

Catholic NEW WORLD

Newspaper for the Archdiocese of Chicago

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Issue of January 20th – February 2nd

India's 'Untouchables' are one Priest's Mission

*A regular feature of The Catholic New World, **The InterVIEW** is an in-depth conversation with a person whose words, actions or ideas affect today's Catholic. It may be affirming of faith or confrontational. But it will always be stimulating.*

The **InterVIEW**

Father Benjamin Chinnappan, founder of Dalit Solidarity and a Chaplain at Hines VA Hospital in Maywood, holds a photo of Indian Children who his organization has helped. Dalits are outside India's caste system and face discrimination and persecution



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hen Oak Forest resident and India native Subhash Chander set fire

to his daughter's apartment on Dec. 30 — killing her, his unborn grandchild, his grandson and son-in-law — he reportedly did so because she married a man from a lower caste. While his action may seem barbaric to Americans, in India it's often par for the course.

For more than 1,500 years, the country has had a system in place that is rooted in Hinduism and divides, sometimes violently, its people into four castes, or Varnas: Brahmins, the priests and scholars; Kshatriyas, soldiers and administrators; Vaisyas, artisans and commercial class; Sudras, farmers and peasants.

Beneath these four castes are the Dalits, the “untouchables.”

In India, people are often discouraged from associating or marrying out of their castes, as seen in the Oak Lawn case. And discrimination is particularly harsh and brutal for the outcastes — Dalits.

For Father Benjamin Chinnappan, improving the lives of these “untouchables” is a life mission. Chinnappan works as a chaplain at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in Maywood and assists at St. Eulalia Parish, 1851 S. 9th Ave., Maywood. He is a native of India and a Dalit.

In 2000, while serving in the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., Chinnappan formed Dalit Solidarity, a U.S. non-profit that raises funds for projects in India to help Dalits with education, health care and other needs.

He recently spoke with editor Joyce Duriga about the Oak Lawn tragedy and persecution of Dalits in India. For information about his organization visit www.dalitsolidarity.org or call (800) 941-8011.

Catholic New World: What were your thoughts when you heard about Subhash Chander murdering his daughter and her family because she married someone outside her caste?

Father Benjamin Chinnappan: What happened in Chicago is beyond our human comprehension. Everyone is deeply shocked at this horrific tragedy that rooted out four precious human lives. This is a daily phenomenon in rural India where Dalits suffer silently at the hands of the upper-caste community. Dalits have been exposed to this kind of oppression for centuries.

I have personally witnessed tragic stories of my own friends who were bold enough to break the caste barriers.

I am also a victim of the caste discrimination since my childhood, even as a Catholic and, above all, as a priest, I could not escape the horror of the caste oppression. Despite all my educational and economical status, I am still fighting this injustice.

CNW: This caste system has been in place for the last 1,500 years. Why has it lasted so long?

Chinnappan: The simple answer to your question is that there is no good will among the caste people to correct this injustice. The Dalits themselves are powerless to fight for their emancipation.

World communities have just recently heard about these grave injustices. Unlike slavery or apartheid, caste cannot be abolished by laws only. We need both people’s movement and a radical attitudinal change. Caste is a state of mind.

CNW: Discrimination against Dalits has been officially illegal in India since 1950 but reports say this law is generally not enforced. Why?

Chinnappan: The simple truth is that most of the Indian officials who are supposed to enforce the laws are the upper caste themselves, who do not want any action taken against their own people. Both the judiciary and media are owned and controlled by the upper caste.

And even when Dalits are raped or murdered, they cannot even file a case in the nearest police station because the police officers will not file these cases. People who come forward as witnesses can be, and often are, killed.

Despite constitutional protections, caste discrimination still exists throughout much of India. In 2005, government reports stated there was a crime committed against a Dalit every 20 minutes.

CNW: What is life like for this group?

Chinnappan: Approximately 200 million Indians, 20 percent of the population, are Dalits. In a country where everybody is supposed to have equal rights, one out of four people are condemned to be “untouchable.”

Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in slavelike conditions and routinely abused, even killed, at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups.

Dalits in India may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples and churches, drink from the same cups in tea stalls or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms, and communities as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste.

CNW: What is the Catholic Church in India’s response to Dalits?

Chinnappan: The practice of caste discrimination within the Indian Catholic Church flows from the fact that the people in the church are a reflection of the people in the Indian society.

Though Christianity does not recognize caste, there are upper and lower castes among Christians. Seventy percent of Christians in India are Dalits. In many churches, the low-caste Christians have to sit apart from the high-caste Christians.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of India has strongly condemned caste practice in any form within the Catholic Church and India itself. As hard as the bishops try to enforce this, human nature sadly sometimes has the upper hand.

When power, authority and control become the basis of one’s life, there is no room for love.