

A relentless crusader

- THE HINDU, July 23, 2011 16:54 IST
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The Hindu
Ruth Manorama Photo: K. Pichumani

Ruth Manorama started her work with the urban poor in her youth; there has been no turning back ever since. She is the powerful voice of Dalit women today.

Is it easy being a Dalit in India? And a woman at that? Have things changed for the better for the Dalits who constitute roughly 16.23 per cent of our population, since the Constitution of India “cast a special responsibility on the State to promote with special care the education, economic interest of the Scheduled Castes and promised to protect them from all forms of exploitation and social injustice (Article 46)”?

Ask Ruth Manorama, relentless crusader and rallying point for Dalit women, and she tells it like it is, without mincing words, in a no-holds barred conversation.

“Dalit women in India are the Dalits among Dalits and suffer from three-fold oppression — on account of gender as a result of patriarchy, caste ‘the untouchable’, and class — as they hail from the poorest and most marginalised communities. Eighty per cent of Scheduled Castes live in rural areas, are dependent on wage employment and have to contend with high rates of under employment which results in greater incidence of poverty,” argues Manorama forcefully.

A grassroots person with her ear to the ground, Manorama is well aware that discrimination is indeed a regular and daily experience for Dalit women. “Less than equal wages at the workplace, being forced into dehumanising jobs like manual scavenging and garbage picking, pushed back by the gruelling cycle of generational poverty, landlessness and hunger, facing threats to their personal security and a lifelong cycle of indebtedness including religious prostitution and the

Devadasi system, are the major hurdles. It is this linkage that makes Dalit women a vital and special concern for the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Committee on Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Human Rights Council.”

SILENT ABUSE

Yet another issue that deeply angers her is incidents of violence against Dalit women and the silence that surrounds this. “Studies have shown that rape against Dalits and tribals are among the highest. Structural violence like caste and communal violence are deep-rooted in our psyche. It is often used to suppress women. Violence against Dalit women in countering Maoist attacks, organised rape and sexual violence (she refers to the Uttarakhand State rape) wherein police suspected women to be informers, are all such inhuman acts.”

Her work has not gone unnoticed at the global level. Manorama was awarded The Right Livelihood Award in 2006. Considered the alternative Nobel Prize and the world's premier award for personal courage and social transformation, it got her the recognition as the sub-continent's most effective organiser and advocate for Dalit women. She was also one among the thousand nominees for the 1,000 Peace women for Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

Besides her focus on Dalit women, the urban poor and their problems also consume a great deal of Manorama's time.

As General Secretary of Women's Voice Karnataka, an organisation working for the rights of women of poorer sections, women living in the slums and working in the unorganised sector, she has never hesitated to take up their issues. During the 1980s and the 90s, she was in the forefront of mass struggles against eviction and Operation Demolition by the State Government of Karnataka and organised massive processions and fought legal cases on their behalf. She also enjoys the distinction of establishing the first trade union in the country in 1987 for domestic workers in Bengaluru and strived for inclusion in the Minimum Wages.

One among the numerous key offices Manorama holds is president of the National Alliance of Women. Pointing to the fact that it all begins at home, Manorama believes that the situation in some families is not a very happy one, with a level playing field still a distant dream.

“Many women do not enjoy autonomy. They are vulnerable and dependent on male partners who make all the decisions. Although it looks as if women are progressing on many fronts, in terms of power relations, it is still unequal. Our law application is unequal and our laws are patriarchal. Once women become widowed, they are left to their own defence. Property is taken away. This scenario extends to public life and politics.”

If one is looking for solutions, Manorama spells out a blue-print for that.

“How do people gain power? It is political power that gives you social power and economic power. Women must get into politics in order to acquire power not for themselves but for a whole lot of people. It was thought that through the Constitution women will automatically get power and men will be out. The Panchayati Raj system, no matter however flawed, has its merits. Women make decisions and offer resistance. Democracy without women is no democracy. I am not talking of politics for making money. Our struggle is not for garnering wealth but for reclamation of the human spirit. Women have better brain capabilities and if it is put to use for national building, considering we have such bright women, imagine what can be achieved.”

Manorama's vision for the future is to start a Political academy. She has already prepared the ground through specific capacity building exercises and has been instrumental in training around 300 women in the country to equip them for community action and leadership positions at the Panchayat, Zilla parishad and State level.

According to Manorama, what compounds the problems faced by Dalit women and hampers their progress is the fact that Government funds earmarked for Dalit welfare remain unutilised or are improperly utilised.

Manorama is the president of the National Federation of Dalit Women. She “grew up in a fairly progressive atmosphere with Christian values where you gave freely and treated people with respect.” There was an open house and her parents extended all kinds of support to visitors from helping to fill out job applications, money order forms and for a consultation on sundry matters. Her parents' lifestyle and dedication inspired Manorama, and the upbringing she received reminded her that whatever she did, she had to serve the poor.

EARLY DAYS

Initially Manorama wanted to become a doctor or a collector. While in Chennai she worked in slum, squatter settlements and realised that working for the urban poor could be her vocation. At her father's suggestion she enrolled for a Masters in Social Work. Later she moved to villages, understood caste structures, land patterns and the problems of Dalits.

Right from the beginning of her foray into the social sector she set about organising oppressed people, getting them to claim their rights and become stake holders in development. “I grew up on that kind of pitch,” she says.

Manorama closes with a pointer. “The situation of Dalits can't be changed by Dalits themselves. Dalits must lead and other progressi