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YERRAGUNTLA PERAIAH AND THE TELUGU BAPTIST CHRISTIANS IN PRAKASAM DISTRICT

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The establishment of Telugu Baptist Mission

A brief outline of the back ground of the Baptist Mission needs to be discussed. It was a strange providence that gave to Rev.Samuel S Day the undevied honour of being the founder of the Telugu Baptist mission in Telugus. Baptist Board appointed Rev.Samuel S.Day and Rev. E.L.Abbott to open a Mission among the Telugus on 22, September,1835.¹ But Rev. E.L.Abbott was sent to Burma. On 27th February, 1840 Rev.Samuel S.Day along with his wife arrived at Nellore after serving for some years at Vizag, Srikakulam, Madras and established the Telugu Baptist Mission. Six years of his faithful labors had so little apparent results that the supporters in America were planning to give up the Telugu work as hopeless. But later it was decided to send out Rev. & Mrs.Lyman Jewett with Rev.Day, though there were intentions of abandoning the Mission. In 1853 the question of abandoning this unfruitful field was again under discussion. On account of very indifferent success that had attended the Telugu Mission for 17 years, the question came up before the Board in America.

Several years went by with very discouraging results. It was in 1862 Dr.Jewett returned to America, tired and ill and for the third time the demand came again. But Lyman Jewett with all his gusto openly stated that some precious souls were already saved by their sincere labors. And many more would come to the saving knowledge of the Savior. Whether the Missionary Society would support him or not, Jewett was determined to return back to India and continue

the ministry amidst the Telugus. Because of the earnestness of his plea the Board decided to send John E.Clough and his wife Harriet along with him. Jewett and Cloughs had arrived at Nellore on 22nd of April, 1865.²

The people were divided into various castes groups . There were four castes; Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysyas and Sudras with a specific profession for each. There was another caste who were considered as separate caste - “untouchables”. For many centuries several generations together the Dalits were kept as slaves with no legal rights to claim for justice. They were helpless, depending solely on the mercies of the higher castes and they were harshly punished for no reason at all. Under such miserable conditions they were always left as the poorest of all the castes and were considered as untouchables.

Such were the miseries of the untouchables from whom the great patriarch of the Telugu Baptist Mission, the fore-runner of the mass movement in Andhra, the spiritual father of 90000 telugu Baptists.³ Rev. Yerraguntala Peraiah was chosen of God. This is an account of such a one from the Dalit community in Andhra Pradesh who pioneered the mass conversion movement around Ongole along with the pioneer missionary, Dr.J.E.Clough. Yerraguntala Peraiah as he is popularly known may be called as the Patriarch of the Telugu Baptist Christian Mission movement in Andhra Pradesh.

The founders of the Telugu Baptist Mission were unaware of the fact of the Indian social system. They lack the knowledge of the oriental way of propagation of the religion. It was due to these reasons that there was no progress in the number of converts till the day of entry of Peraiah into the mission in 1866.

History OF YERRAGUNTLA PERAIAH

Peraiah was born in 1825 and belonged to the untouchable caste of the Madiga who were leather workers. He belonged to a humble little village, Thalakondapadu near Kanigiri situated 85 kms from Ongole. Peraiah was fifteen years old when the Telugu Baptist Mission was started at Ongole. By profession Peraiah was a Cobbler and a Trader. Once he received news from the Godavari District area that many cattle were dying due to some disease. So Peraiah along with his friends proceeded to Eluru on the business. A distant relative of Peraiah, Ongole Abraham was already settled in Eluru. He had become a Christian and

enrolled himself as a member of the Church mission. Now since Peraiah was there, he felt that he must get some firsthand information about Jesus Christ. So he went to Eluru and found the mission Banglaw and Mr. Alexander of the Church Missionary Society who was there always accessible to the enquiries.

From there he went to Palakollu and had conversation with Rev. Bowdens who suggested Peraiah to meet Dr. Jewett at Ongole. It was during this visit that his mind was enlightened by God and after his return to his native village, he began to think over seriously for the conversion of his family and others. Peraiah now spent for four years to ponder over the new religion and interact with others. Peraiah came to Ongole to the Mission Centre and met Obulu, a recent Dalit convert who introduced him to the family of an Anglo-Indian who was the Superintendent of Public works. Peraiah's association with this Christian family provided him much encouragement and they wrote a letter about him to Dr. Jewett at Nellore. "In March 1866 Mrs. & Mr. Jewett, Mr. Clough and Mr. Kanakaiah made a visit to Ongole having a special reference in meeting Peraiah who wanted to see the missionaries and to be baptized. His wife in the same spirit of simplicity, faith and love told the artless story of her conversion. They were baptized in a tank near Ongole on 26-03-1866. After hearing the earnest testimony of Peraiah and his wife Dr. Jewett had the joy of Baptizing them.⁴ Peraiah was a man with a strong personality and had developed a fervor for evangelizing and developing this new religion, and he worked tirelessly. Peraiah brought to Clough the many converts whom he had converted in the vicinity of his home. He insisted however that the right way for the evangelist was to go out to the people and conduct meetings in their neighbourhood. This idea of moving about regularly among the people of the villages proved to be one of the secrets of the success of the Ongole Mission.

The policy of the American missionaries in evangelizing India did not yield much result till the entry of Peraiah into the mission. Peraiah laid emphasis to go into the villages and dwell with the people to proclaim the Gospel. This was the method he found in the existing Indian traditions. Missionaries kept the converts in their Mission Compounds under their protection because of the fear of persecution and to give them what was deemed an adequate education and training, mainly for service as Preachers or Teachers.⁵ But Peraiah made it a strict policy to that the rural population might know that the new religion had entered into India. Peraiah also insisted the importance of working to earn for living along side with the

preaching. This concept of self-support also was found in St.Paul, went a long way in establishing the success of the ministry. In fact Peraiah had never taken any salary from Dr.Clough though he would have given him anything he asked for.⁶ Peraiah felt that this would upset the relationship deeply cherished by him.

Originally Dr.Clough had no idea to establish Educational Institutions. But an unfortunate incident occurred on 22nd September,1867 at Ongole, where some converted Christian boys were not allowed into schools by a Brahmin Headmaster.⁷ This led Clough to strive for providing education to Christian converts. Clough made the Baptist Mission Educational Policy in consultation with Peraiah. In fact he never took any policy decision without Peraiah's consent. As the number of converts was growing there was need for schools. Rangaiah and Peraiah prepared a plan in establish Educational Institutions in about 800 villages, spread over 7000sq.miles. To proceed after these Primary Schools, they had a plan of establish Boys and Girls schools in the central place at Ongole. Later on Mission Schools and Colleges were established. The figures for 1872 show 21 schools and 14 teachers. By 1880, when the seminary had been in operation for eight years, there were 291 teachers, preachers and bible women assisting 32 missionaries in the development of 26339 Telugu Baptists.⁸ Education was provided even to the high caste Hindus. The Church buildings constructed in every village were also used as school buildings. It was arranged that the preachers, teachers and Bible women were to be fed by the concerned Village Christian Community.

As thousands of converts embraced Christianity from the Dalit hamlets, gradually started favoring new Christian communities as the villagers received Christianity with hope, courage and encouragement. They were challenging the oppression which was prevailing for several thousands of years. They started to strive for giving equal human rights while the high castes trying in vain to put them under suppression. The upper caste Hindus started to persecute the Christians in many places. Where ever there was persecution, Peraiah was present there to address the situation. He reported the matter to Dr.Clough and together they would take the issue to the British Government Officials. They filed many number of cases in Courts defending the cases of the Christians based on the favourable laws of the British Government, such as "Caste Disabilities Removal Act III of 1850" and fought to restore

justice. A cold war had started to take place between the Dalits and the Upper Caste Hindus breaking the village ruling system into pieces.

There arose a famine in 1876 where the worst sufferers were the Dalits. During this time hundreds died due to starvation. Dr.Clough took up the work of Buchingham Canal because the line passed through the region of the Christians who lived in Ongole, for he thought by doing this, they could be saved from starvation. Meanwhile cholera had also broken out adding to their miseries. The work of digging the canal began in February, 24th 1987 and many gathered there to join the work. They were very hungry. Several died, some were sick and only a few survived. Many of the preachers had been sent far and wide to the Christian villages, telling about the camp and urging the people to come for work on the Canal, that they might earn enough to buy food and live.⁹ They brought their non Christian friends and relatives from distant places so that the influence of the preachers was extended considerably.¹⁰ Dr.Clough and Peraiah worked with them with heart and soul in this project to support the famine stricken Dalits. A large number of coolies came to join the camp. It was here Christianity was put into practice. The love and benevolence Clough and Peraiah had for this people was proved by the way they treated the weaker ones. The weakest were taken care and they were rested.¹¹ Those who were too weak to work were also given food and everyone were treated well. The high caste people watched with interest the services rendered by Dr.Clough and Peraiah to the poorest of the poor and were impressed at the way of the Missionaries who ate and stayed at the camp along with the Dalits. The project went on a long way in spreading the real message of Christ and more over the social status of the Dalits was improving. The Government expanded in relief works eleven million pounds.¹² As the result of the famine fourteen Hospitals and Dispensaries were established. The famine of 1876 was followed by a wonderful revival in which a nation seemed to be born in a day.

When Peraiah entered into the Baptist Mission, there was a drastic change in the total conception of conversion. There was a shift of emphasis from the regeneration of the individual to that of the whole society through Christian gospel. Peraiah's vision was the conversion of all his people, the Dalits. The minds of Peraiah and Clough were united to convert the whole of Dalit castes into Christianity. From 1841 until 1866 till the entry of Peraiah there were only 38 converts. During 1867 and 1880 about thousand villages of

untouchables were contacted. Clough and Peraiah taking the tent, dwelt among these people, facing the threats and humiliation by the caste people. Whenever they were persecuted Clough and Peraiah were there present to defend the helpless Dalits with the help of the British government which was ruling India.

The awakening of the Dalit community was quite obvious. The communal system of evangelization introduced by Peraiah giving emphasis in converting the whole caste rather than the individual, the Christian love and affection expressed in practice, during the time of famine, the implementation of the three precepts in the new Christian community, the timely help of the British government to the untouchables at the time of tribulations all these factors along with never failing guidance of Peraiah in consultation with Dr.Clough made a humble development of the Telugu Baptist Mission to the greatest achievement of the mass movements in India. During the end of the famine, thousands were drawn into the mission and were asking Dr.Clough for Baptism. But he avoided baptisms in large numbers since he wanted to be sure whether they were interested in the salvation or the material benefits.

In the early days the preachers went out from place to place telling about the new religion.¹³ The preachers from different parts like Podili, Kanigiri, Cumbum and Markapur all brought large number of people to be baptized. Peraiah along with other leaders prepared the list of those to be baptized and on 3rd July, 1878. 2,222 people were baptized in Gundlakamma river, near Vellampalle Village, Ongole and in three days there were 3,536 converts.¹⁴ Peraiah along with other leaders worked in full force for the baptisms. Many Dalits from Hindu religion also were baptized. By this the higher caste leaders were beginning to think that their social order was shaken in the grip of the power that began to dawn on towards something higher.

Peraiah was the forerunner of the mass movements in India. His methods of evangelization stood as a model to others and Christianity spread to all the Dalits in the nooks and corners of the whole of South India. The other Protestant movements were greatly influenced by the methods of Peraiah. This was a shift of emphasis from the regeneration of the individual to that of the society through the Christian gospel”.

CONCLUSION:

Despite his decrepit old age, Thatiah (grandfather, as he was affectionately called) journeyed to Ongole once more 1896. Slowly they brought him to his accustomed place at the platform of the Jewett Memorial Church on Sunday morning. Dr.Clough seeing Peraiah, stopped giving his sermon, walked down from the pulpit, slowly led him and made him sit in his own chair. He saw the lack of wonder on the faces of some of the younger generation who knew little of this old leader. His heart was very tender towards the man who never moved an inch from the God approved task, who had stood by his side in the days of small beginnings, in the days of calamity and of overwhelming responsibility. He paid the richest tributes to this chosen man of God. There was a look of reverence on many a face as the missionary proceeded with his sermon. A year later at his 71st year Thatiah (grandfather) took his flight. It was on 2nd June, 1897.¹⁵

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