

Dalit Freedom Network

Dalit Freedom  Now and Forever

www.dalitnetwork.org

Spring 2008



Of Faith

and Dalit Christian Persecution in Orissa

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ONCE AGAIN the opposition against the Dalit Freedom Network and the good work happening in India has grown. The reason? The increased effectiveness and momentum of the Dalit emancipation movement is bringing a backlash of increased resistance.

Proponents of Brahminism believe in the strict enforcement of caste hierarchies and insist that Dalits remain in their dehumanized position within the Hindu social order. As global awareness and activism increase on behalf of the Dalits, Brahminists are turning to more extreme measures to counteract the Dalit movement.

Seeking to target the core issues, opponents of the Dalit movement grow bolder in their attacks on Dalits' spiritual freedom. The recent Dalit Christian persecution in the east Indian state of Orissa corresponds to a growing false propaganda campaign about the supposed prevalence of forced and fraudulent Dalit conversions away from Hinduism in that area. The atrocities resulting from this propaganda persist despite the fact that Orissa has the most stringent anti-conversion law in India and there has not been a single conviction on the basis of this controversial legislation in the last 25 years.

About 100,000 Dalit Christians now live in the Kandhamal district of Orissa, the epicenter of the recent violence. The Indian-produced news channel CNN/IBN was clear in its statement that it was the overall development and progress of the Kandhamal Christian Dalits that instigated fury among extremist Hindu groups.


Just as religion and spirituality are at the center of all Indian culture, the spiritual component of Dalit life is critical in their struggle for emancipation.

Dalits have not shied away from stating their position on the issue of conversion. Because Brahminism refused to release its stranglehold on every aspect of Dalit life, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit champion and father of the Indian Constitution, wrote extensively on why Dalits must embrace other religious ideologies. He coined the well-known stance in 1937: "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu."

True to his word, Ambedkar and hundreds of thousands of his followers turned to Buddhism in 1956. Since then, many Dalits have opted for Buddhism, at other times for the Christian faith and sometimes even for Islam. Their exodus into other spiritual systems continues.

"The Dalit cry for freedom is about total freedom."

The difference between Ambedkar's day and the year 2008 is that the world now recognizes the Dalits' modern slavery. Dalit discrimination is no longer hidden away in the villages of India. The growing Dalit movement will no longer tolerate the fact that fewer than 2% of all police cases registered by Dalits ever reach conviction. The international community believes it is unpardonable that the criminal justice system has utterly failed India's downtrodden.

The Dalit cry for freedom is about total freedom. The Dalit freedom movement in which we are involved is about the total freedom and complete emancipation for India's Dalits in every area of life. In this hour of crisis for the Dalits in Orissa we will not be deterred in our work on their behalf. 



Economic Development

TWO DALIT MEN recently demanded the government job cards to which they were legally entitled. Infuriated by their request for basic vocational dignity, local authorities publicly forced the men to eat human excrement. Elsewhere in India, a Dalit woman and her four daughters committed suicide in January after a long and bitter struggle with dire poverty.

Such tragedies are commonplace in the Dalit community. Each generation of Dalits has been confronted with the same vocational dehumanization that their parents, grandparents and distant ancestors faced.

Indian society condemns Dalits to degrading vocations, then stigmatizes them as “Untouchables” because of the very work they do. Children learn early that they must follow in their parents’ footsteps, foregoing education to begin a lifetime of work as street sweepers, collectors of human excrement, sweatshop laborers and mistreated victims of backbreaking manual labor.

At the Dalit Freedom Network, we believe that the Dalits’ vocational enslavement and humiliation are unacceptable injustices that persist despite their ingenuity and diligence as workers. In conjunction with our education, healthcare and social justice programs, we stand with the Dalits and join our resources with theirs to create the vocational opportunities and courage they so desperately need.

We joyfully report that over 7,500 people now participate in 507 Self-Help Groups and 30 Vocational Training Centers. These men and women, most of whom are Dalits, are astoundingly industrious. The Self-Help Groups continue to prove their admirable stewardship and responsibility. They have now saved over \$150,000 and are starting to receive sizable fair-rate loans from local governments and banks.

As DFN and OMCC work alongside Dalits to develop vocational training centers that meet real needs and work within local economies, surprising and exciting projects develop and flourish. We currently operate twenty-one tailoring training centers, five computer training centers, three adult literacy classes, and one driver training center. Many additional small projects exist to train beauticians, crafters, embroiderers and solar unit developers.

“We pour courage into people.”

Time and time again, this innovative programming brings resources and hope to the oppressed and downtrodden. Kurian, an OMCC worker in North India, tells of many men and women who were literally on the brink of suicide but who have now found hope through DFN and OMCC’s economic development programs.

At just twenty years old, Jasmine gave up hope of a dignified life and attempted to drown herself. When her mother saved her and told Kurian of the situation, Kurian convinced the young woman to join the local tailoring training program. Jasmine soon thrived in the caring group atmosphere of her tailoring class. She is now a skilled tailor and proudly supports herself with her new trade. For so many others like Jasmine, a kind word and a practical opportunity to learn a trade has made all the difference in the world.

If you ask Kurian what he and his staff do at the vocational training centers, he will simply respond, “We pour courage into people.” Thank you for joining with us to do the same. ✂

DID YOU KNOW?

- You can help dramatically expand the Economic Development Program. As we seek to raise \$100,000 for the Dalit Economic Fund, anonymous donors match each gift four times, turning \$100,000 into \$400,000! The fund will create substantial Income-Generating Loans for successful Self-Help Group members like Mala (see opposite page).
- To contribute to the Dalit Economic Fund, simply visit the “Donate” page at www.dalitnetwork.org and choose the Economic Programs option. Contact Debbie Johnson at djohnson@dalitnetwork.org or 303.221.1333 x 100 for more information or specific proposals.
- As a member of the ECFA, DFN is committed to financial integrity and excellent stewardship of your donations. In 2007, over 90 cents of every dollar donated went directly to programs to help the Dalits! Contact us for more details from DFN’s annual independent audit. Thank you for financially supporting true hope and freedom for Dalits.
- We continually update our mailing lists in order to steward our resources well. You can help by contacting us at 866.921.1333 or info@dalitnetwork.org if you receive multiple copies of DFN mailings or have new contact information.

Education



Staff members at new Dalit Education Centers (DECs) must work hard to convince parents to send their daughters to school. Though Jhulka's parents were skeptical about the benefits of educating females, they enrolled her in the local DEC years ago. Jhulka soon proved to be the school's most brilliant student, excelling in every subject. When she was thirteen years old, her father came to the DEC manager to thank him. Disregarding local cultural standards, he openly wept in gratitude. "If you had not started this school," he said, "I would already have married her off." Instead, Jhulka continues to succeed and dreams of completing a university degree to become a teacher.

Healthcare



Fourteen pioneers in the Community Health Worker Program who completed training in May 2007 are busy serving people like Shalini in their communities. As an active four-year-old girl from a poor family, Shalini attends Upper Kindergarten at a South Indian DEC. When a Community Health Worker began serving at her school last summer, his care and guidance led to her relief from painful scabies. The scabies returned after several months, and the worker researched the cause of the recurrence. When a house visit revealed poor hygiene practices, the Community Health Worker again administered medication and began working with Shalini's parents to develop basic cleanliness practices. Shalini's family never anticipated receiving such quality healthcare. They are deeply grateful that Shalini has recovered fully and has not suffered another relapse!

Economic Development



Seeking to help her family escape their meager hand-to-mouth existence, Mala joined a DFN/OMCC Self-Help Group in January 2006. Within three months, the group granted her a small loan allowing her to establish a small snack-food center. In early 2007, a local bank recognized the group's potential and granted the women a \$1,500 loan, of which Mala was allocated \$75. She invested this additional money in developing her shop. As Mala and the other group members worked diligently and made each payment on time, the bank took note of their continued progress and granted a much larger loan. This capital allowed Mala to build a small structure to house her shop. After much hard work, Mala's small snack-food center has become a full restaurant that provides steady income to meet her family's needs. Mala represents just one of the many, many people whose participation in DFN/OMCC programs has provided the opportunity to work with dignity and escape poverty.

Social Justice



"I am zero when it comes to caste," says Moses. "I was told again and again that I was not fit; I was a Dalit, an untouchable, a low-caste man, and leatherwork - that was my caste-work." Despite humble beginnings, thirty-year-old Moses managed to escape his 'fate' as a Dalit. The All India Christian Council (aicc), one of DFN's primary partners in India, encouraged and empowered Moses, and he became Assistant to the aicc National Administrator. He now records abuses against Dalits on the organization's website, www.aiccindia.org. "Every day I have things to report," he says. "Every day killing, every day a Dalit is raped, humiliated, beaten up." As people like Moses work wholeheartedly to record and expose Dalit oppression, the movement for Dalit freedom advances.

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