

## To Marry a Dog

By June Leavitt<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

I was the photographer/ journalist on an international medical education team, sponsored by The Center for Asian and International Bioethics of Ben Gurion University of the Negev that went to Kadalur, in Tamil Nadu, India to teach rural Untouchable women basic mother and child health care. Two violations of human rights which came to my attention, one an Untouchable child's, and one an Untouchable widow's are the focus of this documented photographic essay which explores the historical, social and religious roots of the repression of the Untouchables of India today.

Though male Untouchables are certainly victims of this oppression, female Untouchables are victimized even more. For this reason, having a girl-child in the Untouchable population is considered a calamity. Untouchable mothers and fathers deal with this in extraordinary ways. One way inspired the title of this essay, "To Marry a Dog."

Although to an outsider the patriarchal Untouchable society may seem to have made desperate adaptations to its structural, historical, and religious confines, Untouchable women have played a role in shaping these adaptations. Nonetheless, there is much about Untouchable women to be admired. It is truly the women who hold Untouchable families together. They are bright-eyed, strong and optimistic. Strangely enough they love life, and taught me, a spoiled westerner, how to find happiness in little things.

This essay is a tribute to them.<sup>2</sup>

*Keywords:* human rights violations, Untouchables, Women

### A Young Untouchable Woman

Shantha married at sixteen years old. It was an arranged marriage, of course, as most marriages are. She became pregnant fairly soon after the wedding, yet continued to serve her husband and his mother, as women rightfully must. Her husband never beat her, but was kind with a good heart which men in these parts don't usually have, not because they weren't born with one, but because their lives crush it out of them. For him, happily she walked the two miles to the only public well they were allowed to draw from and actually, was bringing the water back, when her own water broke.

Setting the metal jug down, she ran barefoot and got the birth attendant, and together they went into her tiny mud hut. It was a very painful labor- Shantha was so

---

<sup>1</sup> June Leavitt was born and raised in New York. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin, and spending five years in the woods as a homesteader, she immigrated to Israel with her husband and young son. In Israel, caught in the violence which wracked the country, she raised her five children, and began writing and publishing her novels and diaries: *Flight to Seven Swan Bay*, Feldheim 1985; *Vivre A Hebron*, Laffont 1995; *Cocav Nophle*, Aviv 2000; *Storm of Terror: A Hebron Mother's Diary*, Ivan Dee 2000. *Esoteric Symbols: the Tarot in Yeats, Eliot and Kafka* (forthcoming from University Press of America, late 2006.) Her articles, essays and excerpts from her diaries have appeared in major newspapers and magazines.

<sup>2</sup> I wish to acknowledge Faye Bittker of Ben Gurion University for her critical comments on the first draft of this essay.

young and her hips and womb so tiny. But when the baby's head was finally out, and the rest of its puny body just slipped after it, there was this joy she had never felt before. The attendant yanked at the placenta, then cut the cord with the coconut knife as all midwives do. Shantha's husband was at the birth, looking down on her and at their son. She promised herself and him she would have more children. It was all so perfect, Shantha told me.

On the verandah of one of the buildings of the Delta Center, a center built and administered by Henry Thiageraj and his Dalit Liberation Education Trust to train Untouchable women in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, Shantha began to tell me something about her life.

My job was to interview the rural women who had come to the Delta Center for our medical team's mini-course. The other people on our team, a bio-ethicist, two physicians, a nurse, a nurse-lawyer, and an environmental educator would teach the women basic mother and child health care. Thirty women who had attended the course last year and had received certificates for being 'Health Ambassadors,' would return for a refresher course and more advanced studies, while thirty new women would just begin the course.

Shantha was one of those who had returned, and not long after we had greeted each other, we were sitting on a porch overlooking the Buckingham Canal eating rice and *dahl* with our fingers. She told me, through an interpreter, that the promise she made to her husband of having more children will never come true. Her first born son is now her last-born child. It is a fact of life. Shantha was widowed at eighteen years old and widows cannot remarry.

"In a country where men have no sensitivity, let not unfortunate woman be born there. Oh women! What sin have you committed that you should have been born in India?" (Pal 22)

These words of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, uttered after long years of fighting for widow remarriage in India over one hundred years ago, are still painfully meaningful for Shantha today. Though the situation is immeasurably better now that women do not hurl themselves into the funeral pyre as they once did, sometimes Shantha quietly wonders if that wouldn't have been a better fate.

But Shantha not only feels cursed because she is a woman. She feels cursed for being something worse. She is an Untouchable.

A newspaper article entitled "Dog bride" appearing in *The Hindustan Times* on December 4, 2000 sheds some light on what it might mean to be both female and Untouchable in modern India.

In the hamlet of Mohanpur, inhabited by Untouchable blacksmiths, a father made a wedding for his daughter, Anju, an adorable five-year old. Hundreds of guests were invited. Musicians were brought in. A fine caterer provided the delicacies while boys trained in the art of serving, presented the guests with an unending array of West Bengal's finest cuisine. There was much reason for the bride's father to rejoice.

The groom, a two year old male was from a higher-caste family. Wearing fine clothing, he watched as the dancers performed. So well-bred was he that he didn't even chase the cats but kept his attention on the drama troupe that had been hired to amuse him and the guests. The bride's family had never seen such luxury. They were awed. The guests for their part thought it was an extraordinary wedding. Not every day do five year

olds get married to two year old grooms. And not every day was the groom a mongrel dog.

As unbelievable as it may seem, the father from the hamlet of Mohanpur had married his daughter to a higher-caste man's dog in order to avert the economic disaster and catastrophe that a daughter necessarily causes an Untouchable family. In order to fathom this blatant violation of a child's rights, it is necessary to understand the social, religious and historical context that Anju's father was imprisoned within. This context will also shed light on Shantha's predicament.

### **The Social and Historical Context**

For thousands of years, the sector of Indian's population considered to be so inferior they were not even numbered among the four castes of Hinduism, were derogatorily called 'outcastes,' or 'Untouchables.' Thought to be impure and polluted, they were never allowed to live within a village of caste people. They were forced to make their homes outside the villages in segregated areas called *cheris*. Banished from Indian society, they were denied access to safe drinking water, prey to disease and denied access to good medical care.

To this day, in most places throughout India, an Untouchable cannot marry anyone but an Untouchable. Untouchables cannot touch a plate or any vessel of a higher caste person without contaminating it. When Untouchables want tea or coffee from a public place, they still squat down outside and extend a cup, showing that they have internalized the self-image that they any contact with them will contaminate the other person. They have internalized the belief that they are cursed by having been born as an outcaste, or one who must earn his or her livelihood through certain hereditary lowly occupations.

Thus, the hundreds of millions of Untouchables in India call themselves "Dalit" from the Sanskrit root 'dal', meaning 'to be oppressed' or broken'. Trying to avoid both the negative connotation of the term "Dalit" and the blatant denigration implied in the word "Untouchable," the British euphemistically termed them "Scheduled Castes," when all Indians were required by the Colonial government to register themselves and their hereditary occupations. (Nirmal 101)

To this day, all Indians must carry identity cards with their castes written on them; the castes in turn are associated with particular occupations. The Brahmins, the highest caste, are priests and teachers. The Scheduled Castes, which in turn divide into sub-castes and tribes of the lowliest occupations, include the scavengers whose job it is to remove the carcasses of dead animals and to carry the human dead to funeral pyres. The sweepers shovel human waste into wheelbarrows and cart it from densely crowded cities. The leather workers tan the hides of cows, the animal which the higher castes regard as sacred and therefore are forbidden to kill. The drummers beat on the tanned skin of that holy animal at weddings and other celebrations made by the higher castes.

The obvious question which may be raised is "So why doesn't an Indian sweeper find another job? Why doesn't the drummer or scavenger get trained for a better profession?" The fact is that it is almost impossible for an Untouchable to break free of the hereditary caste he or she was born into caste by moving up into the middle or professional classes. This enforced social immobility can be traced back to Hindu theology, which created and proliferates today the hierarchically inflexible caste system

in which the Untouchables, including Anju, her father and Shantha, have found themselves trapped.

### **The Religious Context**

According to the foundational work of Hindu Law, "The Laws of Manu," which in turn is based on Hymn 90, Book 10 of the ancient Hindu text *The Rig Veda*, the four castes of Hinduism relate to the bodily part on the anthropomorphic figure of God from which different beings issued during the creation of the world. The primordial Brahmins, the priestly and the highest of the castes, "were born out of the forehead or mouth of God." (Varadarajan 2) The second caste the *Kshatriyas*, are the primordial warriors which comprise the military class today. They came from God's thighs. The third caste is the *Vaishyas*, or the merchant class. The last and lowest caste coming from God's feet is the *Shudras*.

According to the Hindu sage, Brighu, the Untouchables were not even *Shudras*. (Varadarajan 2) They were beneath the *Shudras*, and would comprise the lowest fifth caste had Manu proscribed five castes. But as he only proscribed four, they do not even figure in the Hindu mythology of creation. They are "out" castes because they are sub-humans. However, Mahatma Gandhi argued that the Untouchables were not sub-human. Rather, they were members of the fourth and lowest caste which in Hindu cosmogony were those beings created from God's feet. (Varadarajan 2) It should be obvious that the polemic whether the Untouchables are human or subhuman has continued into modern history.

Whether they are Hindus or not in theory, hardly matters. In practice, The Laws of Manu dictate that the lowest caste must be banished from Hindu society. "Their wealth shall be dogs and donkeys; their dress shall be garments of the dead. They shall eat their food in broken dishes, and black iron shall be their ornaments. They must wander from place to place, and they shall not sleep in villages and towns at nights." (Varadarajan 2)

As the lowest caste is discriminated against cruelly and denied the most basic of human rights, the highest caste of the Brahmins is privileged having come from God's forehead or mouth. Thus, the Brahmins were traditionally granted the exclusive right to education. Knowledge of Sanskrit, the language of their holy texts, was in fact prohibited to the other castes.

One's position within the caste system according to Hindu theology is determined by *karma*. Each particular human life is an accumulation of effects set into motion by previous lives. In other words, this life is a conglomeration of effects, a playing out of causes which are situated beyond the plane of phenomenal existence. According to *karmic* theory, then the very fact that someone is born into a lowly caste, would imply that his or her soul did something in a past life for which he or she must be punished. As such, the incarnation of an impure and debased soul as an Untouchable in this life is a divine ordination which cannot be easily tampered with. Consequently, "untouchability" abolished in law by the Indian Constitution which was adopted after winning independence from the British in 1947, is still rampant in India today with gross violation of human rights committed against the Dalit.

### **Contemporary Effects of Ancient Theology: Violations of Human Rights Today**

Dr. Henry Thiageraj, head of the Delta center and a Dalit who converted to Christianity, initiated me further into the appalling realities that face the Dalit today. "Every hour, two Dalit are assaulted. Every day, three Dalit women are raped. Two Dalit murdered."

Henry speaks calmly and stoically as if such things were matter of course. Below us, a group of teenaged girls frolic on the lawn. One of them weaves in and out of a double line of her friends as they try to touch her. There is a shriek. She has been touched. Henry explained to me that these Dalit teenagers were handpicked by him to attend the Delta School of Nursing at the Delta Center which he established in the late 1990's. The medical team of which I was a part would give them classes in biology and medical ethics while the Untouchable women, most of them mothers, would receive lessons in hygienic child care.

Eighty women in all this year would be benefited. Against how many? Precise population figures are difficult to obtain in India where teems of humanity flow through the streets, and one has the feeling if one opened the faucet they would come flowing out too, like a plague in Pharaoh's Egypt. The 1991 census conducted by the Indian government, put the population of the Scheduled Castes at approximately 130.82 million, and that of the Scheduled Tribes, the low caste people living in the forests- at approximately 60.78 million, constituting 16.48 percent and 8.08 percent of the total population respectively.

By now, over a decade later, with the population growing throughout India's twenty-five states and seven Union Territories, there are many more people stigmatized by their 'Untouchability,' including little Anju now married to a dog.

Yet, there was no resemblance between the stigma of 'Untouchable' and the sparkling women who came to greet us, ceremoniously decking us with garlands of flowers, draping our shoulders with shawls, and dappling our foreheads with turmeric in water to keep away the evil eye.

They were so polished, they shone; so well-groomed, despite their poverty, in their very best *saris*, wrapped around their waists and draped over one shoulder, beneath which they now wear, though it was once prohibited to them, the traditional *choli*, a short-sleeved bodice. They were thankful to the British who granted all Untouchable women the right to wear any kind of dress or ornament. Everything about them was so bright, showing a love of color, a love of life.

Few of them received any education beyond the second grade when they sat on the stone floor of a dark and dank schoolhouse repeating by rote, lines from Tamil poetry. In the classrooms at the Delta Center it was obviously hard for them to get comfortable in the wooden seats with the little writing table attached. Three-quarters of them have never even learned how to read or write. They have been enticed to take part in the 'Mother and Child Health Care Program' by a 500 rupee monthly stipend (the equivalent of 13 US dollars) which they will receive for six months. For the first time in their lives, they would not be the sole the properties of their husbands. They would earn a drop of independence, status.



**Proud Untouchable Women from the Mother and Child Health Care Program, in the Classroom**

Not so many years ago, they were girl-children. Like all girl-children their parents had to pay the dowry which included making the wedding; providing food for the guests and giving the groom whatever he needed to build and furnish a mud hut -- straw for thatching, blankets for warmth, cloth to cover his genitals, pots and pans to cook the food which would fill his stomach, in short all things needed for the young married couple to start off in life. For a poor Untouchable family, marrying off a daughter meant economic disaster.

Yet once the Untouchable girl is married, not only the pots and pans and everything else given to the groom, becomes his property, she becomes his property too. So the family in a sense loses everything. Marrying one's daughter to a dog is one way, but certainly not the only way, an Untouchable can deal with the possible catastrophe of having a girl-child.

On one of the paths through the thickly vegetated environs of Kadalur, some of the women point out the prickly cactus that can provide a solution to female births. A potion quite easy to prepare can be concocted. Put on an infant girl's tongue, it causes the windpipe to constrict.

With such a cactus growing only one hundred yards from her house, the mother we are brought to meet is a hero and a saint. Beneath the overhang of thatching, protected from the merciless rays of the hot Indian sun, lying on their backs are her two daughters, one five years old, the other three, both unable to move so much as a finger since birth.

"Have your daughters been seen by a doctor?" Someone on the team asks. The mother at first, so happy to receive us, begins to weep.

"Yes," she answers. "He said nothing can be done. It's from God."

The mother went to hide her grief on the other side of the coconut tree. She returned drying her eyes. She explained something in Tamil and someone translated into English.

"She is married to her uncle."

Though the deformed offspring of such incestuous marriages show themselves all around the Untouchable villages, for these people it is a chance worth taking. The pots, the pans, but most importantly the daughter herself, stays within the family.

Though scorned within their own society, Untouchable women hold not only the family together, but village life together as well. They are greatly valued, not only because of their intrinsic worth but because the Untouchable men in the state of Tamil Nadu are for the most part alcoholics. The arrack they buy from the illegal distillers costs four rupees a glass;

"Just a few glasses, and you forget," said 'L' whose bones stick through his dark chest, arms and legs. 'L' was an alcoholic himself until the Delta Center gave him and his wife jobs. "But then you get very hungry. So you demand that your wife bring you something to eat. But she says there is no money for food because you spent it on drink. The arrack makes you violent. So you beat her."

Pillars of smoke rise from the forested banks of the Pallar River from eight o'clock each morning to mid afternoon. Clearings have been hacked out where this liquor is brewed.



### **Untouchable Man on His Way to Sell His Deadly Brew**

"You take brown sugar and mix it with fertilizer. You spread the mixture on the ground to ferment for two weeks. Then you boil it."

"Fertilizer?"

He wobbles his head from side to side, which one learns in India, doesn't mean 'no', but rather 'yes.'

The secret ingredient of arrack is urea which is quite easy to obtain as it is the main component of fertilizer. Being extremely volatile, it also is the main component of homemade explosives. If we understand that the ANFO truck bomb which blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1996 was packed with urea compounds, we get an idea what ureic arrack does to the lives of many Dalit.

Though the women complain bitterly about the alcoholism, they are often the brewers. They tend the fires and send the children off scampering for more wood; they stir the contents of the huge double-boiler cauldron, gesturing to the fishermen who pole

their rafts by to come and buy a glass. Nurturers of mankind, they become the destroyers when the choice of hunger or ample food lies before them.

Over the course of several years, the liquor will destroy their husbands' stomachs, and eat away the walls of their veins. In some cases, their husbands will lose their sight; in many cases, their lives. In a country where there is no widow's pension, and no disability insurance only an exceptionally lucky woman will escape becoming a beggar or prostitute. A widow might find clean work as an agricultural coolie where she is employed for a season, approximately three months, at between 25 and 40 rupees, the equivalent of fifty cents a day.

The Dalit Liberation Movement, a growing movement in India, had to come from the women, though using the words 'women' and 'liberation' is dangerous here. These women are not the successors of the bra-burning, men-hating feminists.

P. Amul, a beautiful unmarried Dalit woman, articulates quite clearly what she seeks. "I want a highly-educated husband. And he should have a good heart, even if he is poor.

"That's all I want in life."

S. Amul, bearing the same name as the younger P. Amul, is married. She pulls out the necklace with the capsule-like pendant she wears under her *choli*, the sign of a married woman. "I want my daughter to be a police officer. I wanted so much to be a police officer. I was able to study to tenth grade but then my father died and I couldn't continue. I had to go out to and find work."

"If my daughter becomes a police officer, she can save women from sexual harassment and dowries. She will seek justice for them."

"I want my son to become a teacher," Naga says. Like all of the women, Naga's thick black hair is parted in the middle, and combed back into a small bun. A woman never wears her hair loose and seductive. Her lure lies in her pierced nostrils and ears, gold flashes against her dark skin. "Then he can teach other people."

Govindaimal wobbles her head back and forth in agreement. "I have one daughter. I want her to become a nurse. I want her to save lives. I want her to serve people."

Again and again, one hears among the Untouchable women, the words, "to serve people."

Not one Dalit woman desires anything but education for her children and fellow caste members. This is what brings dignity.

"The fight in India is *not* for anything esoteric," a spokesman for the Indian Foreign Ministry said to me. "It is for dignity and dignity alone."

Yet, the Dalit would never have begun to fight for dignity had it not been for one man.

A photograph of his plump face is present on almost every Dalit family's altar, garlanded with flowers, the face of someone not oppressed by hunger; so obviously an educated man. The face seems benevolent, not a quality one sees frequently among the outcaste people who often throw their old people, as well as the blind, onto the streets. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was obviously a man who had power over his life. But what puts him in the Untouchable pantheon of gods, goddesses, spirits, and heroes was the fact that he fought to empower the Untouchables as well.

Dr. B. Ambedkar was born into the Untouchable Mahar caste. Both his father and grandfather were soldiers in the British Army. As the Colonial Government insisted all military personnel and their families be educated and ran schools for this purpose, Bhim unlike other Untouchables was able to attend fine schools. There, made to sit in a far corner privileged though he was, Bhim began to understand what it meant to be an 'Untouchable.' But what he had that most Untouchables don't, are positive memories and impressions too. A teacher named Ambedkar, fond of him, registered Bhimrao's Untouchable family name, Ambavedkar, as Ambedkar in the school register, thereby obliterating the untouchable surname that sticks as it stigmatizes for an entire life.

After receiving a scholarship to study abroad, and receiving his Master's and Doctorate from Columbia University in philosophy, he went on to London to become a barrister and get a doctorate in science. Armed with degrees, he returned to India to become an activist against the "evil of untouchability."

While it is quite unusual to meet a person who has *not* heard of Mahatma Gandhi, it is quite unusual to meet a person outside of India who *has* heard of Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhi's contemporary and opponent. Side-by-side, the two men fought to forge a new and independent India, as they battled against each other.

Mahatma Gandhi loved his religion, Hinduism, and saw the Untouchables as the fourth caste within its divine hierarchical system. Ambedkar, never able to identify with a religion that had cast himself and his people out, burnt the Manu, the Hindu Book of Law.

Gandhi saw himself as representing all of India's oppressed. Ambedkar appointed by the British to the Simon Commission of 1928 to investigate the setting up of a new Indian government and the writing of a constitution, saw all Hindus as the oppressors and urged a separate electorate for the Untouchables. (Thangaraj 5f) Gandhi and his Congress boycotted the Simon Commission, drawing up their own draft for a new Indian constitution, which Ambedkar charged, made no special provisions for the Untouchables.

When a separate electorate was announced for the Untouchables, a victory for Ambedkar, Gandhi went on one of his famous fasts. (C.P Thangaraj 39) Under threat of death and massive Hindu retaliation against his people if Gandhi should die, Ambedkar gave in on his demand for a separate electorate for the Untouchables and signed, in 1932 what has become a dark document for the Dalit, *The Poona Pact*. In this document, Untouchables are given reserved seats in regional legislative assemblies of the Hindu majority and other such concessions instead of their own electorate.

Three years later, Dr. Ambedkar startled his nation when he appealed to all Untouchables to leave the fold of Hinduism and to embrace any religion that might give them equality. Though he was one of the hands in the writing of the Indian Constitution in which Untouchability was abolished, and its practice in any form forbidden he felt that the Untouchables would never truly gain independence from the caste system which was embedded in the Hindu heart. Deeply depressed, in 1956, two months before he died, he underwent a conversion ceremony to Buddhism.

Though he thought himself a failure, there is now a growing body of Dalit intellectuals who do not have to convert to Christianity and Buddhism in order to better themselves. These intellectuals were able to get a University education because of the policy of reserved places for oppressed minorities, one of the concessions granted to Dr. Ambedkar in the Indian constitution.

Dr. Justice K. Ramaswamy, formerly a judge on the Supreme Court of India, and presently a member of India's National Human Rights Commission is a living example of how far the Untouchables have come since Ambedkar's death. Yet Ramaswamy, a Dalit, made it clear to me that constitutionality and brute reality do not always meet in India.

"The Constitution in effect has granted the Untouchables economic and social opportunity, but it has not been able to grant them protection for their properties and lives."

Ramaswamy continued, "In 1989 India passed The Prevention of Atrocities on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Law. By atrocities we mean the burning of Dalit homes; the burning of the occupants; the raping of the women; the boycotts where the higher-caste people don't let the Dalit leave their villages for work for months on end, as they did in Gujarat, in effect trying to starve them to death.

"But only when a culprit is convicted of the crime, can the victim or his family *get* any compensation. The procedure is so lengthy, passing through so many hands, so many offices and areas of jurisdiction that it doesn't even get to court. The victims' family usually gives up or rescinds the complaint because of harassment and the scorn of authorities."

Yet, Dr. Ramaswamy remains optimistic.

### **The Women at the Delta Center**

This optimism is reflected on the faces of the women at the Delta Center who went through the two weeks of training with our team last year and become 'Health Ambassadors' in their villages. Returning for the refresher course in 'Mother and Child Health Care', they report that aside from their usual tasks of fetching firewood and water, and cooking and taking care of their children and husbands, during the past year they had either linked up with primary health centers or gone to schools and taught. All had earned, aside from experience, a bit of money and respect.

One after the other, the women speak up proudly. "I recognized a jaundiced baby. I told the mother to find a doctor."

"Before I started working with the birth attendant, she would cut the umbilical cord with any coconut knife," Indira, a warm and round woman proudly says. "I told her she must boil the knife first. The attendant asked me why. I told her there are things we cannot see that because disease and boiling water kills them."

Eager to share their experiences, the usually meek women call out, "I told the attendant she must not tug at the umbilical cord in order to make the placenta come out. This is very dangerous. It can cause internal bleeding. "

"I told everybody in our village that water should be boiled before we drink it. That way we may not get diseased and the children we give birth to will not die."

"I taught men about how important it is to keep our sources of water clean. They accepted what I said and are now taking the lead! In my village, they now fine anyone who takes a bath in the pond, or brings a cow there to drink. I will do very well in Dalit liberation!"

The third group of Untouchable females, the students at the Delta School of Nursing, shine even more brilliantly. Mercy Kanagam who heads the nursing school puts it all into perspective. "I work very hard not only to make them nurses certified to work in any hospital or clinic in India, but I work to change their lowly village behavior

"There is a certain sing-song teasing way village girls have of talking Tamil," Mercy continues. "I insist they speak English, not only because all higher level books are written in it and not Tamil, but because English is the language of a higher culture. Sanskrit, the language of the Brahmins, is barred to the Untouchables. English alone can refine them.

"When these girls go back to their villages to visit, their neighbors aren't jealous. Not only are their families proud of them, but all the villagers as well. How much they've changed! How well they speak! How they dress so fashionably!"

The Indian government helps subsidize their education. But it is the parents who have to provide their daughters with the long-sleeved cotton dresses, beautifully colored and simply cut, worn over matching loose-fitting trousers and the flowing scarves that match both the trousers and dresses.

"These girls are lucky," Mercy confesses. "Because even among the Dalit, there are different castes associated with different occupations, ascending from higher to lower. Certainly these girls have had better opportunities."

They were able to get a little education until the tenth grade, something very rare for a village girl where in the segregated area outside of the Hindu village, there may be hundreds of Untouchable families living in mud huts. The huts are so small you have to stoop and crawl to enter. There are no windows, only room to cook on the earthen oven and a little bit of room for the pots. Adding on a room is not possible. The Untouchables are tenants of wealthy landlords. No even the tiny plot their hut sits on is their own.

Some families through connections are able to get a government built house. These houses are airless thatched cubicles made of cement instead of mud with a cement floor instead of packed ground. But even these government houses by any standard would be miserable. Four yards square, as many as seven family members crowd together during the rainy season when living outside is impossible.

Whether gifted with a tiny government house or living in a minuscule mud one, Dalit villagers do try to spend most of their lives outside. The ground outside the huts is brushed clean by the women bending over their short-handled brooms made of twigs. Not a scrap of paper or litter can be seen, only the marks where their brooms have arduously raked. Here, oblivious to the Dalit power brokers in New Delhi, the women still scrub the wash in water fetched from a well; here the women comb their daughters' hair, plaiting it; here the toddler boys romp naked except for a G-string; here their mothers serve them rice and cooked lentils, hopefully three times a day; here their mothers hang the laundry; here their fathers and his friends sit, bodies dulled by arrack, passing away the steaming hot day until the coolness of night falls. Then one by one men, women, and children pick up their bedding and find a piece of ground to sleep on.

The tropical dawn wakes up the Dalit woman. Brushing her teeth with a twig from the *Neem* tree, combing out her thick and long black hair then fastening it at the nape of her neck, she slips the cotton *choli* over her head which will cover her to her midriff, puts on the underskirt, then wraps yards and yards of cotton around her waist in the traditional *sari*. Finally draping one edge over her left shoulder, she stoops into her hut, ready to make an offering at the altar. She may burn incense. She may light a candle. In her hands, she may have some rice, or a decoration from paper that her daughter or son cut out, or a garland of flowers bought from the woman selling them by the side of the dirt road.

The Dalit woman places a garland of flowers, not on the picture of Gnesha, the elephant-like god of the Hindus, but on the photograph of Dr. Ambedkar. Then she lights the incense. She knows God or the gods have received her prayer.

Just look: towering coconut trees, mango trees, banana trees, a pharmacopoeia of plants which the Dalit women know all about. There are the leaves of the Calyotropus which prevents pregnancy, and through the cool and darkened groves you can see, here at least in the village of Kadalur, the sun glancing off the Buckingham Canal as it ripples tranquilly on, its banks a lush habitat for white herons, egrets and numerous wild birds. In the northeastern region of this village, the canal mixes with the Pallar River, teeming with fish, and spotted with low caste fisherman on wooden rafts dropping and lifting up their nets.

The splashes are almost inaudible. There are so many other sounds, there isn't onomatopoeia precise enough to convey, the chirps, whistles, and whillings, the bleating, the honking of geese being led along the wooded banks with shepherds, voices of dogs, children and laughter. Amidst these sounds, there is another.

"I have nothing! I have nobody!"

It is the mournful voice of a beggar woman



### **Untouchable Beggar Woman**

She is crooked over, her hands disfigured into the posture of begging. Still keeping the custom that once forbade Untouchable women to cover themselves with the traditional bodice, she wears only a soiled sari, revealing skin shriveled over a rib cage.

"I have no house. I have no family. Who will feed me?"

Cast out by Hinduism, she has been cast out of her house as well. If a family with just a little food has to feed the feeble, then the able and strong will not eat; so who will bring in more rice?

Another woman- employed, yes, squats outside by an earthen oven, stirring a big pot of soup. It is for the Dalit kindergarten children who are supposedly inside the old concrete building getting their first taste of education. It is the soup of promise. But the building is empty.

"Where are the children?" We ask the woman stirring the soup.

She looks up and answers, "They will come tomorrow."

She said this last year when our team visited; for the kindergarten operates only when the higher-caste teacher, salaried by the government, comes in from her village twelve miles away.

At the elementary school in the village, where the teachers show up with more regularity, the Dalit children are dressed in their best. The girls' long black hair is plaited into two braids, each braid then looped and decorated with white ribbons. The boys' white shirts are washed and bright. Education to them is as sacred and deserving of festivity as the religious processions they were never allowed to partake in.

The two room schoolhouse has no windows, but long slits in the mildewed wall where stripes of light lay on the higher-caste pupils sitting on the floor. The Untouchable children who eagerly come to school must learn outside, bunched together on the ground, happy enough to repeat by rote every sentence the teacher says. Though a word said at the wrong time brings a swift swish of the branch in the teacher's hand, it is well worth the danger.

The nursing school girls studying at the Delta Center have come to visit this elementary school in Kadalur. They try to keep a low profile, standing at the far side of the yard, but their dress and manners attract immediate attention. When the teacher rings the bell, signaling that it is time to go home for tea, the girls are at once besieged by the pupils.

One at a time, the nursing school girls raise their voices above the crowd. "We are Dalit just like you. We're studying to be nurses at the Delta Center. We learned a lot of things which might make your lives better. Do you want to hear?"

"Yes!"

"It may seem strange to you. Our people have always defecated on the ground, near our houses, near our wells, wherever nature calls. But this is not healthy. When you go barefoot near the excrement, eggs of the hookworm get into your feet, and the worm grows there. And as bad as that is, there is something even worse. This excrement seeps from the ground into our water, and our water gets cholera and typhus in it. So what we'd like to teach you is about something called a soak pit. All you have to do is to dig a hole in the ground, put rocks in the hole, and sand..."

The pupils look at them in bewilderment.

It will take more than the new-won confidence of a few to change the lives of many. For even at the Delta Center, where so many of the Dalit women could sleep on beds for the first time in their lives, and use the sinks with running water, and defecate and urinate in the toilets, they choose to do everything as they have always done.

India may have rocketed into the post-modern age by allowing multi-national computer companies to set up software industry and mobile telephone conglomerates to base their technical support services in Indian cities, but the Untouchable women of the villages still prefer to sleep on the floor, and go to the grass near their luxurious rooms at Delta Center to defecate. Though the purpose of toilets and beds has been explained to them, they opt for their age old habits.

There is the firewood to get and carry on their heads and the water to be gotten. The British granted the Untouchables the right to use all public wells, but when they have tried to use them, these wells have become the scene of so many riots and so much violence, the Indian government prefers now to dig other wells for them. So the Dalit

women must walk several miles to another source of potable water, confronting many dangers on the way.



**Young Woman Going to Fetch Potable Water**

*There is the firewood to get and carry on their heads and the water to be gotten. The British granted the Untouchables the right to use all public wells, but when they have tried to use them, these wells have become the scene of so many riots and so much violence, the Indian government prefers now to dig other wells for them. So the Dalit women must walk several miles to another source of potable water, confronting many dangers on the way.*

They might be gored by the horns of an ox quite a common occurrence on the dusty roads so crowded with animals, people, trucks, busses, rickshaws, motorcycles and bicycles, and who would pay for their medical care? They might be sexually harassed, raped or murdered. Untouchable women are prime prey.

If they escape all these dangers, there is still the heaviness of the water in the crook of their arm, and the children waiting for them when they get home, and the cooking. They must feed their children first, of course, as all mothers do. Then their husbands, as all good wives know. If there is food left over, they will eat. If not, they will do the washing, and get the beatings they so often sustain from their husbands for no apparent reason at all.

Yet, when Friday comes around, the women beg Henry to go home for the weekend. When Henry agrees, the women run squealing and clapping to pack their cloth bundles, and within minutes they are on those dusty roads beginning their trek and bus rides to villages as far as thirty-six miles away.

### **Good Bye Shantha**

Shantha goes with them. It is her voice I hear above all the others. Her story I wanted to tell.

"I'm going home to my son. He's all I have in the world since my husband was killed. We were married for only two years when he was singing at his friend's wedding. He held a bad microphone to his mouth, and the microphone electrocuted him."

Seven years a widow, Shantha is now twenty-five years old. There is something deep and sensuous about her, something poignant and beautiful. "I would have liked to have more children," she says wistfully. "But I can't. Widows can't remarry."

I wish her a good weekend, and more than that, a good life, a better life than what she has. She will go to her parents' mud hut. As she walks away, I hear her voice tolling in my mind.

"I'm such a burden to my parents, I would never tell them when I am unhappy or lonesome. My mother is so sad about me. Why make her sadder. I could have had more children if I wasn't widowed. And the village elders say, 'Don't worry. Everything comes and goes. This life will go to.'"

She sighs, "Maybe I do have nothing to worry about. For I have God. He is always there for me."

"Shantha, friends. Do you have any friends?"

"No, I have no close friends. When I told my friends I was sad, they teased me. 'You have a roof over your head and rice to eat. Do you have to sell your body? Do you have to beg?'"

"Tell me, Shantha, did *you* have to marry a dog?"

### **Bibliography**

- Ekbote, "B.R. Ambedkar," in *Remembering Our Leaders* Vol. 6. New Delhi, Children's Book Trust, 1996.
- Nirmal, P. Arvind. "Societal Scenario in Contemporary India," in *Human Rights from the Dalit Perspective*. Ed. Henry Thiageraj. Chennai: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1998.
- Pal, R.M "The Caste System and Human Rights Violation," in *Human Rights from the Dalit Perspective*. Ed. Henry Thiageraj. Chennai: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1998.
- Varadarajan, A. "Human Rights Violations and the Dalits." in *Human Rights from the Dalit Perspective*. Ed. Henry Thiageraj. Chennai: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1998.
- Thangaraj, C.P *Poona Pact: A Boon or Bane; With Intrigues of Mr. Gandhi*. Chennai: Thangaraj, 2000.