

Community Renaissance and the Voices of Liberation: LAFTI, Progressive Activists and the Dalit Struggle in South India

David Blake Willis and J. Rajasekaran

- I. The Wheel of Liberation: Dalits and Dharma in South India
- II. Being a Dalit in South India Today: Sanjeevi's Story
- III. LAFTI: Amma and Her Soldiers of Non-Violence
- IV. Liberation Politics: Dalits on the State and National Scene
- V. Dalits and Liberation: Voices from Spiritual and Intellectual Leaders
- VI. Dalit NGOs: The Front Lines of the Liberation Movement
- VII. Future Directions: Possible Scenarios

The Wheel of Liberation: Dalits and Dharma in South India

A symbol of movement and freedom, the wheel is a key element in Indian society and iconography. In a land long burdened with the hierarchy of caste and vertical power, this Buddhist and Hindu symbol speaks for equality and progress. Imagine the wheel as a symbol of transition and transformation for peoples long oppressed, and we begin to understand that the *chakra* (wheel), rather than the *varna-asrama* image of the primeval man Manu, is now more appropriate as a symbol for Indian society.

In India the *chakra* is a symbol of power and possibility. The rim of the *chakra* can be seen as representing Dalit issues. The spokes are different institutions that work towards the development of Dalits with their principles, methods and philosophies, to reach the hub, the vital center for strengthening the Dalit community. That center is also the Buddha's *Dharma Chakra*. We can now begin to reconceptualize *jati* (caste) and lifecourse in Indian society, not as Manu, a man whose head is the ruling class and feet those who do hard labor (*the Manu Smṛti* or *Laws of Manu*), the basis of the caste hierarchy sys-

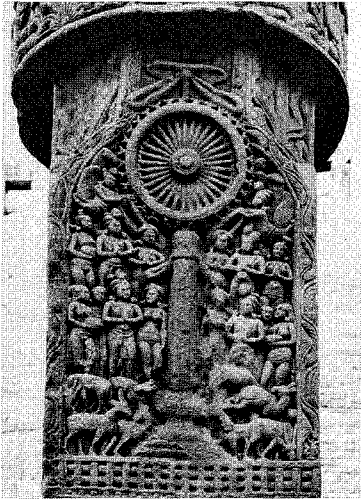


Figure 1 *Chakra* from the great Buddhist temple of Sanchi.



Figure 2 *Chakra* on the national symbol of India, the Ashokan lion capital, also used on the Indian flag.

tem, but as a process of forward movement following the path of *dharma* through the power of the *chakra*, enabling change and new possibilities for liberation from the tyranny of apartheid and oppression.

The choice of a *chakra* is particularly symbolic for the struggles of the Dalits and other oppressed peoples. First appearing as a Buddhist symbol in the great temple of Sanchi 2100 years ago, the *chakra* was quickly adopted by the emperor Ashoka who first united India under his lion capital symbol. During the independence struggles from the British, the Dalit leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was instrumental in the selection of the lion capital as the Indian national symbol and placement of the *chakra* at the center of the Indian national flag (Please see Figures 1 and 2: [http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/aiis_search.html?depth = Get + Details & id = 40096](http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/aiis_search.html?depth=Get+Details&id=40096) and [http://www.payer.de/neobuddhismus/ neobud 14 a 1.htm](http://www.payer.de/neobuddhismus/neobud14a1.htm); and on Ambedkar, see Rodrigues 2002).

Empowering the movement of this *chakra*, the wheel of life, are certain individuals whose voices support and enhance community renaissance. Some of these voices of liberation will be heard in this pa-

per, beginning with a portrayal of Sanjeevi, a Dalit scavenger who gives us an idea of what it is like to be a Dalit in India today. We follow Sanjeevi's story with discussion of the singular contribution of India's Dalit "Lotus Mother," J. Krishnammal, or Amma as she is called by her followers, and the revolutionary Gandhian organization LAFTI (Land for Tiller's Freedom). We then have a series of interviews with progressive activists who support and participate in the Dalit struggle in South India.

We interviewed and observed these activists in their own settings 2006–2007, with the accompanying photographs taken in these environments of struggle, including those of the October 2007 Janadesh walking protest (*yatra*) of the landless, Dalits, and poor sponsored by Ekta Parishad, an activist community led by P.V. Rajgopal. This *yatra* resulted in a significant new commitment of the Indian government to the problems of poverty and landlessness.

We begin with the simple story of Sanjeevi, a Dalit who works as a garbage collector or scavenger for the Madurai Municipal Corporation. Sanjeevi illustrates for us the tensions and challenges of being Dalit, as reflected in later interviews in the paper. We then report on Amma and her soldiers of nonviolence with the NGO LAFTI.

Working on Gandhian principles for the betterment of villagers in a time when globalization is trying to swallow all the arable lands for industrial development that benefits a few individuals far away, LAFTI has undertaken massive demonstrations on the ground in the Cauvery River delta that has resulted in the transfer of lands to the poor and awareness and action against the predation of global capitalism. Taking more than they actually need, these global corporations are not unstoppable, as symbolized by the termination of projects through mass protests such as the Tata automobile factory project in Bengal and titanium mining project in Tamil Nadu. At the same time the relentless drive for profits has resulted in Special Economic Zones (SEZ) for giant manufacturing units of multinationals and transnationals being set up, especially in coastal zones, that have deprived the people of local areas of their livelihood and resources.

The reports that follow are interviews with scholars and intellectuals concerned with Dalit issues: Dr. S. Jeyaprakasam, a noted Gandhian scholar of Madurai Kamaraj University; Dr. Arul Doss of the American College, Madurai, a professor of social work; Mr. Jim

Jesudoss, the founder and leader of the NGO Vidiyal, which works in the slums of Madurai city educating Dalit children, seeing education as a tool for development and working in Dalit slum areas that are politically very sensitive; and Sri Gurumurgan, a Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) political activist, organizer, and consultant.

Questions for the interviews included:

- 1) Dalits: their story of oppression and liberation, individual narrative (including personal stories of discrimination, struggle)
- 2) Strategies for liberation – what works
- 3) Future scenarios for Dalits in India
- 4) Place of Gandhi Gandhian thought in Dalit liberation, if any
- 5) Leaders who interviewees admire and why
- 6) Thoughts on Dalit leadership and the new Dalit government of Uttar Pradesh
- 7) Education and Dalits
- 8) Daily life and being Dalit – anything visible anymore, like treatment, etc?
- 9) Religion and Dalits
- 10) Rigidity of marriage within different Dalit communities (e.g., Palars and Paraiyars may be marrying but is there still a clear taboo on marrying Arundhatiars? Degree of endogamy- May be very personal, but how do they feel about intercaste marriage for the members of their family?)
- 11) Place of caste system in lives of Dalits (daily, annually, life-course)
- 12) Where the caste system will go – future scenarios

Most of the interviews were conducted during fieldwork in Madurai, South India, in September and October 2007 by J. Rajasekaran. Interviews at LAFTI and with Mr. Jim Jesudoss were done together with David Blake Willis, who also introduces research questions, methodology, theory, and the work of other scholars in the paper.

We are trying here to present multiple perspectives on Dalit communities and Dalit problems, especially an emphasis on liberation of the human spirit, a lesson for today's world.

Being a Dalit in South India Today: Sanjeevi's Story

The first time I met Sanjeevi he was trying to dump the garbage from his tricycle garbage truck. I asked his name and he said Sanjeevi. My mind immediately drifted to the *Ramayana*, one of the two well-known Indian Epics. In the *Ramayana* the monkey king Hanuman picks up the Sanjeevi Mountain from the Himalayas, which had all the life saving medicinal herbs, to save Lakshmana, the younger brother of Rama, from the wounds he received in the battle with Ravana.

Here I saw Sanjeevi, too, trying to save this planet from the garbage we have created, to make it a safer place. In his work he separates plastic material from organic waste. He was kind of shy and also frightened about my presence. When I asked him for an interview, he couldn't understand. Why would I want to have something like that? Next morning I went to this upper class neighborhood where he collects garbage, and I saw him with a young lady. I thought that might be was his wife. I was told by the lady she was his sister-in-law, his older brother's wife. There I took a snap of them (Figure 3) and promised that I would bring it to his house. I asked him where he lived. His sister-in-law answered. I found myself at loss that I was unable to break ice with him. He was still suspicious about me. Finally, I found his house a little away from the suburb, closer to the rural area. His mother was at home alone in a small one-room place built of concrete. It was not colony housing (houses specially built by the state for conservatory workers) but closer to one.

She was equally frightened. She didn't want anyone like me to drop in to her place. I showed her the photograph and explained where I met her son. By then other women started gathering around us. One of them happened

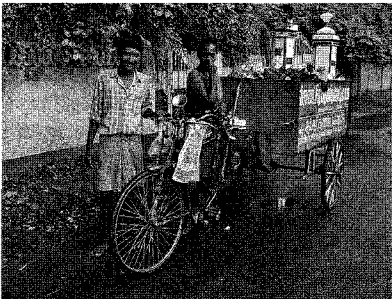


Figure 3 Sanjeevi and assistant on their rounds, October 2007; a Dalit worker in an earlier photograph was too frightened to allow us to interview him or use his picture.



Figure 4 Garbage bin, Madurai middle class community, October 2007.

to be Sanjeevi's older sister. Sanjeevi's father came riding an old rickety bicycle. His father was very warm to me (Figure 5) and told me Sanjeevi is one of his five children. He is the youngest. Sanjeevi has two older sisters and two older brothers, all married. Sanjeevi's father joined the Sholavandan village administration as a sweeper 40 years back. Sholavandan is the rice basket of Madurai

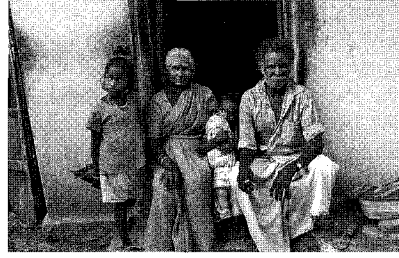


Figure 5 Sanjeevi's Family, Madurai, October 2007.

District, about 29 kilometers northwest of Madurai. Later he got transferred to a village. After his retirement he tried to get this job to Bose the elder brother of Sanjeevi. Ever since that time, however, the previous Government had stopped any new recruitment. Now Bose and Sanjeevi are both collecting garbage in two different neighborhoods.

As it was getting dark Sanjeevi came by and joined us. He was kind of relaxed on his home ground with his parents around. He told me he is 18. He has been collecting garbage from the upper-class neighborhood where he works for over a year. He gets paid one thousand rupees per month by the residents association President. His dream is to work for the Madurai Municipal Corporation. When I asked him about his education his mother jumped in to say proudly, "He has studied up to 5th grade!"

Sanjeevi's mother continued, saying that for the one room house without electricity they pay Rs 300 per month. When I looked around I didn't see any political party's presence such as the usual feature of flag posts and other signboards that suggest the political affiliation of the people. That explained the better housing and clean street. Since none of the family members are employed they are not provided with the village administration's housing. His father is still making efforts to get Sanjeevi's older brother a job with the Anaiyoor Village Administration (Panchayat) so that he would get a decent salary, with retirement benefits of Rs 2000 pension per month and also housing with nominal rent.

Their present address of S. Alangulam, 2nd stop, Bharathipuram 9th street, Madurai, looks much cleaner, and the houses are all built of concrete. Some even had two floors. This is a neighborhood of mixed religions, with some Muslim families. It is less crowded. Whereas in a thickly populated city accumulated garbage and sewage poses a big problem to the health of the residents, here the fight for water is a common sight around public taps. It is ironical to see that the people who clean the entire city cannot have that facility where they live (Vera-Sanso 2007 gives a detailed account of the challenges of maintaining Chakkliyar Arundhathiar families such as San-

jeevi's). The Government's effort to provide flats for the conservatory workers shows its lack of understanding. People who have a rural life style find it difficult to live in a city space. They need more space to keep their livestock, chickens, and pigs, which give them additional income and nourishment. But living there gives them a certain political identity which provides them protection from any atrocity to community members, too.

A recent news article from *The Hindu* of November 6, 2007, reports on how a thirteen year-old minor girl studying in the 8th grade was made a *Devadasi* (woman dedicated to a God or Goddess) through a ritual called *pottu-kattu* in Tamil Nadu near Villupuram. The gullible 55 year-old father, a Dalit daily wage earner, on the advice of a local 25 year-old temple priest, turned his daughter into a Devadasi. Mr. D. Ravikumar, Legislative Member of Tamil Nadu Assembly from *Viduathali Chiruthaigal Katchi* (the Dalit Panthers of India, DPI), informed about this case to the Social Welfare Minister Ms. Poongothai Aladi Aruna. This timely intervention saved a poor Dalit child. So one cannot deny that caste political affinity is strength for the people who belong to the weaker section of the society. What is it like to be Dalit today?

Positioning can be seen as a key. Dalit positioning is traditionally a very sad story, of places, origins, and treatment. But it is now a story of change as well. Caste is no longer the solid, unchanging social edifice that it was once thought to be (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007), if indeed it ever was, but more of a fluid, contested network of relationships. The zoning of caste as a tradition has been met with resistance, in some places successfully. Many Dalits, for example, have been immigrants within India, the Chakkiliyars (Arundhatiars) in the Madurai area who are Telugu speakers being a good example. Sanjeevi and his family are members of this subcaste of Dalits.

The lessons we can derive from their examples tell us something about mobility and its impact on what had been a rigid society. Opportunity comes, socially or economically, and people move. Many castes in India have in fact been immigrants and are now successful, including Dalits who have sent their children as immigrants to the cities (those who have received lands through LAFTI being good examples). The "multiple traditional otherness" of India then becomes changed in Indian cities, where a certain degree of anonymity promises freedom and opportunity from the life back in the villages. Yet this power of place to shape ideas in these local conservative settings is also changing. When the power of ideas of your place in society in the abstract and your space in the society in the concrete are no longer seen as inviolable, there is the potential for change. What happens, too, to identity when beliefs change and the oppressed take actions?

Now there is an increasing political consciousness, with open displays not only of pictures of the Dalit hero B.R. Ambedkar in public places like post

offices and schools where Dalits congregate, but of the organization of nascent political movements such as the Dalit Panthers (Gorringer 2005). Ambedkar, of course, led the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in the 1930s–1950s (Zelliot 2001), while other leaders have led conversions to Islam and Christianity as well. Some organizations, like the Dalit Panthers and LAFTI, the NGO for Dalit empowerment described below, have gone even further.

The traditional caste mapping of purity and pollution placed the Dalits beyond the pale, outside the villages in *cheris* or hamlets that were considered defiling in the extreme by caste Hindus. This outcasting of Dalits actually provides a freedom for them from the caste system when they become educated and can realize their liberation from this oppressive system. We are Dalits, they say. We are Indians, not Hindus. Yes, we may worship Shiva and Shakti, but these are our Gods and Goddesses, before caste Hinduism co-opted them in the service of Vedic “ideals.” For Dalits, the *Laws of Manu* (Brahmins as the head, Kshatriyas as the brawn or arms, Vashiyas as the stomach or loins, and Sudras as the legs or workers) have no place in today’s society. They were always cast out of this system. Now they no longer have any use for it, not only refusing traditional duties such as funerals and the removal of dead animals, but being freed entirely from the shackles of this serious oppression and apartheid (Arun 2007).

They have even turned what had been the basis of their pariah status to their advantage, finding large profits to be made in regular sales of meat or leather products that sustain the community and its members in multiple ways. One example of this could be seen in late January 2005, when the 20th International Leather Fair was held in Madras (Chennai). *The Hindu* newspaper of January 31, 2005, gave extensive coverage to this fair, noting that Tamil Nadu had historically exported great quantities of leather from centuries ago, when the Nawab of Arcot sourced skins from all over the country and exported them through Madras. Here, interestingly enough, is the nexus of Dalits and Muslims, a topic in great need of further scholarship. Now a \$4 billion industry, according to the CLRI (Central Leather Research Institute, Chennai), the leather business in India takes advantage of what is the largest livestock population in the world. There is no doubt that this, as well as other forms of entrepreneurship in Dalit communities, stretches the boundaries of tradition as well as demonstrates a resistance to inequity, social hierarchy, and poverty.

LAFTI: Amma and Her Soldiers of Non-Violence

The founders of LAFTI, S. Jaganathan and J. Krishnammal, Appa and Amma, “father” and “mother”, are people who want to create a new culture. Their work has been very much about ending all colonialism, especially what the activist Gabrielle Dietrich calls *internal and external colonialisms*.

These colonialisms of the mind and of the heart have had an especially devastating effect on oppressed peoples. The opposition or taboo against transcaste marriage, of which Amma and Appa are one example, is one instance, as are caste-related echoes from the emphasis on purity and pollution.

By the 19th century much of the culture and social organization of India had solidified into a rigid and corrupt hierarchical system known as *jati* and which people outside India know as caste (from the Portuguese *casta*). It is this condition of degeneracy which greeted the British when they arrived. However, instead of providing new models of a liberated society, as was becoming current in England at the time, the rapacious traders and government officials of what would become imperial India simply imposed their model of property on the top of a severely oppressive social and economic system in the interest of their own profits.

Regrettably, many early social scientists in India, particularly anthropologists, aided and abetted this plunder and the institutionalization of a severely degrading social system with their codification and organization of human societies. At the time of India's Liberation in 1947 the Tanjore area and the Cauvery Delta (as they were then spelt by the British) had become a hotbed of agitation and social ferment. This agitation exploded in the 1960s in a rural revolution led by the Naxalites, Maoist Communists, many of whom were drawn from the most oppressed of all peoples in the caste system: the Dalits.

Following the massacre of Kilvenmani and other atrocities against Dalits in the Thanjavur District in 1969, specifically in the Cauvery River Delta, Krishnammal Jagannathan and S. Jagannathan, two Gandhian activists who were disciples and followers of Mahatma Gandhi and then his successor Vinoba Bhave, chose the area as the site for their new ashram, which they named *Vinoba Ashram*. The ashram would be concerned with the rights and dignity of the poor, and especially with getting land to the landless.

The approach of Amma, Appa, and LAFTI to caste and oppression is one of healing (Oomen 1984 provides an interesting contrast). Nearly all of the workers and communities with whom LAFTI is associated are Paraiyars, from which



Figure 6 Amma, Krishnammal Jagannathan, South India, 2006 (Lifeonlens).

the English word pariah comes. Amma herself is from this community, as are most of LAF'TI's leaders. Appa is from the Thevar community, a middle level caste that has risen to a position of great power in Tamil Nadu politics in the last twenty years. Thevars have traditionally been *kangani* (supervisors) of agricultural laborers. Their marriage was thus an early example of an inter-caste or trans-caste marriage.

The Dalits are traditionally among the lowest castes, actually outcastes, of South India, as has been discussed above. However, Amma and Appa have chosen to downplay the actual spoken associations with Dalits, despite the fact that they are almost all from that background. Why would this be so? The answers can be found in terms of the questions of confidence, empowerment, and dignity. From Amma's point of view it is not necessary to speak too deeply or too often of caste status. This is of course very much in keeping with Gandhian principles of justice and equality. The status of Dalits, that being said, is one that is only too obvious. Amma has sought a remedy, a solution, to this hegemony and oppression in action and active struggle. Her concerns about gender are similarly reflected in the ways she quietly empowers women, for example in the deeds to lands and houses, which are all in women's names (see Viramma, Racine, and Racine 1997, and Grey 2005, citing Gabrielle Dietrich on violence towards Dalit women, for further reflections on gender and Dalits).

This is not to say that Amma avoids caste identifications or direct action concerning Dalit liberation. No, rather she believes that for the people to be empowered and to receive dignity and respect they must first have lands, homes, and jobs. Basic requirements for human beings. One of the major reasons she sees caste oppression as continuing has to do with the basic lack of these three. In keeping with Vinoba Bhavé's Bhoodan land donation movement, Amma and Appa believe that it all begins with land. Hence the emphasis on acquiring land. What is different with Amma and Appa, of course is that with LAF'TI they are aggressively seeking not only land donations but the capitalization, loans, and other instruments of the modern world for empowering Dalits.

The Dalits who work with LAF'TI are then expected to contribute in kind, either through the donation of labor or services or through support for the active campaigns against prawn farm cultivation, illegal liquor, and other abuses of the society. LAF'TI has the ability to summon tens of thousands of people (again, most of them



Figure 7 Amma in demonstration with LAF'TI colleagues, South India, 2006 (Lifeonlens).



Figure 8 Amma talking with man, South India, 2006. Note touching, seldom seen in India in public, especially for Dalits (Lifeonlens).



Figure 9 Amma with children, South India, 2006 (Lifeonlens).

Dalits) in less than a day's notice for demonstrations and struggles. But these demonstrations are still not directly about caste, although the surrounding society will certainly understand and know who these demonstrators are. Caste is very obvious to the people of South India.

There is another point to be made here about caste and the approach of LAF TI to issues of social status and social hierarchy. That is the extent to which politicians in the past (and present) have utilized caste (*jati*) for electoral-based politics. Amma and Appa do not want to be tainted with the whiff of corruption that inevitably attends politicians in India. Instead, LAF TI works with politicians when the time is right, always refraining from direct endorsements of particular politicians or their parties. This includes Dalit parties, one of the main reasons for this being the ambivalence which greets leaders who change their allegiances frequently, something which has happened with leaders like the Dalit Panthers Thirumavalavan. Since the DPI Party has traditionally been rather weak compared with other caste-oriented parties it has tended to seek alliances, and these alliances often shift with the winds of change in the political landscape.

Krishnammal and Jagannathan are two veritable saints of our time who have opened our hearts to what is happening in deep India. They are two living giants who have given us pause to consider the larger picture of where our lives co-mingle with those affected by the tsunami, by haves and have-nots, by class, by caste, by the oppression of an economic and social system that upholds tradition in the service of, let us be very open about this, apartheid (for accounts of this violence, see Narula 1999; Moon 2000; R. Chandra 2000; and IMADR 2003).

An apartheid of the society and the spirit, it also an apartheid of our spirit

as humans, as our actions cleave us off from our environment. Nature has been literally torn asunder from us, the prawn farms of coastal Asia, wreaking havoc on what had been more or less balanced eco-systems, being just one example. The ripping apart of local cultural fabrics that have ensued cannot be underestimated. Their policies, the policies of LAFTI, aim to resolve some of these great problems, not only for the minority which is the Dalits but, again, for all of us.

Liberation Politics: Dalits on the State and National Scene

On October 19, 2007, we interviewed Dr. S. Jeyaprakasam, a noted Gandhian scholar of Madurai Kamaraj University. This interview gives us further significant insights into the interwoven roles of Gandhian philosophy and the Dalit struggle. (One of the co-authors of this paper, J. Rajasekaran, is "S," Sekar, below and Dr. S. Jeyaprakasam is "J").

Sekar: Sir, please brief us about yourself before we start the interview.

S. Jeyaprakasam: I am currently with the Department of Gandhian Studies and Ramalinga Philosophy at Madurai Kamaraj University. I have been specializing in nonviolence and peace, making a start from the eve of Gandhi's centenary from 1968–1969 when I was a student. I joined the teaching profession in Gandhian studies in 1979.

S: Since then you are heading the Department of Gandhian Studies?

J: It is a small department.

S: But Gandhi is a big man. (He laughs) Sir, what do you think about the Dalits shift to Ambedkar in a big way (*The Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar who led many Dalits to convert to Buddhism in the 1950s-authors*)?

J: Among the Dalit leaders they find great inspiration from Ambedkar. Some of them may not know the historical contribution of Gandhi and the close relationship with Gandhi and Ambedkar. There was a difference of opinion between them. The difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar is that Gandhi belonged to a backward community and was working for the upliftment of Dalits. Ambedkar was a Dalit working for the Dalits, but he had a Brahmin wife.

S: First he married from his own community. Later he married Lakshmi. Is that right? Can you tell me something about Gandhi's plan for the liberation of Dalit community?

J: When he was thrown out of the railway compartment in South Africa on the basis of racial discrimination. . . I think that night he deeply reflected

and he came to a conclusion that he has to work for the removal of this racial injustice. At the same time, while finding fault with the British, he realized that we Indians are ill-treating our own people, Dalits. So simultaneously while opposing British racial discrimination he started working for the racial equality within the Indian context. So he writes in his autobiography how a white barber refused to give him a haircut. He himself did it but he saw that in India we sometimes deny this facility to the Dalits. He always could see the problem not only of the other party but the problem within his own community. That is why the Dalit movement he started was in South Africa itself. He visualized it not only as freedom for India, but as building a nation. Building a new nation means that we should understand how we are going to live as different castes and different religions. So religious pluralism, upliftment of the Dalit women, and so on, these are all very important to his agenda. For him freedom, as you rightly said, is not only a transfer of power but is also freedom to the oppressed, who are marginalized. That was also very important for him. But his effort is how to find a solution. Because he thought Hinduism has all these problems we have to find solution within Hinduism.

S: So he believed in Hinduism? Did he believe in *varnasirama*?

J: Actually he definitely said caste must go. But his style of functioning was different. Because he wanted to carry every one with him (*Comment: That is exactly what the present day politicians are doing. Vote bank politics is a political compulsion for them to please every one. They call it "Coalition Dharma."* The posters and handbills of political parties in Tamil Nadu during elections carry the pictures of caste leaders. To mention a few, Kamaraj, Muthu Ramalinga Thevar, and Ambedkar. Except Kamaraj the other two were seen as caste leaders. Chief Minister Karunanithi is now doing a tight-rope walking, pleasing Dalits, Thevars, Vanniyars and religious minorities. Please note the photographs of recent demonstrations included later in this paper).

The upper caste idea was more of an approach, not blindly rejecting anything past. He was trying to find out if there is some meaning in some of those institutions, but marching ahead, too. Wherever it was necessary to throw it out, doing that. Because in the Indian situation we are all in it together. So if you don't want to create a kind of a polarization and hatred and sense of revenge between the different castes. . . .

S: So you mean he wanted to work within the caste system in the country?

J: But what is wrong has to be rejected. For example, he says untouchability is a plague. It should go, it should be removed, we cannot justify if these scriptures bore the mention of untouchability and pollution. He was very clear. But Ambedkar told he will not wage war, a violent war, against the

upper castes. His method is more of persuasion, constructive work, and ultimately nonviolent action.

S: What do you think about the present Dalit political parties? Are they doing enough for their community?

J: In India the situation is one's political formation through religion or caste. For example Janasangh for Hindus, Muslim League for the Muslims, Forward Block for the Thevar community, likewise, even caste-based or religion-based parties. In India the political dynamics is such that no party which has allegiance to one religion or one caste . . . It is very difficult for them to win an election. So you need to have alliances. For example, the performance of the Forward Block in Tamil Nadu even though Thevars, the Mookulathar (*the three sub castes of Kallar, Maravar, Akamudaiyarthurs*), is a large segment. They are not able to make headway in politics. Because in no constituency are they in a majority and among them there was also division.

So only through the politics of alliance can they get seats. The Forward Block was not successful in that and they are fragmented. Regarding the Dalit parties like *Pudia Tamilakam* or *Viduthali Siruthaikal* only through alliances they are able to win seats in the General Assembly. Now Thirumavalavan of the DPI (Dalit Panthers of India) said he is going to take people from other castes in to his party like Mayavathi. But I think Dalits today recognized or looking back at history and realizing the pains and being angry about it, I think, that is a very legitimate thing. But it should not be inculcated to a kind of a bloody war and revenge. Then India will be like Iraq. Sunni and Shias engaged in an endless battle. (*Comment: Here we see a Gandhian scholar speaking his mind*) Gandhi never wanted to divide, he wanted to unite people. But still he wanted to remove injustice, the roots of the problem.

S: I see there are different groups working for the liberation of Dalits with their own agenda. What do you say about that?

J: I think all these things may help. Because a multiple approach is needed. I think within a certain time span we should be able to remove this injustice. That means we need to have economic growth and also growth in education. Now this reservation policy has helped the Dalits, the mobility, upwards. A person like Narayanan can become a President of India. He came from a Harijan Seva Sangh hostel as a student. He became President of India. That alone doesn't prove that everything has been settled down, of course.

Now if you look at the Government of India even at the under-secretary level, I would say even at the secretary level, you will find Dalits coming

up. So this reservation policy has helped them. Now they are everywhere. But there is a complaint that only the creamy layer among the Dalits are taking up these things, that others are ignorant. Even Ambedkar wanted to review this reservations policy from time to time and make it so that it should be able to be modified accordingly, but such review is lacking. Because of the votebank no political party is willing to do so.

But as there are more economic opportunities, and as more education opportunities are opened up, people are making progress. But still the age long oppression and the trauma is there. And still there is poverty and lack of opportunity. At least in a lesser degree, but still it continues. It may be a small percentage, but it will be millions of people.

S: Can you comment why there is no solidarity among Dalits?

J: I think it is because of *varnashirama dharma*, hierarchy, oppression and marginalization. I think this essence is still in India with everybody. If I am a particular high-level leader and want my son or daughter to succeed me that is *varnashirama dharma* in some ways. Hereditary occupation. So that kind of hereditary occupation mentality is there. Ultimately we have not created a culture in which we are all equal. We are all friends. We are all brothers and sisters. A European model is slowly coming up. But still this mentality is also working. A husband oppresses a wife, a boss oppresses a peon. I think in that kind of colonial county they could manage us. So this we have to change.

But now in TV or Radio interviews they call the people by name. Even they may be big people but still they are called by their name. That creates a new culture. So you become equals. But if you look back at our history it can be very disturbing because in the history there was oppression and all that. Suppose if you isolate this and magnify it then you will have a culture of revenge. There are some people who are nourished in this culture of hatred and revenge. I think that is going to be difficult. Suppose in the United States the Black people, if they are going to fight about the days of oppression in the 19th century, that will lead to violence and counter-violence.

We have to forget our past. Forgive some of our history from the past. Probably we need a truth and reconciliation commission in this country. We should have to heal the wounds of the past. Some people have to ask for apology, some people have to go for truce, penance and compensation. This has to be a big national exercise. Where everybody will find opportunity with some measure of equality, there is some freedom. This land has freedom. That is why all these things find expression.

S: What will be the state of Dalit community twenty-five years from now?

J: I think there will be good change. They will have their rights. Along with rights there are always responsibilities. If you make them militant, more violent, that will be very different. One strange thing has happened. Ambedkar for example. He is such a powerful force. He is a pan-Indian. He is uniting people. Posthumously it all happened. That is interesting. Some people become popular beyond their time. He was also powerful in his own time and became more powerful. I think he is a pan-Indian only after his death. He is a great symbol who unites the oppressed peoples. They are going to help one another. That is good. But also they try to maintain the local identity sometimes.

There is a clash between projecting Ambedkar and trying to address (problems) only through roots. But I think for example, take the Yadava, a community in Tamil Nadu and also a community in UP and Bihar. Now they find an all-India identity. Which gives them the greatest self-esteem. So one of the great things of both Gandhi and Ambedkar, Gandhi gave the title of *Harijan* which integrated all the Dalit communities. If you take each and every Dalit community, they are maybe one percent or one and a half percent. All the Dalits put together becomes 18 percent or 20 percent. It is a very powerful force. So now, with this new identity, Dalits are given a new power. Once in the United States they were happy to be called as Negroes, Blacks, and today Afro-Americans. This gives them a greater identity. Because Dalits were also Christians and in Islam this happened for them, also.

Gandhi called them as *Harijan*. That has a personal connotation. He was using a language which is his own culture. Because his mother discriminated against one Oorka. He was a scavenger. And when Gandhi touched him, his mother wanted Gandhiji to take a bath. He was very surprised, very shocked. But he didn't want to hurt his mother. He writes, "God is everywhere." That is the song which Gandhi always sang, "Hari, Perumal, the lord is everywhere, in the mountain, in the ocean." If God is everywhere, then God is also in Oorka. I think that is the metaphor which worked in his young mind later on. When he started the movement he thought it is a Hindu problem. One of my teachers was very angry with Gandhi. Because he is a Saivaite, he said, Gandhi should have called them *Sivajan*. He was very upset. But there is also another reason for Gandhi. *Hari* means simply God. It doesn't mean a Hindu God. For example, the "Kingdom of God," the biblical expression which Tolstoy was using. I think that Gandhi translated it into *Ram Raj*. *Ram Raj* doesn't have anything to do with Rama or Hindutva. He simply related it to Ram. I think *Harijan* also is like that.

He also used another expression, *Durjan*. *Durjan* means son of the children of *Dustas* or evil or Satan. He says there are only two segments in the society. One, *Harijan*, children of God. Another who are ill-treated by the *Harijans*. They are *Durjans*. So, promoted to *Harijans* they have to do service to

Harijans. I think that is what he says. Durjans, by doing service to Harijans, elevate them to the level of Harijans. He also says the Harijans, because they are living in tune with nature, living on agriculture and crafts, are doing less exploitation of other people and also less exploitation of nature. They are really children of God because all the indigenous people and the tribals even extended the meaning of Harijan. But he said they are living a very simple life, living in tune with nature. They are not destroying anything.

S: Are you quoting Gandhi?

J: We have to take that broad meaning. But unfortunately some of these Dalit groups, they are angry with Gandhi. Probably they didn't take the pain of knowing Gandhi. But also they are partly angry with the traditional Gandhians. Traditional Gandhians after Gandhi . . . they didn't do much for the uplift of Harijans. I think that is also only a kind of ritual than a concrete work. I think there are some people like P.V. Rajagopal, others who are working with indigenous people. Generally the Gandhian movement has not done enough after Gandhi for the Harijans.

S: You said earlier the Dalits have come up in many fields, but we still keep hearing about Dalits unable to walk into a temple and the double tumbler (glass) system. What do you say about that?

J: I think these injustices brought to light is a good thing, but nobody welcomes this. Once untouchability was considered as a kind of a privilege or something normal but people feel ashamed when these things are brought to notice. Today nobody will be able to justify these things. So now we are ready to continuously work.

S: I see lot of people are not happy with the Government's reservation policy.

J: I think the question is if all this reservation is actually going to the needy people. That is the question. I won't say it only goes to the creamy layer, but we need to examine this. There is an amount of jealousy. Generally speaking, everybody accepts reservations. Nobody is openly opposing reservations. Only thing is we need to give more input to the weaker sections so that they can be uplifted. So we need special care, special programmes. Unfortunately in some places there is more of hatred and somehow they manage it instead of doing it as they should.

For example, at the Indian Institute of Science for the Dalit candidates they have a special training program for attending the entrance examination. For some people, for generations, deep in illiteracy, they need more, not only financial support but also other input. I think that is necessary. I think

we are not giving that enough. Now we find even in medical college admission, even in open competition, that Dalit students are able to come. There is a tremendous progress. We cannot deny that. It is not only that Dalits come up in reservations. They come up in open competition, too. Previously there was a lack of opportunity in the 80s and 90s. But suddenly the situation has changed. So now everybody gets an opportunity. If we are talented, if we are educated, we will get an opportunity somewhere. So I think looking down upon reservations, that it has changed to a considerable extent in recent few years. Because everybody gets a chance.

S: Some feel that globalization has made more people poor and the rich have become richer.

J: Marx said the workers of the world should unite. Even in the Tamils' tradition, every village is my village, every one is my kin. The *Advaida Vedanta*, the soul in you, the soul in me, and the God, are all one. I think some kind of unity of human kind, a unity of spirit is always there, but the revolution in transport and communication has brought in a new reality. So now we are in an increasingly interdependent world. Now everybody will use it to his or her own advantage. Now those who want to make more money will use globalization. Suppose we want to spread more love, more fraternity, we should also use the opportunity.

I think simply saying globalization itself is harmful. . . We can't stop globalization. How to use it in favor of the poor, in favor of the downtrodden. Where to stop, where to challenge? That we need to work on. The powerful will always exploit. Globalization gives them a chance to, but globalization gives a chance to speak in the UNO in global forums about oppression, about indiscrimination, too. And also today we are conscious about our problems. When we were a colony we were only thirty crores (*of people*), three hundred million. Now we put India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka together we are something like one hundred and fifty crores. Five times growth in the last hundred years or so. But there are no large-scale starvation deaths. So there is also progress. When we made progress our difficulties will be more visible. It is good so we will address (*that*).

S: Among the Dalit leaders is there anyone who catches your conscience?

J: K.R. Narayanan is a kind of a deity for me (*the former president of India, a Dalit-author*). How a person rises up from an ordinary level to a higher level, but is still very sober and mature? Nobody can make any complaint against him. He is a kind of a role model. I think such models are emerging in the universities. Some of the Dalit scholars who are coming up are more sober and matured. But I still cannot find a Martin Luther King immediately among the famous Dalit leaders. That is a kind of gap. We still need persons like Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks. I think this will happen.

There are indications for such people. And also these Dalit leaders are undergoing a big transformation. This Thirumavalavan is telling, "We need to accommodate people of other castes also in their party, instead of (*it being a*) mere Dalit party. Dalit upliftment comes through with the help of others also. That is a welcome change.

And Mr. Ramadas (*the founder of the PMK party of the Vanniyar community*) realizing the need to take Dalits inside his party. First he tried. Then there was some setback. Now he is again trying that. But like Mr. Kakkan, for example, he was the minister in (*former Congress Chief Minister*) Kamaraj's regime.

Some of the Dalit leaders are quiet, silent, but they are becoming role models, making history. They were not shouting but they were making history. My encounter with some of the Dalit professionals, medical doctors, university teachers, definitely show there is a silent revolution going on. When there will be a big leader coming out of that we don't know yet. But still in every political party there are Dalit leaders, not only in Dalit parties.

Not only in Congress, DMK, ADMK, BJP, Janatha party . . . every party has a place for Dalit leaders. You can't brush them aside, saying they are not contributing to the Dalit upliftment. To work in a pluralistic context they cannot make dramatic statements like others are making. When you are in a single constituency. You cannot underestimate many of these Dalit leaders who are in the Parliament, who are also Ministers or Chief Ministers.

S: Talking about Chief Ministers, can you comment on Mayavathi's recent electoral success (*a Dalit leader elected Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state*)?

J: Yes she skillfully managed an election, but what is more important is how she is going to deliver the goods as Chief Minister. That will ultimately decide things. If she is capable of delivering goods that will decide the destiny of India. How these Dalit leaders perform when they are in power. They can do something substantial. But everybody changes all the time. I think that is the compulsion of a democratic system. You have to change; otherwise you will be thrown out.

The founder of Bhahujan Samaj, Kansiram, is from a Backward Class. He supported Mayavathi. Mayavathi allied with other castes. I think in the Indian situation this is a kind of a compulsion, like in the US people worked with Blacks. Here is a substantial compulsion, our democracy and our election system. It is obligatory to work with others. That is a great advantage for us. I think we enjoyed the parliamentary democracy of the British model. People say there are many defects, but the advantage is we are

forced to live together. We can't afford to throw the other person in to the ocean. We can never do that. So we are cursed to live together. We are condemned to live together. We are blessed to live together.

This interview with Dr. S. Jeyaprakasam revealed a true Gandhian of simple living and high thinking. He has been conducting inter-religious prayers at Madurai's Gandhi Museum every Friday for several years. He is also the Honorary Director of the International Gandhian Institute for Nonviolence and Peace and editor of the bimonthly magazine *Nonviolence*.

Dalits and Liberation: Voices from Spiritual and Intellectual Leaders

We then interviewed Professor Arul Doss, Head of the Department of Religion, Philosophy and Sociology at Madurai's American College. An advocate for Dalits and community politics, Professor Doss is well-versed in the spiritual and intellectual underpinnings of Dalit liberation.

Sekar: Please tell me about your family and yourself.

Arul Doss: At present I am teaching in the Department of Religion, Philosophy, and Sociology. Actually we are from Manamadurai, a small town 40 kilometers east of Madurai. My parents worked in a deaf and dumb (*sic*) school that belongs to the Church of South India, and my mother is a teacher. Formerly, we were there in Palayamkottai for some time. There is also a deaf and dumb (*sic*) school there where my mother was working. So from there we moved to Manamadurai. I am the fourth child of my family. My eldest brother is a priest and a professor at TTS (*Tamilnadu Theological Seminary*) two sisters work as teachers, and one of my brothers in law is also a priest. I am the youngest of my family. Two sisters and one brother and myself four of us. I had my primary education in Palayamkottai and Manamadurai High School in Pasumalai in Madurai. For my college education I came to American College.

S: Do you belong to a Dalit family?

A: Yes I do.

S: Are you the second generation of educated members of your family?

A: I am the third. I graduated from American College in 1975. Then I went to the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary. I did my MA in philosophy, then I did a Bachelor of Divinity. I worked in American College in 1981 for some time. After that I went to TTS and worked in the Rural Theological Institute on a Rural Development programme. Then I moved to ASSEFA (*an NGO which works on Gandhian philosophy in rural areas bringing educa-*



Figure 10 Professor Arul Doss, American College, Madurai, November 2007.

tion, primary health, and other self-help group programs). Then I came to American College in 1986. An undergraduate programme was started. Since then I am here. In 1988 I became the Chaplin for about eight years, up to 2006. Since 2006 June, I am in charge of this Department of Religion, Philosophy, and Social Work. So we belong to a Christian family, CSI (*Church of South India*).

S: Since you belong to a Christian family I have a question. What do you think about the conversion of Dalits to Christianity in the past and future?

A: According to my understanding that I have developed after reading several writings of different scholars, originally the Dalits were not Hindus. They are people descended from the Indus Valley Civilization. According to the writings of many of the scholars, after the Aryans had come and conquered these people, they have been subjugated under the *Varnashirama Dharma's* social stratification system. Which was created then. Since it was not a five-fold system, the Dalits were not included. It was a four-fold system of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Dalits were considered to be Pre-Sudra or Adhi-Sudra. Adhi may refer to before the arrival of these people. So may be we are a section of the indigenous people of this part of the world.

S: Then what was the religion?

A: They had their own religion, culture. A world-affirming religion. It was not world-denying. It had a material affirmation of this world. Not denying the material reality. There is no other world. We are only concerned about this world. Later they have been subjugated and brought under the *Varnashirama dharma*. Sometimes they are also called outcaste, out of the caste system. They were also called as people of *Adhi Dharm*. *Varnashirama Dharma* was later created. These people are *Adhi Dharm* and *Adhi Sudra*, *Adhi Andhra*, *Adhi Karnataka*. People belonging to this *Adhi Dharm* are the indigenous people. So they had their own religion and culture.

So these *Sanadhanam Dharma* and this *Aryan Dharma* came in to this fold, started absorbing the local tradition into this fold. And they also much

later, they have been taken into this fold as Hindus. There they have been subjugated, degraded as untouchables. That is why they have been given this most ridiculing position within Hinduism. After absorbing into this Hinduism they are considered as untouchable people. So there were many attempts made by these people in the past to come out of this Hinduism, or within Hinduism. Reform movements were created, or the Bakhti movement have been created, trying to work out their own liberation through these movements. Though these movements have been providing some space for these people to work out their own liberation, ultimately these reform movements such as Bakhti movements have been much concerned about purifying Hinduism. Hinduism was receiving a lot of criticism from other sections. Particularly the western intervention during European times. So then another important aspect of these Dalit people looking for liberation is conversion. Initially when they converted into other religions one of the conversions taking place was to Christianity when the westerners came here. Initially Christianity itself was not much worried about converting people in India. Only in the latter part of the 19th century after the Charter was changed.

S: What Charter?

A: Every ten years they used to change the Charter, the British. In 1853 they allowed missionaries to come in to India and propagate Christianity. Even before that the East India Company was here. Churches and military chaplains were here. They were not supposed to preach the Gospel to these people.

S: You mean SPG, The Society for Propagating the Gospel?

A: Yes. There in England, also, the political situation changed after the Cromwellian revolution. The parliamentary system has come. The Claffem sect, which is an Evangelical movement. Lot of MPs were coming from the Claffem sect and the evangelical section of the society. They were particular about taking this religion to other parts of the world. That is why they were able to send missionaries. So the British imperialists and the Mogul leaders were also questioning, and they were against this Aryan imperialism. Britain is a huge imperial power. So it was also a kind of a counter-culture and counter-religion. Unlike Islam it was more liberative and a lot of human rights elements were there within this Christian religion. So when Christianity was brought into India Christian conversion empowered these people. So they were able to see the conversion to Christianity as a protest against Hindu imperialism and the inhuman practices of casteism. By converting to Christianity they were able to see that they were becoming human beings, whereas in Hinduism they were dehumanized as non-people or non-identities. So conversion to Christianity was seen as a social protest, not only embracing a religion, but as a protest against Hindu imperialism.

Questioning the authority of the caste system and also people who have been subjugated to the level of non-identities, they were able to become human beings and accepted education that was given. They were also able to get jobs. The people who have been reduced to the level of slaves, who cannot wear clothing below their knees and above their hips, were able to wear western dress. They walked in the streets in which they were not supposed to walk with their chappels. Conversion has empowered the people. Formerly under Hindu imperialism the *Manu Smrthi* has given their identity also, not only the occupation decided according to the *Varnashirama*. Their identity was also decided. So the Brahmins must have names like *Sharma*, the Kshatriya as *Varma*. *Sharma* means intelligence, *Varma* means bravery. Artisans had names like *Dutta* and *Gupta*.

When it comes to the servant class the Sudras must have *Dasa*. The fifth Panjama later subjugated and brought under this system must also have the names of *Dasa* and they are the indigenous people. They are slaves. After conversion, as I have said, this is a protest against the caste system and the inhuman practices of the Hindu religion. Based on having their names such as *Christu Doss*, *Gana Doss*, it is a protest, communicating the message that we are no more slaves of you.

We are the servants of Christ. Even my name as *Arul Doss* is a protest name. *Arul* is God's grace. So conversion was a protest against this oppression.

S: Do you mean to say that conversion is one way of finding liberation and it still continues to be?

A: Still it continues not only for Christianity but other religions. Because even Christianity has incorporated the caste system. So even Christians are converting to Islam now.

S: Can you define Liberation Theology?

A: There are two Theologies. Liberation Theology is different from Dalit Theology. Because already existing theologies are not addressing the Dalit issues. Even Indian Christian Theology. First of all, the Indian Christians were questioning the existing theology, which was highly westernized. So it was an imperial and western theology. So the Theology was created by the westerners, and though it was called Christian theology, was white, racist and imperial theology. That was before our Independence itself. It is a school of thought. So there are a lot of Indian Christian theologians, Chen-jaiya, Chakkarai, Bhrambanda, Uphadyaya, Bishop A.J. Appasamy, P.T. Devanandam, M.N. Thomas, they questioned western theology which is insensitive to the Indian reality and Indian Christians.

So they wanted to express Christian faith from the Indian background, Indian condition, Indian tradition and culture and Indian philosophy. So there is a *Christ Advaida*. From the Advaidian perspective, point of view, trying to understand Christ. It is a Christological theology. Christ is an *advaidiya*. *Geevan Mukthi*. Even Gandhi, Vivekananda . . . all these people they have written about Christianity, And Christian teachings have also been influenced by Hinduism. Bishop Appasamy referred to Sankarachariayar as *Vishista dwaida*. So from different Indian traditions they were able to reflect on the Christian faith. That is called Indian Liberation Theology.

But even within Indian Christian theology Dalit liberation theology was not very much expressed very explicitly. It was not addressing the issues of the Dalit people. And that is completely a different tradition, coming from a different tradition. So the Indian Christian Theology not only was insensitive to the reality of the Dalit people. In other ways it comes from the Vedic philosophy, with the upper class Indian Vedic philosophical background. Certainly it was also much against the reality, the anguish, and the aspirations of the Dalit people. So they have to create their own theology, very clearly expressing their own past, and their aspiration for liberation and their suffering and all.

The very word *Dalit*, some people say it is a root word from Sanskrit, some people say it is from Hebrew tradition. Whatever it may be, the word Dalit refers to the oppressed, broken, split open, crushed. So it reveals the most degrading situation of the Dalit people. It also refers to their own past and ancient history. So they have taken this word Dalit and proved that they were able to reflect on their own reality. Dalit Theology emerges from the reality of the Dalit people who are suffering here in India. Reflecting their suffering from the Christian faith and Christian Biblical background.

So Dalit Liberation Theology is the liberation that the Dalit people are contemplating from caste oppression, from the Biblical and the Christian faith perspective. Trying to understand Christ himself as a suffering person. He suffered in this world under the Roman Empire, an oppressed person, so he is a Dalit. Christ tried to work out for the other oppressed, the Jews and also other kinds of oppressed people. His attempt to liberate people from oppression and his understanding about liberation from that perspective is something the Dalits try to understand from their own background as a liberation from caste and other kinds of social oppression here in this country. So rereading the Bible from this perspective, working out the Dalit liberation from Christian faith, from a Biblical background. Take for example the Jewish people, who were slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. The Old Testament itself is the history of the Jewish people getting liberated from Egyptian oppression and leading them towards a promised land called Canaan. Creating a liberal atmosphere and then they come back to the monarchy.

And they got degraded again. They became slaves, and they were ruled by different imperial powers. By the time Christ comes they were ruled by the Romans. Christ was also coming from the oppressed background of the Jewish people. So rereading the Bible from these perspectives, reflecting and relating to the Jewish oppression. Moses was the leader of the Jewish people when they were under the oppression of the Egyptian people. Moses was able to organize these people and God was with them. They were liberated from the oppression that brought them into the wilderness. That kind of experience. Coming back to Babylonian exile. There are two exiles. The first one was in Egypt. The second was in Babylonia. So reflecting upon the history of the Jews and relating it to their own context is something Dalits do.

How in our (Dalit) own context also can this theology empower us, inspire us (Dalits) to work out our own liberation? First of all, within Christian community, we have incorporated the caste system. Now we have separate churches, and even cemeteries are there. So how to address that disease? This is not Christian. This is un-Christian. Another important aspect is that the Indian Christian Theology that has been contemplated and much discussed, the school of thought that has been created by the Indian Christian theologians, was highly based on the Indian philosophy, which was a world-denying philosophy. Our's is a world-affirming philosophy. So Dalit religion was world-affirming.

Not only are they reflecting upon the Christian faith but also relating a Biblical perspective to the Dalit religion and culture. How that was very much world-affirming and how Christianity is also a world-affirming corporate religion. So from this perspective they can contemplate and work out. It is cooperative in the sense that it is a community. It is not working out the individual's spiritual emancipation. For the entire community, bringing all people together. So that aspect of Christianity is also much related to this Dalit culture. And religion. In a way it is also enriching the Dalit religion and culture. They are also able to work out their own liberation.

S: Where do you think Gandhi comes in touch with the Dalits and their liberation?

A: As far as Gandhi is concerned he speaks from the Indian philosophical background. His philosophy also affirms very much the caste system. It is a new type of interpretation accepting the caste system. It is not radically questioning the caste system. Rather he affirms it. He tries to give the explanation that anybody who is a good person is a Brahmin. Not necessarily he should be born in the community of Brahmin. That kind of definition he is trying to give. He interprets the caste system in a different manner, but at the same time that interpretation is not radically questioning the caste system and changing the society radically and in a revolutionary way. Rather, it reinforces the system.

Moreover Gandhi's philosophy and all his ideas are coming from this Vedantha perspective. Then, it is world-denying, which is not very much positive towards the Dalits. So they differ in certain aspects as far as Gandhi's ideas are concerned. But as a person who fought against oppression, particularly the British, in that aspect we can join with Gandhi because he was a person who worked out the liberation of the nation which was under the imperial rule. When it comes to caste he is not very serious about it. Probably at that time he was much worried about the racial issue and the British Raj, as he had to work out the liberation for the Indians. Maybe if Gandhi would have lived, I mean if he were not killed, he would have taken up the Dalit issue. That is possible.

Ambedkar was only concentrating on the Dalit liberation and was not much interested in political organization or becoming a political party. But there are Dalit political parties (*that*) have been created, that have gotten into politics along with the political power to bring in the changes, make legislation like that in Uttar Pradesh. Kansiram, a backward community person, and Mayavathi, a Dalit, they were able to form a political party. Now they are able to come to power. So these are the different ways in which they are doing it. Here in Tamil Nad we have this DPI, *Pudua Tamilagam (both political parties)*. They are also much interested in politics. Another thing is even in these movements also, reconstructing their own culture and trying to claim that Dalit people are indigenous people, that they have their own religion and culture and they had a glorious past. And reconstructing the Dalit religion and culture and trying to disown from the Hindu identity. We are not Hindus. We are Dalits. We are indigenous. That is the reason the DPI (member)s renounced their Hindu names. That is also another way in which they are finding their identity.

These Dalit movements initially were not planning to get into politics. They feel that political power is very essential for the Dalit liberation. So they become political parties. *Viduathali Siruthaikal Katchi (the Dalit Panthers of India, DPI)*. Earlier it was all movements. They were not interested in politics. Gandhi and Periyar stuck to the idea of keeping them as movements. Gandhi said Congress should not become a political party. It should be a movement. Periyar declared it as a reform movement. Politicians may come and go. We have to be here to question these people who want to bring changes in the society. So, likewise, only Dalit movements started. But now Dalit movements have become political parties. They even joined with other political parties for alliances.

S: So it is a political compulsion to join with others. As for the education of Dalits do you have anything to say?

A: Even Ambedkar himself emphasized, three important aspects for Dalit liberation: Unite, Educate and Agitate. Agitate against injustice. He was

never for violence. Gandhiji on the other hand was doing a fast unto death unless the Dalits world surrender the communal award to the British. In 1931 the British gave two voting rights. One for the Dalit constituency, the other for commoners. Like Jinnah, Ambedkar was not very firm. He was worried about Gandhi's life and respected him, so he came for a compromise with Gandhi. So he was not violent in his ways. Most of the leaders were not working violently for the Dalit liberation. Education is also an important instrument for Dalit liberation. So they much worried about educating the Dalit leaders.

Dalit movements and organizations are now encouraging people for education. If they are educated intellectually and reflect upon the approach and work out a way for liberation, education will give them the wisdom and the knowledge to reflect on their own suffering and construct new ways for liberation of the people. But the problem is that most of the people are in the villages. It is very difficult to get these people educated. Moreover, under the changing scenario, education has become a private affair nowadays. If you have money only you will be able to get a good education. In spite of that, a lot of organizations are concentrating on that.

What kind of education? The present education, which has been contemplated and created by the upper caste people, really enhances the interests of the upper class people, not the poor and the Dalits. Even otherwise, if you get this education you will be able to get a job and your children will be able to come to a better position. Liberation is possible. The present education system is created by the dominant section. So it sharpens the skills of the dominant people again to oppress the Dalit people. In that system if you go you will not have much to contemplate and work out your own liberation. Rather you become a slave to the system. You are indoctrinated. You will accept the oppression. It is not completely liberating you. We need a kind of education, I would say pedagogy for liberation, like Paulo Freire has worked out a pedagogy. That kind of awareness education has to be created. So more scholars have to come and work out that kind of liberation for the Dalit people.

S: When will the caste system go? Will there be a change or will it evolve as something new?

A: According to my understanding, if you read history the caste system is not completely changing and allowing a way for the downtrodden people to uplift themselves. Rather, it adjusts to the different situation and continues to be a system which would be oppressing the poor and the downtrodden people. So even in the modernization and postmodern periods the caste system adapts to this system and continues to oppress the people. I think it will be very difficult to completely eradicate and do away with this system. For example, there were other socially backward communities in India

which were very much dehumanized forty or fifty years ago. They were able to achieve their own upliftment, social, economical and political dimensions of their society. It has not reached the Dalits. What was the situation, the position and the status of most backward communities forty years or fifty years back is not the same now. So there is a self-assertion. Social status has come to a certain level. Even the Brahmins are able to have marital relationships with the OBCs (*Other Backward Castes*). So to that extent they were able to uplift and an upward mobility has taken place. They retain their caste names now even. They even claim Kshatriya status. *Chatriakula Vellalar*. They are more Sanskritised. The Dalits will also have to work out their socio-economic and political upliftment. Make the other community people accept their own upliftment and status. Maybe keeping the caste name, all will be treated equally at a certain level.

S: The other backward classes are spreading themselves everywhere but the Dalits are isolating themselves.

A: That is one kind of experience. They think only in isolation that they can work out their own mobility and liberation. For some time it is essential. To a certain extent the others also understand. There is a need for them to join with Dalits. Dalit organizations work for a different kind of society. Take for example Uttar Pradesh. The Brahmins and the Dalits were not together for some time. It was not possible. So the OBCs (*Other Backward Castes*) and the Dalits were able to come together. They were able to form a coalition government. But they had a bitter experience. The OBCs were able to oppress and threaten the Dalits. They were even able to kidnap some Dalit MLAs and tried to have a majority. The bitter experience has led to a situation that the Dalits and OBCs cannot join together. Now three different groups have formed, the forward community or Brahmins, the OBCs and the Dalits. So over the years what has happened? Exclusively the OBCs were able to come to power.

In Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav, here Mulyam Singh Yadav and other OBCs, have come to power. The Brahmins were able to see the OBCs are much worse political people, oppressing and grabbing all the positions all over the state. Appointing Vice Chancellors, police officers. They felt they are helpless. They have become vulnerable. So here emerges a situation where the powerful community is searching for support from some other community. So they think that it is time for them to associate with these Dalits.

So the present situation in UP is Mayavathi, who has also become a very inclusive person. Most of her lieutenants are Brahmins. Her talk is no more against upper class people. Whoever helps us we will accommodate them. It is a social reality. Both the groups feel they need each other. Now the intelligentsia of the Brahmins and muscle power of the Dalits can counter the biggest muscle power of the OBCs. Now Mayavathi has suspended lot of po-

lice officials appointed by the OBC Government because they are a threat to the Brahmins and other Dalit people. So along with Mayavathi, there will be a situation where Dalits will also become more inclusive.

S: How are they among themselves, I mean the sub-groups?

A: There were times they were much oppressed by the other castes. Once they start working out their own liberation they start taking different models from other people. Like Nadars have worked out their own liberation coming together, becoming very exclusive, getting Sanskritised, getting education, getting into politics. They would follow the same method adopted by others. The Pallars call themselves *Devendrakula Vellalas*. In due course of time they will drop this. See, they will be polarized, they will be organized, they will be very exclusive. They will be able to exclude other people and organize powerfully. The situation may lead to a time and condition where they will realize that not by themselves can they work out their liberation, so they will also seek the help of the other Dalits. They will come together to form new strategies. In Tamil Nadu also they will realize that by coming together they can liberate themselves. And also joining with other caste groups. Who knows? In future they may join with the BJP. A third alliance may be created. Because the immediate opponents to Dalits are not Brahmins but OBCs. The upper castes or the BJP also feel the immediate opponents are not Dalits. A common enemy. . . All the others will be joined together.

S: Do you have any personal story of oppression that you would like to share with me?

A: If I don't share it, that will be the most cruel way of oppressing Dalits in the society. Even they can share their own oppression. So I feel I have experienced that I am crushed, ridiculed, on many occasions.

But I cannot openly say that. Being a Dalit is a different reality. It is a nation within a nation. It is a community within a community. It is a perspective within a perspective. A subaltern within a subaltern. What an upper class person experiences is different from what I experience. For someone like me coming from an oppressed community speaking in a meeting is different. For me to preach in a church or chapel is a different experience. Entirely different from the other OBCs or upper castes.

He need not be conscious of the implications of the statement he makes. But I have to be conscious of the statement I make and the consequences. I am very much conscious of my very own reality. I am not guaranteed security, I am not guaranteed a lot of safeguards that are promised to the person who comes from a different caste because that is ascribed to him. It is promised to him because of his own caste. Even if he makes a blunder he

can be safe. His people will safeguard him.

But I feel always vulnerable, weak. Unless I am conscious of my own reality I would be put into difficulty. Wherever I go, wherever I live, wherever I speak, whatever work I do, I consciously feel my own basic reality and make every step keeping my reality in my mind. If not it will cause a lot of problems for me as an individual. Educated, working in a college as a Head of Department, going to different places, presenting papers, I may be a Christian. But my first reality is I am a Dalit. Within the Christian community nobody sees me as Christian, as a fellow Christian. First of all I am seen as a Dalit. I teach my children in Christ that there is no Jew or male or female. As Christians we can't be caste-conscious. But at the same time you should not forget your own reality. Think you are a Dalit. You must be very much conscious who you are. Unless and until you know that, who you are, you will not be able to live a meaningful life.

Christ was ridiculed. He was tortured, persecuted and killed on the cross. When the people were contemplating how much more we can torture him he said, "Oh God forgive these people. They don't know what they are doing." So it is a very suffering experience. So Dalit theology is more Christian theology. There you put Christ first. So suffering is there, that kind of suffering that we cannot create a society where you are given an opportunity. You will be suppressed by other people. Rather, you have to contemplate a society where all come together as brothers and sisters and children of God. It is a Christian model.

Dalit NGOs: The Front Lines of the Liberation Movement

It is easy to interview an educated Dalit. Those who do menial jobs were often too scared to do any interview, giving us "the runaround and dilly-dallying." Let us now turn to the executive director of a Dalit NGO in Madurai, Vidiyal. Jim Jesudoss is a non-Dalit who has given up Christianity. And we will also turn to another frontline worker for Dalit liberation, Gurumurugan, a Dalit Panthers of India organizer and consultant in Karumbalai, Madurai.

Interview with Mr. Jim Jesudoss, Executive Director, Vidiyal, Madurai, October 17, 2007

Jim Jesudoss: I started Vidiyal in 1996. Exactly, in the month of September.

S: What made you start Vidiyal?

J: Actually I had been working with children earlier to that. I had been working with street children in Bombay. That gave me a kind of inspiration

to work with such children. Earlier, I was working with children in a general context. Then I decided to work more closely with street children. I returned back from Bombay after my training.

S: Oh! You had training in Bombay?

J: So I decided to start this organization.

S: When you decided, did you start working with the Dalit community or for all?

J: Actually when I started this work, it was more general. I was thinking that I was working with street children. But when we started working it was a discovery that many children who came to the street to work were all from the Dalit community.

S: You mean most of the street children?

J: Also from a religious minority, the Muslims. In Madurai it is mostly from the Dalit community.

S: What was that training you had, for how long?

J: Actually it was a one-year training from YMCA. As part of the training we had to work in a kind of field placement. For that I worked with street children in Mumbai for a month. Then I did a research on street children. My research topic was "Modern Development and Its Impact on Children." Why is there this phenomenon of street children? How did it emerge?

S: It is ironical to have development and street children.

J: That is how it is treated. My thesis was published by my training college as a book. At the end of the research I also suggested the modus operandi to do some rehabilitation programme. That became the base for Vidiyal.

The special focus was on Dalits. Especially the Arundhathiar community.

S: Why the Arundhathiar community?

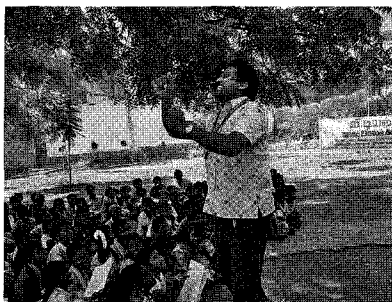


Figure 11 Jim Jesudoss and Dalit children during Vidiyal NGO workshop, Madurai, July 2007.

J: Because even among Dalit communities the Arundhathiar community was far below and more oppressed. Even this so-called development and reservation hadn't reached them. Even this missionary work with education didn't reach them at all. This was another reason why we focused exclusively on Arundhathiar children.

S: When you started, did you face any difficulty?

J: Yes. Actually we started with nothing. We used to meet the children on the street. Wherever it is possible. Near garbage bins, where we can collect them, and we started some contact points and some timings. Sometimes I used to go to the slums and meet them there, in their living areas. Many of the children used to sleep on the overhead water tanks, the common areas. So we used to meet them, chat with them. In 1996 when Vidiyal was getting shaped we decided to organize a camp for them. We thought that could be an entry point. So that time itself the difficulty started, like a big rumor emerged. We organized a camp for 100 children but only 70 children turned up. The reason we found later was that people thought we were going to steal their kidneys. The second difficulty was my Christian name, people thought it could be an attempt to convert. So that was a threat for them for some time. Later they realized that this organization is not for any conversion or anything like that.

S: Now it has been eleven years. What have you done for the past eleven years? Is it gratifying for you?

J: Generally I have a very good feeling for some of the things we have achieved. One positive thing is that the children dropping out from school has come down significantly, to a very minimum number. Because I told you when we started Vidiyal there were many children on the streets and among the children a lot of children from the Dalit community. These children would drop out from 6th grade or 7th because they couldn't cope up with the education system. When we found Vidiyal through the community programme we adopted seven slums. In these slums we put a lot of our efforts on the prevention side. Before children entering into the street, before children entering into the child labor market, let us provide education and some alternative choices. That re-



Figure 12 Jim Jesudoss and Dalit children, Vidiyal NGO summer camp, Tamil Nadu countryside, July 2007.

ally worked well. Today I can very well say that the number of dropouts has come down and many children aspire for greater things. And also we have seen many children achieve so much. Five batches of children who have completed college education. Which was like no hope at all when we started.

S: Were the parents educated?

J: None of them are. They are the first generation of college-goers. Why college-goers? Even middle and high school.

S: Do you consider education as a tool for liberation?

J: One of the best strategies for liberation. Whatever we do is like a drop in the ocean. On the other side, apart from these success stories, we feel that it is not very significant. The change that has been brought is not very significant and also the ripple effect hasn't yet started. The second phase, after our tenth year, we are also looking on how our children can become change agents in their own communities. That is the challenge we are now facing.

S: How do you make them realize this? Is it some kind of training?

J: We are working on that. Children, who have come up, succeeded to commit themselves for their community.

S: How does the family think about the success of their children?

J: Generally the whole community has a very good feeling about Vidiyal. That kind of acceptance is there. Especially from the families where the children are successful and come up in life. They really see that as an initiative, a good opportunity offered to their children.

S: What do you think about the reservation for the Dalit children in schools, colleges and other higher education? What is your opinion?

J: I strongly feel that it should be there 'till it brings equality in the society. Because people now say that they have already completed sixty years of reservation after independence. But still this hasn't reached many people and there is already a reservation existing in the society like who can go into the temple, up to the *sanctum sanctorum*. 'Till today we hear about two tumbler practices (drinking glasses in restaurants). Even in the reserved electoral constituencies people who are elected are unable to exercise their power. So these are some of the issues. So I feel that unless other changes happen in the larger society, reservation should continue. Especially in education and the employment sector.

S: Have you ever thought about religion and Dalits?

J: Yes. One is about Hinduism. If you look at the Vedas, castes are part of Hinduism. So embedded in the society, gone deep into several layers. So it is not very easy to come out of it. One layer is above the other. It is also sectorally designed. So everybody feels that I am higher than somebody, kind of superiority complex is there. Christianity attempted something but it also got absorbed by the castes. Still you practice castes among the Christians. It hasn't done much. About Islam I don't know much, but they are also not given due recognition as it was expected.

S: How does the Government look at NGOs like you? Is it helpful to you?

J: Yeah. It is in two ways. In some programmes we interact with the Government. We work together. We are working closely with the Social Defense Department in the implementation of juvenile justice. We have a child welfare committee running in our premises. So the children come through that. They get a safe and secured rehabilitation programme with our organization. So Vidiyal has been recognized as a fit institution for such children. But these are all children who have not committed any crime. Those who committed crimes still go to the juvenile home. So in some areas, we also point out some of the things that the Government has failed to do it. There is a UN committee on rights of the child. So we present alternate reports to the UN committee saying on what grounds the Government has failed in doing certain things. We also talk to the Government on this whenever there is a Collector's meeting (*the Collector is the chief administrator of a district in India*).

S: How do the politicians react to you? Have you had any problems with politicians in the places where you work with the Dalit community?

J: Actually, we haven't yet faced any such pressure from any political party.

S: Like any Dalit political party perhaps resents your presence in the slum?

J: I can quote one example without naming any persons. Three months ago a girl from one Dalit community was abused by a boy from a different Dalit community. That time we were trying to safeguard the interest of the girl and also the girl is a member of Vidiyal. So we were taking legal measures. At that time one Dalit political group came, put pressure on us when we were in the police station. We explained very clearly. Next day they went to a higher level in the party, but that person was well known to me. So he talked to me, "Why you are supporting this cause, what happened?" When I explained he immediately understood and talked to them. That was solved at that level. It didn't go beyond. But sometimes they ask, "Why do you come here? What is your intention?" But that was in the beginning years,

not now. They were trying to make that unfortunate incident as a caste issue, but we were very clear that it was not a caste issue. They both live in the same slum but in different areas.

From here Jim goes on to talk about different trainings they give to the children.

J: We also train them for social and political empowerment in the programme. We have a forum called RIPPLE CIRCLE where we give caste analysis, lot of information to children. And politicizing children also happens, not directly linking with other political parties, but teaching them. Children also have their own forums here. So they elect their representatives and they try to exercise some of the practices. Through that they get empowered on political issues.

S: So you think conversion is not helpful. What do you think about Buddhism?

J: That is a stand some Dalit political parties take, but I haven't experienced much about that, so I am not the right person to comment on that. Especially in our region in the context of Madurai we don't see Buddhism existing. In a larger context they talk about it as an alternative religion.

S: That is the future scenario of Dalits in India? Let us say by 2025.

J: Yes, it is a very big challenge. Because on one side we still talk about reservation. On the other side the IT industry and all these people who already gained powers, going to another level whereas our children are still learning skills like reading and writing and they are still in the basics. So I would say unless a conscious effort is put into education, quality education for Dalit children, we can't expect social and economic changes for Dalits.

S: Please explain what you mean by quality education.

J: At present, take Madurai or rural Madurai, mainly Dalit children go to schools run by Government. So these schools do not have facilities or infrastructure. The kind of education they receive is poor. These children complete 10th grade or 12th grade and then they have to compete with other children.

S: So you are talking about the huge disparity between schools?

J: So with that kind of background it will be a bigger challenge for Dalit children. We already experience this at Vidiyal. Though we give them alternative education and some support, help them to compete, get ready for the schooling for the next day, these are all the basic challenges even now we

are facing. On the other hand the children coming from affluent communities, they have already gone beyond this. There a huge gap between the opportunities and facilities.

S: So socially and economically deprived community children can't compete with other children?

J: Because education for the masses is not a priority of the Government. For example, the budget allocation for education is only 6% of both the State and the Central Government. Out of the 6% only 2% is for primary education. So still today you see one teacher schools. One teacher teaching five classes. Schools without any infrastructure. So this is going to be a big challenge. They require a lot of practical-like learning-by-doing. Those who are socially deprived of opportunity need a lot of simulation in the classroom. A lot of simulation. But now what we see is mugging up and just vomiting (*memorizing without understanding-authors*) everything in the answer paper. Which is not helping them.

S: Do you have any take on Gandhi and Dalits?

J: I have my own thoughts on that. When Gandhi called Dalits as Harijans, he might have said it with a good intention, but that gives another connotation. Even now many Dalit communities question that. His plans of village-based industry can be good for the rural community if the caste difference was taken into consideration. But that was a very general plan, I think. He never questioned *Varnashirama*.

S: Tell me what is a typical day for you?

J: Actually, it has changed a lot. In the early days it was more with children. When I started a day I would go for street visits, meet the children, organize them, talk to them, listen to their stories, and listen to their concerns. But now because the organization has grown it is slightly structured. Some administrative responsibilities are there. But into the evenings I make it a point to spend my time with the children. Whenever there is a training that is being conducted I spend my time with them. Still I make myself available for children whenever they want to talk and especially for the boys. I talk to them. I listen to their problems. My day goes 'till 8:30 pm every evening.

S: How many children are associated with you?

J: Right now there are four hundred children. We started with 20 children. When we started it was only a street-based activity. But later we moved on to being community-based on the prevention side.

S: What is actually the family situation of these children? What are their parents doing?

J: Many of these children's parents are working for the sanitary department of Madurai city. They work as sweepers of the streets, scavengers. Some of them go for rag-picking. Many of them are working in restaurants as cleaners. Mostly engaged in menial jobs. Some of them may work in a bank, may be a cleaner, or a class four employee. So many parents go for work early in the morning, and the children are left uncared for.

Some addiction problem is also there. They say that, because they are engaged in such menial jobs, like carrying nightsoil, that they drink just to numb their senses. In some families both the parents drink. So children face a lot of issues around that. Their basic needs are not met. To address this we also work with the families. We have taken mothers as very important partners in our work. We tried with fathers but we couldn't succeed. Many fathers are pre-occupied. Some times they are the problem-creators. So we educate mothers on how to care for their children, what could be done with the minimum resources available to them.

S: How rigid is the relationship between the sub-castes? For example, marriage?

J: Yeah, in my experience I see that it is still rigid. Because they have separate festival celebrations.

S: What about life cycle ceremonies?

J: They celebrate those separately. They even have separate temples.

S: Do they live on the same streets?

J: No, they live on different streets but in the same slum. Chakkiliars and Paraiyars. In Madurai City we don't see Pallars.

S: What is the percentage of Paraiyars and Arundhathiars (*Chakkiliars*)?

J: We work in seven slums and the majority of them are Arundhathiars.

S: What are the Gods they worship?

J: Mostly Mari Amman and Kali Amman. Both have separate temples. One group celebrates one week. The other celebrates the next week. Continuous celebration goes on. At other times they may be quarrelling about petty things. It even goes up to stabbing and lynching, going to the police station. Marriages are very, very rare.

S: Why they don't come together? Why do they want to isolate themselves?

J: Castes are like a pyramid, one above the other. The Paraiyar community feels that they are above Arundhathiars because they feel Arundhathiars are unclean. Because mostly Arundhathiar communities are engaged in cleaning.

S: Do you say that the Paraiyars never do cleaning jobs?

J: Nowadays they go as contract labors. Even then there is some reservation: "*I am not doing the kind of job that you are doing.*" But very few Paraiyars take up such jobs.

S: Do Arundhathiars have political leaders?

J: Yes, they do. They have one Mr. Athiaman. *Athi Tamilar Peravai*. The problem for Arundhathiar is they speak Telugu. So the ownership (*he means they are not the "sons of the Tamil soil"*) of the land (*language nationalism*) is still a question. Many of them think they are from Andhra or Karnataka. I also work with another NGO called Arrokiakam in a rural area in Theni District. They are trying to focus on Arundhathiar. What I have seen there is, because of the language problem even children do not feel comfortable attending school. Because it is Tamil. The caste discrimination goes stronger. Their dependence on the Naicker community (*a Telugu-speaking backward caste that is a land-owning community-authors*) is strong because both of them speak the same language, Telugu. But the Naickers are violators of human rights. So in the villages it is much more difficult for them to come to a Tamil school. They will be identified.

S: Do they drop their mother tongue?

J: Even I had that thought. But is it right is another question? Owing that as a mother tongue seems difficult for them. Even some of our children feel very proud when they speak Telugu. When they get a chance to interact with Telugu-speaking communities. So whether it is wrong or right is still a debatable question. Here at Vidiyal we focus on child rights. In child rights the discrimination question comes very strong. That is a larger framework we do. It is not only in the local context but also taking it to a larger context. Any kind of discrimination is not good. So we empower children to assert their rights. That kind of information and education goes to our children.

How do the children at Vidiyal belonging to both communities interact?

V: Here we talk about it. Some integration happens at the children's level.

S: How are they represented in strength?

V: Sixty percent of Arundhatiars and forty percent of Paraiyars.

S: So here they mingle with each other with no difficulty?

J: Yes, they do. The problem is when they go back to their homes the identity grows very strong. Sometimes the pressure from the peer groups who are not part of Vidiyal, but still they can influence each other.

S: Have any marriages happened here between these communities?

J: Some of our first batch children got married, but not an intercaste marriage.

S: Is there anything else you would like to say? You said education could be one of the tools.

J: Yes, if it is given without partiality.

S: Is there any Dalit leader that you admire?

J: I have read some writings of Thirumavalavan. I have a good image of him. He also calls other Dalit communities to join. His political stand relates to the backward communities, too. That strategy is really good. Social change is possible only by relating to other communities, but not in isolation. Which is good actually. He has that kind of idea. There is something holding leaders like Krishnasamy and Thirumavalavan from coming together. Dalit solidarity is a must. Dalit solidarity with the backward communities is also very important.

S: Could you define the word Dalit?

J: It is a Marathi word. It means the oppressed.

S: Could anyone oppressed be called Dalit?

J: See, in the Tamil Nadu context the word as such is very much owned by the Paraiyar community. See the posters and banners of DPI. So there are different opinions on that, but if they come together the bargaining power will be better. It is really a solid percentage.

In the end, when I asked if there was any touching story he may like to share with me, he said there are many stories. He began,

“Within the first few years of our programme, we rehabilitated a whole fam-

ily. That was very emotional, very challenging. This family has four children. Among the four, three of them used to come to Vidiyal. The father and mother both used to drink. There were lots of issues. They belong to the Arundhathiar community. One day the mother came and left three children in our shelter for a short stay. So after a few days she came back and wanted to take the children. Among three, two refused to go back. We stood on the side of the children. The mother was very upset. Because the children were telling her, that you created the problems.

Another thing is the extramarital relationship. It is also very common among the families who live in the slum. The three were boys. We don't like your attitude and activities. One boy was 13, another one is two years younger, and then another younger one. We fathered, mothered the two children for a longer time while the middle one went with the mother. Three boys had a sister who got married. They had some problems, and the girl attempted suicide. So a lot of issues are around this family. She had a child. The child was taken away by the in-laws. So we took some legal measures to rescue the child. So today among the four, three of them are settled. They regained their relationship with their mother. That is one long story."

S: How often do you need such legal support?

J: We don't have an appointed lawyer. Whenever a problem arises we go and approach someone. One lawyer called Gandhi helps us a lot. We go to him for legal consultations. With the police personal also we have a good relationship. I may say around ten times in a year we may have to go see a lawyer. All kinds: sexual abuse, suicidal attempts. During divorce the children face a lot of problems. As an NGO this is the kind of situation we find very difficult to deal with. We are working with the community. At a particular time we have to take a stand. But we are very clear on that and tell them this is our view, so we are taking this stand.

As I was about to leave Jim said, "One positive thing that happened to my own self is the shedding of my caste identity. So for the past eleven years I have never exercised or shown my caste identity. I identify myself with the children. So that has become a powerful tool in our work. I am a very neutral person." When I asked him about his religion, he said, "Religion also . . . I do not practice. That also gave me the opportunity to understand the influence of religion as such. I have an objective view on religion. What has Christianity done to people? I feel good about it. Because shedding of my caste identity helped me to grow."

Jim is a non-Dalit. So I told him, "*This is exactly what Mahatma Gandhi's Harijan Seva Sangh is all about. Non-Dalits serving the Dalits.*"

This interview was conducted at Vidiyal in his humble-looking office around 5:30 pm. There were more than a hundred children at Vidiyal, minding their business, preparing for their school the next day, after which they will return to their families. We could conduct the interview without any disturbance.

As I was leaving the building, looking very pre-occupied, one teenage girl said, "So Sekar, sir, you came only to see our Director, not us!" I was happy to hear that, how a child, without any fear and in a casual manner, could draw my attention, which their parents could never do. I appreciated the confidence and sense of pride that Vidiyal has given them through their empowerment training.

Jim, 40, has a master's degree and is married. His wife works with him. They have a boy who is 12 and a girl 10. It is amazing where they get that kind of strength to take care of this many children and their families. Another Buddha.

Interview with Mr. Gurumurugan, Organizer for the DPI (Dalit Panthers of India) in Karumbalai, Madurai, October 25, 2007

My name is Gurumurugan. I am 42 years old. My actual name was Murugan. Ever since I started working for the Guru Cinema Theatre, people started calling me Guru Murugan. In 1990 Mr. Thirumavalavan gave us his leadership. We were so ignorant of organization and leadership. Thirumavalavan was the one who opened our eyes. Before that, one Mr. Malaisamy, an advocate from Madurai, Pandiyan, a few other leaders were there to guide us. There was also an organization called *Odukkappatta Chiruthaikal (Oppressed Panthers)*. It was not a political party.

Thirumavalavan, who was working for the State Government in the Forensic Sciences Department, quit his cushy job. To give us liberation he started the party. In the beginning we had the blessings of the late Tamil Manila Congress leader Moopanar. He gave us recognition as a political party. The former Chief Minister Jayalalitha was also helpful to us because of certain political circumstances. But today Kalaignar (*Chief Minister Karunanidhi, known also by his honorary title*) is our

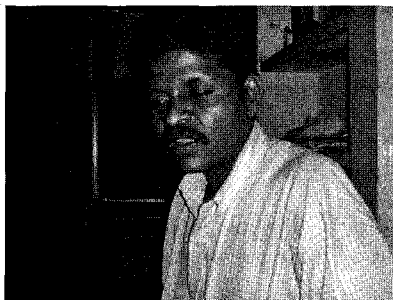


Figure 13 Gurumurugan, DPI organizer in Karumbalai slum, Madurai, October 2007.

best well-wisher.

Murugan's Opinion on Joining Hands with Other Parties

We all go with this plan. Because that is the best way to go and that is good nature. As a consultant of the party. I have to do a lot of conciliation work. On one side I have to work for the solidarity of our own people. I also have to consider other communities, avoiding any filing of cases that will bring enmity. So we try our best to avoid court. We also listen to our leadership's advice. Mostly we go to our local leader and our district organizer, Mr. Kannadasan. We have Kaniamuthan as our state propaganda secretary. Because of my family circumstances recently I am unable to go out very much on party's work. Our leaders are selected in a democratic way through election. We also abide by the leadership's choice.

On a Memorial for Immanuel Sekaran

It is important to honor our former leaders of Dalit liberation. We should have one for Mr. Malisamy, the late advocate who started the movement *Oddukkappatta Chiruthaikal* even before DPI.

On Disunity Among Dalits

I agree with you. There is no unity among us. On a political platform we cannot talk freely supporting marriages within our subgroups. If such marriages happen we support them. We won't separate them. After marriage if they run into problems the party won't go to settle it down. It should be settled among themselves.

Does the Party Pay You for Your Service?

No. I am looking after myself. In my family after my mother died my wife was given a job as a nanny in the same school run by the CSI.

(Gurumurugan has two children. A daughter, 23, is married and has children. His son, 20, is working for a courier service.)

Relationship Between Your Party and That of Dr. Krishnasamy, Another Dalit Leader

Well, he is a senior leader. I cannot comment on him. Our relationship is good. These are two big families. I cannot say anything on such matters.

What About the Next Election? Who Will Be Your Alliance?

The leadership will take the decision. We will follow.

Had You Been In Any Other Political Party?

I was a member in Rajnikanth's fan club, but not in any other political party.

Party Membership Fee

The party is working on a membership card. Anyone can become a member. You don't have to be a Dalit. If you want more detail give me a week's time.

This interview with Gurumurugan took place in his one room tiled-roof house in Karumbalai, the Dalit slum in Madurai referred to earlier. His wife was around attending to their grandchild. He was clearly conscious of his social status throughout the interview, reminding us of the words of Professor Arul Doss in an earlier interview, when he said, "*I Have To Be Careful What I Say, What I Do, Where I Live.*" All of Gurumurgan's answers were very gentle. He was very calm, talking about DPI party leaders with much respect. He was not blaming anyone for their situation. He seemed to be a very disciplined member of the party. He has amazing faith in the leadership of Mr. Thirumavalavan.

All three interviews were conducted in English. Some other words of Professor Arul Doss also come to mind: "I may be college-educated, a professor, going places presenting papers, but I must be always conscious of my Dalit identity. Because I am Dalit first. I must be very careful what I speak, where I live, what I do. Because I am a Dalit, I am vulnerable." This kind of consciousness could be noticed with two young Dalit men who were collecting garbage in the Madurai suburbs and whom we also tried to interview. They were very scared, wondering what kind of implication could happen by talking to us. We could see from their ultra-cautious behavior where the apartheid of caste hegemony and power comes from, suggesting approaches to political change that are only now beginning.

Future Directions: Possible Scenarios

The DPI and other political parties believe the only way to political power is through legislation for the welfare of Dalits. The DMK Party, one of Tamil Nadu's two major political parties, showed that this is possible after the state election of 1967. Within ten years or two general elections, political power shifted from the Brahmins, high caste Hindus and landlords to the *Samaniyarakal*, the ordinary people belonging to backward castes. Even the first non-Congress chief minister called it the rule of *Samaniyars*.

The PMK, a Vanniar merchants and landlords caste community party founded by Dr. Ramadas in 1988, is another example. They have been able to set tough negotiations with the Centre and State Governments. In order

to weaken this party a recent strategy of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi of the DMK is to get closer to the DPI. He is doing this so they can count on the vote bank of Dalits in the southern districts through the DPI leader Thirumavalavan. This is perceived as a threat by the PMK, which has a strong hold in South and North Arcot Districts.

Figures 14–17 which accompany this text depict the lavish celebration of a *Samaniyar* leader's birth anniversary, Muthuramalinga Thevar. This year



Figure 14 Political hoardings showing caste leaders and State Chief Minister, Madurai, October 2007.



Figure 15 Gate welcoming DMK state politicians for caste leader birth centenary celebrations, Madurai, October 2007.



Figure 16 Mixing religion, caste, and politics. Thevar centenary celebrations with young sprouts and piercing, Madurai, October 2007.



Figure 17 Garlanding of statue of Muthu Ramalinga Thevar, caste and political leader, Madurai, October 2007.

is “Thevar Jeyanthi,” declared as a State Government function and celebration of the Thevar caste leader (and thus, in a way, a celebration of the caste itself). The people in some of the other figures are from the Thevar community and belong to the city slum of Theedeer Nagar, next to Melaval, a Dalit slum. In Figure 16 we can see the rituals typically done for Murugan worship, piercing a spear through one’s cheeks and women carrying pots of young sprouts, which is usually done for Goddess worship as a fertility ceremony. They are also sacrificing goats by the statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar that is depicted being garlanded in Figure 17. They have made this political and caste leader a God. Yellow is the color worn by women when they take part in the Mariamman fire-goddess festival generally. Religious parties are crossing the boundary, getting into the social and political arena now, however. The very practice of the BJP taking religious symbols like the lotus and the color of the flag has saffron in it.

What is interesting for us in this paper is the coalition of Dalits with Thevars, traditional enemies in the Southern districts. Dalits can be seen along with Thevars celebrating this leader. Still, tensions occasionally continue to boil over between communities, as seen in recent riots in Madurai city in which many buses were smashed carrying Dalit posters and slogans of their own heroes (Figure 18), and an uneasy peace between these communities is being delicately maneuvered around by the DMK. The story of the Dalit sweepers of Delhi (Prashad 2000) is a similar tale of complex politics, self-assertion, and changing identity (see also Shah 2001 and Pai 2002).

One of the speakers sharing the stage with the chief minister at Pasumpon, Muthuramalinga Thevar’s village, was Thol. Thirumavalavan, the leader of the DPI (see Thirumavalavan 2004 a, 2004 b). He was one of the special speakers, unusual because of the traditional enmity between the Thevars and the Dalits. This year the Government is celebrating the birth centenary of Muthuramalinga Thevar and, being in an alliance party, Thirumavalavan was invited by the Chief Minister to give a speech. Thirumavalavan is the only alternative for DMK victory. In Tirunelveli at the end of August 2007, the Dalit Panthers held a conference on reclaiming the *panchami* lands held by the government since British days. Chief Minister Karunanidhi was



Figure 18 Bus window smashed in Madurai caste riots, November 2007.

the main guest for that conference. These and other movements reflect ways in which the DPI is “establishing territory” (Gorringe 2006), though the maneuverings of politics can also be seen as walking a fine line between the institutionalization of politics as usual and a betrayal of Dalit hopes for a release from hegemony and oppression (Gorringe 2007).

Thirumavalavan can be seen worshiping Immanuel Sekaran on a yellow bus poster in Figure 19. Sekaran was a great Dalit leader of the 1950s who was a contemporary of Muthuramalinga Thevar. He was murdered in a skirmish between Thevars and Dalits in Kamuthi. Apart from having Ambedkar as a pan-Indian leader, the Dalits are looking for a regional one like Thevar. In that poster Thirumavalavan is appealing to the Central Government to release a commemorative stamp for Immanuel Sekaran and build a memorial for him. Figures 20 and 21 also show Thirumavalavan, one being a hoarding celebrating his birthday and the other a photograph with the DMK leader and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi on the occasion of the DPI-DMK coalition. Some background is perhaps necessary here.

During Karunanidhi’s previous rule, it was announced that the Government Public Transport Corporation would now be named after Veeran Sundaralingam, a Dalit hero of the struggle against the British depicted in Figure 22. Caste Hindus refused to use the buses. There



Figure 19 Bus poster, DPI leader Thirumavalvan honors Dalit political hero Immanuel Sekaran, Madurai, October 2007.



Figure 20 DPI Leader Thol Thirumavalavan birthday poster, near Chennai, 2006 (www.kollihills.com_at.com_#4705).



Figure 21 DPI leader Thirumavalvan with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi of the DMK party, Chennai, 2006 (*The Hindu*).

were riots, with buses burnt and stoned. After that the Government passed legislation in the Assembly that names of caste leaders should not be used for any public undertaking by the Government. Now, however, during the Thevar centenary celebrations mentioned above in 2007, Karunanidhi made the announcement that the Madurai Airport would be named after Muthuramalinga Thevar. Dr. Krishnasamy, another Dalit leader, then brought out historical facts in support of the idea of naming the airport after Immanuel Sekaran because the British government took the *panchami* lands of Sekaran's relatives to build Madurai Airport. Just before this, damage was done to an Ambedkar statue in Madurai, too, which sparked protests. The relations between these castes represent a delicate and volatile balance for politicians of all sides in South India.



Figure 22 Veeran Sundaralingam, Pallar Dalit hero of 19th century struggles against British.

Dalit communities will continue to exist, though there is a clear trend towards consolidation and alliances between various Dalit sub-castes. This mobilization involves the retelling of caste histories and, literally, a recasting of identities (Narayan 2004; Arun 2007). Paraiyars and Pallars are leading the way in these efforts in South India as are other Dalit communities elsewhere in India (Charsley and Karanth 1998, Deliège 1999, Bhatia 2006). These transcaste linkages are mirrored by transnational linkages across space and time as well, indicating paths for the future for organizations like LAFTI. LAFTI is clearly concerned about developing new approaches to rural vitality. Much of this has to do with the creation of agricultural and small industrial infrastructure for the rural poor. Land comes first, followed by housing that is both effective and appropriate for rural/urbanizing conditions. Both of these enable the producers themselves to benefit and prosper. LAFTI's community development policies both reflect the past, in terms of best practices, and the future, as the history of what LAFTI has done to empower rural workers reveals potential new policy directions.

What are the regional residential characteristics of new approaches to caste communities in urban/rural India? We find today in many regions of India that had formerly been rural, with a nearby metropolis, the phenomenon of radiating urban community. This rural/urban nexus includes core urban areas becoming linked to surrounding rural towns and villages through a net-

work of vital and growing ties. These ties are primarily economic but social and political links are growing along with them as well. Towns are becoming small cities and villages are becoming towns as the unique patterns of a growing India reveal urbanization that has had a dramatic impact on caste mobilizations and caste relations.

What infrastructure is necessary for the poor in order to vitalize their community? This is of course a question that goes beyond intercaste politics. Housing is certainly one key component of this work, providing basic amenities and shelter. So, too, are activities focused on sustainable economic development for workers and their communities. The politicization of caste and identity politics has meant either the strengthening of caste or the growth of casteism and caste-related politics. At the same time there is a secularization of society so that caste means less on a daily, public basis on the one hand while larger identities such as being Muslim or Hindu have come to dominate public perceptions of society. What has this transition meant? What about the Dalits?



Figure 23 Janadesh Yatra march for the landless and poor, Delhi, Oct 2007 (BBC).



Figure 24 Janadesh Yatra marchers with Ambedkar portrait, Delhi, October 2007 (BBC).

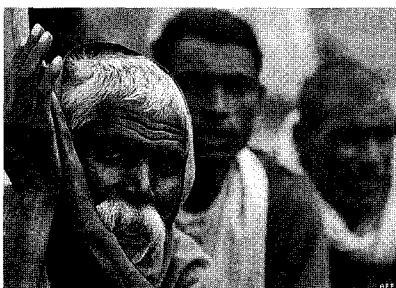


Figure 25 Janadesh Yatra march, poor farmer, Delhi, October 2007 (BBC).



Figure 26 Janadesh Yatra march for the landless and poor, Delhi, October 2007 (BBC).

There is a sense of tension and possibility in the air now for Dalits. What a difference a few years makes, as we can see from the above interviews and narratives. But for some there is still a sense of some being left out and left behind. That is what we are searching for, where and how the politics of being marginalized is having an impact on the daily life of the people.

In October 2007, the front page of India's national newspaper, *The Hindu*, had photographs of the Janadesh 2007 March sponsored by the activist P. V. Rajgopal's NGO Ekta Parishad. A *yatra*, a traditional march of protest, is an important vehicle of dissent in India, as witnessed by Gandhi's Salt March against British imperialism in 1930. The Janadesh protestors, composed of Dalits, other Backward Castes, and tribals, all poor and landless, walked over a period of more than a month from Gwalior to New Delhi.

As we can see from Figures 23–26, the Janadesh 2007 March was large and impressive. It succeeded, moreover, in its goal of bringing to the attention of the world the plight of the poor in India, as well as a commitment by the government to investigate and address these problems of poverty and landlessness. There is a striking parallel here with the US Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The leaders of this movement were inspired, in turn, by Gandhi and the techniques of non-violent protest. Many of them, including the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., had been trained in these techniques at the Workers' Home in Gandhigram, the home of Amma and Appa and now one of the two locations for LAFTI and its work.

What we, thus, see in these early years of the 21st century is the globalization, even transnationalization, of the status and roles of Dalits, something hardly expected by caste Hindus or envisioned in the *Manu Smṛti*. Dalits today are in the forefront of global, national, and local change. It is a welcome state of affairs after millennia of oppression and caste-related violence.

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