

Children 0

India's dalits or former untouchables who immigrated to North America are spreading their new Buddhist faith. **DEENA GUZDER** of Columbia University writes they're not afraid to speak out against the religion they believe is responsible for their previous plight

LAXMI BERWA WAS mercilessly taunted as a young boy in his village in Rajasthan, bullied by kids in higher Hindu castes. Berwa was born into the lowest caste – the untouchables. “The other villagers said my touch would pollute them,” he recalls.

He left his country and his religion in 1980 and headed for Brooklyn, N.Y., with only \$28 to his name. The lower-caste Hindu, who was once not allowed to walk down certain streets or draw water from certain wells, is now an American Buddhist oncologist.

Under the Indian Constitution, untouchability is a crime. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi himself led the battle against the abhorrent practice, calling for its eradication and renaming the lower caste Harijans, or children of God. Today, there are numerous social and political groups across the country that are working to get rid of the scourge.

Yet the practice persists in some parts of the country. More than 165 million “untouchables” in India are condemned to a lifetime of abuse simply because of their caste, according to Human Rights Watch.

Berwa is one of thousands of former untouchables who have rejected Hinduism and its ties to the caste system in favor of Buddhism and its emphasis on equality. A growing number of these former **▶**



PREJUDICE: A listless dalit in Tamil Nadu's Keshvanpalayam village that was devastated by the tsunami in 2005. The dalits in the village were not allowed to receive relief along with caste Hindus.

Of A Lesser God



GETTY IMAGES



MOHAMMED JAFFER / SNAPSPINDIA

◆ lower-caste Hindus are encouraging others like them in India to convert to Buddhism as a way to end their brutal subjugation.

North America has given the former untouchables the opportunity to raise themselves up and the freedom to speak out. Today, these Buddhist converts are uniting, protesting and raising money for the dozens of organizations that have cropped up in North America to support Buddhist missions in India. And they are using their voices to alert the world to what they regard as the dark side of Hinduism.

In the West, Hinduism is seen largely as a peace-loving religion, often associated with John Lennon, vegetarianism and sitar music. But newly empowered former untouchables are speaking out against the religion, decrying its practice of making the lower castes perform degrading work – such as clearing human waste from latrines – and give up their land to higher-caste Hindus who claim it at will.

SWELLING RANKS

There are more than 10 million Indian Buddhists and the number is rising, said Yogesh Varhade, 65, who was born to untouchable cotton mill workers in India and is now a mechanical engineer in Kingston, Pa. Nobody knows the exact number of former untouchables who have immigrated to North America, but community members say their ranks are swelling as established immigrants raise money to help friends and families join them abroad.

Before the 1960s, former untouchables in the United States were extremely rare, according to Owen Lynch, author of “Politics of Untouchability, Social Mobility, and Social Change” and professor emeritus of anthropology at New York University. But their numbers have steadily grown “and they are showing the world that they can succeed when given equal opportunities,” Lynch said.

While in India, the lower castes are often forced into silence, they’re increasingly speaking out once they arrive in North America, advocating for fair land distribution and elimination of caste discrimination in their homeland.

“The Hindus want to save the caste system by keeping us ignorant and half-starving,” Varhade said. “India says it’s a superpower, but we have a sick society. They are killing, raping and lynching fellow Indians with no shame.”

Buddhism’s stress on equality is one reason why scores of former untouchables have embraced the faith. “To look down on people in Buddhism is a sinful action,” explained Kurunegoda Piyetissa, a monk who helps run the New York Buddhist Temple in Queens, N.Y.

Buddhists human rights activists like Varhade are inspired by former untouchable and fellow Buddhist B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution. ▶

FORGING BONDS: Members of the Ambedkar International Mission, USA, celebrate the 117th birth anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at the residence of Ravi Badge, on the floor at right, in New Jersey in April. Below, from left, Yogesh Varhade, founder-president, Ambedkar Center for Justice and Peace, Kumar of Alert International, U.K., V.T. Hireker and Madhuri Hireker, directors of the Ambedkar Center, at a U.N. Human Rights Conference in Vienna, last year.

Buddhist converts are uniting, protesting and raising money for the dozens of organizations in North America to support Buddhist missions in India.





GETTY IMAGES

◆ “Ambedkar gave them hope for a better future,” said Lynch, one of the leading experts on untouchables in India.

Ambedkar is also credited with sparking the Buddhist revival movement among India’s lower castes, according to Robert Thurman, professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University in New York.

Spreading Ambedkar’s message and the Buddhist faith is a higher calling, according to many former untouchables.

“We were slaves for 2,000 years because of this concept of caste that Hindus said was from God,” said Raju Kamble, a former untouchable who lives in Calgary, Canada, and works for the Ambedkar International Mission. “This movement created an ideological base for people to get out of slavery.”

FIGHTING FOR A CAUSE

Many former untouchables in North America are also using their newly acquired privileges to help clothe, feed and educate the lower caste of India.

Sanjay Kumar helped start the Be Educated movement, which raises money in North America to build libraries all over India with the exclusive mission to educate the poorest – usually the lowest caste – about their rights.

“Some of us who started the project were from the very poor, underprivileged communities and have struggled to come up so we know the problems that exist,” Kumar said. “I visited a couple of the villages and I can see that people still need to be uplifted.”

These activists have taken their struggle from the segregated streets of India to the world community. In the early 1970s, Berwa and Shoba Singh, a Fulbright scholar and also

former untouchable, helped found VISION, or Volunteers in Service of India’s Oppressed and Neglected. Its members have marched outside the United Nations in the 1980s and lobbied Congress to protest human rights violations in India. Many of them say their new faith has given them the strength to break the silence.

“My Buddhist identity is something I can be proud of and use to lift myself up,” said Berwa, who testified about minority rights in 1983 at the U.N.

Former untouchables who have immigrated to the United States proudly say they have shattered the myth of their inferiority that is tied to their caste identity. “America gave me opportunities and nobody asked me about my caste so I have succeeded as much as any other person – Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu,” Berwa said.

Ram Babu Gautam, 56, whose parents were untouchable leather workers in Nagpur, Maharashtra, said, “The higher-caste people hated me when I was young, but now they see that I am educated and their perception has changed a little.” Gautam studied computer science at City University in New York and is now a recognized Hindi poet.

Ironically, the new Buddhist converts say they are still discriminated against by fellow Indians in North America. “We took the oath of Buddhism to get out of the rotten caste system,” Varhade said, “but upper-caste Hindus don’t recognize that we have converted because they don’t want to lose their privilege. Even highly educated immigrants still believe they can be polluted by the touch of another human being.”

As for their brethren in India, even after embracing Buddhism, they are still viciously



MOHAMMED JAFFER/SNAPSHOTS

A NEW BEGINNING: Top, Buddhist monks, draped in saffron robes, and dalits at a mass conversion to Buddhism ceremony in Mumbai in May 2007. It is estimated that close to 5,000 dalits converted to Buddhism during the simple ceremony by reciting hymns read out by the monks. Above, children at the celebration of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s birth anniversary in New Jersey.

“America gave me opportunities and nobody asked me about my caste so I have succeeded as much as any other person – Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu.”



GETTY IMAGES



MICHAEL WIED JAFFER / SNAPSHINDIA

CLERGY WITH A CAUSE: Top, Buddhist monks pray at the Chaitya Bhoomi Buddhist Temple in the suburbs of Dadar, Mumbai. Chaitya Bhoomi's monks not only worship the Buddha but also honor Babasaheb Ambedkar, architect of Indian constitution and a dalit-turned-Buddhist who saw social salvation in the new religion. Above, the Badges at Ambedkar anniversary celebrations.

Many former untouchables are not only challenging the West's view of Hinduism as a peaceful religion but also that of Gandhi as a patron saint.

abused, according to a Human Rights Watch report released in February. The report concluded the untouchables continue to endure segregation in housing, schools and access to public services.

They are denied access to land and routinely abused at the hands of the police and upper-caste community members who enjoy the state's protection.

Entrenched discrimination keeps untouchables from getting a quality education, proper health care, decent housing, good jobs and equal treatment in court, the report said.

Many former untouchables are not only challenging the West's view of Hinduism as a peaceful religion but also that of Gandhi as a patron saint. They say Gandhi betrayed their cause by naively believing higher-caste Hindus would embrace Harijans as equals.

GANDHIAN INTERPRETATION

"Gandhi would say you shouldn't fight to abolish untouchability because it's the high-caste Brahmin who has to change his mind," Kamble said. "But why would the Brahmin change his mentality? How long can the untouchables wait? It is not the Brahmin's mind that must change, it is my rights that I must have."

He said mahatmas have come and gone, but untouchables have remained. "Mahatmas have only raised the dust, but not the level. They speak words, but have not improved the situation for us," he said.

The untouchable community's often-harsh attitude toward the Mahatma may stem from a misunderstanding.

"While Gandhi's attitudes toward caste evolved, from liberal to radical, his unequivocal

opposition to untouchability in all of its forms, remained throughout his entire life," said Dennis Dalton, a professor of political science at Barnard College in New York and author of "Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action."

"There was no more famous or staunch opponent to it than Gandhi, because he was known, unlike Ambedkar, throughout the nation and the world for this cause," Dalton said. "Even Winston Churchill, who despised Gandhi's politics, praised him for his opposition to untouchability."

The different interpretation of Gandhi's commitment to the untouchables is indicative of a wider disagreement about Hinduism's responsibility for the persisting caste inequality in India.

"Without the caste system, Hinduism doesn't exist, which is why Ambedkar said we must reject Hinduism," insisted Kamble. "Hindus are not prepared to say everyone is equal and, even in the West, they haven't even changed."

Dalton insists Gandhi saw Hinduism as separate from the treatment of the lower caste. "According to his own writings and speeches, Gandhi believed untouchability is not a sanction of religion, it is a device of Satan," he said.

Whether or not Hinduism is the root of the widespread discrimination and subjugation of untouchables, Indian American Buddhists say they are increasingly convincing lower-caste Indian youth to leave behind Hindu deities for the sanctuary of Buddhist temples.

"The younger generation is getting very interested in Buddhism, but it will take more time – untouchables have to continue to fight for their rights," Gautam said.