It is no mean task for a student to understand and then evaluate the area of one’s study, especially one that has to present a comprehensive narrative of a community right from its inception in India, its meandering history, trials and tribulations and the eventual present; its presence in the state of Punjab where it has had a history of long years.

The Indian Christians, particularly, the Christians of South India have inherited their faith from one of the apostles of Jesus himself known as St. Thomas the Apostle. Historically, St. Thomas came to South India in 52 A.D. and preached among the South Indians where the believers call themselves as Syrian Christians. These are believed to be the high caste Brahmins and namboodries who got converted to Christianity with the teaching of St. Thomas the Apostle. He suffered martyrdom in Madras and the Christians align him to the tomb of St. Thomas at Madras. It is also strongly argued that in AD 42, St. Thomas the apostle, came to Punjab and after hearing the death of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, he went back to Jerusalem and later came again to India and reached South India.

The spread of the Christianity in India began with the arrival of a Jesuit priests under the guidance of St. Francis Xavier in the 15th century and the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries who started to preach Christianity in Goa and surrounding areas.

As the missionaries were able to bring more and more people to the Christian fold, more and more foreign missionaries were sent by their respective organizations to work among the marginalized and the lower castes. The missionaries were completely new and inexperienced about Punjabi culture and traditions. They stayed in mud huts in the midst of the poorest of the people, the out-caste of the Indian society, who for their living at all times depended upon the landlords.

The mass movements to Christianity were also accompanied by many difficulties. The most difficult task was that the missionaries did not comprehend for the individual needs of the people as the number of the people increased in the Church roll. It was a yeomen’s task for the missionaries to bring them and teach them the Christian faith and principles. The missionaries were not well versed in the local language, customs and
culture and they found difficulty in communicating the Christian faith. They also faced shortage of personnel and money to run the day to day activities of the Church. Meanwhile, the number of the villages where the missionaries worked kept increasing, and so did the distances the missionaries had to travel up and down. But these initial difficulties did not dissuade and deter the missionaries to work.

The mass movements and conversion to the Christianity brought the converts a new identity among the oppressed and marginalized people. Together with the spiritual awakening of the low caste people of the Punjab, these people were also socially uplifted. With the arrival of the missionaries and opening of many educational institutions they felt liberated from the tyranny of unscrupulous landlords and attained some happiness.

The missionaries were able to reach out to people because of the various educational institutions they established in various cities and villages in Punjab. They introduced various English medium schools for imparting quality education to the people of Punjab. Even today, the Christians, though a microscopic community in the land of Punjab are running and leading famous educational and health institutions.

The Christians in the area under the study are overwhelmingly poor and illiterate. It was found that only a handful of people owned the land i.e. 24 out of 360 respondents under study. Most of the landless come from communities of Chuhras and Meg whose condition is deplorable. The majority of the Christians are from the second or third generation Christians. It was known that many Christians belonging to Roman Catholic Church are from first or second generation converted Christians. Like all the untouchable communities the Christians are living separately or on the outskirts of the villages which they call lendepasse.

The life situation is changing even though the majority of them are living in the low lying area of the village and are prone to the floods and slushy conditions in rainy season. It is seen that most of the houses have electricity and have some basic amenities of life in the villages. The economic condition of the people has witnessed some improvement. There is a notable change in the structure of the houses and their locations etc. An attitudinal change in mutual relations with the other communities is also happening. Respect and love for one another is manifest.

One realizes that the caste prejudice which affected the village structure has thinned a bit among the people living along the border belt of Punjab. However, the caste
prejudices come to the fore when some vital issues concerning the different communities collectively rise up; upper castes have upper hand invariably. The Christians living in the border belt are victims of forced labour, sexual abuse and forceful eviction from the houses if they fail to pay back the loans they take from the landlords or money lenders. There are sometimes caste related atrocities taking place against the Christians in the villages. All such clashes and atrocities against the Christians, are subsequently followed by a severe socio-economic sanctions laid down by the landlords. In such situations, there is practically no one to protect them or to secure justice or redressal; the Christians in the villages do follow the commands given by the landlords or the village Panchayat.

Outlining the social and economic profile of the respondents we find a larger proportion of Christians in Punjab live in rural areas. Many are employed as bonded labourers and work in the field of landlords in the villages. Historically, Dalits of Punjab have been largely landless. This could be partly due to the Land Alienation Act of 1901 which denied non-agriculturalist castes to own land. Most often cultivable land in rural Punjab is owned by the dominant Jat and some other upper and middle level caste groups. Even though this act was revoked in 1952, very small proportions of Christian dalits have owned land or have been cultivators. Those Christians who cultivated lands in the past invariably did so by leasing out land. The reason being cited was that they didn’t have had the wherewithal like tractors, bore-wells, or canal water and therefore they were forced to lease out their land to the people living nearby at a little amount. Subsequently, the tenant would refuse to vacate the land and eventually the owner of the land was forced to sell the land to the tenant at a throw-away price. It is significant to note that very few Christians in Punjab, particularly, those living in the districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur received ownership over land during the land reforms. Nearly, 93.33 per cent of the rural Christians respondents did not own any agricultural land and only around 6.60 per cent of respondents reported to be possessing little holdings of land.

In terms of family-size, the rural Christians are numerically more in number compared to the urban Christians. It is reasoned that the traditional power structure of the village depends more on the number of members in the family. Another reason is that more children mean more earning for the family. However, there is some change in the hackneyed attitude of the people due to the increasing awareness among the people. The number of girl children is more among the Christians than in other religious groups. The argument for this is that the Christians try their best to educate the people the value of the
girl child in the society. Christianity teaches them that abortion is a sin and one cannot take the life of an unborn child. Life is a gift given by God to people and we have no right to terminate it.

The living conditions of the Christians in the border belt of Gurdaspur and Amritsar are depressing, indeed. One of the crucial problems about the rural Christians is that they are landless and thus are poor. Unless the rural Christians have their own economic resources, which could ensure a dignified and independent living, their dependence on landlords and the discriminations are likely to continue in some form or other. The main inconveniences of the village life are the insanitary conditions, lack of pure drinking water, the accumulation of filth, the presence of manure-heaps, and the existence of ponds of stagnant water near the houses of the Christians which cause hazards to health.

Yet, a more serious handicap is the apathy of the state government: The Christian dalits are being denied the Schedule Caste benefits (Protective Discrimination) and are excluded from the scope of the Acts meant to give special protection to the people of untouchable origin from the crime of untouchability and caste atrocities. This is nothing but the blatant discrimination of the state against a powerless people and based on communal grounds and in violation of the fundamental rights of the people.

As far as the political participation of the rural Christians is concerned, the Christians do not appear to be having any role except in helping a political party. Christians are mere vote banks in the hands of a few landlords or political parties. In a situation where the political process is dominated by caste, class factors and the strength of numbers, the hapless Christians of the border belt are ever being exploited as a vote bank, treated totally on the marginality of the political process. It is no less alarming that they are not allowed to function independently or affect an edifice without the consent and approval of the high caste living in the village.

When we look into the role played by the Christians in politics in the modern day, the impact can be felt in the respective villages at the most, and not beyond. Their influence being limited, the scope of Christians playing a significant role in the society is a remote possibility, at least, in the near future.

The Christians do not have a tall leader of consequence who would command respect and honour among all the denominations of Christian communities. The majority of the Christian leaders change their loyalties as and when it suits them.
Leadership is one of the most important factors for the growth of a community. A dynamic leader with a vision and mission can lead the people towards better things. A great leader moves people. They ignite one’s dormant energy and inspire the best in them. Rural Christians of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts lack firebrand leaders. What we noticed during the interaction was that there were no sincere but self-styled leaders working for their own social, political and economic ends.

In Gurdaspur there is factionalism among the people and which creates a sort of the bewilderment and disorientation among the Christian masses, who fail to, identify and differentiate between the opportunists and the committed and sincere people.

Politics is not the forte of the Christians, in general. May be that the present day politics has been submerged totally under communalism and casteism. And the Christians are miniscule minority with little political potentiality. There are a few Christians who become members of the village Panchayat and Sarpanches where they have the numerical strength especially in the villages of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. Approximately, in about 18 constituencies of Vidhan Sabha and two Lokh Sabha seats, the success or the election of candidate depends upon the support of the Christians to some extent. At the time of assembly or Lokh Sabha elections, they are left with no choice but to support - either of the parties i.e. the Congress or the Akali Dal. Their votes are taken for granted. The opportunists buy and sell as brokers the votes of the community. Some religious leaders show keenness in elections but after the election, they beat the retreat when they are unable to get the promised benefits from the government.

Secondly, the majority of the rural Christians are attached with landlords and political leaders and not to political parties and do the bidding of their masters.

The poor socio-economic conditions also deter and discourage Christians from entering into active politics. How can they participate in the elections and active politics which needs enormous money power. Even elections in the villages are fought by spending lakhs of rupees and lot of alcohol.

Rural Christians are aware of politics mainly during the elections and that too during the Panchayat elections more so because of the sound and fury at that time. A few of them are active during the election to the Vidhan Sabha whereas there is lack of interest and enthusiasm during the time of election to Lokh Sabha. Some people were not even aware who their MP was. They are more worried about the day to day life and
problems involved therein. The policies and programmes of the party do not influence them or change their life pattern.

Another disturbing problem is the unemployment among the rural Christians. It has become too acute in the border belt of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. Unemployment is mainly due to the widening gap between the high growth of labour force and the low growth of employment opportunities. This has led to the destabilization in the society. Crime has increased. And the drug addiction among the rural population has become widespread. The young people nurture high expectations. A school passes out dreams to get a white collared job and shuns doing any labour. He ends up in frustration when he fails to realize his dreams. So every school pass out and drop out add to the woes of unemployment in the community.

The Christians in these two districts are mostly illiterate. The older generation is absolutely unlettered but the present scenario is different as the children are going to the schools with the advent of the missionaries opening formal and non-formal educational centers. No doubt, some people are not able to send their wards to schools because of abject poverty or because their parents are not sufficiently motivated. Sometimes all the family members are employed with the landlord that they are unable to send the children to the school because of their commitment. The high castes, landed people, are pleased with such a scheme of things, otherwise, landlords will lose their work force and which will in turn affect their cultivation.

Some of the rural Christians frankly confess to a sense of inferiority complex because of their low, social, economic status. Self- esteem and self identity is at low ebb when they are with the people of higher caste. When there are disputes between the Jat and rural Christians, voices of the Christians are always muted. The Christians are ever the sufferers, voiceless against the Jats fearing the social boycott that follows such disputes. In the Majha region, they are always under debt and under the control of landlord.

Dalit Christians of Punjab are discriminated by the state government too in the field of reservation in government jobs unlike the other Dalits who enjoy the benefits of the reservation policies of the government. Most of these people are from the downtrodden caste and had embraced Christianity under the influence of the Christian animators and facilitators. In the Majha region, the Dalit Christians are getting education but do not enjoy any facilities from the government.
The study leads to an awareness of the existential realities of the rural Christian community, which are distressing and need both long and short term ameliorative measures to foster a healthy and a resourceful community. Some of the suggestions listed below have emerged during the study and need thoughtful consideration.

1. Education should be made free and compulsory. The poor families should be motivated to send their children to school through different incentives.

2. Training centres should be opened nearby where the young boys and girls can acquire the basic skills in different trades. So that they are fit to earn their living independently.

3. Reservation benefits accruing to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes be extended to the marginalised rural Christians who have embraced Christianity but nevertheless belong to the same backward class as others outside Christianity enjoy.

4. Various rural employment guarantee schemes should be made accessible to the rural landless community to help them tide over the crippling economic woes.

5. Small scale industries which could utilise the little skilled labour like activities peripheral to carpet weaving, dyeing, embroidery centres and such handicrafts be opened in centrally located villages to help the poor people earn a living.

6. Sustained efforts should be made to make the community conscious of gender equality so that the women who have been the worst suffer of discrimination and oppression, are emancipated from the miserable existence and lead a dignified life.

7. The Christian missionaries who did a great job reaching to the people and spreading the message of Jesus Christ, left an extraordinary legacy of selfless missionary work; but over the years self serving men in the garb of leaders have done precious little to address the numerous socio-economic and even religious worries facing the community. The heads of various Christian organisations, associations and other related bodies put their heads together to find remedy for the deep malaise that has set in the body of the community. It is not enough to open schools but it would be a greater service to provide some back up in the form of some technical institute to train the school pass out in some useful trades to help them earn an honourable living. Ostentations spending in family functions – especially marriages – be socially disallowed. Such expenditure results in loans
from money lenders; vicious debt traps bonded labour and loss of human dignity. Prevention of such evil splendour would help much. The body community needs an internal scanning more than the external cosmetics treatment. Let the maladies infesting the community be pin-pointed one by one and treated on a sustained level to rid the community of the evils and render it healthy.

Some of the emerging trends amongst the Christian community are:-

1. Greater awareness of the majority of Christians regarding their socio-economic and political situations.

2. There is an attitudinal change in the perceptions of the rural Christian community. They used to depend more on the missionaries to get their work done. The situation has changed and the people are able to do their own work by themselves.

3. There is some change in the living conditions of the people in the villages and their economic and living conditions have improved somewhat. Some new houses are coming up with a change in the location of the houses. Some of them are at least going out for work, and have their own conveyances.

4. Majority of the Christians living in the villages have a desire to send their children for higher education to various places which was not a story sometime back.

5. An awakening of women of their rights, status and role in the community is brought about with the help of self-help groups Churches and other social organizations. Thiers is a demand for greater participation in the society.

6. Greater participation in politics and vigorous competition among the rural Christian community can be seen among the people now. In the village level Panchayat elections more participation of the people is seen.

7. In the village level politics, more people want to support the Congress party though they also support the Akali Dal in Punjab. But the difficulty in supporting the Akali Dal is that they are the power sharers of Bharatia Janata Party, which is considered anti Christian.

8. The institutional Church has a dominant and significant role to play in the development of the people in the villages. It needs to move away from its sacred world view, and enter into the lives of the people fully, to rise with them in a new
and wonderful way. This means developing a new attitude of solidarity, and understanding which is appreciated whole heartedly.

9. The organized Churches need to re-organize and revolutionalize the working by giving greater involvement to laity. By involving more people in to the Church, it can demonstrate the principles of participatory process which is very much needed for the growth of the society at large.

The rural Christian Community has not only been discriminated against by the larger society but also some of urban Christians themselves. The Christian institutions have been located in the urban centers, the urban Christians have mostly benefited from these institutions. The rural Christians had a very small chance of entering these elitist institutions. Even today, the priest has to coax children to go to school as illiterate parents do not see the value of having their children educated. This attitude, although on the decrease, is still prevalent in the rural areas. A large majority of Christians continue to be uneducated, discriminated against and face lack of economic opportunities to better themselves. The migration from rural to urban areas is continuing. Being unskilled, these people take up any job, mostly on daily basis, which in turn enables them to meet only the daily needs. They are unable to save anything for the future and also spend for the education of their children. Although, they are economically poor, yet, they are becoming assertive.

The problems of the rural Christian community are troublesome. However, there is transformation and change taking place in the rural society. There is tangible change and the rural Christians are on the path of a good prospect.