

# HISTORY III : PROJECT

REG.NO. 15917

M.E.VIRANNA (MISS)

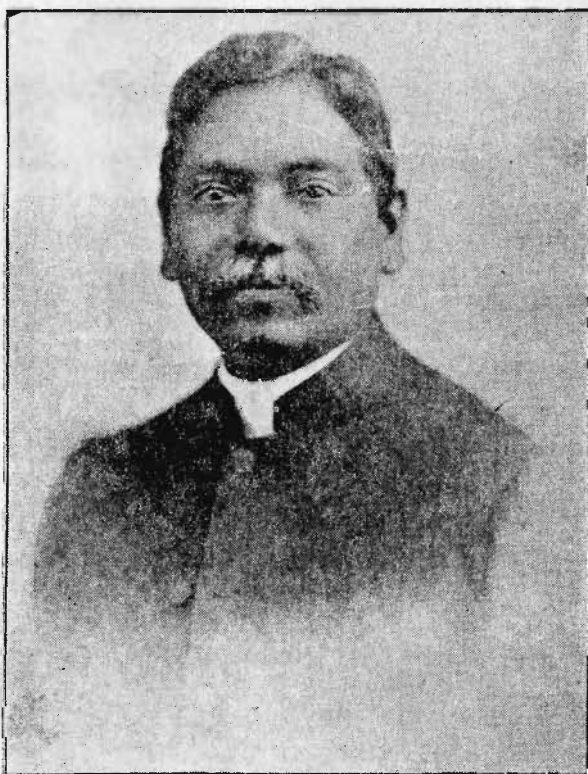


*Cutting cane.*

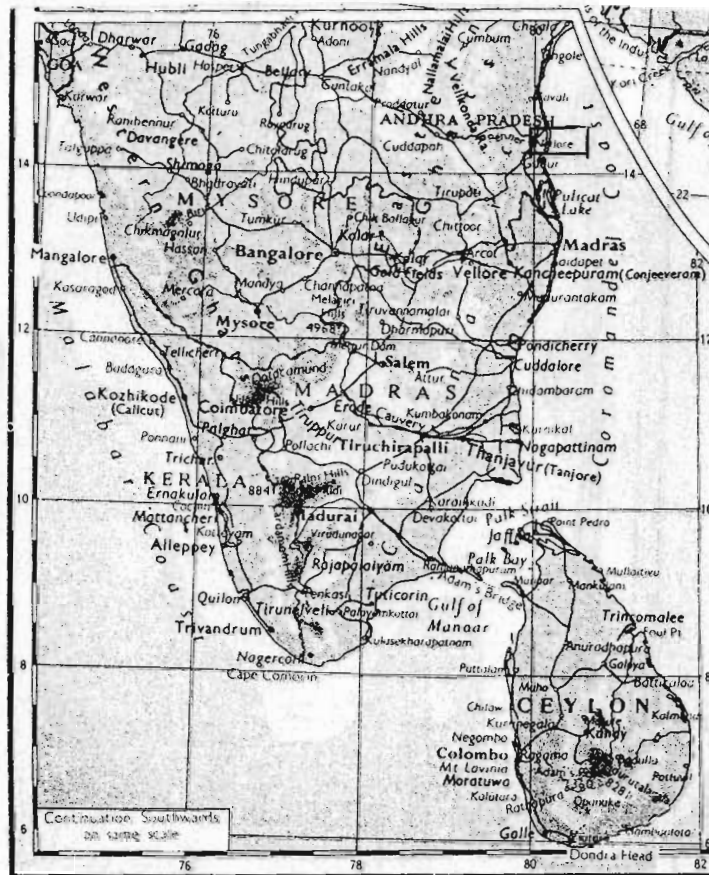
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THE LATE REV. JOHN RANGIAH (1844 - 1915): His early missionary work amongst the Indentured Indian Telegu Christians in Natal.



Late REV. JOHN RANGIAH (1866-1915)  
Pioneer Missionary of Indian Baptist Work in South Africa  
(1903-1915)



Location of Nellore

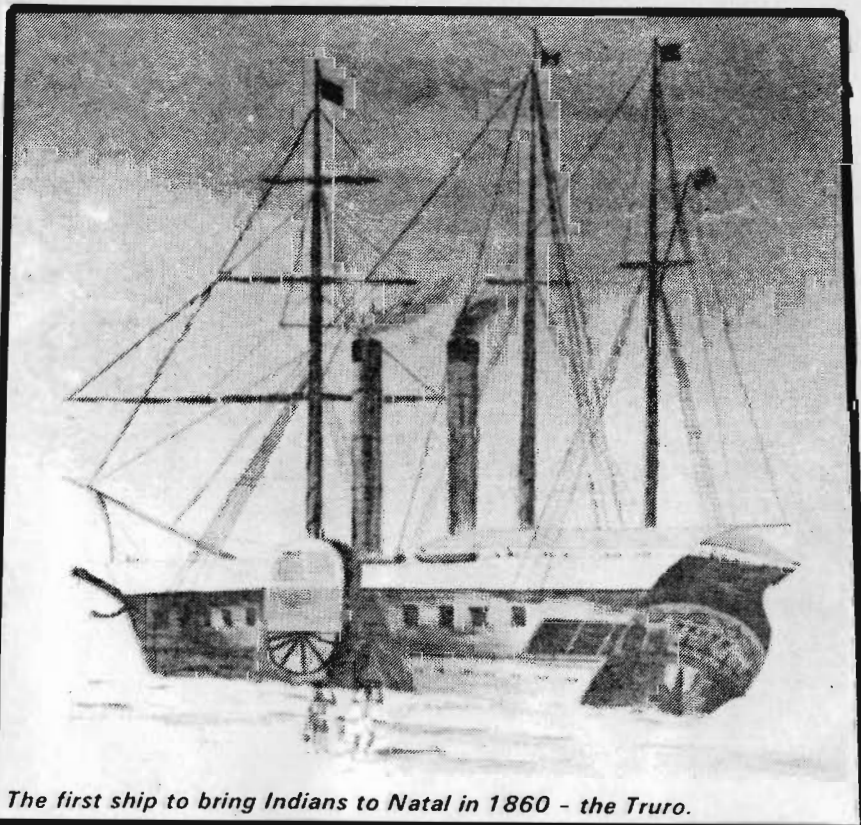


The Voyage from Nellore to Durban

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mr. T. Rangiah, retired principal of the Kearsney Indian School, and son of the late Rev. John Rangiah, for the detailed account of his late father's missionary work in Durban and Kearsney in the early 1900's.

My gratitude is also extended to Mr. Mahaimasthothram Rangiah, grandson of the late Rev. John Rangiah, and Mr. N.M. Israel secretary for the Baptist Association of South Africa who greatly assisted by furnishing me with annual reports, brochures and newsletters relevant for my discussion.



*The first ship to bring Indians to Natal in 1860 - the Truro.*

### PREFACE

There are many pros and cons to be evaluated when attempting an assignment of this nature. Although I found great difficulty in obtaining relevant documents to substantiate and verify my story, I found this type of work to be quite stimulating and interesting. The late Rev. John Rangiah came to Natal as a "free" Indian in 1903 and as result of this I could not trace a single document. My visit to the Stanger Street Immigration Office and the Trust Bank Centre proved futile because the Late Missionary did not have an indentured number. The immediate family as well do not have any relevant documents. I have been fortunate in getting verbal explanations and was able to retrieve written material quite easily because the late Rev. J. Rangiah was a prominent personality in the Natal Indian Baptist Mission and during the early 1900's he was a household name amongst the Telegu community in Kearsney. One very interesting bit of evidence that I came across was that the late Rev. John Rangiah laboured amongst a small group of Telegu Christians who over the years have intermarried and actually formed the present day congregation of the Indian Telegu Baptist Church. This Baptist Association not only became a religious institution but also a family institution.

## Introduction

During 1900 - 1901 several thousands of Indians left India to work in Natal as Indentured Labourers. Among these were 150 Telegu Baptists who came from Vinukonda, Markapuram and Cumbum. Many of the Christians who came to Natal were sent to Kearsney and were employed on the Sir J.L. Hulett tea plantations. Sir Liege Hulett and Lady Hulett saw to the physical needs as well as the religious needs of the Indian labourers. They got help from the Wesleyan ministers but this did not help because of denominational



Tea picking at Kearsney.

and language problems. The Indians from Kearsney sent letters to the Telegu Baptist Home Mission Society requesting for a Missionary to be sent to Natal. This letter reached India and Rev. John Rangiah was chosen to make the sacrifice to come to Natal. Before Rev. J. Rangiah was ordained minister, he was the headmaster of the Nellore Boys School from 1897 to 1900. and of the Nellore Girls School from 1901 to 1903.

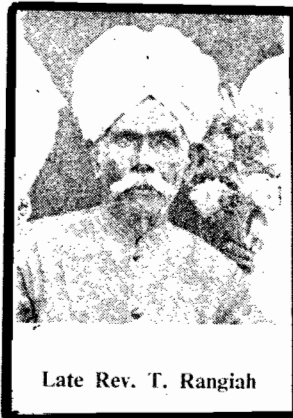
## Background

In the 1830's American missionaries realized there was a need for missionary work in the Orient, Between 1836 - 1840 the American Baptist Missionary Society undertook to send a missionary to India to spread the Christian Gospel. Relevant to my discussion is the establishment of the Indian Baptist Mission Church in Nellore on 12 October 1844. The year 1853 marked the beginning of earnest missionary work in and around Nellore.

It was also in 1853 that a young man accepted the Christian faith. He was born in Nellore and belonged to an orthodox priestly family and served his gods with zest and ceremony in a Hindu temple. The family was deeply religious. This man was called T. Rangiah. He was allowed by his father to attend a mission school in Nellore with other children and to learn the Telegu alphabet.

Whenever he had time to spare he would go to the Missionary bungalow. Later he was offered a job at the Mission School to teach the very little children for 1 rupee a month. His father consented to him taking the job, little realizing that a change was taking place in his son's mind.

T. Rangiah learned rapidly and accepted the Christian faith in 1853 and was baptised. When his family learnt of his conversion he was thrown out of the home and was forced to sever all family connections. He later married a girl named Maha Lukshmee from the boarding school. He had four sons who also dedicated their lives to missionary work. His sons were Rev. Daniel Rangiah, Rev. Samson Rangiah, Rev. John Rangiah and Rev. Benjamin Rangiah. It was his third son who laid the foundation for the Baptist Missionary work amongst the Indians in Natal. Rev. T. Rangiah was the pastor of the Madras Baptist Church till 1905. He died at the age of 83. From the above discussion it is evident that the late Rev. John Rangiah followed the footsteps of his father.



Late Rev. T. Rangiah

#### Preparations for Departure

Between May and June 1903 Rev. John Rangiah made the necessary arrangements for his departure to Natal. During this period he visited various churches and villages to bid farewell to them. He had no idea that his wife was going to be an obstacle. She had no intention of leaving the land of her birth, her friends and relatives and go to a strange country. She inquired, "Was there any need to go across the seas?" 1

Rev. J. Rangiah did not argue or insist that she come. Instead he merely prayed and asked God to give her a change of heart. Within six weeks Mrs. Rangiah informed her husband that she was ready to leave and that they should delay no more.

Rev. J. Rangiah at first intended to leave from Madras or Colombo. According to Rev. J. Rangiah the ship on which he planned to make the voyage from Madras was caught in a storm and wrecked off the coast of Colombo.

#### Departure from India

Eventually the Missionary and his wife Kankammah and their two children, Manoharam and Preemaleelah, left Nellore on 9 May 1903 to Bombay.

On 13 May 1903 they set sail from Bombay on board the 'Safari'. It was not all smooth sailing for the Rangiah family because they were not accustomed to sea - travel and became sick. The kindness shown and assistance given by the captain of the ship made the rest of their journey a pleasant one.

#### Arrival in Natal.

At about 6 p.m. , 12 June 1903, the 'Safari' sailed into the port of Durban. They disembarked the following morning. On Saturday, 13 June 1903, Rev.

1. D.N. Nathaniel : Founders Day Golden Jubilee Number, in Niba News,

J. Rangiah and his family set foot on Natal soil. He was met by Mr. Nelson, a member of the South African General Mission. (S.A.G.M.)

The very next day Rev. J. Rangiah set out to visit places like the A.B.C. Barracks, Duffs Road Barracks and Phoenix. When Mrs. Rangiah saw the hills, open fields, trees and grass, birds and flowers in Phoenix she exclaimed, "Indeed this is a very good country!" 2

#### His First Place of Settlement

The Missionary was given temporary work by the S.A.G.M. at Phoenix. He was also given accommodation there.

#### His Missionary Work

The most touching experience of Rev. J. Rangiah had a month after his arrival was with a condemned man in the Durban goal. A white missionary introduced him to Subbadoo, a Telegu - speaking man, who was awaiting execution for murdering another Indian with an axe. Subbadoo was a non - Christian and Rev. J. Rangiah was determined to save the man's soul as well as save him from execution. Execution was set for the 31 July 1903. Rev. J. Rangiah visited the prisoner daily and even wrote to the Governor pleading for clemency. The Governor replied to Rev. J. Rangiah stating that he is unable to help and that justice must take its course.

Rev. J. Rangiah had the privilege and honour of baptising Subbadoo on the 30 July 1903. This touching scene took place in the goal and even more surprising was that the prisoner's bath - tub served as a 'baptismal pool'. Subbadoo then accepted his death willingly after he accepted Christianity. Subbadoo was Rev. J. Rangiah's first convert.

#### His Visit to Kearsney

On Saturday, 19 September 1903, Rev. J. Rangiah made his way to Kearsney and was overjoyed to find Telegu Christians there. He had the honour of meeting the owner of the Kearsney Tea Estates, Sir James Liege Hulett. Sir Hulett took an instant liking to the Missionary and invited him to come and live in Kearsney and was even promised a house.

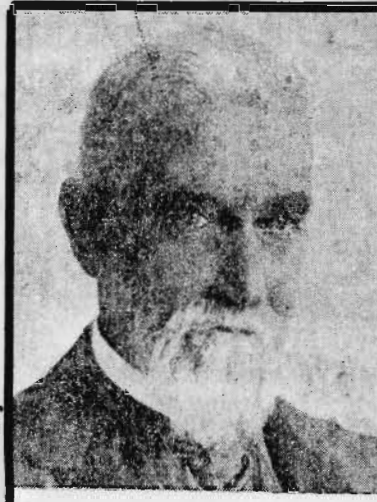
On 6 October 1903 Rev. J. Rangiah, his wife and three children left Phoenix and went to Kearsney. Sir Hulett allowed the Rangiah family to occupy a large house in Sprowston, not very far from the Hulett Tea Factory.



Late Mrs. K. Rangiah  
First Missionary-Lady of N.I.B.A.

The serenity of the place , the fresh air, the trees, gardens and flowers, and orchards fascinated the Missionary so much and the fact that this place was given to him as a 'gift' from God he called it 'Gospel Hill' 3 Even to this day it is still called by that name.

Sir Hulett made it his duty to provide the Missionary with rations and provisions and even promised him a salary of £20 per annum. It was the love and kindness of Sir and Lady Hulett that enabled Rev. J. Rangiah to carry on with his missionary work. This led to the creation of the Natal Indian Baptist Church.



Late Hon. Sir James Liege Hulett



Late Lady Hulett

#### The Missionary's Social Activities

In addition to the spiritual needs of his people, the Missionary was confronted by another problem and that was the educational needs. He was concerned about the growing illiteracy among the Indian children.

So he set himself the task of organising a school in Kearsney. On Monday, 10 October 1904, the first Indian Baptist School was started with a roll of 4 pupils, one of them being the son of Rev. J. Rangiah. Mrs. K. Rangiah was their first teacher. By the end of the year the roll gradually increased to 12.

It became difficult to accommodate the pupils at the 'Gospel Hill' school and the Missionary had to turn to

Sir Hulett for help. The Hulett laundry was used as the first Indian School in Kearsney in 1904.

Later he realized that there was a need for an evening school. There were no funds for a good building so he decided to build one with a thatched roof. Work on this building started at 6 p.m. and continued late into the night until it was completed.



"Laundry" School

3. D. N. Nathaniel: Founders Day Golden Jubilee Number, in Niba News,

### Problems which hindered his Mission Work

The Missionary was faced with a problem in 1906. This time it was the African uprising. This hindered his work to a great extent. The Zulu impi created much unrest and the Indian labourers at Kearsney had to seek shelter in the Tea Factory during the night. The Missionary and his wife spent many nights hiding in the nearby bushes at Gospel Hill. They were afraid of being attacked and killed by the Zulu warriors. Rev J. Rangiah also hid his books and religious literature in a dug - out in his garden because the Zulus burnt and plundered people's houses.

He also encountered problems from those within the church. Missionaries who initially agreed to work on a non - remunerative basis expressed discontent about salaries.

### His Visit Abroad

At the beginning of 1910 Rev. J. Rangiah went to Britain to attend the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. After spending five months overseas he returned to Durban on 31 July 1910.

### His Children

During his stay in Natal Rev.

J. Rangiah had another two sons

and five daughters. They were Mahaimasthothram Rangiah , born 1903 (deceased) ; Rakshanaleela, born 10.06.1905 ( deceased); Rajaleela, born 29.01.1907 (deceased); Tupili Rajaharam, born 07.11.1909; Ramyaleela, born 1911 (deceased); Jayaleela, born 07.12.1913 ; Mahimaleela, born 1915 (deceased). The youngest daughter died at infancy three months after her father's death.

### The End of the Missionary's Journey

After successfully establishing the Telegu Indian Baptist Church in Kearsney, the Missionary took seriously ill on 16 December 1915. On the 20 December 1915 he was taken to the Addington Hospital and on the 23 December he died and was buried on Christmas Day in the Kearsney cemetery.



Rev. J. Rangiah with friends at Missionary Conference, Edinburgh.

### Conclusion

The late Rev. John Rangiah was the pioneer of the Indian Baptist Movement in South Africa. The period 1903 - 1915 is significant because the Telegu Baptist Church started as a humble beginning at Gospel Hill and today has a large following with a number of branch churches. The history of the Telegu Indian Baptist Church of South Africa can thus be traced to the industrious and enduring work done by the founder and pioneer, the late Rev. John Rangiah. His untiring field work, determination, humility, boundless love and compassion for his fellow men made him one of the most prominent missionaries in the early 1900's.

The late Rev. J. Rangiah made copious notes of his life as a missionary. His diary contained details of his day to day life. His recordings were in Telegu and much effort was made by the later Telegu Baptist missionaries to decipher the scrawls and scribbles in order to present to the Baptist followers an English version of the history of the Telegu Baptist Church and about the life of the Missionary.

A P P E N D I X

The Work of the Telugu Baptist Home Missionary Society  
in South Africa, 1903—1905.

BY REV. JOHN RUNGIAH,

First Missionary to the Telugus in Natal, South Africa.

ORIGIN OF THE MISSION.

**I**N the Madras Presidency there are over 65,000 Telugu Baptist Christians. (Telugu is one of the chief languages of South India). These Christians owe their conversion to the work of the American and Canadian missions. Many churches have been formed, primary and advanced schools established, and also a college and two theological seminaries. And now these Telugu Christians, out of gratitude for the gospel sent to them, are seeking to follow their fellow-countrymen, with the blessings of religion, into those parts of the world to which they have emigrated. Many hundreds of Telugus have come to Natal as indentured immigrants.

In the year 1897, the American Baptist Telugu churches in South India formed among themselves a missionary society called the "Telugu Baptist Home Missionary Society," to send evangelists of their own to some of the very degraded and destitute of the aboriginal tribes in that part of the country. And in the year 1902, these churches, altho most of their members are extremely poor, earning only a few pence a day, decided in real faith and by ready sacrifice to send a missionary of their own to Natal.

VOYAGE AND EARLY EXPERIENCES.

I, with my wife and two little children, left Nellore on the 9th of May, 1903, and on the 11th took passage at Bombay by the steamer "*Safari*." After just a month, *i.e.*, on the 11th of June, we arrived at Port Natal and found shelter at the mission house of the S.A.G.M., and a friend in the late Superintendent, Mr. W. Spencer Walton. Temporary work was found at Phoenix. My earliest experience was with a condemned man at the gaol in Durban. After preaching to him the gospel of our blessed Lord and Savior for fully a month, he at last gave a most astonishing testimony of his repentance and faith

Extracts taken from the late Rev. John Rangiah's diary.  
The original diary was written in Telegu and later  
translated into English.

before the officers, and in Christian trust gave up his life peacefully. His last words were, "I go to the refuge at the feet of the Savior, Jesus Christ." While at Phoenix I at once began to make missionary tours, and to search out the Telugu Baptist Christians.

#### REMOVAL TO KEARSNEY.

Finding little communities of Telugu Christians at many points, up to Stanger and beyond, I at once, through encouraging indications of providence, decided to remove to Kearsney, which is now the headquarters of our work in Natal. We settled there on the 9th of October, 1903.

#### GREAT ENCOURAGEMENT AND HELP.

Since our settlement here much kindness has been shown by the managers of various estates, but to the Hon. Sir J. Liege Hulett and Lady Hulett, the Telugu Baptist Mission of Natal, and my family and I are most deeply indebted. This liberal minded and benevolent gentleman takes a genuine and enthusiastic interest in enterprises pertaining to the Kingdom of Christ. Regardless of denominational differences he, with Lady Hulett and family, gave me a hearty welcome, and took the mission and myself into their warm sympathy and Christian care. He provided a house of worship and a dwelling-house for us, and allowed me to draw rations and medicines, and in every way encouraged the establishment of a Telugu church among his employees, a hundred of whom are Baptist Christians.

#### THE FIRST TELUGU BAPTIST CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA.

December 27th, 1903, was a memorable day for us in Natal; for on that Christmas Sunday we formed the first Telugu Baptist church in this land. Sixty-four members, including myself and wife, constituted the church.

#### FIRST BAPTISM AND FORMATION OF OTHER CHURCHES, 1904—1905.

The first harvest we reaped was six new believers, who were baptized in the river Umvoti on the 14th of February, 1904. We called the river the Gundlacumma of Natal, with earnest hopes and prayers for the further progress of the Kingdom. (The Gundlacumma is a river in the Telugu country, South India, where 2,222 persons were baptized in one day.) Ever since I began my regular missionary tours, wherever I have found groups of Christians I have gathered them into churches, and appointed elders from among them, and have set before the churches and elders the duty of spreading the gospel to the utmost of

their ability. The Verulam Church was formed on 22nd May, 1904; the Darnall Church on 12th June, 1904; the Durban Church on 30th October, 1904; and the Stanger Church on 25th December, 1904.

#### HOUSES OF WORSHIP.

For a long time we tried hard to get a suitable house at Stanger in which to hold services. The Lord heard our prayers, and through the generosity of Col. Addison a nicely-built chapel has been provided for our use. At Verulam and Darnall the Christians have built large grass houses as churches for themselves. The Durban Church has not yet got any proper place for worship. We are praying, and trying hard to secure one at that most important town, where nearly 12,000 Indians reside. The price of land there is exceedingly high.

#### PASTORS OF THE CHURCHES THUS FAR ESTABLISHED.

I was long praying the Lord of the harvest to send forth workers for this field. Amongst our Christians there are some who were educated in India, and were teachers in the mission schools there. I was earnestly requesting them to take up the work of the ministry as soon as the time of their indentures should be over. I desired that at least three of them should enter upon this work. In response to my appeal three did offer themselves for the service of the gospel. I promised none of them any regular salary. Our churches are only newly formed: we have no rich society to rest upon. Through simple faith in the Lord himself these brethren were led to work for their Master. One of them has been sent to Durban as pastor of the church there: one is at Darnall caring for the flock at that place: the third one is staying with me at Kearsney, taking charge of the congregation here in my absence, which occurs frequently. We prayed for three preachers and the Lord has provided us with two more, so that five are now employed. One is at Stanger, and the other one is pastor of Verulam Church. W. G. Armstrong, Esq., of Verulam, and Col. Addison, of Stanger, have both kindly spared these men for us, and the latter wholly supports the preacher at his place. Except the preacher at Stanger, the support of the other four preachers rests entirely on our churches. Besides the rations and lodging the support of each preacher costs at least £1-10-0 a month. We are trying hard to help ourselves, and when we do our part we know the Lord will care for the rest.

#### CHURCH SERVICES AND OTHER MEETINGS.

Regular services on every Sunday, and communion services once in the month have been held during the past two years in all these

churches; and regular prayer-meetings have been held on week days at different barracks. From Darnall in the north up to Durban several of the barracks have been visited, and the gospel has been preached at those places. The preaching is mostly done at night, when the indentured laborers return from work. Once in a quarter our Christians gather at chief centres and hold religious meetings. We call these gatherings *festivals* of the Natal Telugu Christians. The Telugu mind in general is simple and inclined to cheerfulness; and the hard working laborers especially need joyous diversion. So, our Christian festivals help us greatly in refreshing both mind and spirit. The festivals are as follows:—1. Christmas; 2. New Year Day; 3. Resurrection Festival; 4. Gospel Festival, on the Sunday nearest to June 11th, when the Telugu Christian missionary, bringing the gospel, arrived; 5. Praise and Thanksgiving Festival, on the Sunday nearest to October 9th, when our missionary finally settled at Kearsney, and the gospel began to be preached and churches to be formed. In all these festivals we teach lessons and stories from the Bible. The Sunday school pictures sent to us from friends in America help us much in this work. Several hundred copies of the *Northern Messenger*, sent by a Canadian lady, have been distributed amongst many English-speaking friends.

#### WORK AMONG THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

We have two schools, just started, one at Kearsney, and the other at Stanger. My wife, Mrs. K. Rungiah, helps us in preaching the gospel to the women around us. Her frequent visits to them have made some of them friends to the gospel, and she has been successful in her efforts. She also teaches the school for children at Kearsney.

Thirty-one have been added to our churches by baptism since the beginning of 1904.

Source List

1. The Kearsney Government Aided Indian School, Golden Jubilee Number, 1903 - 1954, Durban, Mercantile Printing Works, 1954.
2. NATHANIEL, D.N.: Founders Day Golden Jubilee Number, in Niba News, 1V, Durban, Mercantile Printing Press, 1953.
3. RANGIAH, J.: Telegu Baptist Mission Natal, South Africa 1903 - 1905, Madras, M.E. Press, Mount Road, 1905.