



The Broken and Crushed

by Jonathan Aitken

DURING THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade by William Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners, 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.

Of course, no one denies that across our planet hundreds of thousands of women are trapped in exploitative sexual relationships that range from child prostitution to racial subjugation. Under unpleasant employers in lawless regimes, many male workers have their human rights violated. Yet, however shameful these individual situations of human bondage may be, they do not usually equate to the systematic African slavery of the 18th century, which was characterized by the horrors of the middle passage and the degradation of slave auctions.

So are there any examples of modern slavery that a latter-day Wilberforce might be able to abolish through the processes of parliamentary campaigning and the pressures of public opinion on an accountable democracy? 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.

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. At least one million of them are child laborers. They face innumerable forms of discrimination, segregation, and exploitation that are so vile and so institutionalized that the treatment of the Dalits is often described as "India's apartheid."

A charge of 21st-century apartheid against the world's largest democracy is an extremely serious matter. The origins of the Dalits' servitude has its roots in Hindu scriptures, which classify people into four Varna groups corresponding to the parts of the body of the Hindu god, Brahma, from whom they were created. The Brahmins, who were created from Brahma's mouth, became the highest and ritually pure, priestly caste. The Kshatriyas—the warrior and administrative caste—were created from his arms, and the Vaishyas—the commercial caste—from his torso. Finally, Brahma created a fourth varna from his feet that became the Sudra caste of manual laborers.

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. Unfortunately, this constitutional ban on untouchability is undermined by the practical realities of the caste system, which continues to flourish, particularly in rural India.

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." The many millions of Dalits in these categories are mainly those whose bonded labor is a consequence of a loan secured against the labor of a whole family. This is frequently the only way landless Dalits can obtain loan finance. Ruthless creditors impose such penal interest rates and conditions on them that Dalit debtors are unable to repay the loan and their debts pass to succeeding generations.

As for 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, whose children often work as prostitutes too, are perhaps the most poignant example of the paradox faced by Dalit *Devadasis*, for they are treated as untouchables yet exploited in the most intimate way through sexual intercourse.

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.

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-

As for 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.

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.

Michael Lawson's documentary was seen at its premiere in a major Leicester Square cinema by an influential audience invited by Christian Solidarity Worldwide—of which I am now president. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us who watched the emotionally traumatic interviews with the ostracized *Devadasis*, or the physically disgusting work scenes with the excrement cleaners, or the cruel exploitation of the child laborers, were left shocked. In the Q&A session after the screening there were tears, anger, and a widespread determination to start a campaign that will move the enslavement of the Dalits to a high profile position on the international human rights agenda. 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. ❧

Jonathan Aitken, *The American Spectator's High Spirits* columnist, is the author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace, to be published in June by Crossway Books. His biographies include Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday) and Nixon: A Life, now available in a new paperback edition (Regnery).*