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Editorial

DALIT EMERGENCE IN SOCIETY AND CHURCH

The Dalits of India, the vast majority of whom consists of those generally listed as belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes, are undoubtedly one of the most oppressed sections of the human race. The cruel exploitation and repression they are continuously subjected to and the shame and stigma of the low born attached to their very selves not only affect every one of them from birth to death but also have lasted from generation to generation for the past more than two millennia. Deprived of any sense of human dignity, denied of even the most basic human rights, segregated and shunned as outcastes and untouchables they have been trapped into the conditions of poverty and misery that are no less than those of slavery. What is even more tragic is the sense of inferiority, shame and self-doubt that have been branded into their very psyches which has made it so difficult for them to escape their miserable plight or to muster their energies to protest and fight. In fact, there has been hardly any system of oppression ever invented by any human society that is comparable to the caste system of India in its ruthless efficiency and heartless cruelty.

However, times have started changing. Breaking their fetters the Dalits have at last begun to rise up in revolt against all forms of degradation and dehumanization that have been forced upon them in the past. Their voices of protest, for so long muffled and muted, are now ringing out loud and bold. Their resounding call, reverberating with profound challenges to the existing socio-economic-political set-up is understandably causing consternation in many circles that have all along benefited from it and also confrontation and conflicts in many places. The Churches in India have not escaped its inspect

either. In some regions of India and particularly in Tamilnadu, the Dalit Christians have formed associations and action groups and are not only protesting against the various discriminations that are still in practice in some Churches, but also are claiming their rightful place as equals in all respects and partners in decision-making at all levels of the Church's life.

But what is perhaps even more significant in terms of the change of perceptions with their profound and long term effects is the impact the emergence of the Dalits is having on the theologizing in India today. An Indian theology, authentic and original in the full sense of the word, is finally taking shape in India today in the form of Dalit Theology. It has at least succeeded in exposing the irrelevance of most Western theologies that are still taught in many of our theological institutes staffed by men who were mostly educated in European universities and who are often out of touch with the grim realities affecting the vast majority of the people of this country. It has also indicted many of the so-called Indian theologies of the past which were more Brahminic than genuinely Indian.

One of the areas in which Dalit theology is having a notable impact is that of the interpretation of the sacred scriptures. Other areas in which it holds out the promise of making path-breaking contribution are those of Christology and Ethics. Dalit theology also raises some serious questions about the Church's current life and style of ministry and the spiritualities for so long preached and still practiced in the Christian communities. However, Dalit theology can be authentically Dalit, only if it also takes into account the experiences of the Dalit women who are the Dalits among the Dalits. These are some of the key issues that the different articles of this number of *Vaiharai* focus on.

D. Alphonse.