

The Miracle of the Dalits

Something profound is occurring in north India, where the Holy Spirit is moving among the ‘untouchables.’

Muni was 18 years old, a dark beauty among her friends. One evening last summer she was dragged away from her work in the mustard fields by three men who raped her several times. When they finished, they beat her up for fun, dusted off their clothes and walked away laughing.

Muni dragged herself, bloodied and crying, through the dark to her home and collapsed. The next day her parents walked five miles to the police station to seek justice, unaware how much this act of courage would cost them.

Nine days later the same band of men came with a few of their friends to the family’s hut. They took hold of Muni, wrung her neck until she was dead and threw her body into a field.

Again they laughed loudly as they walked away. They laughed because they could. They had no fear of legal reprisal. Muni was a Dalit, an “untouchable”—as insignificant as an insect, according to India’s caste system.

To the uninitiated, the caste in India can be perplexing. It has been in place for more than 3,000 years. It was conceived by the upper-class Hindus—called Brahmins, or “priest class”—to establish their superiority over the rest of the society. Eventually, the system became formalized, and people were split into four distinct classes.

Brahmins are on top. They claim to have come from the head of Hindu god Vishnu. Next are the Kshatriyas, the “warriors,” who

believe they popped out of Vishnu's arms; then the Vaisyas, the "traders," derived from his thigh; and, finally, the Sudras, the "laborers," who originated from the divine feet.

Beneath them all is a fifth group, the "fallen ones." They belong to no caste. Most of the oppressed, downtrodden and exploited are pushed into this abyss. Muni and the Dalits belong here.

"It's a well-oiled machine of exploitation," says V.T. Rajshekar, a Dalit scholar who advocates converting Dalits to Christianity, an action hotly debated in India because it defies the social caste. "Christian missions have understood this baffling phenomena. Yet why is the Western world turning away from this?"

Many Brahmins believe Dalits cannot be part of society because they are subhuman. Indeed Dalits once were treated like beasts. The rich could exploit them as they pleased. They could send them to clean their filthiest sewers, to skin their dead cows, to cobble their shoes, to sweep their roads, to cremate their dead.

Today thousands of them work as scavengers amid human waste. They clean latrines and carry buckets of waste on their heads.

They don't choose these jobs. It is the only work available to many of them. Paid nothing or paltry wages, these men, women and children are made to believe they are polluted, less-than-human and unworthy of touch.

The Dalits make up about 15 percent of India's population, or some 160 million people. Only one in every 10 of them will

ever rise above these deplorable conditions. The other 90 percent will remain poor and deprived, living and dying in a form of complete apartheid.

Being poor means they do not get enough food, that they die without medicine, that they live under shacks, that they take any form of cast-off clothing to cover themselves. They are given no health care and no education. They have no access to drinking fountains or water taps. They can neither sit nor eat with people in other castes.

Their women are easy victims of rape. If they are killed, their bodies are dumped or burned like firewood, and nobody asks questions. It is part of the Dalit life, each moment of every day.

“It’s nothing but religious fascism,” says Joseph D’Souza, president of All India Christian Council (AICC). “Political solutions won’t help—or our constitution would have been enough. Dalits need a socio-spiritual alternative that will eventually evolve into a different political solution. Christianity has the potential to do that.”

A Coming Awakening?

Conversion is a touchy topic in India these days. But those who sit and debate it are not carrying dung on their heads for their daily bread. Nor are their women being raped. For Dalits, conversion is not a topic to be argued over tea but a means of saving themselves for generations to come.

“All they want is a better life,” says Moses Prammar, leader of AICC in northern India. “They are facing a spiritual vacuum

created by upper-caste Hindus. Dalits are not allowed in the temple.”

Mass conversions, which have occurred in the north, are in effect a declaration of unity, transformation and rebellion against the caste. It is an Indian way of breaking chains, Christian leaders believe. Hence, an increasing number of charismatic and Pentecostal missionaries are devoting their time and energy to the spiritual needs of the Dalits.

According to AICC leaders, a spiritual awakening is occurring throughout the villages of Punjab, a northern state. Truckloads of people are turning up at public meetings, where preachers are seeing miracles taking place.

“The pastors I sent tell me that people asked them to pray, and they prayed and miracles happened—mostly healings,” D’Souza says. “It’s amazing. Even patients given up by doctors get healed.”

Such meetings go on until 11 o’clock at night. Sikh and Hindu villagers also attend and arrive in big numbers at public meeting grounds in regions such as Firozpur, close to Pakistan. Villagers attend prayer services that last up to four hours. Many are baptized.

When the Punjab state legislature took a stance against the issue of Christian conversions recently, a New Delhi TV team went to the northern villages to interview residents. Many reported that praying to Jesus fulfilled their needs.

“My mother was sick,” one said. “Jesus did something and she was healed. Now I’m a believer.”

Yearning for Love

On a Sunday morning near Mohanlal Ganj, a village about 25 miles from Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, poor villagers streamed toward the Yesu Durbar meeting grounds, where mass prayer gatherings are held each week. Many of them belong to a community of Dalits. Most are leatherworkers.

Some young women, pondering their plight, were driven to despair. They cried, yet others danced. A mixed crowd of between 2,000 and 3,000 squatted on the ground to listen to the gospel.

Leo D'Souza, a former Catholic priest and no relation to Joseph D'Souza, led the meeting. Rajendra Prasad, or "Baba" as he's called, moved among the sick to pray for them and see them healed.

"A woman from Kisanpur came here with skin disease and was cured overnight," Leo D'Souza says. "She then asked us for house meetings. Now we have three fellowships in her village because of this miracle."

Another miracle—love—arguably is doing a much deeper healing among these people than the physical cures are.

"People come here looking for solutions," Parmar explains. "They come here praying for jobs, for food and even to pray and find their lost buffaloes. They believe Jesus can fulfill their needs, spiritual and mundane."

Bhuvaji, a cobbler who walked 12 miles to reach the meeting, is one such person. "I've seen many things in life at my age of 60," he says. "But here we get loved, cared for and even touched. I like that. We all like that very much."

Because the Dalits believe they are untouchables, they become jubilant at the charismatic meetings when men of God touch them and pray for them.

"Normally Brahmin priests pray, but they won't get near them," Parmar points out. "They'd rather touch their money, but not them. Here, it's the other way."

Dalits are yearning for a social change that will do away with their status as society's evil refuse.

"The Great Commission is about real transformation, not about numbers," Joseph D'Souza says. "Jesus never said, 'Go and make more numbers of disciples.' There are mission groups that say, 'Oh, we've got a hundred-thousand converted.' But have their social, economic and spiritual lives been transformed?"

It is a vital question that missions workers in India will increasingly have to deal with.

"It's not just saving your soul—'Just convert, but I'm not worried if you are a slave or not,'" D'Souza continues. "Now, that's not Christianity. That's cruelty. Dalits need to be changed. How can we segregate the social and spiritual?"

Introducing Jesus into this culture does not mean proselytizing, but loving, as Parmar found out. A team that he

headed held a Dalit women's meeting in a village of central India. They had gone to teach the women social empowerment, not the gospel.

Some 30 women attended with their children. The team talked to them about laws that help women and about their rights and the means to achieve them. "We asked them about their lives. We listened," Parmar recalls. "This was something amazing for them."

As the missions team was about to finish, two women stood and declared: "We want to become Christians." One of them added: "Never in life have we received such love. No one has helped us, not even our men. If we tripped while carrying large pots of water, none would come to help."

Tears welled in her eyes as she spoke.

"Nobody has asked about our problems," she continued. "We are beaten, abused and ridiculed—even by our own men. And here you taught us our rights, looked after our children, poured love on us and gave us food. You held our hands ... played with our children. You treated us as precious. Your God must be very good."

The room became quiet. Parmar still cherishes the sweetness of that moment. Eight women attending the meeting embraced Christian faith on their own.

Elsewhere in India, however, the prevailing caste system manages to blunt expressions of Christian compassion. In some places believers actually practice elements of the Hindu caste belief. Churches in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are facing

allegations of caste prejudice against the converted Dalit Christians.

A study conducted by Dalit Jesuit and sociologist Antony Raj revealed that “untouchability” was still practiced within Christian folds, principally among the Roman Catholics in Tamil Nadu.

A majority of the 9,000 respondents reported the construction of a separate chapel for Dalits. In some parishes services are conducted separately. Dalits have been seated on the floor during parish services despite benches being empty.

“For some, Christianity has become a Hinduized idea which has imbibed all caste rules of the Hindu community,” Raj says. Indian Christian leaders are concerned about the practices and are trying to change them from the inside out.

“This is a challenge we are facing,” D’Souza adds. “You cannot do mission with prejudice.”

For missions leaders committed to Christian values, presenting the gospel to the Dalits is not a quest to increase the number of converts. It is a question of facing human need realistically and making a firm commitment to work toward a socio-spiritual transformation. Within that context, it’s all about the love of Jesus—touching, loving and saving millions of people from the pit of despair.

Joshua Newton is an independent writer-photojournalist based in India. He runs a Web log at .