CONCLUSION

The Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu are an overwhelmingly poor and illiterate community. It is realised that the traditional caste system is not only strong and resilient but also oppressive. A large number of Dalit Christians are being forced to practise traditional caste-based occupations. These occupations and practices are so menial in nature that most of the Dalit Christians generally feel repulsed from engaging in them. A considerable number of Dalit Christians are engaged in Cow-slaughter, drum-beating, traditional cobbler work, skinning and grave-digging. Only scavenging and eating of dead animals by the Dalit Christians are found to be greatly decreased, if not fully non-existent.

The reasons for the Dalit Christians continued involvement in many of the above noted caste-based ‘menial’ occupations and practices are multi-faceted. Utter poverty of most of these people due to the absence of any assets, absence of any visible occupational mobility because of illiteracy and lack of skills, and the oppressive compulsions of the non-dalits who force the Dalit Christians to perform these practices, which were for a long time traditionally foisted on them as their duty to perform, are some of the major factors which force them to continue these occupations and practices which keep them permanently socially degraded. Thus a caste-class nexus behind their plight is very obvious. An on-going dialectic between their social degradation due to ‘untouchability’
origin on one hand and economic impoverishment on the other, with both mutually irritating one another, has pushed the Dalit Christians into their present predicament.

The rampant illiteracy found among the Dalit Christians is a clear indicator of their generally impoverished condition. This is indeed a very alarming situation with far-reaching implications on the future of the community. This situation has not only blocked them from an upward as well as occupational mobility, but has also made them remain unskilled manual low-waged workers, vulnerable to the compulsion to engage in ‘menial’ caste-based traditional occupations and practices.

It is also observed that there is not much difference between the socio-economic conditions of the Dalit Christians and the Dalit Hindus in Tamil Nadu. A close analysis of the situation clearly points out that a number of discriminations are practised against the Dalit Christians by different groups but the discrimination practised by the Church and the Government of India is severally felt by the Dalit Christians.

Christian converts are largely from among the lower castes, especially the untouchables. They were in search of higher social status. The long continued practice of casteism, even after conversion to Christianity, subjected the converts to certain social disabilities in Tamil Nadu. It is proved by the various statements made by the Church leaders and commissions, committees and the Dalit Christian Organizations that caste discrimination against the Dalit Christians has continued in the Church in some form or the other. The Church has made a lot of efforts to abolish the discrimination but owing to the poor implementation of its decision, the problem still persists.
The measures undertaken by the Church for the economic empowerment of the Dalit Christians are really appreciable. But a very few Dalit Christians have been benefited out of the Policies formulated by the Church for their upliftment. At the same time, the Church should take up effective economic measures to enable the economic empowerment of the Dalit Christians and also see to it that the measures are properly implemented so that a good number of Dalit Christians would be able to get the benefits. However, caution should be taken that the economic welfare measures should not be paternalistic but should develop a spirit of independence and self-reliance among the Dalit Christians.

The Dalit Christians are being denied the scheduled caste benefits and excluded from the scope of the Acts meant to give special protection to the people of 'untouchable' origin from crimes of untouchability and caste atrocities. This is nothing but the blatant discrimination of the state against these powerless people. This discrimination has been made on communal grounds, violating the fundamental right of equality of all people before law, irrespective of caste and creed distinctions, guaranteed in the Indian constitution. The communally motivated state discrimination has meted out great injustice to and has created an extremely difficult situation for the Dalit Christians.

In fact, what is at stake here is the right to practise the religion of one's own choice. Apparently the major reason behind their inexplicable plight appears to be their 'crime' of being born in an 'untouchable' caste with an added 'mistake' of embracing the Christian faith. Because of the miserable situation into which they are being pushed, they are
forced to adopt a dual identity – a Hindu identity for the sake of getting some state help which is vital for their survival, and a Christian identity for acquiring a social status.

The Presidential (Scheduled Castes) order was twice amended to extend the benefits of the Scheduled Castes to the Sikh and Buddhist Dalits in 1956 and 1990 respectively. This change proves that the benefits of the Hindu Scheduled Castes are denied only to the Dalit Christians on the basis of religion. The Sikh and the Buddhist Dalits were given the benefits on the ground that they were socially and economically backward because of their ‘untouchable’ origin though both the religions do not advocate Casteism. Hence the Dalit Christians should also be given the same benefits on the same reason that though Christianity does not advocate Casteism, the Dalit Christians have untouchable origin. Their struggle against the Government of India is highly a reasonable one. The Government should seriously look into their problem and do the needful.

Through their struggle against the Government of India by various Dalit Christians, Church and supportive organizations have made a lot of efforts to have the Dalit Christians included in the list of Scheduled Castes. Their attempts are noteworthy. Of course, their struggle is a prolonged one. As they are not able to influence the majority of the members of the parliament and get the absolute support of the ruling parties at the centre, their demands are not fulfilled.

As far as the participation of the Dalit Christians in the political process is concerned, they do not appear to be having any part in it except extending support to other political parties (1) by acting merely as a vote bank. In a situation where the
political process is dominated by caste – class factors and numerical strength, the helpless Dalit Christians, while being exploited all the time as a vote bank, are kept to tally outside the periphery as a non-entity. Majority of the Dalit Christians do not appear to be aware of this fact, and although a general disenchantment with all political parties is growing they continue to allow themselves to be exploited.

The following observations on the potentialities within the Dalit Christian Community for the struggle for liberation and on some of the basics which the role of the Church should include in support of that struggle are suggestive.

The Dalit Christians though steeped in illiteracy, are not a socially unaware group. In fact, they possess remarkable awareness. Undoubtedly, the Christian faith has played an important role in creating this awareness. True, a vast majority of the Dalit Christians do appear docile and submissive, but it is a mask which they are used to wearing owing to their long experience of suffering. One very clear instance of their awareness is that the majority of them are aware of the root cause of their plight. Most of them are also deeply aware of how the surrounding oppressive society, the discriminating state, an indifferent Church and their own limitations are factors which contribute to their predicament. Although instances of their retaliation against oppression are still rare, given the opportunity and with adequate empowerment, the Dalit Christians are certainly capable of opposing the injustice meted out to them in the struggle for their liberation.
It is significant that education, economic measures and effective care of the Church were three essential pre-requisites of empowerment, according to their perception. This positive thinking would be facilitative factors in their struggle.

The very historical fact that the Dalit Christians converted themselves to Christianity not for economic benefits but to seek liberation from serious caste oppression and the fact that they are continuing to cling to the Christian faith in spite of it being the cause of communal resentment and economic disabilities, indicate that their practice of the Christian faith is of a far superior quality, where much sacrifice is involved.

The fact that the Church was indifferent not only to the plight of the Dalit Christians but also knowingly or unknowingly seriously discriminated against them is undesirable. If this apathy and discrimination continues, the Dalit Christian Community, which is already under great strain, may soon lose its hope in the Church and eventually give up the Christian faith altogether. This would be very unfortunate for the Dalit Christians and detrimental to the Church. Under these circumstances, the Church should wake up from its slumber and do some honest soul-searching if it really wants to be faithful to its calling.

The Church should also equip the religious adequately for religious ministry in an area which is usually riddled with contradictions. It is important that priests and nuns are equipped with an appropriate theological orientation and skill in social analysis and action. The social analysis action should help them to mobilize and organize people.
While the Dalit Christians suffer under the additional problem of the discrimination of the state against their community, their problem in general is an integral part of the overall Dalit problem in this country. Therefore in the best interests of their struggle for justice, they should join forces without any reservation with all other Dalit liberation and secular movements. Further, it is of vital importance that the Church encourages its members to join such progressive movements and help to promote a socio-political ferment through effective social and political education programmes.

Assertions of identify by different Dalit communities are basically political in nature, and they are welcome and positive. Each community has to be strengthened with its own identify, symbols, norms and internal organizations. It is from this position of strength that the different Dalit Communities have to come together with one political identify to carve a niche for themselves within state and national politics.

The Dalit Christians agree that there is truth in the argument that, to some extent, the Dalit Christians are free from the ignominy of caste in the new set up. However, this is possible only in cities and towns and even then, there is a great risk that, in the long-run, their identity will be submerged in the crowd. Instead of losing their identity, the Dalit migrants to the cities and towns must preserve it and strengthen their community.

The marginalized group must struggle to use and broaden the newly created possibilities. In spite of its limited influence and oppressive features and gestures, the Indian state thus gives to the marginalised one of their biggest hopes of liberation from
the traditional oppression of the dominant castes. The Dalit Christian intelligentsia must possess a strong and relevant ideology - an ideology of protest and liberation.

To play a relevant role in the Dalit Christians' struggle for liberation, the Church leadership in particular, and the urban Christian in general, should undergo a sincere change of heart. There is no doubt that the indifferent and apathetic attitude of these people is one of the serious obstacles in the task of empowering Dalit Christians. In the true Christian spirit, the Church leadership which is presently dominated by the Caste – Christians should be prepared to share the Church’s resources with Dalit Christians and involve them in the Church’s decision-making bodies. Considering the discrimination under which the people have suffered for so long, including those from within the Church, special priority should be given to involve them more meaningfully in all the structures of the Church.

The on-going struggle of the Dalit Christians should be continued with greater enthusiasm to fight against the discrimination. Special task forces should be appointed at diocesan or regional levels to identify concrete instances and places where discriminations against Dalit Christians are being practised. Let heads of Churches pay special attention to promotion of priestly and religious vocations among the Dalits. Lay people should be encouraged to join politics with a view to fighting the social discrimination. Then only the Dalit Christian Liberation movement can be a successful one.