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About the Cover

In this painting titled 'Transforming the Oppressive Structures', you can see how dominant religious hegemony uses religion to attack women, Dalits, tribals in India. Black Jesus is resurrecting and transforming these oppressive structures in society and transforming it into an egalitarian society. The artist is Jebasingh Samuvel, who has completed his Bachelor of Divinity degree and belongs to the diocese of Madurai Ramnad, Church of South India (CSI). He is currently an intern with the Department of Communication at the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Chiangmai, Thailand.

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Contents

- 1 Editorial
- 4 Honour Killings and Female Sexuality: A Dangerous Nexus
W.S. Annie, India
- 12 The Water-Drawing Girls in 1 Samuel 9:11–14a: Exploring Spatiality and Gender towards a World for All
David A. Dorapalli, India
- 21 **Poem:** Privilege
Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, India
- 22 **Poem:** The Half-Life
Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, India
- 24 Singing Songs of Hope: Resistance and Togetherness
Chrisida Nithyakalyani, India
- 28 Hostility, Hypocrisy, Hospitality: Rethinking the Politics and Theology of Hospitality from a Dalit Perspective
Philip Vinod Peacock, India
- 33 The Role and Position of Sumi Women in the Church: Towards an Inclusive Ministry
Anati K. Yeptho, India
- 39 Christian Women in the Public Sphere in India Today
Aruna Gnanadason, India
- 47 **Poem:** Shame and Excuse ...
Gladson Jathanna, India
- 48 **Poem:** Women of the Walls ...
Gladson Jathanna, India
- 50 **About the Book**
Women as Equal Disciples: Unfinished Task of the Church
Virginia Saldanha, India
- 55 *IGI* Index 2016

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A World for All: Towards Just and Inclusive Spaces

We were three women visiting a *dargah* (a Muslim shrine) in Ahmedabad last week. We had just stepped across the threshold of one of the deserted chambers, containing the graves of three lesser princes, when a man materialized from the darkness and shouted out in Gujarati, “Out, stay out! Women cannot cross the entrance.” When we stood our ground, he came rushing up to shoo us out, most indignant that we might dare disobey. The man was not even a *maulvi* (a learned Muslim leader); he was just another visitor like us. When the women repeatedly asked why they cannot enter, the man replied, “Because you may be impure.” The women pushed him further reminding him that a woman when menstruating will by herself stay out. His response: “How can we be sure of that?” To this the women asked: “How can we be sure that the men who enter are all clean? What if they have not bathed, or have smoked a cigarette?” “Men,” the man answered loftily, “can be trusted to do the right thing. They will *never* be unclean.”¹

The above report is typical in India. A woman's search for a just and inclusive world is endless as she struggles to survive in a kyriarchal world. In a context where gender insensitivity, exclusion (as in the case above) and violence are unfortunately part and parcel of everyday life, women have developed a tremendous capacity to withstand the trauma that they are forced into. Women's psyche constantly wears out due to surpassing the amount of fears and tears that the societal gender norms dictate. These oppressive gender norms intertwine with their sexualities, by which their yearning for emancipation often gets trapped in distorted perceptions of sexualised bodies through heterosexual normativity.

To this we can add the economic paradigm India has opted for and pursues with relentless speed, that very intentionally excludes millions of women and others on the periphery of society, those literally struggling to survive through each day. Additionally, in India today, strong forms of cultural nationalism are being imposed by the dominant Hindutva minority who pursue their agenda of exclusion of religious minorities with indifferent backing from the ruling party and government.

All scriptures, traditions, histories have forgotten the insurmountable contributions of women. Their identities have been submerged in their ongoing longing to emerge anew as empowered entities strangled by the vicious cycle of male chauvinism. Family, church and other religious spaces, the society and the world at large have raised borders and boundaries, which keep women in rigid compartments of narrow identities. In India, especially in the context of the deep-rooted nexus between caste, class, gender, age and sexuality, women's aspirations to discover new avenues for fullness of life have faced enormous obstacles both within the family and in society.

However, women's subjectivity plays a significant role in determining what they desire to achieve, and in channeling their positive energy and potential to aim for fuller affirmation of dignity and worth. Women have worked in solidarity with other women (and men) with similar understandings of liberation and have thus achieved a sense of their own empowerment. It is not utopian any

¹ Vaishna Roy, “When religion is a convenient prop,” *The Hindu*, October 1, 2016. This report is by Vaishna Roy, Associate Editor of *The Hindu*, a national newspaper in India, who was visiting a holy Muslim shrine with Zakia Soman, co-founder of the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (Indian Muslim Women's Movement) and Noorjehan, also from the same movement.

longer for re-imagining an egalitarian world—a just and inclusive space since a great amount of conscientizing efforts are in place.

To the positive responses of women, particularly in resisting violence and exclusion must be highlighted the powerful new theological voices of women in India particularly of Dalit and Adivasi younger women. They explore with conviction the theological meaning of the context in which they find themselves discovering liberating images from India's past and often hidden histories and contexts. Eco-theological explorations, particularly from Indigenous women are also signs of hope.

It is against this backdrop that the December 2016 issue of *in God's image (IGI)* has drawn together life experiences, creative narratives, and critical reflections of Indian women, (and a few men) on imagining the possibility of a world for all, embracing just and inclusive spaces. The theme of the National Council of Churches in India for the period 2016–2020 is “Towards Just and Inclusive Communities”, through which the member churches are invited to strive towards creating new ways of finding justice and inclusivity within human communities and with nature. It is therefore appropriate that this issue of *IGI* focuses on this theme: “A World for All: Towards Just and Inclusive Spaces”.

W. S. Annie reminds us of the consequences of the evil norms of casteism that legitimizes the concepts of “honour” and “shame” in relation to women's bodies. Traditional casteist India believes that caste norms are honourable and to maintain them at any cost is an “honour” especially to families. Individuals who violate these “norms” are eliminated (daughter, son-in-law, daughter-in-law), to retain family/caste honour. Marriage within caste sustains social status—family name and hence prestige; sex within marriage is one such norm. Due to the rigidification of the caste system, secular India has failed; and the number of incidents of honour killing of the vulnerable is on the increase.

David Dorapalli does a gender-sensitive and intensive reading of 1 Samuel 9:11–14a with special reference to the lives and hard labour of water-drawing girls. It is a tragedy that daughters under the social custody of fathers in Jewish society were trained to internalize patriarchal injunctions without question. Dorapalli raises questions about suppressing women's voices, and explores the knowledge women possess about time, space, locale and matter. His attempt to redeem lived spaces from human made biases and prejudices opens the way for a world for all.

Christina Dhanaraj, uses her poetic skills to challenge traditional forms of discrimination and abuse of Dalit women. In her first poem, she lays bare how “privilege” has been used as a way to “speciminize” (*sic.*) Dalit women, and their pain. It is used to pity them and not allow them the space and opportunity to be their own voice and dignity. The second poem speaks of how an *avarna* (a person outside the caste structure), who is bent over by her Dalitness is expected to strive for acceptance; to not speak out of turn, to show in every way and in all she does that she was born a Dalit—“a half-life”; while the *savarna* (the one within the graded caste system) can strut around, enjoy all the benefits of her caste status and speak out and show her resistance with no fear—a symbol of her privilege.

Chrisida Nithyakalyani finds a strong sense of resilience, courage and hope in the songs of Dalit women especially in the lullaby or “*thalattu*”; dirge or “*oppari*”; and in ululation or “*kulavai*”. She states that Dalit women's songs affirm their agency, challenge the inequality and fight intolerance. Dalit women, she claims, have the strong power to resist which needs to be sustained. The harmonies of hope of Dalit women will not stop as they look towards liberation, freedom, solidarity, equality, and a culture of resistance.

Philip Vinod Peacock reads two texts—a historic one of K. M. Banerjea and a newer text the story of Manoj Kumar Majhi—to position and critique the hypocrisy of Indian hospitality which is submerged within the context of casteism and is therefore tainted. He points out that the caste system is retained through endogamy, occupational specialization, heredity, hierarchy and commensality and thus hinders symbols of hospitality. In his theological reflection, he opens up the opposite—the immense possibilities of hospitality in relation to sacrament, empowerment and incarnation.

Anati K. Yeptho writes about the role and position of Sumi women in the church domain to highlight how the patriarchal-kyriarchal structures continue to sideline women's roles, contributions and participation. Women are relegated to a secondary position. She laments that even though Sumi women outnumber men in theological studies in the Sumi community and region, men are given priority and nominated as representatives or appointed as pastors. Keeping these issues in mind she calls for an inclusive community of God, that promotes the sharing of opportunities in a spirit of partnering in ministry.

Aruna Gnanadason recounts that there are innumerable possibilities for Indian Christian women to join in movements against patriarchal and casteist hegemonies by joining hands with women of other faiths. Christian and other women who were reformers in the past, had played a significant role in the public sphere. She challenges Indian Christian women of today to rise above the present definitions of nationalism and strive for true liberation of all. She lifts up some of the theological obstacles that lie in the way of Christian women's engagement in public life—the Christian theology of anthropology; the sin of complicity in self destruction; the feeling of shame and the concept of sacrifice—which have all been used to hold Christian women back. And yet, Indian women's struggle to survive continues as they resist what impedes them in opening up new vistas for ensuring a just world for all.

The journal concludes with the powerful poems of Gladson Jathanna. His poem entitled "Shame and Excuse" highlights contested masculinity that pushes womanhood to bear the blame for the weaknesses of male bodies. His second poem "Women of the Walls" speaks of the struggles of Israeli and Palestinian women to transcend the constructed boundaries and barriers by forging new bonds of sisterhood.

This issue of *in God's image* gives but a glimpse of issues that confront Indian women and their search for a relevant theological response. The yearning for just and inclusive communities continues ... We invite readers to join your voices to our songs of resistance and hope!

Happy reading!

Aruna Gnanadason and Jayachitra Lalitha
Guest Editors

Note of Thanks

Both Aruna and Chitra readily accepted when the EAC requested them to take charge of the India issue. Despite health challenges and other demands of time during the collation of this issue, both rallied together to bring this issue to completion. The EAC is grateful to them for their efforts and time and thankful to the artists who contributed their illustrations and art work to this issue.

Editorial Advisory Committee (EAC)