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Priest helps fellow 'Untouchables'

A Camp Hill chaplain advocates for the still-persecuted outcasts of India, known today as Dalits.

By Jim Remsen. INQUIRER FAITH LIFE EDITOR

CAMP HILL, Pa. - The misery that the Rev. Benjamin Chinnappan has seen distresses his musical voice.

"According to Hinduism, my people are born at the bottom of society and are much worse than dust," he says with a frown that darkens his cherubic face.

Coworkers at Holy Spirit Hospital here know "Father Ben" as their polite chaplain from India, but most don't realize his unusual station in life.

He is an Untouchable, a member of a despised "outcaste" in his homeland. Untouchables, known today as Dalits, are a landless people subject to blatant bigotry even in India's Christian world, where millions of Dalits have sought emancipation.

Father Chinnappan, 41, has borne the suffering since his childhood in rural South India, as one of eight children jammed into a dirt hut no bigger than the narrow living room of his Holy Spirit apartment.

These days, when he finishes his duties at the hospital, the priest returns to his apartment and fires up the computer that serves as the command center for his other life - as a freelance humanitarian for fellow Dalits back in South India.

For the last five years, the soft-spoken priest has been an advocate for India's 200 million Dalits through his pioneering Web site, www.dalitchristians.com.

For the last three years, he and a small circle of American supporters, operating as Dalit Solidarity Inc., have also raised about \$300,000 to establish a children's home and a medical clinic for woefully underserved villagers near his childhood home. The two centers run on a shoestring - a good thing since the cash flow from America is uneven, and often is underwritten by Father Chinnappan's modest chaplain's salary.

"Whatever I can sacrifice, I give away to my people," he said.

Dalit Solidarity, a Pennsylvania-registered charity, is trying to get people to sponsor Indian children for \$15 a month, and hopes to set up a trust to assure steady funding for its two centers.

The beneficiaries, rural Dalits, are at the bottom rung of one of the most rigid social structures in the world, a caste system said to be 3,000 years old. The system has four tiers - priests, warriors, merchants/farmers, and servants - and below them, the "polluted" Dalits, whose lot is to perform the lowliest tasks for little or no pay.

Though modern India's constitution officially abolished untouchability 50 years ago and set up affirmative-action programs, discrimination remains rampant, particularly in rural areas. According to Human Rights Watch, a monitoring group, more than 100,000 cases of rape, murder, arson and other atrocities against Dalits occur every year.

Most families in Father Chinnappan's Dalit village in Tamil Nadu, a state on the southeast coast, tried to shed their caste identity by converting over the last century to Roman Catholicism. They did this under the guidance of Catholic missionaries from abroad, who, he said, espoused a casteless society in which Dalits "will be in the image and likeness of God" like everyone else.

Up to 80 percent of India's 30 million Christians are Dalits. Most are Catholics, and Father Chinnappan said that, theology aside, they had not been able to escape the Dalit stigma. In mixed-caste churches, he said, Dalits must sit in the rear, and the priests, most of whom are high-caste Indians, serve Communion to Dalits last.

Father Chinnappan was born into a Catholic family. Because he was a shining pupil and his father was a loyal aide of the parish pastor, the priest recommended him for the seminary. There, though, he and the few other Dalits endured mistreatment, he said, and later, as priests, they were assigned to the lowliest parishes.

After a few frustrating years in the field, Father Chinnappan said, he got his bishop's permission to pursue an advanced degree in biblical studies. A foreign scholarship brought him to St. Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario.

He followed that with a chaplaincy certificate, a posting in New York, and his current job outside Harrisburg. Four years ago, during his rounds at Holy Spirit Hospital, Father Ben happened to tell a patient, retired businessman John R. Laughlin, of his Internet advocacy for Dalits and his philanthropic hopes. Laughlin rounded up some friends and associates. Dalit Solidarity was born.

The group's St. Patrick Home spends about \$2,000 a month to provide free room and board to 37 children from stone-cutter and cobbler families - "Dalits among Dalits," the priest said.

The program also pays for school supplies and tuition for 150 children. In Tamil Nadu state, the priest said, Hindu and Buddhist Dalits qualify for education aid, but Christians do not.

In November, the brand-new St. Mary Health Center opened its doors a few miles away, becoming the only health clinic in a 20-mile radius. It has two doctors, a handful of support workers, and a small pharmacy, all costing about \$3,000 a month.

Suzanne Benedict, a professor at the Medical University of South Carolina, has just finished leading a contingent of student nurses on an intensive two-week mission to the new clinic.

Reached there by phone, Benedict said the five visiting nurses had treated hundreds of Dalit patients for diabetes, cataracts, snakebites, parasites and other maladies. People pay little or nothing for the care, she said.

"The government hospitals are horrifying," Benedict said. "People would rather die than go there. They are so happy to have this."

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