

THE DALIT EMPOWERMENT IN NEPAL

Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

My visit to two dalit institutions during my recent trip to Nepal has been etched in my memory. I had gone to Kathmandu in November 2007 to attend an International Refresher Programme organized by the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP). During the week-long programme one of the main speakers was a dalit (a member of the oppressed community) leader Mr. Suvas Darnal. He gave us a fair idea of the existential situation of the dalit people in Nepal. Mr. Darnal spoke about the two dalit institutions of the mass media. So I was naturally curious to visit the two institutions: dalit community Radio Station at Butwal and Jagaran Media Centre at Buddhanagar, Kathmandu.

In our refresher programme the last item was a visit to Lumbini, the birth place of Bhagavan Buddha, some 300 kilo meters from Kathmandu. On our return journey from Lumbini on November 20 we went to Butwal. Butwal is a small town. There we visited the first dalit community FM Radio Jagaran. Presently Radio Jagaran is the only community radio station dedicated to the interest and welfare of the dalit people in Nepal.

The FM Radio Jagaran of the dalit community made its first experimental broadcasting on November 6, 2007. From that day Radio Jagaran broadcasts every day for limited hours different kinds of programmes. The Secretary General of Jagaran Media Centre, Mr. Rem Bahadur Vishwakarma was with us to take round the Radio Jagaran station and show us all the facilities there. We also met the staff personnel of the FM Radio Jagaran and enjoyed tea and snacks with them. Radio Jagaran played for us the new national anthem, which was broadcast as the very first item on the FM radio. We were impressed by the quality of the recorded national anthem.

Mr Rem Vishwakarma told us that the dalit Radio Jagaran would function as the voice of the voiceless. Radio Jagaran is committed to the welfare of the dalits and all the oppressed people of Nepal. One of the reporters of Radio Jagaran told us that their plan is to open exemplary FM radio stations in all the five under-developed and developing regions of Nepal.

In our conversation with the staff personnel and the reporters of Radio Jagaran I felt that they are not only well aware of the backwardness and the reasons for it but they were also committed to bring changes for social equality and the development of the whole marginalized and the minority people. The dalit power is certainly awakening in Nepal.

I was lucky to stay two more days at Kathmandu after the UCIP programme. On the first day I could visit together with UCIP Secretary General, Mr. Joseph Chittilappilly and a few other friends the Jagaran Media Centre. Mr. Rem Vishwakarma was our guide who took us to Jagaran Media Centre. There we met the Chairperson Mr. Suvas Darnal. Mr. Darnal enlightened us on the various programmes and activities of the centre. Sharing about the history of dalit movements in Nepal Mr. Darnal said that four enthusiastic dalit journalists started Jagaran Media Centre (JMC) in 2000. One of the main task of JMC was to conscientise the people about the discriminations in the name of caste and launch a movement for human rights and for a casteless society.

The dalits who have suffered discriminations in all their lives now feel strongly that the time is overdue to establish social equality among all people. The founder-journalists of JMC on the basis of their journalistic experiences started to conscientise the people socially through the print and broadcast media and create awareness of social evils of caste-based discriminations and social inequality. JMC has played a significant role from the beginning in creating social awareness in Nepalese society at national and international level.

JMC is fully committed from the beginning to do away with all types of social and racial discriminations on the basis of caste. The leaders of JMC believe that in spite of democracy coming to Nepal in the early 1990s, the government has failed to end the exploitations of the dalit people and bring about social equality.

During the last 10 years the dalit people are at the receiving end of the attacks of the Maoists and the total neglect of the government. Nepal has 40 lakh dalits among a population of 289 lakh people. But in a country of 48.6% literacy the number of literate dalit people are very insignificant. Similarly half of the Nepalese population is living Below Poverty Line (BPL) and the most people under BPL are dalits! The situations of dalit people are pitiable in Nepal. But now the dalit people are awakening to their real situation through the publications of JMC and the FM Radio Jagaran.

The dalit leader Mr. Darnal believes that all the problems of the dalit people can be solved only at political level. So the efforts of JMC are to include all things which concern the dalit people in the new constitution of Nepal. Mr. Darnal told us that JMC is working hard to get political representation and create political awareness among the Nepalese people.

The web page or the internet magazine of JMC says that JMC is engaged with remarkable success in voicing the dalit problems not only in local print media but also in the national print and broadcast media as well as in international media. All the same the dalit leaders are aware that the national media are not giving adequate coverage to dalit issues and problems.

The JMC web magazine has many reports about caste-based discriminations and examples of atrocities against the dalit people. According a report by Prakash Mohera about 300 local dalit people at Rautahut on October 8, 2007 under the leadership of Dalit National Liberation Front and the Maoists entered the local temple of Hanuman and Siva. The dalit people at the end of a procession entered the temple expressing their protest against caste-based discriminations and prohibitions. On the other hand the non-dalits or the so-called upper caste people are threatening the dalits for entering their temple and the dalits live under fear of reprisal. All the same, the dalits are fighting unitedly in many places against the caste discriminations and social inequality. The JMC web pages give many instances of such protest by dalits against inequalities and discriminations in the name of castes.

The dalit power is showing up against rapes of dalit women, separate pipes and taps for water for dalits from the same water tank, the barring of dalits from entering certain hotels and restaurants, discriminatory behaviour of teachers against dalit students, etc.

Today the dalit people are fighting against all forms of discriminations and inequalities in Nepal under the Dalit Jagaran Centre. The dalits know that this fight is not only of dalit people but it is the fight of all sensitive people who believe in the human rights and in the equality of all men and women. So Mr. Darnal told us that the leaders of JMC believes in taking their fight with the support and collaboration of all concerned people.

A dalit leader of Nepal actively participated in the UCIP Refresher Programme together with people of different nationalities, languages and cultures. We all lived together without any discrimination but with love and respect for each other. We ate at the same table, shared rooms with another participants in the hotel accommodation. Like everyone else in the programme the dalit leader too shared his views and opinions with others in “discussions and sharing sessions. Impressed by the love and respect in the spirit of equality the dalit person said that “in Nepal the so called high caste people never behave with such love and respect with a person of a dalit community!” I wish and look forward to the day not only in Nepal but in the whole world that a person, as a human being, is loved and respected without any discrimination but upholding equality, brotherhood/sisterhood and human rights of all people.