



Smoothing the Paths

A caste Hindu tells her story.

—**B.V. Subbamma**

compiled by Frank L. Roy

DURING the five years that I attended a Christian school, I learned a good deal of the Bible. But my caste pride was a roadblock to accept its truths. Christianity for me was the religion of “the outcasts.” I did not even want to touch the Christian children so I sat in a separate corner. Naturally, I was teased for my orthodoxy.

All during these years, the feeling that Christianity belongs only to the Harijans [outcastes, Dalits] crippled my inquiry into further investigation of the truth. This feeling has been and is the common experience of many Hindus.

During my senior high school days, Mr. Rajagopal Ayyangar influenced me to value the Holy Bible. He was a devoted Hindu and on every Saturday observed fasting and silence, but read the Christian Scriptures. In our classes on Saturday, he gave us written work and spent the

Excerpts of her story are taken from New Patterns for Discipling Hindus, B.V. Subbamma, William Carey Library 1970. This article initially appeared in Mission Frontiers, Sept. 1996.

time reading the Bible. When I discovered that, I determined to read the Bible for myself. It was unbelievable how my attitude toward it changed. Until then, because Harijan Christians had introduced it to me, I had been doubtful about the greatness of the Bible. But now the same Book in the hands of a caste man captured my interest.

During that time [after obtaining a Bible] such amazing changes took place in my heart. The name of Jesus became so precious to me that I could hardly believe it. When I first decided to pray to the supreme God, I had considered Jesus a Harijan god—the lowest of all gods in rank. Before I knew it, however, I was praying through the name of Jesus. This happened quite unconsciously as a miracle. I was supremely happy, having the assurance that Jesus Christ had suffered for my sin and had forgiven me and blessed me with salvation.

But the question of baptism disturbed me. I was definitely not prepared to leave my own Kamma [caste] people and join some other community. At the same time, I longed to be baptized since I understood one

had to be baptized if he wished to be a disciple of the Lord.

Meanwhile, I completed high school. In the environment of the Christian college, my desire for baptism increased and I had great inner struggle. It is often said that in discipling Hindus, the crux of the problem lies in baptism.

This is not true for the rite of baptism itself. The water, the complete dedication to a special deity, the words—all of these are common in Hinduism. The crux of the problem lies in one significant detail only—that baptism is believed to entail leaving one community and joining another. And this it does only at the beginning of any movement to Christ. No Harijan today joining the Lutheran Church leaves his people. Rather, he joins the advance guard of his ethnic unit. But every Hindu joining the Lutheran Church apparently has to leave his own people and “become a Christian” which means not merely the rite of baptism but the abandonment of one’s own culture and kindred.

Of course, all my family and relatives were terribly upset; some of them came and pleaded with me not to identify myself with the Harijans. They did not have any objection for my believing in the Lord, but they could not see me leaving the Kammass and joining another community.

My mother had interest in the Gospel. But since they thought they could not join the Church and remain Kammass they had never made a bold attempt to know the complete revelation of the Lord. This is the case with thousands of Hindus. In view of the supposed necessity of becoming a Christian by way of joining the Church, they deny themselves the privilege of knowing the Gospel at all. They avoid coming under the power of the Living Word by believing it does not belong to them.

I passed through that kind of thinking and struggle, but the power

of the Gospel which I could not possibly escape enveloped me. I insisted that I must be baptized.

[On March 23, 1942 Miss B.V. Subbamma was baptized. But she did not marry into the Harijan community. After some years she was finally able to clarify to her family that she was still loyal to them and, one by one, many of them became believers. In time, hundreds more came to faith within the same Kamma community. A movement developed which did not fit into the existing Lutheran church which consisted of a distinctly different community. Here are some lessons we can learn from Miss Subbamma (compiled from her book in her own words).]

In presenting the Gospel to the world, the main problem the Church has to deal with is how to present Christ so that men can truly follow Him without leaving their kindred.

The main issue is that the Harijans and the caste Hindus are in two different homogeneous units (as we have explained). Church growth theory affirms that to attempt to plant one large conglomerate Church composed of a few Christians from each and every subculture, arguing that brotherhood demands it and insisting on integration first whether the Church grows or not, is both a self-defeating policy and not required by Biblical faith.

If we want to communicate the Gospel in a natural way and in an effective manner, house churches—at least in Andhra among caste communities—are the fitting means. For example, at one time, I questioned a Christian lady (a caste Hindu convert) asking her whether she had any objection to go to what her neighbors called “the Harijan Church” for Sunday worship. I shall never forget her

reply. She said that for her own spiritual benefit she would be glad to go to the Church, but if she did so, many of her Hindu intimates who worship with her would be deprived of the privilege of praying to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true. If she wants, she can attend the existing Harijan residential area church. But she deeply desires to bring the Gospel to her many friends and relatives and her house is a church for them. It is my conviction that she is doing right and her experiment should be deliberately multiplied.

Note that Hindus often do not object to a person’s believing in the Lord Jesus and praying to Him. The great obstacle is joining a church of a despised segment of Hindu society.

Let me say that I have no desire to

perpetuate caste exclusiveness and caste pride. My people are wrong in their attitude toward the existing churches and existing Christians. But merely to say this does no good. The question is how to change this sinful attitude. The best way is not—I am certain—to force every new Christian to convert culturally in order to join a church made up of Christians of another ethnic unit. The way is to smooth the path which leads to joyful Christian discipleship. The way is to lead hundreds of thousands of India’s fine sons and daughters to accept the Bible as their rule of faith and practice. Separate Sudhra congregations will help this occur naturally. That is why I advocate them as a provisional and temporary measure, a step in the right direction. 🌐



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