

Interview with Dr. Ruth Manorama

questions asked by Ole von Uexkull on September 22, 2006

Q: What is the situation of Dalit Women in today's India?

A: The situation of Dalit Women in India is unique in nature. Age-old caste discrimination and prejudices operate to keep the Dalit women poor, illiterate, dependent, subjugated, oppressed and victimised. They display the poorest social indicators and dismal social and economic achievements. They lack access to resources such as water, common grazing grounds, roads and playing fields especially in the rural areas. Though they form the backbone of India's agricultural workforce, growing food for everyone, they lack the means to eat one square meal a day. Their dwellings are always outside the boundaries of the main village. Hence they are always at the mercy of upper caste landlords for getting water, firewood, fodder, employment, mobility and even to purchase basic necessities.

Q: What do you do to help them?

A: The women in the community who are part of the organisation are enabled and capacitated through the training programmes to deal with these issues. The National Federation of Dalit Women continues to organise leadership-training programmes and provides skills in organising and information on legal protection to fight against caste discrimination. They were also given information on how to access socio-economic programmes for their upliftment, many women leaders of The National Federation of Dalit Women organise village, taluk, district level meetings to articulate their problems and seek solutions from governments and building strong networks among themselves.

Q: What were your own experiences with being a Dalit Woman?

A: One is always reminded which social hierarchy you come from – be it at school, university or church. If you are a Dalit, people look down upon you as if you come from a very dirty and polluted background. One cannot escape caste even though you study in the urban cities in English-speaking institutions. Especially when you are at the age of marriage caste determines whom you have to marry; this is part of all Indian women's lives. When I was grown up I realised how difficult it is to establish myself as a Dalit woman in the women's movement because the higher caste women (who dominate the women's movement) tend to think that they are the seat of knowledge and intelligence and they only could provide essence to the feminist discourse. Because of my effort I overthrew this dominance and contributed to the formation of the Dalit feminism.

Q: The discrimination of Dalits is very deeply rooted in Indian society. How can you change these old prejudices? What do you do to make people listen?

A: According to me the caste hierarchy itself is founded by men for appropriation of wealth, status, and opportunities, to subjugate and oppress other human beings. There is no scientific validation in keeping the caste statuesque. This needs to be challenged by educating the people who face discrimination and prejudices in their day-to-day lives. An intensive human rights education for all communities needs to be provided to overcome the old prejudices.

Q: Can the Right Livelihood Award help to further your cause?

A: By awarding me the Right Livelihood Award you will be providing the recognition not only to the set of issues that I am working on, but recognising the rights, dignity and the due socio-economic-political share of the Dalit women who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy in India.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: 1. To build the Dalit Women's organisation strongly and to establish alliances across other discriminated communities.
2. Political representation and participation of women, particularly from Dalit communities, in all decision-making bodies to be enhanced.
3. Developing new and young women leadership.

(aus: Website des "Right Livelihood Award" 2006)