

**Baptist World Alliance – Heritage and Identity Commission
General Council Meeting, July 2004, Seoul, South Korea**

**John Rangiah And A Century Of Indian Baptist Work In Africa
(1903 - 2003)**

Paper presented by NOAH MOSES ISRAEL President, Baptist Association of South Africa, at the Baptist World Alliance General Council, Seoul, Korea, July 2004.

*Send the light ... the blessed gospel light
Let it shine from shore to shore.*

In the year 1835, inspired to carry the Gospel light to the East, the American Baptist Missionary Society sent out Dr and Mrs Samuel S. Day. Two years later, the Madras Baptist church established a small membership with Dr Day as Pastor. It was by no means a pioneering effort. To quote Prime Minister Pundit Nehru, "The history of the Christian Church in India is as old as Christianity itself." The question arose: if Disciple Thomas could work successfully among the highest caste Brahmins in 50 AD, why could others not succeed among the lower social strata, namely, low caste Telugus? The reality was that it was a very daunting task indeed.

The next two missionaries sent to India, Dr and Mrs Lyman Jewett, spent some time in Nellore near Madras learning the Telugu language. In 9 months Dr Jewett preached his first sermon in the local language. Mrs Jewett was able to converse in Telugu fairly comfortably. But success, again, was minimal. The Missionary Society in fact noted that the success rate was not commensurate with the resources it was sending.

At an evaluation meeting in New York in 1853, there was a strong recommendation to discontinue the India effort. On a wall map, there were a number of stars depicting success. Whereas some areas such as Burma had several stars, India had one. Critics, some of whom had never been to the subcontinent, were stridently calling for closure. The decision was to be confirmed the next day. That night one delegate, Dr S.F. Smith, was very uneasy. He wrote a poem. That single star had actually inspired him. Every line of the six stanzas he wrote began with the words, "Shine on lone star". The next day a retired judge read the poem to an uncompromising audience. Tears streamed down his wizened cheeks. Many were moved. God chaired the rest of the meeting. Amazingly, there was a complete volte-face and it was a unanimous decision: the Telugu Work must go on!

Statisticians may despise lone stars, but God does not. Dr Smith later became famous for composing the hymn "America".

A surge of enthusiasm developed in Nellore. The Lone Star Mission was launched. The Ramapatnam Baptist Theological Seminary was built. On one day 2222 were baptised in the

River Gundlacumma. The catalyst was the baptism of a youth by Dr Jewett. Tupili Rangiah was a bright lad in Jewett's school. His father was a Hindu priest. When the family learnt of his interest in Christianity, he was excommunicated and rendered homeless. That propelled the young man into the willing arms of the Jewetts and into the ever-eager fold of a new faith. Rangiah's four sons -Daniel, Samson, Benjamin and John, became ordained Baptist Ministers. Joining the missionary team were Dr H.R.Williams and Dr John Clough. Significantly, in the next 50 years, 65 000 Telugus accepted the Lord. The Ongole Baptist

Church (now Jewett Memorial) was ranked the world's largest Baptist Church with 21000 members.

I. AFRICA 1860

Natal was a British colony in Southern Africa in the 10 century. The British farmers decided that sugar cane was the most suited for the coastal region. The farmers wanted a cheap, regular, labour supply and hoped that the local Zulus would meet the need. Historian Edgar Brooks wrote that the Zulus relegated agriculture to the work of women. Mabel Palmer noted that the indigenous people were not accustomed to steady toil. The success of Indian labour in developing the sugar industry in Mauritius, convinced the British Government to persuade the Indian Government to assist. At that time, for nearly 20 years, the east coast of India was experiencing severe economic depression. Reluctant at first, the Indian Government finally agreed.

The year 1860 saw the first ship, the SS Truro, bring 341 immigrants as indentured labourers to Port Natal (Durban).The first to embark was "Coolie No I- Dhavarum - a Christian." In the next six years, 6445 labourers arrived. Not all were employed by sugar farmers. A large number worked in the tea estates of Sir Liege Hulett in Kearsney on the Natal North Coast. Many writers claim, with adequate evidence, that White employers became slave drivers and arrogant lords, but Sir Liege was virtually the opposite. A committed Christian, he was kindly disposed to his labourers.

Working in the tea estates were a group of about 50 Telugu Baptists. Their leader was a respected and educated man named Doopati Benjamin. Hulett arranged for a White Wesleyan missionary, Rev Stott, to oversee the Baptist flock whenever he was in the area. Stott was able to speak Hindi and Tamil. After some time, the Telugu Baptists yearned for a Telugu-speaking, ordained Baptist Missionary from India. Benjamin wrote to India with this request, without Hulett's knowledge.

The letter from "the other end of the world" reached the Home Mission Society's office in due course. A special search committee was set up, headed by Rev John Rangiah. A tedious, fruitless, frustrating period ensued. Had they not heard of the Dark Continent, full of savages, wild beasts and cannibals, and the sea-route bristling with pirates?

As at New York, man's extremity was God's opportunity. A distinct Call came to the committee chairman, "Why not you, John?" After much prayer, John Rangiah was convinced that God

wanted him in Africa. His wife, expecting their third child, responded with an emphatic NO. His family of four ministers considered it an unnecessary risk but decided to wait for God's clear vision. John, however, was prepared to obey the Call "for the struggling Indian Baptists of Natal". God had His way. All the negatives changed to positives, the most significant and persuasive one coming from his wife!

II. RANGIAH AFRICANUS 1903

On 13 June 1903, Rev John Rangiah, wife Kanakamma, son Manoharam (6) and daughter Premaleelah (4), landed on African soil. But there was no welcome party! Benjamin et al did not really believe that their letters had reached India. Neither did they receive any correspondence from the Home Mission. However, there was a blessing of another kind. Rangiah met a dear friend from India, Rev Nelson Tomlinson, who had originally planned to settle in Australia. What greater help in South Africa to a foreign Indian than a White minister friend, and a Telugu-speaking one at that!

John Rangiah was offered a home and work by the South African General Mission (SAGM). In a single-roomed home in Phoenix near Durban, a son was born. The missionary was the midwife! Whilst grateful to the SAGM and Tomlinson, who became a firm friend of the Indian Baptist cause for the next 60 years, Rangiah knew that he had forsaken the comfort zone of his homeland to serve Indian Baptists, not the White community of another denomination.

A few months later, his travels took him to Kearsney. The joy of Benjamin and others was indescribable. They knelt and prayed with much emotion. Hulett was impressed by the missionary and invited him to return with his family. He offered the missionary family a ten-roomed bungalow set in an orchard of ten acres! It had been the residence of a White manager. Rangiah named the property Gospel Hill, appropriately, as for many years to come it sent the light of the gospel out to many. Hulett provided regular provisions and a stipend. The company and the home in turn provided shelter and care for the next three generations of missionaries.

John Rangiah established the first Telugu Baptist Church at Kearsney on 27 December 1903, with 64 members. It was the first church of its kind in Africa, indeed in the Southern Hemisphere. The missionary and his helpers travelled to the outlying districts, locating Baptists, and preaching to their families and friends. He carefully selected leaders and trained them as pastors. He then established churches. He travelled long distances on foot, by bicycle and train. "At times I slept on the roadside," he wrote. In the next six years, eight churches were planted:

CHURCH	DATE ESTABLISHED	PASTOR	MEMBERSHIP
Kearsney	27 December 1903	John Rangiah	64
Verulam	22 May 1904	K.Daniel	32
Darnall	12 June 1904	Yellamanda	30
Durban	30 October 1904	A. Reuben	30
Stanger	25 December 1904		15

Tinley Manor	10 May 1908	K.David	12
Dundee	5 June 1908	T.C.Tyler	21
Amatikulu	11 January 1909	P.Reddy	12

Rangiah also started schools at Kearsney, Stanger, Tinley Manor and Amatikulu where, given the discriminatory system of apartheid, there were no schools for Indians. Later, they became government-aided Indian schools and state institutions. To be noted was that John Rangiah

had been Principal of the Nellore Girls' School in India. He thus combined his role of minister with that of educator, taking social responsibility seriously.

However, in 1907 the minister and his wife realised that the only way for his children to get a good education was to send them back to India. Manoharam, aged 10, and Premaleelah, 6, left for India in the care of friends. When the father rose from his kneeling position in prayer with tears streaming down his face, the ship was out of sight. He never saw those loved ones again!

The Zulu uprising of 1906 forced the family to sleep in the bushes. Rev John Rangiah's valuable books were hidden underground. Hulett took care of about 20 little orphans who were left at Gospel Hill with Mrs Rangiah. It was an added burden in times of unrest.

III. SCOTLAND 1910

Rev Rangiah attended a World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in Scotland in 1910. He addressed the meeting and prayed at John Wesley's pulpit, barefoot as usual. He was away for five months. Prominent American missionary, Dr David Downie from India visited Natal in 1909. He was pleased with the Work in Natal. Rangiah impressed on him the need for a second missionary. Rev V.C.Jacob arrived in 1912, headed the Durban sector of the Work, but returned after a year because of illness.

In eleven years, John Rangiah established eleven churches. Some churches were over 50 miles away from his base in Kearsney, which meant that he had to spend whole weekends in far off places.

IV. SPLIT 1914

For a number of reasons, including a hard-hitting, soul-searching sermon on sin (which was misinterpreted as excommunication), the caste system, cost and the time spent in Scotland, a group of members turned against Rangiah. Without informing him, the Home Mission Society sent Dr W.B. Bogges to investigate. After a very lengthy meeting to discuss the allegations, nothing conclusive was proved. Further attempts at solving the problems did not succeed.

Aggrieved at the attitude of the Home Mission Society, Rangiah resigned from its membership. A split was inevitable. In 1914, of the eleven churches, eight remained with him and formed the Natal Indian Baptist Association. The remaining three formed the Indian Baptist Mission. The two organisations have maintained a cordial relationship and assisted each other but remain separate today. At the time of its Centenary celebrations in 2003, the Natal Indian Baptist

Association, known as the Baptist Association of South Africa (BASA), had 25 churches. The Mission, known as the Baptist Mission of South Africa, had 12 churches.

Crestfallen that the people he had befriended, taught and baptised could betray him, Rev Rangiah became a sad figure, though he still maintained his high standard of work. After a short illness, he was called Home in December 1915 at the age of 49.

REV THEOPHILUS MANOHARAM RANGIAH, the boy of 10 who returned to India for education, was summoned back to Africa. He took over the mantle as the next missionary in 1921. His work of reorganisation and raising standards spiritually and educationally, was well received. He too passed away at the age of 49, having served the Lord for 26 years.

REV DAVID NEWTON NATHANIEL answered the Call in 1951. Unexpected challenges assailed the new missionary. The White South African government's Group Areas Act, which separated the races into geographic areas, was being implemented.

The best suburbs went to the Whites; Blacks, including Indians, were forceably moved away from city centres. This meant a significant drop of membership in many churches. Rev Nathaniel's additional work was to ensure that Baptists in new, rural areas kept their faith and that new churches were formed. Inhuman though the government policy was, it was probably part of God's plan to propagate His gospel!

No other missionaries were called from India. Instead local ministers rose to the fore. Rev R. Ellaya, Rev R. Jayakaram, Rev D. Sunnasy, Rev K. Sunnasy and others, assisted by a host of laymen, valiantly held the banner high. The first White minister was Rev Alexander Morrison, and the first Black minister Pastor Daniel Mahtlatli. Miss Judith Morck (ex India), Rev Theo Pass (ex London) and Rev Dwight Reagan (USA), rendered invaluable assistance to BASA over the years. Mrs Esther Benjamin did admirable missionary work in India, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Miss Valerie Ragwan worked in neighbouring African states. Missionary teams went to India, America and neighbouring countries. Rev R. Ragwan recently led a team to the USA. BASA President (1999), Anthony Polliah, also accompanied a team to America. Mrs Rajie Israel, President of the Women's Department, attended BWA Women's conferences in Sweden, Malawi and Ghana over the years.

V. JOHN RANGIAH - AN EVALUATION

John Rangiah was an unmistakably holy man. He successfully removed the caste system from his churches. He did not tolerate cultural and language barriers. His four Telugu speaking daughters married Tamil/Malayalam men. That he attended a world missionary conference in Scotland, which was not Baptist, speaks volumes of his respect for other denominations. Even to this day, through colonialism and apartheid rule, which was entrenched in South Africa for three centuries, social interaction between Indians and Whites remains strained. But John Rangiah had White friends in high places. Sir Liege Hulett, entrepreneur and politician, cabinet ministers, mayors and station masters, to name a few, were among his friends and associates.

John Rangiah believed in developing an indigenous theology. Indians needed the gospel in an Indian cup, not a western one. Many Indians equate Christianity with westernisation, while some oppose it for that very reason. Christ Jesus in fact transcends culture. Rangiah's work had widespread implications, and the nucleus of other denominations, which have since developed into far larger organisations than BASA, were originally Baptist.

Rangiah's work can be compared favourably with that of John Livingston Nevius, a leading Presbyterian missionary in China and Korea for 40 years. Both began their work by teaching

and preaching through lyrics, dramas and story-telling. Rangiah's audience, like Nevius's Chinese one, was largely illiterate and from rural areas. Both were disciplinarians, well-organised and kept copious records. Rangiah did much social work at Gospel Hill. Both understood the need to feed body and soul. Their work was self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating.

Summing up the life of John Rangiah, it would be appropriate to quote a White Afrikaner stationmaster in Durban in 1904, who had no good word for any Christian or Non-White: "White, Black, Brown or Yellow, I never saw a Christian like that black man.³⁵

VI. UPDATE

INDIA: my wife and I visited India in 1992. We addressed services at Lone Star Baptist Church, Downie Memorial and Day Memorial. Jewett Memorial is an imposing building. Centenary Baptist Church is palatial. The capital of Andhra Pradesh, Telugu Province, Hyderabad has 160 Baptist churches. In the whole of India there are over 9000 Baptist churches. Thank God for great things He hath done!

SOUTH AFRICA: BASA has 25 churches and 3000 members. Approximately 10% of a population of 1.2 million Indians in the country (population 45m), are Christians. Given the transformative developments in the country since democracy in 1994, people now have freedom of movement and religious practice, amongst other freedoms.

REACHING OUT: BASA built the Ndwedwe Baptist Church in rural KwaZulu-Natal. It has also enabled Black students to embark on Bible study programmes, by providing resources. It maintains regular missions to neighbouring states and has contributed to assisting flood victims in Mozambique, as well as earthquake victims in India. It sustains the Sizanani Project, providing meals to around 700 people every week. Finally, it is currently training counsellors to carry out AIDS awareness programmes across the country.

CHALLENGES: What are BASA's challenges?

- To carry the Gospel to neighbouring states more systematically and vigorously.
- To address the issues of HIV-AIDS, racism, oppression of women, child abuse, poverty, divorce, illiteracy, crime, corruption, violence, nepotism, complacency and xenophobia ... an enormous task, but with God nothing is impossible!

- To promote the South African Baptist Alliance (SABA), a fellowship of all five Baptist groups in our country, which was divided for centuries.

FUTURE PLANS: What are our immediate plans?

- To set up more permanent headquarters.
- To develop Gospel Hill as a camp site, clinic, home industry etc.
- To empower pastors, leaders and departmental officials for greater efficiency.
- To appoint a full-time minister in every church.
- To win more souls and plant more churches.

VII. CENTENARY 1903 - 2003

A year-long celebratory programme culminated in a service at the Durban City Hall on Saturday 01 November 2003. The procession of dignitaries was led by a team of girls in an oriental stick-dance to the tune of a Telugu hymn. A team of Zulu drummers joined the choir. Appropriate Eastern and Western items followed. Rev Dr Samuel Chetti of Los Angeles, originally from India, delivered a stirring address. A pledge was solemnly repeated by the whole congregation. Overwhelming gratitude to God Almighty was expressed. The faith of our simple labourer forebears was acknowledged, as well as the selfless work of missionaries from India, local pastors and a host of laity who gave us "a faith to follow and a cause to serve".

The centenary cake was cut by Mrs Jayaleela Pillay, only surviving child of the pioneer missionary. She is 90 years old.

1500 people enjoyed a sumptuous dinner. A local newspaper headline read, "SPECTACULAR INDIAN BAPTIST CENTENARY".

VIII. CONCLUSION

America still leads our denomination, with General Secretary Dr Denton Lotz at the helm. Asia still has millions of members, ably led by Dr Billy Kim, our President Extraordinaire. Africa is the strongest growth point with 5 million Baptists. Great "A Teams" indeed !

*Send the Light, the blessed gospel Light,
Let it shine for evermore.*