CHAPTER –1

INTRODUCTION
Equality - a cherished value clamouring for realisation

Equality is a cherished value - perhaps, one of the most challenging ideals of the modern era, powerfully expressed in French Revolution, which became a foundational theme of modern democratic thought (Desai, 2002). It still remains a core democratic value. This study is within the broad framework of the thinking on ‘equality’ and the experience of its negation in the society.

The various facets of the researcher’s background and identity - being an Indian, a Christian and a professional social worker - inspire the search for this value, beginning with the researcher’s own socio-religious community, viz., the Syrian Catholic Church. 1) **Indian:** The Indian republic has accepted equality as one of its four foundational values, stating that in the preamble of its constitution (Basu, 1981).

2) **Social Worker:** For the profession of Social Work, which upholds the ethical principle: *respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the person*, equality becomes a core value. The National Association of Social Workers of United States, makes the profession’s stand for equality and social justice, unambiguously clear in its section on The ‘Social Worker’s Ethical Responsibility to Society’ (Edward, 1995). ‘Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers’ prepared Social Work Educators’ Forum (SWEF) and published by Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1997, stresses ‘solidarity with the marginalised’ so that they may have equal dignity with all others. 3) **Christian:** Christian Religion, professes by faith in God as the father of all, implying equality among all its followers as brothers and sisters (Col. 3: 10-11).

The researcher’s background as an Indian, and as a Christian, with a professional training in Social Work finds a conflict with the professed value of equality and the actual experience of many, of unequal treatment in spite of being Indians, because

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1 “The social worker should promote the general welfare of the society…, prevent and eliminate discrimination against any person or group on the basis of race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin, marital status, political belief, mental or physical handicap, or any other preference or personal characteristic, condition, or status…, should act to ensure that all persons have access to the resources, services, and opportunities which they require... should act to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, with special regard for disadvantaged or oppressed groups and persons…, should promote conditions that encourage respect for the diversity of cultures…, should advocate changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions and to promote social justice” (Edwards et al., 1995: 2629). **Note:** All the same, there had also been criticisms of Social Work profession of having in someway worked against egalitarianism under the garb of professionalism (See Desai, 2002:101)
of their acceptance of Christian religion. Those Indian Christians, who accepted Christianity to escape the inequality of caste system, especially those hailing from a *dalit* background, is a case in point. The section of Dalit Christians within the Syrian Catholic community (identified as a forward caste community by scholars like Koilparampil [1982]) deserves special attention - due to the multi-dimensional discrimination they encounter - from the society in general, due to their *dalit* background; from the dominant majority of the Syrian Catholic community, which looks down upon them as ‘low caste’; and from the state itself, which denies them privileges due to the Dalits because of their acceptance of Christian faith, in contravention to the spirit of the constitution which upholds equality before law and equality of opportunity irrespective of caste-creed distinctions.

The problems and status of this silent minority among the otherwise progressive and forward minority community of Syrian Christians (the Catholic denomination, in particular) have not been scientifically studied so far. On the other hand, the leadership of the Church waxes eloquent regarding the cause of Dalit Christians. The Church leadership promotes their organisation and speaks out for their cause before the various governments and commissions. There appears to have been several efforts by the Church to support and develop this section. However, the Dalit Christians generally feel left out, sidelined, uncared for and allege that caste feeling is still very dominant in the faith community.

The Dalit Christians are conspicuous by their invisibility - especially in the echelons of power and position and influence in the Church, whereas the Church appears to be a very conspicuous presence on the Indian panorama, in spite of the smallness of its proportionate population, identified as a ‘minority’. Hence, in the recent minority rights discussions the Dalits of Syrian Catholic community in Keralam speak of themselves and their rights in terms of the ‘minority among the minority’.

In spite of the numerous protective legislations and special provisions, the Dalits in India still suffer discrimination and denial of rights. Justice Krishna Iyer laments that even after decades of the constitutional declarations, equality remains a far cry for the *antyajās*³. He has cited various instances of the violations of their rights. He makes it very plain that they are still denied the basic human rights in this country (Iyer, 1990). The case regarding the Dalit Christians of India is not very different. They definitely have received doles, their welfare has been sought by the Church by

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² *Syro Malabar Church* is the more commonly used term (Pathikulangara, 1993).
³ Literally, those who are last in the order of birth. The term is used for the outcastes or Dalits.
various welfare schemes - but their rights? Their right to equality, freedom, growth? These still appear to be not in the priority list of the Christian community.

Against the broad theoretical framework of inequality and stratification, and as specifically manifested in the Indian context in caste system, as elucidated by social scientists like Dumont (1970), Srinivas (1952, 1977), Beteille (1965, 1983 & 1992) and others, the question of caste based inequality in the Catholic Church is being examined in this study, with specific reference to Syrian Catholic community. Caste like functions of ‘rites’ have been studied earlier by Koilparampil (1982), and generally about the backwardness on the basis of caste within the Christian community by Kochuthresia (2002).

Though there have been many studies regarding Dalits and Dalit Christians, studies specific to the Syrian Catholic Community have been minimal. The profile of a Dalit Christian that emerges in all those studies is that of subjected personhood, and of neglect and suppression within the community and by the state. The same, to a great extent is applicable to the state of the Dalit Christians of the Syrian Catholic Church as well. The literature about them mainly consists of views and opinions of people who have worked for them or with them, or in the nature of analysis of events in history that have led to their present status (Jose, 1991; Bandhu, 1992, 1993, 1994; Kadankavil, 1999). There is hardly any empirical study specifically about them. In the literature available, they, like their counterparts elsewhere in the country, appear as a highly marginalized, neglected and uninfluential section. In a relatively forward society, this section is seen as really backward, and being considered as part of a ‘forward community’, is denied the special protections due to the backward sections of Indian republic.

Their status within the Syrian Catholic Church becomes all the more vulnerable because of the social distance between the two groups. Unlike the Church in other regions of the country, and unlike most other Christian denominations, the Syrian Catholic Church has this major difference that the majority of the community belongs to the section having a higher ‘caste-like’ claim, whereas its Dalit section happens to be a miniscule minority. The estimated percentage is around 10%. This makes their position extremely vulnerable, their voices silenced and their protests, if any, suppressed or unheard in the din of the majority.

Professing highest forms of equality, the community fails in bringing the equality ideal to practice. The lack of visibility of the dalit section in the various fields of influence and leadership points to their backwardness. There are claims on the part
of the Church of having spared no efforts for their upliftment. There is much hue and cry made about in various forums regarding reconversion of Dalit Christians to Hindu religion for better socio-economic benefits, and also about their drifting away from the Catholic Community to new evangelical-protestant communities, because of the equal treatment and/or economic benefits they receive in such communities.

It is against such background, that this study is conducted to scientifically find out the present socio-economic profile of the Dalit Christians of the Syrian Catholic Church of Keralam, to understand how the Syrian Catholic community as a whole understands the problems of Dalit Christians among them, the interventions on their behalf, and their effectiveness. The study also seeks to look at the phenomenon of inequality as it appears in discriminatory practices in the context of the Dalit Christians of this community. Though the study takes into account the responses of both the sections of the Syrian Catholic community, effort is made to bring out the voices of the Dalit Christians regarding the various problems they face. It is also looks at the interventions made on behalf of the Dalits, from a Social Work Methods perspective - regarding their awareness about them, and their perception about their effectiveness. It is also seeks to gather suggestions from the community itself what further interventions would take it to the ideal of equality.

This study proposes to answer the following questions:

1. What is the socio-economic status of the Dalits of Syrian Catholic Church? Is it significantly different from that of the Non-Dalits in the same Church? Does the Syrian Catholic community recognize caste based distinctions within the Church?

2. What are the problems they encounter? How does the faith community - both the Dalits and the Non-Dalits - perceive their (Dalit Christians') problems? Is ‘social discrimination’ a reality of the experience of the Dalits of Syrian Catholic Church?

3. What is being done for them by the various stake-holders, and what is their effectiveness according to the beneficiary group? Are these perceptions significantly different from those of the Non-Dalits of the same community? If yes, in what areas?

4. How do the Dalit Christians perceive their identity, status, treatment towards them within and outside the community, on the basis of their caste origin?
Are their perceptions very different from those of the Non-Dalit Christians on these issues?

5. What are the views of the hierarchy/clergy on the issue of Dalit Christians?

6. What, according to the various stake holders, are the measures to be taken?

7. What does Social Work as a profession, with the core values of social justice and dignity and worth of person implying a stand for equality (ref. Edwards et al, 1995: 2629, Code of ethics, NASW & TISS, 1997, Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers) have to propose to remedy the problems, if any? These are the questions around which this study was conducted.

It is hoped that this will add strength to the case of bringing justice to an aggrieved community, which feels strongly about the justice denied to them. It is also hoped that the findings will help the Christian faith community to critically reflect on the practice dimension of the professed values of equality, fraternity and justice, and make amendments to grow into a harmonic society (Beteille, 1971; Koilparampil, 1982, Fernandes, 1983).

CHAPTERISATION

The report of the entire study is presented here in twelve chapters.

The first is an introductory chapter, presenting the background, the theoretical framework, and the research questions in a very brief manner.

The second chapter with various sub-sections is an elaborate survey of literature. The first sub-section is a historical-philosophical survey on the value of equality as opposed to the experience of inequality in inter-personal and social relations. The second sub-section deals with the manifestation of equality in the Indian context in the concrete experiences of caste relations. It has a less detailed section on Kerala specific aspect of this experience. This section also has a component of the evolution of the phenomena of caste. The third sub-section surveys the historical and social movements and campaigns with their philosophy and strategies in coping with the social reality of caste based inequality. The fourth sub-section deals with Christian ideal of egalitarianism based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the Bible, and the ‘strategy’ of conversion to Christianity as a coping mechanism against caste based inequality and discrimination. The last part of this section surveys the description by various authors of the life and experience of the Dalits who embraced
Christianity with the dream of equal treatment. A sixth sub-section is a theoretical presentation of the phenomena of ‘marginalisation’ and the professional Social Work method of Community Organisation/Community Development. The method is presented against the background of Dalit Christian community. The last subsection in this chapter deals with the survey of a few research studies in this area.

The third chapter presents in detail the scientific methodology adopted to study the topic, enlisting the objectives of the study and the hypotheses to be tested in this regard. It explains the various concepts used, the mode of selection of the sample, the tools of data collection, and the limitations of the study.

The fourth to tenth chapters present the data based on the various aspects being studied.

The fourth chapter gives the details of the profile of the sample selected.

The fifth chapter gives the socio-economic status of the respondents selected for the study. An instrument prepared by Aggarwal et al (2005) was employed to assess the SES of the respondents.

The sixth chapter presents the ranking of the problems by the respondents.

The seventh chapter deals with the causes of the problems according to the respondents.

The eighth chapter is on the measures taken by the various stake holders according to the respondents and their effectiveness according to their perception.

The ninth chapter describes the discriminatory experiences in the various fields of interaction and studies the efforts made to address them.

The tenth chapter is on the identity of the Dalit Christians. This is studied against the background of inequality and here too there is the comparison of perceptions of the DCs and the NDCs, on various aspects of Christian life style. A standardized scale is employed to measure self-esteem, alongside various other tools for understanding the DC identity.

The eleventh chapter presents the summary of findings and the twelfth chapter forms the section on suggestions in the light of the study from a Professional Social Work perspective.
In six appendices additional information are provided:

Appendix 1: Glossary of unfamiliar terms

Appendix 2: Ten Case studies in ‘patterns of coping’.

Appendix 3: Excerpts from the observations of the various commissions for Dalits/Dalit Christians

Appendix 4: Intervention Plan

Appendix 5: Bibliography

Appendix 6: Tools of Data Collections