

## DALIT CONVERSIONS TO THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN KARNATAKA

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The *en masse* conversion of *Dalits*<sup>1</sup> to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South India during the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century was the result of Dalits who embraced the alternative culture of Christianity as part of their struggle for self-worth and human dignity. Dalits, subjected to centuries of the Hindu tyrannical caste system,<sup>2</sup> resorted to various forms of protest to assert their human dignity, including conversions to other religions such as Islam and Buddhism. The Dalits' desire for alternatives precipitated the involvement of Methodist missionaries, sometimes against the missionaries' own wishes. However, other Methodist Episcopal missionaries did not hesitate to assist the Dalits to improve their status in Indian society because they

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<sup>1</sup> *Dalit* are the original inhabitants of India. These communities were categorized as "Outcastes" or "Untouchables" by Hindu hierarchy. Hindu society had also called them *Avarnas* (ones without color, category or class), *Chandala* (filthy ones) and low-castes. Hindus considered them ritually defiled and thereby untouchable. Dalits are those who by the virtue of their birth did not belong to the caste hierarchy of Hindu society yet lived at its fringes. Missionary sources have identified them as *Panchamas* (fifth ones) or "Outcasts." The leaders of Indian National Congress of 20<sup>th</sup> century referred to them as *Harijans* (implying illegal offspring of temple prostitutes who could only be identified as children of God) while the British administration classified them as "Scheduled Castes." The latest list approved by the President of India in 1976 listed fifty-nine communities as part of the Scheduled Castes. But these communities today call themselves Dalits. Hence, the term Dalit has been used in this study. Dalit means "torn apart" or "oppressed" and refers to their experiences in the Indian society. Jothilal Phule was the first one to use this word to refer to these communities. By occupation, Dalits were landless agricultural laborers. They also tanned the leather of dead animals, and made shoes. The British and Nizam administrations used their services as village watchmen and peons.

<sup>2</sup> By reference to caste, I imply endogamous groups of people in the four-tier Hindu social hierarchy. The Portuguese word *casta* means "lineage." Traditionally, a Hindu is born into a specific caste and thus has no choice of social identity and occupation and has very limited possibility of social mobility. Hinduism prohibited inter-caste marriages and inter-dining between the people of different castes to preserve this social stratification. Other social transactions between the castes are highly regulated by the notions of ritual purity and impurity. Though the Sanskrit word *varna* means "color," it can be translated as a social "category" as each category has diverse castes within it. Hindu *varnashrama* dharma has four such categories as designated by Manu, the legendary founder of caste system. They are: 1) Brahmin; 2) Kshatriya; 3) Vaishya; and 4) Sudhra. Each category is believed have had its origins from different parts of *Purusa*, the original man. Although each category is identified with a social status and occupation—Brahmin as priestly class, Kshatriyas as warriors, Viashyas as business people and Shudras as skilled and manual workers—these identifications are generalizations, as there were different occupations and hierarchies within each category.

were strongly influenced by a series of social consciousness movements like the Social Gospel, temperance, and progressive movements in the United States in the early twentieth century.

As the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Methodist church in India is observed, it is especially timely to study the religious conversions of the communities who now constitute the church. I am indebted to Hunter Mabry, Methodist missionary and Professor Emeritus of United Theological College, and his colleague, John C. B. Webster, for germinating my interest in the subject. Reviewing Webster's *Dalit Christians: A History*, Hunter P. Mabry cited the writer's lack of attention to the Dalit conversions in Northern districts of Karnataka,<sup>3</sup> such as the Bidar, Raichur and Gulbarga areas, to the Methodist Episcopal Church during the first half of the twentieth century, as one of the few flaws of the book.<sup>4</sup> Nor did the movement find a place in J. Waskom Pickett's *Christian Mass Movements in India*,<sup>5</sup> though the writer belonged to the church involved in the Dalit conversions in the area. J. T. Seamonds, in his doctoral dissertation submitted in 1968, attempted an interpretative history from a church-growth perspective.<sup>6</sup>

The missionary reports identified the phenomena of conversions of Dalits to Christianity as "group conversions," "mass movement," and "community movement." These reports enrich the on-going research on Dalit conversions to Christianity. Since these converts joined the church either as families or groups of families, and all of them hailed from Dalit origins, I will identify these movements as Dalit conversions.

### Dalits in North Karnataka

The districts of Bidar, Raichur, and Gulbarga were part of the erstwhile Nizam's dominion<sup>7</sup> at the turn of the nineteenth century. The State of Hyderabad, according to the Census of 1901, had 12% Dalits<sup>8</sup> in its population of 11,141,142.<sup>9</sup> The prominent sub-communities among the Dalits included *Mahars*, *Mangs*, *Holars*, *Chamars*, *Thoties*, *Mochies*, *Panchamas*, *Dores*, *Maharsomes*, and *Madigas*.

The main occupation of the Holars was cultivation of agricultural fields but they also made their livelihood by rope-making and weaving. They were considered ritually so impure that they could neither enter the Hindu temples

<sup>3</sup> The state of Karnataka is on the southeast coast of India.

<sup>4</sup> Hunter P. Mabry, review of *Dalit Christians: A History*, by John C. B. Webster, *Indian Church History Review* (June, 1995): 72.

<sup>5</sup> J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933). It is interesting that Waskom Pickett, a Methodist bishop in the region, chose to overlook this case.

<sup>6</sup> J. T. Seamonds, "An Interpretative History of the Methodist Church in the South Indian and Hyderabad Conference" (D.Th. dissertation, Senate of Serampore College, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> A province ruled as a Muslim dynasty.

<sup>8</sup> Mirza Mehdy Khan, *Census of India-1901*. Vol.V.XXII, (Hyderabad: A Venu Gopala Pillai & Sons, 1903), 216.

<sup>9</sup>Khan, *Census*, 24.

nor use the public wells in a village. They usually lived in separate hamlets called *Holageri*. They had a practice of dedicating some of their daughters to the temple as *Basavies*,<sup>10</sup> priestesses who were engaged in cultic prostitution. Missionary sources often referred to this practice as “temple prostitution.”

Madigas, Mangs, and Chamars were leather-tanners who made shoes, saddles, bridles, scabbards, leather-belts, bags and purses.<sup>11</sup> Besides tanning leather from dead animals, they also removed the dead bodies of strangers and animals from the village. Mangs and Madigas were required to beat the drums at village festivals, including those of Hinduism. Mahars and Mangs were employed as village messengers and watchmen.<sup>12</sup> The practice of appointing them at village *chavadi*<sup>13</sup> as messengers and watchmen probably began due to the generosity of the British and Nizam administrations. However, the *vetti* system<sup>14</sup> of the day required that Dalits perform the demanded services without any remuneration because they were known to have been born slaves.<sup>15</sup> A fresh reading of the attitude of the Nizams toward Dalits suggests Nizams, as Muslim rulers, were soft on Dalits by granting these fringe benefits that they otherwise would not have received in a province ruled by the Hindu princes.

As per their religion, Dalits evolved their own cult with goddesses and priestesses. Along with spirit-worship, Dalits worshipped goddesses like Mariamma, Ellamma, Kaamma, Morasamma, and Matangamma. Names of the deities and the significance attached to them suggest a certain level of cross-fertilization of cultures between Hinduism and Christianity with that of Dalit culture. Assisted by the drum-beaters, mostly the female priests presided over the cultic rituals.

Amid the Hindu culture of subjugation and caste slavery, Dalits in the region remained firm to their native culture and evolved for themselves a culture of resistance and protest. Dalits joined Hindu reform movements like the Bhakti movement and *veerasaivism*.<sup>16</sup> Participation in the Bhakti movement provided them with a philosophical base to claim spiritual and

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society: The Harijan and Other Low Castes* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1981), 164.

cf. J.H.Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function, and Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 162.

<sup>11</sup> Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society*, 216. See also, Hutton, *Caste in India*, 166.

<sup>12</sup> Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society*, 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Chavadi* is the traditional centre of village administration.

<sup>14</sup> Hindu equivalent of medieval European feudalism.

<sup>15</sup> Hutton, *Caste in India*, 210.

cf. P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and Its Lessons* (Calcutta: Communist Party of India, 1972), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Also known as cult of *linga* or *lingayat* movement. It was founded by Basaveswara in the twelfth century. For more about the participation of Dalits in the movement, see Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 254.

social equality but failed to ensure them real social equality in practice.<sup>17</sup> Veerasaivism or the *lingayat* movement, which initially condemned the caste system and whose ideology was shaped by many Dalit saints, gradually turned into just another caste in the Hindu hierarchy.

While some Dalits were content to improve their status within the caste hierarchy of Hinduism by resorting to what M. N. Srinivasan called the process of “sanskritization,” the adoption of the habits and manners of the higher castes, many Dalits converted to other religions like Buddhism and Sikhism in order to escape the slavery which Hinduism inflicted on them. Although the process of sanskritization could help them inch a little upward in the caste hierarchy, ironically, Dalits also found traces of the caste system even when they converted to other religions.

### Arrival of the Methodist Episcopal Missionaries

The appointment of William Butler on January 5, 1856, as the Superintendent of Missions in India marked the beginning of the Methodist Episcopal mission in India, though the decision to start the work was made in 1819, and the sum of \$7,500 granted as early as 1852.<sup>18</sup> Butler chose Bareilly as his mission station because there were no missionaries at work in the area. The first Methodist Sunday service was held on February 25, 1857. The beginning of Butler’s missionary enterprise coincided with the Sepoy mutiny,<sup>19</sup> which was very intense in the region.

James Mills Thoburn and five other missionaries joined Butler at Bareilly in 1859.<sup>20</sup> Their work was confined to the northern region because the South of the subcontinent was fully mapped out by other missionary societies until Charles B. Ward was appointed to the Bellary Mission in 1876. Little was recorded about the conversion of Dalits to the Methodist Episcopal Church in the region except about the conversions of Mazhabi Sikhs in 1861, “Sweepers” in 1868, and Chamars beginning in 1881. J. E. Scott and James K. Mathews, while writing the history of the Methodist Church in India, made brief references to these movements.<sup>21</sup> R. K. Kshirsagar, a social scientist, attests to these movements as Dalit movements.

The visit of Charles B. Ward to Shorapur in 1878 marked the beginning of Methodist missionary enterprises in the Deccan region. Ward followed it

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<sup>17</sup> Kshirsagar, *Dalit Movements in India and Its Leaders* (New Delhi: M D Publications, 1994), 32.

<sup>18</sup> James K. Mathews, *South of the Himalayas: One Hundred Years of Methodism in India and Pakistan* (Tennessee: The Editorial Department of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1955), 79.

<sup>19</sup> A revolt by a section of Indian soldiers against British dictates.

<sup>20</sup> Mathews, *South of the Himalayas*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Mathews, *South of the Himalayas*, 88-89.

See also, J. E. Scott, *History of Fifty Years comprising the Origin, Establishment, Progress and Expansion of the Methodist Church in Southern Asia* (Madras: Jubilee Managing Committee, 1906), 90.

up by visiting Gulbarga the following year, which led to an orphanage being established in the Muslim tombs there.<sup>22</sup> Responding to a call for volunteers by the North India Conference, David O. Ernsberger reached Gulbarga in 1882. S. P. Jacobs, who had opened mission work in the city of Hyderabad, joined Ernsberger in 1884.

It was not until 1891 that the sources became clearer about the interest of Dalits in Christianity and the attitudes of missionaries towards Dalits. Ernsberger's choice of Indian clothing was a conspicuous example of a Methodist missionary's attitude toward the social hierarchy in India. Brenton T. Badley argues that Ernsberger opted for Indian clothing under the assumption that his western clothing might become a barrier in the preaching of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Badley also narrated an incident in which Ernsberger had cause to become grateful to Brahmins, making one wonder if his Indian clothing was due to his gratitude towards that community or with a view to proselytizing them. We cannot be sure if this gravitation towards "higher" castes was typical of the rest of the Methodist missionaries of the time.

### **Dalit Conversions and the Missionaries' Responses**

The first recorded contact with Dalits came in 1891 when Wesleyan Methodist missionaries invited the Episcopal Methodist missionaries to take up the work in the Bidar area. It was prompted by an inquiring Madiga family who placed the Wesleyan missionaries in a delicate position in which they could neither shun their Mala converts nor completely refuse interested Madiga families because the Mala converts hesitated to socialize with the Madigas.<sup>24</sup>

Muttayya and Munnayya, two members of the Madiga family, were the first Dalits whose conversion was recorded. There is confusion about whether there were two or more baptisms at Kandi on January 1, 1892. K. E. Anderson gives an impression that more than two members of the family were baptized on the day, while J. H. Garden recorded only two baptisms.<sup>25</sup> Garden's report seems more reliable because he baptized them. However, both accounts agree that it was the beginning of the conversion of many more Madigas in the neighbouring villages like Mirampur and Nealkal.

The time between the first recorded Dalit conversions of 1892 and when Dalit conversions slowed down due to the accession of the Nizam's Dominion to the Indian Union in 1948 can be divided into three phases. I considered the gravity of Dalit conversions and the missionaries' responses toward the movement while dividing the period. The first phase, 1892-1925, marked

<sup>22</sup> John N. Hollister, *The Centenary of the Methodist Church in Southern Asia* (Lucknow: The Lucknow Publishing House of the Methodist Church in Southern Asia, 1956), 154.

<sup>23</sup> Brenton T. Badley, ed., *Visions and Victories in Hindustan: A Story of the Mission Station of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Southern Asia* (Madras: Methodist Publishing House, 1931), 603.

<sup>24</sup> Badley, *Visions and Victories*, 622.

<sup>25</sup> Badley, *Visions and Victories*, 765, 622.

the period when Dalits took the initiative to join Christianity, but the missionaries were reluctant to admit them into the Church. The second phase, 1926-1935, was characterized by persistent Dalits forcing missionaries to become involved in their movement though with a different agenda. The final thirteen years, from 1936-1948, witnessed heightened Dalit assertion and the systematic attempts of missionaries to stamp out Dalit consciousness.

Initially, missionaries feared that Dalit conversions would prove to be a stumbling block to converting high castes to Christianity and that Dalit conversions would not result in a sustained change of their lifestyle. In response, Bishop T. M. Thoburn declared in 1890 that experience proved otherwise.<sup>26</sup> He not only acknowledged that mass conversions to Christianity were of Dalit initiative<sup>27</sup> but also called on the missionaries to identify with the Dalits. He reminded his stubborn missionary colleagues of their own ancestors with their pre-Christian culture and assured them that a change of lifestyle was possible among Dalits. He thundered,

we [missionaries] are always prone to forget the social rock from [which] we ourselves [are] hewn, as well as the pit from which our own feet have been taken. Three centuries ago many of the ancestors of the most cultured members of the Anglo-Saxon race were addicted to the practice of feasting upon puddings made of blood drawn from living cows. We forget, too, that three centuries ago there were sections of Great Britain in which the half-savage farmers knew no other method of plowing than that of tying the tails of their oxen to the plow.<sup>28</sup>

Though the beginning of the twentieth century recorded a slow pace of baptisms, missionaries acknowledged a distinct and mass movement towards Christianity by the end of first decade. J. T. Seamonds identified the lack of local evangelists and teachers as one of the reasons for the sluggish pace of conversions.<sup>29</sup> Missionary reports attested to this reason, citing that they did not want to admit the Dalits and leave them untended.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the increased interest of Dalits in conversion to Christianity can be explained in light of the larger developments in Indian society and especially within the modern Dalit movement. The beginning of the century marked the evolution of Adi-ideology in 1904, when Dalits asserted themselves as the original inhabitants of Indian soil. With Dalit consciousness heightened and the unmasked Brahminical agenda of the Indian National Congress, Dalits began to look to Christianity as an alternative culture wherein their status would be uplifted. At the same time Methodist missionaries, with their enthusiasm to Christianize the local communities, did not hesitate to dislocate the converts from their communities and insist on a new lifestyle.<sup>31</sup> Missionaries were more stubbornly focused on what they

<sup>26</sup> T. M. Thoburn, *India and Malaysia* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Curts, 1893) 404.

<sup>27</sup> Thoburn, *India and Malaysia*, 403.

<sup>28</sup> Thoburn, *India and Malaysia*, 404-405.

<sup>29</sup> Seamonds, *An Interpretative History*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Seamonds, *An Interpretative History*, Quoted from South India Conference Minutes, 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Reports of the South India Annual Conference*, 1910, 65. Hereafter, *SIAC*.

wanted the Dalits to become than sympathetic to what the Dalits wanted to be when converted. Therefore, missionaries saw a need for teachers to affect permanent change in the lifestyles of the converts and even hesitated to baptize Dalits due to this lack of teachers. Thus the clash between interests and motives hampered the pace of conversions to Christianity. Even so, the end of this phase witnessed a “sweeping” movement of Dalits towards Christianity.<sup>32</sup>

Missionaries believed that a change from within the Dalit communities would take place if they shunned their traditional rituals of marriage and funerals and adopted their Christian counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Dalits, on the other hand, did not hesitate to adopt new ceremonies, but at the same time they were not eager to abandon certain elements of their traditional cult.

This second phase of the conversions was characterized by the heightened interest of Dalits to convert which forced missionaries to admit them into the church, and by the frequent persecution of these Dalit converts by caste Hindus. This phase coincided with the gathering storm of the Dalit assertion movement led by B. R. Ambedkar in the neighboring State of Maharashtra.

Having realized the intolerable slavery Hinduism had inflicted on them, Dalits in the region were eager to take on a new identity, mostly that of Christianity. The South India Annual Conference report of 1927 boasts that the Dalit converts from Hominabad, of Bidar district, were “happy to own that they belong to the Christian community.”<sup>34</sup> The report of 1929 reiterated the same mood of joy of having escaped Hindu identity and having adopted a non-Hindu religion when the annual conference report stated:

The public is getting more and more conscious of injustice that has been meted out to them all these years and the national leaders are encouraging them to march forward in the path of progress, while the untouchables themselves have awakened from their age-long sleep. They know that Hinduism is very reluctant to own them... Some of the depressed class leaders themselves are advising their brothers to join Mohemedanism or Christianity so that they can improve their social status.<sup>35</sup>

The perseverance of Dalits to convert to Christianity can be best illustrated by the methods they employed to convince the missionaries of their interest. A report of the Annual Conference of 1926 refers to a certain Joseph from Kolar district, a neighbouring district to the ones under the purview of this study. He is said to have gone around in his village collecting the thumb prints of those Dalits who were seeking to be baptized in order that he might impress the missionary with the urgency and resolve of Dalits to convert.

Dalits were not hesitant about paying to have a pastor or teacher instruct them about the new religion. Ashayappa of Kandukur, Gulbarga district,

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<sup>32</sup> *SIAC*, 1923, 410.

<sup>33</sup> *SIAC*, 1911, 9.

<sup>34</sup> *SIAC*, 1927, 120.

<sup>35</sup> *SIAC*, 1929, 145.

went to the missionary and requested he send a pastor to his village. He told the missionary about the 123 people in his village who were baptized almost thirteen years before, and complained that they were left without a pastor to care for their needs. Conscious of financial limitations, the missionary asked if the village Christians could feed the pastor if given one. When asked, "Who would feed the pastor?" Ashayappa shot back, "The mission, of course, what else is its purpose!" Though the answer was negative, missionary reports admitted that it was the Christians of the village who paid for the pastor.

Missionaries described the practice of payment by the Dalits to sustain their interests in their new faith as "self-support." This act of owning the movement through cash and kind is well described in the report of 1930.

We have the poorest poor of the villages. Socially, morally, mentally and materially our people are very backward. Even though they are very poor yet they give something in the form of collection. Eggs, chicken, little rice, cone or millet are brought (to feed the pastor or preacher). In comparatively few villages money is given. Books, slates, [the] house of the teacher and oil for night schools are provided by the people.<sup>36</sup>

Dalit Christians in Raichur evolved a unique way of investing in the movement even before their baptism. The strategy was of "assigning" to the to-be-baptized Christians "their quota and pastoral support, and then having them pay half of it before baptism."<sup>37</sup> The missionaries have described this as the "Raichur way." In other words, it was the Dalits who lured missionaries to be involved in their conversion to Christianity and not vice versa.

The growing self-assertion of Dalits invited fiery persecution from caste Hindus. The report of 1933 recorded a certain village chief, along with his fellow caste men and women, who became angry "on seeing the uplift of the newly baptized Christians, and the change in their lives"<sup>38</sup> and started a bitter persecution. Caste men in the village complained that "soon these low caste people will be sitting on chairs, and they will not stand up when we talk to them. We don't want low caste men to shame us."<sup>39</sup> Edwin Gershom reported that in one of the villages Christians were forbidden to fetch water from the village well simply because they had secured a Christian teacher.<sup>40</sup> Though the Dalits were threatened with a return to their status as slaves and the resumption of their traditional diet of carrion and drinking toddy, the Dalit Christians did not recant.<sup>41</sup>

The Dalits' interest in Christianity did not die out in spite of the cold and bigoted attitude of caste converts within the church. There are ample

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<sup>36</sup> *SIAC*, 1930, 244.

<sup>37</sup> *SIAC*, 1935, 265.

<sup>38</sup> *SIAC*, 1933, 142.

<sup>39</sup> *SIAC*, 1933, 144.

<sup>40</sup> *SIAC*, 1932, 48.

<sup>41</sup> *SIAC*, 1932, 49. A similar incident is reported in the report of the following year. See *SIAC*, 1933, 142.

references that reflected the reluctance of caste Christians to treat Dalit converts as equals. E. C. Reddy, a prominent church leader from caste origin, lamented this attitude in his report. He recalled how Christians of the caste origin responded with a “chuckle” and a “smile” when asked to respect the Dalit converts as equal. Some ridiculed the idea, “what a foolish thing to say in such a high class congregation,” while others joined, “where will we be socially if we admit them freely into our circles?”<sup>42</sup>

However, this phase ended with scattered hints that the status of Dalits was gradually improving. A report from 1933 claimed that caste leaders of the villages were growing “more tolerant” and declared that caste was “loosing its hold upon the people.”<sup>43</sup> This development can be better understood in light of the events like the announcement of communal award by the British administration in 1932, the subsequent Poona Pact, signed by M.K. Gandhi, and B. R. Ambedkar’s exhortation in 1935 to Dalits to convert to non-Hindu religions.

Having sensed the growing interest of Sudras to convert to Christianity, missionaries turned their attention to their communities during this phase. The impact of Dr. Ambedkar’s declaration on the pace of Dalit conversions in the region is not very clear from the missionary reports except for hints of “assiduous” and “alert” expectancy of the missionaries.<sup>44</sup> Reports of the South India Annual Conference from 1937 are filled with statistics of the Sudra conversions along with their caste identities. Missionaries declared the year of 1938 as a period of “concentrated effort to win caste group” and acknowledged “bright prospects” for the effort. Any conversion of a Sudra family or group has been acclaimed as an “accomplishment”<sup>45</sup> by the missionaries. The same tone can be seen in the 1947 report when caste conversions were recommended to be an “objective” for the year.<sup>46</sup> However, the indifference of missionaries did not deter the continued interest of the Dalits in conversion. The reports of 1936 recorded the mass conversion of the Madiga families from thirty-four villages.<sup>47</sup> The reports of 1939 and 1941 referred to the conversion of several Dalit families.

Missionaries seem to have been content with the change in status of the Dalits wrought by their conversion to Christianity. Reports of 1938 and 1940 maintained that the stigma of untouchability was “loosing its hold” on social relationships.<sup>48</sup> Missionaries, excited at the improved status of the Dalits, instead of affirming the Dalit assertion, demanded that Dalits shed their Dalit identity (“Depressed Class Mentality”) and called for a “new consciousness.”

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<sup>42</sup> *SIAC*, 1929, 144.

<sup>43</sup> *SIAC*, 1933, 147.

<sup>44</sup> *SIAC*, 1936, 355.

<sup>45</sup> See *SIAC*, 1938, 79.

<sup>46</sup> *SIAC*, 1946, 80.

<sup>47</sup> *SIAC*, 1936, 350.

<sup>48</sup> *SIAC*, 1938, 49. See also *SIAC*, 1940, 49.

Dalits were told that they were “no more Holeyas or Madigas.”<sup>49</sup> Sources are ambiguously silent about how the Dalits viewed such a challenge from the missionaries.

The “police action” by the Indian Union and the subsequent surrender of H. E. H. Nizam in 1948 were landmarks in the history of these districts. The year was also memorable for the declaration of religious freedom in India. It had its implications on the course of Dalit conversions that with new administration, the pace of Dalit conversions gradually slowed in the years that followed.

### **Conclusion**

The Dalit conversions to Christianity were of Dalit initiative, and Dalits were the prime movers of the movement. Methodist missionaries merely responded to the challenge with their own limitations and agenda. The Methodist missionaries’ social involvement in health and educational ministries was, of course, of great value in the change of Dalits’ social status.

Dalits saw religious conversion, in this case Christian, as a strategy in their quest for better status for their community. It was an act of social adhesion directed by the Dalit community to join a larger Christian community, while retaining what was valued in their old identity. In embracing this new identity, Dalits welcomed certain elements of their new religion while not completely abandoning the old.

Dalit communities, subjected to the religiously sanctioned Hindu tyranny of slavery, resorted to several means in order to either improve their status in the Hindu caste hierarchy or escape from the Hindu culture by opting for an alternative culture. Therefore, conversion to different religions was never strange in the Dalits’ struggle against the oppressions of Hindu culture.

The changing needs of the Methodist Episcopal mission, persistent knocks by Dalits on the doors of the mission, and the interests of Sudras in conversion shaped the attitude of missionaries to Dalit conversions. Neither the changing attitudes of the missionaries nor the resentful actions of the caste Hindus could deter Dalits’ interests in converting Christianity.

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<sup>49</sup> *SIAC*, 1938, 49.