Dalit Women and Colonial Christianity

First Telugu Bible Women as Teachers of Wisdom

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The paper focuses on the history of the first three Bible women, Mary Wesley, Martha Reuben, and Bathsheba, who came from marginalised communities in Rayalaseema, and emerged as new leaders of social change in the context of colonial modernity and Christianity in the region. The emergence of a modern profession of Bible woman for Dalit women in the 1870s was transformative, opening doors of education, learning, and transforming them into local leaders. Bible women played a pivotal role in the history of Dalits, gender, and missions by shaping the life and community of Dalits and spreading Christianity in Rayalaseema.

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While historical studies have examined Bible women and their contribution to the missionary movement in South Asia (Sebastian 2003; Haggis 1998; Kent 1999; Taneti 2013; Mohan 2017), relatively little attention has been focused on studying how the profession of Bible women started in India, particularly in the Telugu-speaking regions, especially the endeavours of the first Telugu Bible women. Based on insights from some of the studies mentioned above, this is an effort to listen to the voice of the first three Bible women of Rayalaseema[1] that have remained silenced by the missionaries and unnoticed by historians. Moreover, in doing so, it analyses their emergence as new leaders of social change and their contribution to the transformation of gender roles and patriarchal structures among the people in Rayalaseema society. The paper draws on archival material, such as colonial administrative reports, as well as a wide range of missionary sources, and additionally uses oral interviews from the field.

In Rayalaseema, Dalit communities (Malas and the Madigas) were the lowest in the social order. For centuries, they were despised and degraded, kept in a state of servitude by the dominant castes.[2] Further, they were subjected to untouchability and unseenability. Their presence and approach, considered impure, was despised by other castes and even their shadow was believed to be polluting. The caste system, with its hierarchical social structure, did not recognise their social value and did not treat them as human beings. In addition, Dalits were not allowed to access public places, such as temples, schools and drinking water wells (Cornish 1874: 118). However, their encounter with Christianity brought visible changes in their life.

In 1822, protestant mission groups such as London Missionary Society (LMS) established their mission station at Cuddapah in Rayalaseema region. Even though individual conversions of Dalits began in the 1820s, mass conversions among the Dalits in Cuddapah and Kurnool districts took place in 1851 (Porter 1885: 46). Initially, the missionaries focused on the conversion of men, as the wives of missionaries were unable to devote their time and strength entirely for women's work, because of family and household responsibilities. However, in the 1870s, the office of Bible women emerged in Rayalaseema with the expectation that they would find access to families and women, otherwise inaccessible to Christian influence. This office was a direct result of a movement that began in England in the 1850s. Mary, Martha and Bathsheba were

the first three Bible women in Rayalaseema who emerged as new leaders, availing opportunities that colonial modernity and missionary Christianity provided. Their work as Bible women contributed towards social change for the women in the region.

Evolution of Bible Women

The origin of Bible women in Rayalaseema can be traced back to the office of British Bible women in England, with Ellen Ranyard being a leading name in the movement of Bible women (Kent 2004: 150–51). Ranyard was appalled at the condition of people in the slums of London (Alldridge 1887: 114). This led to the first Bible woman being appointed in 1857 to carry the message of god by selling Bibles to the poor. In addition, Ranyard founded the Bible and Domestic Female Mission (BDFM) to cater to the spiritual needs of women in the slums of urban England. The mothers' meeting was an essential part of this mission (Taneti 2013: 40–42). Ranyard communicated her missionary work to the donours through the magazine *Missing Link* which was widely read by those whom the Bible women worked with. Ranyard's concern for the salvation of women in slums in London later grew into a concern for the salvation of women in India and other countries. This concern found expression in the origin of Bible women in Rayalaseema.

Martha Kilpin, a missionary who lived in Cuddapah, was a regular reader of the *Missing Link* magazine.[3] After her retirement, she settled in England, where she conveyed to Ranyard that there were prospects for Bible women in Indian villages, and that she was willing to undertake the correspondence and secure reports, if funding was guaranteed (*Missing Link*, March 1871: 91). Kilpin contributed a series of articles to this magazine and argued for the necessity of Bible women for the conversion of local women, appealing to the readers in England to contribute funds towards the Bible women in Cuddapah mission station (*Missing Link*, April 1871: 124). As a result, in 1871, Mary Wesley and Martha Reuben were appointed as the first and second Bible women in Cuddapah district (*Missing Link*, April 1871: 125). Bathsheba was appointed as the third Bible woman in Nandyal mission station in 1872 (*Missing Link*, July 1873: 208; Lewis 1879: 12). They were the first Bible women in the entire Telugu speaking area. They were accountable to Kilpin and were expected to send monthly reports which were published in *Missing Link*. Kilpin worked as the liaison between BDFM and the local Bible women in Cuddapah in securing salaries and supplies. Each Bible woman's salary was £12 per year. The financial support from BDFM and Kilpin's correspondence together shaped how the office of Bible women evolved in the Telugu speaking areas, particularly Rayalaseema.[4]

Biographical Sketches

Gathering information about Bible women and their work in the missionary reports has its own challenges. As missionaries did not record details of native workers, complete details about the Bible women discussed in the paper was not available. Information about how they became Christians, their family background, details about their husbands and children is not available. This was because the readers of *Missing Link* wanted to read about the conversions that were results of their funds and prayers, rather than the personal details of the native Bible women. Therefore, their biographical sketches are reconstructed from scattered clues available in missionary literature.

Mary Wesley: Mary Wesley was appointed as the first Bible woman in Cuddapah station along with her son Samuel Wesley who had been trained as a native medical missionary. There is no direct information about her social identity. One can assume that she was from the Dalit community based on the following clues. In one instance, it is seen that working along with her son enabled her to gain access into caste houses where no other Christian (Dalit) woman was allowed (*Missing Link*, April 1871: 125). Another instance refers to a woman named Achamma from a dominant caste who visited a relative undergoing treatment at the missionary dispensary. While staying the night with Mary Wesley, Achamma felt that having a meal cooked by Mary Wesley would break her (Achamma's) caste, so she was given grain and oil to prepare her own food (*Missing Link*, February, 1872: 53).

Mary began her work in Proddatur when a dispensary was established and her son was appointed as a native medical missionary (*Missing Link,* September 1871: 276). As Kilpin recounts, in 1871, Mary visited many houses and read the Bible and conversed with 700 women in the entire year (*Missing Link*, February 1872: 53). She interacted with many female patients who came to the dispensary for medical treatment. She worked in Cuddapah district for three years, and in 1874, when her son was appointed at the Black Town Dispensary in Madras, she moved there and continued her work (*Missing Link*, May 1874: 155; PDGA 1874: 33).

Martha Reuben: In 1871, Martha Reuben was appointed as a second Bible woman in Cuddapah. There was no clear mention of Martha's caste identity in the mission records, but the following quote hints at her background: "She was going into the houses of women of different castes, reading to them the word of God" (*Missing Link*, January 1875: 26). Missionaries wrote this kind of sentences in the context of native workers who were Dalits to point out that even though they were treated as untouchables, they were received by every caste (including Brahmins and Reddys). Another reference was of Martha visiting a village, where she found several women spinning under a tree. Ankamma, who she knew among these women, invited her to sit with them, when "all those women were Sudra caste (a higher caste than her own)" (*Missing Link*, March 1877: 86). These details suggest that she was from the Dalit community. Kilpin reports that Martha had formerly been an *ayah* in an orphanage, and that she was a clever, intelligent, affectionate, and a pious woman (*Missing Link*, April 1871: 125). In the first year of her work, Martha visited 13 villages, held mothers' meetings with native Christian

women and conversed with 300 Hindu and Muslim women (*Missing Link*, February 1872: 53). However, according to Kilpin, Martha resigned her job in 1879 because of her failing health (*Missing Link*, October 1879: 312).

Bathsheba: Appointed in 1872 at the Nandyal mission station, Bathsheba was the third Bible woman in the LMS mission in Rayalaseema. She was from the Reddy caste, a dominant caste in Rayalaseema. Her grandmother embraced Christianity in 1855 and her mother did so in the 1860s (ARLMS 1856: 80; *Missing Link*, July 1873: 207). Bathsheba worked in Nandyal town and its vicinity for nine years. In 1881, she was moved to Gooty as the mission station shifted from Nandyal to Gooty. In Gooty station, she worked nearly 27 years under Emma Thomason, the wife of missionary W W Stephenson. Bathsheba married a LMS catechist (*Vivekavathi*, October 1911: 12). For many years, Bathsheba was financially supported by Miss Lees from England (ARLMS 1908: 71; Lewis 1879: 12). Emma Thomason, a missionary, documented that Bathsheba visited the houses of almost every caste and they visited her in her own home, too (MMCLMS 1884: 398). Sometimes, Bathsheba took all the women who visited her to the missionary's house so that these women could see and converse with women missionaries, which was followed by a meeting called "mothers' meeting" (MMCLMS 1884: 398). In 1907, after 36 years of work, she resigned from her job (ARLMS 1908: 71).

Bible Women and Skills

Mary, Martha, and Bathsheba took up the opportunities offered by colonial modernity and missionary Christianity, which introduced Christianity and literacy in their lives. Their knowledge in reading and writing, strong religious faith and association with Kilpin, while she was in Cuddapah, contributed to their appointment as Bible women. They were recruited to evangelise native women. However, their activities contributed towards emancipation and liberation from the oppression they faced as Dalit women. Unlike the later generation of Bible women, they had no formal training.[5] Initially, they were looked at with suspicion, as fortune-tellers, whose object was to destroy caste, and cause shame and disgrace to those they spoke to (*Missing Link*, January 1875: 26). Nevertheless, the capabilities of Bible women drew the attention of local women, who began asking them to visit their houses. It is important to recognise that despite no formal training, Bible women acquired and used various skills as part of their profession to impart the Christian message.

Reading: Reading was an essential part of the profession of Bible women as they needed to read the Bible. In Rayalaseema, people were astonished to see Mary, Martha and Bathsheba reading (the Bible). When Mary was reading portions from the Bible for female patients in the dispensary, they would exclaim, "How well she reads ... We cannot read a single line" (*Missing Link*, October 1873: 312). When Martha read the Bible to the gathered women in a village, in astonishment they said to one another, "Can women read? ... look at this woman, she reads without fear or shame" (*Missing Link*, October 1875: 302). The surprise was because a woman being able to read in Telugu society was a new phenomenon. In traditional Indian society, Brahmins maintained the monopoly over education. Dalits and women were denied access to education owing to their caste and gender. Moreover, during this period, women were widely regarded in society as weak, foolish, senseless and the embodiment of evil. Education for women would ruin their lives, bringing shame to their husbands and destroy happiness within families (Acchamamba 1913: 1). In a conversation with Brahmin men, Kilpin was told that "it was not possible for a black [native or Dalit] woman to learn to read," indicating how caste society undermined women, propagating the impossibility of women's literacy (*Female Intelligencer*, September 1864: 189).

However, after mass conversion movements, LMS missionaries established village schools and night schools in *palems*—Dalit settlements, introducing a culture of reading and writing, which was the "threshold of cultural modernity" (Mohan 2015: 10). Bible women took initiative and availed the opportunities provided by missionaries and the colonial state. The advent of education engendered a complex set of changes in the life of Bible women. The act of reading was a new and liberating experience that opened for them a route to get out of the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy. In a context where education was denied to women in Hindu society, women's knowledge of reading the alphabet not only ensured eligibility to take up the profession of Bible woman but also gave them social respect. Bible women, by learning to read and write, demolished the myth that women were incapable of reading and that only a certain category of people were destined to learn.

Interpreting and contextualising texts: The Bible, the sacred text of Christian religion, occupied a central role in the life of Bible women. For centuries, Dalits were denied access to Hindu religious texts; in addition, they were prohibited from hearing, reading, and reciting Hindu shastras, and if they did, their tongues would be cut off, and molten poured into their ears as punishment. Such was the nature of control Brahmins maintained over the scriptures. Hence, the immense significance of Dalit women accessing the Bible, which was regarded by them as akin to the shastras (*Missing Link*, May 1874: 156). When the Bible was made available in the Telugu language, Dalit converts, especially Bible women, embraced and identified with it. They perceived the Bible as a "Text of Life" and a "Text for Life" (Rajkumar 2018: 121). A certain empowerment came with access to the Bible, as it indicated education. Wherever they went, they carried the Bible. The Bible was viewed as a sacred object that contained divine power. Further, it was integrated into their everyday life. In their world view, the Bible became a powerful "metasymbol" of their culture of literacy (Clarke 2002: 251–54). By memorising and reciting the verses from the Bible, Mary, Martha, and Bathsheba became well versed with the text, developing skills to understand the Bible and appropriate and contextualise it to people's circumstances. Eliza Kent (1999: 138) points out that the ability of Bible women

"to locate on the spur of the moment a particularly appropriate Bible verse or chapter constituted an impressive display of textual virtuosity." When female patients came to the dispensary with various diseases and suffering, Mary Wesley read and explained to them the accounts of people being healed from their diseases and the miracles performed by Jesus Christ in the New Testament (*Missing Link*, October 1873: 312–13). The following extract helps us understand Bathsheba's mastery over the scriptures and her skill in interpreting and appropriating chapters from the Bible according to the context:

> a woman being ill sent for her [Bathsheba], told her that she was very ill and wished God would take her. Bathsheba talked to her for some time about the great Physician [Jesus Christ], and read about Christ healing the woman of her bleeding issue ... Two days after, Bathsheba visited her again and read about crucifixion ... and explained that Christ suffered all this for us, and asked her to pray to Him again ... The next time Bathsheba visited her, she was dying, but said: "I am praying to Jesus, will he forgive me?" Bathsheba repeated many texts such as, "Though your sins be as scarlet ... and left her comforted." At her next visit, the woman was dead. (ARLMS 1887: 105)

In the above cited passage, during her dialogue with a sick woman who was about to die, Bathsheba made two references from the Bible which were suitable to the situation. As part of the first reference, she told a story of a woman from the Bible who was suffering from bleeding for 12 years. She was healed when she touched the cloak of Jesus. This illustration highlights that Jesus was a healer who could heal her too. The second reference was made when a dying woman was doubtful about her faith, and who was seeking forgiveness for her sins. Bathsheba read a verse from the book of Isaiah from the Bible: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1: 18). The story of the healed woman and the verse confirming forgiveness from the Bible certainly appealed to the sick and dying woman.

Through these narratives, Mary and Bathsheba not only addressed the immediate physical need of the sick women but also introduced the Christian god as one capable of healing, forgiving, and meeting their needs. As Sebastian (2003: 16) rightly points out that it was the context of their conversation that is significant, rather than just what was read.

Singing: Mary, Martha, and Bathsheba developed the skill of singing, which was significant for them as they used this skill to disseminate the Christian message to women (ARLMS 1898: 100). In Rayalaseema culture, religious or spiritual matters were transmitted to people in villages through oral traditions of songs. Katta Narasimham, a retired teacher from Cuddapah district, in a conversation with me, recalled that in Rayalaseema it was an age-old custom for the wife and husband or a group to tour the villages, where they present biographical accounts of famous kings and virtuous women through stories and songs. They stay in each village for three to four days telling stories through songs at night and are given grain by the village people.

The singing tradition was very much part of the social life of the villagers in Rayalaseema society. Communicating and conversing in villages through the medium of songs was common. Women sang songs on occasions, such as childbirth, puberty, and marriage ceremonies, and while working in the agricultural fields, they sang humorous songs, songs on various caste professions, songs about gods and goddess, as well as songs on different social themes (Seeta Devi 2004: 6–7). These oral traditions contributed to Mary, Martha and Bathsheba acquiring singing skills. They learned many of the Telugu Christian songs and employed those to demonstrate the story of a Christian god (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 242). When they were preaching, singing had the power of attracting and holding the audience, making it tremendously significant in the religious and social context they operated within. During her house visits, Bathsheba carried a song book along with the Bible. As Christopher (2015: 157) points out, the song book became a cultural marker that was placed next to the Bible.

Martha and Bathsheba found songs as powerful instruments of enhancing self-expression. During their visits to villages, Bible women sang songs to gain the attention of women. Bathsheba's rendition of songs involved "great expression" which attracted many women (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 242). She was asked to write down the lyrics of the songs she sang, which the women could learn with the help of those who could read (*Missing Link*, August 1874: 251–52). Bible women started their "women meetings" by singing hymns and songs (MMCLMS 1884: 398; ARLMS 1885: 70). Quite often, the gospel story told through the medium of the songs appealed more directly and lingered in the memory of listeners. Over a period, the skill of singing songs became an essential qualification for the job of Bible woman. Sudarasanamma and Vasundaramma, Bible women working currently in Rayalaseema region, revealed to me that along with telling stories from the Bible, singing Christian songs is an essential qualification for a person who wishes to work as a Bible woman.[6]

Bible Women and the Public Sphere

Dalit Women, as Bible women, were engaging in new roles in the public sphere. Jurgen Habermas et al's (1974: 49) notion of the public sphere is an arena of social life where people come together, communicate with each other, exchange opinions and contribute towards the forming of public opinions. The public sphere is open to all people irrespective of caste, gender, and religion differences. However, in traditional Rayalaseema society, the public sphere was the domain of dominant caste men. Women from these dominant castes were confined to the private sphere. In the name of division of labour, these women were expected to perform activities in the domestic space, such as cooking, caring for the elderly, childbearing and rearing, and serving husbands (Christlieb 1930: 41–46). In relative contrast, Dalit women often were required to emerge from the domestic sphere for everyday labour in agricultural fields. However, there were social restrictions on their mobility and public interaction. The patriarchal norms prohibited them from interacting with other men and restricted them to participate in public spaces where men gather. Nevertheless, colonial modernity and missionary Christianity allowed for Mary,

Martha, and Bathsheba to come out as Bible women and into the public sphere. As Jane Haggis (1998: 95) rightly pointed out that while missionary women tried emancipating local women by converting them to Christianity, the Bible women were liberating and elevating themselves from their low caste status, by taking up this profession. Their profession provided them opportunities and enabled their visibility in public sphere. In addition, the profession gave them public roles, such as evangelist, organiser, and teacher. Through these various activities and roles, Bible women commanded religious authority and social respect in the public, which was otherwise denied to those situated in a similar social location. Their visits to the public space and activities they were involved in give us a sense of new gender roles that were being shaped as part of the profession. They found new dignity in public life and a new place in the structure of the missions. Let us examine some of the activities of Mary, Martha and Bathsheba which were carried out in the public sphere.

Touring the villages and visiting houses: The profession of Bible woman enabled Martha and Bathsheba to construct a space where they could move with dignity and freedom. Touring villages was a regular aspect of their work. Inderpal Grewal (1996: 136) argues, the culture of travel and mobility signifies the notion of freedom. While touring the villages as a part of the profession, Bible women not only enjoyed freedom but also overcame traditional gender roles that confined women to the domestic sphere. During village visits, Bible women conversed with women at various places, common among them were public wells and under the shade of large trees. In the traditional village structure, public wells played a significant role. In the colonial period, women from Rayalaseema villages, after finishing household work, went out to public wells to draw water, carrying their pots on their hips (Christlieb 1930: 37–38). The public wells served as a meeting place for women and an opportunity for a chat. It was here that women exchanged village news. During one of her village visits, Martha stood near the village well, leading many women present there to ask her, who she was. When she introduced herself to them, they were in awe of her, and when they learnt that she could read, they asked her to read for them. She read from the Bible and spoke to them about the way of eternal life (*Missing Link*, October 1875: 302).

Gathering under the shade of large neem or tamarind trees was a common feature of rural life in Rayalaseema. During the daytime, particularly elderly men, and women, sat and discussed personal and village matters, while involved in some work such as peeling peanuts or weaving cotton. On one of her visits, Martha reported that she found several women spinning under a tree. Ankamma, who was also present and whom she knew, invited her to sit with them. All the women there, at that time, were from the dominant caste. She sat with them and sang a Telugu hymn. They were astonished to see her reading, singing, and speaking boldly, and said "As for us, we are like slaves, spinning all day long." She had long conversations with them, read and explained the parable about the Samaritan woman from the New Testament (John 4: 7), (*Missing Link*, March 1877: 86). Also, Bible women also preached and distributed bible tracts during their travels.

Another important task for Bible women was visiting houses, interacting with women, sharing about the Christian god. Emma Thomason, a woman missionary who Bathsheba worked with in Gooty, reported that Bathsheba visited nearly 60 houses of every caste, read the Bible, and taught them regularly, in one year. Further, she had been received by people of every caste (ARLMS 1885: 70, 1903: 155). Missionary reports show that she visited the houses of Brahmins (ARLMS 1888: 105). In Gooty, a Brahmin woman sent word to Bathsheba to visit her. After a conversation with her, Bathsheba read verses from the New Testament (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 243). Bathsheba's access to Brahmin women was due to her caste privilege as she was from the dominant Reddy caste, whereas Martha—a Dalit woman, said that due to her caste location she could not speak and approach Brahmin women (*Missing Link*, July 1872: 207). Historically, Madiga and Mala castes were considered untouchables, which could explain this. Moreover, some Brahmin women were not receptive to preaching from Bible women, unlike women from other castes. For instance, Bible woman Elizabeth Joseph from Madanapalli of Cuddapah district reported that some Brahmin women told her that they were not sinners, and they did not care to hear about Jesus (*Missing Link*, January 1875: 26). However, Martha often subverted these caste norms by interacting with different caste people and entering the houses of dominant castes and government officials. Moreover, she visited the houses of Muslims and interacted with Muslim women, too (*Missing Link*, January 1875: 26).

During their house visits, they sang songs, preached the Bible, and offered prayers. Along with this, quite often they also acted as peacemaker in family disputes. They listened to problems of the women in the house, offered prayers for them and their families. In addition, they gave practical hints about health, cleanliness, keeping the house neat, rearing and care of infants and encouraged women to send their children to the mission school (*Harvest Field*, January 1909: 17). Bible women also comforted and supported women in times of bereavement and sickness. At a house where Bathsheba visited, a woman was crying bitterly, because her two children had died recently. Bathsheba calibrated her words according to the context and sang a hymn as well as a reading from the Bible (John 14), which talks about Jesus's comforting words to the troubled hearts. The portion which she read recognises context and comforts the listener, who responded with, "your words are good; by them I obtain some comfort" (*Missing Link*, June 1876: 180).

Organising women's meetings: The profession of Bible woman gave Martha and Bathsheba a public role as evangelists and preachers. Preaching about the Christian god and reading the Bible during women's meetings was an important activity which they carried out in the public sphere. Bible women gained this space through these meetings and used this to empower and shape themselves and other women as modern women. The meetings were organised in one of the houses which they visited and sometimes at a missionary's bungalow (MMCLMS 1884: 398). These meetings began by singing songs, as women from the neighbourhood gathered and sat in a circle. Sometimes, the mistress of the house would gather several her neighbours together when she was expecting or had sent for the Bible women (ARLMS 1885: 70; MMCLMS 1914: 221; *Missing Link*, January 1875: 26). After singing, the gathered women were asked to share whatever they remembered from the previous meeting. Then the Bible women read verses from the Bible and explained it to them. Martha and Bathsheba's preaching were characterised by themes that ranged from notions of sin, the birth of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection, forgiveness, love of god, and admirable virtues (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 243).

In traditional Rayalaseema society, Dalits and women were kept as illiterates. Reading the scriptures and explaining it to the people was exclusively the domain of Brahmins. Brahmin men alone had the privilege to speak about god and claimed mastery over religious books. For generations, they had the monopoly over religious preaching. Dalits and women were not allowed to hear and read sacred books of the Hindu religion. In this context, reading, reciting, and explaining and preaching the Bible were an empowering experience for the Bible women in the public sphere, as it allowed them to break many caste-based norms. By performing these activities in a public gathering, Bible women proclaimed their equality with Brahmins, and challenged the monopoly of Brahmins. Moreover, as Taneti (2007: 84–85) argues, they established parallel power structures in which they asserted their agency.

Documentation in 1909 suggests that women meetings had been taking place in Gooty town for at least 25 years. In a meeting held in September of 1909, nearly 50 women gathered and discussed topics, such as education, widow remarriage, idol worship and new mothers and children (*Vivekavathi*, October 1909: 6). Women's meetings opened a new space for socialisation, allowing them to take breaks from their chores, come together, interact with each other, share their problems and happiness, praying and supporting each other, while revisiting previous discussions.

Although the stated purpose of these meetings was redemption from sin, they laid a platform for local women to emancipate themselves from the chains of patriarchy and caste. As they listened to ideas about education, spirituality, and medicine, this ensured a certain exposure to modernity. Also, these meetings helped women build confidence and improve their self-esteem. Through these meetings, mobilising efforts, teaching literacy and scriptures, Martha and Bathsheba created womens' networks in Rayalaseema, which embodied a sense of community, generating incredible social capital among women.

Agent of women's literacy: Martha and Bathsheba took up a public role as agents of women's education; they advocated and encouraged women's education. They introduced women to the reading of the alphabet. Bathsheba's following conversation with a dominant caste woman exemplifies her radical thoughts on women's education. A woman who visited her houseowner was astonished to see her reading and said "What! Can this woman read?" In turn, Bathsheba asked her that was not it a good thing to be able to read. The lady replied, "Well, to some extent it may be good thing; but if [girl] children are sent to school they will not learn house-work properly." Bathsheba went a step ahead and argued that if children had a willing mind, they might learn school and housework, too. At the end of her conversation, Bathsheba had read a little book about the advantages which women get if they were able to read (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 243). When Martha was asked by women that "Can women read?" her response was "Yes, we [women] can read and we also can teach others to read" (*Missing Link*, October 1875: 302). Martha and Bathsheba who had experienced empowerment through literacy believed that education was an instrument for betterment of women.

There were prejudices against female education in society. The women folk in the villages were imbued with the notion that "if the women in a house learn to read, the men will die" (ARLMS 1915: 84). Further, they regarded women's reading as a shameful act (*Missing Link*, October 1875: 302). Mary, Martha, and Bathsheba broke these notions by learning to read. In addition, they taught women to break old customs and urged them to send their children to school (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 243). During house visits and women's meetings, apart from religious education, Bathsheba taught women to learn and read the alphabet, sing, and learn and tell stories from the Bible. She encouraged her audience to learn reading so that they could understand the Bible on their own and engage with it better. When women expressed a doubt about their ability to learn, she reassured them that as many others who were learning, they could also (*Missing Link*, August 1883: 243).

Bible women became agents of women's literacy. From their work, it is evident that Mary, Martha, and Bathsheba were instrumental in bringing gender transformation in Rayalaseema society. They believed in the value of education and worked for the enhancement of women's life. By encouraging women to acquire literacy, Bible women challenged the existing caste norms. They used education as a tool for the emancipation of women. Their pioneering work in introducing women to the culture of literacy was a distinctive phase in transforming gender relationships in Rayalaseema.

Conclusions

Ordinary women from Dalit backgrounds availed opportunities provided by colonial modernity and missionary Christianity and became Bible women. By going door to door, reading from the Bible, interpreting it, praying, sharing their own

personal experiences, Bible women became agents of the mission. As Sebastian (2003: 21) argues, Bible women's freedom of movement and their professionalism were signs of the early career woman in South India, and therefore could be termed "liberatory." They became an institution, and their work was indispensable. By acquiring various skills and moving in the public sphere, they crafted themselves as new leaders of social change. Moreover, they mobilised other women to come out from domestic spaces to the public through womens' meetings and empowered them by introducing them to the alphabet. This is what conversion meant for women. The modern profession of Bible woman provided an opportunity to cultivate skills, to empower themselves, to be independent and to defy the older norms under which they were subjugated. Moreover, their endeavour was not only converting, educating women but in that process, they introduced a set of gender models. They mediated between local women and missionary women. In fact, Bible women's work was instrumental to the change of gender roles and spread of Christianity in Rayalaseema. These qualities and achievements, unusual for women at the time, led to the people whom they worked with, to call them as "Teachers of Wisdom" (ARLMS 1904: 166).

NOTES

1 Rayalaseema is a contemporary euphemism for what the British, when they ruled India, called "ceded districts" which was part of the Madras Presidency. At present Rayalaseema, one of the regions of Andhra Pradesh state contains four districts, namely Anantapur, Chittor, Cuddapah and Kurnool.

2 In colonial and missionary records, they were addressed as Pariahs, Out-castes, Non-castes, Madigas and Malas. In this paper, they are referred as Dalits and their caste names are used wherever necessary.

3 Missionary Edward Porter and his wife Martha Kilpin who is often referred in missionary records as "Mrs Porter" were appointed in Cuddapah station in 1844. They worked in that station for 24 years and retired in 1868. Kilpin was known for her efforts for female education in Cuddapah district. She died in 1890 (Sibree 1923: 35; Simmons 1923: 9).

4 The other Bible women who worked in Cuddapah district with the financial assistance of BDFM under the instructions of Kilpin were Soovesheyshum, Esther Balchinsoo, Elizabeth Joseph, and Samadhanam (*Missing Link*, January 1874: 30; January 1875: 26; October 1875: 303).

5 By 1900, a second generation of Bible women started their work. After passing their primary examination from mission boarding schools, the selected Christian girls were retained in the school and put through a course which trained them to undertake the duties of Bible women. In the Rayalaseema region, from the second decade of the 20th century, three years of theological training was started for Bible women at the Theological Training College of Gooty (Hibbertware 1912: 199; *ARLMS* 1921: 38; 1922: 43).

6 Both of them applied for the job of Bible woman in the diocese. During their interview, they were asked by bishop of the diocese to tell stories from the Bible and sing Christian songs (Personal interview, 22 March 2018).

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