need to address the human crisis. Given that the ecological problem has its roots in the way we relate to each other – human to human, certainly any attempt that helps in addressing this human – human relationship is a contribution towards addressing the ecological crisis.

In that light we may now look at the Dalit church. Although oppressed by the inhuman caste system for centuries, the Dalit communities have

²⁶ K.C. Abraham, 'A Theological Response to the Ecological Crisis', in David G. Hallman (ed), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (New York/Geneva: Orbis/WCC, 1994), 67.

²⁷ Preface in John Clarke (ed), *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology – A Celebration of the Work of Murray Bookchin* (London: Green Print, 1990), 2.

²⁸ Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 44. Italics in original.

²⁹ Murray Bookchin, *Which Way for the Ecology Movement? Essays by Murray Bookchin* (Edinburgh/San Francisco: AK Press, 1994), 17.

started asserting themselves not with the aim to replace the oppressors but to make the oppressors humane and to reclaim their human rights and dignity. In this process, the Dalit identity itself has an important role to play. Deenabandhu understands that Dalit identity is not a caste identity but rather an alternative to caste identity. Through the process of asserting this Dalit identity, the Dalits are understood 'to assert their values and culture in an attempt to exist as a people of dignity' and this identity is understood as a valid and viable alternative to the ideological struggle of the Dalits for human dignity, justice and liberation.³⁰ More importantly, reclaiming Dalit identity serves as a means to liberate the Indian church from its caste ridden-ness. One of the most significant theological connotations in this regard, as Deenabandhu maintains:

...the Dalit identity has the ability to lead the church towards an ethical transformation by purging all oppressive and divisive identities within. It helps the church to overcome caste, denominational, linguistic, ethnic and cultural divisions that fragment the body of the church, besides to deal with the hierarchical patterns of its internal life. A vocation of wrestling with the issues of justice and human rights brings along with it possibilities of internationalization of those values.³¹

Now, from the social ecology point of view, since the Dalit church is in the process of addressing the hierarchical caste structures and the human-human relationships it could be seen as on the way to addressing the ecological crisis. Moreover, once the values of justice and human rights are internalised, there is a possibility that there would be outflow of these values towards the ecology and our relationships with the environment would be transformed. This, assuredly, is all a part of the mission of God in the world.

Another important aspect of social ecology is its understanding of nature as a 'participatory realm'. Bookchin writes that social ecology 'radicalises' nature, or the way we understand natural phenomena. Nature is understood as a '*participatory* realm of interactive life-forms whose outstanding attributes are fecundity, creativity and directiveness, marked by complementarity that renders the natural world the *grounding* for an ethics of freedom rather than domination.'³² When various life forms, including human beings, participate in the natural phenomena with a sense of complimentarity and a sense of mutual interdependence then it leads to a

³⁰ Deenabandhu Manchala, 'Re-visioning Ecclesia in the light of the Dalit Experience: An Attempt towards an Indian Ecclesiology with the Experience of the Malas and Madigas in Dommeru and Jonnada in Andhra Pradesh as a point of Engagement' (D.Th. dissertation, Senate of Serampore College, 2001), 177.

³¹ Manchala, *Re-visioning Ecclesia*, 180.

³² Murray Bookchin, 'What is Social Ecology', in Michael Zimmerman (ed.), *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993) (354-373), 355.

radically different plane of existence. This picture of participatory nature of social ecology reminds me of the famous Isaiahic vision (Isaiah 11:6-9):

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.³³

Can we say that the Dalit church is in line with the Isaiahic vision? From his study of the Dalit churches, Deenabandhu attests to this fact. Here, I am compelled to quote at length of the way in which Dalits relate to the earth and also to the community.

The Dalits are the earth people. They depend upon the earth and the earth finds its fulfillment in their hands. Their lives are deeply intertwined with the earth – forests, mountains, rivers, trees, fields, cattle, birds, fish, seasons, floods, cyclones, drought. They graze cattle, dig canals, build houses and roads, and carry loads of fodder, water and soil. They build, grow, create, nurture and care, and produce while diminishing themselves. Working together in the rice fields is an important event of their community as well as daily life. Therefore, their experiences of faith too are earthy. Their aspirations and hopes of God's intervention are always in terms of being able to survive, to be able to live in good relationships and to be together as a community.³⁴

It seems apt for those societies where individualism has so dominated their societies to speak of shifting their perspective from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism/biocentrism. Not so in the Dalit context, because the Dalits have been living in close proximity to the earth for over a few centuries and the framework in which they operate is also entirely different than those who do not live in close proximity to the earth. As observed by Deenabandhu the spirituality of Dalits is already in line with ecological motif. So, nature in the Dalit understanding is already radicalised, and this gives the *grounding* for the ethics of freedom that Bookchin talks about.

As is evident from the text quoted above, Dalits have a strong sense of community. This aspect of community is significant in social ecology also. It is 'in the form of richly articulated, mutualistic networks of people based on community, roundedness of personality, diversity of stimuli and activities, an increasing wealth of experience, and a variety of tasks'³⁵, a society attains its 'truth', its self-actualisation. In case of the Dalit church, Deenabandhu observes: 'the Dalit spirituality is rooted in relationships' and 'one of the remnants of Dalit culture is their strong accent on community

³³ The New Revised Standard Version.

³⁴ Deenabandhu, *Re-visioning Ecclesia*, 189-190.

³⁵ Murray Bookchin, *What is Social Ecology*, 59.

relationship.³⁶ For rural Dalits, community precedes the individual and despite differences they are said to celebrate their togetherness. Deenabandhu maintains that ‘the Dalits as victims of a culture of domination and exclusion aspire for a community that affirms one’s dignity and allows participation and equality.’³⁷ This participatory nature and the sustainable communities³⁸ are what are aimed for in ecotheology, and from the above discussion the Dalit church seems to lead the way to the rest of the world in this regard.

Conclusion

So far I have been arguing to override the concept of anthropocentrism in assessing Dalit theology’s or Dalit church’s significance in dealing with the ecological issues. Although I am using the social ecology framework, it might even seem as if I am anti-ecological because of my ardent opposition to use the concept of anthropocentrism. It is because in the material about ecotheology or environmental ethics, a fair amount of discussion on this concept takes place. In any case, it seems that by over-using the concept of anthropocentrism and by not addressing the right causes of the ecological crisis, we are in fact reducing the gravity of the environmental crisis. It in some ways seems that we are reflecting the essence of Abraham Maslow’s saying: ‘If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.’

Dalits have, only very recently when compared to the long history of India, started reclaiming their human rights and participating in the political processes of the country. It is now that they are attempting to mark for themselves a place in history by asserting their culture and identity, so every attempt has to be done to foster this spirit of assertion. These experiences of liberation hence fostered would eventually extend to the whole of creation. We are not adding ecology to the agenda of Dalit theology, as such, but trusting that the Dalits themselves, having been through the experiences of subjugation and oppression, are in the position to actively and collaboratively struggle for liberation along with those who are considered least of all.

Regarding the frameworks that we use to understand the ecological crisis and the mission of the church, any framework would not comprehensively

³⁶ Manchala, *Re-visioning Ecclesia*, 188.

³⁷ Manchala, *Re-visioning Ecclesia*, 188.

³⁸ In addition to many other sources where theologians have talked about sustainable communities, it is in his essay, ‘Global Ecojustice: The Church’s Mission in Urban Society,’ that Larry Rasmussen, after discussing the ‘three waves of Globalization’ comes to the conclusion that the way to go deal with the questions of social justice and ecojustice is through “‘sustainable community” with its basic question of how we wrap both economy and environment around healthy local and regional communities.’ Larry Rasmussen, ‘Global Ecojustice’, 132.

be able to address all the issues at hand. However, it is best to select that framework which helps us to look at issues from a broader perspective. Social ecology does that. So, now, as we can perceive, we are in a historic moment, sandwiched between the blunders of the past and the possibilities of the future. Our mission in this context is to persevere and to struggle along with those who are struggling. At the end of the day, it is not about which framework wins and which loses, but it is all about how collaboratively we have addressed this crisis. Perhaps, Reuther's wisdom could be of help in having the right kind of attitude in our struggles:

What we need is neither optimism nor pessimism, in these terms, but committed love. This means that we remain committed to a vision and to concrete communities of life no matter what the 'trends' may be. Whether we are 'winning' or 'losing' cannot shake our rooted understandings of what biophilic life is and should be, although we need to adapt our strategies to the changing fortunes of the struggle...³⁹

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³⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 273.

MISSION AS ‘OPENING THE ROOFS’ IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION AND MARGINALISATION

Raj Bharath Patta¹

Prologue

Globalisation is a buzzword in this age of ours where all of us are caught by its pros and cons. Globalisation has also been one of the beaten words for the last two decades or so in India, and has made economists, sociologists and even theologians to ponder and reflect on it from varied perspectives. Let me put forth before you, the way in which my own self-understanding of globalisation has taken different turns and shapes all along, for I think autobiographical experiences may offer some clarity on the subject, as we wrestle with the issue.

I first came across globalisation and its ideology, during my early days of theological study at the seminary. As students, we perceived globalisation as a ferocious lion, on which the developing countries are seated. If we try to jump down to fight against it, it shall pierce and eat us away, and therefore the option left was to sit on it, tame it, make friends with it and keep it going. This standpoint was because, globalisation had already permeated into all walks of life, and had taken deep roots in everyone’s lifestyles, and therefore the viable option was to tame it and keep it going. From this perspective, I transitioned to a stand where I thought no matter what, we should fight the lion, protest and challenge it in whatever small a way it may be. From there I moved to the idea of looking for creative avenues and opportunities with respect to globalisation, which can help Dalits to explore and make use of it. Thereafter, the idea of glocalisation which was based on the premise, ‘think globally and act locally’ appealed to me. From there on I moved to the vertex of being critical of avenues, which are provided by globalisation and have been trying for localisation as an alternative. And today I stand for an alternative globalisation, be it glocalisation or localisation with a call, ‘*make globalisation history*’, similar to the ‘*make poverty history*’ attempts. I may sound very ambitious in my calling and viewpoint, but I think time has come where all of us need to work towards an alternative globalisation,

¹ Rev. Raj Bharat Patta was previously the Executive Secretary, Commission on Dalits, National Council of Churches in India and is at present the General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement of India.

which is alternative to globalisation, and as the journey progresses globalisation can become history.

Recent television commercials and advertisements reveal the true colour and story of the way globalisation has permeated every walk of life. To quote an example to explain globalisation, the *Idea Mobile* advertisement by the Aditya Birla Group comes handy. Their captions have been 'Education for All', the other 'Walk when you talk', 'No Hindu, no Muslim, no Christian' and 'no jat' etc. If we carefully analyse one of their advertisements, particularly the one on 'Education for all', which I guess has increased the sales of their company, the company itself after the advertisement received huge audience and has started the 'Idea Education for All Campaign'.

'What an Idea Sir Ji?' – A Commercial Parable of Globalisation

The plot of the commercial begins with a poor girl (no name at the moment) who comes from a rural village to a Christian English medium school for admission along with her grandfather. Both the girl and her grandfather are pushed out of the corridors of the school by a worker of the school who points to a board, which says, 'Admissions Full'. The grandfather and the little girl had to cry out in tears, 'there is no school in the village, how can my child study further!' As they plead for an admission they are seen by Father Principal (probably with a religious scripture in hand), who has no words but looks at them compassionately.

Then Father Principal goes to the church and prays (this time with a rosary around his neck) for an idea in addressing this situation, contemplating how all can study in *one* school? He then gets an idea to start schools all across the villages by connecting them virtually through the mobile phones from his school. The mobile phones' ring tones serve as a school bell for the students in the villages, and on hearing that ring tone, children from their homes come in groups to attend classes (without shelters). The teacher in the school says, 'Good morning children', with about five mobile phones in front of her, and as the students in the class respond, 'Good morning teacher', the children connected virtually in the villages also respond by repeating the teacher's words 'Good morning children'. While the children in the classroom of the school laugh, the teacher corrects the children in the villages to respond as 'Good morning teacher', and they also then respond by saying, 'Good morning teacher'. From then on different teachers start teaching, both the children in the school and those connected virtually, English, Mathematics and Physical Education. The children in the villages are disciplined over the mobile phone by the teacher in the school for some mischief in the so-called class. The interaction between the children in the villages and the teacher in the class room continues.

Father Principal is then happy for this innovative idea of creating a school for all children both in the class and those in the villages. His happiness knows no bounds, for he takes a stylish jump to tell the audience the success of his innovative idea. The commercial does not end there but also has one more screen to it. It is the 84th Annual Day Celebrations of the School, and Father Principal declares Laxmi Raghav as the best student of the year, the same girl who was denied admission when she first came to school. As Laxmi is given the best student award, there is a lot of happiness from people present there in the auditorium as well as her villagers who are following the function over mobile phone. The grandfather of Laxmi thanks Father Principal for his creative idea by holding his hand saying 'sir ji'. Father Principal then comes back to church and thanks God by telling 'What an idea Sir Ji?' The commercial ends with a caption 'An Idea can change your life'.

The Rationale

This commercial has been telecast on televisions, probably in almost all local vernacular languages, which has a television channel. Through this commercial, I just want to explain what globalisation is, and try to analyse it from the perspective of the marginalised. The rationale for picking this commercial to describe globalisation is that, these commercials are basically made to promote globalisation and media has been an important tool in imparting the doctrines of globalisation into the common persons' mindsets. The other objective in choosing this commercial is that it speaks about the concern of the rich towards the poor, with a special focus on education, which has been a favourite area to plough through the harvest of globalisation. Personally I perceive that this commercial is a typical example to explain and describe globalisation. This commercial is made from the perspective of the winners and the beneficiaries of globalisation, and therefore serves as a ground to analyse it from the peoples' side or the from the margins' side. Mission is after all to vision, perceive and act for those in the margins.²

Contours of Globalisation

Mobile phones in India are a symbol of globalisation, for the technological revolution it had made, and today India's total number of wireless subscribers stands at 362.3 million. The Indian mobile market which is thriving even under these harsh economic conditions adds an approximate 10 million subscribers per month, as against China's addition of 8 million

² This advertisement/commercial (I would prefer to use commercial, for that's the motive of these advertisements) can be watched on YouTube on the following site <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bh3HP51rJs>.

subscribers monthly. The latest report by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India states that India has a teledensity of 34.5 percent as of January 2009, up from 33.2 percent in December last year. Gartner estimates that the Indian mobile market will expand to 737 million subscribers by 2012.³ The number of Indian mobile phone subscribers is little more than the total population of the Dalits and tribals in India. It may be difficult to point out the beneficiaries of these mobile phones among the Dalits and tribals in India; however, when most of them still crave for dignity against discrimination, and for a decent livelihood, I am afraid many would not have been the beneficiaries. In this backdrop, the Idea mobile commercial helps us to understand the contours of globalisation from the perspective of people in the margins. The analysis here is not an extensive one, but shall attempt to delineate four important contours of globalisation. The educational sector being one of the important areas in which globalisation has already taken deep roots, I will limit my analysis to the area of education from the above mentioned commercial.

Marketisation of Education

Saumen Chattopadhyay observed that, 'In India as per our Constitution, education is not meant for business. In the context of market, one fundamental way the market for higher education is supposed to differ from the market of commodity, say chocolate is that providers/universities are generally considered to be not-for-profit organizations.'⁴ But unfortunately today, education has become an important service sector where the rich, powerful and those in the centres are buying education. Though schools/colleges and universities are generally considered to be 'not-for-profit organisations', today they are more considered as 'notes-minting-profit organisations'. Education has been made a commodity today, and those with high consumer energy and money power can secure seats in any of the premier institutions. Such a marketisation of education has brought in the binary of *consumers-students* and *providers-institutions*. With such categories, market as the dominant ideology grabs the freedom of choosing the provider-institution from the consumer-student, and the freedom of choosing product-course-discipline from the student. Huge fee structures, capitation fees, direct and cost-covering prices have all come into force and the gap between those that can afford these and those that are not able to afford widens and therefore leads the education sector to cater to the needs of the rich.

The Idea mobile commercial runs in the same line depicting the sharp gap between the poor like Laxmi for whom education is unaffordable and

³ <http://trendsniff.com/2009/02/22/mobile-subscribers-china-india-2009/>

⁴ Saumen Chattopadhyay, *The Market in Higher Education: Concern for Equity and Quality*, EPW 44.29 (18-24 July 2009), 55.

those students who can afford classrooms. The board 'Admissions Full' deprives Laxmi of the opportunity to prove her 'full potential' by getting educated in that premier school, for the school is full of affordable consumers. Besides this, the story explained above takes a sharp turn, with Father Principal who further markets education in the villages through mobile phones, making a mockery of the whole system of education. Laxmi is portrayed as the beneficiary of such an education, for she is declared the best student. From the perspective of those in the margins, the whole commercial explains how a little child is robbed of her potency to get educated as other students are educated. Father Principal's 'brilliant' idea, only caters to the needs of marketisation of education and not for the benefit of students. Imagine our children being educated in such a virtual school, taught over mobile phones! The poor grandfathers like that of Laxmi are forced to think that such ideas of virtual schools at primary levels are 'brilliant', for the dominant ideologies are disseminated and are made as the norm in the society.

Outward Charity and Inward Discrimination

Father Principal in the commercial on seeing the tears of Laxmi and her grandfather, pities them and goes to God, coming out with an idea of 'education for all'. Out of sheer compassion for poor people like Laxmi, Father Principal starts these virtual schools, taught over mobile phones. On a superficial level, the act of the principal looks like a matter of great charity mixed with innovative creativity, whereas an in-depth analysis brings out the discriminatory aspects. It is easy to start exclusive schools for these poor children in their own villages, specially these virtual schools, so that the rich customers are not disturbed by the mingling with those poor ones. It would have been truly a remarkable act of compassion if the Principal had integrated both the students in the classrooms and those in the villages. But on the contrary, by starting virtual schools over mobile phones, dire discrimination is caused. Those in the classrooms have the privilege of having a teacher who caters physically, and those in the villages have only the privilege of following the teacher virtually without any personal touch. I wonder whether the teachers that are shown in the commercial, have even stepped into the villages of these children. By these virtual schools all are comfortable, for the Principal thinks he has brilliant ideas, he is the most charitable person, or even the best Samaritan for he has been imparting education through mobile phones. The rich students and their parents are comfortable for the village, outcaste students have no direct contact with them. The teachers are comfortable teaching in the classrooms and over mobile phones, for after having best trainings in the cities they need not travel to some illiterate and untouchable villages, which do not have a bus or even a road to go.

But imagine the poor children in the villages who are being taught over mobile phones, who have to sit in the hot sun or under rains for they do not have a shelter, unlike the other students in the classrooms. The students in the classrooms have uniforms to wear and those in the villages probably came with the only dress they have and some even without a shirt to wear. More than learning lessons, I even presume that most children in the villages come to these virtual schools just to see the mobile phones. It is said that more than half of the Dalit students drop out of school even before class 8 in India.⁵ In this scenario how sustainable are these 'brilliant' ideas? Globalisation many a time further marginalises the students in the margins, but gives a picture of charity and human touch.

Nexus of Religion & Globalisation

Globalisation and its adherents are smart enough to ally and partner with any force in order to invigorate the process of liberalisation and consumerism. Religion has not been an exception for globalisation to friendship with, for it tried to promulgate the doctrines of prosperity and blessings. In this episode of the Idea Mobile commercial on which the discussion has been going on, we see the nexus between religion and globalisation. It is portrayed in this commercial that it is a Christian school with Father Principal along with his religious scripture wearing a rosary around his neck; who then goes to church for prayer and ideas. This shows the nexus between religion and globalisation. Since the principal is a religious person he has compassion on Laxmi and people like them and therefore starts these virtual mobile phone schools. On seeing the tears of Laxmi and her grandfather, the principal goes to church to pray for an idea, and receives an idea of starting these schools. And at the end, when he thinks that the idea of these schools has been a great success, he once again goes to the church to express his gratitude and heralds '*What an idea Sir Ji!*'

Globalisation makes people to receive religious sanctions in propagating its good news. It makes religions give sanctions from its scriptures and temples. In the commercial it has been portrayed that the idea of starting these virtual schools comes from the eternal Sir Ji in the church. When the eternal Sir Ji gives such ideas, who on earth can stop such motives and ideas, though it has some adverse affects on the lives of the people in the margins. The whole community of teachers, students, parents and even the people in the villages would have been in great pleasure when Father Principal came up with this idea after spending time in prayer and in church. The whole community of this religious affiliation, the Christians would have called these virtual mobile phone schools as new way of

⁵ Vikas Pathak, 'Welfare of Dalits is Mere Lip Service', *Hindustan Times*, 27 July 2009.

missioning in the context of competition and lack of school facilities. I would even imagine, that many faithful Christians would have bought a mobile phone each in memory of their beloved ones, as part of their faith response to such new ideas. Whatever be it, globalisation is shrewd enough to make people fall into its trap with any ideology and philosophy, and makes joint partnerships in furthering its ideologies. Globalisation even observes a thanksgiving to God for God's best ideas in situations like this. *What an idea Sir Globalisation!*

Cultural Identities Unidentified

K.C. Abraham explains that, 'Globalisation has the tendency to create a monoculture, by monoculture we mean the undermining of economic, cultural and ecological diversity, the nearly universal acceptance of a technological culture as developed in the West and the adoption of its inherent values. The indigenous culture and its potential for human development are vastly ignored.'⁶ In the above mentioned commercial, the principal thinks in the church, 'how can all students study in *one* school?' One school concept, chain of schools concepts have been fast flourishing these days, for the ideology of these chain of schools is to create one monoculture to all its students. The ideology of this monoculture teaches them what they learn is civilised, and that what they are nurtured at home in is something uncivilised. Affirming diversities and pluralities is not the norm of globalisation and perhaps is against the very spirit of globalisation.

The principal wanted to bring in one school to all the students, probably teaching through the same teacher to both in the classrooms and in the villages, and for that oneness to progress the mobile phones have been handy. It is interesting to note in the commercial that, when the teacher first wishes the students 'Good morning children', the response of the students in the classroom was 'Good morning teacher', where as the response of the students in the villages, who are connected by mobile phones is shown in a poor light, for they respond by repeating what the teacher has said, 'Good morning children'. The students in the classrooms laugh and mock at their response and the teacher then corrects the students to respond as 'Good morning teacher.' This incident explains to the audience that the students in the village are uncultured, and don't even know how to wish good morning back to the teacher. Therefore the culture of these students in the class is civilised vis-à-vis the uncivilised culture of those in the villages. So a monoculture is forcefully imbibed into the mindsets of the children in the villages. I was thinking, probably the students in the villages were trained to wish their teachers in the school as 'Namasthe', 'Vannakam',

⁶ K.C. Abraham, 'Mission in an Age of Globalisation: Building Solidarity', in Adrian Watkins and Leslie Nathaniel (eds), *Gospel & Globalisation* (New Delhi: CMS/ISPCK, 2006), 16.

'*Namaskaram*' etc. in their own mother tongues and languages, and therefore could not have wished back in English which is no one's mother tongue in India. The teacher in the classroom was not sensitive to their local culture and language, to which they have been attached to all their lives in the villages. One of the basic tenets of globalisation is to discriminate and wipe away the local cultural identities of peoples and permeate a global culture, which is foreign to the locals.

The other observation in the commercial is that the little girl, who comes for an admission and is denied and later who is part of the virtual school is never mentioned by her name all along the commercial, except the day she was awarded as the best student award in the school, for the very first time the principal calls her by name, Laxmi Raghav. This implies, one's identity is asserted only by being a beneficiary of globalisation. Prior to globalisation, an individual is a nobody and once he/she is a beneficiary of it, then they become a 'global citizen', with a 'decent' identity. Earlier identities are insignificant and are without a name. Therefore globalisation deters and counters one's roots and identities with which one is nurtured and grown.

Reformulating the Agenda of Mission in this Context

Having analysed the agenda of globalisation from the perspective of those in the margins, it's now time to work on what is on the agenda of mission in addressing the global phenomenon of globalisation. Over the years, several theologians have attempted in bringing out what mission is in the context of globalisation. K.C. Abraham has explained 'Liberative Solidarity as a form of global mission in the age of globalisation'.⁷ George Mathew Nalunakkal has explained, 'People's concept of mission from the eyes of the marginalised groups in India'.⁸ and several other theologians have attempted to make mission relevant in the context of empire and globalisation and many other dimensions of it. Complementing on all that has been said and discussed by several theologians and scholars on mission in the context of globalisation, I would like to present 'Mission as Opening Up the Roofs in the Context of Globalisation', based on Mark 2:1-12.

The healing of the man who had paralysis is recorded in Mark 2:1-12, which is a unique writing of Mark, the young evangelistic gospel writer. When Jesus was preaching in Capernaum, people heard that he was home, and flooded into his house to see and listen to him. Jesus started preaching from the word. The house was absolutely jam-packed without even a place even at the door. A group of four people brought with them their friend

⁷ Abraham, *Mission in an Age*, 22.

⁸ George Mathew Nalunakkal, 'Mission as if People Mattered: An Indian Perspective', in George Mathew Nalunakkal (ed), *Re-Routing Mission* (Tiruvalla: CCA-URM & CSS, 2004), 91-107.

with paralysis on his bed to receive healing from Jesus. This scene appears similar to that of Laxmi Raghav, who came for admission along with her grandfather but is sent away with a board 'Admissions Full'. Even these four friends had to read for themselves 'House full'. Without losing heart, the four quickly rushed out and discussed how to address the situation. An idea struck them: since there is no way to reach Jesus, they dared to uncover the roof of the house, and broke open the roof and lowered their friend who was on his bed to catch the attention of Jesus for healing. When Jesus saw the faith of these four friends, who were enthusiastic and bold in their attempt to have their friend healed, immediately Jesus said to the man on the bed, 'Son your sins are forgiven'. Immediately some scribes theologised the whole issue asking, is it not God alone who can forgive? What then is this man Jesus doing? Jesus discerning their hearts said, which is easy to say to forgive or to make him walk? However, to reveal that Jesus had power here, he said to the man with paralysis, 'Arise, and take up your bed, and go your way into your house.' And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, we never saw anything like this.

House Full & Admissions Full

On hearing that Jesus was there in his town, Jesus' house was full with people. The scribes would have occupied the front seats; also those that were close to the house of Jesus would have occupied some place, those who came first from far would have occupied a place, those who had some sicknesses would have come early to find a place and those with some power and might would have found a seat in Jesus' home. His disciples would have found a space, and so also some women disciples who were following Jesus. There was absolutely no room left for any to come in or go out, for it is recorded 'there was no space at the door even'. Jesus was teaching to all of them to enhance their faith, for faith comes by hearing.

This is a situation similar to the 'Admissions Full' board in the school. For those rich parents would have reserved a seat for their children. I recently saw an advertisement, that one can reserve a seat for the yet-to-be by paying the cost of the seat at today's price. Those with political power would have applied and gotten their seat. There is a strict cut-off mark, and those who have the merit (again this is devised by the powerful) would have got the seat. Dalits and tribals would have to go away disappointed, for at many gates of premier institutions, there is no room left to enter through any other means. Educational institutions have been jam-packed with customers who can 'afford' to get a seat. Globalisation cuts down on subsidy for education, and discourages reservation for Dalits and tribals, for it proposes that everyone come through merit. 'House Full' and 'Admissions Full' situations for those in the margins is a reality today.

Collective Idea of These Five Friends and Individual Idea of Powerful

When the house was full, these four gentlemen along with their fifth friend on his bed represent those coming from the margins. Probably since they lived in the outskirts of the town, the information that Jesus was present there reached them very late. If someone could have come earlier to tell Jesus about the man's desire to receive healing, they would have somehow got a seat inside the house. But these people from the margins believed in friendship and community living, and were not selfish in thinking only about themselves. They would have thought 'let's swim together or let's sink together in approaching Jesus for healing' and therefore could not have had a space for them all. Since they had to carry their friend on his bed, they would not have come on time to get a space inside. People would even have opposed these five telling 'how can you come inside the house with a bed, and that too, a sick bed?' Whatever be the reason, these five could not have got a space inside the house, where Jesus was teaching. These five did not give up their mission of receiving healing from Jesus. They collectively focussed on their goal. All five of them discussed the way out. They collectively came up with the idea of opening the roofs, for that was the only way out. When the doors are closed, when the space is walled, the only option is to open and break down the roof. What an idea! Each of them would have appreciated each other for this idea. There would have been some voices of dissent among the five, like why should we unnecessarily disturb Jesus and the crowd. However, respecting the individual ideas, and taking cognisance of all those ideas, for the good of the community, they found that collective ideas are helpful. Therefore, all five of them affirmed this idea of opening the roof, for the sake of healing. They knew, if they miss this opportunity, they might never again get it. They knew such an idea was a risky one. To open the roof was not an easy task. Collective decisions are always good for the community, for it would speak of their unanimity in taking this idea, and even for owning the idea if something goes wrong. There is an element of sharing, concern and commitment towards receiving healing from Jesus.

Globalisation promotes individualism over against communitarian living. Those in power take decisions, and for good or bad, they are implemented. It does not allow space for pluralities and diversities of ideas and thoughts, for power is that which decides. In the aforementioned commercial, Father Principal gives his individual idea and implements it without any second thought or thinking of the consequences. He could have as well shared his idea with his other staff colleagues for a wider discussion, or even could have had heard from the villages what their requirements are. As a man indoctrinated with globalisation and its values, he would not have given space for sharing the idea with others who work under him. He may not have tolerated any one countering his idea, for as a man with power his decision may be seen as the right one. Dalits and tribals today share this aspect of community living, for it is part of their

spirituality and culture. But with the advent of globalisation, their community living has been curtailed for they have had to migrate for work to different places, and their access to schools for education has been lessened. Individualism has badly affected the lives of these people, for it is something which they are not used to.

Opening the Roof and Shrinking the School

Imagine when they climbed up the house to open the roof, probably some elders would have objected to such an activity for it would create a disturbance to Jesus who was preaching as well as to those listening. To climb on top of the roof along with the friend on the bed would have been a Herculean task for these four friends. Further in opening and breaking the roof, these friends would have needed the physical strength besides the moral strength to plead to Jesus for healing to their friend. These four friends opened the roof, which was probably tiled and then broke it up to create space for the man on the bed to be let down to Jesus.

Opening the Roof, Opened the Faith of the Four Seeking Healing

As the four friends opened the roof, despite all the detraction Jesus and the people inside had, they opened their faith wide open as they sought healing from Jesus. Their consistent and collective decision to open the roof, gave them new impetus to exercise their faith in Jesus. Their opening the roof was a symbolic action of their firm faith in the strength of Jesus. That day, if they would not have opened the roof, their faith would not have been displayed, and healing to their friend would not have happened. Faith without actions is a dead faith, and these four were bold in showing their faith through the action of opening the roof. Having come to the house where Jesus was residing and not climbing the house to pitch in the man on the bed for healing, their faith would have been closed, and their desire for healing would have been a mirage.

Opening the Roof, Opened the Heart of Jesus for Healing

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When the four friends opened up the roof, broke it open and let down their friend on the bed who was with paralysis, Jesus on seeing this whole incident and particularly the faith of these four men, immediately said to the one on the bed, 'Son/friend your sins are forgiven.' Jesus probably was distracted by the disturbance caused by these four friends in opening the roof and breaking it down, and in that mood Jesus could have very well cursed these people for disturbing the whole atmosphere, where people are attentively listening to him. But on the contrary Jesus on seeing the faith of the four who were brave, bold and persevering, opened his heart to not just heal their friend, but to forgive him of his sins as well. It was a double

bonanza to the man with paralysis that he received not just physical healing, but also the forgiveness of his sins.

Opening the Roof, Opened the Eyes of the People Inside

The audience listening to Jesus would have been equally disturbed by the opening of the roof, and would have cursed these friends for their uncultured activity of climbing the roof and breaking it open. But when Jesus' heart was opened for healing on seeing the faith of these friends, and when Jesus had forgiven his sins as well and asked him to rise, take up his bed and walk, this sight of healing opened their eyes. These people sitting inside the house would have felt privileged when they came and found a place in the house, but when they saw the healing they were filled with awe and were surprised, praised God and said that they have never seen such things in their lives. If the roof was not opened that day, these privileged audiences would have gone without seeing such an amazing event in their lives. Probably at the end, most of these audiences would have gone to meet the four friends and appreciated them for their faith and would have congratulated the man who was healed for the activity of God in him.

Opening the Roof, Opened the Deceitful Hearts of the Scribes

When the roof was being opened, probably these scribes would have been the first ones to object to such an activity, for they always ascribed to the status quo of rule and law. Besides that, when Jesus pronounced forgiveness to the man with paralysis, these scribes were theologising the issue of forgiveness and were questioning the authority of Jesus in doing so. But with the opening of the roof, and with the pronouncing of forgiveness, Jesus opened the hearts of these scribes, and proved his authority here on earth.

Opening the Roof, Opened the Nerves of the Man with Paralysis

All this struggle by the friends in opening the roof was basically for the friend to receive healing. Jesus said arise, take up your bed and walk. With those words from Jesus, this man's nerves were strengthened all across his body and gave him the confidence of walking along with his bed. This man was let down from above, and had to walk outside through the aisles of the house, though it was packed without any space. Jesus' words were primarily to instill in him the confidence to join the community to be his witness.

Globalisation on the other hand opposes all forms of risks and counter-movements that come against it. From the Idea Mobile commercial, we see that globalisation has been shrinking the idea of school, though the principal thinks that he has widened the idea of school. Education needs to

be learnt in all freedom and quality education can be imparted when there is a personal relationship among students and students and among students and teachers. But the concept of school has been shrunk by redefining the space and the classroom.

Mission as Opening the Roof in the Context of Globalisation Today

In the context where globalisation is explained by the marketisation of education, outward charity and inward discrimination, nexus with religion and cultural identities being unidentified, what does it imply for mission today? What does mission as opening the roof mean in the context of globalisation today?

Mission in today's context needs to be understood as a common united mission towards transformation of society by all religions. The mission partners need to be people of all faith, and mission is not one religion's propriety and no one religion has superiority over and against the other. People of all faiths need to be 'together in mission'. In order to address some giants like globalisation, people of all faiths need to come together irrespective of their religious affiliation to join hands and be collective in opening the roofs of the systemic injustices perpetuated by the altars of globalisation. Mission as opening the roof explains the openness in the understanding of mission. When the doors are closed down by narrow domestic walls, the option left is to open the roofs, so that the foundations will shake.

In today's context, opening the roof is the option left for the Dalits and tribals in countering the gamut of globalisation. To climb on top of globalisation and to open its roof is not an easy task, at the same time not a difficult task as well. In the context of education, Dalits need to press on to extend reservations even in the private sectors, and to that end it has to be pushed, along with creation of necessary mechanisms for monitoring. For Dalits opening of the roof would mean not to succumb to separate schools opened by them, rather to get integrated with the mainstream. According to Felix Wilfred, 'educational policies and text books need to be developed that will instill the evils of caste and the caste-system. Moreover the national policy of education should identify the forces of communalism and name them.'⁹ Therefore opening of the roof is to bring in awareness on caste and its evils through education and its institutions. When the roof is opened and broken down, the foundations also will shake, and through that globalisation can be countered.

Mission as opening the roof today means to act collectively as Dalits and tribals, for the dominant castes try to divide and rule these people and profit out of their division. Therefore, mission as opening the roof means, to be

⁹ Felix Wilfred, 'Dalit Future: Future of the Nation', *Vidhyajyothi* 73.5 (May 2009), 12.

united as Dalits, forgoing all the sub-caste divisions, to be united as Dalits and tribals, and even to get united with all those like-minded people in the journey of liberation. Mission as opening the roof involves some amount of risk, which is worth taking.

Mission as opening the roof today also means to counter acts of sympathy and charity towards Dalits. But rather opening up justice by breaking down injustice has to be done in all fronts of life. Opening the roof in the context of the aforementioned commercial is to integrate Dalit students with other students and create harmony among all students of caste, colour, class, creed and religion. It means opening a rainbow of new avenues of creativity among all students, where money and capital will not primarily rule and dictate terms.

Mission as opening the roof today means to break the nexus of globalisation, capitalism, patriarchy and religion. Religious fundamentalism in any religion needs to be condemned and countered with values of secularism, equality and peace. Reinvigorating Dalit culture and Dalit spirituality to children is inevitable in this context. Opening the roof is breaking down the walls of prosperity, accumulation and greed. Religions should teach and make us learn justice and in that pretext, globalisation's unjust practices can be addressed.

Mission as opening the roof today means to reassert our cultural identities. Each individual today has poly-identities, and they all need to be preserved with a memory into our roots. No one identity is superior over against the other, and therefore, opening the roof means to affirm our own identities as communities. Opening the roof today, can transform the lives of many, challenge the lives of power and can pave the way towards bringing in peace and transformation.

Re-Defining Education Today

Saumen quotes Patnaik who pleads for an alternative conception of education, where, '...education as an activity in which students and teachers are jointly engaged *on behalf of the people of a society*.'¹⁰ Therefore education needs to be more understood not as a means of livelihood apparatus, but rather needs to take into consideration the social context of the society, and thereby needs to impart character that builds the community within the society.

The present United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government has introduced the Right to Education Bill in the Lok Sabha on 31 July 2009, which says free and compulsory education to children of 6-14 years. I think this bill needs to think of children below 6 years, for the private players are very strong in this area. The Union Human Resources Development (HRD) minister says that this Right to Education Bill, shall make India a

¹⁰ Chattopadhyay, 'The Market in Higher Education', 55.

knowledge hub in about 15-20 years. ‘This was a matter of national importance for UPA (United Progressive Alliance). This bill is just not about taking children to school. This is a bill that speaks about quality education, it speaks about the physical infrastructure, teacher-pupil ratio, qualification of teachers,’ Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal said after introducing the bill. ‘The bill is integrated with the future of the country. It will create intellectual assets. Creativity of mind leads to creation of intellectual assets,’ he further said.¹¹

Recently I have seen a board in Mumbai, which said ‘coaching classes for admission to nursery’. The private partners have already privatised education from 3-6 years, and therefore it is high time that the church open up its roof in favour of supporting free education to all people in India.

Epilogue

As we gather to redefine and reformulate mission and its agenda in the globalised world, time has come where education needs to taken to all parts of our country without any bias, for mission as education has been a very long mission agenda in the history of missions. I heard recently Dr Shanta Premawardane of WCC saying that, ‘When God gets up in the morning the issues which makes God to worry about, is all that we call mission’, and certainly globalisation has been one of the deep concerns of God that I guess is making God feel sleepless, and therefore we as partners in the mission of God need to work in countering that. Mission for us today is opening the roofs of those strong structures of globalisation, for opening the roofs would make people to choose their own product according to their own interest. ‘Educate, Agitate and Organise’ of Dr Ambedkar comes handy as we counter globalisation of education. Mission is to educate our communities, mission is to agitate against the vices of unjust policies and mission is to organise people in opening up the roofs of the structures of injustices. Let me end with the words of Bishop Azariah’s speech at the 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference, where he said

The exceeding riches of the glory of Christ can be fully realized not by the Englishman, the American, and the Continental alone, nor by the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Indians by themselves – but by all working together, worshipping together, and learning together the Perfect Image of our Lord and Christ. It is only ‘with all the Saints’ that we can ‘comprehend the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that we might be filled with all the fullness of God.’ This will be possible only from spiritual friendships between the two races. We ought to be willing to learn from one another and to help one another. Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary

¹¹ <http://in.news.yahoo.com/43/20090731/818/tnl-right-to-education-bill-to-make-indi.html>

body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS!¹²

We need friends and equal partners in the common mission and not mere donors and recipients in mission. We need friendship between those in the margins and those in the centres, and mission as opening the roofs is possible on the premise of friendship and collective efforts. Friendship is a responsibility and not an opportunity, and so is mission today.

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¹² <http://www.towards2010.org.uk/downloads/t2010mainintro.pdf>

POSITIVE PEOPLE: SEEKING STRENGTH FROM STIGMA

Devahi Selina

‘We belong to the HIV *kulam*, but we are inclusive, unlike the *kulam* that we were born into’, said in unison three women participants from Guntur at a recent Swabhiman (self-worth) workshop for the People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLHA). One could derive so many conclusions from this statement. For a western researcher who is interested in interrogating the caste of an Indian mind, it might suggest that Indians cannot but think in caste categories. For a census-taker, it might sound too confusing as to how and when this new caste surfaced. For a theorist of caste, it might make no sense, since *kulam* is something you are born into and not that which you create by yourself. My interest in attempting to understand this HIV *kulam*, as these women described themselves is not one of anthropological curiosity, but a theological one. I believe that the emergence of the HIV *kulam* (surely not HIV) is a Kairotic moment in our times, because it opens up new possibilities in envisaging inclusive communities. In this paper I attempt to document the story of the HIV Positive People Network in Guntur district and seek to listen to the gospel that comes from these margins. It is an attempt to seek to discern how God is engaged with these communities.

HIV and AIDS Scenario in India and Andhra Pradesh in Particular

According to the latest figures from the World Health Organization, an estimated 2.3 million people in India are HIV-positive – the third largest population, after South Africa and Nigeria, among the 33 million people affected by the virus worldwide. Among the 2.31 million, HIV prevalence among late adolescents and adults (15 years or above) is 0.34 percent. Previously it was thought that around 5 million people were living with HIV in India – more than in any other country. Recent data, including the results of a national household survey conducted in 2005-6, led to a major revision of the prevalence estimate in July 2007. Of these 2.31 million people living with HIV an estimated 37 percent are female and 3.5 percent

are children¹. The following table² explains the HIV high prevalence in antenatal clinic, STI [Sexually Transmitted Infections] clinic, among the MSM [Men Sex with Men] community and the female sex worker. Among the high prevalence states Andhra Pradesh has the highest HIV-positive in India. Andhra Pradesh accounts for 500,000 of the estimated 2.31 million PLHA in India.

State/Union Territory	Antenatal clinic HIV prevalence 2007 (%)	STD clinic HIV prevalence 2007 (%)	IDU HIV prevalence 2007 (%)	MSM HIV prevalence 2007 (%)	Female sex worker HIV prevalence 2007 (%)
Andhra Pradesh	1.00	17.20	3.71	17.04	9.74
Karnataka	0.50	8.40	2.00	17.60	5.30
Maharashtra	0.50	11.62	24.40	11.80	17.91
Manipur	0.75	4.08	17.90	16.40	13.07

Around 90 percent of infected people in the state contract the virus from unsafe sex. Telugu Network of Positive People, headed by Ramesh Babu says that ‘there are nearly 10,000 sex workers in Guntur district alone and pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations were the main reason for the high HIV prevalence rate.’ Guntur has around 30,000 HIV and AIDS persons. Statistics, however, suggest that Guntur was the only district

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¹ NACO releases HIV figures each year based on data gathered from HIV Sentinel Surveillance sites. In 2007 surveillance was conducted at 1134 sites and 358,797 samples were tested for HIV. The sites carry out tests among the high-risk groups and among antenatal clinic attendees. Data gathered from the antenatal clinics are then used as a surrogate for the general population. Many AIDS deaths go unreported in India, due to unprecedented levels of. In many situations a patient will die without HIV having been diagnosed, and with the death attributed to an opportunistic infection, such as tuberculosis. Sahil Makkar, ‘An Andhra District Scripts HIV Success Story’, May 10, 2008. http://twocircles.net/2008may10/andhra_district_scripts_hiv_success_story.html

² Ibid.

where the numbers came down drastically in three years, while the percentage became double or more in places like Hyderabad, Khammam, Mahabubnagar, Medak, Ranga Reddy and Kurnool³. The Telugu Positive Network workers' dissemination of information regarding free Anti Retro Viral Therapy [ART], testing facilities in the Integrated Counselling and Testing Centers [ICTC], and awareness building programme among the rural and urban areas made many people to go for voluntary HIV testing. Thus the number of positive persons has drastically increased in many parts of Andhra Pradesh; for example in Mangalagiri in the year 2008 there were 104 positive persons; the number has increased to 400 in 2009 says Ratna Kumari, one of the positive speaker bureau.

The Positive People: The People of God

The HIV Positive People Network is a social movement by and for the People Living with HIV and AIDS. The membership is open to all Indians living with HIV irrespective of gender, caste, religion, sexual orientation etc. Members include, besides PLHIV, people from diverse orientation and marginalised sections of the society – LGBT [Lesbians, Gays, Bi-sexual, and transgender, Transsexuals], MSM (Men having Sex with Men), IDU (Injecting Drug Users), sex workers etc. The networks are present in all states in India. They address issues pertaining to them, to empower the members, to fight for their rights and address fear, prejudice, ignorance, stigma and discrimination. It also stands to represent courage, insight, acceptance and hope to hundreds and thousands of People Living with HIV and AIDS. Their shared experience of living with and overcoming stigma, their need to make sense of their own identity as PLHA and their vision to stop AIDS necessitated the formation of such support groups.

Seeking Strength from Stigma

Nobody wants to be stigmatised and every effort has to be made to do away with stigma since it alienates people and renders them as untouchables. One of the tasks that these communities set to themselves is to combat stigma. They do so by seeking to bring about solidarity of the PLHA. It is the shared experience of being stigmatised that forges solidarity in these new communities. This experience also pushes them to understand other forms of stigmatisations like that which Dalit communities experience. The notions of purity and pollution and the mechanisms of endogamy are the pillars that sustain the stigmatisation of Dalit communities. So is the case with the PLHA. The bodies of PLHA are considered as a danger to others. While the Dalit bodies pollute, the PLHA bodies infect. In most cases, the only option these people have is to marry another PLHA. This experiencing

³ Sahil Makkar, 'An Andhra district scripts HIV success story'.

of stigma opened up a new possibility in these communities: transcending caste. I interviewed five participants from Guntur who participated in one of our workshops. Two of them were men and three women. While one male person belonged to Reddy caste, and the other was a Mala. All the three women were from the Kamma Naidu community. All of them confessed that they had their prejudices against the other castes. But now they think that they can empathise with Dalit communities since they now know what it means to be excluded and to be an untouchable. Ratna, one of the participants, told that she never had any social contact with a Dalit person before. Now, her close friend in the network is a Dalit woman. In her most testing times, it was this Dalit woman who lent her a shoulder. She once invited her Dalit friend to her home for lunch. Her mother was so upset that she brought in a Dalit woman straight into the dining space. Ratna had to fight with her mother and tell her that she cannot tolerate untouchability in any form. She further said that in gathering strength to survive, she needs her Dalit friend more than her family. By claiming themselves to be belonging to the HIV *kulam* they challenge the caste consciousness of the Indian society and seek to imagine an inclusive society.

Practicing Pastoral Care as a Community

PLHV experience a range of difficult emotions, including fear of death, depression, suicidal thoughts, guilt, anguish, anger, denial, shock, rejection and isolation arising from HIV status. Being 'humane and loving' and providing an environment of non-judgmental attitude, listening ears, confidentiality and prayers makes a lot of difference in their lives. As these communities congregate they address these issues and by collectively listening to their stories, shedding tears for each other and in the warmth of touch, they deal with these emotions. While ART helps them in reducing the viral load, it is this collective pastoral engagement that gives the courage to hope.

A Natural Interfaith Engagement

Among the five people I interviewed, one is a Christian, two go to a church regularly for prayers and two sometimes go to a church along with their regular practice of Hinduism. The women who go to church regularly never felt a need to be baptised, because religion for them is not a matter of adherence to a set of beliefs but a way to seek divine intervention in their lives, particularly to grant healing and offer strength to live. When asked if their refusal to be baptised is a refusal to be identified with Dalits, the answer was that they do not need baptism for it, since their status of being with HIV already qualifies them to be considered an untouchable. For them, belief in Jesus is not a closed one but an open one. It allows them to

continue to have faith in their household gods and goddesses. They practice yoga and they also pray for each other. They share their stories of their faith journeys. Perhaps, it is an interfaith dialogue that lays its focus on living here rather than the life that is to come.

An Active Engagement for Members' Welfare

They have arranged marriages for positive couples; distribute ration cards; arrange for HIV pension. They question discrimination. They have evolved income generation programmes. Some have become members of the positive speaker bureau. They send pregnant women to Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission (PPTCT) centres; sensitise people to go for volunteer testing and counselling.

Empowered to Announce

The members of the Positive Network pledge themselves to stop HIV and AIDS. Some of these people reach out to the other PLHA to tell them about the availability of ART and kindle in their hearts new hopes. When the PLHAs face discrimination they individually and collectively combat the discrimination. What surprises me was that all the three women that were interviewed told me that their domain before being tested positive was their home. Never did they imagine that they would engage themselves in struggles such as this. There was never an occasion in which they addressed a public gathering before, but now they stand before a community and address people. Their concerns before were merely domestic, but now they talk about the concerns of the PLHA communities and are concerned about youth and women who are vulnerable.

A Theological Note

In my description of the Positive Networks, I am aware that I have used a language that they may not use for their own self description, except that they are positive people. It is so because, as I have suggested earlier, my concern in this study is to listen to the gospel that comes from the positive people. I tried to perceive it in my language, the Christian language. In doing so my intention is to imagine God in ways that help me participate in the mission that these people of God are engaged in. Such an exercise is important for two reasons. First our Christian theological response to PLHA often has been in terms of raising the question of theodicy, why the innocent suffer (most women are innocent)? The question is more in terms of what God is doing? Or where is God? The second response is a mission response in terms of preparing programmes for these people. Both these approaches are important and valid. However one may have to go beyond these, and place the theological question at an ontological level: Who is

God? How do we understand God in the context of HIV and AIDS? Dalit theology suggested a way in this direction. Going beyond the notion of God as the God of the poor (God of the Dalits), Nirmal imagined God as the Dalit God. Could we imagine God as God with HIV AIDS (GWAH)?⁴ Joseph Prabhakar Dayam suggests that such an imagination is possible with the Lutheran understanding of exchange of attributes. Christ by taking into himself the infirmities of humanity offers them healing.⁵ Building upon Luther, Moltmann imagined God as the crucified God. Could we extend this theological logic further and talk about GWAH? Once we imagine God as GWAH our response to PLHA will not be programmatic but missional, in the sense that we participate in their struggles along with God. We seek our salvation by engaging ourselves with PHLA since God reveals Godself in every face of the PHLA.

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⁴ Arvind P Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology', *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey (214-230) (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 224.

⁵ Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, 'Golgotha, the Grave and the Garden: Sites of God's Self Disclosure', *Masih Sevak: Journal of Christian Ministry* (December, 2008).

HUNTING USING HOAX: DALITS, CASTE AND THE CONVERSION DEBATE IN INDIA

Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar¹

The atrocities against Christians on the pretext of ‘conversions’, which escalated during the Kandhamal persecutions of August 2008, have been so ubiquitous in recent Indian history that if some Indians were to say that ‘they were shocked by these atrocities’, in my opinion these would be people who have not been conscientious enough to discern the *zeitgeist* or the spirit of the times. The escalation in the frequency and gruesomeness of such incidents against the minorities and the marginalised communities in the recent past has left little to be shocked.

However shock has to be expressed! And expressed for other reasons.... Perhaps the real shock or even anger should be over other questions: How long will we, who profess to be a secular country, continue to tolerate the Hindutva’s hate campaign against the minorities? Do the lives of minorities and other marginalised groups who are massacred mercilessly by the Sangh Parivar forces matter? Are we through our passivity on course to becoming ‘pro-Hindutva softies’ as a nation? Can the connivance of the ‘law-enforcing’ authorities, the state-machinery like the police and the army, as well as major political parties with the fundamentalist forces, which has ensured that the most vulnerable sections of the society end up as scapegoats in the ‘sacrificial pyre’ of the Hindutva forces be something tolerable at all? Shock should be expressed at the seeming impotence of the law-enforcing bodies to ensure that justice is done to the victims of such atrocities.

Andhra Pradesh has been no exception in the Hindutva’s tirade against Christians using the conversion rhetoric. The All India Christian Council in its website gives details of several attacks on churches and priests in various parts of Andhra Pradesh (<http://indianchristians.in/news/content>). However one major issue which has characterised the targeting of Christians in Andhra Pradesh has been the allegation of proselytisation by Christian preachers in the Tirumala Hills in Chittoor District which is

¹ Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar teaches Christian Social Ethics at the United Theological College, Bangalore. He is the author of *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (London: Ashgate, 2010) and is working on *A Reader in Asian Theology* (London: SPCK).

considered to be one of the holiest Hindu shrines in the world second perhaps only to Varanasi. It is interesting to note that the head priest of the Lord Venkateshwara temple at Tirumala, V.V. Ramana Deekshitulu, in a meeting with the former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh the late Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy at the Secretariat on July 20 2006 himself denied reports that Christian preachers had carried out a conversion campaign in the Tirumala hills. This was contrary to the 'findings' of a 'fact-finding investigation' conducted by the 'Justice Bhikshapathy Committee on Proselytising,' which was set up by Sri Vishwesha Teertha of Pejavar Mutt, Udipi, under the leadership of Justice G. Bikshapathy to ascertain the factual position as regards the activities of non-Hindu religious communities in Tirumala and Tirupathi.² Interestingly The Andhra Pradesh Christian Council (APCC) in a press release pointed out that one of the reasons why Christians are being targeted is because Dalits in and around Tirupathi were choosing Christianity and the work of the Christian missions were received by the Dalits in the Tirupathi area (APCC Press Release March 2007).³

The Sri Padmavathi Mahila Vishwa Vidhyalayam (Women's University) located in Tirupathi town which is on the foothills of Tirumala has also been involved in a 'conversion' controversy. The Sangh Parivar through its student wing the Akhil Bharathiya Vidhya Parishad created a furore after a post graduate student Uma Maheswari committed suicide, alleging in a wholly unsubstantial manner that it was her 'conversion' to Christianity which led to her suicide. This incident followed an allegation 'over alleged evangelical activities on the campus of Sri Padmavathi Mahila Vishwa Vidhyalayam (Women's University)',⁴ which the Andhra Pradesh chapter of the Indian Dalit Christian Rights (IDCR) strongly refuted and dubbed as 'a ploy to malign Vice-Chancellor Veena Noble Das' who was a Christian herself. (*The Hindu*, March 20 2007).⁵ Interestingly but predictably in all these incidents, as in most other incidents, the conversion rhetoric was employed.

These events needless to say raise more questions than answers. How long? What next? Will this ever stop? In such a context, today I want to

² Members of that committee included Justice G. Bikshapathy, Justice K.B. Siddappa, former Judges of Andhra Pradesh High Court, Shri T.S. Rao, former Director General of Police, Andhra Pradesh, Dr P. Geervani, former Vice-Chancellor of Padmavathi Mahila Vishwavidyalaya and Dr R. Srihari, former Vice-Chancellor of Dravidian University, Kuppam.

³ http://indianchristians.in/news/images/aiccupdates/pdf/aicc_Update_Jul06.pdf.

⁴ http://www.nchro.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4201:motivated-campaign-against-christians-in-tirupati&catid=9:minorities&Itemid=19; M. Radhika, Conversion Bogey: Tirupathi: Sangh's New Front http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main19.asp?filename=Ne090206Tirupati_Sanghs.asp.

⁵ Protest against alleged missionary activity in Tirupati, <http://www.hindu.com/2006/04/11/stories/2006041105010300.htm>

focus on the issue of conversions taking into consideration the perspective of the subaltern Dalit communities in an attempt to delineate how the underlying 'nationalist' ideology of the Hindutva impinges upon the basic human rights of the Dalit Christian communities. The issue of conversion in a pluralistic context has more often than not been a hot potato for ecumenical missiology. In such a context this paper seeks to plot the issue of Dalit conversions to Christianity in India in its social, cultural and political framework in order to help us understand the place of conversions in the missional emphasis of the Indian church. The fact that the focus of this paper will be on the Dalit communities inevitably entails a discussion on caste and conversion.

Few things need to be clarified at the very outset. The very fact that we have crossed one decade of the intensification of the violent hate campaign of the Hindutva forces against Christians who became the new-found enemies of the Sangh Parivar in 1998 suggests that the atrocities against Christians is part of a wider and more concerted campaign – a Hindutva experiment. We have had comparatively less violent indications of this campaign when the former Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Dehli declared that since about half an ounce of wine was used to commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus, churches were to be considered as not as religious houses but as places of entertainment and be taxed as commercial centres.⁶ Absurd but true!

The systematic manner in which the unleash of violence is orchestrated against Christians suggests that this was premeditated and strategically executed. One should also be cautious about understanding the attacks against Christian churches, nuns, missionaries and pastors as an attack by Sangh Parivar fanatics over the issue of forcible conversions. The 'facade' of 'forcible conversions' is being evoked by the Hindutva to justify its hate campaign against the minorities. One needs to look beyond this veneer.⁷

Caste, Conversions and the Hindutva Campaign: A Case of Competing Technologies of the Self

The primary thesis that I want to explore today is that Murder of Motivation is the Motivation for Murder. This paper suggests that the wider ideology of Hindutva, has to be understood as the 'Murder of Motivation'.

⁶ Walter Fernandes, 'Attacks on Minorities and a National Debate on Conversions', *Economic and Political Weekly* (henceforth *EPW*) (16-23 January 1999), 83.

⁷ Using the Right to Information Act 2005, which makes it mandatory for the government to disclose to any citizen information relating to public issues the leader of the AICC (All India Christian Council) Samson Christian discovered that even in the state of Gujarat where 'forcible conversions' have been cited as an issue only three complaints of forcible conversions were filed over the last few years, of these only two concerned Christian conversions and were filed in 1997 and 2007 respectively. See *Compass Direct News*.

The motivation that is sought to be ‘murdered’ is the motivation of the subaltern communities to assert their identity and renegotiate their status using the avenues of religious independence, education and economic independence. The ‘polyvocality’ of such a strategy becomes more clear if we analyse the situation using a ‘corporate’ version of Foucault’s concept of ‘technologies of the self’.

The political matrix of the recent incidents can be theoretically conceptualised using French Philosopher Michael Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self. Technologies of the self are one of the four technologies (along with technologies of production, technologies of sign systems and technologies of power) which determine the conduct and actions of individuals and groups and submit them to certain ends or domination. These technologies of the self, ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.’⁸ In the light of this conceptualisation if we understand the situation in India especially the rhetoric of branding any conversions to Christianity as ‘forced’, it is a clash between competing technologies of the self – namely

- a) the technology of self-perpetuation of the Hindutva, and
- b) the technology of self-assertion of the subalterns

The What and Why of the Hindutva

The very ideology of Hindutva advocated by the Sangh Parivar has to be understood as a technology of the self that seeks implicitly and covertly to sustain the caste status quo retaining brahminical supremacy and dominance. It is worth examining the Hindutva ideology in detail at this point. Hindutva is a political movement, which sees Hindutva or ‘Hinduness’ as quintessentially defining Indianness. The conceptualisation of Hindutva can be traced to a book published in 1923 named *Hindutva* by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar an ideologue of this politics.⁹ Hindutva fabricates the concept of the Indian nation along the lines of a pan-Hindu identity. It effectively seeks to reduce India to a Hindu nation comprising of Hindus – undermining the pluralistic ethos of the country. One of the chief arguments of Hindutva was the accordance of primary status to ‘Hindus’ – those who considered India as both *Pithrubhumi* (fatherland) and *Punyabhumi* (holy land) – as against adherents of other faiths.

⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘Technologies of the Self,’ in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18

⁹ Vinyak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva* (Nagpur: V.V. Kelkar, 1923). Later several editions were republished.

Hindutva rests on three pillars of 'geographical unity, racial features and common culture'. It is however with regard to the third pillar that much of the debate on the nationalist ideology of Hindutva has been framed. Hindutva in its definition of Indian culture equates Indian culture with a parochial and selective version of Hindu culture. As such it adopts a 'narrowly Hindu view of Indian civilisation' separating out the period preceding the Muslim conquest of India.¹⁰ It introduces a concept of nationalism defined in terms of culture which conflates Indian culture with 'Hindu' a predominantly brahminical and sanskritised version of Indian culture. This becomes clear if we consider Savarkar's definition of culture:

[W]e Hindus are bound together not only by the ties of love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the ties of common homage we pay to our great civilization – our Hindu culture, which could not be better rendered than by the word *Sanskriti* suggestive as it is of that language Sanskrit, which has been the chosen means of expression and preservation of that culture, of all that was best and worth-preserving in the history of our race. We are one because we are a nation, a race and own a common *Sanskriti* (civilization).¹¹

The Hindutva forces aggressively pursue a broad goal of establishing a 'Hindu Rashtra' and their version of Indian nationalism seeks to be a tool in this endeavour. However, implicit in this broader goal of the Hindutva is a self-seeking goal, which is the goal of self-perpetuation of the brahminical dominance. Inextricably interlinked with the perpetuation of this brahminical dominance is the maintenance of the caste-structure. Conversion to other religions frees the Dalits from the obligations imposed by the caste system and is counterproductive for the perpetuation of brahminical dominance. Thus there is a direct need to subsume the Dalits under the Hindu caste-order.

One needs to recognise at this point that the Hindutva's brahminical ideology of benefitting from the caste-structure and imposing a Hindu Rashtra is severely deterred by the Indian constitution, which has always remained an anathema for the Sangh Parivar for the way in which it replaces the legal codes of *manu dharmashastra*. Because of the stability of the constitutional validated electoral processes, the goal of the Hindutva project of establishing a *Ram Rajya* can only be achieved through the venue of electoral politics. The electoral process, in spite of all its flaws, nevertheless functions as an effective surrogate space which accords equality to all Indians in contrast to other social and economic structures. The electoral process functions on the premise of 'one person one vote'. It thus achieves equality in according the power to people to choose their

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* (London: Penguin, 2005), 9,10.

¹¹ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (2nd ed; Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 91-92.

political representatives. In such a context it is important for the Hindutva to contain the Dalits and the Adivasis under its tutelage and secure their vote-bank.

Hindutva's technology of self-perpetuation negotiates this terrain of ensuing that both its aspirations for social dominance as well as political power are achieved, predominantly through two particular actions, namely:

1. Striving towards the curtailing of conversions, which is most obvious in its continued denunciation of Dalit conversions as forcible, and
2. Consolidating, either overtly or covertly, a homogenised version of a pan-Hindu identity through the tactics of co-option of Dalits and Adivasis into the Hindu fold and fragmenting the solidarity that exists between the minority and marginal identities through insinuation and innuendo.

Why Target Conversions? – The Conundrum of Conversion

Delving into the issue of conversions it is important to locate the Hindutva's constant invocation of the rhetoric of debate on conversions at this juncture. We need to recognise that the question of conversions is the necessary foundation to sustain an anti-Christian campaign in India, because Hindu-Christian relations do not have other issues – like the memories of communal violence or partition or *go-korbani* (cow slaughter) – which have affected Hindu-Muslim relationships. It needs to be mentioned that the issue of conversions has actually forged an unlikely marriage between Gandhi and the Hindu nationalists who in spite of having played a role in the murder of Gandhi for his supposedly anti-national soft-corner to Muslims have surprisingly heralded him as the voice of reason when he opposed Christian proselytisation'.¹²

The Hindu fundamentalist's apprehension of conversions has a history which extends at least to the formation of post-Independent India having figured quite prominently in the discussions of the constituent assembly in the framing of the constitution. However, it was the report of the Niyogi commission, which was 'generated in a climate of chauvinism and ultra-nationalism' which introduced a new argument in the discussion on conversions and contributed to a distortion and demonising of conversions as, 'a form of exploitation threatening the integrity of the Indian state'.¹³ The report introduced the argument that weakness, ignorance and poverty were reasons which made the poor lose control over free will. It hence rendered the deprived sections of the community as being 'vulnerable to the

¹² Gauri Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion in the Discourse of Hindu Nationalism', *Race and Class* 42:1 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 1.

¹³ Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion', 4.

inducements of converting to another religion.¹⁴ It achieved this by essentialising India's economically weaker sections as 'essentially disabled, incapable of distinguishing motives and inexperienced in the exercise of their own judgement'.¹⁵ The implications of this report for the current context are succinctly brought out by Gauri Viswanathan as follows:

The Niyogi commission landmark report set the lines of an argument that have continued to the present day, blurring the boundaries between force and consent and giving very little credence both to the possibility that converts change over to another religion because they choose to. Interestingly in charging that Christian missionaries took advantage of the weakened will of the poor and disenfranchised, the report confirmed an elitist view of freewill and autonomy as the privileges of the economically advantaged classes.¹⁶

It is this argument floated by the Niyogi commission report that has become a tool in the hands of the Hindutva forces who refer to conversions as a diversionary tactic, to draw attention to a non-issue. The rhetoric of conversions functions as a double-edged political sword which can be used to both attack Christian mission agencies working among the downtrodden sections of the community as well as restrain subaltern groups to achieve upward social mobility through adopting a venue which is not sponsored by the Hindutva (e.g. through education). It needs to be mentioned that the conversion rhetoric has been used by the Hindutva forces to particularly attack the educational work of Christian missionaries at a wider all-India level. The fact that Hindutva targets educational institutions by accusing them of forced conversions is actually an attempt to suppress the threat that literacy of the poor could pose to people with a vested interest in poverty.¹⁷ Walter Fernandes points out as to how in Uttar Pradesh (UP) for example dominant castes make it a point to send their own children to school while ensuring that no schools are built in the villages, '*lest their labourers gain access to it and then leave either the village or demand better wages and working conditions*'.¹⁸ Therefore, on the whole the Hindutva strategy of conversions needs to be seen as the murder of motivation as it seeks to ensure the perpetuation of the caste-structure and thus curtails the upward mobility of the Dalits in a way which ensures that they are obligated to the caste hierarchy. It is true then that Hindutva politics aims to 'strait-jacket and to chain the potential assertion of the subalterns'.¹⁹

However we should not buy into this rhetoric of inducement perpetuated by the Hindutva forces, which renders the Dalits as placid and inarticulate in the whole process of conversions. We need to recognise that 'the whole

¹⁴ Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion', 4.

¹⁵ Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion', 4.

¹⁶ Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion', 4-5..

¹⁷ Fernandes, 'Attacks on Minorities', 82.

¹⁸ Fernandes, 'Attacks on Minorities', 82.

¹⁹ P.R. Ram, 'Left Ideology, Ends and Means and Hindutva', *EPW* (14 June 1997), 1428.

emphasis placed on such popular discourse on conversions falls into the Orientalist's pitfall, which accentuates the agency of the western agents, whether colonial or missionary, and devalues the instrumentality of the native subjects themselves in such historical events'.²⁰ In such a context arguments such as those made by the Hindutva merely seek self-perpetuation of their self-identity through the tacit invocation of binaries which constructs the other as a placid, weak and inarticulate object and reduces the other to a controllable unthinking self-perpetuating new patterns of sustaining the asymmetries in the relations between them. These arguments obfuscate the real framework of meaning in which conversions have to be understood, which is brought out perceptively by Sathianathan Clarke:

Religious conversion (thus) can be interpreted to be one strategy whereby Dalits seek to pursue and secure release from the cosmically engendered, and, more importantly, comprehensively and concretely actualized world vision of caste communities. Religious conversion to another symbolic world vision, in this case Christianity, was an effort at community-initiated bailing out from the constructs of the brahmanic symbolic world vision and contracting of newer pictures of the world. In a sense this cumulative and comprehensive discriminatory treatment at the hand of the brahmanic caste communities that surrounded them for many centuries must have been responsible for the stirring in Dalit communities to seek another symbolic world vision.²¹

In this context one needs to understand conversions as the articulation of the technology of self-assertion by the Dalits. It functions as a mode of upward mobility for the Dalits in their search for equality and dignity.

Conversion as a technology of self-assertion of the subalterns is also counter-intuitive to the Hindutva's agenda of cultural nationalism which thrives on the perpetuation of binaristic notions of identity as the 'Hindu' and the 'non-Hindu'. It contests nationalism's recourse to watertight conceptualisations of identity by demonstrating how porous these reifications of identity are. Conversions also demonstrate that identity can be formulated and reformulated at will, which makes it particularly threatening to cultural nationalism which resorts to positivist ways of conceptualising difference through such essentialising markers as race, religion, colour, ethnicity and nationality. As Viswanathan states:

When identity is destabilised by boundaries that are so porous that movement from one world view to another take place with the regularity of actual

²⁰ Sathianathan Clarke, 'Conversion to Christianity in Tamil Nadu: Conscious and Constitutive Community Mobilization Towards a different Symbolic World Vision', in Sathianathan Clarke and Roweena Robinson (ed), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 336.

²¹ Clarke, 'Conversion to Christianity in Tamil Nadu', 336.

border-crossings, a challenge is posed to the fixed categories that act as an empirical grid for interpreting human behaviour and action.²²

The problem that confronts the secular fabric of India in the form of the ideology of Hindutva is a particularly complex and serious one because, as the cultural critic Homi Bhabha has perceptively pointed out, the enemies of secularism are today waging a war *not simply in opposition to secularism but within secularism and in fact in and through secularism!*²³ This attack against secularism from within is blatant with regard to the issue of conversions, because here the Hindutva forces use the argument about the equality of all religions to protest against the attempts of Christians and Muslims to convert people from other religions, effectively threatening the fundamental right of these communities to propagate one's religion. That is the feature of Hindutva's technology of the self – the technology of self-perpetuation. Against this the technology of self-assertion of the subalterns is subversive and thus threatening to the Hindutva forces.

Conversion contests the essentialising of identity to serve interests in a way in which it is more dynamic than either the concept of hybridity or syncretism. Conversion conveys a dynamism of movement of identity-crossings which is different from hybridity. Unlike hybridity, conversion conveys the *remaking of the very categories that constitute identity* and does not view border-crossings as exchange or fusion. It is more concrete than syncretism which is more a blurring of differences than a negotiation of differences.²⁴ As such it contests the very agenda of Hindu nationalism.

Hindutva also constructs a technology of the self-perpetuation through the construction of a concept of homogenised pan-Hindu identity which seeks to subsume the Dalits and the Adivasis under the category 'Hindu'. It is not surprising to see today how through a subtle 'updating of subordination' Hindutva forces seek to assimilate and subsume Dalits and Adivasis under the Hindu fold whilst ensuring that the hierarchy is subtly reasserted. In their co-optive strategies the Hindutva forces even seek to humanise those versions of traditions which have been detrimental to the upward mobility of the subalterns. One mild example is the modification and glamourisation of the Ekalavya episode of the Mahabharata.²⁵ '(I)

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²² Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion', 6.

²³ Interview with Homi Bhabha, *The Book Review* 19.12 (December 1995), cited in Brenda Crossman and Ratna Kapur (eds), *Secularism's Last Sigh: Hindutva and the (Mis)Rule of Law* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

²⁴ Viswanathan, 'Literacy and Conversion', 6.

²⁵ Ekalavya is an *adivasi* ('tribal') boy who is keen to learn archery under Dronacharya the teacher of the royal Pandava princes. However because of his *adivasi* status Dronacharya refuses to teach him. However Ekalavya creates a statue of Dronacharya, secretly watches him give training to the Pandava princes and practises archery and becomes a better archer than the princes. Dronacharya is shocked when on one of the hunting trips of the princes, by chance he comes across

the TV version of Ekalavya's episode Pandava brothers are shown as protesting against the 'injustice' of the demand for Ekalavya's thumb while Dronacharya is shown as saying it was only because Ekalavya 'stole' the 'education'. This is an attempt at humanising the story while ensuring that the rigidity of the *varna* hierarchy remains uncontested.²⁶ There is no focus on why Drona refused to teach Ekalavya.

The same can be said of the various inroads that the Hindutva forces are making to co-opt the Dalits and Adivasis under the Hindu fold. It is also important to pay attention to the way in which Hindutva exploits the subalterns' technology of self-assertion to suit its own ideology, by diverting the subalterns' quest for a new identity into a form of hostility against the traditional 'enemies' of the Hindutva namely the Muslims and Christians. It is a situation of an interesting interplay between the competing technologies of the self. This incarnation of the Hindutva as the new space for the articulation of the identity-affirmation strategies of the subaltern groups seeks to displace the traditional space that conversions and education allowed for the Dalits and Adivasis. Hindutva is now keen on co-opting the Dalits and the Adivasis into its Hindu fold which has had dangerous consequences for the secular fabric of the country.

In a context characterised by continual renegotiation of identity claims, the Hindutva forces seek to engender a culture of Hindutva-sponsored-mobility as against the self-chosen mobility of the Dalits through education and religious conversions. Underlying this ideology is the fragmenting of subaltern solidarity and the 'cleansing' of the dissenting subaltern or the traditional 'other' of the Hindutva – namely the Muslims and the Christians. It needs to be mentioned that this whole process of engendering hostility between the minorities and the marginal identities is done so that the latter can be used against the former. It is highly deplorable that the 'social passion' that is evoked in this whole process helps create a terrorising atmosphere which serves as, 'the best way to suppress the liberalism and the accompanying social space necessary for the struggles of the oppressed groups'.²⁷ It is a well-devised strategy whereby in the competition between the various technologies of the self the Hindutvas' technology of self-perpetuation seeks to prevail over the subaltern technology of self-assertion by assimilating it. The rhetoric of conversions

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Ekalavya's exceptional archery skills which prove better than Dronacharya's favourite pupil Prince Arjuna's (legends say that Ekalavya shuts the mouth of the royal hunting dogs without hurting them, something which the princes themselves could not do). Ekalavya reveals himself to Drona and narrates his story and acknowledges Drona as his 'secret teacher' for which Drona demands as his *guru dakshina* (teacher's fees) Ekalavya's thumb, which would prevent Ekalavya from practising his skills of archery again. Ekalavya parts with his thumb. This story has been glorified as an exemplary story of a student's devotion to his master.

²⁶ Gail Omvedt, 'Hinduism and Politics', *EPW* (7 April 1990), 724.

²⁷ P.R. Ram, 'Left Ideology', 1427.

can function well for achieving this cause because it can target the Christian missionaries and educational institutions which are means chosen by the Dalits in fostering the formation of an independent and autonomous subaltern technology of self-assertion, that is free from Hindutva sponsorship. It can also target the assertive subalterns who seek to dismantle the caste-structure by seeking a new religious identity under a non-Hindu religion.

(In)conclusion: Towards a Humane Nationalism and an Intolerant Secularism

Having analysed the interplay of the competing technologies of the self of both the Hindutva forces as well as the subaltern groups, it is pertinent to reflect upon our role in countering the Hindutva tirade against the minorities and other marginal identities. The missiological task that this particular issue raises for the Indian Church along with the traditional call for inter-religious dialogue (which in this case has to be radically redefined) would be to imagine the contours of an effective resistance to the Hindutva forces and trace its location within Christian mission in the Indian context today. The Hindutva ideology of nationalism is, as we have already pointed out, an ideology of self-perpetuation. In such a context there is a need for the Indian church/es to affirm or articulate an alternative version of nationalism which has the potential to resist the oppressive and the divisive nationalism of the Hindutva. The starting point of our endeavour today would be to recognise that Hindutva politics has distorted the face of Indian nationalism in the third millennium. It has in fact been overtly or covertly involved in a barbaric and aggressive effort to facilitate a shift from the 'secular-territorial' version of nationalism of 1950 (which had effectively repudiated religious nationalism in the mid-20th century even in the context of the partition) to a parochial version of cultural nationalism which conflates Indian culture with the concept of 'Hindutva' or 'Hinduness'. This secular-territorial nationalism of the mid-20th century, it has to be affirmed, refused to make the nation co-terminus with a particular religion.²⁸ It recognised 'the dangers inherent in the religious and fascist varieties of aggressive nationalism' and did not accord general approbation to 'nationalism not tempered with morality'.²⁹ As K.N. Panikkar puts it, 'The alternative (nationalism) envisioned during the liberation struggle and in the protracted discussions in the Constituent Assembly was a humane nationalism, comprehending within it political freedom, economic justice, and social solidarity. What is at stake today, given the resurgence of a

²⁸ K.N. Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87.

²⁹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*, 87.

communal politics that conflates religion and culture, is such a sense of humane nationalism, without which India as a nation can hardly survive.³⁰

It is this humane version of nationalism that we need to protect and strengthen today as an effective resistance to the strategy of Hindutva. Our attempt today should be to recover an explicitly humane version of nationalism in which the defining category is not adherence to a particular 'religious worldview' but concern for our neighbours. Ambrose Pinto's critique of the misguided notion of loyalty to the nation that is expected by the Hindutvavadis and the rightists and the alternative paradigm of loyalty that he suggests also point in the direction of a humane nationalism:

When no one denies that citizens have to be loyal to the country, the question is about the kind of loyalty expected by Hindutvavadis and its loyalists. If burning of SCs/STs, discrimination on the basis of caste against BCs, and hatred towards minorities is considered as a sign of loyalty to national culture and heritage, one needs to redefine loyalty in terms of a concern for the poor, compassion for the suffering and integrity and rectitude. None of these social qualities is highlighted by the Hindutva right as loyalty.³¹

This proposal for a humane nationalism should also be accompanied or complemented by a radical rethinking of the concept of secularism. We need to realise that a secular ideology by itself is inadequate in the present context. We need to consider seriously Dipankar Gupta's call for rethinking the notion of tolerance as a hallmark of secularism.³² It is crucial that the rhetoric of secularism today needs to be recast in the language of intolerance, which emphasises that certain actions are just intolerable.³³ Only an insistence on certain inflexible principles and that these principles relate to matters of law can strengthen the secular ethic of India. Only through an intolerant secularism that insists on the inalienable rights of citizens and in the due process of the law can we mount 'public pressure against minority hunters and sectarian killers'.³⁴ Only through the reaffirmation of a humane nationalism and an intolerant secularism can we be able to handle the invective of the Hindutva forces against minorities and other marginal identities.

However we also need to recognise that there is need for an 'active citizenry' in situations of inequality where the needs and interests of the minority are likely to be sidelined.³⁵ This aspect has not figured in Christian missiological thinking in recent times. Recognising the importance of an

³⁰ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*, 87.

³¹ Savarkar, 'Hindutva', 3633.

³² Dipankar Gupta, 'Limits of Tolerance: Prospects of Secularism in India after Gujarat' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol - XXXVII No. 46, November 16, 2002, 4619.

³³ Gupta, 'Limits of Tolerance', 4619.

³⁴ Gupta, 'Limits of Tolerance', 4619.

³⁵ Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 180.

active citizenry in the transformation of society along egalitarian lines Duncan Forrester writes:

A democracy needs an active citizenry that is willing to put the common good before sectional and individual interests, and sometimes make sacrifices for the benefit of others, and for a greater good. Usually this is only possible when many people are gripped by a vision, and feel a sense of solidarity, shared destiny and mutual accountability. But it also depends on visionary leadership, for political leaders who have convictions which they can share and a vision, a dream, of the future of the society that is infectious.³⁶

The challenge ahead of the Indian church today is to take up this mantle of leadership. It needs to take up the challenge of creatively imagining the shape of the future of India. We are all aware that dreams have changed the historical course of powerful nations. Now is the chance to dream a dream – a dream which will alter the very future of our country. Given the precarious situation of the contemporary context the Indian church needs to dream now. If not the price that India may have to pay may be costly. Who knows, if Indian Christianity does not dream today there may never be a tomorrow for it to dream at all!

³⁶ Forrester, *On Human Worth*, 181.

POSTSCRIPT
MISSION AT, WITH AND FROM THE MARGINS:
A MISSIOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam

With its co-option into the business world and the way in which it is used in the military invasions of the dominant countries, the word mission has become an embarrassment for the church. One of the ways of recovering it in Indian context is by employing Indian equivalents to it. In one of the Indian languages, Telugu, the word used is *preshitha udhyamam*, which means the Spirit-inspired movement. If the church's mission has to be understood in the light of the historical praxis of Jesus, mission as Spirit inspired movement makes greater sense, since Jesus understood his mission as mission in the power of the Spirit (Lk. 4: 18-19). Jesus's mission as we know it, is participation in the mission of God in the power of the Spirit at, with and from the margins. Therefore the church's mission cannot be otherwise. It has to find its location of mission at the margins and derive its meaning and agenda from the margins in the light of Jesus' historical praxis. Imagining mission therefore involves discerning the signs of our times and reflecting on the practice of Jesus and how his disciples understood this practice.

The context at the margins, particularly within the location of Dalits, is marked by a world of crosses and horizons of hope. While practice of untouchability finds subtle and new expressions and atrocities are continued to be leveled against Dalits, Dalits no longer are passive recipients of the caste aggression. They resist and express their assertion in multiple ways. Mission at, with and from the margins, needs to be aware of this dialectic of Dalit existence.

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An imagination of the mission of the church has to begin with the cross of Christ for his disciples understood the cross and the resurrection as the climax of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Their message to the powers of that time was: You killed Jesus and God raised him up. In the gospel of John (where the understanding of Jesus was that he is the third person in the triune God who incarnated and brought in to the world God's presence in his life and ministry) the presence or the revelation of God is understood as glory. Jesus perceived this hour of glory as the occasion when he would be lifted up. For Jesus, according to John, glory or the

revelation of God or the breaking in of the presence of God is the hour of glory, which is the event of the cross. Therefore any Christian perception of God, Christ and God's mission should find in its centre the cross of Christ. As Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God* puts it, the cross is the test of everything that claims itself to be Christian. For Moltmann it is in the cross of Christ we understand the heart of God. Within a Trinitarian perspective, he articulates his understanding of God as the crucified God. In the cry of dereliction, 'Why God, Why God, Why have you forsaken me?' (Mk. 15:34), Jesus the Christ shouted aloud his deep feeling of being abandoned by God. Moltmann raised the question as to what it means to the inner life of the triune God and suggests that as the Son experienced the abandonment by the Father, the Father experienced the death of the Son. Therefore, the death of Jesus the Christ is a death in the very life of God. Hence, he could talk about the crucified God. God as the crucified one suffers along with the suffering human kind and the creation. Therefore the cross of Christ is an expression of God's solidarity with the suffering ones. It is God's participation with the suffering ones, even to a point of death, and raising with them to a new life and new future. This notion of God suggests to us as where we find the locations of God's engagement: God is at the margins, engaging in the lives of those who are at the margins and offering horizons of hope. If Christian faith is a faith in such God, the church's mission is to be understood not in a paternalistic language of 'mission to' but as mission at, with and from. It is from there, God calls us to join God's mission with the people at the margins and offers to the world a prophetic vision of new earth and new heaven. Church's mission begins with a turn towards the margins (repentance) and finds its meaning in its solidarity with the margins (discipleship) and imagines a future of the emancipated creation (hope).

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Interviews:

- Interview with Devanandam, Church Leader, Vegeswarapuram on 2nd July 2009.
- Interview with Sr. Thankamma Satyanadan. Bethel Ashram, Parkal, on 3rd July, 2009.
- Interview with Pastors and CRs on 3rd July 2009 at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Vegeswarapuram.
- Interview with Rev. Binju Varghese Kuruvilla. Missionary-in-Charge, Parkal Mission, Parkal, on 4th July, 2009.
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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

I.P. Asheervadam, a Mennonite minister, is Principal of the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College (MBCBC), Shamshabad, India.

Sunder John Boopalan is a PhD student in Religion and Society at the Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

Rebecca Sangeetha Daniel was administrator of the Bursaries Enabling Strategic Training (BEST) programme of Crosslinks, London, an international mission society serving the worldwide Anglican Communion. She lives in Geneva and is finishing a book on Discipleship in Luke's Gospel.

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, an ordained minister of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India. He is also the convenor of the Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars (CODECS).

K Jesurathnam is Professor of Old Testament at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. His recent work is *Dalit Liberative Hermeneutics: Indian Christian Dalit Interpretation of Psalm 22* (ISPCK: New Delhi, 2010)

Ashok Kumar M. is Chairperson of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Indian Institute of Technology Mandi, based in Himachal Pradesh, India.

M. Shantha Kumari is Academic Dean of the Hyderabad Institute of Theology and Apologetics (HITHA) based in Hyderabad, India.

Motupalli Chaitanya is a PhD student in Social Ethics and Social Theory at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

N.G. Prasuna is an ordained minister of the South Andhra Lutheran Church. She was earlier the Lutheran World Federation's Regional Officer for Expression of Communion in Asia and taught women's studies at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai.

Surekha Nelavala completed her PhD in Biblical Studies from Drew University. At present she is pastor of the Global Peace Lutheran

Fellowship, Frederik, Maryland, USA of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Geoffrey A. Oddie taught for many years in the Department of History in the University of Sydney. His extensive writings include *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793 – 1900* and *Religious Traditions in South Asia: Interaction and Change*.

Raj Bharath Patta, an ordained minister of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, is General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement of India based in Bangalore.

Praveen P. S. Perumalla, an ordained minister of the Karimnagar Diocese of the Church of South India, is professor of Social Analysis at the Andhra Christian Theological College, Hyderabad, India.

James Ponniah is Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of Jnana-Deepa Vidhyapeeth, the Pontifical Athenaeum based in Pune, India.

Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar is Programme Executive for Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation with the World Council of Churches, Geneva.

Pramod Rao is currently Ecumenical Chaplain and Chaplaincy Coordinator of Auckland City Hospital, New Zealand and is the founder and Priest in Charge of the Telugu Church of New Zealand of the Anglican Diocese of Auckland, New Zealand.

Devahi Selina, an ordained minister of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, teaches Christian Ministry at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India.

James Elisha Taneti is the author of *Caste, Gender and Christianity in Colonial India: Telugu Women in Mission* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). He completed his PhD from the Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

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Bethel Krupa Victor is an ordained minister of the Church of South India, Diocese of Karimnagar.

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Mission At and From the Margins Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives

Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspective revisits the 'hi-stories' of Mission from the 'bottom up' paying critical attention to people, perspectives and patterns that have often been elided in the construction of mission history. Focusing on the mission story of Christian churches in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where Christianity is predominantly Dalit in its composition, this collection of essays, ushers its readers to re-shape their understanding of the landscape of mission history by drawing their attention to the silences and absences within pre-dominant historical accounts. Contributors drawn from various Christian denominations explore not only the complex, contested and complicated interplay between caste, colonialism and Christianity in Andhra Pradesh but also the contemporary challenges for Christian mission at a wider level. Not confining itself to the past history of Christian mission, the book engages critical issues as it analyses the missiological challenges of the present and offers theological imagination for the future of mission, which, while embracing the voices and visions of the margins, resists any and all forms of marginalization.

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar have compiled a comprehensive, compelling, creative, and contextual mission manual on how oppressed communities (Dalits) invent novel patterns, spawn unexpected protagonists, and extract new perspective through the celebration and spread of the Christian Gospel in South India. While familiar with the various bird's eye views of Christian mission in India, these feet-on-the-ground theologians, historians, biblical scholars, and missiologists included in this volume offer a plethora of snail's crawl standpoints on the working of mission by focusing on the vibrant and productive features of the margins. In this edited book, Dayam and Rajkumar have woven an ethnographically rich and missiologically sophisticated south Indian tapestry from the colorful local spinning wheels of rural, outcast, and neglected Christian communities.

Sathianathan Clarke, Bishop Sundo Kim Chair for World Christianity, Professor of Theology, Culture and Mission, Wesley Theological Seminary

Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, is Programme Executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation with the World Council of Churches, Geneva. He was earlier Associate Professor of Christian Social Ethics at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam is convener of Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars (CODECS) and Associate Professor of Systematic and Philosophical Theology at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai India.

I.P. Asheervadhani a Mennonite Historian is Principal of Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College, Hyderabad, India.



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