

Caste, Conversion and Social Change in Telangana, South India

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Historically, social movements and ideological struggles against the philosophy and justification of the caste system in Telangana and Andhra go back to the medieval period, which witnessed significant social fluidity and mobility among the lower castes. Recent historical studies have shown that the artisanal, occupational, farming and Dalit communities protested and resisted Brahmanical ideology, precedence and dominance over ritual, sacred and secular practice and sought social equality and justice (cf. Chinnaiah 2017; Yagati 2003; Ramakrishna 1983; Satyanarayana 2005). In particular, the Bhakti movement espoused the perceptions, visions and world view of the lower non-Brahman castes and communities. This assumed a militant character and led to the emergence of several anti-Brahmanical heterodox sects like *Viraśaivism* and *Viravaishnavism* that denounced the caste system and untouchability. In Andhradesha, two great social reformers, Potuluri Veerabrahmam and Yogi Vemana, spearheaded the fight against caste oppression and Brahmanical dominance. Their poetry, sayings, and verses (*tatvālu*) became popular among common masses and they became an integral part of the Telugu folklore (cf. Brown 1911). These saint-philosophers of the pre-colonial era propounded humanism, social harmony, fraternity, equality and social justice. Social reformers of the early nineteenth century, in particular the Christian missionaries, have appropriated certain aspects of the medieval Bhakti tradition to attack Brahmanical Hinduism and the caste system to carry out proselytisation. The missionaries were also aware of the nature of anti-Brahmanical sects like the *śaivaite*, *vaiṣṇavite*, and Nasraiah cults, and incorporated some of the ideas of the Bhakti movement into their preaching. The Christian missionaries were also observers of the functioning of the caste system, local customs, traditions and folk culture. They were familiar with the major Hindu philosophical and religious systems and thoughts. They learnt the local languages and studied the pre-colonial anti-Brahmanical social protest movements of the lower castes.

Conversion as Empowerment

The natural causes and consequences of religious conversions have been contentious issues of the social history of modern India. Divergent and conflicting views, perspectives and interpretations have been presented by scholars. I will focus on the Gandhian and Ambedkarite perspectives, as they represented two opposite positions vis-à-vis religious conversion in modern India.

Through his writings in the journals *Young India* and *Harijan* in the 1920s and 1930s Gandhi expressed his views on conversion. Since Gandhi called himself a “Sanātani Hindu” and also believed in the *varṇāśrama dharma*, he opposed religious conversions. He wrote, “[i]t is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity?” (Gandhi 1976: 327). Gandhi opined that conversion denationalises an Indian because a convert imitates Europeans. He remarked, “I see many Christian Indians almost ashamed of their birth, certainly of their ancestral religion, and of their ancestral dress. The aping of Europeans by Anglo-Indians is bad enough, but the aping of them by Indian converts is a violence done to their country [...]” (Gandhi 1976: 91ff.). He maintained that through material incentives, humanitarian work, etc., the missionaries resorted to conversion and their activities were meant to destabilise and undermine Hinduism. Gandhi described missionaries as vendors of goods with no spiritual merit/worth but possessing material goods which they promise to those who will come to their fold. He opined that Western Christianity “does not represent the spirit of God or Christianity but the spirit of Satan. And Satan’s successes are the greatest when appears with the name of God on his lips” (Gandhi 1976: 235f.).-Therefore, he declared that “[i]f I had the power and could legislate, I should stop all proselytizing” (as quoted in Sahadeo 2011: 138). Mahatma Gandhi’s views on the activities of Christian missionaries do not provide any subjectivity and discretion to individuals and suggest that converts have no choice of their own.

The Gandhian perspective suggests that the lower castes/communities accepted Christianity in ‘cow-like’ obedience. It also intimates that converts were mainly attracted to the new religion by material incentives and that by converting to Christianity they were denationalised. But, as we shall see below, some of Gandhi’s formulations are not supported by the experiences of Telugu Christians. On the basis of available evidence, it could be found that the lower castes in Andhra and Telangana have

voluntarily, consciously and deliberately moved away from one set of religious symbolism to another. They perceived Christianity as an egalitarian religion and hence suitable for their situation.

Contrary to Gandhi, Ambedkar took a more balanced and positive attitude and analysed conversion movements by Dalits as a process of empowerment and emancipation. He reasoned that there are two aspects of conversion: social as well as religious, i.e. material as well as spiritual. He argued that since Hinduism sanctions untouchability, discrimination and inequality, Dalits would be able to achieve freedom and liberty by conversion. Further, conversion brought happiness as Christianity provided social equality and equality of treatment with others. By converting to new religion Dalits could escape from the tyranny of Hinduism. Ambedkar postulated that conversion is the simplest path and it alone liberates the untouchables and provides them self-respect, dignity and freedom (Ambedkar 2002). Further, Ambedkar argued that conversion not only provides social mobility and spiritual democracy to Dalits but also material gains and economic betterment through education and employment. He advised Dalits to change their religion for spiritual and material gains (ibid.: 219):

The Hindu religion does not appeal to my conscience. It does not appeal to my self-respect. However, your conversion will be for material as well as for spiritual gains. Some persons mock and laugh at the idea of conversion for material gains. I do not feel hesitant in calling such persons as stupid. I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, convert yourselves.

In this paper, I will highlight the contribution of the Protestant missionaries in spreading Christianity among the Dalit-Bahujan communities in Telangana, South India. During the second half of the nineteenth century, many oppressed caste groups in the Telangana region of the erstwhile Hyderabad State were converted to Christianity. From the existing studies on socio-religious reform movements it is clear that religiously expressed social protests of the lower caste communities of modern India have basically taken three directions: firstly, construction of new social and religious identities, like the Adi-Hindu and Adi-Andhra movements; secondly, formation of reforming associations like the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, Ramakrishna Mission, etc., and thirdly, adoption of a new religious tradition of non-Indian origin, such as Christianity and Islam, found suitable under the concrete conditions (Aloysius 1998: 16f.).

The Dalit-Bahujans in the Telangana region accepted the third option and adopted conversion as a strategy to escape from caste oppression and an agency of emancipation. It is also clear from the narrative accounts of the Protestant missionaries in the Hyderabad State that mass conversions from the Dalit communities commenced during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The “man with the brown blanket” (Lamb 1920: 6) was the target of the Christian missionaries. A Wesleyan missionary wrote (*ibid.*):

The slow, dull life of the peasant changes only with the changes of season, or under stress of overwhelming calamity. Its badge is the brown goat-hair blanket he carries. Inseparable from him in rain, sunshine, or in cold, the blanket of the villager is the mark of his calling [...]. He is the true villager. There are millions of him. Toiling, resting, sleeping, dying; in patience, in poverty, in ignorance and in hope, he is the man on whom our eyes are fixed [...] the man with the brown blanket is Haidarabad.

Spread of Christianity

The role of Christian missionaries in religious conversion and socio-cultural change as well as the development of educational, health and self-improvement schemes in modern India has been acknowledged by many historical studies (cf. Frykenberg 2003 and 2008; Oddie 1969 and 1975; Billington Harper 2000; Webster 1992). Recent studies on the growth of Christianity in modern India focused on the interconnections between conversion movements, social reform and social change. Christian missionaries were considered to be the institution builders, since they pioneered works relating to social reform, language/literature/philology, and the socio-economic development of weaker sections of the society (cf. Frykenberg 2003). The Protestant missionaries came to the Nizam’s Dominions during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Before the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries of England came to Hyderabad, the American Baptists were already present in the southern parts of the Hyderabad State and established their headquarters in the Cantonment at Secunderabad. While the Church Mission Society was working in the eastern part, namely the Dornakal-Khammam area on the borders between the Hyderabad State and Krishna district in the Madras Presidency, the Wesleyan Methodist Church began its activities in the Hyderabad State since 1879 and Burgess founded the first Methodist Church in the city of Hyderabad (Lamb 1913; Sackett 1924). The Wesleyan Methodists decided to concentrate their work in Hyderabad city and in the districts of Warangal, Karimnagar, Medak, Nizamabad and Adilabad of the

Telangana region. In 1880, a Telugu congregation was formed in Chadarghat and in Secunderabad in the year 1881. Churches were built at both the places. In order to establish more stations a tour of Telangana district was undertaken by Reverends W. Burgess, B. P. Wesley and Benjamin Pratt. Consequently, a couple of mission stations were established at Karimnagar in 1883, Siddipet in 1886, and Medak in 1886. Around this time new circuits were also established at Kundi and Sangareddy (1893), Nizamabad (1900), Aler (1902), Laxettipeta (1918), Nirmal (1938) and Manchirial (1935). The first Christians were converted from among the Malas. Sir Richard Meade, the British Resident in Hyderabad, supported the missionaries and encouraged their activities in the Telangana region.

The beginnings of the Wesleyan Methodists Church go back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Lamb 1913: 6). In December 1878, Rev. Henry Little and William Burgess arrived in Secunderabad. And already in 1879, the first Wesleyan Methodist Church was established in the Telangana region under the leadership and guidance of Burgess and with the help of the British Resident Richard Meade and high officials of the Nizam's government. A number of caste Hindus as well as carpenters and blacksmiths were converted. By 1896, five circuits were established at Karimnagar, Siddipet, Medak, Kundi and Aleru, and a total number of 4,000 conversions were made during the first phase of the missionary work. The church in Hyderabad consisted of the converts from the Malas and the Sudras. From the available data it is clear that the total number of Christians in the Telangana region of the erstwhile Nizam's State increased from 1,656 in 1879 to 66,570 in 1921 (Census of India 1931: 54).

The spread of Christianity in the district towns and villages of the Telangana region during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was significant. The missionaries have undertaken extensive tours outside the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad and founded many churches in Karimnagar, Siddipet, Aler, Medak and Nizamabad (Lamb 1913: 8). In the initial years, they also encountered opposition from the local people. The pioneering work done by the founders of the church in the Hyderabad State like Burgess, Pratt, Wesley, etc., yielded good results. The missionaries adopted the techniques of visiting the villages and preaching in the bazars. In the rural areas, the crowds used to gather at the centre of the village and listen to the speeches of the missionaries. In a short span of time, the missionaries achieved noticeable responses from the local people. They also found favourable response from the government officials for acquiring land to build churches and bungalows. The missionaries also took an active part during natural calamities and outbreaks

of diseases like the plague and cholera (Sackett [1951]: 27) but focussed especially on establishing education institutions.

Educational activities of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Telangana included the establishment of several schools in Hyderabad, Secunderabad and in the rural and urban areas of the districts. The example of the establishment of Chadarghat High School indicates the strategies of the missionaries to spread literacy among the converts. In 1885, it was reported that considerable inducements were offered by the government for the establishment of a high school in Chadarghat. A beginning was made in the Chadarghat Church. And Mr. Corewdson who had experiences in teaching took charge. In November 1886, Mr. Soper arrived and was specifically set apart to develop the school. Later, Ahmad Hussein, a distinguished graduate of Madras University, was appointed as headmaster. About the progress of the school he wrote (Lamb 1913: 38):

Despite the hindrances, we close the year with 88 boys and with examination results higher than have been obtained in any other schools, with a large measure of public confidence and with a solid foundation on which to build up on the future the best educational institutions in Hyderabad.

In 1887, the numbers increased to 118 and six boys were sent up for the middle school examination. In 1885, the "Theological Institutions" had two names on its roll. In 1880-81, four schools for Hindu and Muhammadan girls were founded in Secunderabad and Chadarghat and a fifth in the mission compound for Christian girls, which subsequently developed into the Girls Boarding and Normal School in Secunderabad. The Secunderabad Mission House was purchased, and in 1884 the Girls' Boarding and Normal School was erected. Miss Agnes Lee, a daughter of the first known Methodists who had come to Hyderabad, became the first lady principal. In 1929, in the village schools in Telangana, there were 4,815 pupils of whom 88 per cent were baptised Christians. Upon inquiry it was found that 51 per cent of Christian children of school-going age were being taught.

The spread of education and preaching by the missionaries became popular among the Malas, for instance in Karimnagar district. The first considerable work among the Mala people occurred in the village of Tornala, and Sigarapu Rajanna led the way. He was a man of simple faith, firm as a rock in his allegiance to his Lord, and for many years as a helper opened up hamlet after hamlet to the preaching of the Word. According to missionary accounts from 1888, there were 118 baptisms, mostly from

the villages already occupied. Year after year the movement spread, the days of barrenness were forever ended, and in 1894, Karimnagar rejoiced over a Christian community of 1,463 spread over 32 villages. Such considerable success could not have been possible except by the cooperation of the converts themselves. In Telangana, the Mennonite Church began its work at Mahabubnagar and Gadwal (cf. Wiebe 1988). Most of the members of the Church lived in villages (about 80 per cent). The converts were mainly Madigas, but a few also came from the Mala caste. Almost all the Church members were farmers, coolies and daily wage workers. About 80 per cent of them were illiterate. Mennonite missionaries brought the teachings of Christianity into the Mahabubnagar area at the end of the nineteenth century. The number of 'farmers' could indicate that the Mennonites of the Mahabubnagar area were largely agricultural peasants. The majority of them were very poor, owning at most a few acres of relatively unproductive land. Most, like their coolie fellows, had to work at least occasionally as daily wage labourers in their own or nearby villages, and a minimum of one or two members in many 'farmer' families occasionally worked under contract in distant places as seasonal migrant labourers.

In Telangana, the Wesleyan missionaries established many schools and dispensaries, and imparted modern education, especially to the downtrodden communities. For the first time, the depressed classes and communities which had been denied opportunities of education by the traditional Hindu caste system, had gained access to modern knowledge and became literates. Apart from providing education and employment as pastors and school teachers, the Christian missionaries also introduced many economic and agrarian programmes for the empowerment of the Dalit-Bahujan communities in the Telangana countryside. Therefore, the so-called "depressed classes" have been able to overcome the bondage and enslavement imposed by Hinduism. Due to the impact of Christianity they were able to improve their economic position and social status. In spreading education through the boarding schools the Wesleyan, missionaries have provided ample opportunities to the children of the downtrodden communities, whose parents were unable to support them financially.

Thus, the missionary education benefited the first generation of Dalit organic intellectuals in the Telangana region who had played a significant role in the socio-political movements in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, the founder of the Dalit movement in the Nizam's State, Bhagya Reddy Varma, was a product of missionary encouragement and help (Chinnaiah 2017: 142). The newly educated Dalit-Bahujan children

found employment in the modern sectors like teaching, government service, railways, army, police, hospitals and dispensaries, and gained some sort of socio-economic mobility. Various missionaries like the Wesleyan Methodists, the Mennonites, the Church Mission Society, the American Baptists, etc., were instrumental in organising programmes of socio-economic advancement for the benefit of lower caste women as Bible and zenana activists. The Christian missionaries imparted modern education and vocational skills and training among Dalit women as well as encouraged self-help activities, which made them self-employed and economically self-sufficient. In the Telangana region, Dalit women were educated in the mission schools, employed as school teachers and nurses, and also trained in vocational occupations like tailoring, embroidery, lace-making and so on. In the erstwhile Hyderabad State, the Wesleyan missionaries were the pioneers of women's employment and empowerment through self-help programmes and vocational education.

Mass Conversions of the Malas

The Protestant missionaries were able to attract the attention of the common, lower caste people because, firstly, they used Telugu language in their religious preaching and propaganda, and secondly, the untouchable castes like the Malas were quite familiar and accustomed to wandering/travelling native spiritual preachers (*gurus*). In Telangana, the mass conversions have taken place predominantly among the untouchable Mala communities (Manikya Rao 1967). The Malas have a long tradition of anti-Brahmanical ideology and their priests were known as the Mala *Dasaries*. They were followers of *Vaiṣṇavism* and had a long spiritual heritage. The Christian missionaries incorporated the *Vaiṣṇava* tradition into their spiritual preaching. Thus, the role of indigenous/native preachers became a significant aspect of conversion among the Malas. In particular, the caste head known as *Peddamalla* became an important instrument of linkages between the European missionaries and the local society and its impact was quite considerable. A Christian missionary remarked, "The order of elders thus instituted has the merit of being purely Indian and quite in harmony with habits of the people" (Lamb 1920: 39). The Malas of each village in Telangana have always had a headman whose office was hereditary. It was noted that whenever the headman became a Christian and his affairs were of suitable character, he was appointed a Christian elder. Gradually, the order of elders acquired the respect and authority which has always been given to the caste headman. Naturally, when

such men in association with the pastor constituted a local church court its decisions were binding on the local community. Such a body of men were the back bone of Christian village work. The caste elders helped the pastor in his evangelical tours and contributed donations to the church. The spread of Christianity in Hyderabad was largely spontaneous and the place of the village evangelists was quite significant in causing mass movements in Telangana. A missionary wrote (Lamb 1920: 29):

[...] we must rightly place in the centre of our picture the village evangelist making his own appeal to the village where he lives. And those grouped round it, it is even more important that some five hundred such men in touch with each other make a collective impression over a wide area.

In the Telangana region, if the villager was a man with the "brown blanket", the Evangelist was a "man with the hymn book" (ibid.: 26). The example of Yesuratnam in propagating Christianity among the villagers is a case in point. It reveals the strategy and the tactics adopted by the preachers for converting the village people. Through the method of singing and open dialogue in the streets, the preacher attracted the attention of the people. During sickness he brought medicine to the village, and when trouble occurred he offered his help. The young evangelists became popular among the common people as they cared for their sufferings. There were instances when villages requested the government not to allow any Christian teacher in their midst. But, as the popularity of the missionaries grew, the villages welcomed them and never allowed them to leave them again. In fact, even a village headman belonging to an upper caste often visited the missionary for help.

The best example of a local preacher and his influence on the community was narrated by a missionary in Karimnagar – a young Christian preacher who was sharp, bright and modest, and his influence was felt on the local community. His talent and abilities attracted the attention of the district officials who took him into their office and trained him for two years in administration, and he became a popular pleader of the people. It was remarked that "[t]he young man has been stationed for two years in a big village, which a few years ago petitioned the Government of the Nizam not to allow any Christian teacher in their midst. Today they would tear him to pieces if he talked of leaving them. A high caste headman of the village was often seen on his veranda. He was one of those who petitioned to keep him out of the village" (Lamb 1920: 28). The native preachers were the men who won the war for Christians. It

resulted in converting hundreds of Telangana villages to Christianity. The picture of Yesuratnam in the villages reflects the commitment of the native preachers. Rajayogi Guru Yerraguntla Peraiah, the forerunner of the mass conversion movement in the Ongole region, and Karem Rajanna in Karimnagar district in Telangana provided the classic example of the link between the old and the new religious traditions. Regarding the contribution of a Mala elder to the spread of Christianity in Karimnagar district a missionary wrote (Lamb 1913: 29):

In 1893 Karem Rajanna was baptised, and stands for the sort of man whose conversion has meant a good deal. Rajanna was not an ignorant villager. He had been in military service and had seen the world, and it was only after lengthened and intelligent conviction that he confessed his faith in Christ. As he was the head Mala over 1,100 villages, stretching from Karimnagar to the Godavary, his influence was immense and the conversion of such a man naturally impressed those to whom his work in many matters had been the final one. These incidents show the type of some of the converts and explain the way in which the gospel message, introduced to village after village by men of local influence, won so speedily such widespread success.

Harassment of Converts

Persecution is a Tug-of-War between the old and the new; it tests the strength of the bond that holds the community together. Some strands of the rope snap for good, others are retired, others again are not broken at all, but during the tussle it seems as if all must go. (Lamb 1920: 22)

Indeed, as this quotation indicates, the missionaries also witnessed violent opposition and physical attacks by the local people on certain occasions. In every circuit, the accession due to famine work provoked an outburst of hatred. In Medak a Mohammedan priest and in Siddipet the Devil [low caste/Hindu] Priest were storm raisers. In Ramayampet and Aler, social customs were made the occasion of violence. "But the tornado [tornado] swept over without destroying the tree of the Lord's planting, their roots held" (ibid.). An instance was narrated by a missionary of the encounter in a village in Karimnagar district. Here, a native preacher, called Mangaiah, while touring the villages was subjected to physical attack during the Dassera festival (Lamb 1913: 18):

A number of local people seized him, and after giving him a severe beating, with the utmost barbarity they stacked his hands down to the ground,

in such a manner that he could neither sit nor lie, and was obliged to spend the night on his knees in great pain. Morning brought relief and he was set at liberty, but it was many days past he recovered from the effects of the ill treatment to which he had been subjected.

In another village, the same man had a dagger drawn on him by a Rohilla. The colporteur had ventured to show this man a Hindustani gospel and was very much terrified when the Rohilla unsheathed his dagger and threatened to kill the "Christian dog". But some local people interfered and the Christian preacher made his escape. A missionary remarked, "Joseph Mangiah is dead now, but his children ought to be proud of their father's part in establishing Christ's kingdom in Karimnagar" (ibid.).

During the last decade of the nineteenth century persecution of a virulent type was common. Converts were formally excommunicated in full caste council, firewood and water were refused. The daughters forbid mothers in the house and brothers rose against brothers because they had entered the new way by converting to Christianity. This refers for instance to the son of a village Patel (headman) in the district of Siddipet: The boy was met by a missionary in a village rest house. The boy was bright and earnest and frequently visited the missionary and decided to change his religion. This brought down upon him a storm of persecution. His enemies were his neighbours and his own family members. He was beaten, starved, reviled and eased out, but still he held to his determination to seek baptism. The crusade having failed, he was submitted to cruel treatment by the parents and he was then sent away from them. Such instances of persecution of converts were widespread.

Writing about the obstacles for conversion in the urban areas, a missionary wrote (Sackett [1931]: 50):

[Hyderabad] was a terrible place in those days. It was full of Rohilla and Sikh followers of the Nizam's army. Every man carried arms of some kind or another. Brawls, assaults and daylight robberies, were daily occurrences; and, even for peaceable Indians like Sadhuvu, life was never safe within the walls. On one occasion, while going "to see the tamasha" [(a theatre play)] [the missionary] was attacked at the city gate, near Afzul Ganj, was searched, robbed and badly mauled. It might have been much worse for they found he was a Christian had not Pratt and Campbell [(other missionaries)] heard of his danger and rushed to his rescue. And yet these redoubtable men of God never flinched from their task.

The missionaries who were in Hyderabad had for a long time one of their central meeting places in the square near the Residency clock-tower, but the city remained closed to evangelistic work.

But outside Hyderabad, especially in the villages, missionary activities and their modern education contributed to the growth of a new awakening and self-respect among the Dalit Christians, which in turn shaped them as a distinct entity different from the caste-Hindu 'other'. The intellectual make-up of the first generation of Dalit Christian preachers and intellectuals had been immensely influenced by Christian missionary thought and endeavours. Due to the religious and educational activities of the missionaries, the converts of the Mala untouchable community and other lower castes were able to acquire new knowledge and consciousness and change their livelihood conditions. Consequently, the spiritual and material life of these poor depressed communities had undergone a noticeable transformation, transmuting them into a distinct community separated from the caste Hindus in terms of their religious identity. The distinctness of the Dalit Christian community in modern Andhra was amply manifested in the formation of native preachers, catechists, pastors, teachers, Bible women and the zenana workers. It was these mediators between the religious order and the local society, i.e. Christian religion and Hinduism, who were instrumental in facilitating the formation of the distinct community with a common religious belief and world view. The missionaries have cared a lot for training, and education of native assistants. Thus, Christianity truly became the religion of emancipation for the poor in rural Telangana. For the lower caste persons, the Christian missionary appeared to be a saviour because in times of distress and necessity he was present to help them. Besides education, the missionaries also provided impartial relief to the worst effected lower caste population during the famines, epidemics and other disasters. During the late nineteenth century when the famines spread in the Telangana districts of Medak, Karimnagar and Nizamabad, for instance, Posnett had taken up welfare and employment activities and saved many poor people. At times the individual missionaries became targets of attack and even poisoning by the upper caste for their help and encouragement to the downtrodden communities.

Women Missionaries

Between the years 1896 and 1912, 32 European Women workers were sent to Hyderabad by the Women's Auxiliary. Out of these, 14 were gen-

eral medical workers, 11 did medical work in schools and six in the zenas (Lamb 1920: 30f.). The European women missionaries toured the villages and distributed medicine to the sick people. During cholera, the women missionaries did great service to the common people. They contributed to a great change in the villages. In the Yellareddy area of Karimnagar district, the medical work was quite effective. They ventured into the dangerous terrain and worked among the native people. In those days, robbery and murders were quite common in the country side.

When a woman missionary wanted to visit the remote villages the local officials advised her not to do so. However, an English official, even though he had warned her and said that it was unsafe and risky, yet provided protection to her. The local people were hostile and they called her "the little white devil". Whenever she appeared the children playing in the streets were hurriedly snatched up and dragged indoors. Arabs armed with guns and knives squatted on the rocks round her house and scowled every time she came out. Fear and hatred seemed everywhere. But in less than a year the medicine bottle had won its way and her ministry of mercy and healing had so changed the host of the enemy that she was called "the little white angel". She became popular among the local people and earned their respect. Thus, the traveling dispensaries and the visits of women medical workers to villages during the market days became a popular method of spreading the word of God.

In the course of touring villages and carrying out the work, European women missionaries faced many problems, were sometimes molested and risked their lives. They also had to confront many challenges in connection with their work in the villages. It was observed that generally, even a habitual criminal would not molest a European lady, but no one was safe against the caprice of men under the influence of drinks or drugs. A missionary reported (Lamb 1913: 106):

One of our ladies with her attendants passed a night in the open in the custody of a village policeman who was too stupidly drunk to know the blunder he had made; another was decoyed into a house to treat a woman and found to her dismay that the patient was a man shamming illness; yet another was compelled by the Inspector-General of Police to have two armed policemen always on guard at her lonely dwelling, or he would not guarantee her safety; a fourth lives alone, the only Englishwoman in a purely native town. These things are never spoken of, but lives lived in such an atmosphere of sub-conscious strain are instinct with a quiet heroism that puts us men to shame and makes us realise something of the cost at which women's work is done.

Another missionary wrote (Lamb 1920: 32f.):

In a land where women of repute are secluded, the spectacle of English ladies passing to and fro through road less jungle, braving the hot sun and monsoon deluges, causes unceasing wonder to treat the high and the rich for handsome fees would seem natural, but to minister to the despised and out caste for nothing is a new thing under the sun.

The hospital work by the women missionaries became quite popular among the people. The missionary reports indicated that there were a number of women teachers and wives of missionaries who having some sort of first aid and nursing training became popular among the villagers in the Karimnagar and Medak districts. As Jesus Christ said, "cleanse the lepers", the missionaries, in particular Dr. Kerr, started a Lepers Home at Dichpalli, in Nizamabad District (Monahan 1948: 12). It was the leading hospital for the lepers in the Nizam's Dominions. Local rich people like Narsa Goud and the Nizam's government extended financial and material support for building the hospital. The British Resident and the Prime Minister, Salar Jung III, appreciated the work of medical care and public health by the missionaries. The Prime Minister promised that in this work, "I must share. Tell me what I can do for you" (Monahan 1938: 15). With his financial support, the Salar Jung Hostel for boys and girls was constructed. The native press gave advertisement for the work done by the missionaries. It was reported that on the occasion of the fund raising at Secunderabad for the Dichpalli Leper Home 21,895 Rupees were collected. The Nizam's government not only extended financial support to the missionaries but also made them their partners in the government health policy.

Conclusion

Struggles against caste discrimination and efforts to eradicate untouchability have become an important part of missionary ideology and activities. It was mainly due to the endeavours of Christianity that the lower castes got the benefits of modern education. Given the close-knit and kin networks, the native spiritual leaders were the key factor in the formation of a sense of belonging and group identity and solidarity. The spread of Christianity brought about noticeable change among the Dalit communities in the villages of Telangana. The native men and women were also instrumental in the socialisation of the Christian community as

a coherent group and in imparting solidarity and identity. In the reports of the missions, one notices the significant role played by them not only in spreading the word of God but also in the creation of a Christian community by conversions of kith and kin groups. The narratives of the missionaries provide insights into the process of conversion at the local level. The missionaries participated in local festivals and ceremonies, countered the superstitions and persuaded the people to change their ritual practices. They often maintained that the sacrifices to the local gods, the demon worship, propitiation of evil spirits and sacrifices were irrational. Conversions by the lower castes resulted in the emergence of a new social order and a community with distinctive identities. The most remarkable and significant aspects of the conversion of the Malas were self-respect, confidence, dignity and justice. The converts, especially the women who were educated, found employment as medical workers, school teachers, bible women, etc., and were empowered by the church. The Dalit Christians in Telangana, in spite of a certain heterogeneity, could acquire the status of a distinct community. Thus, their adversaries, the caste-Hindus, called them *peddintollu*, beef eaters and *kirastanapollu*, followers of Jesus Christ, and referred to their religion as *peddintollamatam*, the religion of beef eaters.

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