

**Now We Are Fearless:  
Dalit Women in India**

**February 17-February 23, 2010**

**Lenten Study I**

## Fact Sheet: Now We Are Fearless

There are 260 million Dalit people around the world, 166,635,700 of whom live in India.

In Asian countries where a caste system operates, Dalit people are born at the very bottom of a hierarchical system. Caste is determined by birth and whilst national law outlaws discrimination against people of low castes, in reality there is still widespread oppression and violence against Dalit people.

Dalit means 'broken' or 'ground down'. Many people still use the word 'untouchable' which indicates the extreme discrimination which affects Dalit people. Even today, most higher caste people would not marry a Dalit person, invite them into their house or share food with them. Recent statistics indicate that every week in Dalit communities across India there are:

- 13 murders
- 5 Dalit homes burnt
- 6 Dalit people kidnapped or abducted
- 21 Dalit women raped

Atrocities against Dalit people are a daily occurrence. The Scheduled caste and scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 in India defines the type of abuses which are illegal, including:

- forcing Dalit people to eat obnoxious substances
- assaulting Dalit women with intent to dishonour and outrage her modesty
- using a position of dominance to sexually exploit a Dalit woman
- corrupting or fouling a Dalit water source.

By listing these and other offences, the law reveals the awareness of the many ways in which Dalit and Tribal people are subject to indignity, violence and abuse.

It is estimated that a crime is committed against a Dalit person every 18 minutes. The problem for many is not the law but the lack of political will, at local and national levels, to apply it. In 2006, the official conviction rate for Dalit atrocity cases was just 5.3%.

The statistics are horrifying:

- In rural areas, 37.8% of government run schools make Dalit children sit separately from other children
- In 27.6% of rural villages, Dalits are prevented from entering police stations
- In 33% of rural villages, public health workers refuse to enter Dalit homes
- 48.4% of Dalit villages are denied access to water sources
- In 70% of rural villages, Dalit and non-Dalit people cannot eat together.

Dalit women experience triple discrimination based on their caste, their economic situation and their gender. In rural India, 70% of Dalit women are illiterate. In the Southern States, thousands of girls are forced into prostitution before they reach puberty. Temple prostitutes, or Joghinis (literally 'female servants of God') are usually Dalit. Once dedicated, the girl is unable to marry, forced to become a prostitute for upper caste members and eventually auctioned off to an urban brothel.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network states:

“ Violence, including sexual assault, is used by dominant castes as a social mechanism for humiliating entire Dalit communities.”

## Exodus 1:6 – 2:10 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup>Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. <sup>7</sup>But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

### The Israelites Are Oppressed

<sup>8</sup> Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup>Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." <sup>11</sup>Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup>But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup>The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, <sup>14</sup>and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." <sup>17</sup>But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" <sup>19</sup>The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." <sup>20</sup>So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. <sup>21</sup>And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. <sup>22</sup>Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews <sup>1</sup> you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

### Birth and Youth of Moses

<sup>2</sup> Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. <sup>2</sup>The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. <sup>4</sup>His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

<sup>5</sup> The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. <sup>7</sup>Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" <sup>8</sup>Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. <sup>9</sup>Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. <sup>10</sup>When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, <sup>2</sup> "because," she said, "I drew him out <sup>3</sup> of the water."

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Gk Tg: Heb lacks to the Hebrews

<sup>2</sup> Heb Mosheh

<sup>3</sup> Heb mashah

## **Together, Women are Empowered to be Fearless**

*Exodus: 1: 6 through 2: 1-10*

The Dalit women of India suffer untold discrimination of all sorts because of a fixed notion, determined at birth that relegates them to a state of servitude and exploitation. The term 'Dalit' means 'oppressed.' The Dalits are discounted as 'no people' and the Dalit women are triple oppressed because of their so called 'low caste' status, because they are poor and therefore vulnerable and because they are women who could be exploited further.

Like the film clipping on the stories of women's empowerment, the Exodus story in these chapters is a claiming of power not to be afraid; a story of liberation from bondage. It is all the more exhilarating that such a story of transformation is enacted by an all women team who transcended boundaries and rules that fixed them to a state of helplessness. It informs the women of today of what women are capable of doing together and challenges us today to forge alliances across boundaries of class, ethnicity, race and language in order to save lives. The women in this story did what they could in their limited spheres, without knowing what the other women were up to, but collectively it became a well planned strategy to safeguard the life of a child. It was not a political story, it is not a story of a male prophet, it is not a story of redemption of a particular people, but a story of women's power, a web of interconnectedness that sustained a life. It is a story of not giving up when all the odds were against them. It is good to start reading from Chapter 1, verse 6 through to Chapter 2, verse 10 to fully grasp the background to the story.

The story is more than 3000 years old and spans a generation in which there was a Pharaoh who had a bad dream but did not know what it meant. Joseph, a Hebrew and a slave, bought by an Egyptian, had been interred in prison by a false accusation. But by interpreting the dream of the Pharaoh which warned him of an impending famine that would last for 7 years, Joseph was able to save the lives of all the Egyptians. Joseph also had the wisdom to propose what should be done to safeguard the people. Because of his guidance people were saved not only in Egypt but also in the surrounding countries. Egypt becomes more powerful and prosperous by selling grains to its neighboring countries under famine and of course the Pharaoh profited from all this. But within the space of one generation, such a remarkable story was forgotten.

It is not easy to determine who this Pharaoh was in history. What is very clear is that the Pharaoh made a plan to exterminate the male children of the Hebrews in a very cunning and clandestine way because he feared that the Hebrews were increasing in number. Such an unease and anti migrant stance is becoming a reality in some countries even today. Oppression always starts in a clandestine way at first. Often, the oppressor looks for some people as colluders from within the community he wants to oppress, and influences them to betray their own people through bribery or threats. In this instance it was a command to the midwives to kill the male babies of the Hebrews. But as women who feared God and respected lives, the midwives circumvented his instructions by purposely delaying their going to the birthing Hebrew wives and gave that as an excuse for their inability to kill the male babies. When such a clandestine effort to exterminate the Hebrews proved

to be ineffective, the Pharaoh came up with a more daring plan which conscripted the public itself. People were asked to participate in the slaughter. The imperatives 'you will throw' and 'you will keep alive' are plural in Hebrew, indicating that the people were to carry out this command.

Why did the Pharaoh come up with the plan to throw the babies into the river Nile instead of having them killed in some other way? One reason is to get rid of the Hebrew male babies. (Girl children can always be taken as concubines or servants or made to give birth to Egyptian children.) But the other reason is that he could find favor with the Egyptian Goddess Hapi who was personified by the river Nile that was the lifeline of ancient Egypt. Seasonal festivals were observed along the banks of the Nile in honor of Hapi and occasionally human sacrifices were offered to the river Goddess who will only be too pleased to make the land more prosperous by its life giving waters. The Pharaoh must have thought that he had found a brilliant solution to a problem that he saw and a rich reward that he would reap by finding favor with the river Goddess through a mass of human sacrifice!

It is interesting to note that none of the names of the people involved are mentioned in this chapter. The child Moses' parents are known only as from the Levite tribe. When the text is read, it appears as though Moses was their first born son which is not true. Because there is immediately the mention of his sister Miriam who would have been much older because she could clearly understand and play her role in talking with the Pharaoh's daughter to engage the baby's mother as his wet nurse. We also know that Moses had another older brother, Aaron who was three years older than Moses. (7:7). He was not killed because he must have been over the age limit given for the killing of the male babies.

Often in God's scheme of things, people play vital roles which might look seemingly insignificant at that time. But in hind sight, it could be seen as life transforming. Saving one child when so many other children died appears insignificant and even horrifying. But it is important to note that when the child became the leader of the liberation story of Hebrews, even the powerless women who played a role are remembered. People who are nameless and seemingly insignificant, not only have a role to play but when they play a role in God's plan, greater responsibilities and significance are added to them as well.

In this story even a papyrus basket has some significance. The word for basket is the same Hebrew word (*tebah*) used to describe the vessel that saved Noah and his family from the flood waters (translated "ark" in Gen 6-8). This word is deliberately used by the narrator and occurs only in these two stories in the Hebrew Bible. In both stories, the emphasis is on the activity of God in using the efforts of ordinary people to accomplish God's purpose. In both cases, the "ark," the instrument of deliverance, was carefully prepared by the people themselves.

The mother who had been hiding the baby for three months had to let go of her son by entrusting him over to God. She did as she was told; throw the baby into the Nile; however, she safe guarded him by putting him in a basket carefully lined with bitumen and pitch. The mother and the mid-wives were too powerless to openly defy the orders of the Pharaoh but cleverly found some ways to circumvent them even while they made a pretext of obeying the orders, a demonstration of subversive power that is life saving.

Any act of saving lives in an oppressive context cannot be achieved without the active participation of people who are on the privileged side. The daughter of the Pharaoh was such a person. However, she is also without much power because she was a woman even if she is from the Pharaoh's family. Her decision to take the baby out of the water and to have it taken care of is a power that defies the order within the oppressor's side. It is speculated that this lady could have lost a child previously and was grieving. To condemn any living and crying child to death is more than a bereaved mother could bear. Pain and suffering even when one is on the oppressive side could connect people who are grieving on the other side and such connections are necessary to bring about transformation.

Pharaoh's daughter gave the child a name which means '*son of*' in Egyptian, but in Hebrew language it meant '*to draw out*'. The name she gave him said more than she understood. The irony does not end with the naming. The Pharaoh intended the waters of the Nile River as his means of destruction of the children of Israel. But God used the waters of the Nile as the means of Moses' salvation. A daughter who the Pharaoh allowed to live, i.e. Miriam the sister of Moses, is used to thwart the Pharaoh's plan. Moses' mother saved him by following Pharaoh's orders which she only slightly modified. One of Pharaoh's own family members, his daughter undermined his plan and saved the very person who is going to be used to liberate Israel from Egypt. She, an Egyptian princess took the advice of a small, Hebrew slave girl. Moses' mother was paid to nurse her own child out of Pharaoh's treasury. Moses was placed in enemy territory, into the very court of Pharaoh and in fact was protected at court. He got the opportunity not only to learn the skills of the royal court but also learnt his own history from his mother.

Five seemingly powerless women outwitted the plans of the mighty Pharaoh only because they dared to affirm life and did not think whether the child they were saving was kindred or enemy. That made them fearless and ingenuous.

We all have fears: the most common one is of the fear of people in power and authority. Some people won't take responsibility, because they fear that they may not be accepted by others. It is normal to have fears but we should not allow these fears to overcome us. The only way we could overcome fear is to have the fear of God and the power of God within us that would enable us to do the right thing.

It is easy to talk about justice and fairness and selfhood in so called democratic societies and to decry atrocities, crimes against humanity, war crimes etc. But these are impossible luxuries for those who are in a dictatorial society, or are ruled by religious laws that are different from secular laws, when disobedience could easily mean sure death. How could one operate in oppressive contexts? The text teaches that our fear and reverence for Lord God and caring for the life of all of God's creation should supersede all other fears of unjust laws or one's own self preservation.

The child later goes on to become Moses the Deliverer and Moses the lawgiver. But in the story, we only see him being absorbed into the Pharaoh's court. Often one does not know how God is at work. One's initial hopes and plans may disappear under the power of those who would destroy us. And yet, it is only as we trust God, and do what we can, that we can come to understand that even when the Pharaoh seemed to have won, God's

plan was not yet finished. What appears to be common and ordinary, or a coincidence, God may turn into something wonderful.

One cannot discount this story as something from the dark and distant past. Tyrants and totalitarian governments are always desirous of controlling even the birth processes of their people. We have living proofs of these oppressions in the twenty first century.

One last question to ask before concluding is where were the men? All men were kept busy and forced to make bricks for the Pharaoh which consumed their time, energy, and imagination. They had become completely co-opted by the enslaved reality, their minds as well as their bodies being brought under the Pharaoh's rule. These women, on the other hand, imagined that things could be different, at least for one baby. God used their imagination, and even responded to their imagination. The women, determined, daring, and compassionate, were available to a different reality. And God always uses whoever (and whatever) is available. One empowered woman in India was convinced that she could lift up other women from their powerlessness with the help of others across borders. The Exodus story is certainly not a story of the past but one story each one of us could make as our stories of empowerment.

The term used for describing the basket in which Moses was placed to drift in the Nile and the ark which Noah was asked to build are the same. So I would like to use this similarity in the world to conclude with a funny write up which could help us to remember who we are and most importantly whose we are.

Everything I need to know, I learned from Noah's Ark...

ONE: Don't miss the boat.

TWO: Remember that we are all in the same boat.

THREE: Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.

FOUR: Stay fit. When you're 60 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big.

FIVE: Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.

SIX: Build your future on high ground.

SEVEN: For safety's sake, travel in pairs.

EIGHT: Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.

NINE: When you're stressed, float awhile.

TEN: Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals.

### **Affirmation:**

A Nameless baby, a nameless woman, but no less acquainted with grief....

An aimless life of wandering, powerless to name the past, less power to be the future.....

Aimlessness was not God's Plan

Given birth by a woman with a name, a face, a power,

Named by a woman out of Love, baptized in the waters of her womb, cleansed in her lifeblood...

Blessed by tears from her eyes.... Blessed I have power....cleansed I have life...baptized I can speak... Named I am!

## Prayers of Solidarity

Outcast God,

Born into poverty in an occupied land,  
Living alongside the marginalised and the oppressed.  
Dying between criminals to the jeers of the crowd,

Open our eyes, that we who seek to follow you may recognise your face in the faces of those who are reviled.

Open our ears, that we who seek to hear your word, may recognise your love in the stories which are often drowned out.

Open our hearts, that we who seek your way of life may be bold in witnessing to your longing for justice and peace.

Amen

Abundant God,

Those of us with plenty can observe the lives of those with nothing at the click of a switch.

At the push of a button, we can close down the images which frighten or revolt us, silence the stories which disturb and unnerve us.

Give us compassionate eyes to see clearly the world we live in. Move us from fear to compassion; from wilful ignorance to mindful action, from the complicity of silence to the joyful sings of solidarity.

We ask it in Jesus' name,

Amen

We often hear it said that 'The Poor will always be with us.'

**Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'**

We often hear it said that 'It's what they're used to... they're not like us.'

**Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'**

We often hear it said that 'I don't want to think about it – it makes me depressed.'

**Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'**

We often hear it said that 'What did she expect – dressed like that.'

**Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'**

We often hear it said that 'It's the world – you can't change it.'

**Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'**

Amen

## A Dalit Creed

We believe in God the Creator, the sustainer and the redeemer of the whole of human kind and the cosmos. We believe that God has created all in God's own image.

We believe in Jesus Christ, who was born and lived as a Dalit during his earthly life; who was born of the so-considered lowly Mary; who suffered unjust discrimination in the context of the Roman Empire. He suffered humiliating crucifixion for his voice of resistance against the hegemonic Empire. He part-took in the death of the martyrs to identify himself with death and the death-like lives of the Dalits. He ascended into life to bring about fullness of life in all.

We believe in the Holy Spirit who functions as an advocate and a counsellor to those who are marginalised, and empowers them towards liberation. We affirm our faith in the Holy Spirit, the Living Spirit of God, who empowers her children to break inhuman barriers, and the obstacles that negate life, justice and peace. It is this Spirit that strengthens us to suffer for justice, inspires us to stand against life-negating forces and prejudices, shaping us into a community of forgiven and freely accepted brothers and sisters, set apart for God's service. Raised with Christ, we share in his work for God's world of everlasting love, justice and peace.

We believe in the Church that rises above the caste-based structures and which overcomes prejudices by crossing boundaries and building bridges. We believe in One Holy Catholic Church that is called to risk its life to cross boundaries to incorporate everybody into the Body of Christ, irrespective of caste, creed, class, colour and gender; and to be in solidarity with the wounded communities.

We believe in the community of saints who share a common stance of acceptance of all in the sight of God and all humans; We believe in God's forgiveness of sins when we repent of our dominant nature and seek forgiveness wholeheartedly from the victims of our oppressive nature; We believe in the resurrection of the body as a witnessing voice to liberation from oppressions; We believe in the life-everlasting, which ensures the restoration of an egalitarian cosmic family

Amen

(Prepared by the National Council of Churches, India – Commission on Dalits, 2009)