

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN IN THE ERSTWHILE ANDHRA REGION

Marri Megomi, Research Scholar Department of History & Archaeology, Acharya Nagarjuna University. Email: drmarkpdf@gmail.com

Dr.G. Somasekhara, Research Director& Associate Professor, Department of History, Acharya Nagarjuna University

INTRODUCTION:

India has many urgent needs and churches and missions are responding to them in a variety of ways. All churches and missions are concerned for the social conditions within India and surrounding areas. Most denominations are giving through their church relief programmes to such relief endeavors as the Poona earthquake, flood victims in Andhra Pradesh, and famine relief. The Mennonite Brethren Mission and church has an organized system through which the socio-economic needs of the needy people in Andhra Pradesh are met with. Ministries have been and are being conducted in hospital care, Leprosy colonies, family planning, maternity care, community development, agricultural assistance, literacy training, emergency relief, financial cooperatives, and schools for the Boys and Girls, Orphanages, hostels and many others.

The economic condition of the people in Andhra Pradesh largely depends upon the economy of the State. The economy of the state is as follows:

Agriculture is the main occupation of over 65% of the population. The main crop is rice. Others include tobacco, oilseeds, cotton, sugar cane, Forests cover 22% of the state, and produce timber, bamboo, and casuarina. The state is rich in minerals, including iron, manganese, mica, coal, asbestos, and limestone. The state has many irrigation schemes and power projects. The major industries include machine tools, synthetic drugs, pharmaceuticals, heavy electrical machinery, ships, fertilizers, electronic equipment, and aeronautical parts. 1

It took a long time to reach the present economic condition. The situation was entirely different at the time of Mennonite Brethren arrival into India, and started their work in the erstwhile Hyderabad state in 1899. The social and economic condition of the people was pathetic due to famines and illiteracy. The work of the Christian Missions is one sphere usually affected the other, particularly the social and economic conditions have greater mutual effect on each other. The socio-Economic Conditions are treated together for this reason.

An important factor to be considered is that the evangelistic work of the Mennonite Brethren mission and the church is not only the motive behind in obedience to the commission to preach the Gospel and make disciples, but also includes humanitarian approach for the well-being of the people. From the beginning the

example of Christ and the Scriptures point out the social concern and the Mission in its approach to meet the needs has given due place to the example of Christ, and the exhortation of the Scriptures in rendering the humanitarian services to the people.

The Church's concern in society is founded on the recognition of its own responsibility towards society in which it exists. The church has a social mission, for it finds itself in a context where the divine human relationship in disharmony.

The church's prophetic mission is to turn social life away from its false, perverted, sinful, values ideals and aims. This aspect of Christian mission may be traced back to the eighth century before Christ, when Amos in his prophetic mission gave evidence of a genuine social concern. Down through the centuries Mennonite Brethren Church has been raising its voice against social evils and often found a hearing. Because the very often nature of the Gospel makes the relation between the church and the society inevitable.²

India and as well as Andhra Pradesh state has many social needs and also economic needs from time to time which demand immediate attention, and considerable contribution is made to alleviate the situation. The church and the mission besides the responsibility they felt as Christians, to care for those who were in need physically and spiritually. Daily administration of needs to a waiting humanity is a holy obligation among the saints.

Humanity does not conform only the restoration of spiritual man, but the supply of material needs which are essential for daily life have to be taken care of. Unfortunately many who claim to be evangelicals do not pay much attention to this, and thus neglect the physical aspect of the total man. The social level of the predominant Christian group, the customs, of the family, community and village, the ease of communication between different social strata, the average life expectancy, the literacy rate, all these aspects of society affect the mission's work among the communities. The existence of such cross cultural impact on the people, nationalistic movements, social reforms and the existence of a number of religious faith in every part of the country is a great challenge to Christian missions. The Mennonite Brethren and the church are aware of these trends, and realize the socio-economic needs of the community and have been responding to the situation appropriately. The church has been sensitive to such needs from the time of famine and pestilence and from the time of erstwhile Hyderabad to the present time.

It was often misunderstood that the philanthropic work of missions was with selfish motives to improve the status of converts or to attract many to the Christian faith, such a notion may be true for the critics, but the Church's involvement in incidents such as floods, accidents, plagues and famines, where there was dire need for medical aid, satisfy the hunger, and help in the rescue operations do not support that view. On the other hand would present a case for the social cause and concern of the mission and the church organization. Dr M. Channa Reddy, the honourable Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh has made a valuable observation, while inaugurating the Seven-day first Asian Baptist congress held at Hyderabad in January, 1979.

He expressed his appreciation for the selfless service of the Christian institutions and also the discipline maintained in these schools, DrChanna Reddy said that there was a general feeling among the people that the

service rendered by the Christian Institutions was to convert people into Christianity. But this belief was not correct, he said and added that the Christian Institutions serve people as duty and love towards God. He said that he had early education in Christian Institution, which left on his mind a tremendous impact of discipline.³

The socio-economic condition of the people in the erstwhile Hyderabad State was deplorable. The society was very rigid with caste distinctions, and the economic condition of the lower classes especially due to famine was disappointing. The economic problem of the area where the Mennonite Brethren have started their mission work was not different caused due to the failure of the rains and also the famine that followed as a result. The missionary brethren have been involved in the uplift programmes ever since. The Mennonite Brethren have found the field which suffered with poverty, squalor, starvation, and unemployment all round. Generally, speaking the economic condition of the converted Christians from Harijan background was poor, and constituted the backward section of the society, economically. The missions have been very responsive at times of need such as the above and while extending the benefits no discrimination was made on the basis of caste or creed but the economic situation was the criterion for the aid.

Christian churches and agencies in India have a long history of involvement in meeting the physical needs of the Indian people. Ministries have been and are been conducted in hospital care, leprosy colonies, family planning, maternity care, Community development agricultural assistance, literacy training, emergency relief, financial cooperatives, schools for the blind, orphanages, youth hostels, and many others.⁴

The Mennonite Brethren Church has its own significant role in the contribution to alleviating the situation.

The caste system of social structure has a tremendous influence on the economic situation of the people especially in the villages. India's society is composed of people belonging to different castes. Caste even today when it is banned continues and looks like a continuous process which has no end.

Caste is a prominent factor in the lives of most Hindu people in India. Traditionally there are four major castes, Kshatriyas the rulers/warriors and Temple leaders, Brahmins the priests, Vaishyas the traders and Artisans and Sudras. There are also scheduled castes, Mahatma Gandhi names them Harijans, the children of God.⁵

Mr Hypes defines caste as follows:

An endogamous group or collection of endogamous groups i.e., those who marry within certain specific limits, bearing a common name, whose members follow traditionally a single occupation or certain cognate occupations, who have by fact or fiction a common origin and are generally demanded to form a homogenous unit.⁶

In most of the villages, the caste system is rampant and has stronger influences and repercussions on the socio-economic life of the people. In his article titled 'India: Agony Ahead' Koshy noted as follows:

Characteristics rural society such as apathy fatalism, superstitions, traditional institutions, the joint family system, and the caste system are all determinates of agricultural production. For example, some farmers refuse to use fertilizers, thinking that the yields they get as a result of applying it carry diseases to the consumers. Westerners may laugh, but many farmers are obsessed with such notions and their negative influences are very real. Superstition is another factor that hinders agricultural and economic development. Rural society in India is still stratified on a caste basis, although it is no longer so evident in the urban society. In most rural society, caste groups are arranged as hierarchical rings on the social ladder. The caste structure was first introduced with a definite purpose. It had certain traditional economic, social and political functions to perform. An individual was born with a fixed position in the hierarchy and this remained unchanged regardless of his achievements. This type of social structure shows no sign of dying out in the foreseeable future. People in the higher castes cannot even imagine in cooperating with people whom they consider inferior and in relation to whom they have been enjoying a higher status and more rights. It was reported in one village that the adult education programme failed as soon as the women from the lower castes began to participate.⁷

The social organization of a village life where the Mennonite Brethren have focused their work was based on the above background and the life, marriage, worship, and other aspects of civilization in various respects either directly or indirectly are organically and logically tied with the caste system. Caste is a very deeply ingrained social pattern that will remain a dominant force in village life for a long time to come. Recent government action in India outlawed untouchability. With the coming of industry, higher education, and with greater mobility of the people, the caste system is undergoing marked change for the better. In their social life the Telugus show no striking peculiarities. Their family villages, outcaste lives follow the general pattern of India. The existence of such cross cultural impact on the people, social reforms offer opportunities to mission's work.

The economy of a county or a region determined largely by the habit, greatly influenced by the temperament and opportunity of the inhabitants, is an important cultural factor in church expansion. It would appear that where people are energetic, progressive, and hard-working, the church work in meeting the needs of the people would expand rapidly.

Although the caste system is vicious in its social aspects, it has some advantages economically.⁸

Probably this might be one of the reasons for the rigid caste system in many parts of the country including Andhra Pradesh.

The climate is suitable for agriculture, observed Rev. John H. Lohrenz, and during the rainy season and the cool period this area, which includes the Mennonite Brethren field in Andhra Pradesh region, which constituted the part of Nizam's Dominions at the time of the pioneer mission work. The area produced a variety of crops.

So from the economic point of view, the field is neither barren nor poor, nor does it present too many handicaps to a life of health and happiness.⁹

The economic problem of the Mennonite Brethren area of work is too well known to be elaborated. The area was really a place deserved immediate attention either by the Government or by private relief agencies and the Mission agencies including the Mennonite Brethren, who started their operation in the region have responded to the occasion.

The area was described to have suffered with "poverty, squalor, starvation, and unemployment all round."¹⁰

Generally the economic condition of the converted Christians is poor because most of the Christians are drawn from scheduled caste background, which is economically backward.

In many parts of the country the Christian community forms a backward section and struggles under conditions largely identical with those of the scheduled castes from which they are drawn.¹¹

The measures to improve the economic condition of the Harijan converts and other weaker sections of the society have been taken up from the beginning by the Mennonite Brethren. The measures are as follows according to Dr P.D. Devanandam,

Leatherwork, weaving and carpentry have great possibilities, for development among Christians in Andhra Pradesh who are found suitable by their educational background, should, therefore, be given priority in schemes for experimentation which would also help to solve the problem to some extent of rural employment.¹²

The Mennonite Brethren Missionaries have convinced the poor Sections and made them realize the dignity of labour, as some of the Christians and others were reluctant to take up some projects, such as mentioned above. The Mission has given the aid to start the self-help cottage industries to improve their economic condition. As an experiment in Mahbubnagar field a project was started by the Mennonite Brethren missionaries and the economically backward community of Amarchinta village in Mahbubnagar district were the recipients of the benefits of their project.

Rev. John A. Wiebe, wrote on the dignity of labour and leather industry as follows.

For years we have sought to interest brother J. Moses and other converts, whose ancestors were leather workers, to again take up the leather industry. Brother Moses and other persons like-minded have caught the vision. Four years ago they built a tannery and started tanning hides and manufacturing shoes (sandals). We assisted with special gifts from America where possible but were not able to provide the necessary capital. When at their best they tanned as many as thirty hides a month. Realizing out and their difficulties we together applied to the government for registration of the society and financial aid. The Government has recognized the society and is now giving a liberal grant as well as a loan enabling the Amarchinta

Tannery and Leather Industries co-operative to improve facilities and to build up an industry. We wish them success. Recently an officer told us that he hoped the Amerchinta tannery would become a model tannery.¹³

The Christians who were poor have considerably improved their economic situation as a result of this tannery and were able to support their pastors and also the Gospel work on their own in their area.

Christian Social responsibility:

Christianity is not only concerned about others in its missionary outreach but it is a religion concerned about the social status of all and explicitly teaches concern for the material welfare of others. The apostle Paul who himself represented the highest social order of his religious milieu, preached social and racial equality of all. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28 and.... as you wish that men would do to you do so to them, Luke 6:31. Moreover, the Bible emphasized Christian stewardship in giving one's life as well as material goods. II Corinthians 9:27.

Service to the suffering finds its due inspiration in the conception of God who is not an inactive absolute of being, but a Good who shares our burden, and himself takes human need upon himself. The desire to seek and save the lost must remain, unstable until it finds its support and impulse in a God of Love a God such as Christ revealed in his life and death. Based on the scriptural reference in Mathew chapter 14, verses 13-21, Mr Gregorio Landero and Evangelist, realized the total stewardship of Christian life had to do with all aspects of a person' life both spiritual and material. His experience with the people and time spent with the word of God made him closer to the spiritual as well as physical needs of the people.

Mr Gregorio Landero based his view on the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 14, verse 16 where Jesus performed the great miracle of feeding the five thousand people and it said to him the following: This should teach something to us. It is one thing to sit with the Pharisees and scribes, priests, and doctors of the law and elders of the town in Jerusalem. But it is something else to be in the dry, sterile field, beside the sea, sitting on hard rocks, under the heat of the sun, besides Jesus, before the hungry, thirsty, unclothed, sick multitudes, who are without shelter and without hope.

We need to be ready to forget the tiredness, the privileges of the feasts in Jerusalem, the friends and relatives. We need to be prepared to serve the sick, naked, hungry, confused multitudes, this is the situation in which nations, cities, villages, families and people are now living. When we observe the book of Acts in Chapter 2, we see how the Holy Spirit was spilt out over the church. The apostles could not continue without straightening out the problem, but they took the initiative to solve these economic matters and did not wait for the government nor the agronomy institutes or nutrition centres (food distribution centres). They did not say 'We are apostles and therefore we cannot become involved in these human matters. The considered the economic matters so important that they did not leave these responsibilities to just any person. They chose extraordinary people to handle these problems and listed specific requirements for their work. They

considered teaching to be previous, but the administration for the whole man was necessary. From this, we learn the following: Daily administration of needs to a waiting humanity is a holy obligation among the saints. Humanity does not conform only to the restoration of the spiritual man. We must also supply the material needs which are necessary for daily life.¹⁴

In his article titled India Agony Ahead, MrThottukadevilEapen Koshy brought out the exhortation of the scriptures directly or indirectly to be involved and to participate in the social and material needs of the society. He beautifully tied with the situation in India with the example of Christ in meeting the social and economic needs of the people. He asserted as follows:

What India needs more than anything else, is Christ intoxicated men and women to help her people escape from centuries of misery hardship, frustration and superstition. To identify with the villagers and teach them modern farming techniques requires more than tools and well-trained technicians. It requires people who will serve in love and humanity. This is the winning basis for confidence. Only when confidence is won it is possible to share the love of Christ, Unfortunately, we evangelicals tend to be backward in caring for the people's material needs. There are some things we can learn from our Lord in his feeding of the five thousand. In it, he demonstrated his compassion toward those who are hungry. He was concerned about men's physical needs. More than that, he concentrated on multiplying what was available. That is exactly what India needs, today. Christians must take India's famine seriously and attempt an answer. But like their Lord, they need to concentrate on approaches which are most likely multiply themselves. Seed grains may be a better long-range answer than handouts. Instruction in the use of fertilizers and simple hand tools may help more than grandiose programmes of Modernization. Teaching people the importance of having a smaller family is a Christian responsibility as well as teaching them to read. India with its food crisis and economic problems is like a stormy sea full of desperate people struggling to save themselves. The water is too deep to stand and the shore is too far to reach. Nobody has all the answers, and I do not pretend to. But practical, positive approach coupled with the dynamic of Christ's love will reach farther than anything else in meeting India's needs.¹⁵

The motivation for the socio-economic uplift of the people in Andhra Pradesh is an exhortation of the Christian faith to have compassion of Christ according to Matthew 10:7-8. The physical needs of the people also are to be considered while ministering to the spiritual needs of the people. In ministering to the people in Andhra Pradesh the Mennonite Brethren Mission and the church kept the ideals of the one who taught and acted upon in meeting the needs of the people. They considered the service as an obligation and privilege of service with love.

The Lausanne Covenant of 1974, while affirming the faith put forth the following views on the Christian Social responsibility.

We affirm that God is both the creator and the judge of all men. We, therefore, should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour,

culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both parts of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities.

As long as there is hunger, nakedness, destitution, illiteracy, ignorance, and the like distorting the dignity of the human person, as long as these distortions are not effectively met by anyone, the church will be concerned in obedience to the Commission of God, and obligation due to love towards men. The Mennonite Brethren Mission and the church have been and are continuing the social lift of the community.

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