

PERSONAL VOICES

First Indian Convert's Testimony

S. PAUL THIRUTHUVAOSS

MY FATHER WAS A HINDU. He was converted to Christianity by Brethren Missionaries from England about 100 years ago, and he suffered persecutions from his Hindu parents, relatives and villagers for his having accepted Jesus Christ as his Way. Through him, after about thirty years, all his sisters and brothers and other relatives found Christianity. So I am a born Christian.

I was educated in the Church Missionary Society primary schools and college. This Church Missionary Society was sponsored and managed by missionaries from England and so it was an Episcopal church. Even while I was a student, I was somewhat religious minded and used to meet missionaries and ask questions on Bible stories and doctrines. I tried to find the truth of the gospel, but they were not able to give me any satisfying answers to quench my thirst for truth.

I finished my collegiate education and joined several government departments to work. During these years I joined the Lutheran Church, the Strict Baptist Mission Church, the Methodist Mission Church, the London Mission Church and even the Pentacostal Church. In all these I could not find the real truth of the life of Jesus Christ exhibited by the members of these churches.

S. PAUL THIRUTHUVAOSS, the first twentieth-century Indian convert to Mormonism, operates a private adoption agency in Madukkarai, India. This essay was written in response to an inquiry from Dialogue's editors for more information on the Church in India. British spellings have been retained throughout.

The ministers in these churches relied upon monthly salary, allowances, travelling bills, pocket expenses and monthly subscriptions from church members, and I found ministers drinking, smoking, even playing cards and patronizing entertainment clubs. Yet they appeared at pulpits with robes and preached the word of God to convert others. Their lives were only ordinary ones—nothing different from the normal members. They took up the ministry only as a job because they could not get any other job.

At this stage in April 1954, I was on the verge of leaving Christianity once and for all to become a Hindu. At this time, I went to a book shop to buy a secondhand English literature book. When I opened it at the shop itself, I found a small English tract. I casually went through its contents. I read it two or three times and found it to be a revelation to me, the thing for which I had been searching over twenty-five years. A portion of it was the testimony of Prophet Smith. At the bottom of the tract, I saw the address of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. The same day I wrote to Salt Lake City and asked for more information and details on the doctrines and teachings of the Mormon Church. Within a fortnight I received copies of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and tracts on the Word of Wisdom and baptism. One Brother, LaMar Williams in the Missionary Department, was very helpful to me then. I was asked to contact the Hong Kong mission president, Brother Grant Heaton. In all earnestness and determination I read the Book of Mormon and the other materials. Brother Williams and President Heaton kindly answered my doubts and questions by post. In the next three years, I read the Book of Mormon five times. At the end of the third year, I was convinced that the Mormon Church as revealed to the venerable prophet Joseph Smith is the true restored church on this earth in these latter-days. I then asked the authorities in Salt Lake City to baptise me and take me into the fold of the Church. They asked me to wait for some more time, however. In the meantime, I began to teach people in and around the place where I was living. On Sundays or when convenient, I conducted Sunday school and taught them about the Mormon gospel and Joseph Smith's testimony.

On 7 February 1962, Apostle Richard L. Evans, with his wife, visited India on a Rotary program and took the opportunity to visit with me. He questioned me and met my friends to whom I had taught the Mormon gospel. He was convinced that Mormonism would find a place in this part of India, and so he prayed for me, my friends and for India.

Two years later, President J. A. Queally, who was then the mission president in Hong Kong, visited with me for three days and investigated the possibility of opening the Mormon Church here. He was convinced that I had accepted the Mormon gospel. But he asked me to wait for some more time. In July 1964 he brought Apostle and Sister Hinckley to our place and all of them again made enquiries and conducted investigations with a view to open the Mormon Church here. They came again in December 1964, and after a thorough investigation, Apostle Hinckley dedicated India to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On 7 February 1965, exactly three years after

Apostle Richard L. Evans trod on Indian soil, I was baptised by President Queally as the first convert to the Church out of 550 mission people in India. After me, both my father, aged about ninety-six and my wife were baptised by the President. On that day, I was also ordained as a Priest under the Aaronic Priesthood. President Queally left two young missionaries with us on a tourist visa, and they stayed with us for six months. During this period, they taught me and guided me to be in charge of the newly-born LDS Church in this part of the Indian Union. They visited hundreds of people and taught them the Mormon doctrines. Several of them were convinced but did not openly accept the Church because there would not be foreign missionaries resident in the place to be in charge of the Church. The two missionaries left us on 3 August 1965. On 23 October 1965, my father died as a saved man (probably God kept him to such a ripe old age only for his baptism in the Restored Church).

Until 1967 no foreign missionaries came to us and I was left alone to do missionary work. During this period of two years, I preached the gospel in the neighboring villages whenever I could find time. I was employed as an accountant in a cement manufacturing company, and so I could do church work only in the evenings and on Sundays. But I could not baptise anyone as I had not the sanction from the higher authorities of the Church. No foreign missionaries and no foreign funds are allowed into the Indian Union for preaching and propagating Christianity in any form. In 1967, President Carlos G. Smith, who was then in charge of the Singapore mission, visited with us, and the first batch of twenty-four members were baptised by me, under his authority. From then on, the strength of the Church in this part of the country slowly rose. After Smith, President M. F. Shurtleff and then President Soren F. Cox presided over the mission and visited with us two or three times a year. Whenever they came, there were baptisms and additions to the Church.

I have translated twelve of the English tracts into the Tamil language, including the Testimony of Joseph Smith, the Word of Wisdom, and tracts about baptism, tithing, after baptism and the Book of Mormon. I have also translated some important chapters of the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and ten Mormon hymns into the Tamil language. The Articles of Faith have also been translated. At every Sunday School meeting, the children recite the Articles of Faith from memory and sing them as a hymn. Once a month we stand in road junctions in the town and distribute tracts. We get response from people. They ask questions and we answer them.

As of this date, we have 225 baptised members, five elders holding the Melchizedek Priesthood, and thirteen Aaronic Priesthood holders. We now have four groups in different places, three chapel buildings. All our services—Sunday School and sacrament meetings—are conducted in Tamil.

The members are labourers working in farms and gardens. They are good witnesses to the Church, and almost all of them left drinking alcohol and using tobacco after joining the Church. They work hard and earn their livelihood in an honest way. They are very staunch in their faith, and there has been no falling away all these years. Most of the members are not rich, but

they are certainly not "rice Christians." If they do not have work, and if they do not have money, they prefer starving than stretching their hands to others. President M. F. Shurtleff helped ten families purchase some cows with a donation he got from his friends in America. Dr. Soren F. Cox helped them with Rs. 400.00 (equivalent to \$50) which he got as a donation through Dr. Spencer J. Palmer of Brigham Young University. Thus, American friends help us in our financial needs at times.

Even so, the children in these villages need clothes and books to study in the schools here. There are six promising girls and boys who are in the high school and they need financial help to continue their studies. If it is possible, please send us some old clothes and find some sponsors who would be able to help these children continue their studies in the high schools and colleges. They will be good leaders in the Church.

I am sixty-one years old and now am retired from the cement company. I am devoting my full time to church work and am also running an orphanage. I take children both male and female below seven years of age and send them to foreign countries for permanent adoption after obtaining the Indian government's permission, passports and visas. During the past seven years, I have sent two hundred sixty-eight such children to Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Finland, Switzerland, West Germany, Italy, Canada and the United States. I have given nearly fifty children to Mormon families in Salt Lake City and also in Washington state. Usually my wife and I take these children to all these countries and place them with the adoptive parents.

I need your prayers, and I thank you very much for your divine interest and love in us.

I write this in the holy name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with my personal testimony that Jesus lives, that the Prophet Joseph Smith saw the Father and Son and was the true prophet of God in these latter days. I also testify that President Spencer W. Kimball is the living prophet, that the Book of Mormon is the revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith, and that the missionaries all over the world working for the growth of the Church are the messengers of God.