

Report of the Colloquium – Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives

The Colloquium **Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives** was held at the Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad from the 22nd to the 27th of September 2009. The focus of the Colloquium was on the History of Christianity in the South Indian State of Andhra Pradesh, and particularly on how mission happened and happens **At** and **From** the ‘margins’ – the margins connoting the marginalized yet resilient Dalit communities.

The Colloquium was an important part of a wider study project also entitled **Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives**, which, intending to be a critical and constructive contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 Conference, was an attempt to understand the patterns, protagonists and perspectives of mission in Andhra Pradesh, both present and past, from a Dalit perspective as an attempt to recover the Dalit agency and agenda in Christian mission and draw their implications for the ecumenical imagination of the Church’s mission in the world today.



The Context

In spite of the ongoing atrocities against them and continuing exploitation and oppression, Dalits are asserting themselves by writing themselves into history, celebrating Dalit religion and culture, actively engaging in the political processes of the country and converting to religious faiths that they perceive to be egalitarian – like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

*The fact that the Indian Church today is predominantly composed of Dalit communities can be attributed, to a great extent, to the positive influence of Christian Missions in their struggle for identity and emancipation. However, as the missionaries encountered these communities, they were challenged to review and rearticulate their understanding of mission. The aim of the **Mission At and From the Margins Project** was primarily to i) unearth how in the encounter and interaction of two positions in the mission fields namely – the power of the missionary and the powerlessness of the people – the native evangelists, catechists and the masses emerged as the protagonists of mission using mission as a condition for social change; ii) identify the patterns of mission which have emerged in the context of such interfaces and are evolving today; and iii) offer theological reflections on mission from perspectives emerging from the margins.*



The Significance of the Colloquium

The significance of the colloquium lay in its perspective - that of the margins, and in its focus - on the state Andhra Pradesh.

The South Indian State of Andhra Pradesh offers an exciting terrain for a study on mission for several reasons. The most significant of these would be that the state has witnessed the historical 'mass movements' of the 19th century which saw the influx of Dalits into Christianity; the phenomenal growth of 'mainline' denominational churches; the emergence of several indigenous churches like the Bakht Singh Fellowship and the Bible Mission Church and other non-Church movements like the Subba Rao movement; and the incipient and inchoate interaction between the various churches and secular Dalit movements.

Owing to the largely Dalit composition of the Andhra churches, the conceptualization of the Church's mission has been distinctly centered on the theme of God's engagement in the struggles for Dalit identity, dignity and liberation. However, in spite of the richness of resources that the churches in Andhra Pradesh offer for any research on mission, these resources have been hitherto unexplored. In this context the colloquium 'Mission At and From the Margins' is all the more significant as it draws from the insights of contemporary scholarship and is based on ethnographic, historical and theological studies of mission of churches on the margins which combine both a generic 'bird's eye-view' as well as a more specific and participatory 'worm's eye-view' of historical processes.

The Process

*The wider study project '**Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives**', of which the colloquium was a part, involved a two-fold process. The first part of the process comprised primarily of field studies and archival research by various scholars engaged in research in various fields from different denominations, theological institutions and the secular academia. The second part of the process was a group study that involved ethnographic study and interviews with various focus groups in Vegeswarapuram, a village 30 km away from the town of Rajahmundry in the West*

Godavari District of the South Indian State of Andhra Pradesh with a purpose to derive impulses, identify patterns and offer perspectives that come from Dalits. The Colloquium was an attempt to bring into fruitful conversation the results of both these processes.



The Composition of the Participants

Individuals and groups involved in the various processes that culminated in the Colloquium were diverse and representative of the following denominational/confessional, regional and institutional backgrounds.

Denominational / Confessional Representation

- Baptist
- Church of South India
- Indigenous churches like the “Bakht Singh Assemblies”
- Lutheran
- Mennonite Brethren
- Roman Catholic

Institutional / Regional Representation

- Andhra Christian Theological College, Hyderabad (ACTC)
- Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars (CODECS - India)
- Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Centre, Chennai
- Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad (HMI)
- Hyderabad Institute of Theology and Apologetics
- India Sunday School Union, Coonoor (ISSU)

- *Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay (IIT)*
- *Indian Theological Seminary, Chennai (ITS)*
- *International Services Association (INSA), Bangalore*
- *King's College, London*
- *Master's College, Vizag*
- *Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College, Hyderabad (MBCBC)*
- *National Council of Churches in India, Nagpur (NCCI)*
- *South Asia Theological and Research Institute, Bangalore (SATHRI)*
- *The United Theological College, Bangalore (UTC)*
- *University of Madras, Chennai*
- *University of Sydney, Sydney*
- *Vidhyajothi College, Pune*

Apart from these, we also had four in absentia papers from contributors from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA; Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA; Auckland City Hospital Chaplaincy, Auckland, New Zealand; Adrian College, Michigan; and Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, PA.



Major Themes and Corresponding Papers

Communalism and Christian Mission

- *Harmony, Polyphony, Cacophony: Voices of Dissent and Unfamiliar Vocabulary*
- *Hunting Using Hoax: Dalits, Caste and the Conversion Debate in India*

Indigenous Church Movements and Mission Challenges

- *The Phenomenon of Bible Mission: Exploring the Features of a Local Church on the Margins*
- *A Critical Study of the Bakht Singh Movement and the Challenges it Poses to the Ecumenical Understanding of Mission*

Globalisation and Mission

- *Mission as 'Opening the Roofs' in the Context of Globalisation and Marginalisation*

Historical Perspectives

- *The Nature and Pattern of Christian Church as a Reflection of Christian Missions in Andhra Pradesh (1884-1960): A Critique*
- *The Dalits' Search for Christianity in the Pre-Independent Era in Andhra Pradesh: A Study of the American Baptists and American Mennonite Brethren Missions from the Dalit Perspective*
- *Integral Mission: Leadership Formation as a Strategic Drive in the Convention of Baptist Churches in the Northern Circars (CBCNC)*
- *Revisiting the Missional Engagement at Parkal: A Recovery of the Role of the Dalit Christian Community*

Biblical Perspectives

- *Dalit Interpretation of the Wisdom Literature with Special Reference to the Underprivileged Groups in the Hebrew Society: A Mission Perspective*
- *Decoding the Politics of Lukan Discipleship: Discipleship, Discrimination and Dalit Christians in India*

Theological Perspectives

- *Positive People: Seeking Strength from Stigma*
- *Dalit Christians Come of Age: A Reading of the Recent Times*
- *Transformation of 'Varna' and 'Jati' Relationships in Koinonia*

Feminist Perspectives

- *Stories of Women in South Andhra Lutheran Church: Feminist Theological Reflections*
- *Why make it a Big Deal! Seeing the Widow beyond Her Two Coins (Mark 12:41-44): A Dalit Feminist Perspective*

Sociological Perspectives

- *Caste Identity and Combating Marginality: A Village Lutheran Church in Coastal Andhra*
- *Blurring the Boundaries: Telugu Bible Women, Itinerancy and Social Mobility*
- *Camouflaged Dalithood: Church's Mission, Telangana Experiences*

Ecological Perspectives

- *Mission at and from the Margins: Dalit Church's Response to the Ecological Crisis*

The Plenary

As part of the Colloquium, a plenary on the penultimate day was a platform by which contributors and participants brought their ideas, comments and suggestions to the table on how best we can move forward, both in terms of research and collective engagement with contemporary issues that the Church faces in India, particularly in Andhra Pradesh.



Insights

The Colloquium has provided material for a mission text on Andhra Pradesh, thereby contributing to a much needed area in the History of Christianity in India. The theme of Mission and Power, which is one of the nine study themes of the Edinburgh 2010 Conference is very relevant to the Andhra Pradesh context as the state has witnessed the interaction of different powers (local feudal systems, colonialism, missionary efforts) amidst powerlessness (the Dalit communities). In these encounters the local people in Vegeswarapuram and for that matter Christians generally in Andhra Pradesh embraced Christianity on their own terms, which becomes a significant study theme making important contributions to the ongoing debates about conversion, nationalism, and Christian mission. Another insight that emerged is that no religion is purely indigenous and no religion is purely foreign.

Other Highlights

The presence of the Rev. Andrew Anderson, the Chairperson of the Edinburgh 2010 Committee, the Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala, Programme Executive, WCC, Geneva; the Rev. Dr. Sunil Bhanu Busi, President of Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church; the Rev. Dr. P. B. Arnold, President of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church; and the Living Letters Team from the World Council of Churches enriched our conversation.



We were also greatly enriched by the daily bible studies led by Rev. Dr. Jione Havea, Rev. Dr. Monica Melanchthon, Rev. Dr. Daniel Prem Kumar and Rev. Eddie Makue, who opened up new vistas in reflecting upon biblical texts in the context of the margins and highlighted how biblical stories help us to listen, share, and be open to the experiences of other people whom we often tend to ignore. The presence of the Living Letters Team was a great encouragement especially in the context of WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence. Their presence thus helped all of us to recall and reaffirm our solidarity with one another in God's mission.

The Colloquium was also significant by way of its global representation. We were enriched by the experiences that were brought from different parts of the globe – Asia, Europe, America, Africa and Australia. Amidst this diversity, a common feeling emerged about being committed to Christ and the world and working together as one body with different parts.

Special appreciation must be recorded to the WCC and the Edinburgh 2010 Committee for making a significant contribution towards the organizing of this Colloquium.

Our Hope ...

It is hoped that the outcome of this Colloquium, which would come out as a publication, would enrich the understanding of Christian mission in different parts of the world and contribute to the study of World Christianity. Through this particular effort to understand 'Mission At and From the Margins' it is our desire that this will stir thought and action in the ongoing efforts to understand the general through the particular, and the particular through the general.

List of Participants

- *Dr. Ajit Prasadam, General Secretary, India Sunday School Union, Coonor*
- *Rev. Andrew Anderson, Chairperson, Edinburgh 2010 Committee*
- *Rev. Asheervadam I P, Assistant Professor, Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College, Hyderabad*
- *Mr. Ashok Kumar M, Ph.D Student, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay*
- *Rev. Bapanaiah, Pastor, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Vegeswarapuram*
- *Ms. Bethel Krupa, Doctoral Candidate, SATHRI, Bangalore*
- *Ms. Daisy Prasadam, India Sunday School Union, Coonor*
- *Rev. Daniel Jayaprakash, AELC, Rajahmundry*
- *Rev. David Nelson Babu Geddam, Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church*
- *Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala, Programme Executive, WCC, Geneva*
- *Rev. Devahi Selina, Programme Officer, International Services Association*
- *Rev. Eddie Makue, General Secretary, South African Council of Churches*
- *Dr. Geoffrey Oddie, The University of Sydney, Australia*
- *Dr. George Oomen, Professor, The United Theological College, Bangalore*
- *Rev. Dr. K. Jesurathnam, Associate Professor, The United Theological College, Bangalore*
- *Rev. Dr. I. John Mohan Razu, Professor, The United Theological College, Bangalore*
- *Rev. Dr. Joine Havea, Lecturer in Biblical Studies, United Theological College, New South Wales, Australia*
- *Rev. Dr. Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, Lecturer, The United Theological College, Bangalore*
- *Dr. Monica Melancthon, Professor in Biblical Studies, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, Chennai*

- *Rev. Dr. P. B. Arnold, President, Andhra Pradesh Council of Churches & President, Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church*
- *Rev. Dr. Peniel J R Rajkumar, Lecturer, The United Theological College, Bangalore*
- *Ms. Prasuna Nelavala, Doctoral Candidate, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai*
- *Rev. Pravin Prabhu Sudheer, Ph.D Student, University of Madras*
- *Rev. Raj Bharath Patta, Executive Secretary, NCCI – Dalit and Adivasi Concerns*
- *Ms. Rebecca Sangeetha Daniel, Research student, King's College, London*
- *Mr. S. John Boopalan, Research Associate, CODECS*
- *Rev. Sahayadas, Lecturer, The United Theological College, Bangalore*
- *Mr. Sam Varghese, Lecturer, Master's College, Vishakapatnam*
- *Ms. Shanthi Mondithoka, M. Phil (University of Madras) in Christian Studies*
- *Rev. Sreekanth R R K, Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rajahmundry*
- *Rev. Sudheer Philip, Lecturer, MBCBC, Hyderabad*
- *Rev. Dr. Sunil Bhanu Busi, President, Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church*
- *Rev. Dr. Suraj Komaravalli, Professor, Andhra Christian Theological College, Hyderabad*
- *Rev. Dr. Vasanth Rao Chilukuri, Professor, Andhra Christian Theological College, Hyderabad*



About CODECS & MBCBC - The Organisers

CODECS stands for '**Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars**' who are committed to academic, activist and ministerial engagement with the church and society. We celebrate experiences, perspectives and stories that emerge from Dalit contexts, while taking seriously the stigma of untouchability and any power-related exclusion and alienation. We seek to foster community and conversation, and provide space and support for critical reflection and action of like-minded persons working towards envisioning and engendering transformed, inclusive and hospitable communities. CODECS seeks to do among others, the following:

- To bring together Dalit, Ecumenical, Christian Scholars for community, conversation and collective engagement in the ongoing struggles for Dalit emancipation.
- To foster fellowship and solidarity among academics, organic intellectuals, activists, church leaders and grass root communities.
- To facilitate interface between Dalit theology and the discourses in other/allied disciplines.
- To publish periodicals and texts on Dalit theology, culture, history, pastoral practice and so on, recognising that there are various strands of thought or schools within the Dalit discourse.
- To assist the Church in India as it engages itself in Dalit liberation movements by providing theological impetus.

The Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College is situated in Shamshabad and is a seminary of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of India. MBCBC is affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College. The seminary also has a rich archival collection of historical documents, missionary correspondence, and other material pertaining to the history of Christianity in Andhra Pradesh and is thus a significant resource centre for further research and deliberation.