

Atheist Movement in Andhra Pradesh

1956-1995

By **Dr. G. Vijayam,**

M.A. (Andhra), M.A. (Delaware), Ph.D. (Andhra)

Atheism— ancient and modern

India is not only the land of religion, but also of atheism, humanism, rationalism and freethought. Atheism gained greater social acceptability and respectability and became as integral part of the social life. A number of social reformers challenged the orthodoxy and obscurantism. In the modern period, English education, freedom movement, social reform, progressive legislations helped people to think on new lines.

To a large extent, **the atheist movement in Andhra is unique in its approach and content.** It did not develop as merely criticizing religion and debunking gods and godmen, but was more as a way of life, encompassing all aspects. It is positive in content, constructive in its approach and innovative in its programmes. Atheism evolved as a philosophy and as an alternate way of life, facilitating the march towards a post-religious society. It is this unique feature, which attracted the world attention. In fact, **atheism in Andhra gave a new direction to the world movement by emphasizing on the positive nature of atheism. It recognized far and wide.**

GORA AND SARASWATHI GORA: TORCHBEARERS OF ATHEISM

Gora (Nov. 15, 1902-July 26, 1975) and Saraswathi Gora (Sept. 28, 1912- Aug. 19, 2006), founders of the first known Atheist Centre in the world, were freedom fighters,

social revolutionaries and champions of atheism as a positive way of life. They highlighted through their life and programmes that atheism is not negative, but positive and it touches all aspects of life. They turned attention from imaginary god-centred universe to the human-centred and appealed to the people to be realistic, scientific and rational in their thinking and actions.

Born in an orthodox family on Nov. 15, 1902 at Chatrapur, Orissa, Gora had his education at Kakinada and then at Presidency College, Madras. He taught Botany at Madurai, Coimbatore, Columbo and Kakinada Colleges for fifteen years and was a reputed lecturer and Head of the Department of Botany and also a social worker. However, the then society was so intolerant to atheism that he was dismissed twice from Kakinada P.R. College in 1933 and from Hindu College, Machilipatnam in 1939 for his atheist views. Influenced by the nationalist movement and social reforms, he championed widow remarriages, women education and fought against caste and untouchability. Being a scientist, he challenged superstitions and blind beliefs and obscurantism. His interaction with people of all religions, extensive studies and life experiences made him a staunch champion of atheism.

In history many were dubbed as atheists for their heretical views. But Gora and his wife Saraswathi Gora both declared themselves openly as atheists.

Founded Atheist Centre in 1940

Undaunted by social persecution, Gora resigned his job from Hindu College, Machilipatnam and started the World's first known Atheist Centre at Mudunur village in Krishna District in 1940 and continued his fight against obscurantism and blind beliefs and promoted atheism as a positive way of life. Gora and Saraswathi Gora gave up cozy urban life and chose rigours of village and promoted atheism with zeal and enthusiasm. Their personal character, integrity, selfless work, social service and

commitment to the cause of atheism won admiration and support from the people. Gora toured extensively all over Andhra and outside. Along with a band of committed co-workers Gora and Saraswathi participated in the Quit India Movement. Their practical programmes against caste and untouchability and his struggle for social equality attracted the attention of even Mahatma Gandhi. The conversations between Gandhi and Gora on atheism and social change were published by the Navajivan, the official publishers of Gandhi, in the book form entitled *An Atheist with Gandhi*.

Gora was uncompromising in his advocacy of atheism as a positive way of life. He lived and died as an atheist. His transparent honesty, integrity, impeccable character, simplicity and commitment to the ideals he cherished, won him great admiration and respect. Even those who disagreed with him admired his courage of conviction and sterling character.

What is atheism?

Gora stated that "Atheism is the opposite of theism. What then is theism? Theism means belief in the existence of god. But what is god? The form of god has changed considerably from the primitives, solid fetish to a metaphysical concept of the ultimate reality. Though the forms of god have varied widely, all the types have one common, namely that god is superior to man. So, in relation to the god of his belief, the believer places himself in a position of inferiority. The prayer, 'Thy will be done' expresses the believers feeling of surrender and subordination to god.

Because free will exists, god does not exist and the concept of an almighty god is clearly an absurdity. Belief in the existence of god is an expression of man's slave mind. Slave mind seeks a prop and an easy prop on which the slave-mind rested was a concept of god.

As freewill is opposite of slave-mind, the expression of freedom is recognized as atheism or opposite of theism. Gora asserted that though 'atheism' is negative' in form, it is positive in content. Positively atheism means the expression of freewill. Freedom, equality and morality go together in the atheist way of life. Morality is a social necessity, and it is not 'divinely' ordained.

Atheists are masters of their systems and institutions. They are free. They change their systems and institutions in consonance with new thoughts, new truths and new situations. Openness of mind and conduct is sufficient guarantee against falseness and fanaticism.

In his *Positive Atheism* Gora asserted: "The atheist way of life is full of initiative. It continually progresses towards increasing happiness every time through scientific understanding and technological control of the forces of the world. Its objective is equality; its method is openness; its means is political action; its driving force is the moral freedom of the individual."

Gora developed atheism as a comprehensive philosophy, encompassing all aspects of life. His atheism was not mere theoretical discussion, but an alternate way of life. His progressive ideas attracted many, including his entire family.

Immediately after establishing the Atheist Centre, Gora published his monumental book in Telugu "*Nasthikatvamu [Devudu ledu]* (Atheism—There is no god) in 1941. After his extensive world tour, Gora another book in English, *Positive Atheism*, which was published in 1972 on the occasion of the historic first World Atheist Conference at Vijayawada. His Autobiography, *We Become Atheists*, which was completed just four days before his death, and published in 1976, reveal his trials and tribulations for the cause of atheism.

For Gora, atheism means freedom of the individual. Atheism is liberating man from the notion of god. The term theism connotes slave mind, whereas atheism connotes a free, and independent mind. To be an atheist, one must be bold and rational. God is essentially the creation of a slave mind. The essence of religion was man's surrender to god. Slave minds enjoyed inventing the numerous advantages of being a slave. 'Thy will be done' is the fitting description of the theist mentality.

Man should give up his slave-stance and adopt self-confidence. Man's wants can be fulfilled not through prayer to nonexisting gods, but only through his own intelligent efforts. Atheism is a rebellion against mental slavery, against dishonesty and inequality.

Humans are responsible for their actions. They are makers of their systems and they can build their future with determination and commitment in tune with their cherished ideals. Atheist movement stands for freedom, democracy, secularism and individual's responsible behavior towards fellow humans.

Atheist Centre at Mudunur village in Krishna District was a social change institution with comprehensive outlook. Fighting superstitions and blind beliefs, educating people through science and social outlook, inculcation of a new value system based social reform programmes for eradication of untouchability, caste system, gender equality, widow remarriages, and infusing courage and confidence among people to live as equals. They started with cosmopolitan meets and reform marriages to break the barriers of caste and untouchability. They also participated actively in the freedom movement and suffered imprisonment. Their bold actions attracted wide attention.

When Gandhi had come to know about the work of Gora, he not only published in his *Harijan* weekly about his significant achievement, but also expressed a desire to meet him. They met in Sevagram Ashram and had a series of discussions in 1944-45. The outcome of their discussions was published in a book entitled *An Atheist with Gandhi*.

Gandhi also came forward to perform the marriage of Goras' eldest daughter Manorama with Arjunarao, which aimed at breaking the barriers of caste and untouchability. As Gandhi planned, the marriage took place at Sevagram in the presence of Jawaharlal Nehru in March 1949. After 11 years, Lavanam's marriage with Poet Jashua's daughter Hemalata was also celebrated at Sevagram Ashram in January 1960 in a similar way.

The period under review in this volume of History (1956-1995) has special significance for atheist movement. Different strands in the movement were quite visible in these four decades.

Gora and Saraswathi Gora were firm believers in democracy, secularism and individual freedom. With the legacy of the Gandhian approach and the freedom struggle, they led many a struggle for social equality and political change and national reconstruction in pre- and post-Independence period. They continued their efforts for the eradication of untouchability and caste system. They tried to change the political structure through satyagrahas. Their effort was to awaken people to become active partners in the political process of elections and democratic decentralization. They stood for voluntary action and individual's initiative for social change. With high moral stature they carried out their activities with life commitment and zeal.

Gora and Saraswathi Gora were firmly rooted in the social and cultural soil of Andhra. Gora had national and international interaction through extensive tours. Thus Atheist Centre became a hub of activity of international atheism by hosting national and international conventions. The unique feature of Atheism in India, and the state in particular, is that the activities of Gora and Atheist Centre attracted wide attention. It was a role model in its approach and actions. Atheist Centre's caused a paradigm shift in the international movement and the realization of the necessity to harp on positive aspects of atheism and make it a way of life.

The national and international political developments had their impact leading to different nuances and viewpoints in Andhra atheist movement too. Some of the humanists followed the ideology of M.N. Roy while some others were rooted in the Marxist thinking and its approaches. Thus the atheist movement reflected unity in diversity. Atheist Centre, which sphere-headed the atheist movement, maintained live wire contact with all sections and made an effort to work with all in a common cause to dispel superstitions, blind beliefs, promote scientific and rational outlook and to fight social and economic inequalities. Atheist Centre also focused its attention on secular social work, disaster relief in natural calamities, environmental protection and so on and tried to view life's problems in an integrated manner. It highlighted the need for scientific temper, rational thinking and social outlook, coupled with individual action aiming at social change.

Atheist Centre championed movemental approach for socio-economic equality and for democratic approach. Gora started Arthik Samata Movement, highlighting the necessity to achieve economic equality in a democratic way. He stressed that ministers, who are servants of the people, should shed pomp and peasantry and they

must live closer to the common people. In Democracy, an active citizen is more powerful than his elected representatives and hence he should assert.

1100-MILE PADAYATRA FROM SEVAGRAM TO DELHI

To bring forth public attention on political and social issues, Gora adopted various approaches. He organised 1100-mile padayatra in one hundred days from Gandhi's Ashram in Sevagram (near Wardha) on October 8, 1961 and reached New Delhi on January 14, 1962 with the slogan that "Ministers are our Servants and People are Masters in Democracy" and also insisted that "Ministers should shed pomp and that they must be partyless. MLAs and MPs and ministers must remain as people's representatives, and they should not act as party representatives."

Agreeing with the viewpoint of Gora, some of the MLAs in Andhra Pradesh reduced their emoluments and traveled in third class in trains. They include Vavilala Gopala Krishnaiah, CVK Rao, and Gamago (his original name was Subba Reddy. But he was influenced by the thought of Gandhi Marx and Gora and hence changed his name). Gora's movements reflected moral stature, which stressed on new value system in political and social life.

The matters raised by Gora in India received world-wide attention. The *Humanist in Canada* reproduced many of his articles, stating "what Gora says in India is worth reading in Canada". It was also a topic for discussion in the Universities. Hugh Grey, former Member of House of Commons in England, presented a paper entitled "Gora, Gandhi's Atheist Follower". (Rule, Protest, Identity: Aspects of Modern South Asia", edited by Peter Robb and David Taylor, published by Centre for South Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1978). Arne Naess, a Norwegian professor, in his book "Gandhi and the Nuclear Age" (The Bedminster

Press, USA, 1965) had a section on Gora entitled, 'Gandhi and Militant Atheism,' which he concluded with the statement, "...Gandhi's theism stood not at all in the way of supporting an atheist, or of recognizing the possibility that an atheist might come nearer to truth than Gandhi himself." (p. 57)

Atheist movement in Andhra was Gora's laboratory and his views and experiments received wide acclaim. International journals published on Gora's life and atheism. Gora also traveled extensively all over the country. He organised a Partyless Democracy Convention in Calcutta in June 1962. Earlier, Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan inaugurated the Partyless Democracy convention in Hyderabad which received national attention.

Gora developed partyless democracy, its need and form, and gave a fillip to it. In 1950s and 1960s, the evils of the party system were not so glaring for the common people. Hence, some of the intellectuals as well as the common people criticized Gora for advocating partyless democracy. But over the years, people as well as intellectuals, started to feel the weakening of the party system, and even some of the elected representatives openly say that they will function above party boundaries in serving people.

Gora and some others contested elections as partyless candidates in the first Parliamentary Elections in 1952 and Assembly since 1962 They had placed an alternative to party democracy.

SATYAGRAHAS IN HYDERABAD

Gora organised padayatras from Vijayawada to Hyderabad and organised Satyagrahas in front of Chief Minister N. Sanjiva Reddy's Residence in 1963 urging him to move to small quarters from palatial palace and also to act partyless. He also undertook Satyagraha in 1964 while Brahmananda Reddy was Chief Minister.

PROGRAMMES FOR CHANGE IN THE VALUE SYSTEM

In 1950s and 1960s the country was facing severe food crisis. Under PL 480 (Public Law of the United States), India was importing food grains in large quantities. On the other hand, ministers, Members of Parliament and State Legislators were maintaining flower lawns in front of Government buildings. Gora appealed to the Ministers to grow more food, instead of flowers. He organized a Vegetable Day in Vijayawada 1965 and invited agriculturists and Food Minister of the State. In Hyderabad, he organised a series of programmes and as a symbolic gesture, Gora attempted to replace flower buds with edibles and fruit bearing trees. Gora and the satyagrahis were arrested in Hyderabad.

Some newspapers wrote editorials stating that Gora was a *pushpa virodhi!* However, his opposition was not to flowers, but apathy of the people to real issues and to their wrong priorities. Gora also organized Voters Week in Hyderabad in 1968 highlighting that unless people are active, people's interests will suffer. His slogan was "Control the Government and Construct the village." When Gora went on World Tours in 1970 and 1974, in, he was greeted some places with vegetable garlands and vegetable bouquets and appreciated what Gora did. At the Oxford University the professors

mentioned that during the Second World War, even in the Buckingham Palace, the flowers were replaced with vegetables and started a movement called “Dig for Victory”!

“BEEF AND PORK FRIENDSHIP” TO BREAK AND RELIGION BARRIERS

When Gora organized Beef and Pork Friendship party in Vijayawada on August 15, 1972, the Silver Jubilee of Indian Independence, there was big commotion and opposition. True to his principles, Gora urged for voluntary participation. Puri Shakaracharya and some orthodox people violently opposed and threatened to disrupt the function. When the matter went up to the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Government reacted positively and provided police protection. Thousands of people gathered, to witness the beef and pork party. Gora and Saraswathi Gora, who headed the programme, made it clear that it was meant to bring social cohesion. Participants were asked to sign in a register. Among the hundreds of gatherers, 138 people came forward and ate beef and pork together. They included atheists, and even orthodox Hindus, Muslims and Christians. When similar programme was held at Coimbatore, Periyar EV Ramaswami and Gora participated. In various places including Visakhapatnam, Gudivada and Suryapet, Beef and Pork programmes were held.

GORA’S FIRST WORLD TOUR IN 1970 CHAMPIONING ATHEISM

Endowed with his rich experience in life, Gora traveled all the five continents championing the cause of atheism in 1970 and in 1974. As Gora had no private property, Gora depended on public support even in the world tours. In USA he participated in the International Humanist and Ethical Union convention. His world tours received wide media attention.

Gora's six-month World tour culminated in the historic First World Atheist Conference Vijayawada in December 1972. Gora visualized that atheism was a global force and the world was marching towards a post-religious society.

GORA'S SECOND WORLD TOUR IN 1974

On the invitation of the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies, Gora visited the Soviet Union in 1974 and held discussions with Soviet atheists. Gora also spoke on Radio Moscow. He participated in the World Congress of International Humanist and Ethical Union in Amsterdam and visited Sweden Norway, West Germany, Switzerland, U.K. and Egypt. He also addressed a meeting of Oxfam at Oxford. Jill Turner published a comprehensive article in *New Humanist*, entitled, "Positive Atheist." For Gora, Andhra Pradesh was his social laboratory. But his perspective was international.

Philosophical discussions on atheism

Atheists entered into philosophical discussions on atheism with intellectuals, sadhus and leaders of religion. Gora had a dialogue with Malayalaswami. There was public debate in Vijayawada in which Gora, Swami Chinmayananda and other religious leaders participated which was covered extensively in the press too.

Abu Abraham, famous cartoonist and former MP wrote about Gora and atheism in various dailies with the caption "Atheists among Gandhians", and "Atheism and Liberation"

Atheist movement in Andhra attracted some people from all over the world. Richard Hall, editor, "Observer", London, Prof. Harry Stopes-Roe, a philosopher from Birmingham University, Prof. Muelmann and Prof. Gerald Hauke from Heidelberg

University, Dr. George Willoughby from Philadelphia, American atheist Dr. Madaleine O'Haire, Dr. Don Page, a top Nuclear scientist from Canada, Sir Hermann Bondi, world famous astro-physicist from UK, Christopher Macy, editor, *Psychology Today*, UK and many others visited Atheist Centre and expressed their solidarity.

Gora interacted with national and international political and social leaders like Jayapraksh Narain and Ram Manohar Lohia. Taking inspiration from Gora, Madaleine O'Haire renamed her organization as "American Atheist Centre". Similarly, "Atheist Foundation of Australia" was founded.

Gora was a known Radio Broadcaster from AIR Madras and Vijayawada stations. The Films Division of India made a documentary, "Ancient Curse", in 1960s in which Gora's contribution to eradication of untouchability was duly acknowledged and it also had an interview with him. "*Seminar*" monthly (New Delhi) published a special issue on untouchability and Gora wrote the lead article introducing the multifaceted problem.

The atheist movement and its practical approach of working with the poorest of the poor in resolving the problems of life wide attention.

GORA'S DEMISE ON JULY 26, 1975

Gora, the architect of the modern atheist movement and an ardent social reformer, died on July 26, 1975. He was 73. His end came all of a sudden while addressing a meeting at Vijayawada on Social Change in Rural India. True to his principles, his funeral pyre was lit by an ordinary illiterate dalit. There were no last rites. Hundreds of people from different religions and castes participated along with atheists in the funeral procession and paid homage to him.

In a message then Prime Minister India Gandhi said: “Gora was a dedicated social reformer devoting his energies especially to the campaign against untouchability. He was one of those rare people who practiced what they preached. His courage and sincerity in serving the weak and downtrodden made a mark on all those who came into contact with him”

All the Telugu dailies wrote editorials acknowledging his contribution to the society as an atheist social revolutionary. The Vice President of the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies and the General Secretary of the Soviet Union Culture Society, Moscow, in their joint message said: “We were happy to have him, with us in Moscow in July 1974. ... We were greatly impressed by his personality, his power of conviction, sincerity and transparent honesty. Gora was a friend of all of us here, and a man whom we greatly admired, as well as liked, for his sterling qualities and his good comradeship. His contribution to atheism is great as he fought against superstitions, caste differences, for the removal of poverty, illiteracy and ignorance.”

Venagala Rao, the then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, along with some of his ministers, participated in the condolence meeting at Atheist Centre. Vijayawada Municipality named a Park in his memory.

Gora laid firm foundations for atheism and the Atheist Centre had become the focal point for positive atheism in the world movement.

Activities in post-Gora period

Under the guidance of Saraswathi Gora, the co-founder, Atheist Centre surged forward with innumerable activities promoting atheism as a way of life. It also harped

on secular social work. In November 1977 when the tidal wave and severe cyclone hit Divi Taluk in Krishna District which resulted in the death of thousands of people, Atheist Centre took up relief and rehabilitation activities in right earnest. Atheist Centre's secular social work added a new dimension to atheist movement at the national and international level. Since 1977 Atheist Centre is involved relief and rehabilitation activities to help people in distress due to cyclones and floods. It harped on community based disaster preparedness and protection of environment.

Under the guidance of Saraswathi Gora, Atheist Centre further strengthened its bonds of friendship with others to spread the message of atheism. Since 1970, Atheist Centre was represented in all the International Humanist Conferences of the IHEU. Many prominent international leaders and activists of Europe, America, Australia and Asia visited Atheist Centre. Lavanam and Hemalata Lavanam, Dr Vijayam and others participated in IHEU Congresses in Europe and America. Lavanam visited the Soviet Union three times and exchanged views on atheism with the Institute for Scientific Atheism. Atheist Centre was associated with the World Union of Freethinkers and other progressive movements. Dr Vijayam participated in the World Environment Conference held in Paris in 1991, and also chaired a session on Environment at IHEU Conference in Amsterdam in 1992 and also participated in the International Conference in Mexico.

INTERNATIONAL ATHEIST CONFERENCES AT VIJAYAWADA:

One of the significant achievements of the atheist movement in Andhra is the organization of the World Atheist Conferences. It had shown its strength and sustainable effort. The First World Atheist Conference for five days was held at Atheist Centre, Vijayawada from December 22, 1972. "Atheism liberates humans from all

kinds of bondage and restores the lost dignity to the individual to stand on his feet as a free and responsible person,” declared Gora in his inaugural address. “The essence of atheism is the freedom of the individual. Freedom releases the immense potentialities of human imagination, initiative and effort that lay suppressed under theistic faith,” he said. 120 delegates and observers from India and abroad attended. Many other delegates could not attend due to tense political situation around Vijayawada for a separate statehood. An Exhibition of Atheist Literature from different countries was displayed. Gora’s book *Positive Atheism*, was released. The proceedings of the Conference received good International attention.

In post Gora period, the **Second World Atheist Conference** was inaugurated by Lakshmanan, Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha on December 25, 1980 at Vijayawada in which 1200 delegates participated. Prof. H. Narasimhaiah, former Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University, highlighted the necessity to develop rational and scientific outlook among people through education. An Exhibition of Atheist literature, displayed books and periodicals from 40 countries in 27 languages. Saraswathi Gora, highlighted that atheism is a positive way of life, aimed at solving people’s problems. The Conference, which was attended by many International delegates, stressed on the need to strive for social and economic equality. It received wide attention in the press and All India Radio.

On Gora’s tenth death anniversary, Abu Abraham, known cartoonist and former Member of Parliament inaugurated an International Conference on “Atheism and Social change” at Vijayawada on July 26-28, 1985.

GOLDEN JUBILEE OF ATHEIST CENTRE, FEB. 1990

On February 3-5, 1990 Golden Jubilee of Atheist Centre was celebrated with an International conference, which was inaugurated by then Governor of Andhra Pradesh, Kumudben Joshi. Sir Hermann Bondi, former Master of Churchill College,

Cambridge University, U K presided. He said, "Atheist Centre is a shining beacon to us all. Its work through a wide area has much to show and teach to us." From the country and abroad atheists, and humanists participated in large numbers.

"Atheist Centre 50+" International Conference on "Future of Atheism – Humanism" was held at Vijayawada on December 29-31, 1990. Former Indian Home Minister Buta Singh was chief guest. N. Ram, then associate editor of *The Hindu*, released the Souvenir. Levi Fragell inaugurated the Conference. A five-member delegation from the Soviet Union headed by Prof. Victor Timofev, Deputy Director, the Institute of the Study of the Problems of Religion and Atheism, Moscow and Dr. Yuri Puschik, editor, *'Dispute' (Dialogue)* joined in the deliberations of the Golden Jubilee.

An International Conference on "Social Progress and Women" was held on November 13-15, 1992 at Vijayawada. Kari Vigeland, Professor of Psychology, Oslo University, Norway presided. Kuldip Nayar, known journalist, inaugurated.

III World Atheist Conference was organized by Atheist Centre at Helsinki, Finland in June 24-27, 1983. Year-long preparations were made for **IV World Atheist Conference**, on the theme "Positive Atheism for a Positive Future" which was held at Vijayawada on January 4-6, 1996 in which 500 delegates participated. Sir Hermann Bondi, a renowned astro-physicist, presided. All these International Conferences had good international participation and also received wide media attention. The souvenirs published contained well-documented history of atheism in India and abroad. The Conferences further strengthened the atheist movement in the State.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST AWARD TO ATHEIST CENTRE

In 1986 the International Humanist and Ethical Union honoured Atheist Centre with the International Humanist Award. The citation reads: "In recognition of their demonstration of humanism in action, in particular in the fields of education, health services and social work, and of their contribution to the countering of superstition."

On behalf of Atheist Centre Mythri received the International Award at Oslo Conference in 1986.

PROMOTION OF SECULARISM

Atheist movement in Andhra was practical in its approach. Right from its inception, Atheist Centre championed secularism and strove for untouchability and caste system. Inter-dining, opening of public wells for the use of all, and promoted inter-caste and castelss marriages on a large scale. In the teeth of opposition of the orthodox sections, it organized such programmes in the remote villages. Highlighting the need for social equality, in their tours Gora and Saraswathi Gora stayed in the dalit localities.

Atheist movement also popularized the method of registration of marriages under Special Marriage Act. They followed the **secular method of affirmation** while assuming public office, or in court or in any public occasion, by saying “**I solemnly affirm.**” Similarly, Atheists appealed people not to fill up the columns of caste and religion in the application forms. When the tradition bound educational institutions refused admission to such students, Atheist Centre took up these cases. When Andhra Loyola College, Vijayawada denied admission even to some merited students in 1959, on the count they did not write their caste and religion in the application forms, the matter was brought to attention of the Union Education minister. The matter was discussed even in the State Assembly. Finally, Andhra Loyola College climbed down to admit the students.

Similarly, when the School authorities were adamant to admit students for not filling the caste and religion columns in the application forms, Atheist Centre had to move the court. When B.V. Subbaiah’s son was dismissed from school from the First Standard after studying six months, it was challenged in the Andhra Pradesh High

Court. Justice P.A. Chowdary admitted the Writ Petition (No. 493 of 1980) on January 29, 1980 and directed the School authorities of Gandavaram Elementary School in Nellore District to re-admit the child.

Resolution in Parliament on Secularism and Bill for Castelessness:

The advocacy work of Atheist Centre connected the local to the policy, and this was evident when Chennupati Vidya, M.P. (Vijayawada) introduced a Private Member Resolution in Lok Sabha on the “Necessity to Strengthen Secularism.” It was discussed at length in Lok Sabha on April 23, 1982 and on July 30, 1982. Similarly, she introduced a Private Member Bill entitled “Promotion of a Casteless and Religionless Society Bill” on July 9, 1982. It was taken up on July 29, 1982.

In order to strengthen the secular ramparts we guard, Atheists organized a series of campaigns, seminars, conferences, study camps and rallies all over the state and elsewhere. Atheists popularized **Article 51-A (h) highlighting that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to “develop the scientific temper, humanism, spirit of inquiry, and reform.”**

GORA’S ATHEIST LITERATURE

Gora was a prolific writer championing the cause of atheism. Gora wrote a 200 page book on Atheism entitled, *Nasthikatvamu* (or *Devudu Ledu*) (Atheism: There is no god) in 1941 which created quite a stir in Andhra. In 1950s “Nasthikatvamu” was reprinted and it caught the imagination of the people. Gora’s *Devuni Puttupoorvottaralu* dealt with the origin and development of the concept of God. He reiterated that to do good, or to be good or to lead a moral life, the prop of god and religion are not required.

Srusti Rahasyam gives a glimpse of the origin of the universe and life. In *Sanghadrusti- Nasthikatvam*, he highlighted the necessity of social outlook and role of atheism in this regard. In *Nasthiaktvam Avasyakata*, Gora traced the interconnection between atheism and progress of civilization.

In *Moodhanammakalu – Nasthika Drusti*, Gora traced how superstitions hinder progress. *Nenu Nasthikunni* is a forthright exposition of the quintessence of atheism. In *Jeevitham Nerpina Pathalu*, Gora described that one can be happy and healthy when scientific temper and social outlook grow. In *Prajaswamyam Peragalante Nasthikatavm kavali* he stressed the role of atheism in further strengthening the democratic ramparts we guard. *Arthika Samanatvam, Nasthika Drusti* harps on the need for economic equality. He advocated people's control over their government as eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. *Nasthiaktvam Yendeuku* and *Nasthikatvam-Prasnottaralu* contained answers in simple language to popularly asked questions. Gora's books and articles have been translated into various languages of the world in Europe, America, and Asia.

Gora's book *An Atheist with Gandhi* published by Navajivan, Ahmedabad, reveal lively conversations with Gandhi on atheism and social change. *Why Gram Raj* was a plea of democratic decentralization. *Partyless Democracy* reflects Gora's unconventional and bold thinking about values in political life. *People and Progress* deals with Gora's thinking on politics, society and sustainable development. Gora's *I Learn* is the quintessence of his thought on social values and behavioral patterns of people.

Gora's Autobiography, *We Become Atheists*, completed just four days before his death on July 26, 1975, reveals saga of his struggles and practice of his atheist principles, facing severe opposition from orthodox sections of society. He could

influence his whole family and friends in atheist way of life. He was firmly rooted in the Andhra, but had national and global outreach.

Partyless Democracy –Its need and Form reveals the need for partyless politics and the ways and means to achieve the objective. *An Atheist Around the World* shows the outcome his extensive world tours in 1970 and 1974. He was the first person in modern India who traveled extensively for the cause of atheism worldwide.

Gora's book, *Positive Atheism* indicates the guidelines to plan his or her life with initiative and moral responsibility. The book is the result of Gora's practice of atheist principles, struggles and experiences. Since 1975 Atheist Centre published a number of books on atheism and social change.

Dr. Samaram's books on science and scientific outlook:

Dr. Samaram of Atheist Centre has been a prolific writer who has published more than 100 books on various aspects of medical science, sex education, health, blind beliefs, phobias, and superstitions. His bold, unconventional approach in lucid and simple style enabled large number of people to discuss their family and medical problems.

It may be recalled that it is the atheists and humanists were pioneers in the West in promoting sex education, abortion and unconventional thinking among people. They braved the opposition and contributed to social progress.

JOURNALS

Gora started *Sangham* (Atheist weekly) in January 1949. It was printed and published from Atheist Centre. Some people and libraries were even afraid to keep the journal with them. But it won the hearts of the people. In 1953 *Arthik Samata* was started by Atheist Centre. Lavanam, Gamago and J. Ramalingaiah were its editors. In 1960s *Sangham* was restarted and it was published from Proddatur as Gora was constantly

on countrywide tours. Gora's extensive tours and campaigns in North India resulted in starting a Hindi monthly *Insaan* (Human) for the promotion of atheism in Hindi heartland.

Gora started *Atheist*, English monthly, since January 1969 and after his demise Lavanam and Dr Vijayam edit the monthly. *Atheist* articles were reproduced in the Western journals also. Since 1977, *Nasthika Margam*, monthly has been started from Atheist Centre which is edited by Mythri and Hemalata Lavanam.

ATHEISM AS A WAY OF LIFE:

Atheist Centre promotes atheism as an alternate way of life. It encourages people to transcend traditional boundaries so that they can lead a dignified life with social responsibility and freedom. It is this comprehensive approach in promoting atheism that makes Atheist Centre distinctly different from others.

Atheists in Andhra conducted a number of educational experiments. Gora founded Vasavya Vidyalaya in Vijayawada in 1961 and trained a new generation of workers. It was a prayerless, casteless, secular, and democratic experiment for sixteen years. Gora coined the word, "Vasavya", which stands for *Vasthavikata*, *Sanghadrusti*, *Vyaktitvam* (Reality, social outlook and development of individual personality), which reflect the core principles of atheism. He gave the slogan, *Jai Insaan*, (Victory to human).

PROMOTION OF SCIENCE AND SCIENTIFIC OUTLOOK:

Science Exhibitions:

Atheism and science are closely connected. Both are unconventional and propagate scientific outlook and are opposed to dogma. Gora demonstrated many science experiments, including fire-walking demonstrations even in the remote villages.

Since 1961, organization of periodic science exhibitions on a large scale is one of the primary activities of Atheist Centre. In 1967 C.D. Deshmukh, former Union Finance Minister inaugurated one such exhibition. Atheist Centre has a permanent Science Exhibition housed in "Sir Hermann Bondi Hall." And in "Hall of Science." It organizes large-scale annual science exhibitions to popularize scientific and rational thinking.

When the total solar eclipse occurred on February 18, 1980, Atheist Centre organized a science exhibition and encouraged people to view the eclipse. Saraswathi Gora invited pregnant women who cut vegetables to explode the myths associated with eclipse. On that day, hundreds of people walked from long distances to Atheist Centre, as even the public transport was suspended, fearing the evil effect of the eclipse! *The Hindu* daily from Madras published next day the news with the caption: "Atheist Centre defies eclipse."

Since 1987 Atheist Centre is holding annual science and environment exhibitions which attract wide attention. In 1993 it organized a Science Yatra in all over Krishna district, covering 100 villages to dispel superstitions and blind beliefs and also raise health consciousness among common people.

Fight against witchcraft and Sorcery

It is the belief in the supernatural on which witchcraft and sorcery rest. It is the cultural milieu that enables the belief to thrive in Telangana districts. Mass hysteria broke out at Medidupplapalli in Nalgonda District in 1976. The medical doctors declared the villagers as psychiatric patients.

In 1983 the fear of *banamati* gripped the Medak District resulting in killing of five villagers, District Superintendent of Police invited Atheist Centre to examine the problem. Its team headed by Dr. G. Samaram, consisted of psychiatrists, dentists, hypnotists, scientists and social workers examined nearly 7000 so-called victims of

'banamati' and also organized practical demonstrations to dispel the fear. The team made it clear that they, in fact, were suffering from physical and mental ailments, such as depression, schizophrenia, paranoia, hysterical neurosis, epilepsy and impotence. Its findings received national attention. They were presented in AP Conference of Neuro surgeons also. The Atheist team also met then Chief Minister, Mr. N.T Rama Rao and appraised the situation. The matter was discussed in the Legislature too. Media also widely highlighted the issue. *Andhra Jyothi* daily aptly captioned the fight against witchcraft by Atheist Centre: "Ill health + ignorance= Banamati."

Atheist teams also visited Nalgonda, Nizamabad, Warangal, Rangareddy and Mahaboobnagar districts to create awareness among people. Police and district administration and people from various walks of life extended valuable cooperation. The sporadic outbursts of the fear of banamati in Telangana districts reveal how deep rooted the fear is and how the situation is exploited by some for their ulterior motives.

SECULAR SOCIAL WORK ACTIVITIES

Atheists are involved in secular social work and comprehensive rural development activities through four major organisations—Arthik Samata Mandal, Vasavya Mahila Mandali, Samskar, and Gora Science Centre. They work in hundreds of villages covering a broad spectrum of activities. They include fight against jogini, which is remnant of the Devadasi system, criminal reformation, women development, help for disadvantaged sections of society; popularization of science, environment and ecology, disaster relief and rehabilitation, coastal and drought prone area development, tribal, artisan and small and marginal farmers development, campaigns against superstitions and blind beliefs cover a broad spectrum of activities. Princess Anne, President of the Save the Children Fund, UK, and many distinguished people from India and abroad visited and appreciated these activities.

Since its inception Atheist Centre is harping on castelessness and eradication of untouchability. Under its inspiration hundreds of inter-caste and inter-religion and casteless marriages were performed in various parts of India.

SHELTER FOR WOMEN WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS

As joint family system is breaking down due to modernization and westernization, the age-old safety net for women in crisis is fast disappearing. Hence Vasavya Mahila Mandali of Atheist Centre started Gora Abhay Nivas, a home for women with social problems. Thousands of women receive counseling and support in it. They are given shelter and counseling to infuse courage and confidence, and also training in various skills so that they become economically independent and lead life with dignity and self respect.

It is actively involved in HIV/AIDS awareness. It strongly advocates in its endeavors that there should be pre-marriage AIDS tests for both the spouses. It is also engaged in propagation of sex education among common people and promotes small family norm. Atheist Centre is also involved in the organization of large-scale Medical and health camps in the rural areas and urban slums. It took steps to establish, hospitals, health clinics and health awareness campaigns. Hundreds of free polio corrective surgeries were conducted in its hospital to correct their multiple deformities.

Atheists exposed the hoaxes of rebirth of Padmavathi, challenged Saibaba and other babas to prove their miracles. Atheists challenged the so-called miracle of Mummidivaram Balayogi that he was surviving without food. When Sai Baba visited Vijayawada atheists challenged him to prove his so-called miracles. The protest was headed by Saraswathi Gora and people joined from many parts of the State in the agitation. 500 protesters were arrested on the occasion.

Atheists also condemned the hoax propagated by religious zealots on September 21, 1995 that Vinayaka (Ganesha) was drinking milk. Atheist Centre organised a demonstrative meeting on the very same day revealing to the people that the surface tension principle was behind the trick. The explanation given by Atheists received wide attention.

In 1975, Sarada Mukherjee, then the State Governor, inaugurated the Gora photo exhibition depicting his life and work. The Vice President of India, Mr. R. Venkataraman inaugurated the Working Women's hostel at Atheist Centre on August 9, 1985. Life commitment for positive atheism, secular and constructive approach, unity of thought and action, rendering selfless service to the poor and the downtrodden, that attracts many people to Atheist Centre from far and wide.

RAPPORT WITH RATIONALIST ORGANISATIONS

Atheist movement maintained close association with Rationalist, humanist organizations and other like-minded people and made a common cause in dispelling superstitions, blind beliefs and for promotion of social change. Gora also became President of Indian Rationalist Association in 1970s.

Gora and Tripunaneni Ramaswami, an ardent champion of cultural and social renaissance in Andhra, participated in many rationalist programmes together. Avula Gopala Krishna Murthi (AGK), a lawyer by profession, championed rationalism and opposed superstitious practices. Avula Sambasiva Rao, a prominent humanist, became the Chief Justice of AP High Court and also the Lokyukta of AP. He was also Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University. M.V. Ramamurthi, a lawyer and social activist, along with his wife Malladi Subbamma, propagated rationalism and social change.

Ramamurthi and Subbamma edited *Vikasam* and *Stree Swetcha* and initiated 'Abhyudaya vivaha Vedika and marital counseling center in Hyderabad. Malladi

Subbamma Award for women was instituted in Potti Sriramulu Telugu University. Rammamurthi's autobiography, *Edu padulu—experiences and remembrances in life*, gives a glimpse of his role in spreading rationalism in Andhra. Abraham T. Koor's Andhra Pradesh tours in 1974, 1975 and 1976 gave greater impetus to the rationalist ideas. Koor challenged the miracle men, such as Sai Baba, to prove their claims. Koor visited Atheist Centre and also released Gora's book, *Moodhanammakalu-Nasthika Drusti* in 1977.

Charawaka monthly was started by Thotakura Venkateswara Rao and it was published for half a decade. S.V. Rao from Narsaraopet started *Hetuvadham*, monthly. Katti Padma Rao, a scholar and editor of *Dalit Rajyam*, championed social equality and Dalit cause. Ravipudi Venkatadri, was a prolific writer who championed the cause of science, rationalism and humanism. He edited *Hetuvadi*, monthly. Kotapati Mauarahari Rao instituted "Kaviraju Tripuraneni Ramaswami Chowdary" Annual Award in Potti Sriramulu Telugu University for promotion of rationalism. Ravipudi Venkatadri, a prominent figure in Andhra rationalist movement was given the first award. Saraswathi Gora and Hemalata Lavanam were also amongst its recipients. Gutta Radhakrishna Murthi and his brothers championed rationalism. They married their children casteless. He edited *Hetuvadham* monthly. After his death, his body was donated to Khammam Medical College.

Dr. Narisetty Innaiah, a humanist, wrote many books on humanism. Gauriboyana Polayya, Eswara Prabhu, C.V. and Mitra, and many others spread the message of rationalism. Ranganayakamma wrote voluminous *Ramayana Visha vruksham* and other books.

Kana started Atheist Centre in Suryapet in 1950s. Jayagopal founded Atheist Society of India at Visakhapatnam. He edited *Nasthika Yugam* and *Age of Atheism*. Kodali Kamamma, an ardent atheist and freedom fighter, started "Gora Nasthika Mitramandali at Inkollu in Prakasam District in 1994.

V. Ramakrishna started Charvaka Vidyalayam and edited , *Nasthika Yugam*. His books included *Charawaka Vachakam* to educate children in a secular way. He organized Nasthika Mela, an annual meet of atheist and rationalist families. Kula Nirmulana Sangham was founded in Hyderabad. J. Veeraswami, Law Secretary of the State Government, V. Nageswar, DG Ramarao and others played a key role in promoting a secular ethos in society.

Conclusion

The Atheist movement in Andhra was innovative in its programmes, multifaceted and multidimensional and it was progressive in its outlook and constructive in its approach,. It harped on building an alternate way of life based on freedom, social justice, and equality in all spheres. With many nuances, it had flowered in Andhra as a beacon light to many progressive minded to proceed further with grim determination and commitment.

Influenced by Atheist movement some people discarded the suffixes, which denote their caste, and married casteless, also gave secular names to their children. Their firm commitment had impact on their families too. They educated their children on equal footing, strove for social reform, and promoted liberal and progressive thinking. They became active citizens and harbingers of change in others by their personal example.

The press and electronic media were also helpful in wider dissemination of positive atheist ideas and programmes. The press and the media become partners in exposing babas, dispelling superstitious practices and outmoded customs and thus contributed to social change.

It is not enough if people accept and adopt science; what is needed is that they should promote scientific outlook and scientific temper. The momentum of secularization of societies will be further accelerated when the ideas of progressive thought find a rightful place in the education system. As Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dreamt: “A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for search of truth.” The time has come to remodel and revamp the education and syllabus to suit to the aims and aspirations of the 21st Century.

Otherwise, the growing intolerance, fundamentalism and religious fanaticism may threaten the very unity and integrity of the nation. There is a lurking danger that politicization of caste and religion would lead to the development of fissiparous tendencies in the nation. Hence, it is in the wider interests of the nation and survival of democracy, the country should embark on the road to progress. We have to strengthen the democratic, secular and egalitarian ramparts we guard.

In his *Positive Atheism*, Gora aptly brought to the fore that “atheist way of life is full of initiative. It continually progresses towards increasing happiness every time through scientific understanding and technological control of the forces of the world. Its objective is equality; its method is openness; its means is political action; its driving force is the moral freedom of the individual” (p. 106).

Atheists have been working at various levels, right from educating the masses, to bring social change, through rational and critical thinking in the young minds.

As Gora has asserted in his *We Become Atheists*, “The spread of atheist outlook is hope of humanity to turn from war to peace, from slavery to freedom, from superstition to a sense of reality, from conflict to cooperation” (p. 108).