

Searching for a New Identity: Christianity, Conversion and Dalit Sikhs*

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The advent and spread of Christianity in the Punjab would have been a limited affair but for the “dalits”, the depressed classes of the Punjab. The present Christian community is the result of the mass movement and efforts of the missionaries in the Punjab. The paper also examines the eyewitness accounts of the missionaries which are helpful in demystifying the myth of “equality among the Sikhs”. These accounts also reinforce our understanding of the status of Mazhabi Sikhs as a lower caste among the Sikhs. Using the terms, “foreign enclaves” and “ritually neutral area” from Milton Singer’s classic study, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*, the author has tried to demonstrate the processes of isolation, slow acceptance, and incorporation of the converts.

Keywords: Sikhs, Conversion, Mazhabi, Christianity, Untouchables, Ditt Singh

Introduction

“Within a short time isai, the word meaning Christian, acquired a pejorative sense and became synonymous with Cuhra (Chuhra), the Punjabi word for the Untouchable sweeper” (Khushwant Singh, 1999, p. 138)¹.

With the belief that

Conversion is not a long and elaborate process ... but short and simple ... (which) does not require learning and knowledge ... attainable by the poor and illiterate, who appear to accept the gift easily...whilst the rich hold fast to the world, and the learned stand by their logic, (Gordon, 1886, p. 462)

the missionaries embarked on to the journey of conversion in the land of five rivers. The reasons for choosing Punjab as a field of conversion were historical, political as well as religious. John Newton, one of the first missionaries, cites the reasons as:

No other section of India is so full of historic interest as this. It was from here that the great battle was fought which is described in the Mahabharat. It was through the Punjab that every successful invasion of India has taken place, except the British. It was here that the tide of Alexander’s victories terminated. (Newton, 1886, p. 4; Loehlin, 1997, p. 187)

The attraction of the martial race was no less. The Sikhs were seen as “the most interesting, most

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¹ See Thapar (2010) for a valuable account of the opposition between Christianity as a linear religion and the “Hindus” who were regarded as “the other” religions. “Folk-Hinduism”, the religion of the untouchables was regarded as impure and was not a part of Brahmanic religion (pp. 3, 10, 24).

accessible, and least bigoted race in the Punjab, as well as the most vigorous and manly” (Clark, 1885, pp. 75-76; Loehlin, 1997, p. 189). And Punjab was

the land of the Sikhs—a people of fine physique, and unusually independent character; a people, moreover, who had already, in principle at least, discarded the old idolatry of Hindooism, and broken, in some measure, the bonds of caste; and therefore might be considered to be in a favourable state to be influenced by the preaching of Christian Missionaries. (Newton, 1886, p. 4; Loehlin, 1997, p. 187; Kapur, 1986, p. 14; Arshi, 2004, p. 51)

Unable to understand the multiple dimensions of Hinduism², Sikhism, in contrast, seemed closer to the uni-identification of God and the Christian missionaries as well as the British administrators preferred to divert their efforts and energies towards the understanding of the Sikh religion and their people. Sikhs were viewed as “chosen people, meant to inherit the gift of eternal life, with many other nations who still at that day be found saved, and walking in the light of the Lamb” (Tony Ballantyne, 2006, p. 51). Though Nanak’s teachings were regarded as containing a way to revelation, the Sikhs were seen as still grappled with the beliefs of Hinduism and hence needed to be shown the right path of truth. According to one of the missionaries, “The shabad of the Granth is in truth no more than the Eternal Logos—the mass of Nanak’s followers have not risen to his ideals, for they are still bound by the grave-clothes of Hindu superstition” (Quoted by Doris R. Jakobsh, 2003, p. 59). The only way was to turn towards the Gospel. An article published in the *Christian Missionary Intelligence*, July 1851, made its point clear with the words, “The inhabitants of the Punjab are like the lands around them, which are laying waste for want of irrigation. The Sikh religion cannot benefit them. It has been tried and found worthless” (Tony Ballantyne, 2006, p. 51). Similarly, Fitzpatrick and Clark (1886 cited in Doris, 2003, p. 59) argued,

Though the Brahman religion still sways the minds of a large proportion of the population of the Punjab, and the Mohammedan of another, the dominant religion and power for the last century has been the Sikh religion, a species of pure theism, formed in the first instance by a dissecting sect from Hinduism. A few hopeful instances lead us to believe that the Sikhs may prove more accessible to scriptural truths than the Hindus and Mohammedans. (as cited in Doris R. Jakobsh, 2003, p. 59)

And they were proved right. Within a short period of time, the region of Punjab was at the danger of turning into a Christian state.

Christianity, Conversion and Untouchables: Arrival and Expansion of Missionary Missions

The origin of Christianity in Punjab may be traced to the arrival of John C. Lowrie³, an American Presbyterian missionary. In 1834, Captain Wade, the first British political agent in India, had invited John Lowrie to establish the first mission at Ludhiana and to take charge of the Anglo-Vernacular School. It is believed that Christianity came to Punjab as early as AD 52 with the coming of St. Thomas who had converted people as well (McMullen, 1990; Mores, 1964; Singh, 1967). The Sikhs were familiar with Christianity even during the Guru-period is evident from the Varan of Bhai Gurdas. But the credit for spreading Christianity and

² See Thapar (2010) for a valuable account of the opposition between Christianity as a linear religion and the “Hindus” who were regarded as “the other” religions. “Folk-Hinduism”, the religion of the untouchables was regarded as impure and was not a part of Brahmanic religion (pp. 3, 10, 24).

³ The sole voice which disputes this fact is that of Gurcharan Singh Arshi who in his doctoral work, published as a book with the title, “Esaee Missionarie. Punjabi Bhasha Te Sahit”, cites one book, *The Acts of St. Thomas* (Anonymous) as a proof for the arrival of the missionaries in Punjab much earlier, and not in the 19th century.

conversion in the Punjab region, during the initial period, can be attributed to the American Presbyterian Church which had its centres at “Ludhiana, 1834; Saharanpur, 1835; Sabathu, 1836; Jullunder, 1846; Lahore, 1848; Ambala City, 1848; AmbalaCantt, 1850; Rawalpindi, 1856; Kapurthala, 1860, Hoshiarpur, 1867; Ferozepore, 1869; Rupar, 1890; Khanna, 1894; Phillaur, 1897; Kasur, 1900 and Moga 1909” (Loehlin, 1997, p. 196). The Church Missionary Society, the Church of Scotland, the Salvation Army, the Methodist Church and many more organisations joined in this Godly mission to spread the Gospel.

The Church Missionary Society started its work in 1853 and chose Amritsar as its first centre in Punjab. The Methodist Church began its work in Lahore in 1880, the Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1855 and 1856. The Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic European Community, though, could start their work in the early 20th century only. With Bible in their hands and preachings of Christ on lips, they were found competing with each other to woo and attract converts. Christian missionaries were not only supported by the British Government (though a later development, especially after the Revolt of 1857), but were also provided with all kinds of help by the native rulers as well. In order to gauge the mode of establishing the centre, its activities and expansion, especially among the untouchable castes, the author would like to cite a number of reports from the District Gazetteers of the Undivided Punjab. In the *Gazetteer of Patiala State*, a detailed account is given as:

Patiala lies in the parish of Ambala, and the Chaplain of Ambala pays it occasional visits. There is a small church, capable of holding 35 people. There are 122 Native Christians of all sects. The chief mission is that of the American Reformed Presbyterian Church which was established in 1892 in the reign of Maharaja Rajinder Singh by Dr. Scott, a Medical Missionary. The Maharaja gave him a piece of land 16 bighas in area with a number of valuable trees and permitted him to erect a house of his own on the site. Houses have also been built on it for the missionaries. The only other society working among the Native Christians in Patiala is the American Methodist Episcopal Mission which was established in 1890. In the village of Rampur Katani, in Pail tahsil an Anglo-Vernacular Primary School has been started by the Revd. Dr. Wherry of the Ludhiana American Mission, and in this 22 Jat and Muhammadan boys receive instruction. There is also a Mission School at Basi, where 12 or 13 sweeper boys are taught, but the school cannot be said to flourish. (*District & States Gazetteers of the Undivided Punjab: Prior to independence*, 2006, p. 84)

Similar accounts are provided for the district of Amritsar as:

Amritsar is in the Anglican Diocese of Lahore and St. Paul's Church in the Civil Lines is maintained by the Government of India. Amritsar is now an outstation of Lahore Cantonment and the Chaplain visits once a month or more often if necessary.

The principal mission is that conducted jointly by the Church Missionary Society and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society. The Amritsar Mission dates back to 1852, and a detailed history of the early days of the Mission is contained in a book entitled *The Missions of the Church Missionary Society and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society in the Punjab and Sindh* by Robert Clark. By 1854, a branch of the mission had been established in Jandiala, and educational work of different kinds started in the city of Amritsar. The work spread outwards to centres, such as Majitha, Tarn Tarn, Ajnala, and Asrapur.

Amritsar is the headquarters of the Assistant Bishop of Lahore, and the work in the Amritsar district is his special care. The main emphasis of the mission work in recent years has been on the building up of the Christian church in the villages. This work is now more and more in the hands of the Indian clergy and their assistant lay workers. Efforts are being made to build simple village churches in every centre with a considerable Christian Congregation.

The Revd. Fr. Michael Angela, who was later became Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of Hindustan, was the first Catholic priest to reside at Amritsar in the Cantonment. This was in 1860s. The present church, built in honour of St. Francis of Assisi, was built in 1863, and since then there has been a resident priest at Amritsar with an intermission from 1914 to 1932. At present, there are three priests living at Amritsar who are Franciscan Copuchins of Belgian nationality.

As long as there was only one resident priest, the Catholic activities were almost exclusively limited to the ministration to the British Troops, the railway employees and other European Civilians residing at Amritsar Cantonment and town. Missionary activity among the Indians of the district was systematically initiated in 1929; and, at present, the Catholic Church counts 2,500 adherents living in about 80 different villages. In April, 1939, the Indian Catholics of Amritsar Town associated and founded, "The Indian Catholic Union of Amritsar Town", for the spiritual and temporal welfare of their community. Their present strength is about 70 members (Macfarquhar, 1947, pp. 62-65).

The above reports show the rapid expansion of Christianity. It seems to be a part of the well-planned strategy to target not only the villages but specifically the members of the most depressed and exploited section of the rural communities. The weak position, ritual as well as economical, made the untouchable castes not only the most vulnerable group but the incentives offered in the form of educational and job opportunities were the additional attractions. Whether it resulted into the process of formation of a "new identity" or not will be explored later. Here, to revert to the source of District Gazetteer, the author would cite from the *Report of Sialkot District* which was one of the main centres of conversion of Sikh Dalits into Christianity.

The Church of England, the Scotch and American Presbyterian Missions, and the Roman Catholic Church, all work in the district, and the three former churches have settled their respective spheres of activity. At the census of 1911 the Christians numbered 48,620, against 1,535 recorded thirty years before that and the "mass movement" has been more successful here than elsewhere in the Punjab. Indian converts comprise 95 per cent of the total; the majority of these were originally Chuhras (emphasis mine), employed as serfs or farm labourers, and as a rule they have kept to their old profession.

...The Church of England Mission at Narowal in the Raya Tahsil was founded by the Rev. Dr. Bruce in 1859 and owes a great deal of its success and expansion to the labours of the well-known missionary, the Rev. Rowland Bateman, who was appointed to Narowal in 1872. ...The sphere of the Mission is confined to the Northern part of the Raya Tahsil. The work may be divided into two sections (a) Institutional, (b) Pastoral and Evangelistic. In connection with (a) there is one High School, eighteen Primary Schools and a Hospital ... Pastoral and Evangelistic work is carried on in Narowal and about 250 surrounding villages, in about 170 of which congregations have been formed from among the Chuhras. In fact practically the whole of the Chuhra community have either been baptised or are under instructions, the total number of baptised being about 5,700. These village christians are all agricultural labourers, and considering their poverty they contribute generously to Church Funds. They are not the only fruit of the Narowal Mission, for many of the leading Christians of the Punjab, too, owe their conversion to it. In Narowal itself there is a large church, which seats 400 in the actual building, and can accommodate three to four thousand in the quadrangle attached to it, while there are ten small church buildings in the villages...The mass movement among the Chuhras in the eighties necessitated the opening of village schools, with a central training institution at Daska, which was intended primarily to prepare youths of the district congregations for village and other Christian work. ...The Sialkot Mission of the United Presbyterian Church of North America was founded by the Rev. Andrew Gordon in 1855. The governing body is the missionary association appointed by the General Assembly of the Church. Five men and ten women work in Sialkot district of whom four are engaged in educational work, two in medical work, and the others in direct evangelistic work. There are six Indian ministers, all pastors of self-supporting congregations. There are twenty-two organized congregations, many of which are in charge of unordained teachers. The membership numbers 15,344 and the Christian community 28,487, living in 783 villages...The centres where missionaries reside are Sialkot, Pasrur, and Zafarwal. ...The Roman Catholic Mission was founded by the late Rt. Rev. Dr. Mouard Bishop of Lahore. ...There are four centres, each with a church, namely, Sialkot, Pasrur, Adah

and Sahowala serving 330 villages, in which are about 7,100 converts and some thousands of catechumens. There are also ten small chapels or oratories. Many of the converts have gone to the canal colonies for settlement. (*Sialkot District [Punjab District gazetteers]*, 1920, pp. 59-61) (emphasis mine)

It is obvious from the above records that there was a tremendous increase in the population of the Christians, highlighting the process of conversion. In 1881, there were only 3,796 Christians in the Punjab, which raised to 19,547 in 1891. With their consistent efforts and “outcastes” as the willing converts, the number of the Christians had increased to 37,980 in 1901, 163,994 in 1911, and to 315,931 in 1921 (Government of India [GOI], 1891; Kapur, 1986, p. 14). The number of Christians increased three-fold between 1901 and 1911 and the missionaries were especially successful in attracting large numbers of outcastes into the Christian Church (Dowie, 1974). In addition to educational benefits and acquiring a new identity, grants were given in the canal colonies for Christian settlements in 1899 and many converts went to these colonies. *The Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony* (1904) documented the arrival of the Christian Missionaries as:

All the principal Christian missions are represented in the Colony. At the first auction of land on the Rakh Branch the Roman Catholic Mission bought 645 acres in Manza No. 3 (Maryabad) and the land is formed by their own Christian tenants. In 1898 the Church Missionary Society applied for and obtained the grant of a whole Mauza (No. 424, Jhang Branch, Montgomerywala, named after Lieutenant-Colonel J. A. L. Montgomery, C. S. I., then Settlement Commissioner) for distribution to Christian converts (emphasis mine), who hold the land on peasant terms, it being made a condition that the grantees should have been previously employed in agricultural pursuits. The same mission subsequently obtained a second small Mauza (No. 461, Gugera Branch, Batemanabad, called after the Revd. Roland Bateman, the well known missionary). The principle of such grants having once been established, Mauza 371, Gugera Branch, was allotted to Christians selected by the American and Scotch Presbyterian Missions, and Mauza 51, Gugera Branch, to the Roman Catholic Mission.

The allotment of land, not to the mission but to the converts, was in conformity with the system prevailing all over the colony from which it was thought better not to deviate. It has, however, its disadvantages in the eyes of the missions, because the grantees at once become independent and are not liable to ejection for grave moral delinquencies or even for subsequent apostasy. The missionaries have therefore very little temporal hold over them and there can be little doubt that it is not altogether good for converts drawn usually from the lowest classes of society to be promoted to sudden affluence (emphasis mine). (GOI, 1904)

An upsurge in the rate of conversion can not only be attributed to the enthusiasm of the missionaries but the cause was equally supported by the British government. Their initiative to directly allot the land to the converts, as is apparent from the above account, was not considered a welcome move, especially by the missionaries. The most alarming development was the involvement of the women missionary workers known as Zenana Missions. They could approach the private and secluded sphere of the house and along with imparting tailoring, sewing skills could easily preach the gospel. Sometimes both husband and wife actively participated in this mission. The network of schools, hospitals, and churches was fully incorporated within the state of Punjab and the Chenab Colony was no exception. Montgomerywala had a Church capable of accommodating 800 people; there were schools for boys and girls as well as a dispensary. There was a boys' school at Batemanabad and during the writing of the report, that is, in 1904, the funds were being raised for Church. The European clergyman who was stationed at Toba Tek Singh was engaged in spending most of his time in

marching over the colony, visiting and converting. Apart from the 1,327 converts in the two church of England Mauzas, there are 2,416 others scattered over 132 villages and in six of these there are Mission Schools teaching up to the primary standard” (GOI, 1904, p. 60)

The American mission had its headquarters at Lyallpur and Khangah Dogran where lady American missionaries were also involved. In 1893, the Christian community numbered only 609, but it increased to 2,200, including the Presbyterian village as reported by the Revd. T. E. Holiday who also had 100 boys in his schools. Natives were also actively participating in all the activities as says the report,

In the Christian village the grantees have supported a native pastor for two years and are now building a substantial brick Church. In Lyallpur the Revd. O. Crowe has a church, a girls' school and a reading room; in Sangla a boys' school, with four peripatetic evangelists. His whole flock numbers about 2,000. The Census of 1901 showed a population of 8,616 Christians; an average of 110 for every 10,000 of the total population, a percentage only equalled by Gurdaspur among the Punjab Districts. (GOI, 1904, p. 60)

Table 1

List of the Christian Villages in the Chenab Colony

Mauza No.	Branch	Mission	Size of the land
3	Rakh Branch (Maryabad)	Roman Catholic	645 acres bought in auction
424	Jhang Branch (Montgomerywala)	Church Missionary	2,572 acres
462	Gugera Branch (Batemanabad)	Church Missionary	663 acres
371	Gugera Branch (KotIeain)	American Presbyterian and Scotch Presbyterian	2,605 acres allotted in equal shares
51	Gugera Branch (Khushpur)	Roman Catholic	1,908 acres allotted

Note. Source: GOI (1904).

The encouragement shown by the government was further intensified by passing of the Act in 1850 which enabled the converts to inherit ancestral property. A point came when it became difficult to distinguish “between the goals of British rule and evangelism. In their eyes both stood for Christian civilization” (Harjot Singh Oberoi, 1994, p. 219). In fact, the Punjab administrators, along with the missionaries, considered it their duty to show the right way of salvation to the natives. During the Punjab Missionary Conference held at Lahore in 1862, Donald McLeod who had presided the conference, argued,

If the Bible be the word of God and the books revered by the Hindus and the Mohammedan contain mere fables, then it must have been intended that the Christian rule prepare the way for the spread of the gospel. (Ibid, p. 219)

But it was not always the case as the government policy was one of “religious non-interference” or to remain neutral in the matters of religion⁴. As a result “the government refused to make the study of the Bible compulsory in schools or to promote specifically Christian interests in other ways. In fact, it showed itself ‘most reluctant’ to employ Indian Converts” (Webster, 1976, pp. 188-189; McMullen, 1990, p. 124).

Jeffery Cox in his study of *Imperial Fault Lines' Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940*, while terming the religious responsibilities of the colonial state as “imperial fault lines”, states,

⁴ Robert E. Frykenberg explains the development of “Official Hinduism” in South India when the British “officials not only took control of temple revenues and repairs, but stood watch over its ritual practices. Sepoys and sawars, some of them Christian but many more Muslim (and, later, Sikh), were required to stand on parade and salute local deities, or to attend blood sacrifices, remaining prominently visible at important religious ceremonies ... government officials commandeered huge drafts of involuntary labor from hundreds of thousands of menials who were annually required to pull enormous temple cars (rathas), many falling and being propitiously crushed under the giant wheels”. English missionaries not only faced resistance but when the Bishop of Madras and hundreds of people signed petitions against this official connection with heathen institutions and practices, they along with the Bishop were sternly reprimanded. The missionaries who left India joined the Anti-Idolatry Connexion League in Britain, launching a pamphlet campaign against policies of the Company’s “Hindu” government which was in fact termed as neutrality in matters of religion. See Llewellyn (2009, pp. 18-22). First published in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1993), 23(3), pp. 523-550.

The administrators of the Punjab School were evangelical Protestants, unwilling to use coercion or civil liability to promote the Christian faith; nor were they prepared to use government funds to support proselytizing organizations. However sympathetic to missions, their first obligation was to govern. They were adamant, for instance, in their refusal to allow military officers to show any official support for Christianity, particularly in connection with the small number of Indian Christian soldiers. In 1857 Robert Clark's involvement with the 24th Punjab infantry at the Peshawar Garrison, where thirty or so Mazhabi Sikhs from the Manjha tract of Punjab had converted to Christianity, led to draconian orders prohibiting any officers from discussing religion or worshipping together with Indian Christians, and prohibiting missionaries access to military lines altogether. (Cox, 2002, p. 33)

But soon, there was a change in the attitude and a complete somersault in the policy towards conversion, especially after the mutiny of 1857. Within a short span of time the whole region of Punjab was covered with Christian missions. The castes which found an alternative way of salvation attractive were the outcastes and the maximum converts in Punjab were from this group.

Christianity, Untouchables, and Sikh Converts

Sikhism, despite its claims of equality and less orthodox attitude towards caste, failed to remove restrictions of the caste system, more so in the case of the untouchables. The idea of pollution was very much prevalent, with untouchable Sikhs having their separate well. In villages, they were not allowed to enter the houses of Sikh high caste people and their wedding parties were not accommodated in gurdwaras as they were regarded as impure (GOI, 1965). The close association of Sikh religion with Brahmanic Hinduism and its rituals further tarnished the image of the religion and deteriorated the condition of the outcastes. The arrival of Christianity and its notion of equality was like a new lease of life for the outcastes. The Christian world view presented a different understanding of man and challenged the very notion of equality. Jesus Christ was portrayed as a friend of the poor and the outcastes. According to the Christian understanding of man—each person, no matter how high or how low, has to be saved, has to be reached;

all human needs have to be met, for a Christian is to follow the example of the Christ with a sense of “calling”. Out of this understanding of man and with a sense of calling grew the entire Christian effort of conversion, education, social science, liberation of women, famine relief, orphanages, hospitals, and dispensaries. The Gospel of Christ came as a gospel of hope for the suffering and the downtrodden and the oppressed. (McMullen, 1990, p. 126)

Though Daud Singh was the first Sikh to convert to Christianity, it was only when a Sikh granthi from Punjab, Kaiser Singh, was baptized that the Christian missionaries could mark their presence in big way. But the real victory came in the form of Ditt Singh who was from the Chuhra caste and with his conversion began “the mass movement” in the Punjab region.

In the eleventh year after Ditt's conversion more than five hundred Chuhras (outcaste scavengers) were received into the Church. By 1900 more than half of these lowly people in Sialkot District had been converted, and by 1915 all but a few hundred members of the caste professed the Christian faith. (Pickett, 1933, p. 45; Singh, 1997, p. 27)

Encouraged by the response, the Baptist Mission, the Church of Scotland and the Cambridge Mission, too, the United Presbyterian Mission already in the field, joined in the mission to spread gospel and to convert maximum people into Christianity. In order to understand the “mission of conversion” and their modes of activities, we would refer to the story of Ditt Singh, the first Sikh untouchable to convert to Christianity, in detail and how he led to the development of a “mass movement” of conversion of the Chuhra caste.

Ditt Singh and the Mass Movement

Ditt Singh, “a man of the low and much despised Chuhra tribe, ...a dark little man, lame of one leg, quiet and modest in his manner, with sincerity and earnestness well expressed in his face, and ... about thirty years of age” (Gordon, 1886, p. 422), was baptized in June 1873. The credit to inspire Ditt Singh goes to a Hindu Jat named Nattu who had already been baptized in 1872 by the Rev. J. S. Barr. Since Ditt Singh’s understanding of the gospel was based only on the information provided by Nattu, Samuel Martin was hesitant to baptize him. But seeing his determination, “Mr. Martin finally decided to baptize Ditt, not because he saw his way decidedly clear to do so, but rather because he could see no scriptural ground for refusing” (Gordon, 1886, p. 422).

From “Ritual Neutralization of Foreign Enclaves” to a “Ritually Neutral Area”⁵

The author has tried to explain the process of incorporation of the “new Christian converts” with reference to Milton Singer who in his study of the Madras City, while trying to explain the process of “cultural metabolism of an Innovation” (introduction of something “new”, “novel”, or “foreign” into the old), asks the vital question, whether culturally alien innovations can be incorporated into the traditional system and how such incorporation would change that system? Everything new is not only perceived as foreign but also segregated in a special “enclave”. During this introductory phase, ritual neutralization of foreign enclave occurs when those who maintain contact with the new may face social restrictions and sanctions. As people slowly accept and try to accommodate the new, the marginal position soon gives way to a “neutral area” where the old and the new try to come closer. With the diminishing of differences, new norms of behaviour take shape (Singer, 1972, pp. 389-392). In this case—story of Ditt Singh and the mission of conversion, we can observe the phases of “cultural metabolism of an Innovation” as the new converts were segregated, ridiculed and finally accepted into the social structure.

The converts were asked to remain in the mission for a short period of time, more so for protection from the hostile attitude of the people towards the “newly converts” who, in a way, represent the “foreign enclave”, the period of segregation. But Ditt Singh, contrary of the earlier converts, decided to return immediately to his village. This decision, quite a strange and bold one, took everyone by surprise and they wondered,

How could he, a poor illiterate man, answer their arguments? How could he hold out and stand firm in the face of opposition? How could he even subsist in the midst of persecuting foes? A man in Nattu’s circumstances might succeed in such a course, and should have done so; but in the case of this lame little man, who must earn his bread from day to day, such an experiment appeared unwise. But Ditt returned, nevertheless, immediately after his baptism, to dwell in his native village near Mirali, and pursue his humble calling ... poor little illiterate cripple of a base and despised caste, to make the “new departure” (Gordon, 1886, p. 423)

It has been reported in the gazetteer report that during the initial periods conversion implied breaking from the cultural and social traditions of India and the new European names and ways of living distanced the converts from the social and cultural traditional life. Keeping this handicap in mind, the later periods of conversion emphasised on a two-way process—to safeguard the essential tenets of Christianity while at the same time, maintaining the external traditional ways of living⁶. In his study of *Imperial Fault Lines’ Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940*, Jeffery Cox (2002), very appropriately argues, “Missionaries and Indian

⁵ I have borrowed the terms “foreign enclave” and “ritually neutral area” from Milton Singer’s classic study, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*.

⁶ For instance Fr. de Nobili who had reached India in 1605 and settled down in Madurai, not only learnt Sanskrit and Tamil but also studied the Hindu scriptures. He preferred to live like a sannyasi in matters of food and clothing. It was an attempt to set an example that “in becoming a Christian, one did not become a ‘Feringhee’”. See GOI (1965, p. 489).

Christians were in many respects engaged in a common enterprise, creating something new that was neither European nor Indian but simultaneously indigenous, foreign and hybrid” (p. 15).

Ditt Singh had to face resentment firstly from his big joint family of 60 persons. His five brothers and their wives disapproved his action with comments like, “Oh ho! you have become a Sa’hib (gentleman)” ... “you have become a be-i-man (one without religion)”. His sister-in-law assailed him with:

“Alas, my brother! You have changed your religion without even asking our counsel; our relationship with you is at an end. Henceforward you shall neither eat, drink, nor in any way associate with us. One of your legs is broken already; so may it be with the other!” ... he meekly but stoutly replied: “Very well, my brethren, if it pleases you, you may oppose me and load me with reproaches and abuse; but your opposition will never induce me to deny Christ” (Gordon, 1886, p. 424)

Unperturbed by the opposition shown and despite being relegated to a “ritually-restricted area”, Ditt Singh travelled from one village to another, propagating his new faith and inviting people to Christianity. Within a short span of time Ditt Singh’s wife, daughter and two neighbours were baptised at Sialkot. With some relaxation in the attitude of the people and some degree of acceptance, one can see a movement from a “ritual neutralization of foreign enclave” towards a “ritually-neutral area” as not only the family members and other villagers of Mirali Village slowly accepted the new status of Ditt Singh but some of them willingly took to baptism as well. Andrew Gordon (1886) observed,

When Ditt now visits his people, as he goes from place to place on his good work, their love to him and their joy at meeting him are as intense and unfeigned as were once their hatred and opposition. He sometimes says to them by way of humorously reminding them of their former selves: “Are you really those self-same persons who, in former years, were such enemies to me?” To which they reply: “Whatever we did against you then, we did ignorantly and foolishly, not knowing the excellence of the Christian religion”. (p. 424)

Hence, with the final acceptance, the incorporation of the “new converts” who represent the “strange, new, foreign” innovation is complete. Ditt Singh, within eleven years of his baptism, could motivate more than 500 Churas into Christianity.

Ditt Singh and his efforts inspired the Missions immensely and during their annual meeting in January 1877 they resolved to give “special attention to the poor”, that is, “to reach the despised Chuhras, making them understand clearly that the gospel was for them no less than for the rich, the educated and the powerful” (Gordon, 1886, p. 429). The missionaries focused their attention more on the villages and the Chuhras. No wonder by 1915 almost all the Chuhras of Sialkot had become Christians. It was never an easy task for the missionaries as “the Church of Scotland mission, also at Sialkot, had to deal with thirty court cases brought against their Chuhra converts during just one year” (Taylor, 1906, p. 92; Webster, 2002 p. 105). There were other cases of opposition faced by the missionaries as mentioned below. These cases would help us gauge the socio-political conditions of that period and especially the attitude of the people and the society towards conversion and dalits.

Conversion and Converts: Acceptance as Well as Resistance

Though Maharaja Ranjit Singh was interested in Western education and had even invited Lowrie to Lahore in 1835, it was a known fact that he was against the preaching of Christianity. When Gorakhnath, the Christian preacher, visited Phillaur and “began to preach the gospel. He was at once arrested and thrown on his back and a millstone placed on his chest ... the Sikhs decided to send him back to Ludhiana with a warning not to return” (Wherry, 1962, p. 57; Loehlin, 1997, p. 191). Similarly, John Baptist faced hostility in Kapurthala

when he was distributing tracts and preaching gospel in the market area of the city. He was put into prison by the Sikhs, as reported in the “Foreign Missionary Chronicle”, December, 1838.

Another interesting incident of conversion among the Kukas is mentioned by Wherry as:

While preaching in a village near Maler-Kotla, a numbardar of a Kuka village accompanied by several men came and listened attentively to the preaching. After the discourse was concluded he brought oxen and men to remove the tent, and that same night almost forcibly constrained the preacher to go with them to their village. Arriving there, they assembled the people to hear the Gospel preached, and during the discourse the numbardar broke his mala (rosary) and declared that he was no longer a Kuka, but determined to be a follower of Jesus and also urged the villagers to do the same. (Wherry, 1962, p. 57; Loehlin, 1997, pp. 194-195)

Missionary reports are full of these accounts of the experiences of the people trying to grasp and adopt the new found faith. These reports always conclude with a positive response shown by the people and hence adopting a religion which could help them attain salvation in this very world. For instance, during the Sialkot Conventions, 1904 and 1905, though it was observed by the missionaries that the lives of the Indian Christians of Punjab were not as per the Christian way of life and after observing the day of great Confession, the Conventions concluded with the natives declaring, “We are now soldiers going forth to battle under the banner of the Cross ... Victory, victory in Jesus”⁷.

But what about the women, especially the wives of the converts? Hall (1914) in his *A Suggested Policy for Mass Movements* suggested domestic responsibilities for the married women and security issue for the unmarried girls as the reasons for this non-participation. Jeffery Cox (2002) described the women converts as a problem to be dealt with as viewed by their husbands. Most of the women converts in the Churches were from the orphanages and from an untouchable background. All of them were, in a way, “refugees or would be refugees from their families” as explained by Jeffery Cox. For example,

Presmi came with her whole family and is now in the Mazhabi Sikh Normal class. Rupan, described only as an “old Sikh nun”, came with her niece, Har De, a gentle child who was studying in the Mazhabi Normal class and is now at Clarkabad (that is, an orphanage); Uiliali from the same class was now living in the orphanage as a teacher; Tara and Narani were two girls who escaped from their homes to be baptized. Tara, cast out by relations, was trained as an ayah (midwife), and married a Christian man but still lives in the compound. But Narani is “still a prisoner in her own home” ... Daku married to a Hindu husband who “is often annoyed by the neighbors on account of his keeping a Christian wife”. Haro from the Mazhabi School was recently baptized, along with Chando, a teacher at the school in Tarn Taran. (Cox, 2002, p. 93)

In all these and other cases, not only the Zanana, missionaries were recruited and instruction was imparted in a Christian school but a great deal of Christian literature was also used to attract people into Christianity. The way of gospel was presented as the ultimate true path. The real victory of the missionaries was in their approach to reach people and the use of Printing Press proved to be the most influential tool.

Gurcharan Singh Arshi (2004), in his work, *Isai missionary, Punjabi Bhashate Sahit*, mentions “Jyotiruday” (pp. 136-160), a Punjabi novel published by Mission Press Ludhiana in 1882, which highlights the working of the early missionaries in Punjab and their use of Press and literature to propagate Christianity. The striking point of the novel is the background of the story-everything ranging from the place to the names of the persons is Bengali. The reference to the high caste kulin Bengali family was to play safe and to avoid hurting the sentiments of the Punjabi Community. By using the voice of a “young Bengali kulin widow”, missionaries

⁷ The interceders encourager No. 29, <http://www.calltoprayer.org.uk/encourager29.html>.

could attack the caste system (especially the Brahmins who did not hold much respect in Punjab) and at the same time reach the womenfolk exposing their oppression within the family. Basant, a young widow, represents a liminal position and becomes a symbol for other persons standing on the threshold to consider Christianity as a new life in the form of “new religion”.

In addition to this novel, books and tracts, like “Bible dianMurtan Ate Kahaniah”(1877, Ludhiana Mission Press), “Railguddi da Safar” (1942), “Masih da Bhagat”, “Rajmata”, “Maar Vadike Piyar”, and “Jeevan-Pustak Yeeshu Masih” (1892) flooded the bazaars (Arshi, 2004, pp. 136-205). Heavily inclined towards social emancipation, especially of women and dalits, missionaries could leave a lasting impact on the psychology of the persons. How the ideology of “Christianity as the true path” was introduced, never imposing, but in a very subtle way, the author would like to mention one tract, “Railguddi da Safar”, by A. L. O. E and published by Mrs. L. K. Jainkinson in 1942. In this tract, the main character, who ultimately converts, is a Brahmin and a resident of Amritsar. He meets his childhood friend Tara Chand, now a Christian in a train. Using Railguddi as a metaphor, Tara Chand explains the way to heaven, with multiple stations, like “self-confidence”, “happiness”, and “purity”. Happiness and self-confidence could be achieved only through Christianity which is also the religion of bliss, of purity.

The most interesting of all the novels is *Pilgrim's Progress*, written by John Bunyon, translated into Punjabi in 1844, published by Ludhiana Mission. This novel, comprising 144 pages, has mostly Punjabi characters, the majority being Sikhs with names, like Randhir Singh, Suchet Singh, Budh Singh, etc. Very interestingly, some lines of Japji Sahib are inscribed on page Number 50 which were, as argued by Arshi, used to connect with the Sikh masses and no wonder, they were highly successful in their mission. These novels and tracts point out the strategies used by the missionaries to attract people into Christianity.

What were the reasons for the impressive success of the missionaries? How could they impress the mighty as well as the downtrodden to come into the fold of Christianity. In Punjab, it was not only the Chuhra caste with its high degree of deprivation and exploitation but the royal families, with Maharaja Duleep Singh and Maharaja of Kapurthala, willingly accepting Christianity, which forces one to ponder over the causes responsible for this wave of enthusiasm. There were three categories of people ready to denounce their faith—Unemployed looking for new opportunities; royal families who had lost their dominant position and the socially deprived untouchable caste groups (Kaur, 2006, p. 37). The three categories, in fact, represent the “liminal and marginal” position and the kind of insecurities associated with this phase can be attributed to their inclination towards Christianity. It was like a new lease of life, especially for the untouchables who began to develop a “patron-client” relationship (Gordon, 1886, p. 438). Missionaries regarded it as their divine mission to rescue the “ignorant people” who, at the social and cultural level, were facing discrimination and also appearing to be the soft targets for conversion. Gordon’s views very well summarize the approach of the missionaries towards the untouchables who are described as “people degraded and filthy, poor and ignorant, lazy, dishonest and deceitful...” and then comes the vital question, who will come to the relief of these poor people? Who will free the oppressed, enlighten the ignorant, lift the masses from their degradation, and make them as good, great and happy as they are now bad, wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked? Will a good government will do this?... Can secular education do it? ... Shall we look to modern civilization? ... Shall we find a sovereign remedy in the Gospel? (Gordon, 1886, pp. 57-85). They did find the ultimate remedy in the gospel and were pretty successful as well. It is hard to sideline the contributions of the Christian missionaries as Ganda Singh rightly points out:

India owes a deep debt of gratitude to Christian missionaries for the light of religion and education that they brought to many parts of this country and for the social and political awakening in the masses that came in their wake. But for the services of hundreds of these devoted souls and tons of money that the foreign Christian mission have poured into the land of Bharat, millions of people of the depressed classes, now forming a respectable portion of the Indian population, would still have been rotting as condemned untouchables. The Indian socio-religious reformers should be thankful to the Christian missionaries for providing them with an incentive in the field of education and social reform to ameliorate the condition of their less privileged brethren. It was the foreign Christian missionaries who first lit the torch of renaissance in India by the introduction of Western scientific knowledge through printing press and printed books imported from beyond the seas. (Singh, 1965, p. xii)

Though nobody can deny the contributions of the Christian missionaries, the rate by which lower caste people were being converted, especially in Punjab, could no longer be ignored. It was reported in *The Tribune*, October 19, 1892, that:

Few people have any idea of the rapidity with which the number of the Indian Christian community is being swollen by the conversion of the people of the lowest castes. In fact if conversions go on at this rate there will no longer remain any "low castes" at a not very distant date, and the "higher castes" will have to exert all their energies in protecting themselves from being pushed to the wall by aggressive mehtars and Chamars elevated from their degraded position to the religious level of their rulers. (Jones, 1976, p. 144; McMullen, 1990, p. 128)

Not surprisingly, this alarming situation led to the formation of number of reformatist movements and opening up of educational institutions by other religious communities. It was realized that though "English education remained the key for worldly success, but conversion to Christianity was terrible price to pay for it" (Jones, 1976 p. 48; McMullen, 1990, p. 129). For instance, the Kanya Pathshala was formed when one Arya Samaji leader heard his daughter saying, "Christ is the Prophet ... Christ is my anchor, He is my Krishna" (Jambunathan, 1961, p. 100; McMullen, 1990, p. 129).

With this kind of situation in sight, it was a time to press the panic button and to cast the dice into the field of religion to not only woo back the untouchables by relaxing the caste rituals with the ideas, like "shuddhi" and also to redefine the religious identities with "tradition" as a "modernizing" tool. What a way to enter the modern world of class and education?

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