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In Search of a Touchable Body: Christian Mission and Dalit Conversions

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Abstract: This paper significantly wishes to unpack the social and cultural impact of the mass religious conversion movements in Rayalaseema society with specific reference to Dalits during the period 1850 to 1880. This paper will use the archival material such as missionary records, magazines, pamphlets, and books written by missionaries; further, it will also utilize oral interviews collected from the field. The mass conversion movements established a relationship between Dalits and missionaries and brought them together. In their efforts to create a new Christian community of Dalit converts, missionaries had interacted with Dalits, shared meal with them, stayed with them and transformed forbidden and "polluted" ghettos into social spaces. The present paper argues that the practices of the missionaries were liberating and humanizing for Dalits. It will examine how these practices led to unintended consequences. It needs to be remembered that the missionaries' aim was not to abolish caste but to develop Christianity. How did the missionaries contribute to social interaction and build a spirit of solidarity among the Dalit converts? Based on specific situations, incidents, and examples recorded in the missionary archives and oral interviews, the article observes that community conversion movements destabilized the caste structure and brought significant changes in the social life of Dalits in colonial Rayalaseema.

Keywords: caste; Christianity; Dalits; mass conversion movements; Caste; missionaries; social equality; untouchability

1. Introduction

In Rayalaseema, the opportunity of converting into Christianity became available to the Dalits from the second half of the nineteenth century. Rayalaseema is presently one of the regions of the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. The region was called Ceded Districts during the colonial period.[1] The mission organizations which worked in Rayalaseema were the London Missionary Society (hereafter LMS) and the Society for Propagation of the Gospel (hereafter SPG). Missionary operations were first started in Cuddapah in 1822 by John Hands, who was a resident missionary of Bellary. Later, William Howell was appointed to Cuddapah as a resident missionary and Cuddapah was made a separate LMS station in 1824. Howell worked in the town and toured extensively in the district, making use of Telugu language in his preaching (Brackenbury 1914, p. 56; Bolton 1913, p. 31). The

[1] The state of Andhra Pradesh formed in 1956 comprises of three geographical regions known as the Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana. The first two regions were formerly a part of the Madras Presidency until 1st October 1953 when they were detached from it to form separate Andhra state. During the whole period of British Raj, the Rayalaseema region (comprised of the districts of Anantapur, Bellary, Cuddapah and parts of Kurnool) was called Ceded districts as it was ceded to the British East India Company by the Nizam in 1800. After independence, it was renamed as Rayalaseema which presently includes the districts of Anantapur, Chittoor, Kadapa, and Kurnool. In 2014, the Telangana region was declared as a separate state. At present Andhra and Rayalaseema regions remain part of the state of Andhra Pradesh.

SPG Mission was started in Cuddapah in 1842 with a few families who separated from the LMS when their missionary William Howell joined the Church of England. He was accepted as a missionary by the SPG (Hibbertware 1912, p. 51; Pascoe 1901, p. 563). At the initial stage of both these missions, individual conversions happened. The first converts in Cuddapah town were mostly from the Brahmin or dominant castes such as Reddy communities (Lewis 1879, p. 2; Simmons 1923, p. 8).[2] However, the year 1851 marked the beginning of the increase in the number of converts in the LMS and the SPG missions; these converts were from the Mala community, who approached the missionary first as individuals and later as a group of community.[3]

The Malas along with Madigas were the lowest in the caste hierarchy. *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), an ancient Hindu book is seen as a source for caste inequalities in India. The caste system assigns individuals a certain hierarchical status. In Hindu religious texts the caste system is considered as a system of four *varnas*. Based on their occupations, the Hindu society is divided into Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (servants). Outside of these four *varnas* are the untouchables or *avarnas*. It is believed that these rigid caste groups originated from the Hindu god Brahma. Brahmins were said to be created from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas came from his arms, Vaishyas were from his thighs and Sudras from his feet (Viswanath 2015, p. 259). The castes at the top of the hierarchy were considered to be pure while those at the bottom were regarded as polluted. *Manusmriti* justifies the caste system as the basis for the order of the society. Furthermore, the book inscribed the violence to be meted out towards lower castes, as can be seen in the following verses:

> A low-caste man, who tries to place himself on the same seat with a man of a high caste, shall be branded on his hip and be banished
>
> (*Manusmriti* VIII. 281)

> If he mentions the names and castes (gati) of the (twice-born) with contumely, an iron nail, ten fingers long, shall be thrust red-hot into his mouth.
>
> (*Manusmriti* VIII. 270)[4]

The structural cruelty of the *Manusmriti* did not let Malas and Madigas live a life of dignity.[5] For centuries, they had been despised and degraded; they were in a miserable condition because they were subjected to *antaranitanam* (untouchability), and *chudaranitanam* (unseenability). Their presence and approach were hated by other castes as they were considered impure; even their shadow was believed to be a pollutant. The caste system did not recognize their social value and moreover did not treat them as human beings. The Madigas and the Malas were not allowed to access public places such as temples, schools, and drinking water wells (Cornish 1874, p. 118).[6]

From my readings of the LMS and the SPG reports, it is evident that there were several events of community-based conversion movements from 1851 to 1860 (Missionary Conference 1858, pp. 118–19; Pascoe 1901, pp. 564–65). A visible public Christian community emerged after three decades of missionary work and mass conversions in the 1850s. Dalits became part of the mission through mass conversion movements, and became Christians. The following section will examine the humanitarian and charitable activities of missionaries such as their social interaction with the Dalits, as well as their

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[2] Reddys were the dominant peasant caste in the Rayalaseema region. They comprised half of the population of the region. They were the people who owned lands, monopolized resources, and had control over the villages. Magistrates of the villages were generally drawn from this caste.

[3] In missionary texts and colonial administrative records of the Ceded Districts, Dalits were called as pariahs, low castes, non-castes, outcastes, untouchables, panchamas, depressed classes, Malas, and Madigas. The term 'Dalits' is used in this paper to refer to them. The specific caste names are used wherever necessary.

[4] I have taken these quotes from (Islam 2004, p. 35).

[5] Dr. Ambedkar burned the text of *Manusmriti* publicly in 1927 as a political act to reject the religious base for untouchability.

[6] To know more about the everyday life of Madigas and Malas, their social and religious life, refer to (Thurston 1914, pp. 350–51; Henry 1921).

gestures of sharing food and living space in *palems* (Dalit colonies). Further, they changed *palem* into a new location of spatiality where social relations were transformed and a Christian community emerged.

2. Conversion Movements and Social Equality

The conversion movements established a specific form of relationship between Dalits and missionaries. This relationship can be identified as a "contact zone." According to Mary Louise Pratt, the contact zone is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations"(Pratt 2007, pp. 6–7). Dalits, who were historically oppressed and were under constant subjugation, and missionaries, who came with a different set of values, came into contact with each other. This perspective helps us to map the relationship between missionaries and Dalits, and how they were constituted in and by their relations to each other. The missionary was a white man, coming from the same community which was ruling the country. There was a connection between the British Empire and missionaries. Missionaries' association with colonial officials made their evangelizing work easier. They secured protection from the colonial administration and state aid for their work. Missionaries could do what they did and could have some level of impact because of the empire. However, there were times when they had conflicts and ideological chasms with colonial government.[7] A Missionary would tour villages to preach the gospel; during his visit to villages, people were astonished to see him and they regarded him as a 'white angel' (Pandian 1897, p. 205). This might be because of the dress, color, language, and mode of living of the missionary. Further, the missionary had access to power; he was accessible for them and had compassion towards them.

Missionaries as the readers of the Bible were sympathetic to the conditions of existence of Dalits. The Biblical understanding was that all human beings were equal before God and all of them were created in the image of God (Galatians 3:28). The humanitarian worldview of missionaries, which was rooted in the religious conception of the dignity of man, compelled them to seriously acknowledge the social discrimination and inherited inequality of Dalits. The other reason for this was the background of the missionaries. They came from the modern world, with modern ideas and perspectives influenced by the notions of rationality, equality, liberty, and fraternity. In addition to this, several decades earlier, Protestant missionaries worked for the liberation of slaves. They played a prominent role in the worldwide anti-slavery movement, which resulted in the Slave Trade Act of 1807 (Porter 1999). This enabled the missionaries to apprehend the denial of freedom, justice, and rights to Dalits. Missionaries were sympathetic towards Dalits not because they came to help them but because they came from a different world. In the ongoing relationship between missionaries and Dalits, the following activities were carried: turning *palem* into a social space, social interaction, acts of touching, inter-dining, emergence of *badi* and *gudi* and access to public wells.

3. Turning *palem* into a Social Space

The villages in Rayalaseema society were spatially segregated. The social structure of a village was such that it was inscribed with the Hindu caste setup with all the features ordered by Manu.[8] The village had two types of habitats: *savarnas'* houses and *avarnas'* huts, separated by a distance. The Brahminical Hindu caste society did not allow Malas and Madigas to live in the village among the *savarnas'* houses in order to avoid pollution from untouchables even through wind. They were not regarded as part of the *oor* (village). They lived in a ghetto, a separate place on the outskirts of the village called *geri* or *palem*.[9] Unlike other castes who lived in mud-roofed houses, the Malas

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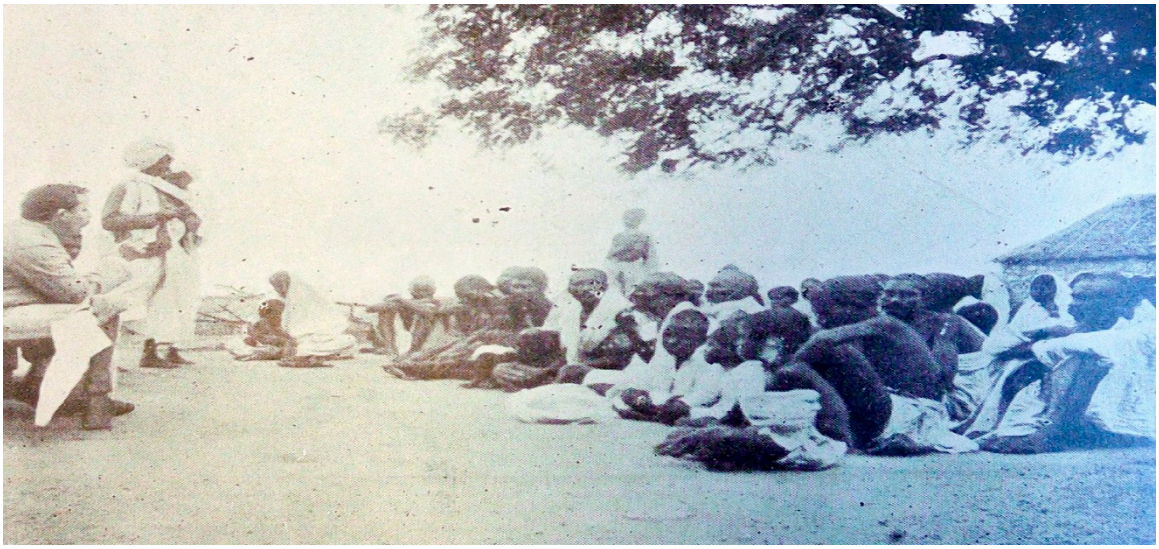
[7] For more discussion on missionaries and empire look at (Copland 2006, pp. 1025–54).

[8] In Hindu tradition Manu is considered as a progenitor of the human race. He was an author of the book *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu).

[9] In Tamil, it is called as *ceri* and in Kannad *keri.* Benaiah Cole used the term *paliem* (Cole 1916, p. 4) and Francis used the word *geri* (Francis 1905, p. 35.).

and the Madigas lived in huts which were roofed with thatch or Palmyra palm leaves (Cornish 1874, p. 168). Therefore, Dalit localities were considered by village people as impure and polluted. People in the villages avoided visiting *palem*. However, missionaries who were considered by the village people as powerful and superior to them, visited *palem*, stayed there, and interacted with Dalits (Figure 1a,b). Furthermore, they changed this space into a locus of sociality where new spaces of public gathering such as churches and schools were introduced. This new spatiality was the location of social transformation. I substantiate this by illustrating how certain activities of the missionaries contributed to challenge the prevailing caste norms and create new social relations in the village.



(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 1. (**a**,**b**) Dalits interaction with missionaries in *palem*. Source (Simmons 1923, pp. 7, 12).

3.1. Social Interaction

It is significant to explore the social interaction of missionaries with Dalits. This interaction was characterized as one between the 'white angel' and 'untouchables,' between the powerful and the

powerless. This encounter was very significant in the life of Dalits as it might be the first time in their life that an outsider was interacting with them. Missionaries saw Dalits as human beings with body, soul, feelings, and emotions, unlike dominant castes who saw them as instruments of toil (Mohan 2015, p. 4). By interacting with Dalits, the missionary broke the prevailing notion that Dalits were untouchables and their presence was polluting. In their interaction, the missionaries told the Dalit that "You are the child of God. He made you and cares for you and seeks to save you" (Stanton 1950, p. 136)[10] Till then Dalits were told by Hindu society that they were cursed people, untouchables and *Chandalas* and hence they were incapable of worshipping god. The missionaries, on the other hand, were telling them that they were children of god, they too were created by god and that god takes care of them. These words were appealing and enlightening to Dalits. During their stay in *palem*, missionaries visited each Dalit house and inquired about their problems (Clayton 1890, pp. 243–44).

3.2. Act of Touching

Another significant element that was involved in the relationship between the missionaries and the Dalits was the 'act of touching.' Derrida reflects on 'touch' in Christianity by observing that "salvation saves by touching, and the Savior, namely the Toucher, is also touched . . . Jesus the savior is touching, he is the One who touches, and most often with his hand, most often to . . . save" (Derrida 2005, p. 100). Thus, touch has a deep significance in Christianity. The discourse on untouchability is articulated around the idea of touch. The Hindu way of life which was codified by Manu conditioned the minds of Dalits to believe that it was a grave sin if they touch caste Hindus. Further, according to Manu's laws caste Hindus touching untouchables was considered as a sin. The Dalit individual's body was considered and treated by caste society as un-*touch*-able, unclean, and polluted. It was not just the body of the untouchable; even their shadow was regarded as impure. Therefore, they were required to walk in the village only during specific times. Most of the time, they were restricted to remain in the *ceri*. The political theorist Gopal Guru argues that the body of an untouchable person and his/her shadow work in circle to generate a humiliating experience for them. The impossibility of physical closeness performed through the taboo of the shadow of the untouchables removed the potential of human beings ever touching each other. Therefore the real (body) and reflected (shadow) were enfolded in the politics of annihilating untouchables from receiving love and acceptance from society (Guru and Sarukkai 2012, pp. 81–86). Apart from the people of his community, an individual from a Dalit community was never touched by anyone else. It is in this context that the touch of a missionary becomes very significant in the history of Dalits. The untouchable body was acknowledged and touched by the missionaries. Touching is not merely a physical gesture or a pragmatic action. For Dalits who were treated as untouchables, the act of touching is incredibly powerful as it has its own historical and cultural significance. Touching goes against untouchability. The touch established a complex form of connection, as it constituted a relationship between the missionary, the one who is touching and the Dalit, the one who is being touched. An illustration from Telugu literature shows how the missionary touching a Dalit was represented and what did it mean for a Dalit. In the novel, *The Untouchable Spring*, Chinnodu, a Dalit, was called upon by the *Tella Dora* [White Missionary] to go near him. The missionary held Chinnodu's hand and laid another hand on his shoulder. Chinnodu could not believe what had happened when he was thus touched. Until then, he remained untouched by people outside his community. However the missionary touched him; he was not from that village, not from that region; he did not belong to that land. The missionary touched him and said that his body was not untouchable. He did not just utter those words but showed it with his touch (Kalyana Rao 2010, pp. 158–59).

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[10] Apart from the LMS and the SPG missions, the American Baptist Mission (ABM) also worked in the Rayalaseema region. William Arthur Stanton was a missionary from ABM.

The missionaries telling Dalits that their bodies were touchable was beyond the imagination of Dalits. It could be argued that the touch of the missionaries provided comfort, empowerment, acknowledgment, and affirmation of humanity to Dalits. As Christopher argues, "The act of touching restored the human dignity to the body that was otherwise despised, loathed, and feared" (Christopher 2018, p. 7). The touch of the missionaries was liberating and humanizing for Dalits who were treated and made to believe for centuries that their body, presence, and shadow was untouchable and impure. Generally, Dalits were made to believe that, in their presence and with their touch, even the (Hindu) gods became polluted (Neelakantha Sasthri 1935, p. 15). However, the god of the missionaries was not contaminated by the presence of Dalits. The touch of the missionaries had a profound effect on the lives of Dalits as it broke the stigma that their bodies were not worthy of being touched.

3.3. Inter-Dining

The interaction between missionaries and Dalits was brought even closer through the act of sharing a common meal. A common meal draws people together and gives them a sense of community. The Brahminical Hindu social order and its culture prohibited inter-dining, particularly sharing food with Dalit communities. Hindus regarded that inter-dining was offensive to their beliefs and doctrines, which they considered as sacred. It is widely believed that eating food prepared by Dalits and eating food with them polluted the dominant caste people. It was not only the body and presence of Dalit, which was regarded as polluting; even the food cooked by Dalits was stigmatized as impure and polluted. It was in this context that the significance of the practice of inter-dining with Dalits becomes even more evident. Missionaries shared meals with the Dalit converts in their thatched huts. Missionary Todman from Cuddapah, during his tours in villages, had meals with Dalit converts where they sat on the ground together and were seen "eating in local fashion with fingers." In one of the villages, after taking baptism, Dalits invited Todman and his wife for lunch. They shared their meal with the baptized family. The missionary Dorothea Smith of Anantapur had a meal with a Dalit family, all seated on a mat. After eating all of them gathered around and discussed some chapters from the Bible (*MMCLMS* 1922, p. 237; 1934, p. 7).[11]

As Shuman observed, "the act of eating together and sharing meals is known as commensality, an activity that not only preserves the physical body but also creates and strengthens social bonds" (Shuman 2003, p. 501). Eating the food cooked by Dalits, which was served on common plates used by Dalits, was an expression of community bonding. Missionaries eating in the huts of Dalits symbolically expressed that the former was part of Dalit community. The feelings of love, joy, and community sense, which emerged from sharing food with the missionaries, were significant for Dalits. Further, it brought them into closer contact and allowed them to converse together as brothers and sisters.

3.4. Emergence of Badi and Gudi

After conversion movements, little thatched huts emerged in every Dalit *palem.* During the fieldwork, Dalits said that this thatched hut was their *badi* and *gudi* (school and temple).[12] This was a school and a church, both at the same time; school by day and church by night. The school and temple are public spaces. In traditional Rayalaseema, caste played a significant role in gaining access to these public places. Dalits were denied their right to access these spaces. However, the public sphere was formed around spaces such as churches and schools in Dalit *palems.* Dalit Children gathered in the school in washed and cleaned dresses. They were taught to read and write and listen to stories about Jesus and Christianity (Stanton 1950, p. 122). The school and church thus became new locations

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[11] *The Missionary Magazine and Chronicle of the London Missionary Society* (*MMCLMS* 1820–1940) was a monthly magazine of the LMS Mission. It was published in London. This magazine contains the monthly reports from LMS missionaries from various parts of the world. This is one of the important sources which I used. I have collected copies of this magazine from 1820 to 1940. Whenever this magazine is referred to in this article, the abbreviation *MMCLMS* will be used.

[12] Personal Interview from 2 November 2016.

for public gathering. It was here that men and women gathered every night and learned to sing, pray, and worship God and hear Christian preaching. Missionaries preached to them in those huts about God, sin, repentance, salvation, and devotion. Dalits oriented themselves to the teachings of the Bible and engaged with the ideas, meanings, and symbols related to it. In a course of time, a new consciousness emerged through what they heard during these Bible classes. The dynamic force of the Word—the written word (the Bible) and the spoken word (from missionary)—worked powerfully in the hearts of Dalit listeners; in Sanal Mohan's words, it worked as an "oppositional knowledge." Such oppositional knowledge became a source of enlightenment to Dalits to nurture themselves and cultivated in them new behaviors, new habits, a sense of morality, and a new understanding of themselves (Mohan 2015, p. 49).

The beginning of a new life, transformation, empowerment in Dalits began in these thatched huts. As missionary William Stanton states, "Here light is beginning to dawn on minds long bound in the prison-house. Here new hopes, desires and aspirations are born" (Stanton 1950, p. 122). For the missionary, this little thatched hut was "the nursery of the Kingdom and home of Religion" but for Dalits, it was a door to a new life and a center for their community. A new world was opened up to children and elders in these huts. By entering into the *palem*, staying there, and establishing the school-cum-church in the *palem* missionaries brought this otherwise forbidden and ostracized space into the folds of public space and transformed it into a space for knowledge and community gathering.

3.5. Access to Public Wells

Dalits were excluded from enjoying the right to access public wells in the villages. Caste rules were very strict about wells. The practice of untouchability was related to 'touching' water. When Dalits went to the well, they were supposed to wait for the other caste people to give them water. If Dalits drew water from wells, those wells were considered polluted. They were denied access to water because of their caste. Missionary Christlieb from Anantapur says that one may see a [dominant caste] man drive his oxen down to a water tank and give them a good wash down, or wash his soiled loincloth in it, but people from the Mala and the Madiga castes were not allowed to dip their vessels in the tank to take home the household water for cooking (Christlieb 1930, p. 38). However, missionaries put in efforts to help Dalits to dig wells for themselves and to own their wells of drinking water. In Mutyalapadu village of Cuddapah district, even today there is an old well in the *palem*, which is built with stones. Among the stones, a slate was engraved with the following letters in old Telugu language—John Clay, 1857 (Figure 2a,b). John Clay was one of the prominent SPG missionaries who worked in Mutyalapadu station. In the same village, there is another well in the *palem* which was a well dug by the missionary Richard Dendi Shepherd.[13] In fact, during famines, one of the relief works which missionaries organized for Dalits was the digging of new wells and repairing old wells (*ARLMS* 1898, p. 105).[14]

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[13] Jayaraju. Personal interview. 5 November 2016.

[14] *Annual Reports of the London Missionary Society* (*ARLMS* 1826–1950) was an annual report of the LMS Mission. It was published in London. It contains information about the mission work in each mission station from Rayalaseema along with the information from other parts of the world. I have collected copies of these reports from 1826 to 1950. This is one of the major sources which I used for my research. To refer to this report in the article, I use the abbreviation *ARLMS*.

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(**b**)

Figure 2. (**a**) Drinking water well dug by Missionary John Clay; (**b**) in the well, inscription of missionary name (John Clay) and year (1857) in Telugu language (Photo by the author).

4. Taking Sides with Dalits

Missionaries took a political stand when they saw Dalits were denied lives of dignity as human beings and individuals. They opposed caste violence perpetuated by dominant castes over Dalits. Missionary F. L. Marler from Gooty wrote in a report:

> Could we make an example of some of these scoundrels [dominant caste Reddys], others might be held in check. I do not forget that I came here to preach to all men, and to bring the

> Gospel of Christ and His righteousness to the most hardened of men; but it seems to me that, if we could by championing the cause of the oppressed, show men that we hate injustice, and will fight against it with all our power, we should create an impression that must tell for the Gospel in the end.
>
> (*MMCLMS* 1893, p. 244)

Missionaries could not tolerate injustice and therefore supported Dalits in their cause. There are incidents in the missionary reports where missionaries challenged the practice of bonded labor which was one of the essential aspects of the structure of caste system. In the southern Indian missionary conference of 1879, missionary Jacob Chamberlain presented such a case. In one of the villages, ancestors of eleven Dalits whom the missionary referred to as slaves, had obtained some money from a Reddy, agreeing to work for him along with their children, until the debt was paid. The Reddy had been very careful and ensured that the Dalits would never be able to clear the debt. When the Dalits converted to Christianity, the Reddy demanded that as Dalits were his workers, they had to work for him on Sundays as well as on other days. One Sunday, during worship at the mission house, a message came to Chamberlain that the Reddy had inflicted violence on the Dalits. Some of their houses were burnt down, and some people were beaten up. That night, Chamberlain and his colleagues went to the village and demanded a meeting with the Reddy. Chamberlain warned the Reddy against such violence. It was said that the missionary and six of his colleagues dismounted in front of his door. This had an impact on the Reddy and he agreed to have a meeting with them. In the meantime, the missionary met all Dalit families and asked them to tell him the circumstances. During this meeting, Reddy mentioned that the Dalits were in bondage to him. They had obtained money which they never paid back. If they would pay off this debt he would at once give them their freedom. The missionary found that the amount, owed by all those eleven Dalit families put together, with all their ancestral debts, was 71 rupees. Missionary Chamberlain and his colleagues paid that money and freed the Dalit families (Missionary Conference 1879, pp. 64–65).

Bonded labor was linked with caste. In Rayalaseema, Dalits were landless, economically dependent on the dominant caste Reddys. Many of Dalit families worked for Reddy landlords day and night without being paid and were always available to the Reddy and his family. As missionary Nicholson claimed, "each birth, each sickness, and each death plunges them deeper and deeper into the slough of debt, in which they have been ever since their birth" (*ARLMS* 1904, p. 163). Many of them, having borrowed money from Reddys, were bound to work for Reddy landlords for generations together. The interest kept increasing for such a loan. Furthermore, given their illiteracy, Reddys robbed and cheated these Dalit families in every way. They wrote down on the notarized paper larger sumsthan what the Dalits had initially borrowed (Goffin 1913, p. 51). In the description provided by Chamberlain, the Reddy perpetrated violence on Dalits when they asserted their individuality by not working in his fields on Sundays and attending the church against the wishes of Reddy. The Reddy could do that since he held these bond papers as evidence for the loan. Reddy was afraid when missionaries questioned him given the latter's knowledge of law. Missionaries confronted bonded labor, an old caste-practice, by questioning Reddys and releasing Dalit families by paying the debt.

In Jammalamdugu vicinity of the Cuddapah district, even today people recall how missionaries helped their (Dalit) communities during atrocities. Benhar, a pastor from Pulivendula remarked in a conversation with me that in the Nemmaladinne village, a Mala convert was tied to a tree and beaten up by the Reddys. Some Malas made a long journey to Jammalamadugu which was a mission station and reported to the missionary about what had happened. The missionary reached the village by horse and went to the place where the Mala person was tied up. Still sitting on the horse, he asked the people to untie the Mala. He then expressed his anger to the Reddys, took a coin from his pocket, bent it and threw it at the Reddys. He declared "these are my people. You bring this coin into the original shape and meet me at Jammalamdugu." Benhar further said that "the coin was not easy to bend, and when

the missionary bent it, it showed how angry he was at Reddys and his love towards us [Malas]."[15] Sikhamani, an elderly man from Chinna Venturla village remembered in one conversation that

> We had a thatched hut school in our *palem*. Hanumanta Reddy and Venkata Reddy came to the *palem*, destroyed the school and took all the equipment with them. The same night elders of the church, which included my grandfather, went to Jammalamadugu and reported the events to the missionary. Upon hearing this, the missionary came to the village and warned the Reddys. He ordered them to return whatever they had taken. By the evening of the next day, they returned all the articles.[16]

In matters of justice, missionaries supported Dalits. On many occasions when justice was denied to Dalits, missionaries took up the cases. Missionary Clayton tells a story of what happened in one of the villages of Tamil Nadu in the Madras Presidency to understand how Dalits were discriminated, cheated upon by the dominant castes and how Dalits got justice with the intervention of the missionary. According to Clayton, in one of the villages, a Dalit woman was caught by Velu Mudaliyar, one of the landlords from the dominant castes in the village, while she was plucking fruits in his farm. The angry Velu abused her and struck her so hard that she died on the spot. Following such unexpected consequences, Velu approached the village headman Sundara Mudaliyar whose name and fame was great in that area. Velu took the headman to the place where the Dalit woman had died and expressed his fear of imprisonment. The headman assured him security and sent a man to bring Chellan, the husband of the dead woman. When Chellan approached the headman, he was asked to choose between going to jail and taking 'compensation' of a few silver coins, equivalent to ten rupees. When Chellan inquired further the headman told him that somebody had struck Chellan's wife and she was lying dead on Velu's land; the headman then made false allegations against Chellan blaming him for his wife's murder. When Chellan started crying, he was told by the headman that nobody knows who killed her; since her body fell in Velu's land, Velu would pay the ten silver coins to perform the funeral. Further, he said that it was a better option to take the ten white coins and to take a new wife than going to jail and be hanged for killing her. Besides, the headman threatened him that if Chellan were not willing to agree to his terms, he would be seized by Velu. Further, a complaint would be registered that Chellan killed his wife and the former would present himself was a witness to the crime. Since there was no other option, Chellan accepted the money and took the body of his wife. The landlord who was the murderer and the headman were greatly relieved. On the evening of the fourth day, the headman heard from his grandson that the missionary had come and was staying for the night with Dalits. Hearing about the missionary was like a thunderclap to the headman. As he predicted, the missionary came to know about the death of a woman through Chellan. That midnight, three police came, arrested Velu and imprisoned him in Chingleput (Clayton 1890, pp. 229–44).

The above incident, gives insights into the life of Dalits—how it was not considered worth living; and how easily they could be killed and disposed of. They had no power to question the murderers who belonged to the dominant castes. If they dared to ask, they would be accused as murderers. Given the fear of colonial law, they were afraid of their crime and negotiated with Chellan. When the missionary intervened, law was implemented. Punishment meted out to the dominant castes was a new reality in society, a significant indicator of social change. Therefore the presence of missionaries empowered Dalits so that they could use the law and challenge the power and authority of the Reddys.

5. Hostility from the Dominant Castes

The involvement of missionaries in the lives of Dalits and their support for Dalits in matters of justice led the dominant castes to look at them with contempt. Mission records and oral accounts

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[15] Personal Interview on 16 July 2015.
[16] Personal Interview on 11 July 2016.

demonstrate incidents of growing animosity of the dominant castes towards missionaries. After the conversion of Dalits, following the instigation of village magistrates and Karunams, the Reddys of Vanipenta and Mutyalapad villages of Kurnool district attacked the missionary Uriah Davies and violently drove him out of the villages (Colonial Church Chronicle 1856, p. 95; Hibbertware 1912, p. 54).[17] In Kadiri, a group of dominant caste people planned to attack the missionary. One night, they sent nearly twenty people to the missionary's bungalow. They however could not find him or his family and left after plundering and pillaging the bungalow (Samuel 1923, pp. 234–35). During my interview with Sunil Varakumar, he recollected an incidenthe was told by his elders. Inthe Talamanchipatnam village of the Cuddapah district, the Reddys resisted the entry of the missionary to the village and let their dogs loose upon his horse. The missionary fell off the horse and was beaten up by the dominant caste mob[18]. Sujiv from Mutyalapadu and Leelamma from Rudravaram village recalled what they were told by their grandparents that the missionary R.D.Shepherd from Mutyapadu station was attacked by *palegars* on account of treating Dalits well[19].

6. Dalits Writing Missionaries into Their Household and Community Histories

Dalits remember the missionaries to the present day for their involvement in improving the lives of their communities. One of the LMS missionaries, Edward Porter came to Cuddapah in 1844, and worked till 1868 (Figure 3). It is significant to mention Porter here because mass community conversion movements took place during his time. Based on my oral history accounts, I infer that he left a deep mark in the hearts of Dalits. Before his retirement, Dalit converts from many villages in the Cuddapah district came and gathered at the mission church in Cuddapah to give their farewell to the Porter family (Porter 1885, pp. 65–66). Benaiah Cole, a Dalit convert from Cuddapah characterized Porter's time in Cuddapah as "Edward Porter's Era." He wrote in his book that, "Vikramarka established his era by squandering away all the Royal Treasures; Shalivahana by war and bloodshed; but Father Porter's was established by *love and piety*". Further, he said

> Ah! Venerable shades of Porter! What a mine of confidence of his name was to these poor people [Dalits]. I have seen the cubs of lions roar for hunger but I have not ever heard of Porter's converts to know what hunger was. He was a man of prayer therefore he fed his children with bread, butter, and kisses
>
> (Cole 1916, pp. 25–28).

After fourteen years of Porter's departure, in 1882, Henry Stanley Newman visited villages in the Cuddapah mission station; he witnessed converts remembering Porter with "intense affection." Dalits told Newman with tears in their eyes that "He was more than father to us" and Porter's portraits were hung on the walls of their little huts (Newman 1876, pp. 123–24).

Missionary J.I. Macnair from Cuddapah wrote that though it was nearly forty years since Porter left Cuddapah, his name was still a household word among many Dalits. Porter's stay in Cuddapah was a watershed moment, a red mark on the calendar so to speak, in a country where time was remembered by events and not by years. "I was baptized in Porter-dorah's[20] time," "In Porter-dorah's time I was five years old"—these and such expressions were common" (*MMCLMS* 1905, p. 238). Benaiah Cole provides ethnographic observations about Porter's love towards Dalit converts in Cuddapah. After his retirement, Porter left a bungalow behind him as his private property. Many years later, when the question of selling the bungalow was referred to him, he sent a long list of names as a reply. In that list,

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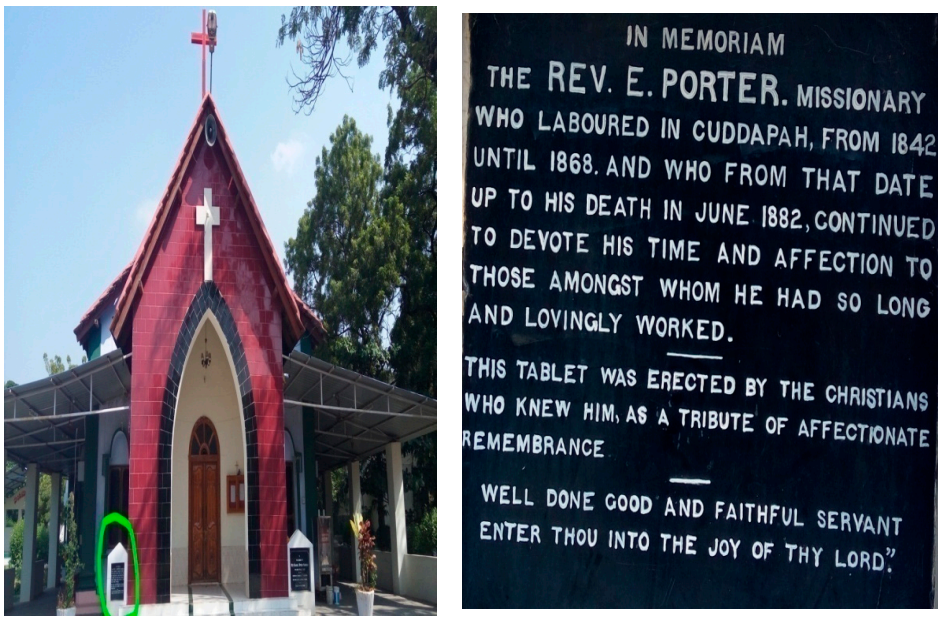
[17] *The Colonial Church Chronicle* was a missionary journal published by the SPG Mission. It was an annual journal printed from London. This journal contains the information of the SPG Mission stations and reports of missionary work across the globe.
[18] Personal Interview from 11 December 2016.
[19] Personal Interview from 5–6 November 2016.
[20] In Telugu language *Dorah* means "lord" or "sir" or "master." It is used to address both the white missionary as well as the local feudal lords.

each Christian's name in Cuddapah station was entered and opposite to it was mentioned, the amount they should get from the sale-proceeds of that bungalow; the smallest amount paid to the lowest of the Christians was rupees twenty. "In this way, he was the only one who used Home Christian Charities over poor Christian people for Christian purposes" (Cole 1916, p. 28). Porter died in 1882 in England. When missionary Bacon announced the news of his death in the Cuddapah church, the entire congregation was in tears. At the close of the church service, a proposal was made that a marble tablet should be placed in the chapel in memory of Porter (Porter 1885, p. 73). This tablet is still there in the Cuddapah town church building which was erected in 1884. (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Missionary Edward Porter (Source: (Simmons 1923, p. 8)).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 4. (**a**,**b**) Tablet which is erected in 1884 in the church building in memory of missionary Edward Porter (Photo by the author).

In remembrance of missionaries who worked among them, Dalits named their children after the names of missionaries. In Mutyalapadu village, Joseph named his son Satyananda Dendi Shepherd John Clay[21]. Sujiv who is a teacher from the same place named his son Richard. John Clay and Richard Dendi Shepherd were SPG missionaries and worked at the Mutyalapadu station[22]. In Jammalamadugu as Martha Yesudas remarked, a Christian lady named her child Peggy and another lady Smith. Peggy Hawkins was a lady missionary who worked in that area and Smith was a medical missionary in Campbell hospital at Jammalamadugu[23].

7. Conclusions

The above discussed evidence and oral accounts show how Dalits were treated as untouchable and were made to live in a ghetto. Nobody touched them, or ate with them. They were not treated as equals and were attacked. Nobody came to/for them and they were denied access to the most basic necessities, including drinking water. I have argued in this paper that Dalits conversion and their relationship with missionaries brought a remarkable social change among Dalits in Rayalaseema society. In the process of making Dalit converts as a Christian community, the missionaries questioned the hierarchical principles of caste-based society in India. Dalit converts experienced social equality which was expressed in the form of social interaction through community dining, accommodation, and dialogue with people outside their community.

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[21] Personal Interview from 5 November 2016.
[22] Personal Interview from 5 November 2016.
[23] Personal Interview from 8 November 2016.

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