

EDITORIAL

Today **dalitism** is a much spoken word in the Indian sub-continent. Many of the developing countries are now victims of capitalism, which has established an inhuman society by constantly pushing the disempowered poor out of the development circle to a sub-human social existence. Social classification of Indian society into castes also aggravates the plight of the downtrodden or broken, who are here designated by the Indian term *dalits*. It is fashionable to use the term 'subaltern' among academics to refer to this section of the people.

The **Centre for Dalit Solidarity (CDS)** at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, organized a seminar on social issues from a subaltern perspective, and the present number of *Journal of Dharma* contains a few papers presented at this seminar.

The Indian Constitution has identified a section of Indian population as backward classes (art.16 # 4) and weaker sections (art. 46), who were known till 1936 as depressed classes, a term coined by Annie Besant in 1906. The legal terms to designate these people are 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) and 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST) and 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC). The subaltern or subordinate situation of the vast majority (namely, ca. 75%) of the total population of India is primarily due to the caste system (the *catuvarnya* of Hinduism) and the attendant practice of untouchability. The system is divinely sanctioned even from the time of *Rg Veda* (X.9, 11, 12). The religion, culture, administration, education and social life have been controlled by this Sanskrit tradition of the *savarna* castes which constitute only 15% of the total population of India. These traditions have monopolized the attention of Western scholars and Christian thinkers to such an extent that the traditions of the *avarnas* (the so-called oral little traditions in folklore, myths, legends and social practices) are almost forgotten.

From the pre-historic to the present time, primal people have been a significant segment of the world population. In India, as per the 1991 census, the tribals form about 7.8% and the original settlers

(*adivasis*) 16.7% of the total population. In epic literature these original inhabitants were known as *dasas*, *vanaras*, *rakshasas*, *candalas*, *nidhadhas*, *nagas*, *yakshas*, *sabaras* and *kiratas*. Their celebration of life through music and dance fostered the conservation of and a symbiotic relationship with nature through their millennia-old healthy practices, myths and rituals, respect for mother earth, sacred attitude to land, forest and resources, and ecological ethics. The egalitarian ethics of their culture, communitarian concerns, democratic values, anti-greed and anti-pride attitudes, simplicity and holistic vision of life stand as a challenge to the dominant worldview of the great tradition, which enslaved these people and kept them as their servants and slaves.

This issue contains seven essays. Dr. Thomas Manickam in his article on "Dravidian Culture" analyzes certain Tamil sources which had given a separate cultural identity to those people who have been designated as *dasas* or *vanaras* in epic literature. A section of the *dalit* or subaltern population of India has, in the course of time, embraced Christianity, and Prof. Roger E. Hedlund makes an in-depth study of the problems of the *dalits* who were converted to Christianity, and compares and contrasts their problems in relation to their original groups. The article of Jabamala Raja examines how existentially the Hindu notion of caste is operative even within the Churches.

"A Dialogue Between Dalits and Bible" by Dr. Maria Arul Raja is an original attempt to put the life-situation of the broken and crushed people in dialogical relationship with the Bible. The next two articles by Dr. J.J. Pallath and Dr. P.T. Mathew are case studies of Christian *Pulayas* of north Kerala and Christian *Mukkuvar* of south Kerala. These articles in a very scientific way articulate the cultural specificity and religious experiences of these communities respectively. The essay of Dr. Antony Kalliath deals with a new kind

of colonization in the form of globalization, which again swells the section of the subalterns from beyond the boundaries of the country.

The cultural and religious studies on the specific identity of the *dalits* and the new social movements are not initiated for the disintegration of national unity, but for a social revolution through which the participation of the *dalit* people in democratic processes and sharing of the political power may become a reality. The studies presented here are a small tribute to those who are engaged in this social struggle.

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