

A Dalit's Cry

I am called a Dalit and not a Human Being –
A forced identity for me.

An identity to distinguish me from others
An identity symbolising my less-than-humanness
An identity for the survival of the others.

My identity is being misused
Both by my oppressors and so-called sympathizers.
Hundreds of conferences are being organized about me
Pages of literature are available about me
Debates and rhetorics are innumerable
Hosts of leaders are mushrooming every minute.

Yet, my Dalitness remains as it was.
Do these rallies and conferences fill my empty stomach?
Do these books cover my naked body?
Do these solidarity talks give me shelter?

I don't want any titles
I wish to live as human as you are
I am hungry and shelterless and illiterate
And have no job to earn my livelihood.

For the sake of others I am kept where I was.
Save me if you can from the Dalitness.
I am being exploited and humiliated
I am tired of being hired out for rallies.

I do not want to be internationalized.
But I wish to be humanized.

Jeevan Babu
India

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Update from Orissa

Revs. Deborah Kirk and Alison Richardson were invited to Orissa by the Bishop of Cuttack diocese to engage in empowerment work with Dalit women in January 2012 and returned for a second visit in January 2013.



Sulakhani was pictured on the back of MWiB's Dalit flyer in 2012. A year on, she has married a young man from her home village of Dengambo. Although she comes from a remote forest village, she had attended school and then college and passed her +2 exams, which gave her eligibility to study for her BTh training. Her training at Gopalpur Ecumenical College was part funded by women from the church at Berhampur, who pledged to give 1IR per day each to enable her to study. Sulakhani is now working across the pastorate as an evangelist particularly among the women. I asked if she would eventually be appointed by the Diocese as a female pastor, and I was told she must now develop the necessary attitude and confidence to earn the respect of the people.

Alimandan works as the Treasurer for the Women's Fellowship in her remote tribal village. The girls and women are very interested in meeting for prayer and Bible study. The pastor or one of the group will deliver the word of God. She survives by working in the fields. She has a brother, but he does not look after the family, and life is hard. Women's Fellowships are very strong among the Christians in India, as a supportive group of friends for learning, Bible study and prayer.



Anusuya is 35 years old. She and her husband are both Christians. She married at 18 - a love marriage - and has two sons who attend school in separate mission homes, and one daughter who lives with a relative a short distance away and attends primary school. Anusuya works in the fields and her husband helps with Christian work in the village. Schooling for the children of remote rural villages is not considered a priority by many parents, and often means the children living away from home in a mission home or hostel. However, education is the strongest tool of empowerment in improving the lives of those from the poorest communities – a woman who is educated cannot be pushed aside so easily, a woman who is educated has a voice, a woman who is educated has a chance for her dream of a future to become reality.



Velammal, a Dalit survivor of the Boxing Day tsunami.

'This house is made of bricks with a tap and running water. I never dreamed I would live in a house like this.' Velammal, a Dalit and a mother of eight, has just seen her new home for the first time.



On Boxing Day 2004 the tsunami washed away Velammal's old home, a mud hut located 100 metres from the sea in Tamil Nadu state. As a low-caste Dalit family, they were not offered any compensation for their loss. The government chose to invest its resources in fishing communities instead.

However many NGOs, including Christian Aid,

worked together and focused support on Dalit and tribal people. Christian Aid began working with organizations such as 'New Entities for Social Action', a network of Dalit and Tribal people tackling social exclusion in southern India.

A district official finally visited Velammal's village and on seeing their desperate living conditions, agreed to help. He provided medicines and food rations and agreed to release a piece of land 2km away with better protection from the sea.

On learning about the plan to relocate Velammal's village, another Christian Aid partner, the 'Development Promotion Group', agreed to build 72 brick houses on the new land with running water and gas tapped to each one.

Several years on Velammal's new home has had a profound impact on her life.

'Owning a house like this gives us confidence,' she says.

'We can speak out and stand up for ourselves because we own a house. We feel like a proper part of society now.'

Online source: Christian Aid www.christianaid.org.uk

Photo - Anne Speight 2007

Tamil Nadu survivors of the Boxing Day tsunami excited at the prospect of their new homes.

Lakshmi Devi, a manual scavenger from rural Bihar

Lakshmi Devi - a 40 year-old mother-of-seven balances a large tin full of human waste on her head. As she walks between homes emptying dry latrines, the foul contents she is carrying drip down onto her vibrant purple sari. The smell is atrocious.

Lakshmi Devi is one of 350,000 people in India known as manual scavengers. Their job is so degrading, filthy and full of health hazards that the Indian government banned it many years ago. But, despite this and the contempt those doing this work experience, it's the only way for some of the country's poorest people to earn money to survive.

Lakshmi says **"It is so disgusting, such a dirty horrible job. I soon learnt that the only way to do it is to hold my breath for as long as possible. The first time I thought I was going to be sick. My mother never forced me to do this job but she told me that there was no other work and if we didn't do it the family would starve."**

Lakshmi says however hard she washes when she gets home she is always unclean in the minds of local people. **"When people see me in the streets they cover their noses and say, there goes a manual scavenger. It makes me feel so embarrassed and ashamed. Sometimes I get so desperate I ask God why I was born into this community, destined for a job like this."**

Born into India's lowest caste, Dalits, Lakshmi says that she and her children are treated as literally untouchable. **"The parents of other children are told that if they touch mine they should wash the place that made contact to purify themselves"**. Fighting back tears she goes on to describe the nightmare of going shopping for manual scavengers like her: **"Traders don't let me near the food they sell. I am not even allowed to touch the vegetables. They say that people like me will pollute their vegetables and nobody else will buy them. I have to point to what I want and then they put it on the ground and leave me to pick it up from there."**

She says **"Whenever there are elections the politicians come and make big promises. They say, we'll give you this and that. But as soon as the elections are over they do not do anything. They forget all about us. Next time they will be back and it will be just the same all over again."**

But there are some signs of change. More government money has been made available to help people like Lakshmi find other work. The organisation SKA (Safai Karamchari Andolan) have campaigned hard to make the job of manual scavengers illegal.

Online source: BBC Radio 4 programme 'Today' 10th November 2010

Balamma – as a young girl dedicated to be a Jogini

When 13 year old Balamma (name changed) was sexually assaulted in her room by a stranger, she felt violated, shocked and hurt. No-one came to her aid, even though she screamed all through the night. Her mother tried to explain, **“This is your destiny, Balamma: this is what you were born for: to be a Jogini and serve the goddess”**. Balamma remembered her dedication ceremony as a little girl. She had been given a small ring of pearls pinned onto her clothing. She had been very happy that day, but had no idea what it meant for her future; a lifetime of ritual sex slavery as a Jogini.

Balamma was taken to a brothel in Mumbai where she was used and abused by ten to twenty men a day. She had several miscarriages. The money that she earned would be taken by an agent, with just a fraction sent back to her community.

Forced to return home after several years, Balamma became the property of the village. When a high caste customer fell for her, Balamma was flattered; she thought he loved her because he was kind. When Balamma became pregnant, though, he wanted nothing more to do with her. He would turn the other way whenever he saw her and their son. To make matters worse, villagers ridiculed Balamma and her son since she was a Dalit and so her son was considered a half-breed.

Balamma’s life changed when she met some newcomers to the village. It was the first time that she was treated with dignity and respect. Now Balamma is working with Dalit Freedom Network’s Indian colleagues to prevent more Dalit children being dedicated for ritual sex slavery as Joginis.

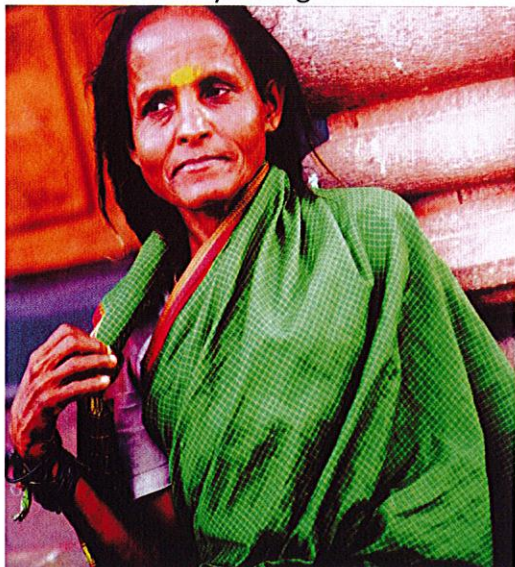


Photo – Rachel Robichaux for Dalit Freedom Network UK

The dedicating of women and girls as Joginis was made illegal in the 1980s. But the law is rarely used. There have been no successful prosecutions. This is often due to the public, including the Joginis, having little knowledge of the law, but also the police and other legal authorities having little, if any, awareness. To help women leave the practice, the laws have put in place various state benefits and entitlements but again few people know about this.

Online source: Story from Dalit Freedom Network UK. www.dfn.org.uk

Chandramma Moligeri, a farmer from rural Andhra Pradesh

Chandramma is one of the oldest members of a Deccan Development Society (DDS) women's group. A Dalit, she lives on the margins of Bidekanne village in Andhra Pradesh, India. Before she joined the women's group, she farmed only 1.5 acres of land. She says, **'We were very poor, we had no food and we were at rock bottom.'**

Through improving her farming methods and growing multiple crops including healthy millets, she is now farming 20 acres of land. She says, **'If there was no DDS, I don't know how my life would have been. We would have been working on a scrap of land and most of the time dependent on the landlords.'**



The Deccan Development Society (DDS) works with poor Dalit women farmers in southern India. With training and through mutual support the women have been able to transform their farming methods. With increased confidence they have been empowered and now help influence government policies.

The DDS have helped 5,000 women turn 5,000 acres of wasteland into productive cropland that now feeds 50,000 of the poorest people in the region. The DDS community media initiative trains illiterate Dalit and tribal women to produce their own films and radio programmes to raise awareness about important issues locally and nationally.

Christian Aid has been a partner since 1988. Over 25 years.

DDS works through the many local women's groups. By supporting these groups, DDS is empowering socially

excluded communities to gain control over land and natural resources and begin to cultivate crops on previously fallow land.

Story and photo - Christian Aid / Chiara Goia / Getty Images

Nayana, aged 9yrs – a child beggar

The Oscar winning film, ‘Slumdog Millionaire’, highlighted the plight of hundreds of thousands of children in India who are being forced to beg by mafia style gangs.

Many children are deliberately maimed, arms and legs forcibly amputated, while some are cruelly blinded. The gangs also pour acid on to children’s bodies leaving them with suppurating wounds. The more they are tortured or tormented the more sympathy and money they gain when they beg. They are trained to approach certain kinds of people and use mannerisms to extract even more money. There are many child beggars who are not mutilated but those with the worst injuries make the most money.

Nayana was rescued in Bangalore. She said she was staying with an old woman in Bangalore. She said she had been begging for the past few years and would be beaten by her ‘guardian’ whenever she returned with less than 200 rupees (£2.30) for the day. **“I was not getting food and she used to beat me. I want to go to school. I have three brothers and they all go to school. I don’t know why they sent me here to beg”** she said. The girl was ‘rented out’ to the mafia as her family was deep in debt. But needless to say neither the girl nor her family saw any of her earnings.

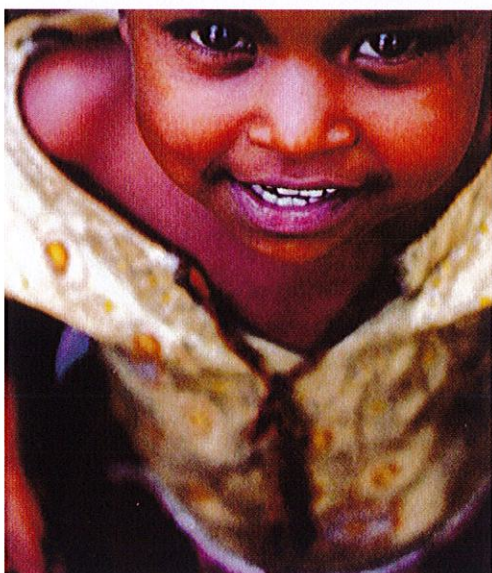


Photo – Rachel Robichaux for
Dalit Freedom Network UK

As reported in the Bangalore Mirror, 13th December 2011. Nayana was rescued in an operation led by NGO – OASIS.

Online source: Story from Dalit Freedom Network UK. www.dfn.org.uk

Rukhsana – a hostage bride

Rukhsana was sweeping the floor when police broke into the house. Wide-eyed and thin, she stood clutching a broom in her hand. Police officers started to shout "How old are you? "How did you get here?" The girl may have tried to reply, but then an older woman broke through the circle of policemen. "She is lying," she shouted. "She is 18, almost 19. I paid her parents money for her."

A year ago, Rukhsana was a 13-year-old living with her parents and two younger siblings in a village near India's border with Bangladesh. Her childhood ended when one day, on the way home from school, three men pushed her into a car. Rukhsana said **"They showed me a knife and said they would cut me into pieces if I resisted."** After a terrifying three-day journey in cars, buses and on trains, they reached a house in a northern city and Rukhsana was sold to a family of four - a mother and her three sons. She has never been allowed to go outside since. Rukhsana said, she was humiliated, beaten and routinely raped by the eldest of the three sons - who called himself her "husband".

Tens of thousands of girls from poor backgrounds (often Dalits) disappear in India every year. They are sold into prostitution, domestic slavery and, increasingly, like Rukhsana, into marriage in the northern states of India where the sex ratio between men and women has been skewed by the illegal - but widespread - practice of aborting girl foetuses.

Use of ultrasound for sex determination is illegal in India, but remains widespread. Rich and modern cities like Delhi, Chandigarh, and Ahmadabad show some of the worst child sex ratios.

The UN children's agency UNICEF says that 50 million women are missing in India because of female foeticide and infanticide - the killing of baby girls. The Indian government disputes this estimate.

"We don't have enough girls here," the woman who bought Rukhsana cried as she tried to convince the police to let her stay. "I paid money for her," she wailed.

"Every house in northern India is feeling the pressure, in every house there are young men who cannot find women and who are frustrated," says social activist Rishi Kant, whose organization Shakti Vahini (or Power Brigade) works closely with the police to rescue victims.

The Indian police estimate that only about 30% of cases of missing girls are actually reported.

Online source: by Natalia Antelava, BBC World Service, Delhi. 9th January 2013

Growing up as a Dalit

Usha, a young Dalit woman currently in the UK for further study, shares something of her life story:

1. When did you first realize that being a Dalit girl meant you were discriminated against by some people?

Since my childhood. I was born in a remote village, where feelings of untouchability against Dalits are much stronger; my home village is like a symbol of the Dalit community. But still now today in my home town, high caste people make us live in the backside of the town.

2. What forms did this discrimination take?

When I was studying 6th standard (13 years old), I went along with one of my classmates to her house, they made me stand outside their house. Her parents and grandparents did not allow me to come inside their house. And then when I asked water for drink they gave me one kind of cheap metal glass to drink water. In my village some high caste people did not call us to their houses and one of my other friends took me to her home and gave me food to eat in the banana leaf and made me sit in the veranda.

As for me mainly poverty, because high caste people are rich and land owners (100 & 1000 acres) and land lords, Dalits are just daily wages workers in their fields, still today.

3. Can you describe how this made you feel, what sort of impact it had on your life?

First of all this kind of attitude made me feel inferior a lot. I was always questioning myself, sometimes I asked God, "Why is it like this, God?"

4. How have you overcome the discrimination and prejudice of others?

The impact made me study well to study higher studies. By studying I can overcome this discrimination.

Now, through the influence of the modern days, in urban situations we do not find so much discrimination, but still in the villages. Education takes out all these prejudices.

5. What can other people do to help the Dalit struggle for justice?

Where there are Dalit communities, we must recognize them and provide the education, as well as better hygiene and living standards. Uplifting the poor, poverty elimination. These things have to take place in order to change things for the Dalits. Education must be provided in all ages. As for me these things can help the Dalits to have value in society.

