SECTION - I

Introduction and Methodology

Political Economy and Religion in the Encounter of the Dalit Mādigās of Kōnaseema (E.G. Dist., A.P.) with Catholicism

Introduction

The religions of the world have been often in competition with one another in assuring their followers a way for trans-historical salvation. Salvation proposed has often been pictured as the result of a struggle against matter. This approach ensues from the matter-spirit dichotomy, written deep into the texture of most of the dominant religious traditions. To a great extent, this deflects the attention of the leaders and followers of these religions from an immersion into the concerns of this world. To say this, is not to deny the involvement of religions like Christianity, and other religions, in matters mundane, and even in extending charity and welfare to the less privileged of their brothers and sisters.

But the religions have approached the immersion into the world and involvement for ameliorating the needs of the downtrodden, often in an instrumentalist fashion. Service of the poor is undertaken, so that either the beneficiaries of the service can be eventually led to trans-historical salvation, or those who reach out to others can themselves attain merits, and augment the possibility of their own salvation. The material and the human, as spheres of reality, have not been valued for themselves and in themselves, and have not been accorded the autonomy due to them. But they have been treated as inferior to the spiritual or the divine, and from an instrumentalist perspective. The religions have been by and large, locating the sacred in the beyond, the other world.

This dichotomous and instrumentalist approach to the material and the human has led the dominant religions to be oblivious of the intimate link between political economy and religion, as seen in the life and religiosity of the subalterns. As a corollary, there has been amnesia of the dignity and the agency of the
subalterm, whose lives and religion have been revolving around their primordial and radical concern for well-being and survival. The dominant have failed to appreciate the transcendence at play in the subaltern art of survival against all odds, and to take note of their deep religiosity in their everyday hopes and dreams.

Christianity does profess faith in a God, who became incarnate in the flesh and shared our humanity's lot. At its core, Christianity is supposed to be a celebration of the oneness of the matter, with the divine and the spiritual. But the fact remains that, Christianity too, like many other dominant religions, has been a sad victim of the matter-spirit dichotomy and the attendant negation of matter and the denigration of the human, and the subalterns, in their agency for survival and the link between religiosity and political economy in their everyday life-concerns. The mission history of Christianity, especially in its colonial phase, and even up to this day, bears ample testimony to this chasm between its professed faith in the incarnation, and its denial in praxis.

Background of the Enquiry

My earlier pastoral ministry among the Madigas of Konaseema, and my present research has made me come face to face with the interrelationship of political economy and religion, in the life of the subalterns. The specificities of the political economy of Konaseema have deeply influenced the religiosity of the Madigas of this particular locality of the vast state of Andhra Pradesh. The encounter of the Dalits Madigas of Konaseema with Catholicism, testifies to the subaltern economic agency of the Madigas, expressed in their struggle for survival, identity and autonomy, and the attendant contradictions. This economic agency at play in this encounter is not reducible to the social and cultural agency of the subalterns, which phenomena, are affirmed by the anthropologists and sociologists to be usually at work among the subalterns, in their striving for mobility and identity during social dislocations.

If the encounter of the Madigas of Konaseema with Catholicism brings into relief, the alchemy of political economy and religiosity in the life of the subalterns, it is also a telling historical example of the negation by the dominant, of the spirit-
matter continuum and the collapse of borders, between political economy and religion, which are ever operative in the lives of the subalterns. The present enquiry attempts to delve deep into the continuities, discontinuities, and the contradictions at play in this encounter. They flow from the matter-spirit dichotomy superimposed by the dominant on the subaltern religiosity of the Madigas, which stands in the matrix of the matter-spirit continuum.

It also attempts to bring to the foreground, the subaltern agency operative in the process of religious conversion, which is usually eclipsed by the dominant constructs and narratives of conversion, and the resultant amnesia of the intimate link between religiosity and the everyday concerns of survival and political economy in their lives. In the present inquiry into the contradictions and the ambiguities of subaltern religiosity of the Catholic Madigas of Konaseema, I have carried forward the subaltern thrust and subaltern hermeneutical framework, I had attempted constructing in my M.Phil. thesis entitled “Socio-political Thought of Daya Krishna: A Subaltern Critique”.

The history of Catholicism in Konaseema bears witness to this eclipse of the subaltern agency of the Catholic Madigas and the amnesia of the link between religion and political economy in their lives. After the initial euphoria, immediately following the encounter of the Dalit Madigas and colonial Catholic Christianity around 1942, there has been growing mutual disenchantment between the Church leadership and the flock. The poor people of Konaseema, especially the Madigas, the backward group among the Dalits feel that the Church and its ministers were working at a tangent to the real concerns of the Madigas, their survival and well-being. The ministers of the Church were carrying out their ministry and even welfare measures were and are being undertaken. But the Church, the refuge of the Dalits among the Dalits, is not able to touch the people’s lives, in their vital concerns. Dissatisfaction amidst the flock is indeed growing.

The reality of a Green Konaseema, which had become greener, but the poor people, especially the Madigas, becoming poorer, in spite of the Church’s interventions on their behalf, in faith, education and health, is there for all to see.
"Trickle Down Theory" refuses to work, whether in the realm of the spirit or matter. The Madigas are looking for salvation for sure, in their own terms, of well-being and survival. And the Church has been looking other way around, because for it, real salvation is beyond this world. The subaltern religiosity of matter-spirit continuum and the dominant religiosity of matter-spirit dichotomy are intertwined in the lives of the Catholic Madigas of Konaseema.

Though the research covers a historical period from 1942-2002, as foreground and 1800-1942, as background, the inquiry is not intended to be a study in history, but an inquiry into the subaltern Madiga consciousness and praxis. It looks into the circumstances in which the conversion of the Madiga Dalits of Konaseema to Catholicism began just over 50 years ago, and hermeneutically explicitates the dynamics of that encounter. This has led the researcher to take into account of the socio-cultural, religious and economic background of the people before and after their conversion.

The Statement of the Research Problem

As the title indicates, the research intends to be an open-ended phenomenological-hermeneutical inquiry into the multi-layered religious consciousness of the Catholic Madigas of Konaseema, in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. The focus of inquiry will be the subaltern agency of the Madigas, expressed in their religious subjectivity, embedded in the political economy of Konaseema, prior to their conversion to Christianity, and in their appropriation of Catholic Christianity, around 1942. The inquiry is carried out under the hermeneutical preunderstanding that subaltern religiosity, as a religion-in-society has necessarily to do with the political economy of a particular context or region.¹

¹ Cf. G. Aloysius, Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils Under Colonialism, (New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, 1998), pp. 1-12. By religious subjectivity, we mean the process of contestation and appropriation by the subalterns, of the dominant and asc iptive religion of the oppressed, which was considered to be a "given", in the multiple confessional contexts of their oppression, and their own subjectivity, in the process. In the context of the understanding of religion, as a social construct, religion ceases to be a transcendental given, but something, which can be is being constructed, by the oppressed, in the context of their praxis oriented consciousness of their oppression, economic, as well as other related spheres. Religion in the new sociological understanding, from the hermeneutical perspective of the oppressed, is both an ideology and a weapon, and also an identity marker. In the religion of the oppressed, there is an ascendance of the ethical over the transcendental, giving space for the assertion of their religious
The broader area of the inquiry is the investigation into the emancipatory potential of religion itself, in the journey of the subalterns towards identity, autonomy and critical consciousness. In the process, the inquiry brings into relief, the continuities, as well as the discontinuities and the contradictions, inherent in this subaltern search for identity and well-being. The focus of inquiry is the subaltern agency of the Madagas, expressed in their religious subjectivity, prior to their conversion to Christianity, and in their appropriation of Catholic Christianity, around 1942.

The problematic latent in this search for well-being, namely, the interconnectedness of political economy, development and religion is critically addressed, from a hermeneutical angle. The concrete hermeneutic locus of this problematic, as well as the heuristic thrust of the entire inquiry is centred on the following question: how far has Catholicism, which presented itself to the Madagas, as a religio-social movement, and as an emancipatory alternative to the dominant religiosity, succeeded in playing its role, as a carrier of identity, autonomy, critical consciousness, and above all mobility, in their subaltern journey?

subjectivity, unlike in the ascervative religion, where the subaltern identity was submerged. The religion of the oppressed is made, constructed by them, in the context of their socio-economic oppression and cultural alienation. To indicate the fact that the religion of the oppressed is being constructed by the subalterns in the context of the dynamic interplay of socio-economic forces, it is termed as religion-in-society. See also Madara Otto, Religion and Social Conflicts (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979); also G. Alexy, Religion as Emancipatory Identity, pp. 7-9.

2 The word ‘subaltern’ is coined by Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theoretician, who attempted a praxis-oriented re-interpretation of Marxism. For him subaltern meant one of the inferior rank. Subaltern groups are always subject to the action of the superordinate or dominant groups. By subaltern hermeneutics is meant that type of hermeneutics in which subaltern, the underdog, the downtrodden, the subordinate is the focus of interpretation and more importantly the subject of interpretation. Cf. Antonio Gramsci, “Notes on Indian History” in Quimin Hoare and Geoffrey Novell Smith (eds.), Selections from Prison Notebooks (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 323-343. Also cf. Ranajit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies I - Writings on South Asian History and Society (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984). Preface by the editor Ranajit Guha and the contribution by him. “On some aspects of Historiography of Colonial India” in Ibid p.8. Cf. also Felix Welteke, “Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics: Beyond the Contemporary polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Tradition” in Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the dawn of the Millennium (ISCK, Delhi, 2000), pp. 98-121.

Rationale of the Research Problem

The present inquiry intends to place an alternative to the prevalent grain of the amnesia of the poor, which is becoming a common phenomenon in the realm of social sciences. It wishes to highlight the struggle of this particular community of Madiga Dalits of Konaseema, for their identity and mobility, as expressed in their search for their historical roots, theirs being a community which is considered to be Dalits among Dalits. It is a well-known fact that in Konaseema, Catholicism is a Religion of the Dalits among Dalits.

This enquiry will examine the validity of the emancipatory role of religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, as a weapon of the weak, in their striving for identity and empowerment. Potential of the Madiga Catholicism, to enter into the space of civil society, especially in the context of identity politics, and the onslaught of the forces of globalization will also be looked into.

As a result of this research into the encounter between the subaltern Madigas of Konaseema and Catholicism, and the attendant contradictions, the researcher intends bringing into relief certain subaltern signposts, which might be of help to Konaseema Catholicism, in its subaltern oriented praxis.

This renewed subaltern thrust of Konaseema Catholicism will bring the Christian thematic of salvation, under fresh hermeneutical scrutiny, especially from the context of the Madiga community’s search for identity and well-being. In the course of the enquiry, attention will be devoted to the hermeneutical/theo-logical contributions, made by the Madigas themselves, in the wake of newly gained political consciousness. The inquiry also takes into account of the deeply rooted openness to feminine symbolism, present in the Madiga religious consciousness.

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Alms and Objectives of the Research

Against the background of the inquiry sketched above, the following aims and objectives of the research were proposed at the beginning of the research:

1. To enquire into the interrelationship between political economy and religion
2. To analyze the economic motivations, which inspire the religious conversion of the Madigas
3. To investigate into the ambiguities, which are present in the encounter between Catholicism and the Madigas
4. To examine the potential of the symbolic and cultural resources of the Madigas, for their socio-economic empowerment
5. To review the practice of Catholicism in Konaseema, so as to help the Catholic Church, to be of greater service to the Madigas, who are in struggle for identity, autonomy, and well-being

Hypotheses of the Inquiry

1. Subaltern agency of the Catholic Madigas of Konaseema is expressed in their religious subjectivity, which is informed by their struggle for identity, autonomy and critical consciousness.

2. At the centre of this quest, intertwined with their religious subjectivity, is their concern for survival and well-being, which cannot be de-linked from the vicissitudes of the political economy of Konaseema.

3. It is this subaltern quest of the Madigas of Konaseema, for well-being, expressed in religious subjectivity, which leads them to encounter Catholicism, and through it, colonial modernity, around 1942.

4. This encounter manifests certain continuities and discontinuities with the past, and reveals certain contradictions, in the spheres of political economy, subaltern agency and leadership.

5. At the core of these contradictions, is the cleavage between the dominant mode of religiosity, and the subaltern mode of religious subjectivity, which is informed by the primordial subaltern posture of survival, quest for economic well-being and autonomy, all concerns radically embedded in political economy.
Theoretical Frameworks of the Research

The main theoretical frameworks, deployed in the inquiry are the following.

Gramscian Perspective of Religion as Contradictory Consciousness

As already indicated above, the basic theoretical framework of the research is the subaltern hermeneutical perspective, which has been influenced by the Italian Communist theoretician, Antonio Gramsci. Subaltern, for Gramsci, is one, who is on a journey from eclipse to identity, dependence to autonomy, contradictory to critical consciousness. As the subalterns journey from contradictory consciousness to critical consciousness, their spontaneous orientation to and autonomous interpretation of reality come to the fore.

This inquiry intends making use of Gramsci’s theory of religion as contradictory consciousness, as one of its subaltern hermeneutical tools. The research will examine how the concept of contradictory consciousness has been at work in the encounter between Madiga Dalits of Konaseema and Catholicism. For Gramsci, religion is contradictory consciousness, in as much as, it is an instrument of hegemonic articulation, wherein the dominant and autonomous conceptions of reality are intertwined. According to contemporary Gramscian scholarship, hegemony is the dialectical process, wherein different antagonistic forces are in articulation, by which social relations are organized, without essentialist fixity.

This dialectical, relational and non-essentialist nature of hegemony, in Gramscian discourse, has implications for our understanding of social movements. The political meaning of a movement is not a priori given. It is dependent on the contingencies of the hegemonic articulation, with other struggles and demands.6

Social Constructionism and Religion-in-society

Constructionism takes us beyond essentialism, in our approach to reality. In the perspective of constructionism,7 the religion of the oppressed is made.


constructed by them, in the context of their socio-economic oppression and cultural alienation.\(^8\) This religion of the oppressed is rightly termed religion-in-society, to indicate the fact that different dimensions of society like political economy, culture and ethnicity impinge upon it, and goes into its constructed texture. In turn, religion-in-society, as religious subjectivity of the oppressed does influence these spheres of society. The subalterns in their religious subjectivity engage themselves in a process of contestation and appropriation of the dominant and ascriptive religion of the oppressed. Thus, religion in the new sociological understanding, from the hermeneutical perspective of the oppressed, is both an ideology and a weapon, and also an identity marker.\(^9\)

**Amartya Sen’s Notion of Development as Freedom**

Another source of theoretical inspiration has been Amartya Sen’s approach to development economics, especially his notion of Development as Freedom.\(^10\) Sen’s approach is embedded in his epistemological mooring of ‘positional objectivity’, and his interpretation of well-being as capability. By positional objectivity, Sen means the hermeneutical privilege to be accorded to the welfare oriented interpretation, in dealing with economic issues, especially related to the poor, as opposed to the abstract, profit-oriented stance adopted by neo-classical economics.\(^11\) This framework provided by Sen has helped the researcher in his inquiry into the political economy of Konaseema. It lends itself as a tool of hermeneutical mediation, in overcoming the matter-spirit dichotomy and the hierarchization of the spheres of religion and political economy operative in the discourse of dominant religiosity.

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\(^9\) Cf. note 1 above.


The hermeneutical assumption behind this choice of the framework provided by Sen, is that in the matrix of the freedom and agency of the subalterns, concerns of political economy like survival and well-being are intertwined with religiosity. In the agency of the subalterns, striving for freedom, many a cleavage flowing from the matter-spirit dichotomy, inscribing dominant religiosity are resolved. Freedom and agency of the subaltern already calls for the spiritual, the spirit, in search of matter. Subaltern religiosity is earthy and eminently incarnational, in as much as there is transcendence at play in the economic agency of the subaltern, in striving for freedom and well-being.

The construction of a hermeneutical framework needed for enquiring into the multi-layered subaltern agency of the Madagas calls for an interdisciplinary approach. In the concrete context of this enquiry, I have attempted at an interdisciplinary approach between anthropology, sociology, political economy, philosophy and religious studies. The inspiration has been what is termed the collapse of borders or violation of frontiers in Postmodern approach to integration of knowledge.  

Methodologies of the Research Inquiry

Going along with social constructionism, which forms the broad epistemological mooring of this hermeneutical inquiry, the research adopts a

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12 In this context see Ananta Kumar Giri, *Global Transformations: Postmodernity and Beyond* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1998). Also idem. "The calling of a creative transdisciplinarity", *Futures*, 2002/34, 103–115, where the author places a challenge of a transdisciplinarity interrogation, even beyond interdisciplinarity. This transformational endeavour calls from the seekers of knowledge, the courage to invoke the perspectives of the other disciplines into the core of the disciplinary self. Transdisciplinary participation requires participatory approach, overcoming disciplinary chauvinism.  
12 Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics: Beyond the Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Traditions" in *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, pp. 247-268. See also Felix Wilfred, "Religion in Search of New Mediations" in *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, pp. 269-304. Here the author places a strong challenge to the sciences, both natural and social, for a human turn of knowledge, making it not a weapon of power, but an instrument of service. The paradigm, he proposes is that of Liberation Theology, which achieved a violation or frontiers between religion, sciences and political theory, placing knowledge, at the service of the empowerment of the poor. Also enlightening in this context is the attempt made towards the end of 1980s in the Free University of Amsterdam to achieve a rapprochement between Development Studies and Anthropology, under the hermeneutical paradigm of ‘Development as Religious Discourse’.  
combined methodology of ethnography and grounded theory. This combined methodology, which is adopted is also in line with the Postmodern call for the collapse of borders, of which mention has been made in the section on theoretical perspective. A brief explanation of each of these methods, in the hermeneutical context of our inquiry is in order.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography is a form of social research, in which the socio-cultural settings to be studied, however familiar to the researcher, have be considered as anthropologically strange. The task is to document the culture- the perspectives and the practices of the people in their settings. The aim is to gain perspective on the way each people sees the world.\(^\text{13}\) The subaltern is the subject of interpretation.\(^\text{14}\)

**Grounded Theory**

This approach was developed by Barney Glasser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s. 'Grounded theory' refers to that type of theory which is generated by or grounded in 'an interactive process involving the continual sampling and analysis of qualitative data gathered from concrete settings, such as unstructured data obtained from interviews, participant observation and archival research.'\(^\text{15}\)

Both ethnography and grounded Theory are informed by another theoretical perspective of social research called Symbolic Interactionism.\(^\text{16}\) This perspective in social research has its origins in the sociological approach of George Mead. According to him, as we 'take over the institutions of the community' and 'take over the attitudes of the community', as we grow into personhood, we have to take over


the roles of others, by adopting the standpoint of others. Only through dialogue, we can become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent. Hence the approach is called symbolic interactionism.\textsuperscript{17}

Theory of symbolic interactionism has been used in studying the everyday protest of the subaltern people and the other forms of resistance and assertion they engage themselves in daily life, vis-à-vis the dominant peoples.\textsuperscript{18}

Tools of Inquiry

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a research that involves social interaction between the researcher and the informants, in the milieu of the informants, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected. I had live-in experience in all the Catholic Madiga Petas (colonies) of Konaseema, the field of research, have gathered firsthand knowledge of their ways of living and livelihood, customs and traditions,\textsuperscript{19} through participant observation.

In-Depth Interview

In-Depth interview is a qualitative, non-directive research method, in which, through repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and the informants, data and insight into the informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences and situations, expressed in their own words are gathered.\textsuperscript{20} I conducted in-depth interviews of about 10 village elders, 3 catechists, 6 parish priests, who work among

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Ibid., pp. 74-76.


\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Ibid. p. 77.
the Madigas, and two non-Madiga elders. Most of the information has been recorded on audiotapes.

**Group-Interview**

Here too, the atmosphere is non-structured and non-directive. The interviewers bring together groups of people to talk about their lives and experiences in free flowing and open-ended discussions. I have used the potential of this method, to the maximum to gather information about and gain insight into Madiga life, socio-economic problems and culture.\(^1\)

**Folklore and Identity Myths**

Madigas, as a caste, are inclined to be performers and storytellers. They have satellite castes of professional storytellers among them. I had in-depth interview of at least two of these performers and gathered their life-experiences, as well as the oral performance texts from them. I have also collected the scripts of some traditional enactments, which have been gathered by the social activists and centres of culture. These performance texts and oral traditions, are examples and indicators of Madiga subaltern identity-assertion, protest and the “ethnopoetics of everyday life”,\(^2\) where memory and destiny, as identity-markers meet.

**Field-Songs**

During group interviews and informal gatherings, I was able to collect several field songs, sung by the Madiga women, during their work, celebrating their struggles and protesting against the system. Most of these songs were until recently in oral tradition only. During the climactic days of the Dandora movement, many of these songs were collected, compiled and added to the Madiga cultural repertoire, and used as instrument of mobilization of the caste.

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\(^1\) Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 111
These songs and performance texts, apart from giving insight into the Madiga assertion and protest, as life-story narration, will go into the making of Madiga Identity discourse.

Archival Sources

I also made an inquiry into the history of India and East Godavari (A.P.), in particular under the dimensions of colonialism, neo-colonialism, agrarian relations and development. This was in view of gaining insight into the micro and the macro context of the agency the subaltern Madiga of Konaseema, in interaction with the socio-economic and religious forces, during the period under study.

The Structure of the Thesis

The study is divided into five sections.

Section I: Introduction and Methodology formulates the research problematic and lays down its rationale, context and objectives in broad contours. Being an open-ended study of phenomenologico-hermeneutical nature, this introductory section also presents the hermeneutical landscape of the inquiry, which is predominantly Gramscian in orientation. The section also includes the other methodological orientations, as well as an inventory of research tools.

Section II: Konaseema and its Political Economy in Historical Perspective has three chapters within it. It delineates the key themes of Amartya Sen’s approach to economics as a science of human welfare, as a tool of hermeneutical mediation in the subaltern inquiry into the political economy of Konaseema. The struggle of the labouring classes for survival and livelihood is the main focus of inquiry. The section also contextualises the inquiry, mainly from the point of view of political economy and the eco-determinants of Konaseema, where the Madigas are in struggle for autonomy and identity. The story of the Dalits of Konaseema, especially the Madigas, is not one of the synergy of freedoms,

enhancing human capability and human productivity in Senonian terms, but one of negation of Human Rights, alienation of land and the denial of minimum wages, and the consequent standstillness in mobility, with untouchability written in the texture of political economy.

Section III: Mapping the Inventory of Madiga Subaltern Agency and Religious Consciousness, against the background of the salient features of the political economy outlined in the foregoing section, in four chapters, attempts at tracing the inventory of Madiga religious consciousness. The tool “Inventory of the Religious consciousness of the Madigas” makes sense only in the context of the continuum between their godlessness in the ritual of their daily struggle for survival and the worship of the village goddesses, in ritual solidarity. This ritual continuum, with its two symbolic inner continguities, which emerge in the myths of origin and identity (Jambuvadu) and Matangi, the liminal feminine symbol of power, is indicative of the actual agency of the Madigas in struggle to assert their identity and autonomy.

Section IV: Madigas Encounter Catholicism: An Itinerary of Continuities, Discontinuities, and Contradictions in three chapters narrates the story of the encounter of the Konaseema Madigas with Catholicism. In the first chapter, it traces the triggers and catalysts of the encounter, phenomenologically narrating the continuities and the discontinuities with the past, latent in this encounter. The second chapter looks at these phenomena hermeneutically, and especially brings into relief the attendant contradictions, being revealed in the encounter, against the background of the socio-cultural and politico-economic vicissitudes of Konaseema. In the light of the hermeneutic of the encounter, the final chapter of the section brings into relief certain subaltern signposts, which might be of help to Konaseema Catholicism, in its onward journey with the subaltern Madigas.

Section V: Conclusion and the Main Findings of the Research gathers together the main findings of the research and presents the salient contribution of the thesis, followed by a brief methodological Afterword.