

## A NAME OF OUR OWN

### Subaltern Women's Perspectives on Gender and Religion

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#### 1. Introduction

Even early in human social organization, women had primacy of place in the religious consciousness and practice. Their role as progenitors and mothers – giving birth and nurture, as producers and gatherers – cooking, weaving, livestock rearing, and as early agriculturists and horticulturists clearly gave them an edge as functioning parts of human society. At a time when there was only a rudimentary understanding of reproduction the fact that women gave birth and nurtured the babies perhaps engendered a sense of awe. Thus religious practice in almost every primitive community has women in important roles – as priestesses, even objects of worship. The fertility cults, of course, celebrate women and their fertility.

As societies evolved and patriarchal practice gained ascendancy, it was accompanied by a shift, a degradation, of the role of women in society, and inevitably, in religion. From the female principle being celebrated and worshipped, events resulted in the delegitimizing the role of women in religious practice. Men took over the priestly roles, and women barred from even entering the “holy” places, far from officiating as priests. The dual stereotyping of woman based on male fears and fantasies entered the popular imagination and thence into societal organizations, including literature, religion, myth and art: the idealised pure, vestal virgin, the ideal chaste mother figure on the one hand and the wicked, sexually aware and active woman, chiefly interested in entrapping foolish men through arousing lustful thoughts and behaviour. Thus, woman as a class was thrust from the pedestal and brought down to the earth.

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## 2. Woman in Indian Religious Traditions

As religions developed across various civilizations, whether western or Asian ones, a similar pattern is evident. Even in agnostic Indian religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, the main points of debate centred on the issue of women. Jainism split in the first century into two sections, the *Digambaras* and the *Swetambaras* on the question of whether it was possible for a soul clad in a female body to attain nirvana.<sup>1</sup> Buddhism faced a major crisis during the lifespan of the Buddha himself when large numbers of women wanted to join the *Sanghas* as celibates. The issue was finally resolved when he permitted them to organize themselves into congregations of nuns, with the proviso that they had to submit to the leadership of a senior monk.

K. G. Gurumurthy<sup>2</sup> in his anthropological study of the Renuka-Yallamma tradition shows how Brahminism's conquest of the indigenous religions – which are basically either animistic, monotheist, or from the Mother Goddess tradition began with remaking the myth of the Mother Goddess, dethroning the reigning deity through implying loss of health and/or fertility and supplanting her with a male mentor who reigns in her place. The Devadasi or Jogini who had ritual status now loses it and becomes an adjunct of the male Tanika – head of the sacred centre who now takes over the ritual roles and becomes the mentor of the Devadasis, who are bound to take instructions from him, obey him, and even offer him the ritual offerings she receives. Thus, the religious establishment, allying with the political powers of the locality, grabs leadership of the local religious power centre and through this takes control of the rites, rituals, offerings and thereby the economic surplus of the people of the area.<sup>3</sup> As the people depend on the temple's oracle for their basic life decisions, their behaviour and social practices are also powerfully influenced by those in charge of the sacred centre. The subaltern religious traditions thus fall under the total sway of the Brahminical forces with little hope of change. The most that the subaltern traditions can hope for is to maintain a foothold in the periphery of the practices, though not within the canonically approved (read Sanskritised) 'traditions' now practiced in the temple.

<sup>1</sup>Cynthia Stephen, "Social History of India, in J. B. Santiago and P. Theagarajan, eds., *Early Christianity in India with Parallel Developments in Other Parts of Asia*, Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>K. G. Gurumurthy, *Religion and Politics*, trans. A. A. Mutalik-Desai, Athani: Vimochana Prakashana, 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Gurumurthy, *Religion and Politics*, 66-74.

### 3. Liberation Struggles of Women and Blacks in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a number of developments in the philosophical sphere which had their reverberations in the political sphere as well. While the European Enlightenment sowed the seeds of Human Rights consciousness, the end of Colonialism and the executive Monarchy, it had mixed results. Nietzsche proclaiming the demise of the Divine gave impetus to the rise of powerful forces of Secularism in Europe, which in turn caused the weakening of a strong socio-political factor – call it Faith, Religious Belief or the Church – operating on the European continent. This gradually paved the way for pragmatist philosophies which eventually resulted in huge aberrations such as the nations of Germany and Italy coming under the thralldom of Fascism,<sup>4</sup> and which finally required the Second World War to bring it to an end.

Struggles of oppressed communities such as the blacks in South Africa and the Peasants in Central and South America for justice and liberation found resonance around the world. While students of political science and history may be aware of the role of religion in these struggles, it is otherwise not known that the philosophical core of these struggles had roots in Religion. While the Blacks in South Africa and the United States used their own interpretation of the Bible and drew liberative meanings from the stories of the Jewish nation in the Old Testament and the life and mission of Jesus in the New Testament, they became the creators of a new theological stream which came to be known as Black Theology. The rejection, oppression, repression and injustice recorded in the Bible came alive to them and they found a powerful source of faith, belief and political mobilization through their internalization of the liberative content in the Bible. Thus was born the US Civil Liberties movement of the 60s, with the charismatic leadership and the martyrdom of the Rev. Martin Luther King.

The Apartheid Movement in South Africa was also led by Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu of the Reformed Church, with the ardent support of a number of church and civil rights groups from around the world. But even as the radical message of the Bible was uncovered by its re-reading by the subaltern communities – the blacks both in the US and South Africa, the women in these communities – especially the black

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<sup>4</sup>These ideas are discussed in Francis Schaeffer, *Corruption vs. True Spirituality*, Reissued (self published) as a composite work by Vishal Mangalwadi, with an annexure by him, in 1998. See [http://francisschaefferstudies.org/francisschaeffer-studies/schaeffer\\_books.php?book\\_title=Corruption-Vs.-True-Spirituality&PHPSESSID=5bc9116123c6866083cf9e1016886230](http://francisschaefferstudies.org/francisschaeffer-studies/schaeffer_books.php?book_title=Corruption-Vs.-True-Spirituality&PHPSESSID=5bc9116123c6866083cf9e1016886230)

women, who played a very focal role in church and community leadership for historical reasons – found that these movements actually continued to reflect the patriarchal norms prevalent in wider society. The content of their lives and experience were not mainstreamed in these movements.

The entire continent of Latin America was in turmoil with the struggle between the feudal political forces and the indigenous population. The struggle was the crucible in which was born one of the most influential ideologies of the twentieth century, again birthed by a priest, Paulo Freire, who wrote the little book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” in the 1970s<sup>5</sup> which ushered in a totally new method of understanding the knowledge and wisdom of the common people. It had a major impact in subverting the transmission of dominant knowledge, through the strategy of ‘raising the critical consciousness,’ also known as ‘conscientisation,’ awakening the consciousness of the people which had been made dormant by the dominant ideology that enslaved the individual and the community.

This method privileges people’s knowledge and experience over that of the received knowledge of the dominant groups. These developments spread rapidly throughout Latin America and the rest of the world, and had a lasting impact on the identity and belief systems of the dominated or subaltern groups. In Latin America, Liberation Theologians were able to use these techniques to mount a successful siege on the sources of domination, the feudal class aided and abetted by religious institutions, including the Church (which played a key role in legitimising the oppressive structures), which had kept millions of Hispanic community in poverty and exploited their land, cultures and social systems, and delegitimised their indigenous forms of faith and belief. Their work, including the ‘conscientisation’ resulting from the application of Freire’s pedagogy, had a huge impact on the lives of the common people and empowered them in many unexpected ways.

The outcome of all these social and political upheavals of the 1970 and 80s triggered veritable ‘earthquakes’ in the academic sphere. These reverberated through the universities, and important advances such as the work of Edward Said, with his powerful critique of Colonialism; Foucault, Derrida, Noam Chomsky and other post-modernist thinkers had a very fundamental impact on the academy and also specifically the seminary.

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<sup>5</sup>*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first Published in Portuguese in 1968, was translated into English in 1970, and went into 30 editions (New York: Continuum Books, 2006). It was banned during the 1970s and 80s, but illegal copies were circulated in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle.

#### 4. Women Come into Their Own in the Academy<sup>6</sup>

Feminism has evolved over three waves – the first wave, led by such stalwarts as Mary Wollstonecraft, struggled for the right to vote, access to education and equal rights. The struggles of women for self-determination and full citizenship in the shape of the vote and access to education and employment continued to break fresh ground in the post-colonial and post modernist schools, in the Second Wave of Feminism. The academy and the seminary, till then the citadel of white male privilege, was breached by these developments. Consequently, a number of Universities and training institutions in the US, in keeping with the American policy of promoting diversity, made special efforts to promote research into various aspects of life of women, including women of colour. An "enabling environment" including a favourable and receptive academic climate and resources was created. Funding for training leaders – including women from diverse backgrounds – black, Hispanic, and 'Third World' also became available. This contributed to a rich flowering of research, writing and discourse in these areas as women from these hitherto relatively silent sections began to gain spaces and voice in the public discourse. Thus one notices an explosion of publications and creative production from these sections in the academic discourse. The silenced women had found their voices, and they found that they were finally being heard, and there is a visible and sudden flowering of thought, and creativity. They articulate, in their own ways, their struggle for liberation. They realize the need to assert not just difference and particularity of identity but also a particularity of cultural and existential reality. Women theologians and scholars in the US and Latin America found the need for a new name, of the need to be 'called by a new name.'

On a Personal-'Communal' Note, I had been instinctively uncomfortable with defining myself as a feminist but never understood why for a long time. Part of the answer came as described in a personal narrative which has been published earlier on a website<sup>7</sup> – it may have been an instinctive rejection of the feminism shaped by a dominant ethos. Perhaps it was an intuitive need for an "ism" based on a more personalised consciousness. Maybe I too was looking for a name that would include the experiences of the Dalit women themselves, their experiences of suffering, exclusion and *thrice-removedness* – isolation by virtue of gender, caste, and

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<sup>6</sup>This section is drawn from, and builds upon my article "Liberative Ideologies and the Indian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *People's Reporter*, May 2010.

<sup>7</sup>"Feminism and Dalit Women in India," <http://www.countercurrents.org/stephen161109.htm>

class – not to speak of religion, if one were a Muslim or a Christian Dalit. I then came across the term womanism, applied by black feminists, used in a way that may be seen as tangential to feminism.<sup>8</sup> Imagine my excitement and joy to find that the same experience is mirrored in the life of Hispanic and Black women, who also struggle to find a word to define themselves! I now feel that this term is a more appropriate term to use, though it is not very well-known in India given the upper caste-class biases that tend to define the discipline of Women's Studies in India and which has also appropriated the discursive space offered by the term Third World Feminism.

The Dalit Womanist paradigm will be invested with its own meanings from its own political and geographical location, just as Black/African womanism is imbued with its own meaning. Dalit womanism will be broad enough to include the experience not only of the Dalit women in general, but also sensitive enough to provide space for the expression of the diversity of the experiences of religious minorities, tribal and ethnic identities who are presently termed subaltern. Once the process begins, there can be no stopping it. It will not only build and shape theory, but also learn to mediate the spaces and build solidarity between itself and the existing Feminist and Womanist thought and theory. It will also negotiate its differences with and build solidarity with men from Dalit and other subaltern and marginalised groups. The imperative will not be lost on anyone who can see the changing paradigms of society from a Patriarchy-dominated ethos towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

To back-track a little, trained theologians among black women began to articulate their own experiences and soon came out with a term – Black womanist Theology. The term *Womanist* was coined by Alice Walker, a black woman writer who defined it to differentiate it from the term *Feminist*.<sup>9</sup> Delores Williams, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at United Theological Seminary, New York, wrote in 1978: "Womanist

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<sup>8</sup>I first heard this term from my good friend Prof. Evangeline Rajkumar of United Theological College, Bangalore, and then coined the term Dalit Womanism, with which I immediately felt more comfortable.

<sup>9</sup>Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, New York: Harcourt, 2003. Also, according to Delores Williams, "The concept of womanist allows women to claim their roots in black history, religion and culture, [A] womanist is also "responsible, in charge, serious." She can walk to Canada and take others with her. She loves, she is committed, she is a universalist by temperament. Her universality includes loving men and woman, sexually or nonsexually. She loves music, dance, the spirit, food and roundness, struggle, and she loves herself." "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," *Christianity and Crisis*, March 2, 1987.

theology, a vision in its infancy, is emerging among Afro-American Christian women. Ultimately many sources – biblical, theological, ecclesiastical, social, anthropological, economic, and material from other religious traditions – will inform the development of this theology."<sup>10</sup> A womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour.

Around the same time the Hispanic women also were finding that their own experiences in the church in Latin America and the US did not get reflected in the life of the churches they were a part of. While Hispanic women generally agreed with the idea that sexism was a negative force among the Hispanics, which further strengthens the dominant forces of society, thus helping to repress and exploit them thus contributing to their widespread poverty. And despite forming the vast majority of the faithful in the churches, they do not have any role in any of its decisions. Their understanding of the God to whom everyone prays is ignored. According to Ada Maria Asisi-Dias,

Therefore Hispanic women continue to search for a name that will call us together, that will help us to understand our oppression, that will identify the specificity of our struggle without separating us from our communities...To be able to name oneself is one of the most powerful abilities a person can have. A name is not just a word by which one is identified. A name provides the conceptual framework and the mental constructs that are used in thinking, understanding and relating to a person. For almost 15 years, Hispanic women in the U.S. who struggle against ethnic prejudice, sexism, and in many cases classism have been at a loss as to what to call ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

She continues her search and finds that one common term is used in literature and song – *mujer* (woman). Thus, she says, those who make a preferential option for *mujeres* are *mujeristas*, just as the black feminists who struggled earlier chose to called themselves "womanist."

### **5. Indian Scenario: Caste, Class and the Nationalist Movement**

To bring the argument into its Indian context, one needs to point out the essential commonalities as well as the differences in the situations of the oppressed in their struggles for liberation across the globe. It is too well known to recount that Indian society is ridden, as no other, with the canker

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<sup>10</sup>Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black women's Voices," *Christianity and Crisis*, March 2, 1987.

<sup>11</sup>Asisi-Dias, "Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own," *Christian Century*, May 24-31, 1989, 560.

of casteism. Caste is essentially a pernicious system of social organization which institutionalizes hierarchy, and values individuals and communities on the basis of accidents of birth, assigning a large section to social, economic, political and religious marginalization, and gives inordinate power, pelf and privilege to a relatively tiny number of communities and individuals. Needless to say, the system, which is justified through religion, tradition and scripture, is most discriminatory, and women as a whole are totally negated as individuals. Their only identity is through their relation to a male in their biological family – as daughter, sister, wife or mother.

It was Jotirao Phule, and his wife Savitribai, who struck the first blow for liberation and justice of the oppressed masses in modern times.<sup>12</sup> Phule, as a young student from a backward class community, was strongly influenced by his teachers and his reading of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*.<sup>13</sup> He was the first to publish critiques in his mother tongue Marathi, of the ways in which the Brahmins – the powerful Peshwas of Maharashtra – oppressed and exploited in every way the common hardworking peasants and workers of the country. He taught his wife to read, trained her to teach, and eventually the couple started a number of schools for girls, ran an orphanage, organized the first civil marriage in the country, and set up a discussion group called the Satya Shodhak Samaj, with the objective of interrogating the unjust practices of the day. He lobbied the colonial government to run day schools for common people's children – meaning the majority of non-Brahmin castes – so that all could access education and benefit from it: employment, modern thought and liberation. He was the inspiration for the life and work of the eminent economist, lawyer, thinker, political leader and finally, spiritual head of the oppressed Indian masses, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who championed the cause of women as a large section of the oppressed in the country. He addressed their issues specifically in his writings, and built up their leadership in the trade union he set up. He drafted a secular Constitution with women getting equal rights, freedom and non-discrimination as citizens. After independence, in his capacity as Law minister, he also drafted a far-sighted Bill giving women the Right to Property, which the Hindu Personal Law denied at the time. When he faced fierce attacks on this count, and the PM Jawaharlal Nehru did not back him, he resigned from the Cabinet in protest.

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<sup>12</sup>Braj Ranjan Mani, *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule*, New Delhi: Mountain Peak, 2009, 5.

<sup>13</sup>Mani, *A Forgotten Liberator*, 5.



The anti-colonial struggle was, however, one of the rare modern contexts in India in which women were seen in public roles, as freedom fighters and leaders of popular struggles. Gandhiji clearly articulated the need for women to be fully involved in the struggles and this legitimized their role. Women were also active participants in the struggles of the depressed<sup>14</sup> class for voice and representation led by Ambedkar. Women were closely involved in the Indian National Army set up by Subhas Chandra Bose, the Telangana Movement, and other struggles against the British by the tribal communities in Central India. Women from the lower socio-economic classes in Southern India had joined the ranks of the educated and started working as teachers, nurses, and paramedics.

### **6. Post-Independent India and Indian Feminism**

The overall situation of women in society, however, fell back into subservience and subordination in the post independent India, as was the norm following periods of political turmoil and struggle – just as happened in the West following the Second World War, due to the entrenched patriarchal norms which still keep the women as outsiders to political power and decision-making. It was only when the civil liberties movements and the third wave of Feminism hit the world that women in India began to mobilize around their issues – the 1970s. Since then, there has been a fairly large mobilization of women especially of middleclass urban women, who have notched up quite impressive success in struggles for legal reform, against gender violence, etc. The question remains, however, as to whether the Indian Feminist movement truly made a difference to the largest numbers of women in India? To answer this it is necessary to undertake a critical review of the role of the Feminist movements in this context.

Feminism in India, with its liberal and left-oriented value base, has over the years continued to marginalize Dalit Women's lives and experiences from theorizing and actions. It may even be said that the women's movement in India is in the grip of the Brahminical and casteist consciousness which totally obscures the role of caste oppression in the lives of the mass of underprivileged women in India.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>The term Depressed Classes was the official term in use at the time, to denote the groups who faced traditional impediments to their human and citizenship rights.

<sup>15</sup>For a detailed treatment of the subject, see Cynthia Stephen, "India, the Idea of Nation and the Subaltern Indian Woman," *Integral Liberation*, vol. 15, 2, June 2011, 161-172.

One important illustration is the almost total lack of response from the mainstream women's movements to the most blatant atrocities like public rapes, lynching and discriminations that Dalit women face – for instance, the horrendous Khairlanji case where two dalit women – a mother and daughter – were brutally killed in public, and where no action was taken till several days later street demonstrations and violence by youths from mostly the dalit community finally forced the police to register cases and take up investigation. The submission by the Christian Solidarity Worldwide to the Universal Periodic Review of the UN asserts that caste-based analysis of the various contemporary forms of slavery show that the chief victims of human trafficking, sexual slavery, the Devadasi system, bonded labour and manual scavenging are Dalits, especially women. The UN Committee on the Status of Women noted that the implementation of laws to prevent such exploitation is extremely poor.<sup>16</sup>

Contrast that with the strong demonstrations and legal challenges and resources the women's groups devote to issues relating to domestic violence in middleclass homes, or rights of alternate sexualities, or for struggles to licence prostitution.<sup>17</sup> According to Vibhuti Patil, eminent economist and women's rights activist, the women's movement in Maharashtra has undergone a huge split on the issues of the subaltern women. The mainstream feminists choose to articulate and work on issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights, alternate sexualities, the assertion of the right of women to continue on sex work and struggle for their rights; the women and activists from the Dalit and Bahujan groups question this priority and assert that the real issues is of discrimination, caste-based gender violence against Dalit women and girls including the structural discrimination which imposes sex work, manual scavenging and low-paid "unclean" occupations on them by the collusion of caste, class and patriarchal hierarchies. It is even more significant that the cases taken up by the mainstream women's groups are indeed reviewed and addressed sympathetically by courts, thus underscoring the fact that the class-caste-patriarchal alliances are more comfortable with addressing issues seen as coming from "safe" quarters.

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<sup>16</sup>From the summary prepared by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN, New York, March 2008.

<sup>17</sup>It is left to Dalit organizations to raise these issues in international forums, while mainstream women's groups focus on the above issues. For instance, the issue of the state's failure to protect the rights of women in prostitution and sex work is raised by the Gramin Mahila Sanstha and VAMP.

In contrast, the lack of access of Dalits to justice is widely known even internationally – as the numerous recommendations and comments by the bilateral and multilateral bodies show – and continues unchecked even in the face of the blatantly casteist and anarchist violations commonly seen all over India. These include targeted rapes and atrocities against educated and newly-assertive Dalit communities, social and economic boycotts, ongoing untouchability practices in the public and private realms, exclusion from certain occupations, and reserving certain low-paid and unclean occupations for Dalits; extraction of caste labour on pain of violence and displacement. The conviction rate, even under the low number of cases which come up for trial under the special Laws drafted in their favour, is woeful, even going by the National Crime Records data.<sup>18</sup> Further, in the cases of Dalits, the caste factor is sought to be downplayed, and the issue addressed as a 'mere' law-and-order problem. For instance, in the Khairlanji case, the judgement only gave relief for the murders, and chose to disregard the caste angle. In the notorious Kambalapalli case, even though seven Dalits from the household of a panchayat waterman who was a Dalit – were burnt alive in a public lynching, all the accused were acquitted for lack of evidence as the witnesses had all been intimidated by the powerful perpetrators into not testifying.

Thus both civil society and the courts have placed the issues of Dalits at a much lower priority despite their intensity and the fact that they are duty bound by the Constitution to prevent and deter anti-Dalit crimes. The situation reflects the caste and class bias of influential sections of Indian society – the police, courts, the government. But even civil society, especially the mainstream Women's movement, has chosen to down-play these blatant structural violations faced by Dalits. In other words, they have failed to take these issues on board, even as they are most articulate on issues such as communal violence, violence against the Maoists, etc. It is also interesting that most of the women who head feminist organisations come from privileged class and caste background. Their social location obviously dictates their choice of issues and approach. Thus Dalit women's concerns which include wages, water, housing, food security, violence from males of other castes in addition to their own, child marriage practices (with all its attendant social and health complications) due to high possibility of sexual violence against girls, etc – are fairly low on their priorities.

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<sup>18</sup><http://www.ncdhr.org.in/media-library/media-library/?searchterm=Atrocities>

In contrast, feminists are quick to take up issues relating to the sexual economy, such as reproductive rights which include “choice” to abort, even the outlawed sex-selective abortion is being touted as the “right of a woman to choose what child to bear;” the “right” of women in sex work to remain in it, protection for them and legalisation of sex work, etc. In Mumbai, the issue was brought to a head by the Bar Girls Controversy about four years ago. A police officer, who happened to be a Dalit, passed an order banning the use of girls to dance in bars. This caused a huge uproar and issues were polarised as women from the elite groups rose up in support of the bar girls who lost their means of livelihood; the women from the Dalit and Bahujan movements spoke up in favour of the decision as they felt that the system targeted girls from their sections for such work which they felt was sexual slavery and degraded women especially from the subaltern groups. Further, they felt that the system therefore privileged the women of the elite class and castes who wanted women from Dalit and other subaltern groups to provide basically illicit sexual services to men at huge personal cost while they benefitted by exercising choice of profession, and also were able to maintain their own legal, social and health status at an increasingly high level.

Thus, it is clear that mainstream, elite Indian Feminism has huge gaps in the way it chooses its issues, its strategy and reach. As a result, one may conclude that their real intention of liberation for all women everywhere is tainted by class-caste-self interest.

On the other hand, the work of strugglers for liberation like Freiere, Gramsci, Martin Luther King, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson and Winnie Mandela have influenced grassroots-level interventions by the ‘action groups’ of the 80s and the NGOs and people’s movements of the 90s and onward. Therefore, the tools of liberative movements of people if not all of its radical content, have been in use in India for decades, often by theologically trained activists who in turn used these ideas to train and mobilise the masses.

### **7. Dalits, Women and the Church in India**

According to Dr. John Dayal, a journalist and activist, the Indian Church comprises of 70% Dalit and Adivasi, the majority of whom continue to be poor, oppressed, and excluded, even in the church. But due to the search for liberation and hope that impels the oppressed to various options, the church continues to grow in numerical terms. According to Godwin Shiri, the Christian Dalits have not lost hope in the liberative potential of

Christianity.<sup>19</sup> One of the important manifestations of this search for fulfilment by the Dalits in Christianity has been the development of Dalit Theology from the 80s onwards. This field of study has seen rapid growth and development, with many thinkers, writers and practitioners in this field bringing in fresh and well-grounded perspectives which have challenged existing biases and set new benchmarks of authenticity and rigour. Rev. Nirmal, Rev. Devasagayam, and Rev. James Massey were among the pioneers, and several younger scholars have enriched the field immensely as well.

However, just as Black women found that Black theology tended to be as gendered as mainstream theology, Dalit women were marginalized in the development of Dalit Theology. Even the articulations by Dalit men of the female-centred value base of the Dalit consciousness were made from a male perspective, it was felt. Women theologians from a Dalit background such as Prasanna Kumari, Martha Gladstone, and Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar and many others have written and spoken extensively on this subject.

The situation of the women of this group, both Dalit and Adivasi, but especially Dalit, is more problematic, as it appears that they are exchanging one form of oppressive social system to "escape" into another one, which continues to marginalize women's life experiences in general, but that of the working class, oppressed section even more. The teachings of the church to these sections appear to prime their response to 'peace,' 'humility,' 'acceptance of one's lot,' and most important, that of the very loaded term 'submission,' especially to the men and to the teachings of the Bible as interpreted in the main (read male) stream.

The question is, why then do the Dalits, especially women, continue in their faith and even share it joyfully with others, who also accept it and become part of the faith community as well? Where does the answer to this lie? One looks in vain within the existing theological and pastoral counselling practices within the church for the answer.

It is a serious lacuna that the theology the church has been practicing, especially the mainstream churches, is far from the lived experiences of these masses. Hence we need to note that they seem to have tapped a far deeper lode of faith than is available to them in the mainstream church, one that meets their deepest and unmet needs, and which, one may even add, are not accessible to the present form of doing church or theology,

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<sup>19</sup>Godwin Shiri, *The Plight of Christian Dalits: A South Indian Case Study*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1997, 234.

and even to their theologians and pastors. I suggest that the women experience it as a deeply individual form of faith experience, predicated on an intense, one-to-one relationship with Christ. This may be seen in the writings of young Dalit women Theology students as they write their BD and MTh Theses. It may also be seen in the fact that many of these women choose professions which help them reflect this faith experience – nursing, social work, teaching underprivileged children at the school level, grassroots health workers, evangelists, ‘prayer warriors,’ etc. I know of one young fully-professed Catholic nun from a working-class background who had to leave the convent due to some unpleasant situation. Though her family accepted her back fully, and urged her to marry and “get settled,” she replied “No, after having accepted Jesus as my bridegroom I cannot give that place to anyone else.” She chose to serve as an attendant in a home for severely disabled children for many years till the opportunity ended. She continues to serve the children of her family and her aged parents in an exemplary manner.

The present form of church life and discourse, especially in the Protestant denominations, perhaps does not adequately reflect this life of willing sacrifice of self in practice, though liturgy and ritual do. This is more so in the Catholic Church with its space for the spirituality of women. It is this mismatch between the women’s life and experience that sisters in the US, Latin America and Africa identified as the need for a name of their own.

### **8. Conclusion**

In the year 2006, the Women’s Studies Department of the United Theological College, held a consultation titled “Dalit Women’s Movements – Leadership and Beyond.” The consultation put out a statement in which it announced the setting up of the Dalit Women’s Network for Solidarity, or DAWNS, which would

work to strengthen the voices of Dalit women through building knowledge, working towards ideological clarity, and highlighting the values, visions and aspirations of Dalit Women. It will strive to put their agendas in the mainstream, thereby giving a new shape and direction to socio-political and cultural discourse. It is a conscious effort to break the existing stereotype of Dalit women as mainly activists (doers) who have little to contribute (as thinkers) to

ideological discourses in society, politics, governance, ethics, economics, and development.<sup>20</sup>

The statement points out the unique realities of Dalit women in India: discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, and class; and diversity of religion, region, and language. It announces the coining of the term *Dalit Womanism* to "better define and understand our lives, because it affirms us in a more holistic way rather than the term 'Feminism' which comes with a lot of baggage."

Further, they ask:

How are liberative theologies and ideologies reflective of our understanding of reality? How will our knowledge, our voices, our viewpoint, our life experiences and most importantly, our contributions, find a place, a voice a value? Will they also find a place in the midst of the church's teaching and expositions of the Bible? Will our theologians think with us on doing a new theology – a theology of Dalit womanism? Further, will the church show its solidarity with our lot? Will it throw in its lot with the poor and oppressed, and be bothered intellectually, materially and spiritually by us and our lives?<sup>21</sup>

But, they also say, "Whatever the church chooses to do, we have heard His voice, and He says, 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.'"

This last term – the Kingdom – has been interestingly critiqued by Kwok Pui-lan, who first articulated Asian Feminist Theology, which reflects the multi-cultural, multi-religious context of Asia, with the reality of cultural subjugation of the women, the demand for self-sacrifice and obedience as prized virtues, with communitarian values which place a value on social relationships. Women are thus uniquely disadvantaged and are found on the losing side both theologically and culturally. Hence she terms the use of the word "Kingdom" as sexist, reflecting a culture of dominance. She coins an alternative, more inclusive term: "kin-dom," meaning a community of "kin," which actually reflects our kin identity due to our relationship with God.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>The full statement may be accessed at [http://www.womenutc.com/06documentation\\_01Evangeline%20DAWNS.htm](http://www.womenutc.com/06documentation_01Evangeline%20DAWNS.htm)

<sup>21</sup>[http://www.womenutc.com/06documentation\\_01Evangeline%20DAWNS.htm](http://www.womenutc.com/06documentation_01Evangeline%20DAWNS.htm)

<sup>22</sup>Asisi-Dias: "Christ in Mujerista Theology," cited in Tatha Wiley, *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003.

The evolution of the thinking now leads me to feel that while Dalit Women are without doubt one of the most excluded and marginalized groups in India, we do have sisters who may not be Dalits but face the same hardships and exclusions. Further, it is necessary to maintain solidarity with the sisters from the larger sections of the oppressed, which include other groups including but not limited to the Adivasis, the Northeast groups, OBCs, MBCs, etc. Therefore, I propose that the unique experience of Indian women from the subaltern/Dalit groups be given a new name: *Subaltern Indian Womanism*. Thus we will be able to give form and content to our own experiences, interpret, analyse and critique society from our perspective, and shape the discourse in directions which have meaning for us, rather than be told what are our issues. We can give voice to our own visions, exercise our discretion as we see fit, and express our own opinions. We can grow to be our own leaders. We can choose to work with the men on common issues and listen to them and shape their thinking to our thoughts too.

If Dalit women want, rightly, to assert their own specific identities and discriminations (under the term Dalit Womanism) which indeed set them apart from the rest in unique ways such as forced child prostitution through a debased Devadasi system or the ongoing banned practice of manual scavenging, they should be able to do so with the full and principled support of all thinking and sensitive persons, but especially of the women from the subaltern sections of India society, who despite their large numbers are yet to find their common identity and voice. It goes without saying that the religious establishment, especially the church and its leaders, have a key role to play in this process.

Thus the belief and faith of subaltern women who know and love their Creator construct their faith and belief predicated on egalitarian and communitarian values and concepts. Can the Church accept this and mainstream the content of their faith, or will it reject their approach? Will our brothers, fathers, elders, and teachers walk with us on this search for a new Kin-dom?