In this chapter, I turned to the Mahar and Mang women - I tried to systematically document details from their daily lives by recording speech, habits and customs, taking photographs and trying to log in the minutest details of every aspect of their lives. I was invited to their weddings, attended mass (Marathi Church) with them, visited their relatives, enjoyed bhakri-mutton curry cooked in the Kolhapuri style at their homes. My emphasis was more on seeing things from the point of view of an insider- and the emphasis being more on induction than deduction. In order to arrive at a proper understanding of the way in which these Mahar and Mang women exercise a sense of agency in their lives, I took the help of their own experiences, their narratives and their voices which I analysed through qualitative research techniques. Through the use of qualitative methods, I could focus more on the subjective experiences and meanings. I used semi-structured or unstructured interviewing techniques. Since it is difficult for an outsider (like me) to gain information through purely empirical means, the usefulness of such an approach was that it maximizes the ability to explore experience, rather than impose externally defined structures on women's lives.

Like the women performing Tamashas and the devadasis, the women from the Mahar and Mang castes who have converted to Christianity too suffer a whole lot of discrimination in Kolhapur today. So poor is their condition that often their basic requirements of food, clothing and shelter are hardly met with. The Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad (DSVP) organized under the aegis of the Diocesan Board of Social Services (DBSS) of the Kolhapur Church Council, Kolhapur was the focus of my research here. It fights for the cause of the Mahar and Mang women; their daily struggles took varied forms in their search for material
comforts or emotional/personal satisfaction. So, eventually, other alternatives, such as a new religious identity through conversion were attempted. To this, they turned in their search for a change of status – through conversion to Christianity, aided by the Church of Kolhapur. Religion, thus became a crucial element in their quest for a sense of agency among themselves.

Among the various non-state actors in civil society, the Christian Church over time has been playing a very active and important role in helping Dalit women of the Mahar and Mang castes to rise from their degraded existence. Now, a question may arise: what about the other religions and religious organizations that have traditionally been dominant in Maharashtra – Hinduism and Buddhism – the Shiv Sena and Neo-Buddhist organizations, what has been their attitude towards caste?

The challenges to Christian missions in Kolhapur are mainly two-fold:

- **Neo-Buddhism** - Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits to Buddhism in an effort to reject Hinduism and break free from caste. But a question arises – has Ambedkar converted his followers to Buddhism or to a new religion which can be an offshoot of Buddhism called Ambedkarism? This is because to Ambedkar, Buddhism was not a vision of a mystical illumination or divine experience; rather Buddhism gave him a framework of social justice within which he could carry on his struggle. In fact, the new identity that the Dalit Buddhists who converted got was based more on a negation of Hinduism than on an acceptance of Buddhism – more on cutting the umbilical cord that has kept Dalits subservient to brahminical Hinduism than on building a new religious community. A glaring example of this is the fact that converts to Buddhism often celebrate Hindu festivals as well as the birth anniversary of the Buddha, Buddha Jayanti.

There were three reasons behind Ambedkar’s choice of Buddhism – Buddhism taught prajna (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), karuna (love) and samata (equality). Apart from these three principles which Ambedkar felt was needed to uplift the morale of the untouchables, Buddhism had a rational approach towards eradicating...
human suffering. In the words of Rev. Subash Dongardive, Ambedkar created a frenzy among the Dalit population of India by leading them out of Hinduism into the Neo-Buddhist fold. For some, he almost became the second Buddha who stood against caste discriminations. With the emergence of Ambedkar and his charismatic appeal to the untouchables to convert to Buddhism, many untouchables, most notably Mahars lost interest in becoming Christians. Seeing the possibility of a radical transformation in their lives, innumerable Mahars responded almost totally to the conversion appeal. Buddhism to many became a political weapon, not a matter of personal devotion. The memory of Ambedkar (after his demise) and his life became their driving forces and the Buddhism that comes through is his version of the faith, and he himself is regarded a Bodhisattva. The Neo-Buddhists, in fact, have a huge following in the Nagpur and Vidarbha region. Nagpur has since then been the main belt of conversion. In fact, the religious composition of India and especially Maharashtra changed due to this mass conversion. Dalit communities outside Maharashtra also responded by converting to Buddhism. The conversion spread rapidly throughout Maharashtra. People who had come to Nagpur for the conversion ceremony went back to their villages, repeated oaths and converted their own Dalit people to Buddhism. Compared to Vidarbha (the region around Nagpur), Western Maharashtra, where the district of Kolhapur stands is relatively less influenced by this act of conversion. As I enquired about the spread of the Neo-Buddhist influence in Kolhapur, people shrugged off saying that Kolhapur was not as captivated by Buddhism as was Vidarbha. Apart from that, in the Kolhapur area many converted Mahars could not change their deeply rooted belief system and practices and the centuries-old hold of Hinduism could not be wiped out easily. Thus, many Mahars became Neo-Buddhists superficially, but in their beliefs and practices, they continued as Hindus. In fact, most illiterate or semi-literate Mahars could not comprehend fully the implications of renouncing Hinduism and accepting Neo-Buddhism. As Rev. Dongardive comments, for many it amounted to the changing of labels and not necessarily of hearts. Unlike the Mahars, there were many other Dalit communities, especially the Mangs, who did not accept Buddhism; even among those who did, even after conversion, most Neo-

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256 Assistant General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India. The Evangelical Fellowship of India is a national representative voice, articulating Biblical values, engaged in training, addressing issues and advocating for the poor and marginalized.
Buddhists could not change their caste identities and to a certain extent, their caste duties. For instance, the Dhors, Chambhars and Mangs remained outside the orbit of Ambedkar’s movement. It was these classes who were eager enough to give Christianity a try.

Another interesting aspect of the conversion is that many, rather the majority of untouchables converted to Buddhism, not because they perceived it to be the best religion, but because they wanted to give full allegiance to their leader, Babasaheb Ambedkar. Neo-Buddhism did not provide real spiritual satisfaction to many. Ambedkar, like Buddha began to be worshipped like a God. Thus, this ideology-based conversion movement initiated by Dr. Ambedkar fizzled out largely after its initial momentum. Conversion has not solved the problems of the converts, argue some Christian leaders of Maharashtra. Some Indian Christian leaders have sensed that the Dalits, including Neo-Buddhists, have recently shown signs of openness to consider Christianity as an option. Therefore, there arises a huge need to look into this interest from the perspective of Christian mission and to devise creative ways of undertaking Christian mission among Dalits. Interestingly, many Neo-Buddhists are showing an interest towards Christianity; thus the Dalits and the converted Mahar Buddhists are considering the option of Christianity. Inspite of all this, Buddhism has indeed changed the landscape of many villages throughout the length and breadth of Maharashtra.257

**Hinduism** - Maharashtra is home to the Shiv Sena, a right-wing Hindu organisation with political affiliations. The local office of the Shiv Sena is at Malti Towers (Basement) G-8, Tarabai Park, Kolhapur – 416003. The Shiv Sena with its anti-Christian propaganda keeps Dalit castes away from the Church. But, in recent times, there has been a spate of conversions among the Hindus – untouchables in large numbers are turning towards the Christian Church. One reason is quite clear – the Church has been promising them economic benefits, benefits of education and other kinds of aid. This has been the main reason for their attraction towards the Church. As far as the Shiv Sena is concerned, though it has a big organization in Kolhapur, its reach among the Dalit castes, especially among the women has not been very wide or appealing.

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257 Information obtained from Abraham Kisanrao Awale, of the Bahujan Rayat Parishad; It is a Dalit Political Organisation mainly based at Pune; Interview taken on 4/5/09
Compared to the Buddhists and the Senas, the Christian Church with its team of Church leaders and priests is directing a lot of effort towards education of the Dalits. Conversion to Christianity, offers even more than Buddhism, a break with a painful past. It aims at delivering Dalits from the stranglehold of the oppressive discourse of caste and relocating them in another where alternative possibilities, material, psychological, social and metaphysical, all open up simultaneously. David Mosse is of the opinion that upper-caste attacks and sanctions against converts suggest that Christian conversion was indeed taken as a mark of independence and upward social mobility. However, in independent India, because they were excluded from the list of Hindu (Scheduled Castes) SC’s, Christian Dalits lacked the state protection and privileges accorded to other Dalits. They were ineligible for reservations (in education, employment or local government) and have no recourse to protection from the law under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989.

Conversion to Christianity in Kolhapur has vastly different roots than the rest of Maharashtra, and it is a phenomenon quite different from conversion as a political statement. One thing that was very clear was that the missionaries held out the prospect of a better life at both economic and social levels. In fact, the most attractive aspect was the certainty of schooling, the Christian schools were comparatively better run, with better teachers, and chances of learning were far better than in any government school. It also showed the future hope of leaving behind a degraded past.

i) Firstly, because of the work of the missionaries, the Mahars were more eager and open to moving upward and outward and the opportunity of educating themselves was aptly grabbed by them all over Maharashtra. They were the first ones to accept the opportunity provided by the Church and the Christian missionaries in mission schools. They probably perceived the opportunity of educating themselves as a means of moving out of the traditional caste based...
occupations and took it as a means to elevate themselves above other outcaste people in the village.ii)

ii) Secondly, the emergence of Dalit theology as a significant body of literature has been a very important development towards the upliftment of Dalits. Serious interest in a range of Dalit issues is being shown by a segment of Christian thinkers and theologians, involving much research and theological reflection at both the grass-roots and academic levels. These reflections are attempting to voice the concerns, struggles and aspirations of the Dalits in general and the Dalit Christian population in particular. A segment of the Christian community, notably in southern and western India is really committed to the Dalit cause in terms of evangelism, Church planting and other holistic ministries.

The National Council for Churches in India (NCCI) organized a Seminar exclusively for Dalits in the year 2010 at Delhi. “Christ and caste do not go together” this was the message at the National Ecumenical Conference against Caste-Based Discrimination in the Church organized by the National Council for Churches at Delhi in the year 2010. It also celebrated the Dalit Liberation Sunday on 8th December, 2013. The celebration of NCCI Dalit Liberation Sunday is associated with the observance of Human Rights Day. The UN General Assembly declared 10 December as Human Rights Day in 1950, to bring to the attention ‘of the peoples of the world’ the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. On 11th December 2013, Church leaders and Dalits congregated in Delhi and took part in a protest rally to again impress upon the government the urgent need for rendering justice to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. In the view of NCCI leaders, even the Church in India is not free from the effects of caste. A significant percentage of the membership of the Church in India is Dalit. Therefore the NCCI has been engaged in the campaign “You cannot serve Christ and Caste!” Celebration of Dalit Sunday is an important expression of The NCCI’s solidarity with their Dalits sisters and brothers. However beyond this celebration, the real
need is to bring about certain changes in the life, structure and mission of the Churches. Only then ‘celebrating faith by witnessing’ will become a reality. The Dalit Liberation Sunday, an initiative of the NCCI was later taken up on a larger scale by the National Coordination Committee for Dalit Christian Rights (NCCDC), a joint programme of NCCI and Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI), aiming at the empowerment of the local congregations for Dalit liberation. Dalit Liberation Sunday is celebrated by the member Churches of National Council of Churches in India and the Churches under Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India in their local congregations across India on the Sunday nearest to the International Human Rights Day (IHRD December 10th) commemorating the importance of it in Indian Dalit struggles.

iii) Thirdly, to quote Eleanor Zelliot in her introduction to the second edition of the book From Untouchable to Dalit – Essays on the Ambedkar Movement,

“…not only have remarkable publications on ‘Dalit Christians’ and ‘Dalit Theology’ poured out, but the Church has also fostered new writing on Scheduled Castes in general and sponsored conferences in which scholars, Dalits and other interested folk as well as Christians participate. There seem to be two thrusts to this movement: one is the acknowledgement of the fact that there are Dalit Christians, a matter of shame for the Christian Church, and that the Church must not only recognize their needs but form a theology that encompasses all and even recognizes their Dalit creativity. The other is that the Church in India is wholly Indian as well as international, and must participate in solutions to India’s problems.”

Finally, she speaks of institutions such as the Indian Social Institute at New Delhi, which, led by Christians, has become an extraordinarily active and effective force in many Dalit matters.

Before we turn to the Dalit Christians in Kolhapur, it becomes necessary to analyse the term ‘Dalit Christians’. Many tribals and Dalits have tried to move up the social ladder of Indian society. Conversion movements among Dalits and tribals have shown the potential for changing their religion. These movements were characterized by an effort on the part of the Dalits to gain dignity, self-respect and the ability to choose one’s own destiny for oneself. Many Dalits chose Christianity as it would enable them to belong to a new community which
not only had a religious tradition comparable to that of the caste Hindus, but it also held the promise of new dignity and self-esteem. These movements were also a revolt against a socio-religious system, which had failed to provide a meaningful response to Dalit needs and aspirations. Conversion has been a heated topic of debate not only in political but in social circles as well; conversion to Christianity among Dalit communities occurs not generally as an individual but as a group phenomenon\textsuperscript{262}. Massive problems arise when all members of a jati in a particular area become Christians. Two important questions need to be answered: one is the type of social relationships to be established or destroyed with the non-converted segment of the old jati; and secondly, the selection of those characteristics that would define their new social position vis-à-vis other social groups.\textsuperscript{263}

In fact, of the roughly 20 million Christians in India, about 14 million are of Dalit origin; that is, about 70\% of all conversions to Christianity have occurred among Dalits.\textsuperscript{264} The Dalit converts to Christianity were called the \textbf{Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin (CSCO)}. This name came into prominence after the First National Convention of Christian Leaders on the plight of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin in the year 1978. In Christian circles, the term ‘Dalit’ began to be used for Scheduled Castes by the early 1980’s. By 1985, the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement had formulated the concept and category of ‘Dalit Christians’ – as well as the slogan ‘Dalit is dignified’. The National Churches and Ecumenical Councils of the World Council of Churches have become familiar with the term since 1986. Initially, though the Protestants began the concept and use of the term Dalit Christians, the Catholics started using it much later. It was in the year 1989 that the National Convention of All India Catholic Union (AICU) decided to refer to Scheduled Caste Christians as Dalit Christians.\textsuperscript{265}

Under Article 341(1) of the Constitution of India, the President is empowered to give a list of the Scheduled Castes. It says that no person who professes a religion different from

\textsuperscript{262} “Conversion and the Collapse of a Social Order” in Fernando Franco, Jyotsna Macwan and Suguna Ramanathan” op. cit, p. 117

\textsuperscript{263} Ibid, p.119

\textsuperscript{264} S.M.Michel ‘Dalit Encounter with Christianity: Change and Continuity’ “ in Rowena Robinson & Joseph Marianus Kujur op. cit, p. 52

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid, p. 54
Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste. In this way, discrimination against the Dalit Christians was etched in the Constitution itself. Most importantly, the Central Government’s programmes for the Dalits, such as post-Matric scholarships and reservation of jobs were restricted to Dalit Hindus. These were later extended to Dalit Sikhs and Dalit Buddhists. Dalit Christians, strangely enough are excluded from these benefits. However, in Tamil Nadu and some other states, the Dalit Christians find their place among the category of the Backward Classes. Moreover, the laws which protect the Dalits such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 do not apply to the Dalit Christians. This is irrespective of the fact that a huge number of caste and untouchability related crimes are committed against the Dalit Christians themselves. Though Christians of Dalit origin have left the caste system of the Hindus, in the eyes of caste Hindus, they remain Dalits. Also most Hindu Dalits frown upon the Christian Dalits as their potential competitors in the share of reservations; Dalit Christians are also looked with disfavor when they seek state assistance, since they are considered to have already benefited from and uplifted by missionary assistance.

Various Government Commission reports also point to the prevalence of caste practices within Christian communities.

i) The Kaka-Kalelkar Commission Report states that even a change of religion does not destroy caste. For instance, converts to Christianity sometimes carry caste practices with them though their religion does not recognize it. A large number of people belonging to lower castes, and in particular, from among the untouchables become converts to escape the rigor and humiliation of the Hindu caste system. It is sad to note, however, that even these converts could not easily shake off their old caste disabilities.

ii) The Kumara Pillai Commission report (Kerala Government, 1965) too states that the caste system is found among the Christians. It observes that the degree of segregation of the new convert from the Scheduled Castes is almost as high as before his conversion. In practice, converts from the Scheduled Castes are treated as socially backward.
iii) The Mandal Commission (1980) too makes a similar observation: Though caste system is peculiar to Hindu society, yet in actual practice it also pervades to non-Hindu communities in India in varying degrees.

Dalit Christians have not shown a complete detachment from the intricate web of caste customs either266. During life-cycle celebrations such as birth, puberty, marriage and funeral, Christian converts follow local caste customs and ceremonies. For example, in marriages, the Dalits usually follow their own customs, except for the nuptial blessing in the Church. There are times, when they even follow the food, dressing habits and so on of their Hindu counterparts. There have been cases where the converts having failed to comply with caste customs, have faced ostracism from the community. Thus Michel asserts that the Christians of Dalit origin continue to live under the burden of the oppressive forces of casteism within the Church and outside. 267 Even though the Church administration claims that it feels helpless in the face of caste consciousness of the Christians, which they have inherited from Hinduism, the number of parishes, cemeteries and places of worship, where these divisions and discriminations are continuously practiced are innumerous.

Another interesting fact that has surfaced is the Indian Church’s attempts to indigenize itself on Indian cultural soil by adopting Indian architectural styles for Church buildings, rituals such as aarti in the service, and lighting lamps as well as candles. These serve as official signs encouraging continuity with local customs. Though in the beginning, there wasn’t much resistance to this; with the passage of time and awakening of Dalit consciousness, there has been increasing resistance to the Sanskritic model of the indigenization of Christianity. This is because Dalit struggles have infused in their religiosity a deep sense of aversion to Sanskritic rituals and symbols of the upper castes. In fact, before the Dalits converted to Christianity, they had their own traditions, mythology, customs and folk religion. This cultural creativity did not vanish with conversion and was gradually brought into consonance with Church-based worship. Dalit Christians have built their own shrines and developed their own devotional practices; most of these have many elements of

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266 I met a Dalit Christian lady belonging to a priest’s family who had applied mehendi/henna on her palms on the occasion of a marriage.

267 Ibid, pp. 56-60
popular religion which may be very distinct from the mainline Churches. Thus, a look at the everyday life of the Dalits shows that conversion to Christianity has brought about no radical, social transformation as such.

I now turn to the Dalit Christian women in Kolhapur’s villages and see how has Christianity affected them – has it helped them in their daily struggle for survival or has it remained an empty dream. Before discussing the present status of the Dalit Christian converts in Kolhapur today, it is necessary to look at the history of the Christian Church in Kolhapur, Maharashtra.

SECTION A –

THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN KOLHAPUR, MAHARASHTRA

The low castes search for social dignity and mobility was one of the important reasons for the success of the Christian Church and its missions in Maharashtra. Most of the Protestant missions that came to Maharashtra in the first half of the 19th century established their headquarters in Bombay. In the beginning, the focus of their work was to win over the Brahmins. It was felt that the conversion by the Brahmins would lead to conversion of the masses. However, such a strategy proved to be hazardous with very little results. The people belonging to the higher castes, in fact, were too conscious of caste pride to accept Christianity. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) established their first foreign mission with the American Marathi Mission in Bombay on December 21, 1813. It was the first Protestant mission in Western India and spread into hundreds of villages.268 The mission center moved from Bombay to Ahmednagar in 1831 because it was closer to the center of Marathi County. The mission did a number of things for the community. By 1911, Christians were attending Church and school, learning academic subjects, practical farming, basic medicine and industry including carpentry and weaving. Aiding famine and plague victims and beginning a women’s Bible training school increased the goodwill towards the Marathi Mission. Colleges and a theological institution were

268 Information obtained from Bishop Geevarghese Mor Coorilos; Interview taken at the NCCI Conference on Dalits at New Delhi in October 2010
created by the Marathi Mission in the late 1800s to mid-1900s. It created an institution for care of the blind, as well as a leper colony in 1899 at Sholapur. Although the number of Christians was growing, caste prejudices and the scarcity of Christian leaders continued to be an issue for the organization. The move for Indian independence led to a downturn in relations between Indian Christians and missionaries. In 1922 the Marathi Mission created an Indian Mission Board to help give locals more independence over their Christianity. India gained its independence from Britain in 1947 and Christianity is still the country’s third-largest religion.\footnote{David, M. D. (2001) Missions: Cross-Cultural Encounter and Change in Western India Delhi: ISPCK} In the meantime, the missionaries of the American Marathi Mission began to search for other places to work in western Maharashtra. In October-November of 1831, they toured the area and decided that Ahmednagar should be the centre for their work in western Maharashtra. It was here that the American Marathi Mission saw the fruits of their missionary labour in terms of large conversions and subsequently they were able to expand their missionary endeavors in western Maharashtra.

During the initial years, the missionaries were careful in maintaining the caste distinctions among the pupils and the teachers. The schools were mainly for the higher caste children and no lower caste students were allowed. However, soon, in the Deccan, the mission came in contact with the Mahars and the Mangs, two of the outcastes. These two caste groups had showed receptivity to the Gospel right from the beginning, but somehow the missionaries did not give sufficient attention to them. Nevertheless, the openness of these people made the missionaries rethink their priority of reaching the higher castes at the expense of the lower. The missionaries knew that if they allowed lower caste children into the school, they would lose the higher caste students. Finally, separate schools were opened for low-caste children in their villages. These people were considered as sub-humans by the higher castes and the Government at that time did nothing to uplift them. Therefore whatever was done by these people was considered to be deeds of great kindness by the low castes, they greatly appreciated it when schools were established for them in the Maharwadis and Mangwadis\footnote{Colonies inhabited specifically by the Mahars and the Mangs respectively.} of various villages.
Becoming Christian was hugely attractive for the Mahars and Mang, as it raised their social status by opening the doors of education to them. Soon the missionaries found themselves to be busy reaching out to these people with substantial success. The missionary preaching tours now began to focus on the lower castes and outcastes. At about this time, there were clear signs of a quickening of life in the American Marathi Mission. Doors were opening through both the Konkan and the Deccan.

As the new converts began to multiply, it was essential to start Churches for them. Initially the missionaries pastured these congregations scattered around the villages. Later, they realized that their numbers were inadequate for the task and they began to train local people for leadership. By then, a generation of young Christians, educated by the mission schools, had come to prominence. As the Churches grew, they were given autonomy to manage their own business.

The congregation belonging today to the Kolhapur Church Council (KCC) is the fruit of missionary work by American Presbytarians, which started in 1852. In 1924 the Kolhapur Presbytery became part of the United Church of Northern India, which brought together Presbyterian and Congregational Churches \(^{271}\), they formed the Kolhapur Church Council (KCC) within the Church of Northern India. Though the United Church joined the Northern Church in 1970, the KCC claimed that it continued to exist as a juridical entity. A dispute between the Presbyterian Church USA and KCC over properties was finally settled in 1977 by mutual agreement. The KCC does evangelistic work in western Maharashtra and is represented in the districts of Kolhapur, Sangli, Ratnagiri, Sindurga, and Belgaum (Karnataka).

A part of the Church of North India (C.N.I) the Kolhapur Church Council, with S.Pathane as the Executive Secretary, has its office at E.P.School Compound, Nagala Park, Kolhapur. It has a total number of sixty organized Churches, one hundred house fellowships, forty ordained ministers and seven evangelists in charge of the pastoral care that is

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\(^{271}\) Presbyterian churches derive their name from the presbyterian form of administration, which is administration by representative assemblies of elders. Congregational churches are Protestant churches practicing congregationalist church governance, in which each congregation independently and autonomously runs its own affairs.
undertaken. All together, the KCC runs six Government-aided High Schools and one Primary School; coupled with three unaidered High and one Primary school. It also runs three Hostels for girls and one Hostel for boys. The Church Council also runs two Hospitals, Mary Wanless Hospital along with SFI Medicare Pvt. Ltd. Students who wish to pursue nursing are also aided by the KCC by arranging sponsorships for them. A Micro Loan Programme for the rural Church members is also undertaken by the Council. A residential Bible College has also been established by the KCC in the year 2003.272

With the help of the Emmanuel Gospel Center, (EGC)273, Boston, the KCC has reached out to many Dalit homes. Since 1989, EGC missionaries Rev. Ramesh and Sheba Telore have provided strategic support to Kolhapur Church Council (KCC) and helped mentor the KCC’s executive secretary, Rev. Shrikant Pathane. Educational partnerships with EGC provided leadership training and discipleship. Microloan projects have improved the economic conditions of village Churches. The number of established Churches grew from 43 to 66 in the last 15 years, and there are 250 Church plants and cell groups underway. The KCC’s Micro-Loan Programme, launched through EGC’s training and support in 1997, has grown from 25 to 212 men and women pursuing new businesses in numerous villages, and inspiring them in turn, to give indigenous support to new, local, Church plants.

SECTION B –

THE LEGENDARY BALUTEDAAR – MAHAR & MANG

In Maharashtra, there are two groups of respondents to the Gospel: the outcaste groups, the Mahars and the Mangs who responded positively to the Gospel and converted to the Christian faith: the non-Brahminic middle castes, the Marathas and the Patils who stood against the spread of the faith and often are the opponents of the Gospel.

272 Information obtained from Joseph Awale, Co-ordinator DBSS ; Interviews taken on 2/5/09 and 05/06/2010

273 Founded in the year 1938, at Boston, U.S.A, The Emmanuel Gospel Center is a faith-based, non-denominational, Christian organization that seeks to identify and nurture the systems that empower the effective ministry of urban churches in their communities. Their main purpose is to engage in applied research that helps to understand the city with which they get involved: mainly to understand the city as it constantly changes. They also offer consulting and different sorts of programs designed to help churches grow stronger and serve people better.
Before we delve into a deeper discussion of these castes, it is necessary to understand the social location of the Mahars and the Mangs and for this it is necessary to turn to the balutedaari system which has held the various castes of Maharashtra into a united frame and has withstood the test of time. According to the balutedaari system, the people are divided according to their occupation into jatis (castes). Within this system lies the explanation of the deep inter-relation between society and religion – between the socio-economic and the religio-ritualistic order. In a village community, each of these jatis had their own separate residential areas. The role of each jati within the agrarian economy of the village was decided by the ruling elites, who were usually the land-owning jatis. Each group of people served the village in a separate manner and in turn, they received grain and money. There were twelve balutedaars in all, they are as follows:

- Brahmin joshis (priests / astrologers)
- Kulkarnis (accountants)
- Sutars (carpenters)
- Lohars (blacksmiths)
- Kumbhars (potters)
- Nhavis (barbers)
- Parits/Dhobis (washermen)
- Guraos (shrine-keepers and priests for the non-Brahmins)
- Chamars (shoe makers and leather workers)
- Mahars (messengers, watchmen, disposers of the dead animals and general village servants)
- Mangs (rope-makers)

THE MAHARS

There is a common saying in Maharashtra, “wherever there is a town, there is a Maharwada”, which implies that Mahars, a community of untouchables are found throughout the state of Maharashtra. However, they are looked down upon and are considered to be outside all castes, in Marathi, “Mahar sarva jaticha bahar”, i.e the Mahar is outside all castes. They are also given an unwarranted bad character.
Subjected to the worst forms of untouchability, the shadow of the Mahars too was considered to be polluting. The village barber would not shave the Mahars, nor were they allowed to take water from the village well. Formerly, an earthen pot was hung from their necks to hold their spittle; they were made to drag thorns to wipe out their footsteps and when a Brahmin came near they were forced to lie far off on their faces, lest their shadow might fall on him. The poems of the Mahar poet Chokhamela who lived in the fourteenth century show that the Mahars were engaged in menial occupations and went begging for leftover food. They were persecuted by the temple authorities too and any food touched by them was considered to be defiled. Any Mahar going against the caste rules was punished very severely. For instance, in earlier times, if a Mahar ventured close to a temple to hear the sacred texts being recited and was caught, molten metal was poured into his ears.

Some scholars suggest that the very name Maharashtra is derived from the word Mahar, i.e the Rashtra of Mahars or the state of Mahars. They believe that the Mahars were the original inhabitants of this land that the Aryans first encountered. There are many legends explaining the origin of the Mahars in Maharashtra. According to the Hindu traditions, Mahars were originally night rovers (nishachar), whom the God Brahma transformed into men lest they eat his whole creation. People of the Nasik region believe that the founder of the Mahar caste was a man named Svarup Somaji who originated from the sole of Brahma’s foot.

Of the many divisions into which Mahars say they are divided, thirteen are represented in Kolhapur. They are: Andvan (virgin-born) Beles (broom, basket and mat makers) Jhades (sweepers), Ghadsis (musicians) Ghatkamblis, Gondvans, (beggars), Hedsis, Kabules, Kudvans, Ladvans, Pans (flute-players), Sonkamblis and Saladis. These divisions once neither interdined nor intermarried but the restrictions are now relaxed, though to some extent, they may be observed regarding marriage. Within these divisions the community had two endogamous divisions, namely Bhat and Dhegu-megu. The Bhat used to preside over marriage, funeral and other social ceremonies and also served as messengers carrying news of social incidents to relatives. The ancestors of the Dhegu-megus were said to have brought megh (rain) by prayer and they were gurus (teachers) of the community. Both these divisions now identify themselves with the community and intermarry. There are also a number of
exogamous divisions known as *Kuls* (surnames) in the community, some of which are Abbute, Ambedkar, Gayakwad, Ingle, Jadhav, Kamble, Pawar, Vaghmare etc.

Except those living in the villages bordering on Kannada speaking areas, most Mahars speak an incorrect and oddly pronounced Marathi. When a Mahar meets a man of his own caste he greets him with "*namastu*" (a bow to you); to others he says, "*johar*". They are generally dark with irregular features and flat noses. They live in the outskirts of towns and villages in special quarters known as *Maharwada*, generally in untidy and ill-cared for houses of sun-burnt brick or stone and mud walls and tiled or thatched roofs. In villages the men dress in a loincloth or waist cloth, a blanket as a shoulder-cloth, a coat or smock and a Maratha turban. The women plait their hair in a braid which hangs down the back and wear the full Maratha sari (robe) without passing the skirt back between the feet and a *coll* (bodice) with short sleeves and a back.

Mahars consider themselves as Brahmanic Hindus. Some Mahars have Brahman Gurus; some have also *gurus* (teachers) of their own caste. Some who are followers of the saint Cokhamela (*varkaris*) wear necklaces of *tulsi*\(^{274}\), beads and make periodical pilgrimages to Alandi and Pandharpur. They worship all gods and goddesses, their favourite deities being Bhairoba, Khandoba, Mhasoba and Vithoba. Their peculiar deities are Mariai, the cholera goddess, Pandhar, the village site goddess, and Thal, the settlement or place spirit. They also worship their ancestors' brass images as house gods, and they have generally faith in soothsaying, sorcery and witchcraft. Some Mahars have recently adopted Buddhism as their religion.

Like all Hindu communities in the region, Mahars worship Satvai Goddess on the fifth day after birth. A few spots of sandal and turmeric paste are daubed on the wall near the mother's cot and worshipped. The woman is held impure for eight days after child birth and the naming ceremony is held on the ninth day. When the child grows old, its first hair is clipped by the maternal uncle. Marriage within the same *kul* (lineage) and with mother's sister's daughter or sister's daughter is not allowed. The custom of giving dowry to the bride is current in the community, but now-a-days the parents of the girl offer dowry to an

\(^{274}\) *Holy Basil, Ocimum tenuiflorum*
educated or well-placed boy. Formerly a person of the bhat sub-division of the community used to preside over the ceremony. Now-a-days he is often replaced by an elder or an educated person. Mahars bury their dead and mourn for three days.

Inspite of their untouchable status, the Mahars had an important role in the village societies; being an indispensable part of the village organisation, there were certain duties, which by village custom and law, could be performed by the Mahars alone. The hereditary occupation of the community is village service and skinning dead animals. They assist the patil (headman) in village administrative matters, act as guides and messengers to public officers travelling on duty, call landholders to pay the land assessment at the village office, watch boundaries and the village office, repair the chavadi (village office) and Ganvkusu (village gate), convey death notices, remove dead cattle from the village streets and flay them, and sweep the village roads. They also carry cowdung cakes to the burning ground and dig graves as a part of their duty to the villagers. As a watchman, a Mahar was called a Vaskar. Guarding the village as well as the crops was his responsibility. Any stranger who came to the village first encountered a Mahar on duty at the village chavadi. Some tribes such as the Gopala and Nandivale, the singing bands and entertainers, could proceed to the village only after getting the permission from the Mahar on duty. In case of any emergency, he was to report to the patil. Most of them enjoy a small Government payment, partly in cash and partly in land. The chief source of their income is the balute (yearly grain allowance).

For their private services they are paid in cash or, what they like better, in cooked food. Of recent years complaints have arisen in villages near large centres of industry that Mahars have been so depleted in numbers by migration to cities as to leave an inadequate staff for village requirements. As unskilled labourers they are employed in large numbers. In villages some are husbandmen and a few are bricklayers. Now-a-days with pieces of waste land assigned to them in villages they have proved good agriculturists. The community is making good progress in education and many have found employment in various branches of Government service as well.

The Mahars were the most mobile community during the British Raj. A large number of them began to move into the British military services in the 19th century and by 1857, one-sixth of the army in Mumbai were from Mahar background. The Mahars were more proud of
their services under the British Raj than of their services in the village communities. Certain Mahars even rose to the ranks of officers and non-commissioned officers in the Bombay Regiment. Apart from the military services, the Mahars provided a great deal of labour for the railways and docks. In western and Central India, they were recruited in textile mills owned by the British. They also did all sorts of menial work in the cities.

In fact, the Mahar’s versatility and exposure to the world beyond their own community also helped them to find better ways of life. Their contact with villages other than their own, because of their traditional jobs as messengers provided them with information most other Dalits did not have. They were exposed to new ideas and different ways of life, practices and belief systems. In many cases, since they were among the first to be exposed to the missionary message as well as comparatively mobile, they became instruments in spreading the message of Christianity.

THE MANGS

In the Hindu caste structure, Mangs were not only the lowest among the untouchables, but, numerically too, they were lesser than the Mahars. Each village was characterized by a Mangwada along with a Maharwada. It was sometimes difficult for an outsider to decide where a Maharwada ended and where the Mangwada began. Being an impure caste, the Mangs too were not allowed to draw water from village wells or enter the village temples. The village barber would not shave them; nor would the village washerman wash their clothes. By occupation, the Mangs were traditional ropemakers and the hangmen for the rulers. In certain districts they were in charge of Mariai, the goddess of Cholera. They were also casual labourers, known for thieving and robbing. This led to their being the most wanted men by the police patil in the village. The Mangs always lived in close proximity but in permanent animosity with the Mahars. This was a traditional animosity that lasted for centuries. The Mangs too were reported to eat dead animals.

Babasaheb Ambedkar himself had been protected from a personal experience of untouchability as a child by living in military cantonments whose society and schools did not take into account caste or religion.
SECTION C –

ATTEMPTS AT UPLIFTMENT: THE DALIT SAMAJ VIKAS PARISHAD

When the missionaries began schools for the natives, the low castes, especially the Mahars, deprived of education for centuries, showed their enthusiasm whole-heartedly and sent their children to the mission schools. In certain places, they requested night schools for adults since they had to work in the daytime. A good number of schools, orphanages, technical schools and hospitals provided the educational facilities and other benefits to the Mahars, which led to a rise in their socio-economic status. The impact of education upon these Dalit castes was such that they began to react to their old-age tradition of being subordinates to their caste-masters. New ideas through education paved the way for self-efforts to free themselves from the oppression and degradation and to rise to a new level of human dignity and identity. They became more confident, assertive and courageous in their claims. Education not only raised their status and led them to a life of dignity and identity but also taught them good habits. The Maharwada and the Mangwada had been the dirtiest places in the village. The diseases the Mahars, Mangs and other Dalit castes suffered in the village were mostly due to their unhygienic lifestyle. The missionaries taught them to have baths regularly and wear clean clothes. Christian teaching generally included moral teaching and prohibited the converts to worship idols, drink alcohol, eat carrion and promoted the message of honesty and equality.

It is against this background of goodwill and goodwork done by the missionaries that we turn to the Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad – an organization working wholly and solely for the Dalits in and around the city of Kolhapur. Established under the Diocesan Board of Social Services, the DBSS, it is a part of a larger Christian Organisation, the Synodical Board of Social Services (SBSS) under the Church of North India, CNI. The SBSS is the development and justice wing of the Church of North India (CNI). It was established in the year 1978 as an expression of concern for the poor and to deal with issues related to justice and human rights. Its aim is to ensure social and political rights for marginalized communities with a special focus on Dalits, Adivasis, women and children.

In India about 70% of people are engaged in agriculture. However rampant industrialisation is making farmers landless and taking away their livelihood. This has
ultimately caused an increase in starvation deaths, farmer suicides and migration in search of an alternative means of livelihood. SBSS believes the solution to these problems lies in developing assets to create a society which is just, equal and independent. This can be achieved only when people dynamically link up their livelihood issues and control over their habitat and environment with rights. SBSS uses social security schemes guaranteed by the Supreme Court to combat livelihood issues. Land forms a crucial part of people’s livelihood. The loss of land has resulted in not only a loss of livelihood and security but also a loss of identity. Thousands of indigenous communities have been displaced because of the shift in government policy. The struggle for Land Rights is one that works to recover lost identities and restore livelihood to those who had none. The advocacy for land carried out by the SBSS covers areas in the Dioceses of Kolhapur, Nagpur, Marathwada (Maharashtra) Phulbani, Sambalpur (Orissa) Eastern Himalayas (West Bengal) and Jharkhand. 

Together with the SBSS, The Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad (DSVP) and the Diocesan Board of Social Services has been organizing various sorts of programmes to aid the downtrodden and to stand beside them, some of which are as follows:

1) February 2010 - Talsande is a small village in Hatkanangale Taluka in Kolhapur district. In this village, the dominance of the Maratha community is strong and the overall working of the village is largely dependent on the mood of the politicians. The basic civic amenities are provided only to the Marathi community, thereby segregating the Dalits and the oppressed people from the society. As if this was not enough, the politicians in this village were forcing the Public Distribution Shop to disburse the grains which are meant not for humans but consumption by animals. In this way, the Dalit people were deprived of this grain facility; while the remnants of the grains were being sold out through black marketing in the village at a hefty sum. Even kerosene was sold at a hefty sum through black marketing. In this way, the shop owners of the Government approved shops were being benefited surprisingly after flouting every norm set out in this respect by the Government. The shop owners were also giving bribes to the Government officials and politicians to enable them to grant a safe haven for carrying out their anti-people activities which was going on unnoticed for years. When

\[276\] Information obtained from Mr. R.V.Ranbhise, Tarabai Park, Kolhapur, Hony. Secy, Kolhapur Diocesan Council ; Interview taken on 5/05/09
the Dalits came to them for grains, they were being threatened and oppressed and ordered to calm down. Shocked at this pathetic condition of the Dalits, the Kolhapur Diocesan Board of Social Services (K-DBSS) and its People’s Organisation the DSVP swung into action. After prolonged dialogue and discussion, it was revealed to the officials of the DSVP that various forms of malpractice was being carried out and the Dalits were being victimized. Subsequently, a branch of DSVP was opened in the village and a strategy was evolved to fight this anti-social menace. An ‘aandolan’ agitation was taken out at the Hatkanangale Tahsildar Office on the 16th of February, 2010. A large number of women belonging to the *Mahila Aghadi* (Women’s Wing) of the DSVP took centrestage in the rally. They protested by ringing ‘thalis’ / plates all along the road. They broke the barricades of the police and stormed into the Tahsildar’s Office at Hatkanagale. Under pressure, the Tahsildar ordered the Mandal Officer and Talathi to investigate the matter thoroughly. Most importantly, they were to investigate the mode of working of the grain shop by its shopkeeper under the provisions of the Public Distribution System. Noticing the seriousness of the issue and the magnanimity of the hue and cry raised by the DSVP and *its aandolan*, the PDS shopkeeper and the political leaders who were involved decided to come to terms with the Dalits. Their arrogant language ended, they tendered their apologies and expressed awareness of the wrongdoings. After sixteen long years, sugar was distributed; the distribution of foodgrains also picked up, this time, in a fair manner. It was a huge relief to the Dalits to see the PDS machinery functioning normally than ever before.\(^{277}\)

2) **March 2010:** Dalits belonging to the villages in and around Kolhapur had drawn loans in order to begin small-scale undertakings. However, these small entrepreneurs were labeled as defaulters and the banks who gave them these loans pressurized them for the repayment. On many of these occasions, the Government had assured those farmers who had suffered losses due to natural calamities that their loans would be waived off. However, these words couldn’t get formulated in a policy or written agreement and the woes of the farmers continued. Despite repeated protests and agitations, the banks too did not pay any heed… Finally the DBSS-DSVP of Kolhapur decided to organize a protest march. Accordingly, a *Morcha* was organized in Mumbai on the 15th of March 2010. The Diocesan Board of Social Services

\(^{277}\) Information obtained from Lt. Rev. Sachin Lokhande; all materials are from the DSVP database.
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(DBSS) and its People’s Organisation – the Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad (DSVP) team brought in hundreds of men and women from Kolhapur and Sangli field areas on one platform for the Mumbai Morcha. The demands that were put forth are as follows:-

i) Regularizing the occupied land
ii) Subsidy on loans
iii) Effective implementation of government schemes
iv) Ensuring benefits of governmental schemes and waiver loans to the Dalit communities.

The event was covered by the local media and given due coverage. The Charter of Demands were also placed by the DBSS and DSVP to the Maharashtra State’s Home Minister and an assurance was given that the matter would be taken up to the higher level for further action. In the initial stages, the DBSS and DSVP officials claimed that they had to work really hard in building pressure at the local levels, creating mass awareness on the issues, taking rallies to the government offices strategically using media advocacy, networking with like-minded civil society bodies and gaining people’s confidence. The DBSS-DSVP members who had initiated the struggle were very thankful to the Church of North India (CNI) – SBSS (Synodical Board of Social Services) and the Diocese of Kolhapur for being the funding partners, supporting the cause and strengthening the people’s struggle.

3) **August 2011** - Kerli is a small village in Karveer Taluka in Kolhapur district. Under the DBSS, a Women’s Front has been established by the Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad, comprising of nearly 72 members. This Women’s Front plays a huge role in looking after the needs of the women and Dalits in their area. It was due to their relentless campaign that an old and deserted lady, Smt. Rukmini Pawar (also a member of the DSVP) was assisted in building a hut for herself. As she lacked a Ration Card or Voter Card, her repeated journeys to the Taluka Office was in vain. The Government authorities showed their reluctance and inability to assist her under the prevailing Government schemes designed to aid the poorest of the poor. Even more important is the role played by the women activists of the DSVP in the Gram Sabha. The village of Kerli is divided into two parts – Gavbhag and Vinchwacha Mal. On the route to Vinchwacha Mal falls a gorge; in the rainy season, this gorge is inundated with gushing waters thereby paralyzing the normal life of the village. The village is also cut
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off from the rest of the district during the rains. Due to lack of proper communication networks, the people of the village, especially Dalits are deprived of the basic amenities. The women activists of the DSVP took serious cognizance of the situation. They took up the issue at the Gram Sabha held on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of August 2011 and managed to approve the resolution passed in the Gram Sabha for a road to be constructed in the village. The resolution has been submitted to the Tahsildar’s Office and thus, the Vinchwacha Mal made history.\textsuperscript{278}

4) **August 2012** - Nimshirgaon is a small village in Shirol Taluka in Kolhapur Dist. The Matang Samaj (a Dalit marginalized section of the society) had no burial place of their own to bury their dead. Owing to this, the community had to face a great deal of difficulties. On the death of a Matang community member on 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 2012 there was a problem as to where the deceased would be buried for want of burial ground. The DSVP activists were enraged by this incident. They gave a prior intimation to the Jaysingpur Police Station for the proposed agitation for grant of burial ground to the Matang community. Accordingly, a *Morcha* (March) was taken out along with the dead body of the deceased person to the Grampanchayat office and placards were shown and slogans were chanted against the authorities. The entire village was taken aback at this kind of agitation and a large number of people from various walks of life converged before the Gram Panchayat office. Since the police authorities mainly belonged to the upper class it was pertinent that the police action would be imminent against the DSVP activists. However, nothing of that sort happened since authorities were somewhat nervous by the scale of agitation launched by the DSVP activists. The Police authorities gave a written assurance that a burial ground along with all its amenities would be provided to the Matang community within a period of one month. Only then was the agitation withdrawn by the DSVP activists and the corpse was buried with religious rites. During the period of assurance, the funds were made available from the Panchayat Samiti. Out of these funds a compound wall together with shed were constructed and the water connection too was provided.\textsuperscript{279}

5) **October 2012** - The Sangli Miraj Kupwad area which is also under the ambit of the DBSS-DSVP is inhabited by many Dalit people. Though the people in this area are living under

\textsuperscript{278} Information obtained from Lt. Rev. Sachin Lokhande; all materials are from the DSVP database.

\textsuperscript{279} Information obtained from Yoseph Tiwade, Co-ordinator DBSS; all materials are from the DSVP database.
acute poverty yet they are not classified under BPL (Below Poverty Line) as per the Government norms and thus deprived of privileges and amenities applicable to people of BPL cadre. In order to press their demands, a mammoth Morcha or march was taken out on the 25th of October 2012 by these people to Sangli Municipal Corporation on behalf of DSVP. The Morcha was accompanied by slogans for investigation into the criteria for BPL applicability. A delegation met Mr. Sanjay Degavkar, the Commissioner of Sangli Municipal Corporation and presented a memorandum to him. He was kind enough to issue necessary directives to the concerned for investigation in the matter. On pursuing the matter further it was told by Mr. Shirish Kale, the official of the SMC, Sangli to wait till new survey is carried out. However, the DSVP is keeping its fingers crossed on the matter although it was further assured that the investigation would be complete by the end of February 2013.

6) October-November 2012 - In view of the elections to be held in some places in the working jurisdiction of Kolhapur Diocesan Board of Social Services (DBSS), its People’s Organisation the DSVP decided to contest the election in these villages. After conducting village level meetings, the appropriate candidates were selected. In all 15 candidates were in the election fray on behalf of DSVP.

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280 Information obtained from Yoseph Tiwade, Co-ordinator DBSS; all materials are from the DSVP database.

281 The following activists were elected in elections held from 21st October 2012 to 29th November 2012 in the three phased Gram Panchayat elections.

1. Pramod Vinayak Awale  
2. Mrs. Sunita Deepak Kamble  
3. Mr. Santosh Tukaram Sadamate  
4. Ms. Archana Kothavale  
5. Ms. Ranjana Rangrao Kamble  
6. Ms. Minakshi Kothavale  
7. Mr. Sandeep Anand Kamble  
8. Ms. Vidya Appaso Mane  
9. Ms. Nandatai Arun Shinde  
10. Ms. Nandini Balwant Ranbhise  
11. Mr. Santosh Suvase  
12. Ms. Suman Suresh Kumbhar  
13. Mr. Tanaji Gaikwad

Ms. Mayuri Aivale & Mr. Ashok Aivale were defeated in the above election in the Rangoli constituency. The defeat of these two candidates was attributed due to the communal flare-up and the financial paucity in this constituency. During the election of Sarpanch & Vice Sarpanch at Kasbe Digraj which took place on 8th November 2012, Mr. Pramod V. Awale of DSVP was unanimously elected as Vice Sarpanch of Kasbe Digraj Grampanchayat. Similarly Ms. Nandatai Arun Shinde was elected as Sarpanch at Thanapude Grampanchayat.
These elections were fought under dire financial crisis and it is a matter of pride that on the strength of DBSS along with DSVP their candidates met with a huge success.

5) There has been acute scarcity of water in recent times in many places falling under jurisdiction of Kolhapur Diocesan Board of Social Services (DBSS). In an effort to tide over the situation, to provide water supply in places where Dalits reside, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), Hyderabad was contacted. Subsequently the officials of the CBN visited the DBSS. A joint survey was conducted in 22 villages by CBN & DBSS. It was decided to drill bore wells in these villages. It was also decided to meet the expenses of platform including material through public contribution. During the period from 14th September 2012 to 14th October 2012, exactly in a month’s time 22 bore wells were drilled in collaboration with CBN, Hyderabad and ample amount of water was provided in these scarcity stricken villages. Thus the age old water problem in these villages has been solved to some extent and efforts have been made to eradicate the hardships faced by these Dalit women. The task of overall maintenance & repairs if any was vested with the Gram Panchayat. At the time of inauguration of the borewells, boys of the local school took out a cleanliness drive and the children were distributed soaps. As a result of kick starting of bore well, the DSVP formed its base in 7 villages, out of which one branch was duly inaugurated by Mr. Yoseph Awale, its Co-ordinator.

**SECTION D**

**RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF AGENCY**

Dalit Christian women live at the intersection of three traditions – Indian, Dalit and Christian. My visit to the villages of Tardale and Tarsandey in Kolhapur district made me realise that it is after all, only the Christian tradition that really matters. The women I spoke to do not really care whether they are Dalits or even Indians – all that they do know is that they have to eke out a living and that the Church is either helping them or not helping them.

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282 The number of borewells is as follows: Udgaon-3, Kothli-1, Rui-2, Savarde-1, Talsande-1, Pargaon-1, Kodoli-2, Thanapude-1, Kerli-2, Kushire-1, Pohale-1, Vita-2, Gardi-1, Nagewadi-1, Dhanwad-1, Mazale-1.
The weird expression that clouded their eyes when I asked them to define the word ‘Dalit’ left absolutely no doubt in my mind that religion played a secondary role in their lives.

The DSVP is working for the Mahar and Mang women in the villages of Tardale and Tarsandey outside the city of Kolhapur; and it is through this organization that the Dalit women are voicing their grievances; narrating their life stories and trying to work out a sense of agency in their lives. The DSVP is trying to mobilize these women to raise their grievances; discussing ways of financial investments; working together as a team and educating the younger generation. This is what I describe as ‘agency’ – thus, to the extent that the Dalits can ‘make a difference’... to the extent that they can develop the capacity to intervene'; to the extent that they are trying to visualise a better future - it can be said that they are exhibiting a sense of agency in their day-to-day lives.

I visited many villages where the DSVP is working – out of the many women who shared their lives with me, I will narrate the detailed conversations with two of them, of two different castes, in two different villages. Many Mahar and Mang women spoke to me; for hours on end I listened to them; some sang for me, some cried, some laughed with me. The ‘life-stories’ of these Dalit Christian women; these little micro-narratives, these little stories of the Dalit women will portray the true picture of their journey and thus, with this very objective of finding out ‘micro-narratives’, did I go ahead to meet these low-caste Dalit women. Thus, this section focuses on life-story oriented narratives; rather, testimonials, life stories and oral histories are a significant mode of remembering and recording experience and struggles. As Mohanty claims, written texts are not produced in a vacuum. In fact, texts that document Third World women’s life histories owe their existence as much to the exigencies of the political and commercial marketplace as to the knowledge, skills, motivation, and location of individual writers. Moreover, the existence of Third World women’s narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and

283 Here I am reminded of Bishop Geevarghese Mor Coorilos whom I met in Delhi at the NCCI Conference on Dalits, and his discussion of ‘little narratives’. In his discussion on the post-modern version of embodied theology and spirituality, Mor Coorilos mentions a theology of the logos (flesh) that took the form of body and pitched its tent among the people, it is the ‘little narratives’ that are confronted in the tents of the homes of the oppressed. He is actually meaning that for a true theology to develop, a true Dalit theology, one has to move closer to the tents and homes of the oppressed and the Dalits... only then will one be able to get a truer picture of the reality that goes on...

subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally that is of paramount importance. After all, the point is not just to record one’s history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant.

Mohanty\textsuperscript{285} continues to say that feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering, retelling and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Writing and speaking, therefore, often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself. Mohanty also discusses Barbara Harlow’s work who writes about Palestinian narratives of childhood - Palestinian narratives of childhood can be seen as narratives of resistance, which write childhood, and thus, selfhood, consciousness and identity, back into daily life. Ultimately, the basic fact is that history and memory are woven through numerous genres: fictional texts, oral history, and poetry, as well as testimonial narratives — not just what counts as scholarly or academic historiography. The primary purpose of testimonials and oral narratives is to document and record the history of popular struggles, foreground experiential and historical ‘truth’ which has been erased or rewritten in hegemonic, elite or imperialist history, and bear witness in order to change oppressive state rule. Resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering, writing and speaking. Agency is thus figured in the small day-to-day practices and struggles of Third World women, I am trying to reconstruct this agency.

**GANGUBAI RAMU RUPNE, TARSANDEY, KOLHAPUR**

Tarsandey is located in Haatkanangale taluka of Kolhapur district. The total population is around 10,000 out of which there were about 25 Christian families\textsuperscript{286}, 1 Dhangar family, 2 Brahman families, and a big community of converted Mahaars. The rest were Maratha, Matang, Charmakar, Lohaar, Sutaar and Gokul. It was 11:05 in the morning

\textsuperscript{285} Ibid, pg. 77-83

\textsuperscript{286} Information obtained from Vijaya tai, a field worker of the DSVP.
of a hot, June day, when we set off for Tarsandey - we boarded the bus from Kolhapur to Islampur. We had to get down at a place called Vathaar, and then take another auto to Tarsandey, the village where we were supposed to go. It was a half hour long journey and I sat at the very last bench of the red coloured government bus with Sarah and Vijaya tai, my referents, by my side. As the bus rambled on, I took a long look at the countryside. It was an undulating one, with a yellowish soil and sometimes the yellowish tinge gave way to a light reddish hue. Sugarcane fields dotted the open and vast expanse of the countryside. We were on the Pune-Karad highway. Afar off, the hills of Panhala, that belonged to the Sahyadri mountains could be spotted. We crossed Shiroli and moved on till we reached a busy crossroads town – Vathaar. From Vathaar, we boarded an auto and after fifteen minutes, we got off at a bus stand on the main road. Autos in Kolhapur, as in the rest of Maharashtra, are almost like a mini-van and can seat more than ten people at a time. We were overcrowded - a total of twelve people including the driver. Tarsandey is about 30-35 kilometres from Kolhapur.

On both sides of the road were thatched, tiled houses. We crossed and went on walking along the left side of the road. The first thing that Vijaya tai pointed out to us were two huge hoardings of the DSVP – the Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad and beside it another poster of the Shiv Sena. The first house that we entered was that of Sureka Kamble, the DSVP Mahila Aghadi President. A vocal yet simple woman, she spoke a lot of good things about the DSVP. Her whole family encouraged her and took part along with her, in the movement for ensuring justice to Dalit women. She called quite a few ladies and I, together with her and Sarah commenced my interviews. All during the interviews, I was a bit disturbed at the role played by Sureka Kamble. Yet her attitude helped me to find out many things about these people. She was playing a dictatorial role and heavily prompting everyone. It was only after I politely asked Sureka to leave me alone with my interviewees that the real picture started to emerge.

I met Gangubai Ramu Rupne in Tarsandey. She had a problem with her waist – old age and rheumatism, coupled with extreme poverty had made life incredibly difficult for her. At the age of sixty-five, Gangu Bai Ramu Rupne had milky white eyes that could touch you, and move you to tears. A member of the Dhangar caste, she had a relative called Sonabai.
Sonabai complained about her husband; the fact that he was a liquor addict, he used to drink and beat her every night seemed of little importance when she told me the worst part of it all – so addicted was he to his bottle that he used to even sell his own clothes for a bottle of liqueur. She was complaining about her life throughout. But before I was finished with Gangubai, and as she was about to leave me, she fell down at my feet, touched my feet and begged me to help her. As my eyes widened with shock, she explained that her waist gave her a lot of trouble, pained a lot, making it increasingly difficult for her to walk the 4-5 kilometres to fetch water. I will never be able to forget that plea in her eyes, that emotion in her words and yet, a feeling of helplessness together with frustration settled over me as I realised that there was, frankly speaking very little that I could do for her.

No, neither the Neo-Buddhist nor the Shiv Sena or the Congress ever thought of them when it came to real work for the Dalits. No political party neither any Messiah came to take them out of the traumatic existence that they had. Also, political parties used to make attempts to divide the Dalit constituency, she rued, as one party gave ticket to one Dalit group while another would give a ticket to another - knowing very well that sub-castes would vote for a person of their own sub-caste. She also went on to say that even though Dalit politicians did come to visit them, nothing much came of these visits. Most importantly, the commitment of these Dalit politicians to their cause seems to her to be highly superfluous. Being an aged lady, she was fully aware of two vital things – i) If all the Dalit castes could be totally united, they could wield a lot of political clout and ii) Political parties play ducks and drakes with Dalit interests for their own selfish gain.

What is stronger? A Dalit identity or a Christian identity? What is the self-perception of the Dalit Christian? Which of the two terms, ‘Dalit’ or ‘Christian’ dominates their lives? Gangubai, surprisingly, had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she was a Dalit. For her, the problems of food, clothing and shelter are of utmost importance - most importantly, their conversion from traditional faith to Christianity does not automatically effect a ‘total break’ with the past. In spite of change in religion, the converts remain Dalit socially and culturally. Even though their self-esteem may be boosted up, their actual lives encounter very little change. This was because while the Christian leaders could live by certain rigid principles of faith, they, the converts had to rely on the politics of daily accommodation. In
other words, people generally avoided conflict and lived through negotiation and accommodation.

There were times when they faced discrimination within the Church too. When discrimination takes place within the Church, Church authorities often turn a blind eye to inequality within the Church. Though the Church in Tarsandey has always publicly condemned caste, in reality caste continues to exist among the Christians. As Dalit Christians, women in the village were suffering from five-fold discrimination namely i) by the state ii) by caste Hindus iii) by fellow Hindu Dalits iv) by the upper caste Christian community and v) by the subgroups of the Dalits Christians. To Gangubai, real progress was not one man’s job, nor should it be the fight of only one community. Rather it was an issue where everybody ought to get involved.

As far as life within the Maharwada was concerned, Gangubai mentioned that the closed-in living quarters of the Harijan Mahars were also a place of security for them; there was a complete sense of belonging and it was very difficult to tell who belonged to which household. Privacy, a value so dear to the Western people was completely lacking among them.\(^{287}\) They were happy to eat, sleep and relax in each other’s company; human companionship was a person’s greatest asset and unity was much more valuable than competition. What seemed to me to be overcrowding was looked upon by them as comforting.

At Tardale, where the Kolhapur Diocese had built a Church, things were no better. Everywhere, it was a grim, sorry state of affairs.

**YANAWA MAYAPPA KAMBLE, TARDALE, KOLHAPUR**

On another hot summer day, we set off in an auto at around 8:15 a.m for the village of Tardale. It had rained the previous night and a slight crisp chill, unnatural for the season was already in the air. Once again, on crossing the town, undulating brown plains surrounded us and we could see the Sahayadri hills in the distance. On the Bombay - Pune, Highway No: 4, we crossed Shiroli and then entered the Nagpur Road that goes all the way to Nagpur via

\(^{287}\) In fact, I was quite appalled at the degraded, dirty and unkempt look of the Maharwada when I first walked through it.
As we left Hatkanangale, the landscape changed. Vast expanses of fields stretched out on all sides. The smell of fresh cow dung reached our nostrils and we crossed a railway track where trains ran all the way from Kolhapur via Miraj and Sangli to Mumbai. We could see an occasional bullock cart and a windmill factory in the distance. As we entered Tardale, I realised that it was a slightly more developed village than Tarsandey. On the way inside the village, we crossed a corporation tap and women and girls had crowded around it in an attempt to fill water. Tardale, in taluka Hatkanangale, Zilla Kolhapur, had an estimated total population of 15,000 and the number of Christian families were 40 heads. Among other religions, were Buddhists, Jains, Muslims and Hindus.

An interesting thing that I noticed in both villages was that the Buddhist and Muslim families were much better off than the Hindus and Christians. Among the other castes that were present were Matang, Harijan-Mahar, Maratha, Jain, Muslim, Korvi (the bamboo-maker), Vadda (the stone-cutter), and the Brahman. As the auto pulled up in front of the Church adjoining Rev. Gulab Tiwade’s (he was my host as well as the local Parish priest) house, he came out and welcomed me. I had to explain the nature of my visit and it was then that he started giving me certain inputs. He started describing the status of the Dalit castes; right from the British days, for example, the Mangs had to give haziri (proof of physical presence) to the local Thana (police station) as they were considered to be thieves. In his village, the Harijan Mahaar was the lowest (the untouchable) caste. In the past, they used to eat dead animals, and today, though that practice has ceased to exist, they do sell the skin of dead animals. However, there was no dearth of schools, high schools and colleges nearby; he was also of the opinion that since there were many industries nearby, money was easily available. Therefore, efforts at education were very few. At Ichalkaranji, a nearby town the Bhangi caste was the lowest, who till today, cleaned the bathrooms and toilets.

According to the Pastor, Rev. Tiwade, untouchability had been removed to a large extent. However, the older generations still believed in it. As we were talking, a lady of the Dhangar caste was walking outside the house with her spastic son. The Pastor called her in, and she became my first interviewee. She was collecting whatever she got from whichever house in the form of blessings for her son. Her name was Jaywanti Datta Pujari and she was of the Dhangar caste. There was confusion in her mind as to the terms ‘Dalit’ and
'Ambedkar'? Her biggest problem was her daughter-in-law, according to her she was of a 'disturbing' type. Also, she expressed immense frustration in making ends meet - there was almost no help available from any political party.

Now this place had inaugurated its new Church barely five days before I came. Several Bishops, including the Bishop of Pune, Bishop Sathe, Bishop Lyngdoh, the Moderator of the Church of North India (CNI) had come. The Church too, was built very nicely. It was evident that a lot of money was spent there. The Priest and others present at his home were of the opinion that the DBSS had definitely worked on the lands and helped the Dalits acquire them. In the year 2003, land was given to many Dalits; but after that, unfortunately enough, they hadn’t done proper follow-up – they hadn’t worked on building up the organisation. Another fact that struck me as strange was that there was a DBSS lady co-ordinator named Mrs. Rita Christi to look after things at Tardale. But ground realities suggested that she was not doing her duty properly. Later on, I learnt that internal politics within the Church was hampering development work in Tardale.

My next interviewee was Mrs. Baby (Gulab) Tiwade, wife of Rev. Tiwade. Immense prompting, from her husband, made her change some of her answers. On being asked, being the Pastor’s wife, what difference had Christianity brought to her life, initially silence and hesitation followed. Later on, she answered that now she didn’t use slang words and didn’t fight. Next, another member of the pastor’s family, his daughter-in-law, Shubhangi Nandu Tiwade, a Mang Christian, complained of water problem. I wondered, if the Pastor’s family complained of water problems, what about the others?

Nevertheless, one thing stands out as significant – the homes of the Christian converts were cleaner and slightly better-off than most other homes. Not only the Church, the women’s wing of the DSVP was also trying to look into matters concerning day-to-day existence.

When I insisted on visiting the Mahaarwaada, I came to meet Yanawa Mayappa Kamble. Aged around 65-70 years, Yanawa was married at the young age of 10 years, and settled down at Tarsandey. Her natal home was at Kotli, Jaisinghpur. Her husband’s family had worked in the military for 3 generations. Her nephew, also present in the house, had even
served in Nagaland and Jammu and Kashmir. Her daughter-in-law had left for a visit to the famous temple of Tirupati Balaji (in Andhra Pradesh) along with other people in her locality. Her house was in the Mahaarwaada- an unfinished house, unfinished due to lack of money. Belonging to a Harijan-Mahaar caste, there was plenty of deficiency in her life. She had only one teeth and her face was full of wrinkles. As we were getting blank answers to questions on the Dalit movement and Ambedkar, the Pastor requested me to leave out those questions as they hardly made any sense to her. It struck me as highly strange! (What I personally felt was that matters of being Dalit or a woman hardly mattered in the struggle for survival); when I asked her questions about her life “jeevan”, she thought I was asking her about “jevan” – i.e food! This signified another thing - food was one of the most crucial issues that actually mattered in her life. She had got land, but that too, was not in her name! When I asked her about her savings in some bank account, she stretched out her arms wide and burst out laughing! Yes, yes, I have plenty of money, she said, then she looked at me and said, ‘KHURI” which meant that I was mad! At this, all the others including me, burst out laughing! “The Church had helped her with a few paise!” and that too, this response came after a lot of prompting! On the way out of the village, I met her when she was filling water, and she asked me a question, probably the most difficult, touching question in my entire life! She asked me, ‘what will I get by answering your questions?’ At this Pintu dada, my translator, joked, “She will give you a book”. Webster288 describes an interesting moment in a Dalit woman’s life when he talks about a ‘moment of truth’. In his opinion in a woman’s life, an important ‘moment of truth’ is arrived at when a woman reaches middle age and is provoked (often through an encounter with another person) into looking back at what has become of her life. To me, maybe, I myself had served as that encounter in her life; maybe she had arrived at her ‘moment of truth’ in conversation with me.

As a Dalit Christian lady, what were the changes in her life? What did conversion to Christianity bring for her? 289 Was religious conversion a way of escape from caste-based


289 The Oraon converts to Christianity refuse to follow the authorities of the Church. They do not discard their traditional practices or their deities and ancestral spirits. Nor are they able to understand Jesus as completely different from their traditional divine beings. Rather they have incorporated Jesus into the existing divine hierarchy that includes the entire range of beings with whom they have engaged in the past.
Yanawa replied that Dalit Christian women, faced discrimination from three fronts:

i) Firstly, caste Hindus in the countryside do not discriminate between a converted Dalit Christian and a Dalit. All Dalits, whether Christian or non-Christian are meted out the same treatment by those considered high in the caste hierarchy.

ii) Secondly, upper-caste Christians too, discriminate against the Dalits. There are separate seating arrangements for the Dalits in the Churches, while in some other Churches in and around Kolhapur, liturgical/worship services are performed separately for those presumed ‘high’ or ‘low’ in caste. There are times when Dalit Christian women are asked to sit on the floor, even where raised seating is available; and there are occasions where there are separate queues for receiving the Holy Communion.

iii) Finally, as Dalit Christians, Yanawa rues, the State too discriminates against them and excludes them - not only are they excluded from the list of Scheduled Castes, they are also not eligible for reservations in local government structures or in education and employment. (The protection accorded to the Dalits by the POA [Prevention of Atrocities] Act 1989, have also been denied to them, making them vulnerable to oppression and violence from the so-called upper castes.)

What has been the role of the Church in the lives of these Christians? Does freedom for Yanawa ultimately meant an eradication of who one is and where one comes from? At this, Yanawa’s reply was not very positive – more than 50 percent of all Christians in India are Dalits, but they are yet to become a priority for the Church and a significant presence in the Church.

The majority of the Dalit converts, have only succeeded in becoming Dalit Christians. In fact, Yanawa mentioned that the very emergence of such an identity is demonstration of the failure of the Church to nullify the invidious inequalities of caste. Sometimes the civilizing mission of the Church itself seems like a burden to them – it is when the Church tries to

\[290\] In some Churches of India, there are separate queues of men and women when they go to receive the Holy Communion.
confine the Dalits in order to contain them within the confines of institutionalized religion. The clergy themselves, largely of Indian origin today, are cut off in terms of caste and culture from their Dalit flock. In very many ways, the Church has kept its Dalit community within its fold, taught it docility and discouraged involvement in the politics of the outside world. S.M.Michel has very interestingly quoted Archbishop Casmir of Madras about the existence of caste among the Christians thus, “When Hindus became Christians, they kept the social structures that they belonged to, the caste system overflowed into the Church. The Church condemns the system…”291; yet the Church unfortunately enough, has failed to remove it.

Yanawa felt that one of the biggest disadvantages of being a Dalit Christian was due to their inability to avail of the benefits offered by the reservation policy of the Government. She explained that the Government sought to redress the inequalities and injustices imposed on the lower-caste groups through the structure of an affirmative action programme that would give the depressed groups access to resources. The problem that their youth faced was that with conversion, Dalit Christians excluded themselves from the benefits offered by the reservation policy. They, the Dalit Christians, had no representative, who could speak up for them. Converts to other faiths were no longer considered to be Scheduled Castes as caste was thought to be peculiar to Hinduism.

But then again, another aspect that caught my attention was that the established Church at Tardale had enough resources to create employment, if only they had the required will. Moreover, another interesting factor was that the presence of powerful priests has inhibited the emergence of local leaders. More importance is laid on the rites and rituals within the Church, than on the issue of eradicating caste and helping the converts. As far as participation in the local politics is concerned, the Church has not encouraged any sort of active political participation to its Dalit members. Some Dalits however feel that the Church should use its reach among the masses for political awareness, to instill the urge to enter into the mainstream, to get themselves educated, to get themselves organized.

THE MAHILA BACHATGATH –

Nevertheless, the little prestige that these low-caste women got was a result of their proximity to the Christian Church, admitted Yanawa. There was some light at the end of the tunnel too: aided by the DSVP and its organization, some of the local women had set up a savings scheme among themselves called the “Mahila Bachatgath” with the help of a Maratha lady Rukmini Shinde; in course of time, they had succeeded in getting many women along with them. Under the savings scheme, women would save whatever little they could with a bank, they even showed me a Bank Savings Pass Book – It was written “Golden jubilee Village Self-Employment Yojana Antargat – Self-Employed Savings Scheme, Name of the village, Name of the member and the serial number”. They keep a Pass Book at a Bank at Shakha (branch) Hatkanangale. In it was written, Savings Bank Pass book, Kolhapur Zilla Madhyavarti, at the Sahakari Bank Limited, Kolhapur. Usha Dinkar Shinde, also a Christian, was a member of the Mahila Bachatgath; and its reach was slowly spreading out largely among the Christian converts. After this, we interviewed a Christian Mang, by the name of Suvartha Jaywant Bhorey. In her view, it was true that she had acquired some land as a result of the Church’s struggle, but the land that the DBSS had given was very far away, and that too, in her dead husband’s name. Now, since her husband had died, she got back the land in her own name! But there were some difficulties with the piece of land – not only was it very small in area, making it difficult to cultivate, the quality of the soil also was very poor! Also, she had no money to build a house on her land! She too told me something quite stirring” she told me, “sirf likho mat, kuch karo!” translated as, “Don’t just write, but do something” when I replied in the affirmative, she told me “shabaash”! Meaning well done!

DALIT THEOLOGY AND ITS PROMISE FOR A BETTER FUTURE?

Today, the realization is dawning upon the Dalit Christians that the Church in India has not taken a credible step to evolve adequate strategies and programmes to walk with Dalits in their day-to-day struggles. From one perspective, the Indian Church has compromised with the caste culture of India. The persistence of caste in the Church is one of the reasons for the hesitation of the low castes coming into the Church. All over India, the trend among the Dalits is to remain Hindus legally to avail themselves of the reservation benefits from the State. This is alarmingly, the situation in Kolhapur too.
However today, the Christian leaders are accepting the existence of caste practices in the Christian community. The memorandum of the National Convention of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin (1978) states: “It is also found that notwithstanding conversion, caste system with all its prejudices is not destroyed but is unfortunately prevalent among the Christian converts also. They continue to be treated by their neighbors as Untouchables and are victims of the same social and economic disabilities as their Hindu brethren of the same category. These Christian converts follow the same usages, customs, manners and habits of life characteristic to each particular caste…In a caste-ridden society as we have in India, caste practices and prejudices die hard. Hence, the Christians of Scheduled Caste origins suffer from disabilities of the practice of untouchability.²⁹²

A series of attempts and initiatives began in the early eighties to systematically articulate Christian faith in the context of the newly emerging Dalit aspiration for liberation. Considering that theology was perceived by the marginalized people as serving the interests of the elite sections of the society, and in the process sidelifing the faith of the ordinary people, Dalit Theology manifested itself as a counter-theology movement. The rich contributions of Dalit Theology during the last two decades to theologising in India have been significant. There has been a growing sensitivity in the theological world on understanding theology from the people’s perspective. The “permanent Dalit stamp” on the Church remained largely as a social reality while the power structures in the Church continued to be controlled by the urban educated communities, often from the dominant castes. That also goes to show that though religious conversion often emerged from the urge to escape oppression and enslavement, the result is not always liberation and fuller humanity. Dalit Theology emerges from the conviction that traditional Indian Christian theology was largely based on the Brahminical tradition and consequently did not represent the life situations of the marginalized communities such as the Dalits. Dalit Theology emerged out of the conviction that theology should be rooted in the context and, in the Indian situation, as a conscious reflection of the oppressive situation of the Dalits. In this sense, the Dalit theological movement was a corrective to the institutionalisation of inequality and

inaccessibility within the Indian Church. Like Black theology, Christian Dalit theology should emerge through efforts to re-interpret the liberating presence of God in a society that consistently denies the Dalits of their humanity, socially ostracises them, economically exploits them and culturally subjugates them. The point of departure for Dalit theology is the liberation of the Dalits from their socio-economic and political bondage. It is not only a prophetic theology for identification with the oppression of Dalits and their struggles for equality and justice; it is also a political theology for social action towards the transformation of unjust, undemocratic and oppressive structures.\textsuperscript{293}

A Christian Dalit Theology will be produced by dalits. It will be based on their own dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations and their own hope. It will narrate the story of their pathos and their protest against the socio-economic injustices they have been subjected to throughout history. A Christian dalit theology will also be counter-theology. In fact, all people’s theologies are essentially counter-theologies. It is also an affirmation that the Triune God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – is on the side of the dalits and not of the non-Dalits who are the oppressors.\textsuperscript{294}

It is undisputed that over the past two decades Dalit Theology has emerged perhaps as systematically the most developed form of subaltern theologies in India. Dalit Theology has enriched substantially a contextual understanding of Indian Christian theology. Questions however remain as to the direction Dalit Theology should take, especially in the context of religious fundamentalism and communalism in India, a force that has made deep inroads into all sections of the society including the Dalits.

The emergence of the Christian Dalit Movement and its commitment to fight against casteism within Churches and society, and to promote along with the Churches, the Christian Dalit struggles for civil economic rights, are not fully recognised or appreciated by the Church. Indian Christianity has not yet accepted the emergence of Dalit Theology which can initiate a counter-culture within the Church. The primary task of the Church in such a context is to admit its mistakes of the past, repent and resolve to side with truth and justice. In the face of continuing violence and oppression on the Dalits and the Church’s reluctance to rise

\textsuperscript{293} Arvind P.Nirmal (ed) \textit{A Reader in Dalit Theology} Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, pp. 47-48

\textsuperscript{294} Ibid, p. 58-59
The Making Of The Dalit Woman’s Agenda: A Study Of Their Organisations And Culture In Kolhapur District, Maharashtra

to its prophetic mission, the Church is called upon to renew and radically redefine its mission.

The Dalits’ conversion to Christianity led to not only a numerical increase in the membership of the Church, but to an inner transformation of the oppressed communities as well. Dalit mass movements have come to be seen as liberation movements in which the power of the dispossessed to challenge the Hindu social order was affirmed. Later Ambedkar used religious conversion as a means of social liberation from the caste system. As was pointed out earlier, the unfortunate part of conversion was that although Christianity is an egalitarian religion, the caste system found its way into it in India. Dalit Christians within the Church were discriminated against and were denied powers within the ecclesiastical structure. Although Dalit Christians constituted approximately 70% of the Indian Christian population, they were marginalized and ignored until recently. The Dalits who joined the Indian Church in large numbers bitterly realized that the caste system is not only a reality within Hinduism but is practised in the Church as well. In the context of this realization, there is the need to take a fresh look at the continuing relevance of the missionary strategy of conversion in India.

SECTION E –

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The Diocese of Kolhapur is actually trying to do a lot for Dalit women in pen and paper. In reality, most of the women were complaining that the Diocese had spent a lot of money in building a new Church in the village of Tardale – when it came to providing economic aid for the Dalit women, they were hardly taking any initiative in that regard. The land that had been provided to them (as a result of the agitations by the DSVP) was actually either too far away or too barren to cultivate. Sometimes, the land was in the name of the male members of the family – this was of no help to the women once their husbands died – because they never had any marriage registration certificates as a proof of their marriages. Also, the Christian Church is actually full of corruption and caste based discrimination –
whatever benefits come by way of NGO’S or any Agency, it hardly percolates down to the Dalit women.

Nevertheless, Gangubai and Yanawa are Dalit Christian women who are struggling to leave behind a life studded with pain and suffering in order to leave a different legacy to their children. In both of their opinions, the inner strength to carry on fighting comes from within, from an acknowledged faith in God. The Church thus, is doing its best, still, as Suvartha Jaywant Bhorey said, a lot still remains to be done. Dalit women like Gangubai and Yanawa have a right to be seen not as objects but as subjects, who have to play an active role in the attempt to better their own lives. Their voices have been muted and their issues obscured thus far. For instance, their voice has to be heard not only at decision-making levels in policies, programmes and funding for projects for economic or social development but also in questions of identity formation, in struggles for the entire gamut of civil, political, economic and cultural rights and their fullest participation at all levels of in the institutions of society at large. They have a greater right to be heard than the privileged ones – in fact justice and equity make it imperative that their voices be heard and their articulations publicized.

Thus, so far most of the Dalit women have shown a certain resolve, resilience, have exhibited a sense of agency; in the next chapter, I will look at Dalit women vis-a-vis the Indian women’s movement and analyse the nature of Dalit women’s activism.