

Faithful Dalits: Christians and caste

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue



Children in a Chennai slum. [Attribution Some rights reserved](#) by Flickr user [jcandeli](#)

The streets of Chennai, formerly Madras, India's fourth largest city, are jammed with bikes, buses, trucks and cars, all careening in and out and around each other, honking incessantly and largely to no avail. An occasional sign on the back of a truck or cab that reads "Please honk horn" seems hilariously irrelevant.

Along one of those busy thoroughfares is an imposing gate that opens onto the campus of Gurukul College, a major Lutheran theological center in India. One of the buildings houses the office of the Chennai Slum Women's Advancement Program, a ministry under the auspices of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India headed by Vidhya Rani.

Rani, 44, works with some of India's most vulnerable people—female slum dwellers struggling to eke out an existence against towering odds. Rather than recite statistics on urban realities, she told about Lakshima, a woman whose story exemplifies the plight of many.

Lakshima was born in a village several hours south of Chennai. Her mother died when she was no more than ten. Being the youngest daughter in a large, poor

family, she had to stop attending school because of the new duties that fell upon her. Then, at age 13, she was raped by men in her village. When her father discovered that she was pregnant, he demanded that she have an abortion and took her forcibly to have the procedure performed. After that he gave her some coins, put her on a bus for Chennai and told her that because of her shame she could never return.

Wrapped only in her skirt and a shawl, she arrived in the vast, noisy bus terminal in Chennai, too traumatized to move from her seat. The driver found a woman passenger who helped her get off the bus and find a shelter, the first of many. How she made it from day to day and from shelter to shelter, often sleeping in the streets and always begging for the next day's food, is a saga blurred by the daily misery that became her routine.

Rani came across Lakshima about a year later, and after hearing her story decided to do something she had not done before. She made arrangements for Lakshima to move from the slums to the care of the matron in the dormitory of the Women's Center at Gurukul, only a few minutes from Rani's office. There, for the first time in her life, the teenager could go to sleep in safety and awaken with assurance that there would be food for her and something useful to do—help clean the Women's Center.

Rani was not surprised by the rage that Lakshima vented when she began to speak about the numbing events that had enveloped her. Lakshima expressed determination to return to her native village and kill those who had abused her. Rani listened at length and began responding in a process of slow, carefully calibrated steps, persuading Lakshima that violent revenge was no solution. She knew that too precipitous an offer of advice could backfire and cause Lakshima to slip away. Moreover, Christians in positions like Rani's must be cautious, as witnessing to the transforming power of Jesus Christ may be viewed as manipulation by a government suspicious of Christian motives.

My wife and I had the chance to meet Lakshima. She was shy at first, but with polite words in English she indicated that it was possible to converse. She told us that she was attending night school nearby and was grateful for all that she was receiving at the center.

Later that evening, when we were in our room, there was a soft knock on our door, and to our surprise there stood Lakshima. We invited her in for more conversation. At the end of the evening, as we walked with her to the gate, she gave us the gift that she had come to our room to deliver—a pocket New Testament in English. I have no idea where she got it. In parting, she gave a shy wave of her hand, a gesture of pleasure at being able to give something to people from another land.

Moments like these, anecdotal and fragmentary though they are, symbolize the power and promise of the ministry of Vidhya Rani, who leads one of the tens of thousands of Christian ministries sponsored by the 26 million Christians who constitute 2 percent of India's 1.3 billion people.

The principal of Gurukul College, Samuel Meshack, cited two facts of importance in the school's vision of its mission: 80 percent of the Lutherans in India are women and 80 percent are Dalits, the name designating the caste at the lowest rung of the social ladder. Those facts shape the college's curriculum, which relates the traditional disciplines of theological study to the social analysis of the communities in which Christians are called to live and serve. Contextual education has meant introducing women's studies into the curriculum (30 percent of the students are women). Contextual education has also meant providing training in the information technology that has made India a leading player in the global field—something Americans realize when they find themselves talking to someone in India about a computer glitch.

One of the teachers of women's studies and Old Testament at Gurukul is Monica Melanchthon, who completed her doctorate in Old Testament studies at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. A Dalit herself, she provided further insight into the caste system. Though the system was constitutionally abolished in 1950, Brahmins and the upper castes still hold tight to their power positions, as do the next castes lower down. Dalits are the fifth—and outcast—caste. This may not be seen in the ordinary course of daily life; Dalits can now own land, for example. But when it comes to marriage, the lines are drawn hard and fast. Since most Christians are Dalits, they can rise only so far in political and other circles of Indian life.

A relentless theological advocate of the Dalit cause is Masilamani Azariah, a Presbyterian theologian and a retired bishop of the Church of South India, who was on loan to the Lutherans at Gurukul College. The central theme running through the three books he has published on the Dalits is this: they are both the challenge and

the hope of India. He repeated an emphasis I heard from every Indian with whom I spoke: as long as Hindu themes and practice rule in India, the Dalits will remain outcasts, subtly or overtly. This is their destiny according to the texts of the Hindu sacred writings. Because the Dalits are destined to be the underclass, they suffer the psychological damage of being relegated to nonpersonhood.

The church bears the primary responsibility of addressing this dilemma, but too often during the five centuries of Christian presence in India the church has let the system stand. It has confined the meaning of conversion to the believer's inner life at the cost of nullifying the witness to God's power to transform society. All India suffers the blight of caste segregation. Those who flourish economically and socially as members of the upper caste maintain their superiority only because their privileged status rests on the backs of the poor and oppressed.

Hearing these insights into the complex realities of Indian life left this American visitor with a lot to sort out. Hinduism teaches absolute separation of castes, yet Monica Melanchthon has her doctorate and teaches at Gurukul College. In Chennai a Dalit minister leads a congregation of middle- and upper-middle-class parishioners who hold well-paying jobs and live in comfortable homes. I met recently baptized young men who are Dalits and are university graduates participating in the Indian information technology boom—yet their spouses cannot be from a non-Dalit caste. Bishop Azariah hosted us at a dinner in a sophisticated setting in which no one questioned his caste status—or his capacity to foot the bill.

These people did not make caste their primary identity, but neither did they deny its divisive presence in life's most intimate relationships of marriage and family. As visitors we had to squint to see what Indians see and cup our ears to catch the ups and downs of being a practicing Christian in India.

This article is excerpted from F. Dean Lueking's Through Their Eyes: A People's View of the Global Church (available from TyraBooksChicago.com).