

MISSIONARIES ROLE FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF DEPRESSED CLASSES WOMEN THROUGH THE LACE INDUSTRY OF NARSAPUR AREA OF ANDHRA PRADESH

Mr. M. Hari Prasad

Lecturer in History

S.R.R. & C.V.R. Govt. Degree College

Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

Email: mangalagiri.hariprasad@gmail.com

Narsapur area of West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh is famous for the crochet or lace works. Crochet is a process of creating fabric by interlocking loops of yarn, thread, or strands of other materials using a crochet hook. The name was derived from the French word 'crochet', meaning 'small hook'.¹ Even the industry dating back to more than one hundred and fifty years still it maintaining its legacy, and over a two-lakh people are involving till today in this work. Geographically about 50 kilometers radius of East and West Godavari districts and Krishna district concentrated on crochet work. This work was mostly confine to women. The Christian Missionaries of 19th century had introduced this lace work in this area. The English East India Company's with an ambition to grip trade and commerce it did not entertain any missionary activity in India under the pretext that such activity would hinder their trade activity. Nevertheless, in the year 1813, William Wiber Force proposed a resolution in the House of Commons regarding amendment of Charter Act of English East India Company for allowing Christian missionaries to promote gospel work in India.² This step has encouraged the several missionaries from different denominations of Western countries to step into India to do evangelical work and other service oriented works. After they allowed in to Indian sub-contnent as per Charter Act of 1813, they started to promote lace work in Narsapur area among the women of Christian converted and non-converted. Here, in this paper an attempt is made to depict the services rendered by the Christian Missionaries of various denominations in the field of self-employment pertain to women

from depressed classes. The sum total of the lives of Christian Missionaries speaks eloquently of their contribution to the betterment of the out-castes, especially of the Malas and Madigas.³

Background of Lace-Industry:

Even during the medieval period Narsapur is a thriving town in the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh. Dutch East India Company had established a factory at Palakol and chosen Narsapur as port in the 17th century, Narsapur was already in a prosperous trading centre for the exports of hand-woven and hand-painted cottons together with grain and other commodities.⁴

Its fortunes dwindled in 1813 when the Charter of East India Company was changed and the country was opened to import of machine-made textiles from England. In 1827, the East India Company closed its factory at Narsapur and withdrew. In subsequent years, Narsapur area saw several shifts in its fortunes, the most dramatic being its evolution as a centre for lace making. The evolution has a long history and is closely bound to the history of Christian Mission in the Godavari Delta.⁵

The lowest of the low community in the ladder of the Indian caste system had been depressed classes. Lack of enterprise, capital for development, ignorance, total absence of support from caste Hindus, they remained on the fringe of the society, undertaking the uncaring occupations. During the calamities of either man-made or nature, the worst victims were the Dalits. They were the double depressed one was from the calamities and another from the society. Thus, the cup of their sorrow was full to the brim. In this situation stepped in the while missionary. The missionaries in their existing society did not prevail any caste system and discrimination that nature of nurturing life made them close to any community of Indian society. In this divergent situation, the Christianity missionaries had taken different

care for the uplift of depressed classes in India in addition to promote their faith. Implicitly they acted as a social reformers and harbingers to Indian social reformist movement.

Owing to above reasons the finer lace-work in Narsapur is closely connected with the entry of the Christian Missionaries in the East and West Godavari Districts. There are at least two lakh people in these districts both depressed classes and as well as caste people involving in this work. But very few people know that the early Missionaries of the Godavari Delta first introduced the art of lace work over a period of hundred and fifty years ago in the Godavari Delta basin. The women of Christian missionaries had given the training in the art of lace work to the converted women with an aim to empower the women economically. Further, the missionary women trained the local converted women in the lace work and gave them advances to set finished products and finally they export the goods to foreign market.

Initially the Charter Act of 1833 provided the opportunities to the Christian Missions in Europe and America to propagate their faith in India.⁶ Many missionaries of different denominations began to respond to this opportunity in India. In their aspire they searching for suitable mission-stations across the Andhra region. In this scenario, Captain Sir Aurther Cotton, an engineer of English East India Company at Rajahmundry invited Anthony N. Groves who belonged to the Plymouth Bretheran Mission, to start his Gospel service in the Godavari region. As a part of their response the missionary had sent two people viz., George Bear and William Bowden in 1836. They established their mission station at Narsapur and called it as 'the Godavari Delta Mission'. They were actually non-professionals and were expected to make their work self-supporting.⁷ They spread the Gospel to the neighboring villages and converted the many people in Palakol in 1842 especially from depressed classes.⁸

Another mission that spread into West Godavari District was Church Missionary Society. John Goldingham, Collector of Krishna District, invited this Mission in 1836 to

spread the Gospel. The Church responded by sending missionaries Robert T. Noble and Henry Fox to serve the Telugu people. While Robert T. Noble founded the Mission at Machilipatnam, Fox founded the branch of the Mission at Dummagudem and Chintalapudi of West Godavari District. Later, the name of the church changed to the Church of South India. Like this until 1937, many missionaries of different countries and denominations of Christian Missionaries entered into this region. Besides their work to convert the people into Christianity, they trained the people in different kinds of income-generating works and among them the significant one was Lace work.

Origin and growth of Lace Work in Narsapur Area:

There are many suppositions about the origin of lace work in and around Narsapur area. According to Mara Mies, “the lace industry or rather the technique of crocheting was introduced into this area by missionaries around 1866”. The origin of lace industry is connecting closely with the history of the missionaries in the Godavari Delta. In 1837, George Bear and William Bowden came to Narsapur where they founded the Godavari Delta Mission. They settled down in the abandoned “Dutch House” near the Holland Wharf in Narsapur. Bowden who was first taught the art to a few destitute girls of depressed classes for whom they provided shelter in their house in Narsapur. Based on the fact women were to be the first learn the craft of lace making. They were two more versions about its origin. One among them was the Irish sisters introduced the art of crocheting around 1860. Other contributing evidence tells us that the lace making work had introduced by Mr. and Mrs. Macrae from Scotland after they were joined in the Godavari Delta Mission.⁹

The early Missionaries were very compassionate by tragic plight of the depressed classes that most of them distributed gifts among them. The Hermannsburg (German) Missionaries were particularly liberal in this regard. Entire families of the Dalits slept in the

church, the school and the porches of Missionary bungalows. When famines and droughts had put most of the people out of the work, they flocked to the Mission compounds to receive food to keep going. Some Missionaries felt that the depressed classes, not being accustomed to independence and self-respect, had lost all sense of initiative, thrift, industry and honesty.¹⁰

On the other hand, during the Great Famine period (1877-78), lace industry became a means of livelihood to the poor women of depressed classes to assist in a quantum of their share to family by the training of missionaries. In the early phase the Missionaries gave threads to the women and taught them some patters then they collected the finished goods and sent them as gift parcels to friends and dignitaries in Scotland, England and Ireland in order to collect the donations from them for Missionary work.¹¹

More information is available about the services rendered by Mrs. and Mr. Schmidt. They involved in famine relief works in 1870s in Rajahmundry. While the situation was so grim the people from depressed classes were prepared to offer children in exchange for a morsel of food. This Missionary bought lands, and distributed money for their proper use.¹² Mrs. Schmidt began to introduce the lace work to the natives and thus she was responsible for Lace industry in Rajahmundry Mission. Every day she conducted sewing classes from 12 pm to 2 pm. Her husband Mr. Schmidt founded institutions to teach skill like carpentry to the illiterate converts. Similarly, Mrs. Schmidt wished to help the women of converted families through lace work. She began spend time in teaching lace and crochet making even in traveling in boat. In 1879, for the first time, lace products exported from Rajahmundry to Philadelphia. Thus, Mr. And Mrs. Schmidt made significant contribution before leaves the Mission in 1883, after thirteen years of service.¹³

In their intensive work, clever students were identified by missionaries had sent to Rajahmundry Industrial Training School for more intensive coaching. This enabled them to

become teachers themselves.¹⁴ Industrial school was the workshop for the girls and women of the Dorcas Home. Crochet lace, pillow lace, handkerchiefs, fancy work, church hangings, embroidery church hangings, gown and stoles for pastors, dress-making, machine and plain sewing, weaving of floor mops, shopping bags, weaving of bed sheets, colored bed covers, tapes were the things done in the school.¹⁵

Mrs. Cain the wife of Rev. J. Cain had started lace work in Dummagudem missionary station in 1882. Actually, it is 160 miles away to Narsapur town. Lace making became a regular production process under her initiative. Mrs. Cain paid daily wages to the lace workers of Dummagudem. Average per week she gave Rs.70 to Rs. 80 for a lump sum lace work did under her control. Lace-making was usually taught at the church Missionary society's boarding-school for girls. But during the famine of 1896-97, Mrs. Cain encouraged the young women who had trained the art in the school to take it as alternative source of livelihood. Form that time onwards, the industry spread among the wives of the natives round, and there were about 110 workers and most of them were Christians. The lace exported was qualitative. She sold it first in India, later in England, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The making of the lace was controlled through friends and well-wishers in India and abroad. Though she was succeeded by Miss C. Wallen, the Dummagudem lace industry came shortly afterwards to end. It is not clear whether Mrs. Cain was influenced by the lace makers of Narsapur or whether lace making as a regular industry in and around Narsapur followed Mrs. Cain's example.¹⁶

In the early phase, the missionaries gave thread to the women and taught them some patterns. Then they collected the finished goods and sent them as gift parcels to friends and dignitaries in Scotland, England and Ireland in order to collect donations from them for missionary work. Probably, crocheting was also taught to the girls who attended the schools,

which had been founded by Bear in 1854 in Narspur and by Macrae in 1875 in Amalapuram.¹⁷

Role of Converted Christians in Lace work:

Messrs. Jonah and Josef, belonging to the converted Dalit families, made their entry into lace work around 1900. They were teachers in the primary schools of the Mission. They continued to give work to the poor. But at the same time, they changed the production of lace from a non-profit activity aimed at soliciting donations and aid for the poor into a value producing business and then lace-work came under native management. The missionaries gave them address of importers or buyers of lace in England, New Zealand, Ireland, etc. to develop this industry in a broad concept through the natives of Godavari delta basin.

The first invoice sent by registered mail to New Zealand. Messrs Jonah and Josef first sent samples to the customers abroad on receipt of their orders they gave thread - 'Diamond Thread' imported from Manchester- and the designs to the women and asked them to prepare articles. About 2000 women in Narsapur were then engaged in this work. Jonah and Josef not only employed poor Christian women but also the fisher women or the Agnikulashatriya community women, thus opening the work to the non-converted community, whom were also fringe of society. Actually, until this step most of the women of non-converted Dalits were mainly engaged in agricultural work.¹⁸ Later in 1908, K. Smaraju started (native) exporting lace regularly on purely business mode, which gave a great encouragement to growth of lace export in West Godavari District.¹⁹

CONCLUSION:

In my findings there were many things coin side the development of industry among Dalit women during colonial period in Godavari delta basin. One laudable aspect has to be

mentioned here regarding to the women of depressed classes and their contribution and initiation to survive in a better economic status of their families such progress may be less among caste Hindu women. In the first place, lower caste women were more important economically and as 'bread winners' compared with a higher proportion of the latter not being engaged in income earning occupations. For hundreds of years Mala and Madiga peasant women had played a key role in agricultural and allied works. While Mala women helped support their families by spinning (as the census of India in 1921 so clearly showed), and many Madiga women collected bark for the process of tanning and preparing the leather.²⁰ This kind of innate quality provoked them to involve or move into lace work in the initial stage and later it became profession of depressed classes women. In the course of time it became a profession to all the community's women of Narsapur region. In the initial stage there are only 30 varieties of lace items developed and present more than 300 items are producing in this area. At present over 2 lakh people are involving in this thriving art both men and women. The government of Andhra Pradesh with an objective of overall development of Andhra Pradesh economy is focusing on the development of labor-intensive and export-oriented industry for the generating both sustainable employment and valuable foreign exchange. The foreign exchange is expected to Rs.40 to Rs.50 crore. If women produce the lace goods and men do the business. For this background of development undoubtedly all the services rendered by Christian missionaries of the Godavari delta basin to the persons with the most appalling stage known to society.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. The salient difference between crochet and knitting, beyond the implements used for their production is that each stitch in crochet is completed before proceeding with the next one, while knitting keeps a large number of stitches open at a time. Knitted textiles survive from early period, but the first substantive evidence of crocheted

fabric relates to its appearance in Europe during the 19th century.,
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/crochet>

2. *C.B.Firth, An Introduction to Indian Church History, (Delhi, 1961), pp.158-59.*
3. Numerically Mala and Madiga people are more in number than the remaining communities of Scheduled Castes (or depressed Classes) in Andhra Pradesh. And they were benefited more than the others of same classes through the impact of Christian missionaries. Within the Malas and Madigas there are about 25 and 18 sub-caste groups respectively., Venkata Ramana, **Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Tribes (STs) in Andhra Pradesh: A Situation Assessment Analysis**, MPRA Paper No.48186, p.2, https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/48186/1/MPRA_paper_48186.pdf (accessed on 14-12-2018)
4. Stven Cohen, “Portuguese carpets from Khorasan, Persia”, in Ruth Barnes (Ed.) **Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies**, (London,2005),p.32. Also see, www.ijmart.in/PreviousIssues/May%202101/5.pdf (Accessed on 12-12-2018)
5. Stven Cohen, op. cit., p.32.
6. Shering, **The History of Protestant Mission in India**, 1706-1881, (London, 1844), p.403.
7. M.L. Dolbeer, **A History of Luthernism in the Andhradesa 1842-1920**, Board of Foreign Missionaries, (New York, 1959), pp.38-39; Also see Olive Rogers, **Origins of the Godavari Delta Mission and Its Distinctive Tenants**, (Narsapur, 1986), pp.10-13.
8. T. John Ratnam, **Lutheran Sangam** (Telugu), Lagos Printers & Publishers, (Guntur, 1992), p.86.
9. www.ijmart.in/PreviousIssues/May%202101/5.pdf
10. Luther Dolbeer Jr. **A History of Lutheranism in the Andhra Desa (the Telugu Territory India) 184-1920**, (New York, 1959), p. 304.
11. www.ijmart.in/PreviousIssues/May%202101/5.pdf(accessed on 10-12-2018)
12. Luther Dolbeer Jr., op.cit., p. 308, See also Harpster, **Among the Telugus**, (Philadelphia, 1902), p.308.
13. Rev. M.L. Dolbeer, **Hundered years of Lutherns Society 1842-1950**, (Telugu), (Rajahmundry, 1950), p.31.

14. M.J. Jaya Prasad, **On Contribution of Lutheran Mission- A Study of Godavari Region-1845-1937**, unpublished M.Phil. dissertation Submitted to Acharya Nagarjuuna University, (Nagarjuna Nagar, 2005).
15. **Annual report of the foreign missions of United Lutheran Church Mission for the Year 1935**, p.41.
16. F.R. Hemingway, **Madras District Gazetteers, Godavari**, (Madras, 1915), p.112;
Also see E.B. Bromley, **They were men sent from God**, (Bangalore, 1937), p.5
17. Ibid.
18. **Annual report of the foreign missions of United Lutheran Church Mission for the Year 1935**, p.41.
19. www.ijmart.in/PreviousIssues/May%2021015/5.pdf
20. **Census of India 1921** (Madras), Part-2, pp.253-260.