Encounter between Protestant and Telugu woman's paradigms of scripture

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ENCOUNTER BETWEEN PROTESTANT AND TELUGU WOMAN’S PARADIGMS OF SCRIPTURE

Introduction

Telugu\(^1\) Christian women perceived the Christian scriptures as a written record of God’s word speaking directly to their life situations. They heard a feminine tone in the biblical texts because of their cultural understanding of deity and the divine revelation. In hearing God speak in the texts, they disregarded the human mediators in the process of divine revelation. Having been prohibited from reading, and even hearing, the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, Telugu Christian women asserted their equality with men by mastering biblical texts.

Christian women in Andhra Pradesh, south India, who hailed mostly from the Dalit communities, believed in “phonic” revelations of their Goddesses and abhorred the sacred texts of Hinduism prior to their conversion to Christianity. They rearticulated their understanding of the divine word in light of the Canadian Baptist missionaries’ view of scripture. Telugu Christian women eventually embraced the Bible as an “intimate” *lectio* and a means of God’s communication with humanity. Besides translating the texts into story-forms, Telugu women memorized the texts and recited them as they saw their recital to be an empowering experience.

This essay will glean from scattered clues available in the missionary literature and interpret those hints in order to identify Telugu women’s understanding of the Christian scripture. The active interaction of Telugus in the Northern Circars\(^2\) and

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1 A linguistic group of people in south east India who speak Telugu language. Telugu is most spoken language in Andhra Pradesh, south India.

2 The present districts of Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram, Visakhapatnam, East and West Godavaries, and Krishna were referred to as the Northern Circars. Mughal emperor Shah Alam gave away these districts to
Canadian Baptist missionaries began in 1874 and ended when the Telugu Baptists took over the reins of the Baptist convention in 1948. For the sake of brevity, I will not study the ramifications of this particular view of scripture on the hermeneutical lens of Telugu women although these two are closely intertwined. By grouping Telugu Christian women together, I do not see them a homogenous group. Telugu Christian women included women from both Dalit and Hindu (caste) backgrounds sharing contrasting understandings of scripture prior to their conversion to Christianity. Dalit women were more active in the religious affairs of their community, often as mouthpieces of the deity, than their Hindu cousins who were marginalized from reading and hearing the Hindu scriptures. Hindu women, however, were equally active in their households teaching their children popular Hindu piety and retelling the Hindu classics of bhakthi tradition. Despite restricted social intercourse, conversations from and about the Christian scriptures between Dalit and Hindu women brought them together.

In my search to find Telugu women’s view of scripture, I relied on the missionary sources, painfully aware of their limitations. Most of the conversations among the Telugu Christian women occurred either in the verandas of their homes or in the women’s seminary founded in 1922. Bible women -- native women preachers -- went out in the streets, visited non-Christian homes and told gospel stories. But none of these
conversations are available today as Telugu women, despite being literate, never recorded their god-talk. The faculty at Eva Rose York Bible Training School, a women’s seminary, included native women teachers. There are neither written syllabi nor course material available in the archives. Telugu women preferred to speak their god-talk from the biblical texts than reducing them to letters. This preference in itself reflects their view of scripture as a divine utterance that could not be reduced to a textual form.

The archival material, available at McMaster and Acadia universities, provides us with missionaries’ representations of native women. These missionary portrayals of the natives aimed at highlighting the accomplishments of missionaries to impress their donors and friends. These reports were preoccupied with the moves and movements of the male missionaries with their families and those of single women missionaries. They accounted for the places that missionaries visited, the institutions they founded, and the achievements they made. Needless to say, Telugu Baptists were considered as mere additions to the missionaries’ statistics. Therefore, the views and responses of native Christians did not evoke reporters’ imagination. It is still not impossible to decipher the faith of Telugu Christians in the hints scattered in these missionary transcripts. A re-reading of the texts with commitment to hear the submerged voices, suspicion of the colonizing texture of the texts, and solidarity with the native women would be helpful in hearing native women’s faith from these missionary representations.

● **From Speaking Goddesses to the God who writes**

Canadian Baptist missionaries who arrived in the Northern Circars in 1874 did not need to start from the scratch as there were at least four translations of Telugu Bible by middle of the nineteenth century. Christian missionaries found the translation of scripture
very crucial in their missionary activity either because of the *sola scriptura* principle or for the catechetical purposes. In addition, women missionaries disseminated the Christian faith among the Telugu women with picture books, hymns and the Gospel portions. Thus the message of the gospel was transmitted to Telugu women was sensory- see the pictorial representations of the biblical stories, hear the scriptures sung as hymns, and read the scriptural portions. This process of transmission and appropriation of the Christian message, however, demanded adjustments from both missionaries and Telugu Christians.

Dalits, who converted to Christianity *en masse*, had to make two adjustments in their belief system. First, Dalits accepted a male representation of the Deity offered by the Canadian Baptist missionaries. Second, they also welcomed the textual forms of divine revelation. For Dalits, the deity revealed herself as feminine\textsuperscript{5} and communicated her will through women priests. Dalits, along with their Hindu and Christian neighbors at local level, sought divine voice through sacrifices. When women priests invoked the divine voice through cultic rites, in the event of a natural calamity and community epidemic, Dalit goddesses spoke to the community through them. In converting to Christianity, Dalits traded their belief in feminine god and *theo-phony* for male representation of the deity and *theo-logy*.

Telugu Christian women, however, did not need to make any adjustment in receiving the divine revelation communicated through women. They continued to hear the sacred words uttered by women-- either women missionaries or the Bible women. They retained their prerogative in educating their families and communities in religious

\textsuperscript{5} Their goddesses include Mariamma, a Dalit rendering of biblical Mary, Yellamma, Kaamma, goddess of desire, Morasamma, Matangi, Gonti, a Dalit rendering of Hindu Kunti, Somalamma, and Moosamma.
matters. On the other hand, male missionaries, who once demonized the possibilities of a feminine God and divine voice uttered through a woman, conceded the possibility of hearing God’s voice through women. Canadian Baptist missionaries invited single women from Canada to join the missionary force and introduce Christian faith to native women in their homes. Men missionaries realized how crucial women were if they were to Christianize the Telugu society and how difficult it would be for them to reach native women since Hindu men would not permit any strange men to visit their homes. It is this strategic need of reaching the women that necessitated change in missionaries’ attitudes to scripture and opened up scripture to be explored by native women.

The arrival of single women missionaries warranted a few adjustments in missionaries’ understanding of the Bible. The sacred word could now be expounded in smoky kitchens of native huts and even by Telugu women. Canadian women missionaries found native women preachers as indispensable in their missionary visitations. Canadian and Telugu women reclaimed this religious function of speaking for God, which in the Dalit past belonged to women. While men missionaries were preoccupied in preaching on Sundays and writing biblical commentaries, women missionaries and Bible women took the scriptures to Hindu homes and Dalit hamlets. In an attempt to foster and tame native women’s god-talk, women missionaries founded a seminary for Telugu women in 1922 introducing the Bible and teaching them literacy for their continued reading of the biblical texts.

But in their encounter with Dalit women, women missionaries themselves gradually learned to present the gospel as “stories” instead of reducing it to abstract ideas.

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6 Matilda Churchill makes several references how indispensable Siamma, a Bible woman, was in her mission in her Letters from My Home in India, edited by Grace McLeod Rogers (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1916).
Telugu women’s illiteracy was one of the major factors behind women missionaries’ choice to tell the gospel in a story form. The use of oral tradition in transmission of the faith was very common among the Telugus. Moreover, having been baptized in the waves of evangelical revivals sweeping through the Maritime regions of nineteenth century Canada, Canadian Baptist women themselves were not women of written creeds and confessions.

Although Dalits were accustomed to receiving religious truths in the form of stories and songs, they were not completely averse to the idea of religious truths being available in textual forms. The mellowing of this Dalit animosity to textual forms of divine revelation was due to their interactions with other religions. The Hindu communities, with which Dalit Christians were in direct interaction, had their own religious scriptures. Moreover, Dalit communities had earlier converted to Islam, another religion with its holy book. The gradual introduction of the western education and worldview opened up Dalit minds to imagine new possibilities of God’s revelation. In fact, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Dalits were looking for an alternative religion of the book as a weapon to challenge the ever-absorbing and aggressive Hinduism. This was one of the many factors for Dalit conversions to Christianity en masse. Hence the Christian view of the truth being textual was neither strange nor intimidating. Rather, it was reassuring to have a scripture accessible to them in their language.

- A “Kind” Text written by a Feminine God

Telugu women’s openness to receive religious truths in a textual form does not indicate Telugu women’s willingness to subscribe to missionaries’ understanding of
scripture. Biblical narratives appeared to them as “kind” and feminine. Amelia Muir from Montreal, while speaking at a Baptist women’s gathering in 1880, referred to an episode that would shed light on Telugu women’s understanding of the Christian scriptures. Muir would have heard this story from a woman missionary working in India since women missionaries were required to report their experiences to women’s mission board officers at “home.” It was an attempt by the missionary and Muir to stir up the interest of her fellow women calling them either to give for the missionary cause or to go as missionaries. This story also mirrors the triumphal tone of a Baptist missionary in displacing the native scriptures.

According to the report, a woman missionary gave a portion of the Bible to a Telugu woman. Having read a few sentences, the reader, a Telugu woman, commented, “this book must have been written by a woman, it is so very kind to women.” Both the informant and reporter appear amused at the reaction. But they were also satisfied at the tone in which Telugu women described this text as an alternative to the Hindu scriptures, which Telugu women believed were written by men.

It is neither attested that all Hindu scriptures were written by men nor is it proved beyond doubt that any biblical book would have been written by a woman. We have no clue as to which biblical text/s was given to the woman in question, except to infer that it could have been one from the Gospels as missionaries often distributed portions from the Gospels in their street preaching. As such, there is no woman writer of the given text unless one hears a feminine voice in the transcript. This cryptic comment from these Canadian women reflects Telugu women’s view of God and the divine word. Canadian

women, whose ears were not tuned to hear a feminine God speak in the biblical texts, would not have fabricated this event. Seeking an alternative scripture to challenge the sacred texts of Hinduism, which legitimized gender discrimination, the Telugu woman readily saw a goddess behind this text offered by the Canadian Baptist missionaries. But this goddess is different from the goddesses that Dalits worshipped for their deities only spoke and never wrote. This reflects Telugu women’s openness to imagine a writing goddess as early as 1880.

However, we cannot dismiss this as a callous response of a naïve reader who was yet to see the gender discrimination in this new worldview. But seeking a goddess, who writes, can be understood in light of Telugu women’s eagerness to master literacy and the sacred texts. John McLaurin discerned “a craze” for literacy among Dalits as early as 1879\(^8\) although, for economic reasons, parents restrained their daughters from going to schools.\(^9\) Dalits, who shared oral traditions, would have seen the act of reading and writing as an empowering experience as well as a challenge to Hinduism, which also was a text-based culture. Dalits considered literacy as a political weapon with which they could challenge their Hindu oppressors. Hindu propriety prohibited both all women and Dalits from hearing and reading the Hindu scriptures. Melting metal was to be poured in to their ears if they heard the Vedas, Hindu scriptures, being read. According to Hinduism, the very recital of the religious scriptures and their sounds is sacred and emancipating to one’s soul. It was the prerogative of the Brahmans, the ‘highest’ caste in the Hindu hierarchy. In this context, mastering these texts and their sounds is a power claim. Through mastering the sacred texts, Telugu women were attempting to create

\(^8\) *Canadian Missionary Link*, published by the Woman’s Board of Ontario and Quebec, 1879, 6.
\(^9\) Women were equally active in earning livelihood for their families in Dalit families.
parallel power structures in which they could assert their power. It is evident in the response the women’s seminary in Tuni received and in the way Telugu women, especially Dalit women, mastered (memorized) the texts, and rendered them in story forms to their Hindu counterparts.

This claim on the Scriptures was equally shared by Hindu and Dalit women. In fact, it built solidarity among these two, though partially. It gave the Dalit women a forum to claim their equality with their Hindu counterparts. The preaching of the Dalit Bible women to their Brahmin counterparts defied the age-old Hindu prejudices that Dalit women were inferior to their Hindu counterparts in nature and knowledge. Orville Daniel, writing as late as 1973, cited an account of how a Dalit woman’s “memory” of the sacred texts “galloped” a Brahmin woman. Mariamma, probably a Dalit Bible woman, impressed her Brahmin counterpart with her knowledge of the sacred texts and “magnetic personality.” Daniel, a Canadian Baptist missionary, does not identify the social identity of the Bible woman except to refer to her as “black aunt.”

It is difficult to date the report from which this event was quoted. But Daniel cited it to highlight the contributions Canadian women made to improve the status of Dalit women. Nor are we sure of the origin of this racist description, as both Brahmins and Caucasian Canadians were equally adept at using such language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It would not surprise me if a Brahmin had used this language as color of skin was one of the factors in discriminating in Hindu varnasharam dharma. However, this

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10 Orville Daniel, Moving with the Times: The Story of Baptist Outreach from Canada into Asia, South America, and Africa (Toronto: The Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board, 1973), 47.

11 Though the Sanskrit word varna means ‘color,’ it can be translated as social ‘category’ as each category has diverse castes within it. Hindu varnashrama dharma has four such categories as designated by Manu, the legendary founder of caste system. They are: 1) Brahmin; 2) Kshatriya; 3) Vaishya; and 4) Sudhra. Although each category is identified with a social status and occupation- Brahmin as priestly class,
description gives us clues on the social location of Mariamma, Bible woman, as a Dalit woman. Although women missionaries desperately sought to recruit Christian women from Hindu background as Bible women, they had to employ Dalit women as there were more applicants from the Dalit background. This episode illustrates the leverage memorizing of the sacred texts gave the Dalit women in their transactions with caste women.

- Hearing God in the Biblical Texts

Like many Latin American communities, Telugu Christian women heard God speaking to them quite literally in their hearing and reading of the biblical texts. On the contrary, a Canadian missionary could only read a biblical passage but could not hear God in it as clear as a Telugu woman could. Their literal reading of the scriptures often overlooked the human elements in divine revelation. But this attitude, however, would not have desecrated the human element in divine revelation since Dalits always looked for a theophony in human voice. This literal reading of the biblical passages sounded amusing to the missionaries’ eyes, which were trained to analyze the language of the biblical texts with the tools offered by Brooke F. Westcott and Alvah Hovey.  

Orville Daniel recorded one such conversation between a Telugu woman and the God who she thought was writing to her. Daniel cited an undated baptismal ceremony from Gajapathinagaram. After finding a woman eligible for baptism, the missionary led this Dalit convert to a stream of water to baptize her. At the time of baptism, the missionary, as it was customary, read from Romans 6:1-4. He read, “What then are we to

Kshatriyas as warriors, Viashyas as business people and Shudras as skilled and manual workers- these identifications are generalizations, as there were different occupations and hierarchies within each category

12 The notes offered by Westcott in his translations and the commentaries by Hovey were often quoted in McLaurin’s commentaries. It is likely that these were used in their theological education at Canadian Literary Institute which is now the McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.
say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” The woman promptly responded, “No, the Lord Jesus will give us victory over sin.” The annoyed missionary told her that she did not need to give “outspoken replies” to the questions in the text. He then continued to read, “How can we, who died to sin, go on living in it?” The woman cried out, “Dead to sin! Praise be to God!” The missionary was enraged and told her again that he liked to read the passage without “interruptions.” Again he continued, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” She gladly shouted back, “He is my savior.”

Although the answers in the conversation hint at some amount of mishearing of the questions, they reflect Telugu women’s attitude the text. This is a classic example of how the women heard God speaking to them in the biblical texts. This openness to bluntly hear God speak in a biblical text unfortunately ignored the cultural biases in the text and the writer’s agenda. But it allowed the reader to bring her world to that of the text.

**Conclusion**

The pre-Christian worldview of the Telugu Christian women tuned their ears to recognize a feminine *voice* of God in the biblical texts in which their Canadian Baptist missionaries could read the divine *word*. This missionary encounter between Telugu women and Canadian Baptists opened up for each partner a new world of possibilities. While Telugu women welcomed the textual representation of divine oracles, Canadian Baptists accepted the idea of women communicating the divine word in pictorial, audio and literary forms. It not only opened up new ways of communicating the gospel but also of understanding it.

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The socio-economic conditions of the Telugu women enabled them not only to hear a “kind” voice from God through scripture but also to own it in order to assert their social equality. Imaging a feminine God and imagining an egalitarian social order were the two keys that the Dalit culture had provided to Telugu women in their understanding of scripture. The ramifications of imaging and imagination in Telugu Christian women’s interpretations of the scriptures and evolution of their spirituality would need further inquiry. But Telugu Christian women’s hearing a feminine God in the biblical texts and dreams for an egalitarian society can reshape our understanding of scripture and re-anchor the process of theologizing.

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