

EDINBURGH 1910: ROOTS AND FRUITS!
**A STORY OF MISSIONARIES WHO BROUGHT THE GOSPEL TO BERAR AND
FOUNDED UBS**

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INTRODUCTION

Berar is a former name for western division of Vidarbha called Amaraoti, comprising of Akola, Yeotmal, Amraoti, Buladana districts. To the east of Berar was the Nagpur division and to the west was Khandesh comprising of Jalgaon, Malegaon and Dhule districts. Friendship and confidence of the first missionaries to Berar foreshadow Edinburgh 1910, the founding of various union corporate enterprises including Union Biblical Seminary 1953 and form the spirit of the continuing story of world evangelisation.

CRIERS IN THE DESERT

“A voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his way’”. John the Baptist was this voice in the first century AD, preparing the way of the Lord by proclaiming repentance to the Jews in Palestine. But who prepared the way of the Lord in the wilderness of Berar? Were they the Bhakti saints such as Tukaram of whom Narayan Vaman Tilak had once said “I have come to Christ through the bridge of Tukaram?” This could well be true, because there were prominent saints like Gulabrao, Tukadoji and Gadge Maharaj active in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in Berar. Intense devotion to God and selfless service of people characterized their lives. They spoke against idolatry, proclaiming that God dwells in the human heart and demands right action and justice. Besides these, however, there were others who played a vital and more immediate role in preparing the way.

Many civil and military officers who came to India from England prayed for the central region. One in particular Sir John Field who, during his stay in Malegaon in Khandesh between 1860 and 62, felt a burden for Khandesh and Vidarbha regions where thousands were dying of epidemics “without any being present to administer help to either body or soul.”¹ He ministered mainly to the members of the British armed forces, preaching the word and praying for the people.² More directly, though, is the role played by Sir George Oldham and his wife Mrs. Lillah from Scotland. Oldham was an Engineer by profession. It is his work that brought them to Berar and it is their prayer that brought Berar to the Lord. They prayed and thus prepared the way for the Lord. They also provide a vital link between the mission work in Berar and Edinburgh 1910.

TRAIN ROUTE THROUGH THE DESERT

The Gospel needs a path to the hearts of people, a path which is “cut out” by repentance. But it needs to travel also by motorways, rail-roads and air routes. But there was no road for the

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¹ Claud Field, *Sir John Field, K.C.B. Soldier and Evangelist A Brief Memoir*, The Religious Tract Society, London, 1908, 120.

² Field, *Sir John Field*, 120.

Gospel to reach Berar. The man who laid the rail track from Bhusaval to Nagpur was Col. George Oldham. He was present on this maiden journey and had celebrated the event as the first step towards the material progress of the region. The feat would have made the British government happy. The American civil war had stopped the supply of cotton to England. But now, Berar could provide cotton to England's starving mills by rail to Bombay and by ship to England.

When the first train zoomed past Berar and steamed into Nagpur in 1867, there was no Gospel, nor a single evangelist in Berar. Soon after mission stations were established in big cities. A large part of central India, however, was "entirely without evangelistic efforts." "There was mission work in Bombay, Nagpur, Jabalpur and Allahabad, a leap of some hundred miles from station to station, and between—darkness."³

PRAYER IS PREPARATION

On the Christmas Eve of 1873, a couple was travelling from Mumbai to Ellichpur. As their train entered the Berar region, the burden fell upon them to pray for the people of Berar. They celebrated the beginning of New Year in 1874 at Ellichpur with fasting and prayer for Berar. They cried out to the Lord "Please! Send a missionary!" While returning to Bombay, at the railway station at Badnera, they saw a white man alighting from the train coming from the opposite direction. "Why have you come here?" they asked him. "I have come to be a missionary to the Kurkus", he said. Their joy knew no bound for finding answers to their prayers so soon. The couple were Col. George and Mrs. Lillah Oldham. The missionary was Mr. Albert Norton from the United States of America. The Oldhams were so moved with gratitude to God that they gave the missionary Rs. 500 as cash and promised regular support of Rs. 1000 a year.

This British engineer supporting an American missionary reflects a spirit of ecumenism which laid the foundation for continuing missionary work in Berar and foreshadowed the 1910 Conference and Ecumenical Movement.

SPIRIT OF REVIVAL AND ECUMENICAL COOPERATION

Albert was a product of revival movement in colleges that surged across America during the late nineteenth century. He committed his life to Jesus while he was a student in Wesleyan Seminary and underwent deepening of his Christian experience at a camp meeting while he was studying at North Western. Upon graduation from the Seminary, Albert was invited to join the Pastorate in the Methodist Conference at Chicago but he chose to come to India. Albert Norton arrived in Bombay in November 1872.

About two years later in 1874 a young woman arrived in Bombay. She was Mary Kelly. She had been a student of Charles Finney at Oberlin College and felt a call of God to come to India as a missionary. Albert married Mary Kelly. *Together* they set the foundation at of the mission work in Berar, preparing young missionaries, men and women, and sending them in different parts of Berar and Central India. They began with Ellichpur which was the capital of Berar. It was in Ellichpur that the seed of the movement was first planted when two godly servants George and Lillah Oldham fasted and prayed on New Year's day in 1874. The seed became a tree that soon covered the whole of Berar with a network of mission stations. By

³ Helen Dyer, *A Life for God in India*, Fleming H. Revell Company, London, 13.

1902, 54 missionaries, of different nationalities, were working in 19 stations and 18 were on furlough.⁴

PIONEER OF THE NAZARENE WORK IN SOUTH BERAR

Lucy Drake arrived in latter part of 1875. After doing internship of fourteen months with Nortons in Ellichpur, Lucy went to West Berar and founded the Basim mission. This mission later on became the mission station of the Church of the Nazarene.

The Montreal Daily Witness, November 15, 1877 relates how Lucy went from Ellichpur to Basim on a bullock cart and began her work alone.⁵ God provided all her needs in time and thousands heard the Gospel. Lucy had been ill but she experienced a miraculous healing touch by God and followed his leading to go to West Berar to give the gospel to three million people who had never heard about Jesus.

PIONEERS OF THE ALLIANCE WORK IN NORTH BERAR

One of her classmates at Oberlin wrote to Mary Norton “I am coming to Berar to help you.”⁶ This was none other than Ms. Jennie Frow “a member of the 1876 Literary graduating class at Oberlin College and regarded as its best linguist.” Jennie’s motto in life was “Have faith in God!”⁷ With faith in God and encouraged by Mr. Charles Finney, Jennie arrived in Mumbai on 4th January 1877. Albert Norton received her and brought her to Ellichpur where she did a few years of internship before venturing out to Akola area.⁸

As Jennie was toiling in the mission field in Berar, God was preparing the heart of young Mr. Mark B. Fuller to go to India. When Jennie went on a furlough (1880-81), she met Mark, who was her classmate at Oberlin. In April 1881, they got married.⁹ Mark and Jennie founded the Alliance work in Akola.

PIONEERS OF THE FREE METHODIST WORK IN NORTH EAST BERAR AND YEOTMAL

Albert Norton was on furlough when he met Earnest Ward at a camp and introduced him to India. He encouraged him to take Phoebe Cox, his friend, as a life companion to India: “As Jesus sent out his disciples two by two, so today he sends them out in couples.”¹⁰ Both resigned their respective jobs of teacher and draftsman and set off and in January 1881 arrived in India.¹¹

When the Wards arrived in Mumbai, they stayed with Colonel and Mrs. Oldham in Girgaum. When the Wards reached Ellichpur, they stayed as guests of Revd. and Mrs. Sibly of The Christian and Alliance Mission. Earnest and Phoebe Ward became the first faith missionaries

⁴ Dyer, *Life for God in India*, 97; Ruth Norton, *The Triumph of Faith*, 37.

⁵ “Miss Drakes Beginning In India”, MISCELLANY, *Montreal Daily Witness*-Nov 15, 1877, 6 (<http://news.google.com/newspapers>, 11 of 25, accessed 29 March, 2010, 11:45 am)

⁶ Norton, *The Triumph of Faith*, 37.

⁷ Dyer, *A Life for God in India*, 1, 33.

⁸ Norton, *The Triumph of Faith*, 38.

⁹ Norton, *The Triumph of Faith*, 39.

¹⁰ Norton, *The Triumph of Faith*, 42.

¹¹ Norton, *The Triumph of Faith*, 42.

who pioneered the the Free Methodist work in India. The first official missionaries of the Free Methodist were two women Ms. Louisa Ranf and Ms. Celia Ferris. Ms. Ranf came in 1886 but died in a tragic accident by fire. Celia came in 1891 and pioneered the work in Yeotmal against all odds: antipathy of the Government officials and adverse living conditions including snake infested accommodation. The Alliance and the Nazarenes, however, supported Ms. Ferris. She often visited their headquarters in Akola and Basim for retreat and guidance. Thus a spirit of unity and confidence in the Gospel characterized these pioneers. They combined vocational calling and professional efficiency in their mission work.

Whilst at Ellichpur, Ward, Norton and Fuller with Vinayak Tryambak took the evangelistic trips of Berar and Central Pradesh. The Nortons, Fullers and Wards employed indigenous thought forms and methods in communicating the Gospel that attracted the locals.

Once, Mr. Ward saw a Brahmin Pundit on the train who was reading a New Testament. The missionary confidently told him that he would become a Christian within a year and recited the Lord's Prayer with such a passion and zeal. The Pundit began thinking about the prayer seriously and decided to become a follower of Christ. He took baptism on 10 of February 1895. This Pundit was none other than very famous poet and saint Revd. NarayanVaman Tilak.

SUMMARY OF THE SECTION

Pioneers, Albert Norton, Ernest Ward, Jennie Frow and Lucy Drake were faith missionaries. Among them were many women sharing major responsibilities alongside men. Their work predates the work of their mission bodies which were formed later. This is true in case of the Alliance, the Free Methodist and the Nazarenes. These Churches whose mission boards were formed later than the work at mission stations at Akola, Yeotmal, and Basim respectively. They were all influenced by revival spirit and had confidence in what God could accomplish through them. Sharing resources, they worked in comity and fellowship. Later on as their tribe increased, converts grew, and churches multiplied, they were looking forward to organising themselves into a fellowship or society. But this was to wait until much after the World War I. Meanwhile Edinburgh 1910 happened.

1910 EDINBURGH: EMPHASES AND THE COMMISSIONS

The problems encountered, issues resolved and lessons learnt on the mission fields were passed on to the headquarters of the mission bodies and through their representatives were deliberated upon at Edinburgh 1910. The issues were discussed through the eight commissions of the Conference:¹²

1. "Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World"
2. "The Church in the Mission Field"
3. "Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life"
4. "The Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian Religion"
5. "The Preparation of Missionaries"
6. "The Home Base of Missions"
7. "Mission and Governments"
8. "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity"

¹² Kerr, *Edinburgh 2010*, v-vii.

The Commission One and Eight reflect the two major emphases of the Conference: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian world and Cooperation and promotion of unity with an objective of planting in every non-Christian nation one united church of Christ. All the intervening commissions focus on achieving the evangelisation of the world and unity of the church.

Commission five “The Preparation of Missionaries” highlights the need to combine genuine vocation with highest possible professional and theological training to the missionaries. The missionaries should have the best of the education that their country and the church can give them. This commission thus sought the cooperation from the churches for giving the best training to missionaries, which would facilitate world evangelisation, the objective of the first commission.

Commission eight dealt with “Comity, Conferences, Joint Action, Federation and Union, and Cooperation at the Home Base.” The main argument of the report was that the Christians in Asia, China, India, the Philippines and Japan were “the first to recognize the need for concerted action and closer fellowship.”¹³ The Comity Principle highlighted an attitude of respect by one missionary society to the integrity and disciplines of the other working in close proximity. The American Board of Commissioners were first to enunciate the principles of comity in 1838. This was necessary to avoid proselytism, duplication, and wastage of resources. They agreed for joint action in Bible translation, education, mediation with the colonial government through a single representative. The report appreciates those who regard organic unity as impractical or undesirable but promote the ideal of unity in an “experimental stage.” The comity agreements should be expedient rather than permanent and the comity should lead to federation or some form of unity.¹⁴

EMPHASIS ON WOMEN’S ROLE IN MISSIONARY WORK

Women pioneered the missionary work alongside men. Even the local women played key roles in pioneering work--“local women were very much a labour force in missionary enterprise”.¹⁵ Until the nineteenth century, however, the women were confined to supporting roles. Women missionaries were trained with a narrow view point: “women’s work for women.” Edinburgh 1910 realised that this should change and the focus should be on “the vision of the place of women in the building up of the whole fabric of national life”.¹⁶ Ms. Annie Small of the Women’s Missionary College in Edinburgh, who was one of the four women commissioners at Edinburgh 1910, was cited as an example of how women can play a crucial role in building up the very fabric of society.¹⁷

ROOTS AND FRUITS

The spirit of revival, friendship and confidence that characterized the early missionaries was manifested in Edinburgh 1910 and was evidenced in expressions such as the founding of Union Biblical Seminary. The emphasis of Edinburgh on “Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian world” actually originated from the revival movement that surged throughout

¹³ Kerr, *Edinburgh 2010*, 223.

¹⁴ “Cooperation and Promotion of Unity: Report of Commission VIII”, *World Missionary Conference 1910*, 19 in Kerr, *Edinburgh 2010*, 234.

¹⁵ Kerr, *Edinburgh 2010*, 64.

¹⁶ Kerr, *Edinburgh 2010*, 15.

¹⁷ Kerr, *Edinburgh 2010*, 15-16.

the North America, Europe and Asia in the nineteenth century. It was this revival spirit that brought different missionaries and mission bodies together in joining hands to achieve synergy both in education or training of workers and evangelistic work. It was the same revival spirit and emphasis on world evangelisation that provided the milieu to the Edinburgh 1910 and motivated founding missions and churches of Union Biblical Seminary to join hands in upgrading the Free Methodist Bible School to graduate level. The revival of 1935 in Yeotmal led to the upgrading of the school in 1938 with Dr. Frank Kline as its principal and to a seminary level in 1953 as Union Biblical Seminary.

THE UNIQUE GIFT AND LINK

Earlier we said that the Gospel needs both path to the heart and a path through the region. George Oldham built the railway line through the land of Berar and a path to the hearts of the people of Berar through prayer. A unique contribution indeed! The Oldhams supported the mission work and Bible training in Berar. They gifted their “magnificently situated property in Akola to the Alliance and it has been the Society’s Indian headquarters and receiving Home ever since.”¹⁸

When the Oldhams returned to Scotland they contributed towards Edinburgh 1910 in a unique way: through the gift of their son Joseph to the conference. He became the Secretary of the Conference, continued as the Secretary of its Continuation Committee and founded International Missionary Council. God gave Joseph to the Oldhams when they were fasting for Berar--Joseph was conceived in January and born in October of 1874--and the Oldhams gave Joseph to Edinburgh 1910 and the cause of missions.

Joseph was born and grew up in Mumbai. His parents welcomed in their home Indians no less than Europeans. This may well have been a formative example. So when V. S. Azariah appreciated the sacrifice of missionary heroes from the West and pleaded before the Conference “Give us FRIENDS,” Oldham knew what that meant!

EVANGELICALS AFTER EDINBURGH

It was evangelicals who gave birth to the Edinburgh 1910. But can a mother forsake her baby after giving birth? Well, in this case, yes! They ditched the baby they gave birth to. The reason given was that certain concessions were made to the Catholics and High Churches. One of these was exclusion of the questions of faith and order from the discussion.

The missionaries who brought the gospel to Berar lived in comity and in fellowship and formed themselves into Berar Khandesh Christian Conference (BKCC) to promote comity and fellowship:

The Berar-Khandesh Christian Conference is a voluntary association of the Evangelical Christian forces in Berar and Khandesh, working in comity and in the fellowship of the Gospel, and comprised so far as possible of an equal number of Indian and missionary representatives...¹⁹

¹⁸ *Gods have heavy ears*, 5.

¹⁹ *Findings of the Fifth Berar-Khandesh Christian Conference [BKCC V]Akola, Berar, Sept.14-16, 1943*, 6; *BKCC I, Khamgaon, Sept. 14-15, 1939*, 1.

BKCC was thus an heir to the pioneer missionaries and missions. It is these missionaries who through their home mission boards had influenced the agenda of Edinburgh 1910. But has Edinburgh influenced BKCC?

BKCC AND ECUMENICAL BODIES: ATTEMPT TOWARDS CHURCH UNION

The members of BKCC were in constant dialogue with ecumenical bodies such as National Christian Council of India (NCCI) based in Nagpur and India Sunday School Union (ISSU). They received fraternal delegates from NCCI, Bombay Regional Christian Council (BRCC). They reviewed National Christian Council Review (NCCR). They sent delegates to ecumenical bodies such as BRCC, Nagpur-Chanda Conference. Once, they even requested financial assistance from NCCI for Adult Literacy ministry.²⁰

They read and discussed the reports from the International Missionary Conferences and acted upon some of the vital concerns of IMC in relation to world evangelism and missions. Their 1952 conference receives the report of BRCC September 1952. This report highlights the role that the National Christian Council had played in “securing a place in the Constitution for the propagating of religion.” It speaks of the role of International Missionary Conference, Willingen, Germany in emphasising evangelism and mission as God’s, and the need to moving away from “sitting at desks” and getting into the field to evangelise.²¹ This is how they responded to the “The Missionary Obligation of the Church”, a booklet produced by Willingen:

We recommend to the B.R.C.C. that this booklet be translated and published in Marathi, and that it and the accompanying booklets be read and studied by members of this Conference. We are gratified at the fresh realization the booklet shows of the primacy of evangelism, and commend to the local churches the exercise of their privilege and responsibility in witnessing to Christ in their immediate areas, and to the widening of their boundaries of accepted duties.²²

The members of BKCC were approached by NCCI and BRCC about joining the Union. BKCC, then, considered the question of forming themselves as United Church of Berar and Khandesh, and appointed a committee to discuss the problems of church union.²³ Their interest in the Union seems to have abruptly ended. They stopped sending representatives to Nagpur Chanda Regional Conference. In the same year, 1961, they discontinued the Church Union Study Committee. The work of the committee was to be undertaken by the Executive Committee.²⁴ Attempt towards church union failed but BKCC became one of the key players in forming associations such as EFI and UBS. Edinburgh had endorsed the comity model for various mission bodies but envisaged that this would lead to some kind of fellowship, association and eventually church union. It was their aim to have on every land one united church of Jesus Christ to provide one witness.

²⁰ *BKCC XIII*, 1951, Sept. 11-14, Washim, 18; *BKCC XV*, Sept. 10-11, Akola, 1953, 16; *BKCC XVII*, Oct. 26-28, Nandurbar, 1955, 12.

²¹ *BKCC XIV*, Sept. 8-11, Achalpur, 1952, 22-23.

²² *BKCC XV*, Akola, 1953, 13.

²³ *BKCC XVIII*, Sept. 13-15, Yeotmal, 1956, 16; *BKCC XIX*, Sept. 11-13, Buldana, 1957, 15.

²⁴ *BKCC XXIII*, Sept. 12-15, Nandurbar, 1961, 3.

In the post Edinburgh 1910, the formation of BKCC provided impetus for cooperative efforts in establishing several fellowships and associations including Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) and Union Biblical Seminary.²⁵ It was Dr. Paul E. Burckhardt, Professor Emeritus of UBS, who recalled during the address he gave at the silver jubilee celebration of UBS how through the Berar-Khandesh Christian Conference an impetus “was given for a united evangelical action in seminary education.”²⁶

CONCLUSION

Thus the founders of BKCC, heirs of the pioneer missionaries to Berar, influenced the agenda of Edinburgh 1910. Edinburgh 1910 in turn provided impetus to BKCC to move beyond comity in building up fellowships and associations. It was BKCC which conceived the idea of Union Biblical Seminary and played a primary role in establishing it in the spirit of Edinburgh 1910!

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²⁵ Betty Kline, “Hitherto-Henceforth”, *The Light: Union Biblical Seminary Silver Jubilee Issue*, 1964, 6-7

²⁶ “Fruits of Faith: The 25th Anniversary Programme”, *The Light*, 1964, 7.