

Abstract for IAMS – 2020 Assembly

Dalit Women in Christianity: Telugu Bible Women as Teachers of Wisdom

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Seventy six year old Grace Sundari from Penugonda of Anantapur District recollected during an interview that her mother Manikyamma who was from the Mala community worked as a Bible woman in Penugonda of Anantapur District and its vicinity. Every day, Manikyamma visited houses, and conducted prayer meetings once a week at one of the houses, which she visited. Once a week, she gathered women and organised *streele maitri* (women's fellowship). In that gathering women prayed, sang songs and meditated on the Bible. She taught songs, prayers and Bible verses to other women.¹ During my ethnographic fieldwork in Rayalaseema², people still remember Bible women and their activities. The introduction of the profession of Bible women in Rayalaseema in the 1870s changed the status of women and became an avenue for them to transform and to empower themselves in many ways. Ordinary coolie going women from lower castes and Dalit³ community evolved as Bible women by associating themselves with women missionaries and by availing the opportunities of missionary education. Along with financial security, this profession gave them public roles. As Bible women, they were invited into Hindu and Muslims houses. The magic of literacy, mastery over scriptures, and skill of telling biblical stories, helped them to command religious authority and social respect which was denied to them in their social locations. They contributed their work experiences to *Vivekavathi*, a journal and also used the same journal to impart Christian religious values to the women. They contributed to the cultural change of women in general and Dalit women in particular. They mediated between local women and women missionaries, by bringing modern notions such as women's education, domesticity, and hygiene and by appropriating the Christian message to the interests of local women. This paper will outline the emergence of the Bible woman as the new Christian woman in the context of colonial modernity and Christianity in Rayalaseema. Missionary records, magazines, pamphlets and books written by women missionaries and oral interviews from the field will be used in this paper.

Key Words: Religion, Missionaries, Colonialism, Caste, Dalit women and Bible Women

¹ Grace Sundari. Personal interview, 19 Mar.2018.

² Rayalaseema is one of the regions in Andhra Pradesh state of India. During the colonial period, it was a part of the Madras Presidency and was called the Ceded districts

³ In India, Dalits are treated as untouchables who experienced slavery and were historically denied access to any kind of economic sources.