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Read and React: “The Broken and Crushed”

Jonathan Aitken from The American Spectator, June 2007

DURING THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY celebrations of the abolition (outlawing) of the slave trade many contemporary commentators have asserted that ~~the abomination of~~ slavery is still defiling our 21st-century world. Is this true? If so, where? In what numbers? In which specific countries and situations? Requests for such further and better particulars are all too often met with vague generalizations rather than hard facts. Main idea- Is slavery still a part of our life today?

Of course, no one denies that across our planet thousands of women are trapped in exploitative (exploit or take advantage of these woment) relationships. Under employers in lawless regimes (governments), many workers have their human rights violated. Yet, however shameful these individual situations of human bondage may be, they do not usually equate to (they are not as bad as) the African slavery of our history, which was characterized by the horrors of the middle passage and the degradation of slave auctions.

So are there any examples of modern slavery? Amazingly, there is one such contemporary slavery situation to which a normally respected democratic government turns a blind and uncaring eye. This is the tragic plight of the Dalits in India (slavery example). The Dalits are the untouchables of India's caste system. Officially they are known as "Scheduled Castes" or "Scheduled Tribes." They are described by various humiliating terms in the languages of India, but they call themselves Dalits--a name that derives from a Sanskrit word meaning "broken" or "crushed." It is a most appropriate label, because throughout history Dalits have been compelled to perform the most lowly, menial, dangerous, and degrading forms of labor in Indian society. Today it is estimated that about 30 million Dalits are forced to work as bonded laborers, often as cleaners and carriers of excrement (human or animal waste). At least one million of them are child laborers. They face innumerable (more than can be numbered) forms of discrimination, segregation (separation), and exploitation that are so vile (terrible) and so institutionalized (part of the government system) that it is often described as "India's apartheid." Main Idea- The Dalits are the untouchables in India’s caste system and are treated very much as slaves.

A charge of 21st-century apartheid against the world's largest democracy is an extremely serious matter. The origins of the Dalits' servitude (being servants)has its roots in Hindu scriptures, which classify people into four Varna groups. However, a fifth group of people falls below this system altogether. They were "untouchables" in old speak, now internationally known as the Dalits. There are over 250 million of them spread across India. In theory they have had some legal protection since passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1976, which was intended to end the untouchables' obligation to perform degrading forms of labor and to allow them access to all public amenities (such as parks, transportation, government assistance). Unfortunately, this constitutional ban on untouchability is undermined by the practical realities of the caste system, which continues to flourish, particularly in rural India. Main idea- While this discrimination is supposed to be ended, it really continues especially outside of the cities.

A recent government report, Untouchability in Rural India, shows that all the worst features of discrimination against the Dalits are as bad as ever. The U.S. State Department's 2006 report Trafficking in Persons highlights India as one of the worst countries "for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced or bonded labor and commercial sexual exploitation." Dalit women are among the worst treated in the world, thanks to the large number of them trapped in the Devadasi system. Devadasi, or temple prostitutes, serve as concubines for priests and are common property for male visitors to the temple. These unfortunate women are perhaps the most poignant (emotional or touching) example of the paradox faced by Dalit Devadasis, for they are treated as untouchables yet exploited in the most intimate way.

HARSH FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION for Dalits are not confined to Devadasis or debtors. According to the Untouchability in Rural India report, a census in Maharashtra state showed that in 48 percent of the villages Dalits were not allowed to use the central well or water supply; in 73 percent of the villages they were not allowed to enter the houses of non-Dalits; in 64 percent they were denied entry into places of worship; and in 36 percent they were denied entry into shops. On a national scale, Dalits are discriminated against in schooling, resulting in a 60 percent illiteracy rate for them compared to a 30 percent rate for all other Indians. Dalits are also the poorest Indians, often living below the International Poverty Line of $1 per day. Main idea- The Dalits are denied the most basic human rights such as water, worship, and education.

In April I attended the world premiere in London of a documentary film designed to arouse international concern for the plight of the Dalits. Under the skillful direction of Michael Lawson, some of the most harrowing scenes were shot in Pipe Village near Hyderabad, a Dalit community on the outskirts of the city where thousands of families live in discarded waste water pipes. Most of them work under bonded labor conditions seven days a week on alternate 12-hour day and 12-hour night shifts. They are allowed one day off a month. There is no education for the children of Pipe Village, so many of them work as child laborers. The women work too, some as Devadasi prostitutes and many more as excrement cleaners--the traditional hereditary forced labor of the untouchable Dalits. Main idea- this paragraph gives more examples of the terrible conditions and treatment of the Dalits.

The government of India is not listening to this campaign yet. But it will soon as the charges of "slavery" and "apartheid" begin to ring round the world, and as militant groups of young Dalit men in India continue to protest against their plight with riots. As Martin Luther King said, "Riots are the voice of the unheard." An unexpected side effect of the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade is that from now on the enslaved voices of the Dalits will become much more widely heard both internationally and domestically. Main idea- People around the world and groups of young Dalit men are starting to protest and the treatment of the Dalits is becoming more known world-wide.

Reflection

1. What is the main point of this article?
2. Who are the Dalits and why are they considered to be “untouchables”?
3. Name three reasons why the author believes the Dalits fit the definition of “slaves” or are victims of human rights violations.
4. What has been done to draw attention to the Dalits’ plight in India?
5. How do you think it feels to be a member of the Dalit caste?
6. Do you believe this system should be protected as part of the Hindu Religion?
7. What do you think could be done to help the Dalits of India? Explain at least two ideas.