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## CHRISTIAN DALITS : A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### I. The Term Dalit

'Dalits' is the plural of dalit which in Sanskrit language is both noun and adjective. As a noun 'dalit' can be used for all three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. It is derived from the root 'dal' means to crack, open, split etc. When used as a noun or an adjective, it means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, trodden down, scattered, destroyed etc.<sup>1</sup> The term 'dalit' is also found in Hebrew with a root 'dal' means low, weak, poor, helpless etc. In the Old Testament different forms of this term are used to describe those people who are reduced to nothing or helpless or poor (examples are Exodus 23.3 *dal*, Judges 6.15 '*h-dal*,' Jeremiah 40.7 '*um-dalat*' and 52.15,16 '*um-dalot*.' Amos 2.7 *dales* etc. The Hindi translation of the New Testament also used the term *dalit* for the English expression 'oppressed' in Luke 4.18,19.

The present usage of the term dalit goes back to Nineteenth century, when a Marathi great social reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jotirao Phule used it to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of our caste-ridden society. But it was during 1970s the followers of the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term dalit as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed.<sup>2</sup> Today this term is much used and has become popular among all the people of various protest movements in our country, who are struggling on behalf of the dalits and women.

Besides its common use, this term dalit today is specially being used for those people who on the basis of caste distinction have been

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1. S.V., 'dal' and 'dalit', Vaman Shivram Apte, The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Delhi, 1989 (reprint), p. 493.
  2. Cf. M.E. Prabhakar (Ed.), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Delhi, 1988, p. 36, 37.

considered 'outcaste.' They were 'outcaste,' because they were not fit to be included in the four-fold graded caste structure of our Society.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of this status they were made to bear extreme form of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries which made them almost lose their humanness and finally they reached the state of 'no-people'. Here in this paper the term dalit is used to describe these people, which many of them today preferred to be used for themselves. Because this term for them is not a mere name or title, it in fact has become an expression of hope for recovering their past self-identity. In fact because of these outcaste people and their struggle this term dalit has gained a new connotation, which has more positive sense. It "has become a positive, assertive expression of pride in Untouchables' heritage and a rejection and oppression."<sup>4</sup>

## II: The Problem Exists in The Church

The subject of this paper is 'Christian dalits: A Historical Perspective.' The basic question addressed here is: Why Christian dalits? Even after becoming Christian? Particularly, when Christian religion upholds the principle of equality.<sup>5</sup> Then why the conditions of Christian *dalits* are unchanged? This problem as it stands today is well recognised in some circles both within the Indian Church/Christians as well as outside. But on the whole the blame is put on the caste system of Indian society. For example the former General Secretary of the Church of South India and the present Bishop of Madras M. Azariah, while recognizing the problem of Christian dalits says that the Christians of out caste origin are: "... discriminated against and oppressed by the fellow Christians within the very Church...", but further he adds, "The caste Christians . . . carry their caste prejudices even after generations, unaffected by these Christian belief and practice."<sup>6</sup> Nirad Chaudhuri, a well-known journalist and by faith a Hindu, has also confirmed the views of Bishop Azariah in his work 'Continent of Circe.'<sup>7</sup> It is true that in general caste system

3. Four-folded caste structure of Indian Society included in: Priestly (*Brahman*), Warrior (*Kshatriyas*), Traders (*Vaiṣya*) and Serving Caste (*Sūdras*).
4. Joshi, Barbara R., *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, New Delhi, 1986, p. 3.
5. Luke 22: 24-27, Galatians 2:25-28, Ephesians 2:13-16 etc.
6. Azariah, M., *The Un-Christian Side of the Indian Church* (the plight of the Untouchables Converts), Bangalore, 1986, p. 10.
7. Chaudhuri, Nirad C., *The Continent of Circe* (An Essay on the Peoples of India), Bombay, 1983 (reprint), p. 310.

is the root cause of the problem of dalits in India. But is that the case of Christian dalits also? Or is their problem much deeper based or rooted in some particular religious understanding (of Christian faith)? Besides addressing this question, discussion here also includes the questions of the missionary methods, their superiority complex, their response to the problem of the Christian dalit, and also later on how Indian Christians/Church responded to the same issue.

### III. Historical Survey

The history of the Christian dalits in India began mainly with the coming of the Western Missionaries. Prior to the Western Missionaries, the only Christian tradition existed in India was Syrian, which has its base in Kerala (South India). It can be considered a contributory factor, particularly in relation to Christian dalits in Kerala.<sup>8</sup> A brief historical survey is divided here into the following parts:

- (a) Selected Cases of Missionaries
- (b) A Case from Church History

#### a. Selected Cases of Missionaries

##### i. *Roberto de Nobili*

The first Western Missionary was a Roman Catholic Jesuit Francis Xavier, who arrived in India in October 1542. On his arrival in India, he adopted a very simple method of preaching. He made a translation of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments into Tamil. Then he took a bell in his hand and went around ringing it first in the streets of Goa and then from village to village at the Western Coast among the fishermen. It is believed he baptized 700,000 people belonging to different caste groups, but majority of his converts came from pariah people (out-caste).<sup>9</sup>

The next well known missionary who played a very important role in the history of Christian dalits was another Jesuit missionary. viz. Roberto de Nobili. He arrived in Madurai (South India) in A.D. 1606.

8. Cf. Mathew, C. and M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, Delhi, 1967, p. 7.

9. Thekkedath, Joseph, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. II, Bangalore, 1967, pp. 22, 23. Also cfr. Kaye, John William, *Christianity in India*, London, 1859, pp. 17-23.

On his arrival he found that the Christian religion was successful only among the low caste. He found that it was because of the Portuguese who were known as 'Paranghis.' These Paranghis ate beef, drank liquor and lived unclean without bathe and had contact with the low caste people. Therefore he wanted to change this. Kaye says:

Rejecting the example of Xavier, whose warm heart had expanded towards the poor and the oppressed, and whose ready limbs had ever borne him amongst them, Robert de Nobilibus, his associates, and his successors, addressed themselves to the dominant class, and sought their converts among the Brahmins.<sup>10</sup>

Robert de Nobili in order to gain converts from upper caste declared himself as a high caste Raja (King). He said he was not a Paranghi, but a royal person from Rome. Later on he, along with his colleagues declared that they were 'new Brahmins' (priests). They made use of a current belief of that time that original Veda was lost. Roberto de Nobili declared that he has found the true lost Veda and he is teaching from that. He started following all the Hindu religious customs. He accepted the Caste and practised untouchability. Seeing all these many upper caste Hindus became Christians.<sup>11</sup> Roberto de Nobili even introduced separate priests for upper and lower caste Christians.<sup>12</sup> But all these efforts of Roberto de Nobili brought fruits which, in the future proved negative in nature: "A divided Church resulted. On the one hand, were Brahman Christians, on the other hand Pariah Christians."<sup>13</sup>

## ii. *Ziegenbalg and Plutschau*

Ziegenbalg and Plutschau were the first Protestant Missionaries. They studied at the University of Halle, a great centre of Evangelical Christianity, under the learned and pious Professor Francke.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, as expected, religiously they were both trained within a tradition of pietism which was highly individualistic in nature.<sup>15</sup> The pietistic tradition in which they

10. Kaye John William, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

12. Jenks, David, *Six Great Missionaries of the Sixteenth Seventeenth Century*, London, 1930, p. 127.

13. Anderson, William B. and Charles R. Watson, *Far North in India*, Philadelphia, 1909, p. 146.

14. Kaye. John William, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-74.

15. Heick, Otto W., *A History of Christian Thought*, Volume II, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 23.

were trained had a special stress on the second or new birth (Wiedergeburt). Professor Francke himself had a dramatic conversion experience in 1686.<sup>16</sup> With this kind of religious background, these two missionaries Ziegenbalg and Plutschau arrived in South India during 1705. On their arrival at Tranquebar they first mastered the local language and started translating the Scripture. The method of preaching of these Protestant Missionaries was different from that of Jesuits, which was based on a set of moral oral teaching and a mere ceremony of baptism. But as per the pietistic tradition, Ziegenbalg and his colleagues' work was based on the Bible. Therefore they provided the Scripture as the basis for their preaching. Their first convert was baptised on May 12, 1707, who was a poor slave (low caste). Their later converts were also mostly from the low poor caste.

Besides Ziegenbalg and Plutschau another important early Lutheran missionary was Christian Frederick Schwartz, who was also trained at the University of Halle. Schwartz did help the poor people, but it was for him a secular work. He considered this kind of work subordinate to spiritual work.<sup>17</sup> But it was he who later on became an instrument for Christian Mass Movement.<sup>18</sup>

A similar method like that of the above missionaries was adopted by William Carey and his colleagues in Bengal, North India.<sup>19</sup>

### iii. Bishop Heber

In 1813 when the British Government passed a bill, it gave more concession of greater liberty to Christian Mission. This also was followed by another decision, to have in India a Bishop of the Church of England. The first Bishop elected was Thomas Franshawe Middleton, whose main interest was classical and western theology, which he introduced in India by founding a college after his name i.e. Bishop College in Calcutta.<sup>20</sup> But he was against Indians to be made priests till his death.<sup>21</sup>

16. Wborg, John, 'Pietisms : "The Fire of God which Flames in the Heart of Germany," in *Protestant spiritual* edited by Frank C. Senn New York, 1886, pp. 199-202,

17. Kaye, John William, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

18. Phillips, Rev. G. E., *The Outcastes' Hope*, London, n.d., pp. 31, 32.

19. Kaye, John William, *op. cit.*, pp. 218, 230, 232.

20. Andrews, Rev. C. F., *North India* London 1908, pp. 14, 15.

21. *Ibid.* pp. 14, 15.

The second Bishop to succeed Bishop Middleton after his death in July 1922, was Bishop Heber, who reached India in October 1823. Bishop Heber tried his best to change the situation.<sup>22</sup> Bishop Heber very seriously considered the question of caste in the Church. Before his visits to South in 1826, he wanted to prepare himself to face this problem. He knew even the famous Missionaries like Ziegenbalg and Schwartz have accommodated the evil of caste in the Church. At that time there was a convert in Bishop's College by the name Christian David, who was a follower of the teachings of Schwartz. Bishop Heber asked the opinion of this native Christian, who gave his opinion in writing. Kaye has summarised Christian David's views in these words:

First, with regard to nature of Caste it was declared by Christian David, that it was among the natives of Southern India, "purely a worldly idea" . . . From the days of Ziegenbalg downwards they had been wont to sit at Church in two separate divisions, and had communicated separately at the Lord's table, drinking out of the same cup, but high-caste converts drinking first . . .<sup>23</sup>

Bishop Heber accepted the views of Christian David, which in fact were the "views of early missionaries such as Christian Schwartz. Bishop Heber concluded that in some forms distinctions exist even in Europe."<sup>24</sup>

Alexander Duff of the Scottish Presbyterian Church was the other important missionary, who tried to use the Western education system and English language to approach the young people of the upper castes.<sup>25</sup>

#### **b. A case from Church History**

The Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (known as A.P. Mission) began its work in Punjab on November 5, 1834 with the arrival of its first missionary the Rev. John C. Lowrie, in Ludhiana, Punjab<sup>26</sup> and the work of United Presbyterian Church of America began on August 8, 1855 with the arrival of its first missionary the Rev. Andrew

22. *Ibid*, p. 20.

23. Kaye, John William, *op. cit.*, pp. 252, 253.

24. *Ibid*, pp. 355-56.

25. Andrew, Rev. C.F., *op. cit.*, p. 24.

26. Newton, John, *Historical Sketches of the India Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, Allahabad, 1886, p. 1 (Preface).

Gorden in Sialkot, Panjab.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, of these Presbyterian Missions beginning from 1834 till 1885, there were 477 communicant members.<sup>28</sup> But from 1885 onward the number increased in thousands. The number of total Christians belonging to all Missions increased in the same way. In 1881, the total number of Christians in Panjab was 3796, in 1901 the number was 37,980 and in 1921 this number went upto 375,031.<sup>29</sup> What was the reason behind this increased number of Christians? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the following case history. The source of this case history is the first missionary Andre Gorden himself.<sup>30</sup> Here only the main points of this case history are given:

The beginning of this case history took place, when a Hindu of the Jat Caste (a Panjabi upper Caste) by name Nattu was baptised on November 17, 1872 by the Rev. J. S. Barr. Nattu was not only from a high caste, he was also son of a Lambardar (Village head man), who was a legal heir of his father's property and position. Missionaries were very happy but later on they became unhappy because Nattu forfeited his right of his father's heir. For them he proved a failure – 'a weak brother'. But it was not true, because he became an instrument in bringing a person to Christ, who later on became responsible for the present Church of Christians of Panjab. This man's name was Ditt.

Ditt was from a small village named Shahabdike, which was about two miles from a larger village named Mirali, and thirty miles from Sialkot, (now in Pakistan). Ditt was born around 1843. Gorden introduces him in these words: "... a man of the low and much despised chura tribe, by the name Ditt, a dark man, lame of one leg, quiet and modest in his manners, with sincerity and earnestness, well expressed in his face, and at that time about thirty years of age."<sup>31</sup> By profession Ditt was a hides dealer. He came into contact with Nattu, who taught him about Jesus Christ and in June 1873 Nattu took him to Sialkot for baptism.

27. Anderson, William B. and Charles R. Watson, op. cit., p. 184.

28. Webster, John C.B.; *The Christian Community and Change in the Nineteenth Century in North India*, Delhi, 1976, p. 47.

29. Survey of the Evangelistic work of the Panjab Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1929, p. 25.

30. Gordon, The Rev. Andrew, *Our India Mission, 1855-1885*, Philadelphia. 1888, pp. 421-28.

31. Ibid, p. 422.

The Rev. S. Martin was hesitant to accept Ditt for baptism. After all his Christian knowledge was based on the teaching of 'a weak brother Nattu'. But at the same time Ditt's knowledge of Christ was quite sound. He also found Mr. Martin as an honest person. Still he wanted to delay his baptism, to which Ditt was not willing. In the words of Gorden: "Mr. Martin finally decided to baptize Ditt, not because he saw his way decidedly clear to do so, but because he could see no scripture ground for refusing."<sup>32</sup>

Mr. Martin faced another problem, immediately after baptism, Ditt asked permission to go back to his village. This was a new thing for Mr. Martin. The practice was that a new convert was to stay with the missionary for more instruction and protection. In fact this practice made such converts depend on missionaries. So Mr. Martin's worry was, how this poor illiterate man would face opposition. Anyhow Ditt returned to his village and this action proved to be the starting point for a Christian Movement among the churas (lowest sweeper caste/outcaste) of Panjab.

On reaching home, Ditt did face a bitter opposition from his relatives and villagers. For example, one of his fellow villagers rebuked him by saying: "Oh Ho! You have become a Sahib" (gentleman). Others said: "You have become a be-i-man" (one without religion). His own sister-in-law said: "Alas, my brother, you have changed your religion without even asking our counsel; our relationship with you is over. Henceforth you shall neither eat, drink, nor in any way associate with us. One of your legs is broken already, so may it be with the other."<sup>33</sup>

But Ditt did not care any opposition. Instead he proclaimed his new faith in Christ openly and boldly both to his family members and others. The result was amazing. Three months after his baptism in August 1873, he had the privilege to take his wife, his daughter and two neighbours to Sialkot for baptism. For thirty miles he had to walk for the sole purpose of introducing them to the missionaries. Mr. Martin examined them and was fully satisfied and gave them baptism.

Ditt's work of buying hides from different villages took him to different villages. So wherever he went for his business, he preached about Christ also. In the eleventh year (1884) of his baptism, he

32. Ibid, p. 422.

33. Ibid, p. 424.



brought to Christ more than five hundred persons from his caste. By 1900 half the people of his caste had accepted Christ and by 1915 almost all the churas of Sialkot district became Christians.<sup>34</sup>

A Similar Christian Movement took place among the Mazahabi Sikh (Sikh by change of religion) and Outcaste sweeper (known as Lal Begis) in the United Provinces (present Uttar Pradesh, North India).<sup>35</sup> Also a Christian Movement among the Madigas (outcaste hide dealers) of Andhra Pradesh (South India) began in the same way and progressed.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. An Analysis

The discussion in the last section on 'Selected cases of Missionaries' and 'A Case from Church History' gives hints towards both the origin and causes of the development of the larger section of Christians in India i.e. 'Christian dalits'. Particularly if one carefully looks into the content of the two preceding sections, one can easily see the basic causes which are responsible for the unchanged conditions of Christian dalits even after embracing the Christian faith. These causes can be classified into the following five categories for an analysis:

- A. Theological/Religious Background of the Missionaries
- B. Missionary Methods
- C. Superiority Complex
- D. Missionary Response to the problem of Christian dalits.
- E. Indian Churches/Christian's Response

#### A. Religious Background of the Missionaries

As far as the early Roman Catholic missionaries, (i.e. Francis Xavier) were concerned, their religious teachings were limited to a set of moral teaching based on the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. On the other hand the early missionaries viz. Ziegenbalg, Plutschau, Schwartz etc. had pietistic religious background. Basing on this background their teachings included a special stress on 'personal holiness' and on the things of 'another world' where the caste-class struggle belongs to this world. Almost similar were the theological background and teachings of various Presbyterian missionaries.<sup>37</sup> These teachings

34. Cf. Pickett, J. Waskom, *Christian Mass Movement*, New York, 1933, p. 45.

35. Vide, *Ibid*, pp. 51, 52.

36. Vide, *Ibid*, pp. 47-49.

influenced very much their converts like Christian David. In a nutshell the teachings of the missionaries in India provided only a 'half salvation' to the Christians. It was a 'half-salvation' because in it no effort was made to relate the teaching of the Christian faith to the real life of the people and it dealt with only the moral issues, or the personal holiness and other worldly spirituality. The average Indian Christian, even the most illiterate, even today carries this aspect of Christian faith deep inside him. Because this very theological factor is the main one, on which Christians in India have been nourished from the beginning. And this factor was/is the main reason which kept the 'dalitness' perpetuated within the inner being of the average convert from dalit background. Also perhaps the same encouraged the converts from upper caste to continue to practise the caste even after becoming Christians and not to treat equally the Christians having low caste background.

## **B. Missionary Methods**

The first major point with regard to the missionary methods is that most of them "... wanted to penetrate India from the top, rather than the bottom."<sup>38</sup> This is true more or less in the case of all early missionaries as it has been mentioned already particularly about Robert de Nobili and Alexander Duff. One made an attempt to identify himself with the highest caste Brahman, he almost became a high caste Hindu himself by disguising himself. On the other hand Alexander Duff used the instrument of highest culture and science of the West in a Christian setting to reach high caste Indian. This is also true with the Presbyterian missionaries in Punjab, who, at the beginning, made an attempt to convert the upper caste.<sup>39</sup> The first missionary of the United Presbyterian Mission, Andrew Gordon himself admitted in 1886 at the end of his first thirty years work, that:

In concluding these remarks, about my own evangelistic work in the last decade, I may say briefly, that I began with my eye upon the large towns and cities, but have been led from them to the country villages. I began with the educated classes and people of good social position, but ended among the poor and the lowly.<sup>40</sup>

37. Cf. Webster, John C. B., op. cit., p. 93. Heich, Otto W, op. cit., pp. 440-43.

38. Grant, John Webster, *God's People in India*, Madras, 1965.

39. Juergensmeyer, Marik, *Religion as Social Vision*, Berkeley, 1982, p. 184.

40. Gordon, *The Rev. Andrew*, op. cit., p. 446.

The second major point with regard to the missionary method is the way they tried to use the education system. Already reference has been made to Alexander Duff's purpose of introducing a new system of education. But what was true with the early missionaries, with regard to the use of education, was also true with the latter ones also. For example the earliest missionary Robert Clark of C.M.S. Mission, at the end of his first thirty years in 1883, tells about the Boy's School at Batala, Panjab and the Alexandra Girl's School, Amritsar that: "In Batala, near Umritsar, Mr. Baring had established his Boarding School for the better classes of Native Christian Boys."<sup>41</sup> About the Alexandra Girl's School he says: "This school has been established for the children of the higher classes of Native Christians . . ."<sup>42</sup> But the results of this best education and missionary and Christian institutions is more negative, than positive, particularly with regard to the Christian dalits in India. Because these educational institutions and systems have supported more the values of oppressors, rather than the oppressed. These gave education mainly to the children of the rich belonging to upper caste classes of people. The mere cast factor and not giving proper opportunities to the children of poor and low caste people, kept/keeping them away from these educational institutions.<sup>43</sup>

### C. Superiority Complex

A famous missionary and a bishop of the Church of South India, Leslie Newbigin, while on his return to England, after retirement, admits and testifies, how from the very beginning in 1936, they were considered as 'Sahibs' (Lord).<sup>45</sup> Another old missionary C.F. Andrews also agrees with his views and says: "The missionary is not only a Western, but a Sahib."<sup>46</sup> C.F. Andrews quotes an example to make his point clear. He tells that once in a city in North India, he was going along with one Indian gentleman. While walking together they were discussing about Christian faith. He further tells that while they were going just then a Sahib drove by a trap, with a groom seated behind. The crowd

41. Clark, The Rev. Robert, *A Brief Account of Thirty Years of Missionary Work of the Church Missionary Society in Panjab and Sindh, 1852-1882*, Lahore, 1883, p. 20.

42. Ibid, p. 42.

43. Aixala, J, *Jesuit Formation and Inculturation in India Today*, Anand, 1978, p. 17.

44. Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Other Side of 1984*, Geneva, 1984, p. 1.

45. Andrews, Rev. C.F., op. cit., p. 160.

46. Ibid, p. 164.

scattered before him, and the policemen saluted in military style. "Look" said the Indian gentleman to me as he drew me aside, "there is your Christianity driving along! That Sahib is the missionary of this place, and that is his position, and that is how he goes to his work."<sup>47</sup>

Related to the question of 'Sahibism' among the Western missionaries, equally the racial superiority complex of Europeans in India as rulers is also responsible for the unchanged conditions of Christian dalits in India. For example Nirad Chaudhuri has compared the Muslim rulers with the British rulers (as Christians) and those low caste people, who became Muslims, with those, who were converted to Christianity. He tells as per his experience in Bengal, he could see that Muslims belonging to low castes could gain a higher status with their fellow Muslims, because the Muslim rulers did identify with all the Muslims, which, not only gave a new faith to the low caste Muslim, but also a new political status. He says:

... under the British rule in India, on the other hand, the Christians remained as much a subject population as the Hindus. I have heard that even in the Churches in the olden days, the Indian congregation could not sit with the Europeans. The consciousness of racial superiority on which British rule in India rested was not cancelled by Christianity. On the contrary, the British rulers felt happy if Christianity did not infuse arrogance into the converts from Hinduism, and they attached the greatest possible importance to the saying that blessed are the poor in spirit<sup>47</sup>

#### **D. Missionary Response to the Problems of Christian Dalits**

Already reference has been made to the general education of Indian Christians, which was mainly for the children of upper caste. The examples are given of Alexandra School, Amritsar and Baring School, Batala. Even a missionary educationist like Alexander Duff was not happy, when vernacular schools were opened for the children of low castes.<sup>48</sup>

Among the missionaries there were two groups, one who were interested to increase the number from the low castes for the sake of

47. Chaudhuri, Nirad C, op. cit., p. 332.

48. Forrester, Duncan B., *Caste and Christianity*, London, 1980, p. 70.

numbers; second who were opposed to the whole idea of accepting converts from the low caste. Such two groups among the missionaries were existing from the very beginning i.e. Francis Xavier representing the first group and Robert de Nobili the second group. Tyndale Biscoe (a missionary of the Church of England) in his autobiography tells how the first group used to baptize people at sight by filling: "A bowl full of water and sprinkling on the person in front of the whole crowd, would say: In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost."<sup>49</sup> While narrating another example of a Methodist missionary, Biscoe tells how a senior missionary rebuked a junior missionary for not maintaining increase of baptism for a fear of losing dollars from America.<sup>50</sup>

The early missionaries as well as later had created a myth that a convert belonging to high-caste has to loose much from the worldly point of view, where a convert from a low-caste nothing. But it is not true.<sup>51</sup> The fact is that most of the high-caste converts almost always have gained much more than the low-caste, even from the worldly point of view. For example, the first Presbyterian convert's family, even today, own the largest property in Jullunder.<sup>52</sup> All these worldly means have developed with the help of the missionaries, but that cannot be said true about the Christians from lower castes, except that they got odd jobs done from the missionaries i. e. gardner, cook, sweeper etc.<sup>53</sup>

The missionaries in fact always have felt embarrassed while facing the low-caste converts. In fact they have made distinction by addressing them only as "mass movement Christians" or simple "Christians" but not "Convert". The title "Convert" they would use only for the upper caste Christians.<sup>54</sup> Because of this embarrassment, some missionaries were afraid to mention in their reports the caste of these low-caste Christians. They would address them as "common villagers" or "illiterate

49. Tyndale-Biscoe (of Kashmir), *An Autobiography*, London, 1946, p. 110.

50. *Ibid.* p. 113.

51. Snell, Rev. C.D., "Christianity in India" in *The Church Missionary Review*, Vol. LXVI, No. 790, February 1915, p. 85.

52. Also Cf. Kaye, John William, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

53. I have lived in Jullunder city (Punjab) from 1969-1974 and have seen such properties belonging to the converts from upper caste.

54. Again such an example can be seen today. If one visits Mission compounds in a city like Jullunder and Ludhiana in Punjab, one can meet such converts from lower caste living in small houses, who have worked for Missionaries as servants.

menials" etc.<sup>55</sup> Even one famous missionary J. C. R. Ewing, while reporting to his Board of Foreign Missions of the U. S. A. referred to these low caste Christians as "raking in rubbish into the Church."<sup>56</sup>

Again missionaries as their common response to the caste problem, which can be labelled as 'the policy of accommodation', divided the Church or Indian Christians on the basis of their caste background. Even the Lord's Table (Sacrament of Eucharist) were not spared, for which they allowed cup with wine first to be taken by the upper caste Christians, and at last the lower caste.<sup>57</sup>

The missionaries response to the problem of Christian dalits included establishing the "mission compounds", "Christian colonies" in the towns and cities, and for rural people "Christian villages" were established. The main purpose of these establishments was to keep these new Christians away from the other people, who were considered to be heathens.<sup>58</sup> But this approach of the missionaries only helped in creating a very distinctive, but narrow Christian culture of lower level.

#### **V. Indian Christian Response**

Reference has already been made to a Christian Convert (Christian David), who was approached by Bishop Heber on questions of caste problem. Christian David a typical representative of the Indian Christians, who declared caste problem a 'purely worldly idea', who of course was taught and influenced by his missionary master (Christian Schwartz). In fact today an average Indian Christian is an evangelical in faith (follower of pietist traditions). The idea of 'other world' has become part of their blood and life, which was infused in them for the last two centuries by different missionary groups. The result is that they have become further unconscious of their problem of dalitness.

The Indian Churches/Christians have further strengthened some of the traditions followed by the missionaries. For example, the Christian educational institutions are continuing to strengthen the values of 'Upper Ten' representing the oppressors.

55. Juergensmeyer, Mark, op. cit., 1982, p.187.

56. Cf. Ibid, p. 186.

57. J. C. R. Ewing, letter to Dr. Gillespie, 19 March, 1894, cited in John C. B. Webster, op. cit., p. 60.

58. Cf. Juergensmeyer, Mark, op. cit., p. 188. Also Vide, Kaye, John William, op. cit., p. 353.

The tradition of superior complex i.e. 'Sahibism' has been fully inherited by our Indian Church leaders. Today every Christian leader is either 'Bishop Sahib' or 'Padri Sahib' or '... Sahib'.

The problem of Christian dalits has been further deepened by a few Christians, who have come from the upper caste background. For example after India's Independence in 1947, at the time of making the Indian Constitution, all people belonging to low castes were given special economic privileges like getting free education for the children, getting special privileges with regard to the government jobs etc. At that time the Christian representatives were asked if they wish to have such privileges protected for their community, because a large majority of Christians had a background of outcastes and they were economically poor as others of the same background belonging to other faiths. But the Christian leaders refused to accept that offer. But who were these Christian leaders? These were H. C. Mookerjee, Amrit Kaur and Jerome D'souza, S. J. The first one, a high caste Bengali convert, second a Punjabi convert from a royal background and the third a Jesuit. The leader of these three Christians, H. C. Mookerjee said, "I am a member of the minority community myself and I feel proud that the Community of which I am a member has decided to give up all special privileges . . ." <sup>59</sup> But this statement carries the ego and sentiments of a few upper caste Christians, not of millions of Christians having the dalit background.

Because of the above stand of upper caste Christians, as per the Order of the President of India 1950 (amended in 1956), the Indian Constitution does not even give the equal rights to Christian dalits as it gives to other Indian dalits in general.<sup>60</sup>

In the recent decade, because of the awareness created by various Christian dalits sections in India, the Churches both Roman Catholic as well as the Protestants have started discussing the problems of Christian dalits in general. For example during June 1989, the Catholic Convention which met in Bombay has recommended to their members to take this as a future priority as part of their future programme. The Church of North India Synod (a United Protestant Church) which

59. Newton, John, op. cit., p. 58.

60. Vide (for details) Kanaikil, Jose, *Scheduled Castes in the Constituent Assembly*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 14.

met from October 3-10,1989 has for the first time included in the final statement the concern of dalits.<sup>61</sup>

Besides various Christian traditions' change in attitude, the factor for Christian dalits' awakening is they themselves. Proof of this truth was seen on August 17, 1990, when over 1,00,000 Christian dalits came to the Boat Club, New Delhi for a national rally through which they presented their case for equal rights to the whole nation. Now their movement for the struggle for their equal rights is becoming more and more organised, which surely is going to bring positive results for their lasting liberation.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The sketchy discussion on the subject of 'Christian *Dalits* in India' in this paper makes the following main points clear.

One, perhaps the fundamental reason for the continuing unchanged conditions of Christian dalits in India is more theological/religious in nature than social. 'Religious' here means the particular understanding of early Christian missionaries. Because of their understanding (which was pietistic in nature) their main concern was to strengthen 'personal holiness' rather than dealing with the problems of whole group more in an organised way. More or less this understanding was continued to be followed by later missionary groups. This understanding of Christian faith made the future Christians in India, particularly from the dalits' background, more passive in their approach to life issues. Because the Gospel interpretation/understanding, which was communicated to them, did not include the concerns of 'this world', it was related to 'other world' and the individual salvation of the 'soul'. This understanding of Christian faith perhaps also continued to help the Christians coming from the upper castes to continue with their old attitude of life, particularly toward the Christians coming from the lower caste. So the theological understanding of the early missionaries, which later on was inherited by the Indian Christians became specially responsible

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61. Vide (for the text of) the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 with amendment *in* Constitutional Provisions for the Scheduled Castes by Jose Kananaikil, New Delhi, 1984, p. 39.

62. Minutes of the 7th Ordinary Meeting of the Synod of the Church of North India held at St. Stephen's College, Delhi from 3rd. to 10th October, 1989, Appendix VII, p. XXIII.



for the on going captivity of the 'dalitness' instead of bringing them out of it.

Two, the discussion of this paper makes it clear that perhaps the other major reason responsible for the unchanged conditions of Christian dalits is the methods of early Christians by which they not only accepted, but also encouraged the evil like caste distinction within the Church. This helped particularly in perpetuating the old practices and customs among the Christians in India.

Three, the matter of superiority complex deepens the problem, first the gulf between missionaries and their converts and also because of this they failed to identify with local people fully. This factor made the principle of equality further ineffective. This factor related to missionary attitude encouraged perhaps the upper caste Christians as well as the other Indian Christian leaders to perpetuate the same complex within the Church.

Finally, because the Indian Christians have inherited the missionaries' theological/religious understanding of Christian faith, methods and attitude, their response to the Christian *dalits* in India is mostly negative.