Problems and Prospectus of the Community

The problems of the rural Christians community of the Majha region are not specific but are of broader perspective, of course, varying in nature and extent. The differences in the degree and the kind of the problems are determined by multiple factors the environs, the locale, the numbers, the governing powers, etc. In any case, the rural Christians have been facing difficulties in social, economical, political, religious matters, for sure.

5.1. Social Problems

The vilest problem that downpins the community is a kind of ostracism it faces in the society at the village level. The general attitude of the people towards the Christians is that of disdain and disapproval. Placed at the lowest rung of the social structure, they face the ignominy of the deeply ingrained stigma of otherness in almost every aspect.

Being economically a deprived class, viz. landless, they even lack the bare necessities of life. For the bare minimum needs of existence, they have to toil hard in the homes and fields of the landed class. Such a life of labour and servitude does in no way improve their social status.

Table 5.1.

General Attitude of the Co-villagers towards the Christians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Foreigners</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Labour Class</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>17.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Untouchable</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>66.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Foreigners &amp; Labour Class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Foreigners &amp; untouchable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Labour Class &amp; untouchable</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Any other</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Study
At the face of things, the attitude towards of the villagers towards the Christians seems to be amiable. They work and play and on some special occasion even sup together. The majority of the respondents viz. 240 (66.66 per cent) feels that people of other communities are friendly towards them. Others, 120 (33.34 per cent) view the behaviour of other communities differently. 64 (17.78 per cent) feel that rural Christians are always treated as the labour class. Interestingly, seven (1.95 per cent) feel that rural Christians are considered as outsiders. Twenty six (7.22 per cent) opine that Christians are labourers and untouchables.

With the spread of education and the subsequent growth in the level of awareness, some change in the behavioural pattern of the higher castes seems to have come about. However, at critical moment’s viz. elections, etc the collective reactions of the other communities are acrimonious, caste-based and discriminatory.

5.1.1. Educational Level

The literacy level is an important index, which not only reveals the actual living conditions of the people but also indicates the extent to which the community is able to make progress. It was noted that 30.83 per cent among the respondents were literate, while 69.17 per cent were illiterate. This shows that the general literacy level of the community is miserably low.

What are the causes of the low literacy level of the rural Christian community in the rural areas? There is no doubt that the poor economic condition of the rural Christian is the predominant cause for the rampant illiteracy among them. They are unable to send children to school because of the money needed for their education. The parents see an advantage if their kids work, as it adds to the family income. In the process, however, the Christians children are deprived of their elementary schooling.

Not going to school deprives them of yet another advantage of interaction with the members of other communities which could develop into healthy relationship and understanding. (A teacher in one of the rural schools was initially dismissive towards the shabbily dressed poor Christian students and was hesitant in teaching them. But the students loved and respected her in spite of her indifference. Eventually, the realisation dawned on the teacher and she became a different person with abundant love for these kids). The contact between different students of different castes, creeds and even
economic status, helps remove the false notions among the people and fosters love and
understanding.

5.1.2. Poverty

Poverty is indeed a curse. It is not only humiliating at the moment but also
incapacitating the future. Poverty cannot be determined in absolute terms. It is a relative
concept. The rural Christians are a case in point. Their children are not only unable to go
to school due to the poverty as their parents are unable to meet the expenses of their
education, but also they don’t have hopes of any better for the future. The Christians are
themselves to blame for the warped living conditions. Most of them think and live for
today and are not bothered about the future. Come an occasion for celebration, they
spend money like anything as if there were no tomorrow. Overspending is very much
rampant among the rural Christians, which traps them into perennial debt.

5.1.3. Social Segregation

Rural Christians live in segregated clusters on the margins of the village
distinctly far away from the high caste people who live on an elevation, symbolic of their
wealth and social status.

The houses of the Christians are mostly one room *Kaccha* structures, housing an
entire family. The houses are overcrowded as the room serves all the purposes of a
household ‘an-all-in-one’ entity. Obviously the space is so cramped up that family life
becomes a difficult proposition. In case the number of members increases, the family
goes in search for additional accommodation. A new house needs a piece of land and
importantly the resources to build one, an effort which is nothing short of a nightmare.

In case they get a piece of land from the landowner, it would be an abandoned
piece at an abandoned location and condition.

84.44 percent Christians live in separate clusters. 6. 95 per cent of such people
live individually but separate from the high-caste while 8. 61 per cent live in a mix of the
different communities of the village. (Table 2.)

In the rural areas of Gurdaspur and Amritsar, people who profess their faith in
Jesus are addressed by their neighbours differently (Table 5.2). 10.83 per cent of the
respondent answered that they are addressed as ‘Saai’ whereas 20 per cent . 72
respondents said that they are called by names ‘Masih’ which means the anointed of
God. 55 per cent of the respondents and the majority opined that rural Christians community is called as ‘Christians’ which means one who is the follower of Christ. 12.75 per cent respondents opined that people call them interchangeably as Masihi or Christians. 1.39 per cent did not answer it. General impression is that the psyche of the rural Christians has changed.

### Table 5.2.

**Addressing of Christians by the Non-Christians**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Saai¹</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Masihi</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>55.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Masihi and Christian</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Any other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field Study*

Christians are addressed in a typical manner by the other community members. Every appellative given to them by others smacks of ingrained bias towards Christians. The tone and tenor of address are designedly used to convey a sense of their lowness.

One hundred ninety eight of the documented respondents 55 percent said that they were simply called Christians while 162 gave interesting vocatives used for them.

### Table 5.3.

**Addressing of Christian Locality in the Village**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thathi</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>37.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Basti</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Patti</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mohalla</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>56.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field Study*

The Christian localities are differently identified by the villagers in the border district of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. *Thathi* and *Mohalla* are the common names given to
these clusters. Both these identification are in fact derogatory and insulting. In the present parlance, *Mohalla* is thought to be relatively acceptable.

### Table 5.4.

**Relations with and Access to the High Caste**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Access to Houses of High Caste</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>56.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>43.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field Study*

The above table shows that 203 (56.39 per cent) of respondents were quite positive about their access to and relations with the high caste people. They had no reservation about their interactions with each other. But 157 (43.61 per cent) were frank enough to admit that there were barriers in their interactions and they were not treated as equals. The courtyards of the houses of the upper class were the borderline for the Christians.

During wedding functions and such other celebration, the interactions were free and fine. Both the Christians and other communities shared drinks and broke bread together with no qualms. Differences, whatsoever, are forgotten for the moment.

### 5.1.4. Indifferent Attitude of the Government

Government policies, for the upliftment of the backward classes and communities are, in general, well-meaning. But when it comes to the implementation of the policies and programmes spelt out, the stumbling blocks hit the plans surprisingly so much, that the plans are put to sleep. A common impression gathers that the promised plans announced with much fanfare are only temptations to soothe the community. The loud promises by loudmouthed leaders prove illusory and hence insincere.

So the Christians feel that the government expected to do much, has in reality done little to ameliorate the miserable economic condition of the minority community. They have a perception that the bureaucrats are so insensitive to the grievances of the rural Christians that they scuttle most of the plans which could have benefitted them most. The benefits should have accrued to them as scheduled castes, since they are
basically Dalits. But they are the considered without the preview of the schemes introduced for the welfare of the other backward communities. Though this anomaly was removed when Giani Zail Singh was the Chief Minister of Punjab way back in 1972, yet, the orders of the Government have never ever been introduced at the ground zero level due to the lack of sincerity. The rural Christians also perceive discrimination in government jobs. During our interactions with these Christians, they even alleged that Government showed little concern for their security during militancy when they had to escape from the village of Malchowal in district Gurdaspur (near Fategarh Churian) in Punjab.

5.1.5. Threat to the Christians: Communal and Fundamentalism

Communal and radical forces now and then raise their ugly head to destabilise the pluralistic culture of the society. Media highlights the tragic incidents so graphically that such incidents leave deep scars on the psyche of the people especially the people of the affected community. The spirit of tolerance and forbearance gets eroded steadily and gives place to the feelings of retribution and the stray incidents involving Christians are seen in the perspective of alleged larger diabolic designs by the others - especially the majority, to put a stop on the overall development of the minority Christians. BJP and its allied forces are the clear villains.

During our study, such cases were noticed. The Christian community is unable to resist any humiliation because of their inherent weakness. They depend for their livelihood on the high caste people so much so that they don’t have the luxury of standing up to the tantrums of the upper class people, but submit to their dictates meekly. Government remains a mute spectator in such cases and subscribes to the mutual agreement reached to end a sore conflict.

**Table 5.5.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the party</th>
<th>Number of people</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Akali Dal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>31.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.5 denotes the political parties and groups which are working against the Christian community in Punjab. During the survey majority of the people of the community were vocal were about the activities of the BJP led Hindu fundamentalist as the greatest challenge to the Christian community in Punjab. Hindu organizations like the Rashtirya Swayamsewek (RSS, 1925), Vishwa Hinsu Parishad (VHP, 1964), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, 1980), Bajrang Dal (Team of Hanuman, 1984). Practically all these organization, associations and several others like them together form the Sangh Parivar (family of RSS) with the RSS as their parent body. The Sangh Parivar openly opposes the minorities. These organizations are relentlessly spreading false and misleading notions about the Christians.

On 26th October, 2005, the Christian community under the leadership of Freedy Joseph, Agnes, Hamid Masih, and Anil Munna were leading a rally to the office of District Collector, Jalandhar (Punjab) and wanted to give a memorandum to him against the atrocities committed against the Christians in various parts of the country. As the procession reached near to the Punjab National Bank Chowk in Jalandhar group of BJP workers appeared from by lanes and attacked the Christians with lathies, swords and wounded the peaceful processionists. Some ran helter-skelter to save themselves. However, an FIR (FIR/289/section 345, 341, 307, 323, 324, 148 149 IPC) was filed against the Christians and they were put in the police station. Even a prayer meeting of Christians was attacked at Bhatinda in 2009.
In the villages, there is lots of injustice to the Christian community by the landlords who have association with the Akali Dal or the Congress party. It was reported from village Granthgarh in Ajanala Tehsil (Amritsar District) that a Christian, Jinda Masih was working in the farm of an Akali leader Hardev Singh. He was falsely accused of stealing the money from the house and put under the police custody and beaten up mercilessly. The Christians of Ajanala and the vicinity assembled on 13th of March, 2009 under the leadership of a person popularly called ‘Captain’ to mount pressure on the police to release Jinda Masih. Jinda Masih was released but the ‘Captain’ was hauled up and falsely implicated in many criminal case at the instance of Ajanala MLA Boney. The Christian leader ‘Captain’ became the victim of police harassments and died of heart attack.

The people who were quick to cite the case of village Umarpura (Harsh China Teh, Amristar Dt) on 14th February, 2007. The Christian in the village had a church and a plot of land adjacent to it. Just opposite the Church there was a Gurdurwara. One fine morning, some Sikh youth forcibly occupied the vacant plot of land lying in front of the Church. It was all made possible at the instance of the local MLA, Sardar Harpratap Singh, Ajanala, and the connivance of the police. The Christians who stood up to resist the encroachment of the land had to face hardships and persecution at the hands of the police. They were put behind bars. A case was filed in the court and is still going on. Had the government been really caring about the Christians, the injustice could have been checked and case verified on the basis of facts. But that was not to be.

Yet, an instance of the hostile atmosphere the Christians face in Punjab. On 15th December, 2010, the village Ghoney Wala (Dera Baba Nanak, Gurdaspur District) Sarpanch Channan Singh and his sons came in a jeep with weapons at 11am along with tractor and destroyed the graveyard and damaged the Church in the village. The Christians who were living in their land were attacked and their houses were ransacked. The trees in the land were cut down, claiming that these lands were demarked in the revenue records in their name. The people who were living in the Ghoney Wala village, which fell in Amritsar district were affected and uprooted during the time of floods. To rehabilitate them the central government, in 1976, took some part of land from Talwandi Hindua (127 canal and 6 marlas) and from village Mansooa (51.kanal and 6 marlas) and allotted to the Christians to put up their houses. This village was inaugurated by the then revenue minister of Punjab on 6th May, 1977. (More information: Under Secretary,
However, the Sarpanch wanted to acquire the land and therefore filed a petition before the Gurdaspur DC who deputed the Tehsildar to make a study and report back to him. (22/7/1977 letters no 2884). In his report, Tehsildar clearly stated that the lands at villages Talwandi Hindua and Mansooa were given to the Hariajan Christians who were living in Ghoney Wala village. The original ownership of the land at the time of distribution belonged to the Central Government. After distributing the land to around 250 families, rest of the land was given for the use of the Church, School, Graveyard, ‘hadda Redi’ (a secluded place to tear off the hides of the dead animals), rudi (dumping cowdung). Till date, it was under the possession of the Christians. It was also suggested to the DC of Gurdaspur, to make the mutation of the land in the name of the Christians. Unfortunately, under the influence of the politicians it was not done.

Channan Singh the Sarpanch, with the help of the hooligans took possession of the land and when the Christians objected to it they were threatened of grave consequences and some of them were put into jail. The Christians came together, roads were blocked and then the administration woke up and Channan Singh and his sons were put into the police custody. On 19th December, 2010, under the leadership of the Speaker of Punjab Vidhan Sabha Nirmal Singh Kahlon tried to resolve the problem, since the Sarpanch belonged to Akali Dal party. But he did not succeed and the matter is in the court. Meanwhile, several organizations of farmers and labour union took up the issue and they demanded action against the culprit and the ownerships of the land be restored to the Christians who are the original occupants of the land.

The most unfortunate, humiliating and provocative incident was the deliberate mocking of Lord Jesus Christ by one Pritam Singh in Jalandhar on 19th February, 2010. Lord Jesus Christ was depicted drinking and smoking on a hoarding. The hoarding was put up in BMC chuck, Jalandhar. The caricature of Lord Jesus Christ was an unpardonable desecration of the Christian faith itself. The Christians felt hurt at the offensive portrayal. They were up in anger. They assembled in different places to protest the sacrilege of Lord Jesus Christ. The protest by the Christians spread far and near. There was violence in Batala area. The Christians of Kallanor, Fatehgarh Churiah, and other villages assembled at Batala. There were angry protest which resulted in looting and
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arson in Batala. There was retaliation from both Hindus and Sikhs. Some Churches were attacked and houses and property of the Christians destroyed and Christians were chased and attacked. The concerned authorities were too slow to bring the culprits to book. However, uneasy peace prevailed after a couple of days.

5.1.6 Casteism

The Christians had embraced Christianity as their new faith way back in the 60’s and 70’s of the 19th century to escape from the feeling of wretchedness of the caste system in their age old mode of life in Hindu society. They were in search of a dignified identity in the new casteless religio-social structure of Christianity. The considerations of spiritual, psychological and material import tempted them to adopt the new mode of life.

However, the warped state of their life has not been redeemed and the old baggage of casteism hangs around their neck. They are infected with the same malady in their new avatar of Christianity from which they sought an escape. Though in principle, Christianity ordains an equal status to one and all, but the harsh reality of subdivisions and sub-castes within the community is a fact of life. It is a reduplication of the picture of social hierarchy of the society within the community.

The built in tension of complex caste structure outside is faithfully reflected within the social structure of the rural Christians. The hierarchy of a particular sub caste is on display in social assemblies and religious functions. There is a defined segregation. ‘Gill’ caste is relatively a high sub caste than the ‘chamar’ and the ‘mochi’ sub-caste, and they show it in their behaviour.

The Christian villages in the border area have became the testing ground of numbers of different sub-castes and hence the determinant of the inter-village interactions. The inter-caste diversity is manifested more tellingly at the elections of the members of various local bodies. The sub-castes are fiercely loyal to their own kind. Sometimes several sub-castes come together to form a numerically strong group that can turn the tide in any such elections, but at a price of their choosing.

5.1.7 Dalits as Workers

All the documented respondents belonged to Dalit families. These Dalits are infact, the converts from the backward landless marginalised class of the people placed at
the lowest rung of the socio-economic structure of society and expectedly worked as labours, scavengers, tanners and the like.

The menial jobs didn’t fetch those adequate wages. They could subsist with pain and misery, with no hope of improvement at all. They couldn’t afford to send their children to school and considered children as earning some wages better than wasting time in schools.

However, the things have changed somewhat. The rural Christians, who had been totally dependent on local jats for their jobs till late, are now commuting daily to nearby towns and cities to work in factories and business establishment and earn far better wages. So their overall economic conditions are improving steadily. Their young children are now going to school.

5.1.8. Bonded Labour

Man’s cruelty to man has been a tragic story of lust for power and pelf, which has not been confined to any particular region and culture but has been a universal phenomenon for ages. It has been effaced to a great extent from the face of the world thanks to the spread of awareness of basic human rights. One such form of barbaric cruelty or is bonded labour – serfdom, slavery and the like.

The inhuman practice was abolished in India through a legislative enactment in 1976. But in spite of the Act, the evil of bonded labour still persists.

In the border villages of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts, instances of bonded-labour have been often seen. The poor victims of exploitation fall prey to the ravenous and unscrupulous powers mostly by borrowing money. Once entrapped in the vicious clutches of the landlords, they find it impossible to wriggle out of the debt and are condemned to the drudgery all their lives, along with their families, mostly.

It is sometimes the acute penury that drives the poor rural Christians to approach the rich people for a loan which is usually a small amount. But it is certainly on occasions of marriage or some similar celebration that they indulge in reckless spending which lands them in the trap of the avaricious money lenders never to redeem themselves. Thus, begins the tale of misery and drudgery of the bonded labour. Held in awe, they dare not speak of their pathetic plight.

In Shahpur village, in Amritsar district, a man was kept as bonded-labour for 15 long years for borrowing some amount of money from the landlord. As the years passed
Problems and Prospectus of the Community

by the entire family was working in his fields and yet they were not able to pay back all
the money they had borrowed. Finally, with the help of an NGO the entire family was
released after a payment of Rs. 15000 to the landlord. In another case, in a village called
Umarpura, the man had to take some money for his daughter’s marriage. He could not
pay back the whole money he had taken and thus went on working for so many years
with the landlord. One morning he ran away from the house and the landlord failing to
fetch him, went and locked the house in which he and his family were living. After few
days the man had to return and pay the money raised by some kind-hearted people. Thus,
they could continue to live in the village.

5.1.9. Graveyard

In Punjab in general, and villages in particular, the most painful problems faced
by the Christian community is that they have no place to bury their dead. This is one of
the most critical issues faced by the community. It has caused a lot of tension between
the Christians and other religious people.

There are villages where the rural Christians have no burial ground to bury their
dead. At places where they had the graveyard, the higher castes have usurped the places.
There were scenes when the ploughing was done; ploughshares were used to level the
ground, the bones of the dead tumbled out and were exposed to the public, which was
extremely humiliating to the Christian community. The graveyards have become
contentious issues in the village, which should be taken as the most sensitive social
problems faced by the rural Christian community.

The case of Awan Lakha Singh is very tragic, heartbreaking, distressing sight
where the rural Christian community stood helpless and humiliated, when the Zamindars
used the tractor and ploughed the graveyard. It was all the more agonizing and
unbearable that even the local MLA and the entire police supported the zamindars. To
add to their plight, the police under orders from the MLA arrested the Christian leaders
who went to the police station for help. Instead, they were kept in the police station
illegally.

This same story was repeated in a village called Jasserwal where a convict got on
parole for a month drove, his tractor and ploughed the graveyard of the Christians. No
one from the Christian community dared to stop him. They felt that he would have killed
those who would have resisted him. The Christians were unable to reclaim the graveyard.
Table 5.6.

Nature of the Issues of the Community at Village Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr.No</th>
<th>Nature of issues of community</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>23.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Indifferent Attitude of Political Leaders</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Land Grabbing by the Upper Castes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Graveyard</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Behaviour Towards Christian Woman, Molestation, etc.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Discrimination and Indifferent Attitude of Political Leaders</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Discrimination and Graveyard</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>21.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Land Grabbing and Misbehaviour</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>24.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Study

The table above graphically pinpoints the many existential issues which are critically crucial to the community. Discrimination by the high castes and the uncaring attitude of the powers that be have all along been depressing and debilitating the rural Christians. The usual irritations of the snubs and the mocking thrown at them by the high castes of other communities are simply unbearable. The curse of poverty, of casteism, of neglect and other such other maledictions dog them all through their lives.

5.1.10. Population

As in the case of other poor and low caste sections of society, there is a significant increase in the number of rural Christians as recorded by the different missionaries, related to both the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations. According to the diocese of Jalandhar, the number of Catholics was 10,112 in 1971,
which has reached to 1, 11,354 in 2010. With the increase in the number of members of family, the housing problem has become acute.

5.1.11. Distance from the Town

One significant factor that determines the economic condition of the rural Christian is the proximity to the town. Easy mobility due to availability of transport with the development of the link roads has helped the people work in the nearby towns. But the rural Christian villages situated in the border line with Pakistan feel somewhat at a relative disadvantage. Consequently the people lag behind in education and suffer from the neglect of the different helpful agencies including the government.

5.1.12. Unhygienic Conditions of the Christian Habitations

Since rural Christians are mostly the converts from the dalits – the lowest caste in the social hierarchy, they live in clusters and at low-lying areas of the villages. These areas are inundated with rain waters which collect in puddles around the houses, stagnate and eventually become stinking breeding grounds for mosquitoes and other such disease carrying insects. The approaches to the houses turn swampy. Another cause leading to the unhygienic conditions of the houses is the overcrowding in them, leaving little space for open, clean atmosphere.

5.1.13. Discrimination against Women

Gender-bias, a social sickness that debilitates society in general, equally afflicts the rural Christians. The prejudice against the women is deeply embossed on the psyche of the men-folk. Girl child is the most unwelcome thing in the household. The discrimination is so pronounced that the poor girl child is a picture of absolute pathos. Neither the mother not the baby is cared for. Female foeticide is rampant. While a male-child’s birth is an occasion of celebration – drink and dance.

Though there is a slight change in favour of the education of girls, but it is limited to the elementary level. The Christians don’t dare to risk sending their girls for education away from native village for fear of eve teasing. They are married off as soon as they are mature.

Then there are the perennial dowry related troubles which haunt the poor people the most and cause the break down of marriages. And the woman is always at the receiving end, she has no voice.
The girl child right from her birth all through her life is battered both physically and mentally. The rural Christians women are more cursed in the sense of being the meek gender as also coming from the dalit poor. They are victims of so many abuses.

5.2. Economic Problems

On the economic front, the rural Christians are disadvantaged and are placed at the rock bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. They are mostly landless and face a lot of difficulties in the villages they live in. The economic well-being or otherwise determine the social and political status of an individual or a community undeniably.

5.2.1. Unemployment

The rural Christians face the big predicament of securing gainful employment to meet the basic needs of their life.

Primarily, they are a landless people and as such it is only the labour of one kind or the other that can help them earn their livelihood. Since they are generally uneducated, they have to do the manual work and such work is available as farm labour or at the houses of the Jats as domestic helps and tending the cattle of the masters. The Christian women work as maids in these houses, cleaning and washing etc. The farming jobs are only a seasonal employment. Such work is available during the transplanting the paddy and the harvesting seasons only. This labour which used to be aplenty sometime back too has decreased quite a lot with the introduction of the modern agricultural machines. Secondly, the availability of the cheaper migrant labour from UP or Bihar too has affected the prospectus of such jobs to the local people to some extent. It is a worrisome situation becoming grim with the passing years. Again, the hazard of farm labour is the rampant practice of administering stimulants (in the form of opiates) to the workers to make them work longer and at a stretch. Used oftener, the practice leads to the habit formation and eventually an addiction which proves disastrous to the labourers soon enough.

At times due to the non-availability of any work near home, the poor Christians have to go to distant places in search of work leaving their families behind which too causes worrisome domestic problems. The men folk try their hand at jobs other than traditional ones of scavengers and tanners, but illiteracy is the great impediment in their way. More often the Christian youth due to unemployment end up in desperation and fall
easy prey to drugs and other social evils. These young men are labelled as anti-social elements and hence always regarded as ‘suspects’ in the society.

It is indeed unfortunate that the youth who could have been useful members of the community notwithstanding the travails of poverty end up as wastrels. Unless and until, the rural Christians acquire elementary education and get skills (basics in some different gainful trades) they cannot be able to improve their lot. Nay, they cannot even find the jobs they used to do since such jobs are becoming scares due to mechanisation. The community leadership needs address this problem and work on the remedies without any further dilly-dallying

5.2.2. Lack of Amenities of Life

Though much change has come about in the rural areas with the development in various spheres of life, yet much change is still desired. Link roads have made the movement of the people easier and quicker. However cheap public transport is not often available in the border areas. In the studied villages, the backwardness still stares the outsider. Some of the rural Christians do not have even a cycle to travel to places of their own but travel by ‘Kudukha’ or ‘marutha’ a four wheeled contrivance – wobbling and creaking but moving, nonetheless.

For drinking water, the villagers have to depend on their own. The richer people have fixed motors to draw water from tube wells while the poor have to do with hand pumps and the Christians form part of the poor. For the electricity the majority of the families under study are having electricity connection only for one or two bulbs.

5.2.3. Unskilled Community

The modern age is an age of professionalism, precision and task centred activities. To climb the ladder of success and to become rich today one should be equipped with a particular skill with which he can work and earn the livelihood.

Among the rural Christian community, they lack skilled labourers. Earlier the ‘varuna’ system existed by which at least they were expert in their own caste job (inherited job) or the profession. With the advent of technological era life is changing and these people are looking for lucrative jobs. But they must be trained and skilled people. The deplorable economic condition of the people prevents them from getting trained in skilled jobs. An added key problem is the lack of motivation; they do not want to be trained on skilled jobs. Since they are not skilled workers, naturally they won’t get
employment in the modern technological and computerized society. Thus, there is a need to motivate the rural Christian community to be trained in skilled work so that the standard of the community is enhanced.

5.2.4. Lack of Ancestral Property

Possession of land is an indicator of the family’s financial stability. The ownership of land determines the social status in the society. It is unfortunate that leaving aside a few, majority of the rural Christian population does not possess the land.

According to Juergensmeyer, the Christian missionaries had not really intentionally targeted the low castes for conversion. It was the untouchables who came out seeking conversion to Christianity. Consequently, it was from the lower castes that the majority of people embraced Christianity.

The lower caste people were not allowed to possess land which was ratified by the passing of the land Alienation Act of 1901, which stopped transfer of agriculture land from the agriculture castes, mostly Sikhs and Muslims to the non-agriculture castes, which proved an act of discrimination against the Christians. With the passing of the act, the schedule caste people were not able to acquire the land and which promoted and encouraged the predominance of the caste system in the society. This casteism continued even after their conversion to Christianity and they could not possess the land².

It is ironic that the British did not give the fertile land to outcasts, even when they were professing and practising Christian faith. The British were concerned only about the production of cotton and improving their prospectus by getting other raw material from India. When they established the Canal colony system, they distributed the land according to the prevailing caste system to keep the outward peace, which was essential for the production of those commodities which were needed for the British people. Even in some rare cases if the land was allotted, the British would not give the outcasts the first piece of land on the canals as the upper castes would be utilizing the water which passed through the land of the “untouchable”. So the few Christians ended up with lands on the tail of the canal system³. In this way, the Christian community is left with no ancestral property. At the present, they are unable to purchase the land because of skyrocketing prices. Since joint families are disintegrating and space to put up new houses is needed, they are finding it difficult to purchase even a ‘marla’ to put up their houses.
5.2.5. Lack of Access to Modern Facilities

The world today has moved into scientific and technological era. Things impossible have become possible today. The things, which were considered as luxury, have become a necessity for one’s life.

In this changing scenario of the world, most of the modern facilities are inaccessible to the people living along the border belt of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. It obviously points to the backwardness and under-developed system even now existing in the villages. There are many people who even do not have a cycle at home. Most of them are travelling by an indigenous travelling facility known as ‘kudukha’ or ‘marutha’ a four-wheeled engine-connected thing used for carrying of things. It is disheartening to see that despite the development of modern amenities, steps are yet to be taken to ameliorate the existing situation in the rural areas. The plight of the rural Christians is disquieting and dispiriting.

5.2.6. Indebtedness

The extent of the indebtedness of the rural Christian community gives the idea to gauge the economic conditions of the Christian community. It was discovered that the rural Christian community is extensively caught up in a debt trap of both government and private agencies. Indebtedness has caused not only awesome trouble for the people but even forced them to commit suicide.

During the fieldwork, it was discovered that a greater number of rural Christian households are in debt to private money-lenders than to the government. It is because the rural Christians, most of whom are illiterate, find it easier to access local money-lenders. When they fall upon hard times, the rural Christians easily take recourse to loans for subsistence. This leads to exploitation of their labour both by land-owners and money-lenders that are the major sources of creditors in the rural society.

Alarming indebtedness is one of the principal causes of the poverty among the rural Christian community in the districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. It cripples them mentally and physically, which also explains their backwardness and deplorable social state of life in which they find themselves.

Some of them who take a loan have to surrender the title deeds of their houses as surety at the time of availing of government loans. The securing of loans from money-lenders and their repayment works out in a different way. The debtors give an
undertaking on stamped paper, the most common method used for borrowing money from the money-lenders. For the realisation of the money lent out the money lenders have devised a strategy of their own so that no lender escapes from their clutches. In case the loan amount is not paid back along with the accrued interest on specified time, the debtors have to present themselves before the lender as bonded labourers eventually. To escape such a humiliating eventuality, the defaulters raise a second loan from some other source to pay off the first. Thus, the debt-trap results in a vicious circle.

In the case of the bonded labour, the victims have to work strictly according to the dictates of the creditors. The routine of the work, breaks in between, off days or emergency leave, are decided by the money-lender cum landlord. Thus begins the life of drudgery and destitution of these hapless people. In the course of time, their illiteracy is exploited very cunningly.

The bonded labourers have to face the wrath of their masters if these poor people commit a mistake unwittingly or displease their master. Even a little wrong warrants harsh punishment. They are thrown out of their homes and hearths.

Such a thing occurred in one of the villages in Amritsar district called Suparipind. The whole family of a poor Christian was employed in one of the landlords’ house. But it happened that the landlord had a serious quarrel with these people working in his house and sent them out. The landlord locked the house and the entire family had to stay out of their house. It did not stop there. When the poor man was alone, he was caught and beaten up by the landlord and he had to pay all the debt that he had taken. The landlord was so clever and cunning that he added everything that was given to him for years and the total amount had to be returned. The poor man could return the money only thorough the help of the missionaries working in those areas.

5.2.7. Rural Christians

The Jat Sikhs/landlords and Hindus are the two socio–economically predominant community people in Punjab. It is the high caste Sikhs who were found to be very strong socially and economically, in the studied villages. In a few villages, there were some Hindu households. It was found that many villages had significant Hindu population but during the terrorist days, they either sold the land or left for nearby cities and started living there. Their land is in the village, though.
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In villages like Karyal in Harsha China block, Dharmekot in Dera Baba block, Kot Dal Patrai in Dera Baba Nanak, Pakhoke Tali Sahib in Kallanor, the Christians are in good numbers in some of the villages and even more than fifty per cent in the case of Chhogan village in Kallanor block. But the they have no political say even in such villages. In the rural society of the Punjab state, prestige and power of any community or caste or groups are determined by the possession of land, the traditional socio-economic set up based on agriculture productivity and customary relationships. The jats as land owners look down upon all other villagers and claim their rights under the relationships which is called ‘Jajmani’ relationship.

Each family of ‘Sepidar’ rural Christians was attached to particular family of landowners and helped the agriculturists. They were employed in the fields and also had to cultivate and irrigate the land, carry manure and graze the cattle. The landholders maintained their economic power and social superiority over the rural Christians by keeping them suppressed. The rural Christians in some villages constitute nearly half of the village population but unfortunately, they are not able to cope up with the situation and change the things even at the Panchayat level. Since most of the rural Christians worked as labourer in the fields of the landholders, they rarely interacted with others to discuss things and forge a sort of common front.

5.3. Political Problems

The rural Christians, a backward minority face an absolute vacuum in the political arena of the state of Punjab. It is a vital problem which has a profound effect on the life and activities of the community.

It is hard for the people to think that the these being illiterate, ignorant, backward, poor and from a lower strata of the society, could take part in politics whichever political parties function in rural area, correspond to various layers of the caste existing in the stratified rural society.

Unlike in the Pre–British period, the modern state plays a decisive role in determining the life of the rural society. During the pre–British phase, the village was almost an autonomous unit. Nowadays, the village population no longer lives an almost hermetically seated existence but is drawn into the wider whirlpool of the state and national political life. But were being illiterate, backward and economically very poor, rural Christians have little political consciousness.
There are number of political groups in Punjab of Christian profile namely Punjab Masihi Dal, Punjab Misiahi Shaba, United Christian Forum, Punjab Christian Movement, Christian Dalit Front, New Christian Dalit Front, United Christian Front, Masihi Kranti Dal, Masihi Jagat Committee, Christian Welfare Association, United Christian Association and many others which are mostly organized on sectarian level or for personal enhancement. According to the study done by Emmanuel Nahar there are about 40 organizations working in Punjab. They don’t have any common agenda. The leaders who are leading these groups have their own personal agenda and do not have any concern for the community.

On 23rd February 2009, in an effort to bring all the organized and unorganized church leaders were called to bring about unity among the Christian community in the meetings held at St. Luke’s Church at Jalandhar Cantonment. Many of the leaders of the various denominations were present in the meeting. They unanimously elected Bishop of Jalandhar, Rt. Rev. Anil Couto, as the chairman of the meeting and resolved to face the local, assembly and Lok Sabha elections under one umbrella. But the mood and the situation changed as soon as the meeting was about to finish and each one of the self-styled leaders began to harp on different tunes according to his or her advantage. Once again a meeting was called on 8th March 2009, by a group of Christians ignoring the main line churches in Batala and declared to support the secular parties and not the communal parties. But during the election it was alleged that some of the Christians who opposed the communal parties, themselves canvassed for communal parties and voted for them. The political parties have taken the Christians for a ride. In fact no political party is ready even to acknowledge the contribution of the Christians in Punjab.

5.3.1. Lack of Cohesion

The fundamental cause of the political distress of the Christian community is the disorientation within the community itself, applying of half measures without addressing the main malady that has afflicted it so grievously.

The root cause of the disorientation is that the community is not cohesive, but divided on each and every issue, which leads to factionalism. Any move to bring about a political unity among the rural Christian becomes counter productive. Any suggestion to cement unity is countered acrimoniously by allegations. Heated arguments follow which subsequently lead to disruptions. Narrow-mindedness, personal agendas, old rivalries
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and bitterness surface. So it is common knowledge that the Christians are a divided entity and the politicians exploit them to their gain. However, in religious issues, the community evinces a keen co-operative spirit.

Basic socio-economic and political problems among the rural Christian community and the unhealthy situation they are in, are of their own making. Lack of unity, fierce rivalries, charges and counter charges mark the villagers when it comes to politics. It was noticed in one of the villages under study that a group of elders did not want to acknowledge the contribution made by one party, heated argument followed leading to disruption. These weaknesses of the rural Christians are very well manipulated by the political parties to their advantage. In fact, the politicians try to promote acrimony, bitterness and division among the rural Christian community so that their vote bank is kept safe and secure. Political parties are also accused of instigating caste violence. Thus, the rural Christians are a bewildered, a disorganized and a confused lot.

5.3.2. Neglect by the Political Parties

The main stream political parties in Punjab are perceived to be totally insensitive to the concerns of the Christian community. During the election meetings the political parties make high sounding promises to take speedy steps to ameliorate the general living conditions of this backward community, but once the elections are over they turn their back on the community. Such antipathy towards the community, a microscopic minority and coming from the lowest strata of society, has been an unbroken narrative since the independence of the country.

These people, unfortunately have no political voice to express their angst and their aspirations. So if and when they cry, they cry in wilderness.

5.3.3. Discriminatory Role of the Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy, the dispensing arm of the Government policies and plans, display the same lackadaisical attitude when it comes to the concerns of the poor Christian community. There is, of course, genuine sincerity in the minds of some bureaucrats but it remains only a pious sympathy rarely translated into action at ground level.

The general perception in the bureaucratic circles vis-à-vis the community is a kind a love-hate relationship. At the surface of the things, love and understanding is given out, but at bottom, it is the same story of antiparty. Disconnect between the word
and the deed is so deep and wide that even the officers coming from the Christian community, find it convenient to hide their personal identity and adopt the general attitude of unconcern.

### 5.4. Religious Problems

The church, itself is a symbol of all that Christianity stands for – charity, love, mercy and above all faith in Trinity Father, the Holy Spirit and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. A church is not a mere building in any case but an abode of a benign God and His Son where one finds peace and tranquillity. In the real terms it conveys the aura of the kingdom of God and His Son Lord Jesus.

The Holy Bible states that it is the body of Christ. “Because there is one bread, we are many but one body for we all partake of the one bread”\(^5\)(I Cor.3 :9-10). He continues “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”. What the church requires is a constant dialogue with God, an appreciation of the centrality of Christ in all life, and a common vision of the community church emphasis on prayer, to live ethically, to imitate the dying and rising Christ, and to selflessly give themselves to the service of others and the spread of the gospel.

Acts of the apostles state 'keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of His own Son’\(^6\)(Act. 20:27). Thus, the Bible clearly states that Church is God’s community, guided by the Spirit and purchased with the Lord’s blood.

The most important thing the Church adheres to is to become aware of itself as a community. From this, it is inferred that the church sees itself as a community called to be in the very heart of the world. Thus, today’s vision of the church is one that depends on the community members. Members at all levels of the church increasingly respect the dignity and vocation of everyone else, realizing that “we will grow only if we grow together”.

It is the Church again, that strives not only to instruct the mind but to regulate by its precepts the life and morals of individuals who ameliorate the condition of the workers through its numerous beneficent institutions, and that wishes and aims to have the thought and energy of all classes of the society united to this end. The social concern of the Church directed towards an authentic development of man’s society that
would respect and promote all the dimensions of the human personality, has always expressed itself in most varied ways. The church has been true to the values given by Lord Jesus, following His footsteps “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recover the sight to the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”.

The Church’s doctrine focuses especially on man and upliftment of each and every human being on earth. The church is trying to bring up the ‘Human Person’ as a whole by engaging people in various social upliftment programmes by opening higher centres of learning and initiating various socio-economic programmes for the development of the people in the rural areas. In the process of initiating various schemes, the church had to encounter lots of religious problems in Punjab. These problems can be enumerated or analysed from two points of view: (a) internal and (b) external

5.4.1. Internal Problems

The missionaries who are engaged in the rural villages of Amritsar and Gurdaspur face a lot of difficulties and are sometimes in a terrible predicament and are silent endures. They suffer due to the faith and love they have in the Saviour Jesus Christ whom they have accepted as their master and the Lord. At the surface everything seems to be sublime and splendid but there are lots of internal and inner conflicts taking place.

5.4.1.1. Internal Strife and Conflict

One of the major problems faced by the rural Church is the internal strife and conflict that exists between individual households. People who get the benefits from the socio-economic programmes of the Church sometimes turn against the Church and its activities the moment the benefits get dried up. These individuals have only material attachment, skin deep love, with the Church. They join the ranks of disgruntled elements and oppose vehemently the programmes and policies of the Church.

The Church is helped by its own people. The Code of Canon Law describes “Christ’s faithful have the obligation to provide for the needs of the Church, so that the Church has availability of those things which are necessary for divine worship, for apostolic and charitable works and for the work support of its worthy ministers”. They are also obliged to promote social justice and are mindful of the Lord’s precept to help the poor from their own resources. The faithful also have the duty of providing for the
The Church helps the people out of the contribution it gets from its members. There is a misconception in the society today that the church is very rich and wealth of the church should be shared by all the Christian community members. But very often the people forget that money is contributed to the church by thousands of people by the way of alms - giving.

In the case of the Catholic Church, the ‘Diocese of Jalandhar’, there are 130 priests and approximately 655 sisters working in different places with total dedication serving the humanity without salary and are given subsistence allowance. They are all well qualified and work ceaselessly for the socio-economic growth of the community. The money is pooled together and given to the Bishop of Jalandhar and it is he who determines how the money should be spent. Thus, the individual animators and missionaries working depend upon the headquarters for their work. Collectively the church is rich.

Third problem is the lack of foreign donations to the church. Earlier the church depended for its growth on the financial help it received from the foreign countries. This help has stopped and therefore the growth rate of the rural Christians has been affected.

5.4.1.2. People from Lower Strata

The Christians of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts who were originally the low caste people of the society, suffocating under the tyranny of the caste-system, had embraced Christianity for a dignity and a new identity free from all the old encumbrances. Fair enough were their anticipations of regeneration. Expectedly they were provided both moral and material support to boost their confidence and the missionaries tried their best to make the life of these converts meaningful.

However, the missionaries had a tough time with these converts later. To their dismay they found that the conversions of these people had been only in name while it was their hearts and the souls that needed a complete transformation. These converts carried the old baggage of evil customs and traditions with them which in no way were in consonance with the new faith; habits die hard. It is this sad state of affairs, the habitual indulgence in evil activities that is bringing bad name to Christianity. And these Christians are labelled evil-mongers.
5.4.1.3. Mass Illiteracy of the Christian Community

With the influx of Dalit poor and illiterate people into Christian society, especially in the border belt of Amritsar and Gurdaspur, the number of the illiterate into the folds of Christianity increased. The church is doing the duty faithfully by rendering every possible help to the poor children and encouraging them towards education. This most important need of the community is being addressed in a multipronged way. Not only are the illiterate parents motivated to send their children to schools in religious congregations but even different groups are formed specifically for this purpose in specific areas. Encouragement in the form of books, uniforms and some other odd needs of these poor children are looked after.

5.4.1.4. Christian Property Is Under Threat

The most serious problem that local church faces today is the protection of its landed property from its own flock. Most of the land which the missionaries had purchased and attached with the different institutions started for the upliftment of the community, has been usurped by those very members of the community who were supposed to take care of it. Some portions of this land have been illegally and clandestinely sold away. Enquiries have revealed the nefarious designs of the avaricious and unscrupulous members of the community.

The church has lost its prime land in most of the towns. This tendency is still prevailing among the few so-called leaders of the Churches. Thus, the church is very solicitous while handling over the properties to the individual even for cultivating. Even when the land is let out for cultivation, the cultivators try to establish their ownership over the land by crooked ways. This is happening at many places and Church is facing troubles. The stock answer of such cultivators is that it is their own property.

It is these unscrupulous greedy elements who are playing havoc with the church property in the temptation of easy money undermining the lofty mission of the luminaries of the church.

5.4.2. External Challenges

There are quite a number of other daunting problems facing not only the growth and development of the community but even threatening the very survival of the Christians. These inimical forces are ever ready to seize any and every opportunity to
tarnish the Christians as evil elements bent upon destroying the Indian culture and civilisation.

5.4.2.1. The Religious Challenges

The most important task to the Christian missionaries was Evangelism, in other words, the primary aim of the Christian missionaries. The missions sought to gain access to and to be of service to sectors of Indian society that had been virtually closed to them. A person who had the personal experience of God was impelled to preach Jesus to others.

Earlier the method of evangelisation was quite easy. In the past all who listened to the evangelist used to speak about Jesus. Prior to the mass movements the evangelisations were conducted in direct interactions. These included bazaar preaching, religious lecture as itinerate preaching in the villages or at religious melas and festivals where pilgrims gathered (Webster). Most of preachers preached in the villages. Missionaries went around the villages with the help of Indian animators and read a portion of the Bible to them. Interested villagers were invited to come for further discussion to the missionaries’ tent, which was pitched just outside the village. The method employed by the catholic priests for spreading the message of Christ was that they would stay in the village and proclaim Jesus to the villagers. There were a few catholic priests who used to stay together in a strategic place and used to disperse on Sunday evening or Monday morning to different villages either on cycle or by bus or on horseback. They would reach a village, camp there, stay at night in a house and eat whatever they got from that village. Almost the entire night would be spent in instruction, prayer and singing and the priest would be back to the main station on Saturday morning for the Sunday service and community prayers.¹¹

Things have changed drastically with the passage of time and with the modernization of communication facilities. It has become a great risk and challenge to the people to preach and proclaim ‘Jesus’ in public places. There are so many hostile forces which would never allow such preaching today. Secondly, negative attitude of the pastors who are really ignorant about the real teaching of Jesus. They interpret Bible ‘verbatim’ and accuse the other people’s faith. Naturally, when other people’s faith is challenged they react to it. The Christians are equally facing existential problems from
the fundamentalists. There have been stray incidents of grabbing of graveyard land by the jat Sikhs especially in the border belt of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts.

5.4.2.2. Problem of Conversion

The most heinous accusation against the Christians is forced conversion. Conversion from the upper classes and castes has been very rare. Those who embraced the liberating faith of Christianity from Punjab were menial workers and rural labourers and similar others deprived or marginalised sections of the society. The reason for their conversion besides the religious experience was that of obtaining a social identity and social status in the society.

People fail to understand that conversion is a personal decision and conviction and no one can be forced to embrace any religion or faith. But Christians are accused of forceful conversion by the fundamentalist forces of other religions. It has created a lot of tension and chaos and some people have lost their lives for this cause. A number of anti-missionary agitations have taken place in certain parts of the country. The recent incidents in Orissa, Kerala and Karnataka are such instances. The State Government of Punjab has admittedly been very positive about the role of missionaries in Punjab.

5.4.2.3. Communalism and Fundamentalism

The greatest threat to the Christian religion in ‘India Today’ is the fundamentalist attitude of the various Hindu organizations like R.S.S., B.J.P., V.H.P., Brahma Dal, Shiv Sena, Baring Dal, Sri Ram Sena and various fundamental groups of different faiths in different states. However, the rural Christian community in Punjab is not aware of the atrocities committed to the Christians in various parts of India. Luckily, these are not rampant in the villages in Punjab.

5.4.2.4. Inter-denominational Factor

The Church consists of different denominations basically divided into Catholic Church and Protestant Churches. The Protestant Church have different Churches namely, The Anglicans, C.N.I. (The Church of North India), The Salvation Army, The Methodist Church, The Seventh Day Adventist, etc. The most affluent and influential Christian community in Punjab were the protestant missions and they had under their management very prestigious institutions like C.M.C. (Christian Medical College and Hospital, Ludhiana); Baring Union Christian College Batala; Francis Newton Hospital, Ferozpur;
The Salvation Army, Mac Robert Hospital, Dhariwal; Elewan Public School, Pathankot which is run by the United Church of North India; Saint Thomas Technical Institute, Suranassi, Jalandhar; C.M.S. High School, Majitha; Alexander High School, Amritsar; etc.

The things changed with the establishment of the Catholic Church hierarchy in 1952 which established its head quarters in Jalandhar called “The Apostolic Prefecture of Jullundur”. It was created by Pope Pius XII. On December 6, 1971, the Prefecture of Jullundur was raised to the status of Diocese of Jullundur, and Right Reverend Symphorian Keeprath OFM, Capuchin was appointed its first Bishop.

He opened many village schools and various other institutions even in far-fetched villages through which the Christian community began to get education. Slowly, as the missionaries moved to villages and visited the different homes, people from the other denominations joined the Catholic Church. But their roots were in protestant mission and it was difficult for them to sever the affiliation with this mission. However, many of them got advantage from both the Church run institutions i.e. Catholic and Protestant. The education of the community got a boost. Secondly, matrimonial alliances between the two got accepted. The inter-denominational marriages took place and this helped to continue the alliance. Importantly, involvement of different missions and churches resulted in a great advantage to the unity and the struggle of the members.

Suggestions

On the basis of our field experience and the existing realities at the village level, there is a crying need to explore the possibilities of improving the living conditions of the Christian community at the village level. There are exploited and marginalized groups in the villages. However, with the rising awareness of basis human rights and the media help, there is some change in the attitude and behaviour of the people towards the Christians living in the villages.

1. Need for Charismatic Leadership

The root cause of many ills that plague the rural Christian community is the lack of proper leadership. Being generally illiterate and marginalised, these poor people need a tall, selfless and a farsighted person to rejuvenate their sagging morale and take them out of the rut of despondency.
Problems and Prospectus of the Community

It is a fact that such person would face tough opposition by the men interested in keeping the rural Christians in subjugation and by the different factions within the community. But unless and until such a leadership in the form of a guiding spirit who can bring about radical changes in the mindset of the community, and who can forge a sense of purposeful unity, rises things are not going to change much.

Much consultation was held in the year 2008-2009 under the leadership of Bishop Anil Couto, Bishop of Jalandhar, to bring all the Christian Community under one banner. But it failed to materialize due to the infighting among the various factions of the small time and self-centered Christian leaders.

2. Establishment of a Political Identity

The community needs a political voice to draw the attention of the power that be to the socio-economic grievance that have almost paralysed its growth and development. It is felt that the only remedy to the malaise that has set in the community is the floating of a political party which can represent the community in all earnestness. The various organisations and the associations of the Christians have failed to get a sympathetic response for the various governments in the state. It is felt that the existing organisations have their own agenda to pursue and do never look beyond their own interest.

3. Education

For a subtle and a positive change in the overall life style of the poor rural Christian, the one and the most effective tool is the education. Since these people are mostly illiterate, all efforts to bring about any reforms in the socio-economic scenario come to naught. It is imperative; therefore, that free and compulsory schooling should be introduced. A number of committed and professional non-governmental organisations should be fully entrusted with the implementation of the scheme.

There is no denying the fact that the Christian missionaries have done and are still doing practically a yeoman’s service in the field of education for the society as a whole. Yet, much needs to be done.

By the end of 18th century the missionaries took the initiative by introducing education in areas where the government machinery would not dare to
Christian missionaries did not restrict their activities to the urban centres such as Lahore and Amritsar alone but were also interested to reach out to the rural areas as well. The Roman Catholic Church contributed a lot to remove illiteracy from the border belt and educate them.

The Roman Catholic Church has opened many schools in the border belt both in English medium as well as in vernacular language. There is also a College named St. Mary’s College for women in Othian, in Ajanala started by Bishop Symphorian Keeprath on 15th July, 2002, for the education of the girls. They have opened many hostels for the poor children. Most of the respondents told us that the missionaries were constantly motivating and inspiring them to send their wards to school.

4. Development of Cottage Industries

One of the effective steps for tackling the economic woes of the rural Christians could be establishing of some cottage and small-scale industries so that the landless poor Christian find some gainful employment. Such an opportunity would free them from the perennial jobs of farm labour as also decrease the charges of drug-addiction and crime.

Thus opening the areas of employment would eventually lead to the socio-economic empowerment of the community.

5 Reservation of seats in the Panchayat

The rural Christians in Punjab should be treated at par with the scheduled castes and Rai Sikhs and should have the privilege of reservation of seats in the Panchyats. When elected as Sarpanches, they should have the powers to execute welfare schemes for the community.

6. Minority Status of the Community

The Christian community is a religious minority. It forms just 1.4 percent of the total population of Punjab. They are not thus politically visible. But it is imperative that they retain their identity and not be overshadowed existentially. The need is the granting of the minority status which in itself ensures the survival of the community as an individual entity.
Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, an in-depth analysis of the problems and prospectus of the rural Christians has been attempted. The problems facing them are existential and the remedies needed should be equally effective and far reaching. The problems call for the attention of the government as well as the community leaders (whosoever, they be). The concerted and comprehensive efforts of both, and not the occasional cosmetic touches, alone can ensure good prospectus for the community.
END NOTES

1. The word Saai is the distorted form of ‘Issai’ which means followers of ‘Issa’ i.e. is Christ. ‘Issai’ is the right expression meaning the followers of ‘Issa’, i.e. Jesus Christ.


9. Ibid, p. 183


11. Interview with Fr.Thomas Kalapura on 25th March, 2008. He is the first Catholic Priest for the Diocese of Jalandhar from India.