

Plight of India's 285 Million 'Untouchables' Worsens Daily

With almost 300 homes destroyed recently by angry mobs of caste Hindus, the plight of the Dalits, India's "untouchables," is growing more critical daily, according to K.P. Yohannan, founder and president of Gospel for Asia (GFA). An estimated 1,500 homeless Dalits spent the night in fear without shelter before being housed in government schools, he said.

"Christians everywhere are called to urgent **prayer** for these oppressed people who are crying out to God for hope," said Yohannan. "Only Jesus Christ can offer the ultimate hope and freedom these abused people seek."

The Hindu-caste violence revealed to the world in *The Hindu*, a major Indian secular newspaper, is indicative of their silent suffering that almost never receives public attention, Yohannan said.

According to *The Hindu*, the most recent outbreak of violence occurred in three colonies of Dalits of the Adi-Dravida community in western Tamil Nadu.

As many as 268 of their primitive huts and one- or two-room concrete houses were torched by a mob incited by the marriage of a caste Hindu girl to a Dalit boy from Natham Colony. Upon learning of the marriage, the girl's father committed suicide, and mobs took fierce revenge on unsuspecting families in not only the boy's colony, but two adjoining colonies as well.

This kind of violence inflicted by the upper castes is not an isolated incident, said Yohannan. The Dalits, who are considered subhuman, less valuable than farm animals and therefore not even part of the lowest of the caste system, are segregated, treated as slaves and mercilessly abused. In many

places, they are denied access to safe water, education and choice of faith and occupation. In their suffering, they are opening their hearts seeking hope.

Of India's 1.2 billion people, one-fourth are "untouchables." Ninety-five percent of all Dalit women are illiterate. The 62 million child laborers from the Dalit and the lowest caste comprise the largest number of working children in the world.

Into this culture, 580 GFA Bridge of Hope institutions are bringing education, meals and healthcare to 60,000 children in need. In communities where Dalits are not allowed to draw water from public wells, "Jesus Wells" are providing clean water for 800-900 families.

"In spite of all that Gandhi did to fight the caste system, it still exists," said Yohannan. "True hope, liberation and human dignity for 285 million outcast people in India can be found only in Christ. It is imperative that we join in their suffering through prayer."