

The Dalit Villages

By: Eric Schempp

While in India, I had the extraordinary opportunity of visiting the Dalit Villages. I was shocked by what I saw and awed by the people. Words cannot fully describe the experience I had. I was truly amazed.

If someone would have told me five years ago that someday I would be shaking the hand of a person who had never seen someone with white skin, I would have ignored them. Had they told me this just a few months ago I would have laughed. But, just a few weeks ago, that is exactly what happened. I encountered a little Indian boy bearing a smile a mile wide and staring at my quizzically. It was a look I don't think I'll ever forget. We didn't say a word as we both knew communication was impossible, but that didn't stop me from returning the smile. That was all the communication that was needed. We were trying to understand each other's situation, but it was obvious that we both also knew that we wouldn't succeed.

The interaction was over as quickly as it started. The young boy was pushed aside by another young girl that wanted to shake my hand. I must have shaken a hundred hands that day. Each had a smile to accompany their hand, but nothing will be as special to me as that very first hand I shook. Every child wanted the opportunity to shake my hand. It made me feel rather awkward. I didn't know how to react so I just stood there and smiled.

The reason they wanted to shake my hand was because I was privileged. To them, white skin indicated a great life. I wished at that point that I did not stand out, but

rather could blend in so as to see the life they lived and why they considered white skin a royalty. I wanted to see the world through their eyes. I had heard of racism, the hatred, the pain, the ridiculing, the persecution, the rapes, and the murders that these people had been through. Yet all they had to present to me was a smile. I wanted to hear the story behind the people. I wanted to know where they were coming from.

I soon found out that the only way to do this was to talk to the people. I sought out our leader, a wonderful Dalit woman who spoke fluent English and drilled her with questions. She willingly answered them all. I realized it's a story I'll never understand. It's a story that goes back a long way. It's one that I will never be able to fully comprehend since I did not live through the drama. It's one that involves bitter disputes. It is one that revolves around religion, and it's more than just a story. It is everyday life for the Dalits. It is a struggle they all share. Change seems so close and obvious but it is more likely ages away. Many Dalits have made radical decisions that would change their lives. Many have decided to look at their life from a different point of view. Many have completely changed religions from Hinduism to Christianity.

According to our leader, the decision to change religions is based on an attempt to change their situation. The desire to convert is heavily influenced by the desire to abandon Hinduism. Hinduism is a religion in which the caste system plays an integral role and the Dalits are low on the totem pole.

The Caste system is indeed fundamental to Hindu religious beliefs. It is part of the Hindu Law. A creation in the Hindu scriptures justified the caste system. According to the myth, a god created humans out of parts on his body. The priestly and scholarly

caste of Brahmins was made out of the god's head. The military and royal caste of Kshatriyas was made out of his arms. The Vaishya caste of merchants was made out of his torso, and the serving caste of Shudras, which consisted of farmers and laborers was made out of his feet. The Dalits, however, are entirely outside the Hindu Society's fold. Since there is no social mobility among castes during a given lifetime, each person is born into a caste of his or her parents and remains there until death.

Hinduism practices the idea of birth and rebirth. It is this idea of reincarnation that allows individuals to get out of their caste. Hindus believe that their actions in their current life will result in a change of status in their lives to come. They believe that their current situation is based on their previous life and what they experience today is part of their destiny. In fact, when India's national anthem is translated into English, it means "destiny". If they were born poor, they were meant to be poor. If they were meant to be rich, they would have been born rich. Therefore, Dalits will remain outside Hindu society for the duration of their lives.

In the next life, a Dalit or any other Hindu may incarnate into a higher or lower class as determined by his or her Karma. Karma is defined as one's action on a wheel of life that includes growth, suffering, death, birth, and rebirth. They will be elevated or degraded into a caste based upon how they followed the Dharma of the caste in their previous life. Dharma is the moral responsibility with which one carries out the duties of his social class and the virtuous person is the one who performs just those duties and refrains from the functions that belong to other castes. One's Karma, that is the extent to which they follow the Dharma of their caste, will determine their position in their next life. In plain English, this means that the actions of the individual (Karma) and how

closely they followed the duties of their particular caste (Dharma) in this life determine a Hindu's caste in their next life.

Since the Dalits are considered outside or lower than the Hindu Caste System, they are repeatedly subject to prejudice and violence. They are segregated from the common people and live outside the villages or cities. This is referred to as untouchability.

Article 17 of the Indian Constitution has expressly abolished untouchability and has made it a legal offense punishable under law to practice it in any form. However, untouchability is still practiced in Tamil Nadu, the region of Dalits that I visited.

The greatest and most obvious form of untouchability is physical separation. Great distances separate Dalits from other communities. On our way to visit the Dalit villages, we drove through the city and into the rural areas. At one point, our driver stopped the car and we all got out. The reason for this was so that we could see the contrast between the cities and the villages we were about to enter. On one side of us were large buildings eloquently rising out of the ground. On the other side were forested areas where villages were located. The difference between the landscapes on either side of us was amazing. The reason for the stop immediately became apparent. It was our driver's subtle way of saying, "prepare yourself for what lay ahead."

In addition to this physical separation, untouchability is practiced in several other ways as well. The Dalits are prohibited from drawing water from a village common well, entering village temples, and they are separated in dining halls and restaurants. Violent attacks such as the burning of houses of Dalit people are common against those who

question the social system. For example, on April 14th of 1992, the birthday of Dr. Ambedker (14.04.1891 – 6.10.1956) a great Dalit leader and intellectual, twenty Dalit houses were burnt at Dadalur Village. Social tensions prevailed for many months. Because of this, many Dalits were assaulted and arrested. It was to be a great celebration of 100 years since Dr. Ambedker's birth, but was turned tragic.

It is because of this social oppression that Dalits are abandoning Hinduism. The favorable religion to convert to tends to be Christianity. The reason for this is that the Christian teaching of "God is Spirit" is natural to them. The Dalits in general have always worshipped nature and spirit since their arrival in India between 2000 and 1500 B.C. despite 2000 years of Hindu indoctrination. For example, the spirit of nature of divine force is worshipped and represented by a green tree and a stone represents the symbol for fertility and Mother Earth. Therefore, open areas are considered more holy than those covered by temples. Thus, the idea of worshipping God in spirit and truth without a form became easy for the Dalits to understand and accept since these beliefs are akin to what they have always practiced. Simply put, it is not an alien idea to them.

However, conversion to Christianity is not the end of their troubles. It is only the beginning. Because of the conversion, Hindus in higher classes look down upon the converted even more. A job will likely not be given to an Indian citizen in Madras if they are not Hindu, especially if it is a government job. I talked to one very educated Dalit about his educational experience. He said that he was attending a school in Madras based upon scholarship and when they found out he was not Hindu, they took it away. This placed a heavy burden on his family. He considered himself extremely lucky that he was still able to go to school, and he owed that to his parents. I tried to push the subject

further, but all he would say was that the school didn't necessarily want to kick him out, but rather wanted to help those with the religion that was considered more acceptable. I sensed there was more to the story, but it appeared that I had caught him off-guard, and that he was slightly offended by my intrusive questions. It was apparent that he wanted to change subjects. I let it go.

He had left me to speculate and that is what I did. I sensed that his scholarship had been yanked from him because his school had somehow got information that he was not Hindu without his confession. I sensed that he was ashamed by that and it was apparent by the apprehension with which he told his story. I sensed he was angered by the fact that a great opportunity had almost slipped through his fingers. I sensed he was at a battle between logical and moral reasoning. Logic telling him life could have been so much easier if he would just fall in line. His morals were telling him that he had to do what he believed was right. I sensed that because his morals told him something different than that of the rest of India, he was considered rebellious.

But I do not think that there was one person in that village I visited that considered themselves rebellious. A conversion in religion occurs not out of rebellion, but rather an awakening to a new light. I cannot imagine anyone desiring to create complication in the field of religion for the pure enjoyment of it. The Dalits want to be accepted by all of India. They want a break from the hatred and pain. They want equality, but equality is a far-fetched dream. They want justification for why there is evil in the world and why they are subjected to it. No, they are definitely not rebels.

I believe that the conversion to Christianity by the Dalits is not one of a blind leap of faith, but rather one of logic and reasoning. To the Dalits, Hinduism is not compatible

with the situation they face. What I mean is that it does not make sense that a Dalit must play the role of an animal and endure the pain and wrath that their master delivers when the master is of the same religion. If that were the case, and they closely followed the Dharma of their caste, essentially they should role over and die. To put up a fight would be considered disobedience and the individual would posses bad Karma. As a result of this bad Karma, in the next life they would reincarnate into a situation no better than their current situation. In other words, a Dalit should willingly be a servant. So, in Hindu society, A Dalit serves no purpose in society other than that of fulfilling the wishes of the stronger. According to this, the caste system is in the interest of the stronger.

If this in taken a step farther to incorporated more philosophy, than I should incorporate philosophy greats such as Plato. According to Plato, justice is always in the interest of the weaker, and the caste system is definitely not in the interest of the weaker. Therefore, under Plato's definition the Hindu religion is not just.

A counter-argument by those in the upper classes would simply be, "Religion is Religion, just or not, it is still religion and the law of the land. It may not be fair, but that's the way it is." A Dalit's response would be phrased something like this. Why would a god create a world in which the strong exploit the weak and the rich exploit the poor, and then say that poor can become the rich if the first endure the abuse of the rich. If individuals can work up a chain to this "good life", then those that deliver the evil will work their way down as well. Eventually the good will reach nirvana and the evil will be in low castes and have to abide by a new Dharma. Essentially all evil should be eliminated through this process, and Plato's definition of justice would prevail.

However, this is not the case. Dalits still witness evil in the world. It is because of this attempt to find an answer to the question of evil that many have switched to Christianity. Conversion to Christianity does not immediately justify evil in the world, but it offers advancement in society in their own mind and promotes a world in which justice should prevail.

Like the Dalit student with whom I talked to about his school dilemma, it is moral reasoning, not logical reasoning that the Dalits are following. They do not see themselves as servants, nor do they see themselves as rebels. They are simply searching for a way to escape their current situation. They want an explanation for evil and Christianity offers a start if that is all. And although it may be a start, it is sure to be a long journey for the Dalits.

I'll never forget the look on the face of that little Indian boy that I met that first day I walked into the Dalit Villages. He was searching for explanation and understanding. He was not the only one at that particular moment. We both knew communication was impossible so we didn't even try. Maybe we all have something to learn.

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