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The Church and Native Culture : A Telugu Lutheran Perspective

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There is always the possibility of that in our anxiety to identify ourselves with the people of our country, who are kinsmen in our culture, we may compromise on the fundamentals of our faith¹.

Evidently, churches everywhere exist in interreligious and intercultural situations. To begin with in the emergence of christian missions in India right from the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Jesuits opened up their indigenous christian mission and gained the roots of christian faith among natives. An experimental 'Adaptation' method was formulated and practiced by Robert de Nobili, an Italian Jesuit among Tamils in the seventeenth century. Ziegenbalg and his successors under Tranquebar Mission had also studied the total life and culture of Tamils and their missionary strategy achieved sizable natives in the eighteenth century which was historically called as the first protestant mission in India. From nineteenth century, the christian mission entered a new era with the inception of Serampore Mission in a wider scope of mission which was noticed by the historians as the modern missionary movement. Various missionary organizations initiated contextual ministries among Dalits, Tribals and other classes of Indian society unquestionably during the English Colonial period. But the increasing Indian nationalism was one of the factors that helped Indian christians to voice for a native church. Providing this historical context, our chief aim in this article is to show how the Telugu Lutherans attempted in various aspects of their church life to come out as a Native Church in the context of Telugu Culture during the twentieth century.

A. The Founding of Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church and other Christian Missions in Andhra Pradesh : Nineteenth Century :

The Anadhra Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded by John Christian Frederick Heyer, an American Lutheran missionary at

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Guntur on July 31, 1842. By 1992 it completed 150 years of its life and work of the mission among Telugu people. Currently, it is the largest church of the nine Lutheran churches in India under the Confessional Federal Union of United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELFI). Some of its self-supporting programmes clearly show us how the church struggled for its identity as a national church.

Further, the protestant missions during nineteenth century made their impact on the society, religion and culture of Telugu people. Apart from AELC, the London Missionary Society (LMS) started its work at Visakhapatnam in 1805 and at Cuddapah in 1822². Another protestant mission to Andhra was the American Baptist Mission (ABM) which sent its first missionary Samuel Day to Visakhapatnam in 1837. Robert Nobel of Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived at Machilipatnam on October 28, 1841 and started his work. Meanwhile, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) intensified its efforts in the Rayalaseema districts. These were the first major christian missionary organizations which started their evangelistic, educational and medical work among the masses of Circar and Rayalaseema, areas³. Roman Catholics started their work even before the protestant missions existed in Andhra Pradesh.

B. Native Church and Telugu Lutherans : Twentieth Century :

In 1861 itself, Henry Venn, Secretary of Church Missionary Society in England and former missionary to India was striving for an Indian church and issued the "Three-self formula" which explains that the church will become native only when it attains the state of self-support, self-government and self-propagation by native personnel and native money⁴. Overall, it is understood that a church becomes self-reliant not only on the line of its structures but also on the line of religio-cultural context of the people.

1. Evangelism :

Eddy Asirvadam expounds on evangelism :

The church of India, as is generally true of churches everywhere else, were born in evangelism. The history of christian church shows that no church can be truly vital and vitalizing until it has a deep missionary purpose. The nature of christian experience is such that the more one spontaneously shares it with others, the richer and fuller it

becomes to oneself⁵.

The church rooted itself and spread among Dalits. Therefore, the christian god was a Dalit God in the minds of high caste Hindus. Though many native clergy and lay people rendered their utmost services in building the church, the dalit Bible Women who were appointed by church as lay women evangelists had done tremendous evangelistic work among the Caste Hindu Women through native methods such as story-telling and singing. D.T. Niles defined 'Evangelism' as "one beggar telling another beggar where to get food"⁶. Likewise, the Bible Women played a beggar's role in spreading the goodnews of Jesus to their cultural neighbours. Dr. (Miss) B.V. Subbamma praises the role of the native women evangelists in the church during 1960-70 as follows—

The Bible Women's work is vital to the mission of the church. They comprise the main force of evangelistic workers and all doors are open to the women, but not to men workers. The strength of the Bible Woman lies in the personal friendships she forms with Hindu women⁷.

Evangelistic work among Muslims started even from 1884 by founding a Urdu School for Muslim girls at Guntur. Some national clergy and lay people were trained in Urdu for evangelistic work among Muslims from 1910. Later in 1926, three native Bible Women were entrusted for Muslim work. Rev.D.T. Lindell, an American missionary worked for many years among Muslims from 1960s and later contributed his services enormously to the Henry Martin Institute, Hyderabad till recent years.

The Lutheran National Missionary Society launched its first mission field in 'Rewa' of Mādhyā Pradesh in 1914. Later, Rev. B.J. Krupadanam of A.E.L. Church was chosen as missionary and sent to 'Murwahi' field of Madhya Pradesh in 1941. There a large amount of national missionary efforts was made to the people through its educational, medical and evangelistic work. A Bible school for village leaders was also established by him in 1953. A.E.L. church was not only sending the national missionaries, national medical staff but also providing some financial aid from 1962 through celebrating N.M.S. Festivals all over the church. This festival has been creating and encouraging the national missionary awareness and self-supporting idea among the Telugu people till to-day.

2. Christian Ashram Movement :

When Sadhu Sundar Singh lived the life of a 'Sanyasi', the Indian

christians started the 'christian ashrams' which were more native expression of christianity⁸. Ashrams have demonstrated that christ can unite people of different creeds, castes into one humanhood.

(a) Dr. B.V. Subbamma, founder of christian ashrams, A.E.L.C. :

B.V. Subbamma was born in the Kamma community of Bodipalem in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh and most of her studies took place in christian institutions where she was highly influenced by christianity. She took baptism along with her mother on March 23, 1942. When Subbamma was the Principal of Charlotte Swenson Memorial Bible Training School for Girls at Luthergeri, Rajahmundry in 1968, she started firstly the ashram programme. The baptized women (converts) and Hindu women who were interested in knowing the gospel attended this programme. The participants were of different castes but lived together, so that fellowship provided an excellent means in communicating the gospel⁹. The chief aim of the ashram programme was to communicate the gospel indigenously to the Hindus. The native expression of the evangelism and worship was the significant factor of the movement¹⁰.

(b) Native methods of Ashram movement :

Many hindus from caste background expressed a great desire for the gospel. So, in order to help them to understand Christ, ashram programmes came into existence and started to grow with the people who participate in work and worship of the ashrams. The following are some of the native methods used by ashrams in communicating the gospel—

(i) Bhajans :

Bhajans are the traditional form of singing in Hindu worship. It is an expression of deep love and devotion to God. Bhajan is worship accompanied by music with native instruments like cymbals, bells etc. The leader of the bhajan group will sing a verse and the congregation will respond by repeating the verse. So ashram team used this popular means of communication¹¹.

(ii) Harikatha :

Harikatha is a popular means of communicating the Puranas

of the Hindus in Andhara. It is performed by a leading singer and assisted by a helper or full choir using the musical instruments violin, tambura etc. The performance will be both through singing and speech. This method was also followed by ashrams¹².

(iii) Burrakatha :

This is very attractive method followed by the Telugu people for a long time. There is one head singer with two assistants who used dhakkis for beating. The main person stands in the middle and use songs and speech alternately whereas the other two provide some music by beating dhakkis and repeating part of the songs. It was also used by the ashramites in their gospel work¹³.

The ashrams were based on the word of God, and a sound theology relevant to Indian culture, and accepted by the church as the valid instrument to promote its witness and service. Ashrams produced many women leaders both within the church and converts.

3. Worship, Liturgy, Music, Art and Architecture :

The Tambaram Conference of International Missionary Council (1938) urged the younger churches to observe the native worship for useful presentation of the gospel of Jesus to the people of other faiths.

Majority of Lutherans come from rural sector. So the Sunday worship service was a very significant one. People used to sit on the floor. Native musical instruments like tabala and others were played. The vernacular bible and hymn books were used by the worshippers. Pastors always encouraged village christians to bring all their offerings like first fruits, first eggs, first pluckings and first day wages in kind or cash and animals of all kinds. Usually May-June months are auspicious for marriages. Traditional Telugu sentiments and practices were adopted in the ceremonies of Christian marriages too. For example, a small gold disc with a cross on it called 'Tali' was used for marriages where the bridegroom would tie it to the neck of the bride. At this moment, the groom makes his vows putting his hand on the knot of the tali string.

Though AEL Church follows the western liturgical form, it translated all liturgical forms into Telugu language and music. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the festivals, marriage ceremonies, burial services and the sermons of the pastors were indigenously performed even before they were systematically

arranged in the Lutheran liturgy. Numerous ordained and unordained talented Telugu people wrote many christian hymns, plays, Harikathas, Burrakathas and composed sweet music too. Telugu christian hymn writers used Telugu Bhakti Theology in their Hymnody. A solid research work also was done by Rev. Dr. R.R. Sundara Rao on it in 1970s. C.H. Swavelly a Lutheran missionary comments :

As the poems, playlets, songs are written by freelance writers of india during its freedom movement, many Lutherans contributed their Telugu Literature and music for their native church¹⁴.

During 1960s, Rev. P. Solomon Raju and Rev. P. David, clergy and theologians of AEL Church who worked for Suvartha Vani (an organ of ecumenical radio evangelism in A.P.) and Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Madras respectively, contributed much to the church on indigenous methods of worship through their writings, Seminars and other special efforts. With the collaboration of South Andhra Lutheran church and other churches, a Telugu Indigenous Curriculum Project was founded and worked together on indigenous christian literature. 'Kusumanjali', a Telugu hymnal with 214 songs was the outcome of that project in 1980.

The Indian church had adopted Oriental or European art and architecture to its church buildings till 1947. But after independence, the churches in India started thinking of native art and architecture for them. Telugu people also practised this in various forms of their church buildings and institutions. The good example we see is how it adopted in its centennial emblem in 1942 itself Indian Lampstand, Dravidian style pillars, Banana bud and Lotus of India which symbolically remind us the church in Indian culture.

Evaluation :

India has its rich heritage of multiform culture from the ages. During colonial period, the Indian christianity had emerged as a vital force in the midst of various cultural communities. But from the beginning of twentieth century, the Indian christians tried for a native church as Indian Nationalists struggled for national freedom. The Telugu christians also attempted many programmes to make the church a native one. Initiative of both clergy and laity from rural and urban areas and their tremendous efforts in the context of Telugu cultural situations transformed the life and work as well as faith and order of Andhra Evangelical Lutheran

Church into a native church. The role of women in the church has increased commendably through ashrams and other services. Though has not gained the status of a full shaped native church in all its spheres, the church made an impression among Telugus that it has been searching for its survival and identity in the midst of many cultural communities. We must conclude with an observation of Mathai Zachariah, former general secretary, NCCI on Indian church :

What the 'open church' means in the Indian context is a question which the churches in India should address themselves seriously... today since we are increasingly made conscious that there are both secular and religious faiths with which we should co-exist¹⁵.

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