

Faith walkers

Dalit women's spiritual journey

Fatima Bernard, Vedamani Epsibai and Arul Mary

The following article is written by three women who are prominent in the movement for the liberation of the dalit or 'untouchable' peoples of South India. Put together especially for this Supplement it tells the story of a movement which has grown rapidly in political and inter-religious significance in recent years. In presenting this article here the editors wish to acknowledge a special word of thanks to the women themselves and also to their collaborators, Michael Jeyaraj SJ and John Kumar SJ of the IDEAS (Institute of Development, Education, Action and Studies) centre in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, for their help in preparing this translation. The poem with which the article concludes is by Bharathi Kannamma, a young dalit mother of two children and a university professor of Tamil. Aged 33, she was poisoned by her non-dalit husband in 1994.

THE LONG MARCH TO FREEDOM has begun for us, the dalits ('untouchables') of India. This journey of resistance and revolution, a collective act against exploitation and oppression, a revolutionary passage from death to life, began all over India in the nineteenth century. Today it has reached its climax, thanks to the passionate commitment to our cause of Ambedkar, Phule and his wife Savitri, Periyar, Narayana Guru and a host of other heroic men and women. The Lord has put his spirit within us and we have come to claim our rightful place in the nation's development. We are alive. We have taken our destiny into our own hands.

Even the international press could not but notice this 'new resistance'.¹ *Time* magazine, for instance, recently carried a lead article on 'India's Angry Untouchables' and described in great detail with ample illustrations the bold and courageous stand we are increasingly taking against the atrocities unleashed against us in various parts of India, and the articulate assertiveness with which we are pursuing our cultural identity and self-determination.

The country's more than 150 million untouchables (who prefer to call themselves dalits) are striking back. They are instigating a

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social revolution that is long overdue, one whose aim is to topple the 2,500-year-old juggernaut of the Hindu Caste system.²

We, the dalit women, have good reason to be angry at the existing social order. We have suffered bondage and brokenness for centuries. In the name of God and religion, we have been systematically deprived of any semblance of human dignity and social equality for over 3,000 years. The saga of planned dehumanization and exploitation is being effectively continued today despite India's attainment of political freedom fifty years ago and the enactment of stringent laws against untouchability by the Government. Landlords, politicians, businessmen, industrialists, bureaucrats and religious leaders continue their unholy alliance in making us a non-people. Periodically planned repressive techniques by caste groups decimate even the little economic progress we have achieved through hard labour against many odds.

India, a land of violence and rejection

Contrary to popular belief, India is a land of violence. She is, in the words of V. S. Naipaul, a 'land of a million mutinies'. In their struggle for identity, security, survival, democratic participation and development, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, political, economic, caste and gender groups vie with each other and create conflicts at various levels.

In this process of power play, the most affected groups are children, women, indigenous people, dalits and the poor. Even among these vulnerable sections the *rural poor dalit Christian women* are the worst victimized. We are crucified because we are dalits, exploited because we are poor, oppressed because we are women, denied privileges because we are Christian, and marginalized because we are rural. In the context of globalization, liberalization and privatization, it is this group of women, who are already at the bottom of society, who are further burdened and paralysed and deprived of basic human rights. We continue to be economically exploited, socially excluded, politically powerless and culturally deprived. The caste men and caste women, and our own dalit men, humiliate us at every possible opportunity and make it impossible for us to lead a human life. What Rayan says about dalits in general most accurately applies to us dalit women:

For them life is scarcely permitted; their bread of life is daily taken away and they are massacred and burnt at the slightest sign they show of movement, growth or dignity . . . Their rejection is structural and permanent, and it is renewed daily, thus increasing and refining the cruelty of our ancient exploitative system. These human beings are used daily for profit and pleasure and daily discarded.³

Dalit Christians and the failure of the churches

The Christian churches also have failed the dalits. The tyranny of caste and the effects of casteist politics play havoc inside the Catholic Church. This fact has, of late, been openly and with sadness admitted in not a few official documents and public pronouncements by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.⁴ The minority non-dalits (30 per cent) in the Indian Church have created, as Antony Raj says, 'a system of social closure by which they monopolize all the positions of power and privilege and restrict access to resources and opportunities to the majority dalit Catholics who form 70% of the total Catholic population'.⁵

It is true that the Christian churches have for many decades played a major role in improving the educational, employment and economic opportunities of their members, including dalit women. Even today there are attempts in each diocese to awaken them to their dignity and to empower them to become productive human beings. And yet the plight of women within the Catholic Church is deplorable and that of dalit women still worse. A patriarchal and casteist church does not know how to respect and treat women as equal and responsible partners. Participation and power-sharing are still at the very early stages and are given very grudgingly. Nevertheless, despite these handicaps in Church and society, we forge ahead with our struggle for liberation with blood, sweat and tears.

*Milestones in the struggle for justice*⁶

The fast to death at Palayamkottai, December 1991

Protesting against caste oppression in the Catholic diocese of Palayamkottai in South India, when all other avenues of resolving the issue failed, twenty-four young dalit Catholics aged eighteen to twenty-five undertook to fast to death. They included nine women. Only when compelled by Government officials did the diocesan authorities accept to dialogue with the utterly exhausted and emaciated dalits. They agreed to end untouchability and segregation

of dalits and to restore equality and dignity to them in the Church. In this struggle the role played by dalit women was remarkable.

*Murder at Tsundur, August 1991*⁷

In an agricultural village in Andhra Pradesh called Tsundur, the minority dalits who were Christians were traditionally working for the rich Hindu upper-caste landowners. In course of time, through education, they improved their economic status and aspired to social mobility. They had gradually stopped working as agricultural coolies and had started questioning the upper castes, wanting social equality and challenging their power. This infuriated them. On 18 August 1991, with the active co-operation of the police, the landowners hacked to death nine dalit men in the most gruesome manner in broad daylight. After the event the remaining men fled the village. Only the women were left behind to grieve over their dead husbands, sons, fathers and brothers. In the middle of their village, they built a memorial as a symbol of a new determination not to take things lying down. They named it 'The place of blood'.

*Police atrocities at Ponnur, November 1992*⁸

On 8 November 1992, as the dalits were preparing to go to work in the fields, about three hundred policemen surrounded their hamlet and attacked them. People were dragged out of their houses and beaten up. Not even pregnant women were spared. They were stamped upon with booted legs. The policemen thrust their cudgels into their vaginas. Looting, rape and destruction followed. Around forty persons suffered fracture of bones, and fifteen persons head injuries. Many women suffered multiple injuries. The long-drawn-out legal battle was withstood especially by the women with great courage; but for them and the various women's organizations that assisted the victims, the villagers would not have had the stamina and grit they manifested all through the rehabilitation process.

*Land reclamation, October 1994*⁹

In 1930 the British rulers of India assigned to the dalits some lands in each district. These are called the Panchami Lands. These lands cannot be sold, mortgaged, exchanged, leased or gifted away etc. to non-dalits. The dalits in the seven villages around Karanai near Madras in South India were allotted 650 acres of Panchami Lands on 11 November 1933, but later lost them to caste Hindus. In 1994 they started a movement to reclaim these lands, and on 10 October of that year a crowd of 5,000 dalits, 80 per cent of

whom were women, gathered in front of the sub-collector's office and placed their demands.

When their leaders were insulted and thrown out of the office, the people resorted to a non-violent road block. The police then without warning fired into the crowd. The hapless people ran helter-skelter. The women were rudely handled, harassed and molested. Two men were killed. One hundred and eighteen dalits, including twenty women, were taken into custody. After this incident, the Panchami Land Reclamation movement gathered momentum and has grown into a people's movement in Tamil Nadu today. The dalit women are participating in it with great enthusiasm and in great numbers.

Police atrocities at Gundupatty, February 1998¹⁰

On 26 February 1998 from 9.00 a.m. until 1.00 p.m. one hundred policemen and thirty policewomen along with four lorry-loads of goondas entered Gundupatty village in South India and attacked the people brutally under the supervision of the district police inspector and one of the local political leaders. As the men of the village had gone out to work, the women and children were those most affected in this ruthless attack.

The people lost everything. Even the rice kept in the houses for cooking the next meal was not spared. The people lost their dignity too. A teenage girl who experienced the entire episode lost her ability to speak. To make matters worse, the police foisted false charges on the dalits. All this happened because the people decided to boycott the recent elections; despite repeated requests to the Government over the previous ten years for a link road to connect with the main road in this hilly area, nothing had been done.

Dalit organizations, other NGOs, church groups and like-minded groups rose as one body to help the victims and brought pressure on the Government to do justice to the affected people. Even the National Commission for Women from Delhi sent its chairperson to conduct an on-the-spot enquiry and brought pressure on the local government to act speedily. The villagers, especially the women, showed great courage, unity and determination in standing up to the police and the political thugs. Their fight for justice goes on.

Spearheading the process of death and resurrection

All the above incidents bring out the fact that, while the discriminations and disabilities, atrocities and massacres go on unabated, the tenacity and courage of the dalits in resisting and bouncing back is

steadily growing in strength. In a unique way the dalit women spearhead this process of death and resurrection. Indeed,

suffering has been maturing the oppressed, who no longer see their plight as intractable fate but as human creation, something they can tackle and forge into a sword with which to sever chains that hold them into bondage.¹¹

In the early phases of this journey we were part of reform movements initiated and led by *caste men*. Immediately after political independence, it was under the leadership of *caste women* that we fought for our liberation. This coincided with the liberation of women as a whole. We had a common cause as women in general and dalit women in particular. We had an outlook, quest, emphasis and demand which had always been for protection of all life resources and we were committed to economic systems that could guarantee the right to livelihood of all the people. We were committed to the participation of all sections of society in order to ensure the sharing of its benefits by all. But soon we became acutely aware that in spite of this collaboration in working for a common cause, we would never be accepted by caste women as equals and that we would always remain subservient to them in every way.

It was at this juncture that, looking forward, we felt strongly the need to get organized as a separate force. Of course, this did not in any way mean to disrupt or weaken the united strength of subaltern women against any form of violence and exploitation. Our quest even amidst the general women's movement had been for our own identity – for its due place and importance.

The third phase was marked by our consciousness of being dalit first, and then women. Consequently we joined the movements led by *dalit men* and struggled alongside them for dignified human life. Since even our own dalit men did not treat us as equal partners in this struggle, we started autonomous movements led by dalit women for dalit women. In all these phases, we were mainly concerned with ourselves, our own liberation as women and as dalits. Currently we have begun to go beyond ourselves to embrace broader social issues affecting all people.

From 25 April to 1 May 1998 all the major women's movements and non-governmental organizations under the leadership of Tamil Nadu Women's Forum organized a march for peace and justice.¹² They started at the tip of India, at Cape Comorin, and travelled in

small groups towards Madras, a distance of over 1,200 kilometres. All along the way we stopped in as many places as possible and with the help of the local women's groups held public meetings to explain the purpose of our march:

- to promote caste and communal harmony in the state of Tamil Nadu which for the past year had been rocked by caste and communal conflicts;
- to create better understanding among Hindus and Muslims;
- to build up sentiments that unite people belonging to different political parties and groups;
- to conscientize the public about the role and contribution of women towards a just social order.

Wherever we went, men and women, especially the young people, thronged to hear us and assisted us in every way to proclaim our message of peace and harmony.

A dalit poet has well captured the spirit of our journey of anguish and anger, courage and commitment, joy and hope in the following words.

We live without living
 We die without dying
 And yet . . .
 We dare to believe
 We dare to hope
 In a new day – tomorrow
 For we know
 That we are power.¹³

Compassionate contemplation: sources of strength for faith walkers

You may be wondering how mostly uneducated, traditionally obedient and proverbially ignorant rural women are emerging out of their apathy and fear to become courageous leaders and enlightened followers. It has something to do with our changing self-image and the vision we have of the new society that we want to create in this world. Both believers and non-believers among us are gripped by an undying hope that is born of contemplative compassion. We have learnt to take a 'long loving look' at the ugly as well as redeeming realities of this life. With a deep concern that only women who are victims of society are capable of, we are learning to shed our fear

and surge forward with determination to re-create our world and establish a new social order with peace, harmony and justice.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us . . .
 S/he has sent us to bring good news to the poor,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives . . .
 to set the oppressed free and
 to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

(Luke 4:18-19; Isai 61:1-2)

We, dalit Christian women, are learning to walk with Jesus and with his oppressed. It has become for us a new spiritual journey. We have discovered new perspectives and gained new insights. Life is becoming no longer just a struggle for existence but a *faith walk*, an encounter with new signs of hope – despite the daily crucifixion that even today is imposed upon us.

What has been the source of our spiritual energy? What has sustained us in our faith journey all these years?

- Historically, the self-sacrificing and sustained efforts of men and women irrespective of class, caste or creed who immersed themselves in the social reform movements and later in the freedom struggle in India and all over the world.
- The social movements in independent India, including those of the peasants, the tribal peoples, women, youth etc.
- The heroism of countless men and women in the Christian churches who, following the footsteps of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, chose to lose themselves for the liberation of the oppressed people.
- The simple faith and the supreme courage of ordinary village dalit women and their longing for a peaceful, happy and just human society, at least for their children and grandchildren. In moments of doubt and despair, it is their yearning faces and angry cries that beckon us never to turn back from our march for freedom and justice.
- Personal experience of fear, hunger, injustice and imprisonment; just being together as women in a common struggle; inspiration from the Bible and books like *City of joy*, *Man's search for meaning* etc.; personal faith in Jesus and the conviction that 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me'.

Bearers of hope for the whole world

Recently a young dalit woman writer, Bama¹⁴ by name, has made history in Tamil literature by telling autobiographical stories in a style and genre that reflects the unique language and culture of the dalits. A schoolteacher by profession and rejected by a religious congregation, she narrates vividly the spiritual journey of a people, now in bondage but in search of freedom. She describes how the vision of a promising future acts as a powerful motive of change and gives courage to our people to organize themselves as a force to be reckoned with. She seeks to disentangle the living current that lies deeply hidden in the collective experience of our people's long history of oppression, and that could act as a catalyst for change. With delightful humour Bama brings out all that is bold and beautiful in our people and points out the 'weapons of the weak' used by us to protest against the unjust situations inflicted on us. She challenges us to become *bearers of hope* for the whole world.

We know we have a long way to go in our search for authentic humanity. We have shared with you, dear readers, our story of the relentless struggle for freedom, with the hope that, transcending the cultural and continental barriers that divide us, you would

- hear our cries of anxiety and anguish, of joy and hope with compassion,
- enable these cries effectively to reach the international fora of human rights, and thus
- become co-pilgrims in our 'faith walk' towards our rightful place under the sun.

Fatima Bernard is a veteran dalit social activist. Founder of the Society for Rural Education and Development, she recently formed the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum, a federation of over one hundred and fifty women's organizations. ***Vedamani Epsibai*** is a well-known advocate in Tamil Nadu and founder of the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement. She attended the World Women's Conference at Beijing as part of the Indian delegation. ***Arul Mary*** is a teacher by profession and an active member of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement in Tamil Nadu.

NOTES

1 *The Frontline*, 1 December 1995.

2 *Time*, 20 October 1997, p 19.

3 Samuel Rayan, 'Outside the gate, sharing the insult', in Felix Wilfred (ed), *Leave the temple* (New York: Orbis, 1992), pp 138-140.

4 E.g. the message to Catholics published in March 1998.

5 Antony Raj, *Children of a lesser God* (Madurai: DCLM Publications, 1992), p 1.

6 See *The Indian Express*, Madurai, 18 December 1991.

7 See *The Hindu*, Madras, 1 December 1991.

8 See Arul Raja, *Jesus the dalit* (Hyderabad, 1996), p 7.

9 See F. Borgia (ed), *Dalit land struggle* (Madras, 1995), p 6.

10 See IDEAS documentation, Madurai, March 1998.

11 Rayan, *op. cit.*, p 144.

12 See IDEAS documentation, Madurai, May 1998.

13 Author unknown.

14 One of her books, *Karukku*, is being translated into English, to be published by Macmillan.

Hear me, Mama

(A dalit girl's plea to her mother)

Hear me, Mama,
bring me up, though a girl child,
bold in spirit.

Like the giant tree
beyond the neighbour's house,
I long to grow tall and
touch the sky, and
from the space above, solemnly view life
in its fullness.

A spirit of defiance create in me.
Let it become my protective armour.
Teach me how to wipe out your poverty.
Instill in me the power to transform our people.

Mama,
I long to traverse the entire universe
with my two tiny wings, and
piercing through space,
I long to span the entire sky
and break a new path.

Let me look into the eyes of the oppressed
and shout aloud the frozen longings therein
for all the world to hear.

Let me destroy the peaks and fill the valleys
in human life,
leaving only those in nature
intact.

Bharathi Kannamma