

India: A Dichotomy Between Thought and Action

by Jeanne Carpenter, Group 12 Fellow

“The soul has no color, no agenda, no cost.” – Mahatma Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, India, January 11, 2008.

Sixty years after Mahatma Gandhi led a nationwide campaign for the alleviation of poverty, the liberation of women, and an end to caste discrimination, India remains a dichotomy between thought and action.

While it is the largest and most active democracy in the world – election turnout routinely tops 70 percent – only 8 percent of its parliament is women and 21 percent of its citizens live below the poverty line. More than 150,000 farmers have committed suicide in the last 15 years, as farm fields are rapidly developed into suburban housing and stress levels amongst rural and village families skyrockets.

In a land of 70,000 castes, 1,800 languages and 150 religions, the Republic of India and its one billion people are struggling to become one. It won't be easy. As Dr. Ashis Nandi told WRLP Group 12 and alumni at the American Institute of Indian Studies, “India is being steamrolled into one nation. There will be a price paid.”

No one is paying a higher price than those in the lowest levels of the Indian caste system, despite governmental edicts banning discrimination based on ancient birthright. “Dalits” – known as untouchables or outcasts – the lowest of the lows in India -- are still forced to do the most menial jobs, such as burying the dead, and are very often abused and excluded from leadership positions, are barred from attending schools, and are refused entry into Hindu temples.

One group working hard to change the fate of being born a Dalit is EVIDENCE, a Madurai-based non-governmental organization founded two years ago by a husband/wife team who classify themselves as “middle-class dalits.” The group partners with the media to draw attention to blatant discrimination against outcasts. One thing that is important to understand is that caste goes beyond religion, according to Vincent Raj Kathir, executive director at EVIDENCE. “It doesn't matter if you're a Christian, or Muslim, or Hindu, your caste is part of your identity.”

During the last two years, Kathir has been instrumental in bringing media attention to cases where Dalits are still forced to walk barefoot, lest they be punished for wearing shoes by upper level caste members. Worse still is the prevailing attitude that Dalits are “non-human.” Many state-run court systems still look the other way when Dalits are beaten, raped or even murdered.

In fact, the morning that WRLP Group 12 visited the EVIDENCE office, a young girl – perhaps 13 or 14 years old – walked in the door with her father. Kathir stepped aside and chatted with them briefly, promising to talk to them after our group left. Those of us in the WRLP group found out afterward that the girl, a Dalit, had been raped the night before by an “upper-level caste boy” and was having difficulty in getting authorities to pursue the case. EVIDENCE will help the family navigate the court system.

“You have to understand – Americans have never had anything similar to the caste system,” Kathir told WRLP. “Even in your darkest history – your African-American slaves were sold on the auction block. Dalits are not even worthy of being sold. We have no attributes, no positive qualities. We are invisible.”

In its race to become a key player on the global economic stage, India can no longer afford to have a segment of its population classified as invisible. Life with dignity in India is being pursued like never before, as a rising lower to middle class demands to be treated with respect. But it will take time. As Kathir says, “Dalits have been subordinated for 1,000 years. It takes time for them to speak out and accept they are human beings.”

Jeanne Carpenter is owner of Word Artisan LLC in Oregon.