The assertion that a caste system operated within Christianity came to me as a surprise. I was not prepared to accept the proposition. In one of our academic discussions I questioned it, but there were too many voices against me. This created in me a desire to establish that there was no caste system among the Christians, for which I decided to undertake a scientific study.

It was not that I was unaware of the different divisions existing in the Christian community in Keralam. From my childhood, the divisions of Syrian and Latin Christians were known to me. Later on, I became aware of other divisions among the Christians. However, they did not strike me as versions of caste system in Christianity, until I came across the doctoral research of Koilparambil (1982). For, to my mind, the caste system was invariably associated with purity and pollution or untouchability, which was restricted to Hinduism. It never occurred to me that this could be part of my community and environment. And yet, the terms ‘putukristyānī’ (new Christian) and ‘mārgavāsī’ (one who dwells/walks in ‘the way’ of truth) used in a derogatory sense, were not unfamiliar to me. All the same, since I had never met some one as a ‘mārgavāsī’, the awareness was really vague.

In 1984, I happened to attend a meeting of Harijana Catholicā Mahājana Sabha (HCMS) in which the demands for the rights of the dalit Christians were made. That was in Keralam. Again, in 1922, with a group of friends, I attended a ‘satyagraha’ for reservation privileges for dalit Christians, in Bangalore. These however, did not register in my mind as something pertaining to the Syrian Catholic Community of Keralam, which I always perceived as a very progressive and egalitarian community. When assertions, which tended to shatter this conception, were made, in the sociology lectures at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, I decided to explore for myself and systematically study the social life and status of Dalit Christians (which I had presumed as mentioned above, would establish that there is hardly any discrimination within this community).

The little literature available on the issue pointed to the existence of caste discrimination among the Christians of Keralam. References to Catholic Community in general, and Syrian Catholic community in particular were few. The study by Koilparambil (1982) established that there was a division among the Catholics of Keralam, as Latin and Syrians, on the hierarchical caste pattern. There were similar references to the phenomenon by Alexander (1968) and Barnabas (1965). But no
specific study on the discriminatory practices or related experiences of the Dalits within the Syrian Catholic community could not be traced.

The small exploratory study, which I undertook in this field as part of my Master's programme in Social Work, established beyond doubt that there was discrimination based on distinctions along the line of caste system, at least one section of the Syrian Catholic Church (the Dalits) perceived that there was discrimination in the community on the basis of caste. However, the study was confined to the exploration of the experiences of discrimination of the Dalits, of a small geographical area called Ezhupunna.

It showed the acuteness of the problem hitherto unexplored scientifically and pointed to the need to study the phenomenon in depth and in its various dimensions, so as to identify possibilities of social work intervention to ameliorate the situation. As a person fortunate to have gained professional training to facilitate social change for a better (egalitarian) society, there are various other reasons which prompted me to study the various facets of this phenomenon.

Of the two prominent Catholic Christian communities of Keralam, namely, the Syrian Catholics and the Latin Catholics, the latter (both Dalits and Non-Dalits) comes under the category of other backward classes (OBC). The Dalits belonging to the Syrian Church, do not have these privileges, as Syrian Christians are regarded as a forward community, of a higher socio-economic status. It is assumed that the socio-economic status of the dalit converts (converted relatively recently) to this community is the same as that of the traditional Christians (claiming a Christian tradition of centuries.)

- The issue assumes an added significance, in the context of the recent activism among the Christian community as a whole and Dalit Christians in particular, regarding reservation for the Dalit Christians in the fields of education and employment. The promise to this effect of the alliance government at the centre in its election manifesto also adds importance to the issue.

- Under presumed equality for all, I am against the policy and politics of reservation. However, in order to overcome centuries and generations of oppression, exploitation and discrimination a section of the population may require special considerations and protections in a secular state. I hoped that my enquiry into this field would bring out the situation of the Dalit
Christians in the Syrian Catholic Church and would enable the state and the Church to take adequate steps, to redress their situation.

- I belong to the Syrian Catholic community of Keralam. Being a priest and a student (and practitioner) of social work, I wanted to know the various factors leading to this situation. I hope that this study would create opportunities for the concerned sections to come together and would lead to increased awareness resulting in perceptible change in this undesirable state of affairs.

The researcher had the desire to study the problem from the stand point of those who are subjected to discrimination. Velaskar & Wankhade (1996) and Ram, (1998) have termed such studies which they conducted as a ‘view from below’. Though semantics of what is ‘below’ and what is ‘above’ could be debated, what they try to present is the perception of those who are oppressed. I agree with Ilaiah (1996:xii), as he argues in introducing his work, “Why I am not a Hindu”: “Now in your own interest and in the interest of this great country you must learn to listen and to read what we have to say. A people who refuse to listen to new questions and learn new answers will perish and not prosper”. I apply this statement to the Christian community of India in general, and to the Syrian Christian community of Keralam in particular. This is an effort to help them to listen to the oft unheard, and suppressed voices within the community. Though the effort is to objectively present what these oft-objectified subjects perceive and tell, I have tried to present the other side of the view, by posing almost the same questions to the Non-Dalits. This was because, if change is to be brought about, it is necessary to know whether and where people differ and agree in the perceptions regarding the same problems.