

## The Karuna Trust – Perspectives on Education and Women’s Empowerment

In this paper I will present the work of the Karuna Trust, focusing on education and women’s empowerment, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium Development Goals. The vast majority of the beneficiaries of Karuna’s project partners belong to the ‘Dalit’ communities. The term Dalit refers to the ‘ex-Untouchables’ under the Indian caste system; in the constitution of British India, they were listed as Scheduled Castes (SC), a legal term which has remained in common usage. In the paper I use the terms Dalit and Scheduled Castes interchangeably. Some of the tribal communities have been classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST) indicating that they are entitled to the same government schemes as the Dalits.

The size of the Dalit population is 200 million out of India’s total population of 1.2 billion according to the 2011 census; the estimates for the tribal population vary but are around 70-100 million; if you include tribal communities outside of the official classification, estimates is all we have.<sup>1</sup> Poverty and deprivation also affect millions of people belonging to the ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBC), the lowest castes in the caste hierarchy. The estimated figures – 200 million Dalits, 100 million Tribal people, 600 OBC’s – adding to 900 million illustrate the scale of exclusion and poverty. The figure of earning less than 2 USD a day puts 68% of the population below the international poverty line.<sup>2</sup> Using a broader index of indicators (poor health, lack of education, lack of sanitation) to assess poverty, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen claim in their book *An uncertain Glory – India and its Contradictions* that 53.7% of Indians are ‘multidimensionally poor’.<sup>3</sup> Their assessment points to the slowness of social change in the Indian society.

The Indian political leader, leader of the Dalits, social reformer, the first law minister of independent India and the architect of the Constitution, Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in a public ceremony on October the 14<sup>th</sup> 1956. At the same ceremony in Nagpur, after receiving the refuges and precepts from a senior monk, he, in turn, converted 500,000 of his followers.

Ambedkar, himself from the Dalit Mahar caste, had argued, agitated and worked for the social and political reforms that would lift the millions left outside the Hindu caste system out of poverty and deprivation. The reforms would ultimately enable them to participate in society on equal terms with those born into the other sections of the society. He saw caste as a ‘monster’ and argued that it would always jeopardise and undermine the attempts to reform society that didn’t confront its influence. In his seminal work ‘Annihilation of Caste’, he further described caste, traditionally practised as a division of labour within which each caste has its predestined ‘duty’, as ‘a division of labourers’: a system of graded inequality, based on the dogma of predestination, a hierarchy in which labourers are divided into ‘watertight compartments’.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The figure given to Karuna’s by a project partner is 150 million (NIRMAN, personal communication)

2 Data.worldbank.org

3 Drèze and Sen, *An Uncertain Glory*, p 345

4 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p 14

Ambedkar, keen to lead his followers to a religion of Indian origin, would have found support in the Buddhist scriptures for his aspiration to help create a caste-free society. During the Buddha's lifetime, the society was divided into the four *varnas*, with the Brahmins at the top of the religious and social hierarchy. The rejection of the caste system in the Buddhist scriptures was the core of Ambedkar's message of liberation. He elaborated on it, especially in his work *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (published in 1957 after his death) and asserted the Buddhist view of ethical responsibility – what matters is actions, not birth into a particular caste or social group.

Ambedkar's insight into the nature of caste is highly significant both as a route to liberation and its congruence with the Buddhist teaching of the mind. 'Man is what mind makes him.'<sup>5</sup> Analyzing the idea of caste, he writes: 'Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire' [...] 'Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means *notional* change.'<sup>6</sup> In other words, it means changes in people's views, attitudes and beliefs.

In 2013, 56 years after the momentous event of the mass conversion (which has been followed by a series of further mass conversions), the revolution, or the 'reformation of mind', Ambedkar may have envisaged, remains incomplete. In a cramped community centre in the state of Madhya Pradesh, a group of women talk about their experience of manual scavenging and finding a way of liberating themselves from it. One of the most degrading of the caste-based occupations, manual scavenging (removing by hand human excreta from dry toilets), is passed from mother to daughter, or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. In urban areas more Dalits have been able to escape many of the traditional forms of discrimination and progress in life thanks to job opportunities and education, but in the rural areas people still struggle and suffer. The most vulnerable group are the Dalit girls and women. They typically have less education than other groups in the society, and there continues to be silence around the violence against them, the fear of reprisals from the perpetrators and lack of access to legal services being the main reasons for not reporting the crimes.

Amartya Sen's and Jean Drèze's critique of contemporary Indian society agrees with Ambedkar's analysis from 78 years ago: caste is still 'a major barrier to social progress in India', and 'more importantly as Dr Ambedkar argued with great clarity, [...] a pernicious division of human beings into iron-curtained compartments'.<sup>7</sup> The authors acknowledge the decrease in some of the discriminatory practices against SC and ST population whilst pointing out 'the continued dominance of the upper castes (and virtual absence of Dalits and other disadvantaged communities) in media houses, corporate boards, judicial institutions, and even cricket and polo teams'.<sup>8</sup> Invisible to outsiders, but present across the whole of the society, caste remains a defining factor.

The Karuna Trust was founded in 1980 by members of the Western Buddhist Order (now Triratna Buddhist Order), disciples of the English Buddhist teacher Sangharakshita. During his time in India, Sangharakshita had made contact with Ambedkar's followers and, keenly

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5 Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p 359

6 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* p 37

7 Drèze and Sen, *An Uncertain Glory*, pp 34-35

8 *Ibid*, p 222

aware of their material and spiritual needs, encouraged some of his disciples to go and work in India. Dhamma teaching was soon followed by the setting up of small-scale health and educational projects.

The Karuna Trust, a medium-size charity based in London, currently has 40 project partners in India, over 90% of which are led by individuals from the SC/ST background. Out of the total funding, 68% goes towards projects run by people belonging to the Triratna Buddhist Community in India (also known as Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana, or TBMSG) and the remaining 32% to other NGO's. Karuna is one of a growing number of faith-based organisations that operate in the secular sphere. A central paradigm of Karuna's theory and practice of development is the close relationship between individual transformation and social transformation. In this, Karuna draws on the teachings of Sangharakshita who has repeatedly emphasised it in his teaching career; in his view, Buddhism stands for the creation of an ideal society, or 'new society', as well the development of the individual. In a lecture from 1987, he urges his disciples to overcome spiritual individualism and be both vigorous and rigorous in the 'active service' to others.<sup>9</sup> In an earlier lecture, a commentary on a late Mahayana Sutra from 1979, he speaks both in mythic and down-to-earth language of the Bodhisattva spirit and the creation of the 'Buddha-land', the ideal environment for the leading of the spiritual life. 'We are social beings', he says; 'we cannot really separate helping ourselves from helping others'.<sup>10</sup> This has become the motivating and guiding principle for the Karuna staff and fundraising volunteers.

Ambedkar's vision of Buddhism as a religion capable of transforming individuals as well as societies found a resonance in Sangharakshita's teachings. Their respective visions of Buddhism arose out of the desire to meet the needs of the people in the society of their time. A key theme of Ambedkar's exposition of Buddhism is the centrality of a moral order situated in the human beings and their power to act, as opposed to a Transcendental entity ('prayers to god are a futility')<sup>11</sup>. His tone is brisk and emphatic as he urges people to be thoughtful, kind, generous, earnest, bold, vigilant and just and strive for not just their own welfare but that of others too<sup>12</sup>. He calls 'inhuman and absurd' the (Hindu) doctrine of karma that makes people helplessly stuck in the conditions that were supposedly created by their actions in a previous life; 'the only purpose one can think of' [for such a view] 'is to enable the state or the society to escape responsibility for the condition of the poor and the lowly'<sup>13</sup>.

Buddhism has a 'Social Message' and teaches 'equality, liberty and fraternity'.<sup>14</sup> This message gives rise to an emancipatory, liberative identity that Ambedkar created for himself and his followers. The message becomes absorbed into the ethos of the 'Ambedkarite' and 'Ambedkar-influenced' NGO's and is embraced by the beneficiary communities. The project workers and the beneficiaries speak the same language. The key to a better life comes from

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9 Sangharakshita, *The Buddha's Victory*, freebuddhistaudio.com

10 Sangharakshita, *The Inconceivable Liberation*, pp 37-38

11 Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, see for instance pp 361,399

12 Ibid p 382

13 Ibid p 34

14 Ibid pp 225-226

substituting the toxic mix of 'blind faith', superstitious practices, drinking and gambling with self-reliance, education of children and the support of one's own community. In other words, people need to free themselves - and help others do likewise - from oppressive and exploitative attitudes and practices thus becoming agents of their own social, moral and religious liberation. The natural and easily perceived connection between one's own welfare and that of others also motivates former beneficiaries to become project staff and volunteers.

Karuna's work is organised around five themes – education, women's empowerment, human rights/ advocacy, leadership and mind change. All of them reflect responses to the urgent need for social change in India; the last one, 'mind change' brings to the fore the Buddhist teaching of views and attitudes influencing actions. The greatest proportion of Karuna's funding goes towards education and women's empowerment (39% and 29% respectively). These two themes also coincide with the Millenium Development Goals 2 and 3: *ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling, and promoting gender equality and empowering women.*

## Education

The first Karuna-funded educational hostel opened in 1984 and many others followed as the social and educational needs of poor families from marginalised communities became clear. There are currently 20 of hostels receiving funding from Karuna, with approximately 930 children living and studying in them. India's Right to Education Act (2009) establishes the right to free education for all children between the age of 5 and 14. Karuna is helping implement the Act through its hostel programme as well as community-based action that supports children's education by reducing school drop-out rates, for instance. The hostels offer children from Dalit and Tribal background a chance to receive a quality education which will enable them to participate in mainstream Indian society. By extension, the children from particularly disadvantaged and poor backgrounds contribute to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion of their communities.<sup>15</sup>

Over 70% of the parents of hostel children are daily paid labourers earning 30.000-40.000Rs (480-640 USD) a year. Many of them are illiterate. The baseline surveys in the areas the children come from demonstrate the limited access to education. Schooling beyond the 4<sup>th</sup> standard (10 years) is hampered by long distances to schools and poor public transport services. Parents are reluctant to let their children walk to school unsupervised, especially the girls. In many cases the parents are all too keen to bring the children along to work with them in the fields, brick kilns and factories. Some of the parents are seasonal workers, regularly on the move in search of work, which makes the children's schooling almost impossible.<sup>16</sup>

The hostels offer the children physical safety, nutritious food, educational and emotional support, opportunities for musical tuition, dance and other arts activities and the martial arts, all of which contribute to an all round development their personalities. In fact, they receive the sort of support and attention any child deserves and thrives on. The hostel wardens bridge an important gap in these children's lives - a gap that exists between a cycle of poverty and a life beyond it.

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15 Programmes Plan April 2012-March 2013

16 TBMSG/BH Hostels Midterm Evaluation Summary, 2013

The hostels also address the needs of the parents by arranging regular meetings and workshops for them. One of the main aims is to help them understand the importance of education; they are also given support and guidance in child development and dealing with adolescents. Their own attitudes begin to change – making them less vulnerable to a sense of disempowerment. The girls' hostel in Pune taking in students from the city slums and villages in the surrounding areas demonstrates some of the successes that are possible. The school drop-out in the area is 57%, and 27% of the girls marry before the age of 18. Initially, many of the parents didn't consider girls' education to be important, however, with the help of the parents' meetings and witnessing the girls' educational success, their attitudes have changed significantly.

The outcomes point to a possibility of long-term changes in families and communities: 60-80% of the students are expected to pass their school exams with distinction or in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> class. An increasing number of parents become aware of the negative effect of addictions, practices based on blind faith and gender discrimination on family welfare.<sup>17</sup>

Child labour continues to be a major problem in India. According to the 2001 census, 12.7 million of children are working in various sectors across the country; the non-governmental organisations estimate the figure to be currently 60 million.<sup>18</sup> In the state of Madhya Pradesh, the conditions for millions of children are generally poor, with 60% of them suffering from malnutrition. Child labour is closely linked with caste-based bonded labour in agriculture and manual scavenging. According to recent research carried out by *Jan Sahas*, Karuna's project partner in Madhya Pradesh, 68% of the children of manual scavengers and bonded labourers are brought by their parents to work with them. The research also includes evidence of ongoing discrimination against Dalit children: in schools, they are made to sit in separate rows, served food on paper plates and made to clean the classrooms and toilets. It was found that 90% of Dalit children leave school before 8<sup>th</sup> standard (the age of 14).<sup>19</sup>

*Jan Sahas* takes an integrated approach to the problem of child labour and education. Fundamental to their approach is encouraging and helping the adults leave behind caste-based slavery. The organisation works at a community level with the support of barefoot social advocates to create awareness amongst the Dalits of their rights. Child labour is released through community and legal action and legal support is offered to the children and their families; young people from the Dalit communities are encouraged to undergo training to become barefoot activists and lawyers; attention is brought to cases of discrimination and violence against children (according to 2009-2010 statistics, the highest number of crimes against children in Indian states were registered in Madhya Pradesh). The overall low educational achievements are reflected in the fact that only 39% of children aged 8-11 are able to read and 39% able to write.<sup>20</sup> The organisation has also set up 'Dignity Centres' for children released from child labour to offer them supplementary educational support whilst they attend mainstream schools.<sup>21</sup>

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17 TBMSG/BH Hostels Midterm Evaluation Summary, 2013

18 Jan Sahas Project Proposal April 2013-March 2016

19 Ibid

20 Drèze and Sen, p 125

21 Jan Sahas Project Proposal April 2013-March 2016

The importance of addressing the underlying reasons for low school attendance and high drop-out rates is illustrated by the work done by an NGO in rural Maharashtra. The project, part funded by the UK Department for International Development, was set up to increase enrolment and completion of primary education within the Bidi-rolling (cigarettes) community of 35 000 people. Only 65% of school age children attend school and 35% complete primary education. The girls are particularly disadvantaged as they tend to follow in their mothers' footsteps through the route of domestic help at home and bidi-rolling on to early marriage. Whilst the main focus of the project is increasing the enrolment and completion rates through enrolment campaigns and awareness raising, the complementary interventions regarding poverty and health, in particular, are seen as crucial. (65% of the population earn less than 1.64 USD per day.) Improving sanitation and providing immunisation and supplementary nutrition are some of the measures taken to improve the childrens' health. Parents and young adults benefit from micro-finance loans, training in literacy and financial skills, career guidance and vocational training courses – interventions which help reduce poverty.<sup>22</sup>

Another example of the importance of having a full understanding the problems facing families and communities comes from the Pardhi community also in rural Maharashtra. The Pardhis, known as a tribal community, were classified during the colonial rule as a 'criminal caste'. Traditionally nomadic and engaged in hunting, they are constantly hunted by the police at the slightest suspicion. They incur high costs in their legal battles, forced to sell whatever grain or livestock they own, or their daughters in marriage, or 'mortgage' them to wealthy families as servants. Their poverty is abject; their exclusion from mainstream society near total.

Karuna is working with a partner organisation which has recently set up a hostel for 20 boys from two Pardhi settlements which include 500 families. A new building with space for 50 boys and 50 girls was opened in January 2014. The work has to start with the parents and community leaders who are resistant to the children being educated, or rather they don't see it as a priority when the more urgent need is for the children to go out begging or stealing. Furthermore, 80% of the families have a case pending with police or the courts; 40-50 people are in prison. Over 90% of the population are illiterate.<sup>23</sup>

It is a modest but significant beginning for this particular community. The two social workers and a tutor based in the hostel work within the wider community to raise awareness of education as a way out of poverty; they have also forged strong links with the local primary schools helping the staff understand the needs of the Pardhi children and their families. So far, the school attendance rates for the boys from the hostel, as well as children living at home, have been very encouraging (78%-90%).<sup>24</sup>

The girls' education in this community remains problematic because of the traditionally held view of them as valuable commodities and domestic help. These are the attitudes the local NGO is addressing, but it's probably only when a large number of girls have gone through primary and secondary education that the parents will be convinced of the benefits of their education.

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22 Impact Grant Concept Note, 2011 (Global Poverty Action Fund). NISD

23 Pardhi Educational Development Project: Projects Proposal April 2013-March2016

24 Ibid

Karuna's hostel programme offers children from a poor background a chance to complete their primary and secondary education. The community-based action – such as raising awareness of the value of education and gender issues, focusing on eradicating bonded labour and addressing problems regarding health and livelihood - improves significantly the educational opportunities of children who might otherwise fall through the cracks. It also contributes towards the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium Development Goal of eradicating poverty.

### Women's Empowerment

In their discussion of India's social problems and the slowness of social change, Drèze and Sen draw attention to the influence of caste, class and gender in India. '[...] caste stratification often reinforces class inequality, giving it a resilience that is harder to conquer. Gender inequality, too, is exceptionally high in India.' [...] It is the mutual reinforcement of severe inequalities of different kinds that creates an extremely oppressive social system, where those at the bottom of these multiple layers of disadvantage live in conditions of extreme disempowerment.'<sup>25</sup>

The evidence from the communities Karuna works with, especially the ones lagging behind on several socio-economic indicators, supports Sen's and Drèze's argument that the division between the privileged and the disadvantaged is particularly entrenched. A Dalit girl from a poor background who dreams of becoming a teacher or a doctor (a common aspiration) will struggle with inadequate educational facilities, poverty in the family, as well as gender discrimination and negative or indifferent attitudes in the family and community towards her education. 'Given the wide-ranging personal and social roles of basic education (especially female education) in development, these multiple social barriers and divisions have exacted a heavy price.'<sup>26</sup>

Karuna's approach to women's empowerment and gender equality is based on the analysis of the 'triple marginalisation'. Women from SC and ST communities often have poor access to education and healthcare and little control over land and other productive assets. To the extent they are trapped in the cycle of poverty and subordination, they also remain vulnerable to physical and sexual violence both within and outside the home.<sup>27</sup> Dalit women are commonly subjected to physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution outside home; the violence continues inside the family in the form of domestic violence, female foeticide and infanticide and child sexual abuse.<sup>28</sup> The reported cases of rape have seen an increase, but it is estimated that 90% of the rapes against Dalit women go unreported.<sup>29</sup> The position of the Dalit and Tribal women may be more acute, but discrimination, gender inequality and sexual violence are wide-spread in the society. *TrustLaw* survey 2011 ranked India as the fourth most dangerous place for women

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25 Drèze and Sen, p 213 Sen & Drèze

26 Ibid p 281

27 Karuna Programmes Plan April 2012-March 2013

28 Briefing note to the 11<sup>th</sup> Human Rights Council, 2012, International Dalit Solidarity Network, [www.ldsnet.org](http://www.ldsnet.org)

29 Violence Against Dalit Women, AIDMAM, [allindiadalitmahilaadhikarmanch.blogspot.co.uk](http://allindiadalitmahilaadhikarmanch.blogspot.co.uk)

because of trafficking, female foeticide and infanticide, dowry deaths, domestic violence and servitude.

Karuna has developed partnerships with several Indian women-led NGO's. Community development projects usually include women's literacy classes, women's self-help groups, which manage loan schemes for the members, and vocational training, albeit on a relatively modest scale. The staff running the women's community programmes often come from the Dalit background, have few if any qualifications and, like the hostel staff, draw inspiration from Ambedkar's message of liberation and the Buddhist teaching of compassionate social action. The capacity building of these women, which focuses on project management, is part of the empowerment.

Karuna's project partner in West Bengal, *Nistha* offers a well researched and articulated analysis of the needs of girls and women in the area. They operate at the grassroots level raising awareness of the importance of formal education, the adverse effects of child marriage and dowry, child labour, trafficking, sexual harassment and violence. In its current phase, the Karuna-funded programme focuses on 450 girls in rural areas. Only 11 of those girls (2%) have dropped out of school in the first year of the programme, a significant decrease compared to the average of 72% for this area. Child marriage is down to 1% in the beneficiary group, the state average being 60%. The effectiveness of the project is largely due to the mobilisation of the girls and mothers as change-makers through the girls' and mothers' groups: whenever a girl is removed from school, or a family is planning a child marriage, some of the girls or mothers approach the family and enlist the help of the *Nistha* social workers if necessary. There are 35 girls' groups and 30 mothers' groups (which also include income-generating initiatives). The 'peer pressure' and peer training are encouraging a move away from the short-term solutions of early marriage and unskilled labour.<sup>30</sup> The successful networking also extends to the local government and other statutory agencies.

An organisation in Tamil Nadu, ADECOM, runs a programme to identify and build the capacity of women leaders in an area of covering 50 villages. The women leaders, 30 in all, take an active role in preventing and responding to gender-based violence. In collaboration with the NGO staff, they support women through the legal system, advising them on how to take their case to the police, helping them gain access to counselling services and understand their constitutional rights. The NGO is also engaged in supporting women agricultural workers, who don't own any land and receive low pay, to organise themselves into an agricultural union.<sup>31</sup>

At one end of the scale, women are campaigning to close down the liquor shop near their homes and encourage a change in the local drinking habits; at the other end, ADECOM enlists the support the State Welfare Minister to launch a book on 'women against violence' to be distributed widely.<sup>32</sup>

As with all the other community-based women's projects, the issues and problems are brought to the awareness of the local women – as well as the whole community – not only through meetings but also street plays, singing and drumming, loud slogans and colourful

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30 Nistha Project Proposal April 2012-March 2015; Karuna newsletter 2012

31 ADECOM Project Proposal April 2012-March 2015

32 ADECOM Update December 2013



banners in the small rallies noisily meandering through the narrow alleyways in the slums, or the small village squares.

Maharashtra, on average one of the wealthier states in India, includes some of the most extreme poverty in the country too. In a common pattern, it affects people from SC and ST backgrounds in a way that it hard for them to break out of. An organisation working in the Beed District has a firm focus on caste and gender as the underlying causes of poverty violence against women. The starting point, in a sense, is once again the self-help groups which, with their microfinance schemes, offer the first steps out of poverty to economic independence. Following on closely, are the business development scheme and training in how to gain access to legal services. An important feature of economic empowerment is supporting women continue to gain or maintain ownership of land that is rightfully theirs. They have set up 'flying squads', groups of Dalit women, to galvanise legal and emotional support for victims of caste- and gender- based violence; with this support, the victims are more likely to be able to file legal cases against the perpetrators. Interestingly, they also offer 'gender sensitisation' – gender awareness training – for men in the local communities.<sup>33</sup>

The women leaders and activists in the National Association of Dalit-Run Organisations (NACDOR) have concluded that Dalit women and their concerns remain marginalised in the mainstream women's movements in India, as well as within the Dalit movements which tend to be led and dominated by men. The Dalit women's leadership programme offers capacity building and mentoring to local women leaders – who work in their own communities making women aware of information and legislation, supporting women in cases of violence and discrimination and helping women form occupational organisations (sweepers, agricultural workers, rag pickers, domestic servants).<sup>34</sup>

One of Karuna's project partners in Mumbai, *Urja*, works with vulnerable young women aged 16-24 who have left home; 70% of them had been forced to leave, the remaining 30% had decided to leave. Many of them are found at railway stations, utterly vulnerable to exploitation. The combined model of offering immediate help and campaigning for better services and general social change is the basis of *Urja*'s approach. The women are offered short and medium term shelter, counselling, assessment of physical and mental health, advice and support regarding their future. In *Urja*'s analysis, the problems of these women are directly related to their low status due to their caste and gender. In a sense, they are 'denied any status or identity'.<sup>35</sup> It is the building up of their status and identity – in a safe space - that empowers and enables them to make decisions about their future and claim their place in society.

It is worth drawing further attention to the situation concerning the women and girls in the Scheduled Tribes communities - I referred to the conditions in the Pardhi community when discussing the hostel project in Maharashtra. In a way, the tribal communities are so far away from mainstream society, often geographically and certainly culturally and socially, that the caste hierarchy doesn't affect them. However, their socio-economic situation has become dire in contemporary India – largely, ironically, because they are not part of the

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33 Asmita Project Proposal April 2012-March 2015

34 NACDOR Project Proposal April 2011-March 2014

35 *Urja* Project Proposal April 2012-March 2015

caste-based system: they lack ID evidence, caste and birth certificates, voting cards, access to government schemes, including, crucially, ration cards which enable poorer people to buy essential food stuff and other commodities at subsidized prices.<sup>36</sup>

The disappearance of the traditional nomadic livelihoods of hunting, performing religious rituals and performing with animals has led women to seeking employment in construction work, making alcohol, baskets and ornaments. Many of them have very little alternative but to engage in prostitution and accept their role as 'property' to be sold, mortgaged and leased out. The leaders of the ST communities are usually male, which means that atrocities and discrimination against women don't get readily addressed. Vaishali Bhandwalkar from NIRMAN (an organisation devoted to the uplift of the Tribal communities) also points out that the needs of tribal women have escaped the attention of many feminist organizations working for women's empowerment.<sup>37</sup>

The women's empowerment programme at NIRMAN has its grassroots component. A key objective, however, is the forming of a state level (Maharashtra) network of Scheduled Tribe women's organisations. This will make the task of advocacy – citizenship rights, livelihood, and education being of primary concern - easier and more effective.<sup>38</sup> In the absence of any previous state level development policy for women from tribal communities, NIRMAN presented a paper to the Minister of Women and Children in the Maharashtra State Government and expects it to be included in the next Women's Policy for Maharashtra.<sup>39</sup>

To increase the impact of the women's empowerment projects, Karuna set up in 2009 a network of its Indian partner organisations working in the field of women's empowerment and gender equality. The *Maitri* network aims to maximise learning and solidarity amongst Dalit and Tribal women across all the Indian states.<sup>40</sup> The objective is to build the capacity of Dalit women and organisations, train women leaders, create awareness of the rights of the Dalit women and, crucially, create public awareness of their needs and discrimination against them. The annual campaigns of the *Maitri* network give the women a strong voice – through local rallies, demonstrations and other street events, and engagement with state government officials. In 2013, the network mounted a successful campaign on violence against Dalit women with a total outreach of 600,000 people across 9 Indian states. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, manual scavenging, female infanticide, dowry payments, awareness of legal and civil rights were amongst the key issues highlighted in the campaign. Apart from creating general awareness and media coverage, the campaign has led to successful advocacy in cases of rape and domestic violence (Madhya Pradesh), the setting up of a legal centre (Tamil Nadu) and establishing a fact-finding team to track cases of violence and atrocities against women (Haryana).<sup>41</sup>

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36 NIRMAN: Vaishali Bhandwalkar, Paper on A State Level Network of Nomadic and Denotified Tribes, 2013

37 Ibid

38 Ibid. See also NIRMAN Project Proposal April 2013-March 2016

39 Personal communication, Santosh Jadhav, NIRMAN December 2013

40 Karuna Programmes Plan April 2012-March 2013

41 Maitri Network Update January 2014

The same theme has been chosen for the 2014 campaign.<sup>42</sup> The campaign is also calling for a more rigorous implementation of the Domestic Violence Act (2005). The Act brings the issues out into the public domain but it isn't quite as effective as it could be – for instance, it doesn't recognise the concept of shared matrimonial property increasing the likelihood of women staying on in abusive relationships. And, as with other pieces of legislation, the lack of political will and social awareness hinder the implementation of the Act.

I will briefly outline the key elements that have emerged from Karuna's work within women's empowerment. Women from Dalit and Tribal communities are faced with patriarchal attitudes in the society, including the Dalit movement, but they are also faced with a lack of understanding of their concerns and conditioning amongst feminist organisations, or organisations led by individuals from the other castes. For this reason, they are eager to address their problems with the support of their own organisations. In discussing the role of women's NGO's development, Razani and Miller emphasise the importance of women organising themselves in order to have 'agency' in civil society. The NGO's are entrusted with the task of reaching the least privileged and the poorest women, or facilitating group formation.<sup>43</sup> This 'bottom-up' empowerment enables women 'to take control of their lives, support each other and make demands on the state for support and on society for change'.<sup>44</sup>

A similar point is made by Kaan Tasli in discussing the empowerment approach. Women can increase their socio-economic and political powers through grassroots level action.<sup>45</sup> Awareness raising, political mobilization and networking are some of the instruments of this approach.

Many of the successful women's empowerment projects funded by Karuna use the combined approach of grassroots work and advocacy. The self-help groups, microfinance, income generating schemes, community-based activism, legal support and advice on accessing services and government schemes are the most common forms of grassroots activities. The grassroots work itself can be seen as a form of advocacy when women in the slums and villages have the confidence to speak to the police if necessary, address the problems in their families, receive the health care they are entitled to and ensure their children are able to attend school and get to school and back safely.

The women leaders from the community level up to state and national level are important role models, especially as there have been very few such role models in previous generations of Dalit women. Successful advocacy has to reach the state and national level institutions, the media and the political establishment and, as such, requires professional

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42 Maitri Network update December 2013

43 Sharashoub Razani & Carol Miller, Conceptual Shifts in the Women and Development Discourse, [www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org), 1995, pp33-34

44 Ibid p 34

45 Kaan Tasli, A Conceptual Framework for Gender and Development Studies: From Welfare to Empowerment. [www.oefse.at/downloads/publikationen/foren/Forum32.pdf](http://www.oefse.at/downloads/publikationen/foren/Forum32.pdf)

skills. The expectation is that more and more of Dalit women will gain the expertise and confidence to be able to operate at the 'higher' levels of advocacy.

Karuna has witnessed the transformative power of the 'liberative' identity created out of a mixture of Ambedkarite thinking, Buddhism and awareness of the society around the individual. This new identity is the basis both for individual change and change within the collective. How far the changes go and how fast they happen, will depend on many factors. One of those factors is the willingness of the women themselves to discard their caste, gender and religious identity and not pass it on to their daughters. As Drèze and Sen point out, the 'agency' of the individual should go beyond the immediate control over decisions: 'The fuller sense of the crucial idea of 'agency' must, among other things, involve the freedom to question established values and traditional priorities.'<sup>46</sup>

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the assessment made by Lakshmi Puri (Deputy Executive Director for the Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – UN-WOMEN) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millenium Goal.<sup>47</sup> She acknowledges the progress that has been made, especially on primary education and access to water, and highlights four areas where the goals are falling short: maternal mortality, social norms, access to decent work and participation in decision-making. She regards women's empowerment as a pre-condition for achieving many of the other goals which, in turn, contribute to women's empowerment. Importantly, she calls for a new stand-alone goal of women's empowerment from 2015 onwards with three core concerns: ending violence against women, equal access to resources and opportunities and equal participation in all sectors of society. With its long experience in India and understanding of the key issues, Karuna would be well placed to contribute to more progress in all those areas.

## Conclusion

I have illustrated Karuna's approach to education and women's empowerment, two of the Millenium Development Goals, through examples from the project work amongst the Dalit and Tribal communities of India. I have emphasized the interconnection between the individual and his/ her community and the society at large, and drawn attention to the importance of the 'emancipatory' identity with its Buddhist and 'Ambedkarite' underpinning. This identity is a helpful tool - arguably an essential tool - in the field of education and women's empowerment, both of which offer a reliable route out of marginalisation and poverty. However, when it comes to challenging 'established values and traditional priorities', the individual will need the support of community-based collective action; without it the consequences of the challenge could be tragic and destructive.

Working with project partners whose leaders come from the beneficiary communities and investing in capacity building have enabled Karuna to contribute to a culture of empowerment that includes the project staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. In a wider context, this could also be seen as part of an emerging form of socially engaged Buddhism that aims to dissolve the hierarchical way of viewing the respective status of the funder, project staff and beneficiaries. Or, to put it differently, it aims to generate mutual understanding and positive regard.

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46 Drèze and Sen, p 232

47 [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals)

In an inherently unequal social system, divided by caste, class and gender, which nevertheless boasts egalitarian legislation and affirmative action, the role of a charity such as Karuna is to help create resources both for the individual in his or her quest for a better life, and the social activists and advocates in their campaign to put pressure on the legal system and the government to uphold justice and transparent governance.

Dharmacharini Vajrapushpa

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