

## **Kali is Her Name: Dalit; Her Experience**

A. Metti, scc  
Amaithi Nilayam, Thiruchirapalli.

### ***Introduction***

A dark and a bit plumpy figure with an oval shaped face, green eyes and head held erect entered my room one fine morning. She is Kali who lives not far from my house. She is in her twenties, but looks much older. She has a husky but quiet and firm voice. Whenever I came across her, I always had the impression of frank friendliness and boldness. " Why are we called SC, STs ? Why does this society make that difference? How are we different from the others? What do we lack in our abilities so as to be treated differently?. How long are we, human beings, to be treated like this? " She poured out the anguish of her soul and the questions of her heart one after another, with pain and anger.

These and the like questions of the dalits very often go unheeded and unanswered. They continue to be victims of a hidden apartheid.

Social action groups that are genuinely interested in the welfare and liberation of the dalits and especially the dalit women, working in diverse areas in different parts of India, are attempting to work out a dalit feminism. And this paper is an attempt at exploring some of its key elements by following their own methodology. We do so by stepping into a dalit woman's chappals or her bare feet and by capturing her life blood and heart beat.

### ***Dalit Feminism, a Methodological Enquiry***

Dalit feminism is not just another 'ism' which is added to the many 'isms' that are existing in the world. But it is a way of thinking

and living that questions the very structure of the present society and proposes a new vision of an alternative society.

- It starts with the stories of the dalit women: a) of being dalits i.e. socially economically and culturally marginalised group and b) of being women who share the gender-based inequalities and subordination.

- It critiques the past, exposing the oppressive myths of patriarchy.

- It evolves a new vision for society based on the analysis of the present day reality, inviting the dalit women to be the participants towards the transformation of the entire society.

Hence, in the following pages, I have adapted the above methodology to highlight some of the key elements of dalit feminism.

### ***Dalit Woman....?***

The Hindu caste system has often been compared to a pyramid of earthenware pots set one on top of another. The Brahmins and Kshatrayas are placed at the top of the society while Shudras and untouchables are at the bottom. And within each earthenware pot, men are at the top and women of that caste are at the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. The dalits are at the bottom and below them are the suppressed dalit women.

The dalits form only 16% of the Indian population, half of them are the dalit women who are part of the toiling masses, leading their life as beasts of burden and often as victims of dominant caste onslaught. A major part of the labour force in our country is the dalit women. They go through greater oppression and violence. They are 'the dalits among the dalits', 'the down-trodden among the downtrodden'. They are oppressed in the family as well as in the society. They are exploited socially, politically, economically and culturally. They are the victims of triple oppression. The vast majority of the dalits remain poor, illiterate, lack the requisite skills for competing in the modern world, enjoy unequal access to productive resources and remain deeply tied to land and traditional occupations which offer limited possibilities of upward mobility.

They are humiliated, insulted, beaten up, tortured and burnt alive. Their miseries are aggravated when they are boycotted socially

and economically. Even today in some places, the dalit women are not allowed to cover the upper portion of their body. Since covering is the mark of upper caste women, they are not allowed to do this. There are plenty of instances of the abuse and oppression of the dalit women all over the country.

## ***Different Manifestations of Oppression***

### ***Experience of Atrocities and Sexual Harassment***

"Very often, atrocities are committed in direct connivance with the police and the administration," says Muniammal who was raped by the landlord to teach a lesson to her husband, and she continues, "when complaints against atrocities are made either they are not registered, or if registered, hardly any action is initiated."

"We constantly go through threats of rape and violence from the majority community and increasing restrictions from the fundamentalists of our own community who seek to reinstate the communal identity through women" says Karuppayee.

"Violence against 'untouchables' are growing says Human Rights Watch Report, New York, released on April 14, 1999."<sup>1</sup> It is heartrending to see that the lower caste women are far more vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment and the threat of public violence. Analysis of rape victims, shows that 80% of the victims belong to the lower caste women. Moreover, whenever there is a dispute or conflict or war, it is the dalit women who will become victims in the hands of the persecutors. The logic is simple. If you want to teach a lesson to a rebellious dalit, destroy his crop, burn his house and rape his woman. Incidences of rape are higher in areas declared to be turbulent and where the army or the police force is stationed.

What is more painful is that in several instances, the rape of the dalit women is not considered as rape at all because of the customary access that the upper caste men have had to dalit women's sexuality. In almost all regional languages in India, the word for 'rape' is equivalent to the phrase 'stealing the honour of' and since lower caste women by the virtue of their double oppression have no 'honour' to

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1. Ambrose Pinto, *Dalits: Assertion for Identity*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1991, 1.

speak of, the right to redressal is often denied. Dalit women suffer rape as a part of the ongoing caste confrontation. In rural India, defiance of caste restrictions by the dalits have most often resulted in arson and gang rapes of women of the lower castes. Added to this, millions of the dalit women live in a situation of constant violence in their homes in the hands of their drunken husbands and sometimes other members of the family.

### ***Experiences of Being Abused***

"We are being abused, misused and brain-washed in the name of customs, habits, religion, and rites for the pleasure and luxury of the upper caste men " says vehemently, Karutha Bharathi, a second year student of zoology. "The exploitation of the dalit women under the name of religion such as nude worship, practice of devdasi system and many other similar type of superstitions make the dalit women more submissive."<sup>2</sup>

In the small village called Chandragupthi in Shimoga district, there is a temple of Renuga to which the women go naked, after taking the holy bath in a river, 3Km. away from the temple. This nude parade or worship is watched by several thousands of people both from / in and out of India. It is unfortunate to note that these women who participate in this nude worship belong to scheduled castes / tribes and other backward castes.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Experience of Oppression at Workplace***

The caste system has defined social division of labour in such way that it leads to giving status to one kind of work and loss of status to another. Hence, dalit women who constitute the major working force are thrice alienated and oppressed on the basis of their class, caste and gender. They work under the most exploitative, dehumanising and unhealthy conditions. Their work is mostly unorganised and they are forced to receive low wages. They have to work to meet the survival needs of their families. Today the dalit women are working in various government offices. They are active members of zilla parishads but they are still bearing the burden of a

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2. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995, 84.

3. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 85.

double-day work, sexual division of labour and over all patriarchal ideology and not saying anything about it.

The components of this vast group are unskilled workers, landless agricultural labourers, factory workers, members of households with uneconomic holdings and those in traditional menial jobs. These women are subjected to wage discrimination and physical harassment. They are deprived off maternity benefit, pension, promotion, leave facilities and other job securities. "About 90% of women working in unorganised sector are mainly from the lower castes."<sup>4</sup>

There are health risks also which often cut into their already meagre earnings. Women workers face instability and insecurity of employment, low wages, non observance of labour laws, bondage to the middle men who employ them without providing them facilities enjoyed by legislation. Their way of life is perpetually in a state of flux as they have to keep migrating from site to site. The average wages for women construction workers are generally lower than their male counterparts. In the industrial sectors and in the free trading zones, women are exploited as cheap labour and have been made to work under conditions of strict supervision and physical abuse.

The women working as agricultural labourers are discriminated against in the new economic policy proposed by the Government of India by not considering the output of the labour in the developmental process of the nation. The participation of women in both the organised and unorganised sector is reduced and they suffer from competition from foreign firms. This reduced employment affects women both directly and indirectly.

### ***Experience of Being Labelled as "Impure"***

From the time of pariah, an untouchable whose very shadow was considered polluting by orthodox caste Hindus, to the present-day dalit, the story has been a long journey of oppression, humiliation and alienation. Concept of high - low, pure - impure, have brought about negative and damaging implications on the dalits and all the more on the dalit women. They suffer socially as the lowest group in the caste system with the stigma of untouchability attached

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4. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 87.

to them. "Manusmriti marks off this group as untouchable, unseeable, whose touch, shadow and even sight pollute the people of the other castes."<sup>5</sup> They are considered impure due to the fact of their birth and polluting professions. They are labelled as inferior and sexually loose.

"Nur Yalman shows the link of the sexual purity of women with the purity of the caste, suggesting that female sexuality presents a threat because of the danger of her introducing impure or low caste blood into the lineage."<sup>6</sup>

Lukes has argues that, "the supreme exercise of power is through compliance, by control over the thoughts and desires of the other. The collusion and contestation between patriarchies and 'brahmanism' (upper caste practices and ideologies) reveals the exercise of such power through the differential definitions and management of gender by caste. Gender was and is crucial to the maintenance of reproduction of caste inequalities."<sup>7</sup>

In the patriarchal joint family system, women were considered as part of men's property in the same way as a field belonged to the men of the family. Only sons were given importance and inherited immovable property. Thus the cultural explanations of caste hierarchy had its material basis.

In India, women are protected by community, caste, kinship and family networks. Every caste not only controls "their" women's sexuality and labour power but in the process of reform or upgrading the community or the caste a new agenda of morality and efficiency is designed at every stage of history for women. Women from lower castes were considered so lowly and degraded in life that their body was a free terrain for colonisation.

### *Experience of Insecurities*

Dalit women who are working in organised sector account for approximately 10% of the female labour force. The document on National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000 A.D. has noted that,

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5. Arvind P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras : Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1990, 4.
  6. As cited in M.E. Prabhakar, *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Delhi : ISPCK, 1989, 148.
  7. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 19.

“employment opportunities in the governmental and public sectors and the private corporate sectors are limited in view of the general constraints on resources for region, expansion and dependence on the dictates of market mechanisms which are prejudicial to women.”<sup>8</sup>

Although urban dalit women are found engaged in relatively secular and money-making occupations, employment opportunities for dalit women in general are too grim. Entry into organised sector depends much upon contacts and social connections in addition to educational qualification and previous job experience. There are also other negative features like, segmentation in the labour market which works against the dalit women, the adverse implications of the growing technology, lack of unity among the female workers etc. In addition they also do not have proper facilities or training to develop their productive capacities. Absence of national labour policy to encompass the needs of the dalit women in the organized sectors is also another handicap.

In urban areas the dalit women staying mostly in slums or hutment colonies are found concentrated in the unorganized sector. They are involved in activities like hawking, scrap collection, petty trade or home based production, construction labour, land levelling, earth work, domestic labour, beedi-making, aggarbatti and candle making, garment-apparel industry, jari and embroidery, toy-making etc. Women working in this sector are victims of low wages and irregular employment. They lack social security benefits and many other privileges. Very often they are forced to become a prey in the hands of the employers. Their working conditions are extremely arduous. These self-employment activities generally provide very meagre financial returns and also have uncertainties and insecurities.

The basic problem that affects the dalit women's role and opportunities for employment in this sector spring from their helpless dependence caused by lack of adequate employment opportunities, limited skills, illiteracy, restricted mobility and lack of autonomous status. The lack of control over productive resources and a persistent gap between consumption and expenditure leading to perpetual indebtedness deprive them of all bargaining power and occupational

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8. As cited in P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 10.

mobility. The proportion of dalit women below the poverty line is comparatively higher than upper caste women. They constantly experience insecurity.

### *Experience of Being Deprived*

In rural areas, the dalit women are closely identified with their caste status and associated social disabilities. Therefore, these women suffer all deprivations which their caste group as a whole suffers. Besides, they have to undergo additional hardships because of their gender. The Dalit women have to struggle harder to secure basic necessities of life, and also scarce resources like firewood, water and fodder for which they have to walk a long distance.

The struggle of these women revolves around procuring food, fuel and water for their families. The number of female headed households have been on the increase and there has been a growing deterioration and privatisation of the country's common property resources on which the poor in general and women in particular depend.

The dalit women are deprived of even good health. The early marriage, child rearing and their type of hard work in the fields make them more malnourished and become unhealthy and pushed to live in an unhygienic situation. They are even prevented from using the public well, tanks, public places such as temples, cinema halls, etc.

They are deprived of education, religious rights and social status. They have to struggle harder to climb the educational ladder for they are victims of triple deprivation and their literacy rate is too low. It is also being observed that the number of girls enrolled in schools decreases in the higher standards. The progress of literacy among dalit women still presents a dismal picture. Most of the dalit women are illiterates and the school going girls discontinue their education to contribute to the running of the houses as well as the family economy.....The image of the Indian women created by a few upper caste women holding high position or academic qualification conceal rather than reveal the low status and educational level of the dalit women.

The dalit girls drop out easily from the schools, since the burden of the maintenance of the families, very often falls on them. As a result, the percentage of female headed households among the lower castes is high. The incidences of desertion is very high and even in cases

where the husband is present, often just his presence is seen as necessary by the women to ward off the sexual threat of the men from their community. It is the women's income that goes towards the survival of the family since the husbands income is spent on arrack or, often towards the maintenance of the the second and 'preferred' wife.

### ***Experience of Being Cheated***

Women constitute half of the total population, but are unable to get equal share in active politics of the country. "It is regrettable that the dalit women have not been given the representation in all the political parties which reflects the social difference. The women involved in politics and power sharing are mainly from the upper caste women with political, high financial background of the family."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the new economic policies totally ignore women's role in Indian economy, and specially that of the rural untouchable women. So far none of the political parties has introduced any useful policies for the betterment of the economic status of women and the right to work. Women in dalit politics figure very low in number and are also caught in the trap of 'our women' framework. This results in further marginalisation of the dalit women. The representation of dalit women in Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats does not widen the reality of women's political visibility. These above experiences of dalit women reveal their day to day realities.

### ***Root Causes of Oppression***

The advent of patriarchal Hinduism and its introduction of the caste system into India institutionalised the oppression of the outcaste dalits and this had a particularly destructive effect on women. "The control on women's sexuality was essential for the development of a patriarchal caste hierarchy, both for the maintenance of caste and for the legitimation and control of inheritance,"<sup>10</sup> says Aruna Gnanadason. M.N Srinivas, the renowned scocioiologist, clearly states that "sanskritization results in harshness to women."<sup>11</sup> During the

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9. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 89.

10. Arvind, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, 133.

11. As cited in Arvind, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, 134.

period of the Smritis, the law giver Manu laid down his code which degraded the position of women still more.

“Dharma Sutras had initiated the process of arranging the society in a system of graded inferiority and superiority. This system continued as practical evidence of the hegemony of the purohitis (priestly class).”<sup>12</sup> And again during the classical age, several new restrictions were imposed namely, child marriages became the norm, widows were denied remarriage, women were denied of property rights and the dowry system was introduced. The concept of marriage was introduced as an important aspect of male control of female sexuality by brahmanical codes on morality. The gender division which was imposed by patriarchy, reinforced the caste division and the gender ideology legitimated not only the structure of patriarchy but also the organisation of caste. Although women of all the castes experienced this ‘dalitness’ it was women of the lowest castes who experienced the brunt of patriarchal repression both in the hands of the upper castes and in the hands of men.

### ***Dalit Women in “Movements”***

“The 1970s and early ‘80s were times of the reinvention of revolution,”<sup>13</sup> which gave birth to several organisations, autonomous women’s groups and movements. The two notable movements of this period are the Dalit Panthers and the women’s movement as constituted mainly by the left party based women’s fronts. “The dalit panthers did make a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s, but both in thier writings and their programme, dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of the *mother* and the *victimised sexual being*.”<sup>14</sup>

The women’s movement in India gathered momentum after the declaration of International women’s year and the publication of the report of the committee on the status of women in India. Women from the upper castes gained an opportunity to be conscientised and issues earmarked by the movement were issues affecting the women of the

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12. Prasanna Kumari, *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, Chennai : Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998, 64.

13. Sharmila Rege, “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” in *Seminar*, November, 1998, 47.

14. Sharmila Rege, “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint,” 48.

upper caste and middle classes. Mostly, the international decade for women centred around issues like widow remarriage, domestic violence, sexual atrocities, dowry conscientization, amendment in law, etc. The autonomous women's groups politicised and made public the issue of violence against women but did not address the issue of Brahminism.

Although these issues are important, their prime focus is not the changing of the social structures that are at the very root of such oppressions. Therefore the women's issues that were taken up did not appeal to the majority of women and this has been a big flaw in the women's movement. And the leadership of these movements remained with the upper castes. Hence the movement remained elitist.

Dr. Ambedkar's movement for women's liberation started with an attack on Manusmruthi which fostered blind faith and insulted womanhood.<sup>15</sup> "In 70s Dalit Movement as a new Social Movement expressed itself through radical literature and action. But even this upsurge did not give vent to the mute voices of Dalit women located either in rural or in urban India."<sup>16</sup>

However, there is either a complete invisibility of the experience of the dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices. Hence one needs to take into account the specificities of Dalit women in India.

### ***Dalit Feminism: Its Standpoint***

Is the issue of the dalit women separate from that of other women? Are they two different issues or one and the same? It is true that both dalit women and non-dalit women are oppressed but they have different priorities to address the problem. Struggle for emancipation of dalit women is a struggle for emancipation of all women. Some say that there is no need to distinguish between the dalit women and those from upper castes since all women fall under the same category. It is true that the upper caste women do not realize the subjugation they are subjected to and to some degree suffer from

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15. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 109.

16. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, p.xii.

the same predicament as dalits do. However one cannot water down the seriousness of the emancipation of the dalit women, although finally it all leads to the emancipation of the entire womanhood. Because, there is a qualitative difference between the plights of non-dalit and dalit women.

### ***Dalit Feminism***

Dalit feminism starts with the real experiences of dalit women in a concrete historical situation. It confirms that the experience of a dalit woman is real and important. It further states that a dalit "woman's lived experience as she has felt it, reflected upon it, voiced it, can be a major corrective whose impact must lead to a major transformation in the world of ideas, knowledge, history, action and research."<sup>17</sup>

"A dalit feminist standpoint is viewed as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e. the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position claims a higher emancipatory status than other positions and counters pluralism and relativism which posit all knowledge-based and political claims as valid in their own way."<sup>18</sup> Hence it insists on the individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class and ethnicity which construct such groups. Emancipation from religious and caste bondage and creation of a new society are the push factors of the dalit feminism.

The dalit women's emancipatory project has a distinct identity because it envisages an alternative value system as feminism envisages an alternative society. It threatens the existing social order. It challenges the age-old Hindu tradition and patriarchy. When the activities of the dalit women's liberation movement are analysed, as against a restricted view of only the social, political and economic peculiarities of a society, it manifests different characteristics from other women's movements. The dalit women's emancipation entails a dual struggle as dalit and as woman. For caste and women's problems cannot be separated in the Indian context. They are

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17. Sumitra Bhave, *Pan on Fire*, New Delhi : Indian Social Institute, xi.

18. Sharmila Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," 51.

intertwined. Religion, rituals, texts and the organisation of caste system have intensified and aggravated women's problems.

In times of Hindutva and globalisation, dalit feminism "calls for a critique of Brahmanical hierarchies from a gender perspective". Such critiques will lead to translate the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations of hierarchies. In the Brahminical social order, the caste-based and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed.

### ***Dalit Woman, Herself Her Liberator***

Who can change the dehumanising, oppressive and marginalised situation of the dalit women? If one has to go by the experiences of the past, it is clear that it is the dalits themselves. "The core of dalit consciousness is made of protest against exploitation and oppression. In short, the term dalit stands for change and revolution."<sup>19</sup>

Compared with other women, the dalit woman is a born feminist and militant as she has to fight the caste oppression continuously. "Dalits like me are fired by the desire to construct a new world of justice, equality and love," says Mariamma, a dalit activist from Neikkupai.

Indian history reveals that the dalit women actively participated in the Ambedkar led movement in the pre-Independence period.

"By using the term Dalit women we understand that if women from dalit castes and of dalit consciousness create a space for themselves for fearless expression or if they become subjects or agents of the society, they will provide a new leadership to Indian society, in general and to feminist and dalit movements in particular," says Thilakavathi, a dalit reserch scholar in dalitism.

Moreover, the dalit women see their liberation as linked to the abolition of caste oppression. Such a conception of liberation is based on the 'community' and not individual, since the dalit women feel a part of community.

"I don't feel personally insecure, since I am also earning like my husband. And I don't look upon my husband as a protector or a provider" says Malaramma.

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19. P.G. Jogdand, *Dalit Women*, 2.

In this sense, the dalit women on the whole, do not feel personally, individually insecure. Since they are as much bread winners as the males, the artificial, subordinating relations that develop between men and women in the upper castes, do not emerge in the working class dalit families. But they feel left out, alienated and marginalised in the society.

Bhama, while writing her narrative, displaces 'I', an outcome of bourgeois individualism with the collectivity of the dalit community. Her story refuses to be her own but merges with that of the others. *Karukku*<sup>20</sup> achieves this through a range of textual strategies. The absence of 'I' gets its further affirmation in the polyphony of other voices from the dalit community which saturate *Karukku*. They always feel part of the community.

The sense of 'community' is strong among the dalits. The atrocities on dalit women are not to be seen merely in the light of their being women but must be analysed within the broader framework of societal structure. Hence the struggles of the dalit women are not individualistic. Inspired by the teaching of Buddha, Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar, their struggles are in the long run, struggles for women emancipation.

The dalit women's agential collectivity is a fundamental necessity to build up a feminist movement in the Indian context. Dalitism essentially implies conditions of subjugation; economic, political, social and cultural. Dalitism also embodies different degrees of marginalisation, legitimised through social institutions and their legal or quasi-legal structures. Dalitism includes not only marginal status in economic sphere but also similar marginal statuses in cultural, political, religious and other domains.

### ***Empowering Dalit woman***

\* Due to lack of unity they are unable to convert their numerical strength into political and economic power. For they are divided either on the basis of many subcastes that exist among them or due to reservation. Hence uniting the dalit women is an urgent need of the hour.

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20. *Karukku* is the first dalit testimonial narrative in Tamil. For further details, see Bhama, *Karukku*, Madurai : Samudaya Sinthanai Seyal Aaivum Mayyam, 1992.

\* "Due to a long period of oppression the dalit women suffer from a crisis of self identification. Hence they need to be conscientized through a critical social analysis, through retelling of the myths that subjugate them"<sup>21</sup> and through reconstructing their story from their perspective.

\* The dalit organizations and women organizations have to play a very important and serious role in establishing the equal status of the dalit women with other sections of the people in the class and caste dominated society. One of the best ways to really help them out is to organise the dalit women through proper education and conscientization. Agitation and aligning themselves with broader forces of minorities and other progressive forces is also vital for their survival and growth.

\* They also have to produce their own critical interpretations of the issues prioritized by the other feminists in India viz. securing control over body, sexuality, fertility and labour.

\* Efforts should be made to increase the scope and percentage of dalit women's participation in every area of life and in a special way in reservation in legislatures and in parliament to plan, to decide and to implement.

\* The dalit women need to join their voices with all the other women of this land beyond caste, language, religion or economic strata to speak clearly of what women want for their people, their society, their environment.

## **Conclusion**

Dr. Ambedkar says in *Annihilation of Caste*: "There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up morality."<sup>22</sup> As "wo-man is made, not born," according to Simone de Beauvoir, a dalit / dalit woman is also made, not born. It is high time that the Indian society realises this and allows itself to be purified from all oppressive ideologies. What Ambedkar has said above is certainly applicable to our society as well.

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21. Devasahayam. V, ed., *Dalits & Women*, Madras : Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1992, 226.

22. Prasanna Kumari, *Feminist Theology*, 61.