

## Ruth Manorama – her life and activities



*"...for her commitment over decades to achieving equality for Dalit women, building effective and committed women's organisations and working for their rights at national and international levels."*

Ruth Manorama is India's most effective organiser of and advocate for Dalit women, belonging to the 'scheduled castes' sometimes also called 'untouchables'.

### **Dalit women India**

Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, from being from the poorest and most marginalised communities; and caste, from coming from the lowest caste, the 'untouchables'. Although discrimination on the basis of caste is against the Indian constitution and prohibited by many laws, its practice is still widespread, especially in rural India.

### **Manorama's career**

Ruth Manorama is a Dalit woman. Born in 1952 in Madras, her parents escaped the worst consequences of being Dalits by becoming Christians. In 1975 Manorama took a Master's degree in social work from the University of Madras and has trained in both the community organisation methods of Saul D'Alinsky and the conscientisation methods of Paulo Freire. In 2001 Manorama was granted an honorary doctorate "for the distinguished contribution made to church and society" by the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration.

Manorama has been consistently associated with a range of issues - the rights of slum-dwellers, domestic workers, unorganised labour and Dalits, and the empowerment of marginalised women. She stresses the interconnectedness between these issues, and the common cause that marginalised people share the world over. Her work crosses the borders between grassroots movements, mass mobilisation, and international movements.

Manorama's working life has been spent on organisation building, mobilisation of people and advocacy on behalf of Dalit women through a large number of organisations. She is:

- General Secretary of Women's Voice, founded in 1985, to work with women in slums, struggling for land, shelter and survival rights of the urban poor.
- President of the National Alliance of Women, set up following the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 to monitor government performance on its various commitments to women and lobby for change.
- Joint Secretary of the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement, formed in the 1980s to mobilise Christian Dalits for affirmative action.
- Secretary of the Karnataka State Slum Dwellers Federation.
- Secretary for organisation building of the National Centre for Labour, an apex organisation of unorganised labour in India.
- President of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), set up in 1995.

In addition, she has a number of regional and international roles (Asian Women's Human Rights Council, International Women's Rights Action Watch - Asia - Pacific, Sisters' Network). She has also been a member of the Karnataka State Planning Board, the State Commission

for Women, the Task Force on Women's Empowerment of the Government of India and a number of other state and national bodies.

Manorama's work in these different roles consists of organising and educating people, and speaking on behalf of the marginalised. She travels all over India, co-ordinating their efforts, lobbying and advocating, and building alliances between movements.

### **Working for the rights of the deprived**

In the 1980s and 1990s, Manorama was at the forefront of mass struggles against eviction and the 'Operation Demolition' by the State Government of Karnataka. She led mass processions of 150,000 people along with other activists, demanding the protection of the roofs over their heads, a fair deal of security and safety and allowing them to live legally and with dignity. On behalf of the Slum dwellers, Manorama was involved in legal cases at the High Court as well as the Supreme Court of India. Since then, she has been working with the urban poor protecting and voicing their rights.

### **Empowering women's groups**

Manorama has been involved in Women's Voice and mobilised the women at the grass-root levels since the 1980s. She has been consistently urging the Indian Government for pro-poor policies like providing infrastructure and basic amenities to the poorer women who are living in slums. In more than 120 slums, women are now mobilised, trained and capacitated to face the issues on their own and take leadership in their communities as well as in society. Women are also trained to protect their rights against violence, discrimination and deprivation.

### **Championing the cause of the Dalits**

Looking at the deplorable conditions of the Dalits, Manorama felt it is necessary to work with the Human Rights organisations to advance the emancipation of Dalits. She has participated in several struggles against human rights violations, for land rights and for the cause of Dalit women. The Dalit women in the rural areas as well as in the slums suffer unique violence and discrimination. This led Manorama to form a special platform to address their concerns. In 1995, the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was established as a platform for Dalit women. It allows them to articulate the social ostracism and exclusion, powerlessness and poverty, violence and discrimination, which they daily experience. The work of the NFDW has had effect: Today, the Dalit women are recognised in the movements as leaders, Dalit women are able to organise themselves autonomously and independently, and they now demand a National Perspective Plan to be created for Dalit Women in India.

### **Working for the rights of unorganised labour**

With consistent effort, Manorama has built an organisation for the women workers, unionised them, and struggled to provide minimum wages. She serves as one of the Secretaries of the National Centre for Labour (NCL), which has brought the issues of the informal sector of labour to people's attention and lobbied for a Comprehensive Welfare Bill and social security measures.

### **Protecting and promoting human rights internationally**

Through her expertise on the International Human Rights Treaties (such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention to Eliminate Racial Discrimination) Manorama has exposed violence and gender discrimination faced by Dalit women at various platforms including the UN committees. The concerned committees recommended that the Government of India take appropriate and suitable action to eliminate this discrimination. Manorama has several times held public hearings to monitor human rights violations and demand accountability from the Government. Manorama articulated issues of discrimination against Dalits and Dalit women particularly at the International UN Conferences, e.g. in Beijing and Durban.