

**Religious conversion en masse:**

**An 'Untouchable' caste and missionary intervention in colonial Punjab 1870-1930**

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This paper aims to trace the mass conversion of the 'untouchable' caste group known as the *Chuhras* to Christianity in late nineteenth century Punjab in colonial north India. Described as 'lower menials and scavengers' by the colonial machinery in Punjab, the Chuhras constitute a majority of the Christians in colonial northwest India and present-day Pakistani Punjab.

This paper will explicate the mass conversion movement starting in the year 1873 as embedded in the transformative change the British brought to the Punjab by consolidating certain caste groups over all else in their reformation of the province. It asserts that the outcaste-Indian's emphatic association with the Christian Mission Institution by means of religious conversion was an effort towards a contractual arrangement for rights, privileges, and refuge by bypassing a disinterested colonial state in favour of an organisation with perceived competitive capability. The paper argues that this action is rooted in the restructuring of land and village economy under the 'Punjab School' of governance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the increased policing and criminalisation of certain tribal groups in the Punjab. In framing mass conversion in this context, the article attempts to underscore 'untouchable' agency even as structural forces seem to dictate the group's motivations and actions. In doing so it ventures to capture power dynamics in rural north India and the intersection of caste, precarity, and missionary intervention. This paper will use census reports, government documents, official reports of the American Presbyterian Mission, a vernacular Christian newspaper titled *Nur-e-Afshan* as well as the private papers of missionaries to weave together the story of religious transformation in the Punjab.