

Food Issues

The following material could be used as the basis of a sermon, in personal reflection or in a fellowship or house group. Invite volunteers to tell the stories (much better than just reading them) and then use the questions to prompt discussion.

Questions

1. Identify on the map of India where each story refers.
2. What factors are common to all the stories?
3. How does each story make you feel?
4. What bible references come to mind?
5. What response can you make in the light of each story?

Alongside discussion and prayer, an event could be organised around a simple meal using the following recipe. For many Dalits, a dhal curry served with rice would be an absolute feast.

There are thousands of different varieties of rice which are grown depending on the soil conditions. Dalits generally eat a poor quality, sticky rice whereas rice grown for export is often basmati rice; aromatic, long grained and of good nutritional content.

DHAL CURRY (Serves 8 to 10)

- 15 g / ½ oz butter or margarine
- 1 onion, peeled and chopped
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 250 g / 9 oz split red lentils
- ½ teaspoon chilli powder
- 1 teaspoon each ground cumin, turmeric, salt
- 750 ml / 1¼ pints water (may need more)
- 50 g / 2 oz creamed coconut (optional)



Melt the butter or margarine in a large saucepan. Add the onion and fry gently for 10 minutes, until soft but not browned, then stir in the garlic and fry for a further 1-2 minutes. Add the lentils, chilli powder, cumin, turmeric, salt and water.

Bring to the boil, then cover and leave to simmer gently for 25-30 minutes. If included, add the creamed coconut and stir until dissolved.

Mealtime discrimination

Sundaravanitha from a rural village in Tamil Nadu

Several women, who cook at schools in various villages in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu, are facing a social boycott as people are preventing their children from eating the school meal cooked by the Dalit women, claiming that it is **“a sin to eat food cooked by them.”**

The government appointed the Dalit women cooks, under the “Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme” but they are not being allowed to do their job.

“I feel like dying,” said Sundaravanitha, a Dalit, who has been facing boycott since her appointment on August 16, 2012. She said **“from day one, I have been hounded and harassed.”** The village president has expressed his inability to help her.

After discussing it with local officials, the Salem district administration transferred Sundaranitha to another school, which happened to be her native village. But her woes were far from over. Since her village people knew that she was a Dalit, they too raised the caste issue against her.

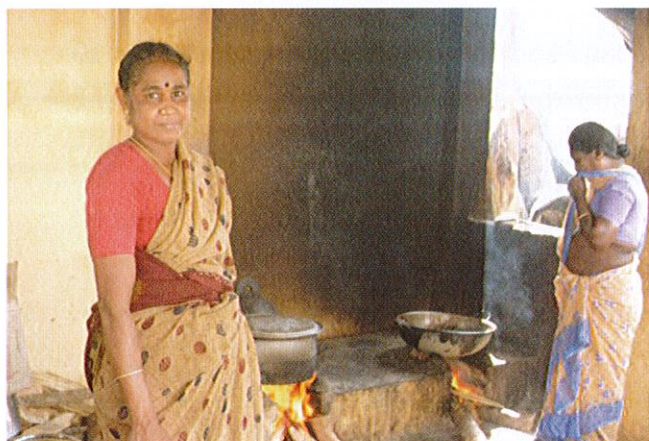
With tears rolling down her cheeks, Sundaravanthia said **“of the 75 students who used to have a school lunch, only 20 students, a majority of whom are Dalits, now have food at the centre. A few youths barged into the centre recently and abused me in filthy language.”**

An official of the Salem district said **“It is a sensitive issue. In her own village which has an equal share of all castes, we believed that her appointment would not create any unpleasant situation.”**

Similar situations of distress are being reported by other Dalit cooks in other villages.

The Tamil Nadu ‘People Rights Movement’ has demanded action under the Prevention of Atrocities Act against those who promoted untouchability. The ‘Democratic Youth Federation of India’, have already staged a demonstration, demanding police arrests.

Source- The Hindu newspaper – Salem, 4th September 2012



School cooks in Tamil Nadu 2007
Photo - Anne Speight

Collective farming

Begari - a farmer from rural Andhra Pradesh.

Begari is a Dalit, who lives in Malchalma, a village in Andhra Pradesh. Without land of her own, Begari previously worked as a farm labourer but was desperately poor. Now she has joined a collective farm along with other Dalit women from her community. They grow 22 crops on the 3-acre farm, including corn, okra, gourd and an array of beans.



The government of Andhra Pradesh state has invited thousands of Dalit women to take up collective farming to empower themselves economically. The women say the scheme also elevates their social status within their

communities. Caste-based discrimination is illegal in India but continues against Dalits. The scheme, a government initiative in the state of Andhra Pradesh, has had much success and is now prompting plans to expand it nationwide.

In India, 70 percent of Dalit people are landless, according to ActionAid, an international development organization that works to eliminate poverty. The percentage is even higher in Andhra Pradesh state, where 86 percent of Dalit people do not own any land, says Mary Madiga, founder and president of Telengana Mahila Samakhya, an all-Dalit women's organization in Hyderabad, (the state capital) that fights for Dalit women's political and social rights.

"Dalits are considered inferior to people born in higher castes," she says. "So, they do not want the Dalits to have equal rights because it would put them in equal position in the society."

Since 2004 when the scheme started in Andhra Pradesh, women from over 8000 villages have turned to collective farming. The programme has succeeded in providing better nutrition to women while helping them to find dignity and economic independence. In villages the project starts with the formation of an all female self help group. The group then identifies the poorest of the families and selects the women members for collective farming.

The government buys 3 to 5 acres of land for each collective farm and hands control of it to a group of five to 10 women. The women are free to use the produce they grow to sell or to consume. Once they generate enough income, they pay the government back for the land. The scheme also provides the women with training in organic and multicrop farming. The government and local self-help groups offer microloans to the women to buy materials such as seeds.

Online source: Global Press Institute – 6th December 2012

Government politician speaks out

Small-scale Industries Minister Narasimha Naik — who is himself a Dalit — on Sunday said some “upper caste” people were still discriminating against the Dalits. **“If you, who eat grain like rice, jowar and ragi that have been dehusked by the feet of Dalit farmers and labourers, have so much ego, then what should be the level of ego that these Dalit farmers/labourers themselves should be having?”** he said.

Addressing a programme related to Dalits’ business ventures organised at a hotel in Bangalore, the Minister said: **“You may be eating food items prepared from these grains with the help of a fork, sitting at a star hotel. But have you ever given a thought towards how these grains come to your dining table. Farmers, including Dalit farmers grow them. After harvesting, it is farm labourers (who are mostly Dalits) who dehusk them with their feet”**. The Minister said he felt **“Once a person understands this, he will never look down upon Dalits.”**

At the same time, he called upon Dalits to resist from hating or having ill will towards other communities for being oppressed historically. **“All that you should be bothering about is your development, without any ill will towards others,”** he said.

He expressed concern that though Karnataka in the state of Kerala has a sizeable number of Dalit MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) most of them feared they would not get re-elected if they aggressively raise their voices against Dalit oppression. **“Though we have got constituencies reserved for Dalits, it is unfortunate that those who act like rubber stamps, without aggressively opposing any oppression, are being preferred by caste forces,”** he said.

Source: The Hindu Times – Bangalore, 27 August 2012.

Fairtrade rice

Sunstar Overseas Ltd has assisted rice growers in Khaddar, in the Haridwar district of Uttarakhand state (formally Uttaranchal) to convert to organic production. It has then helped them to set up a growers' co-operative so that the group is eligible for fair-trade certification.



The co-operative supplies organic basmati rice to Sunstar which markets it domestically and internationally, including to Fairtrade markets in Switzerland and France. Tesco launched Crazy Jack Fairtrade rice in its UK stores in 2005.

Sunstar rice grows on the large flood plain of the River Ganges at the base of the Western Himalayas.

From Sunstar, members of the co-op gain training in agricultural methods to improve crop yields. Growers do not need to take out expensive loans to buy seeds, fertilizers etc. Sunstar provides interest free loans.

Sunstar has a 5 year contact with each grower – Sunstar will always buy the entire crop but growers can still sell elsewhere if they wish. Previously as individuals, small scale growers sold to agents (middle men) and were constantly swindled.

Sunstar pay a fair price for the crop and pay an additional premium which members of the co-op can decide how to spend. So far, five villages have decided to improve the roads to their agricultural fields which were inaccessible during the rainy season. They have raised the level of a school playground which was unusable during rainy season, constructed a bus shelter to protect waiting passengers from sun and rain, and built several small bridges to make villages more accessible in the rainy season.

Day labourers (who are virtually all Dalits) are used as seasonal labour – but many of the benefits from Fairtrade also include them.

Besides from Sunstar, Fairtrade rice from India is also available in the UK through Agrocel, a limited company based in the Gujarat. Their products can be purchased through Traidcraft. Sold in packets of rice or as rice cakes, Agrocel Fairtrade rice is also one of the ingredients in Geobars.

Source: Fairtrade Foundation www.fairtrade.org.uk and Traidcraft www.traidcraft.co.uk

Violence at a university in Hyderabad

Dalit students argue they should have freedom to eat what they want.

A festival at Osmania University in Hyderabad has led to clashes between rival sets of Hindu students. The police say that Hindus, who regard cows as sacred, fought with Dalit groups who organised the beef-eating event.

About 1,500 people were fed beef biriyani as part of the festival late on Sunday evening. Dalit groups want beef on the campus hostel menu. Right wing Hindu groups say eating beef is not Hindu practice.

The BBC's Omer Farooq in the city says that there has been tension for a few days now on the campus. The clashes that were feared erupted on Sunday evening and carried on late into the early hours of Monday morning. Apparently last year's event at the same university also ended in violence.

Police say that the violence began when about 100 members of the right-wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) marched towards the festival ground and were stopped by police. The protesters then set two vehicles on fire and threw stones at police, who used batons and tear gas to beat back the crowd. Senior police officer Amit Garg said the situation is now under control.

Protesting students say that Hinduism is being besmirched by beef eaters.

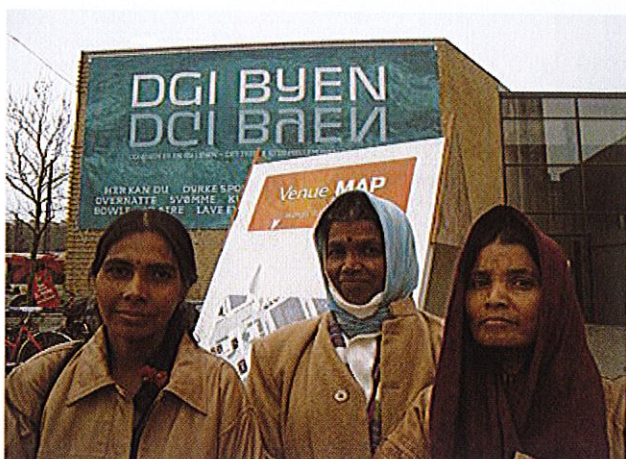
Festival organiser B. Sudarshan told the BBC that they were involved in a fight for the "freedom to eat". He said **"Everyone should have the freedom to eat the food of their choice. Beef has traditionally been a part of Dalit food, it's a part of their identity."**

But senior ABVP leader Ramkrishna said beef eating was contrary to Hindu teachings. **"Today they are asking for beef, tomorrow they will want alcohol,"** he said.

Hindus comprise the religious majority in India and most regard cows as sacred. They are widely used in temple ceremonies and freely wander through the country's busy towns and markets. But some Dalit groups argue that beef has been part of their diet for centuries.

Source: BBC News India website - 16th April 2012

Climate change – Dalit women at Copenhagen UN conference



In 2009 three Dalit women from Andhra Pradesh went to take part in the alternative Climate Forum for NGOs in central Copenhagen.

- Sammamma Begari
- Narsamma Managaris
- Manjula Tammali

They call themselves ‘food sovereignty activists’ and advocate sustainable methods of agriculture.

The impact of climate change is often felt most heavily by the poor and the marginalised.

This is the case in the Medak District of Andhra Pradesh where extreme heat and erratic rainfall complicate the lives of village communities.

- **“Climate change does make it more difficult. If there is drought or unseasonal rainfall, the first thing that suffers is crop cultivation. If there are no crops, it is difficult for us”** says Sammamma Begari, a Dalit woman from the village of Bidakanne.

In the middle of a busy day of demonstrations and meetings, speaking through an interpreter, Narsamma Managaris said

- **“Upper caste farmers use machines to plough their land, heightening the climate crisis with fertilizer and other things. Our impact on the climate is much smaller. Larger farmers grow money, we grow food.”**

On 16th December, the women took part in a protest outside the UN Conference centre. They believe that the poor and the excluded have had too little say in the talks. There are similarities between this exclusion and the type of discrimination they suffer as Dalits in India.

The degree of discrimination varies. In Narsamma Managaris' home village of Pastapur, she has managed to gain the respect of the community. In other, more remote, villages, such as Edulapalli, where the third woman, Manjula Tammali, lives, things are different.

- **“In my village, we are not allowed entry into temples. In tea shops there is a system of separate glasses for Dalits, and we are not allowed to enter houses of upper caste people. Dalits are also left with specific occupations, such as digging graves for everyone in the village. It makes me angry, but it has helped to be part of this organisation,”** she says.

Manjula is referring to the Deccan Development Society (DDS), a grassroots organisation working with women's groups in about 75 villages in Medak District. All in all, about 5,000 women, most of them Dalits, are involved in DDS programmes.

Manjula, Narsamma and Sammamma work with the DDS Community Media Trust and have brought digital video cameras to Copenhagen to document the event so that they can talk about it with others back home.

Grassroots work has enabled the women to take charge of their own lives and be less entrenched in centuries-old patterns of caste prejudice. In a number of communities, Dalit women are regarded with respect by their fellow villagers.

- **“We have shown that we are organised and have taken control of our own agriculture. We have no obligations towards bigger farmers. And through lots of activities, we have demonstrated the leadership skills of Dalit women. Dalits have become village council members and taken leadership of villages. If there is a conflict that needs to be resolved, our women are on the panel,”** Narsamma Managaris points out.

The women have fought hard for their rights, and their struggle has gone through different phases. They had to combat discrimination based on caste as well as gender. Now their different struggles have merged into what they call 'food sovereignty activism'.

In her lifetime, Narsamma Managaris has seen a lot of changes. **“When I was a child, my mother was a bonded labourer for an upper caste household. I used to stand watch over the landlord's fields. We have grown a lot since then.”**

Source: Website of International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN)