

Dalits: The Changing Contexts of Caste, Culture, and Class in South India

By David Blake Willis

Urban and rural: Changing contexts in India

The Dalits reveal an India on the edge where the apartheid of caste, culture, and context has been intensified by a social devastation wrought by a system of property ownership imported from the West. Along with tribal peoples (Scheduled Tribes), the Dalits (Scheduled Castes), are the most downtrodden of people in India, something they themselves would acknowledge. They are now engaged in a monumental struggle against the hegemony of the upper castes in a system that has long regarded them as outside society altogether, as out-castes. Mostly located in agricultural villages that are becoming increasingly urbanized as new forms of communication and improved transportation networks penetrate India, the Dalits reveal the harsh realities of a system driven by materialism, greed, and oppression. Urban sprawl has begun to encompass all villages within a 20–25 kilometer radius of urban centers, transforming the nature of this oppression.

Following the massacre of Kilvenmani and other atrocities against Dalits in the Thanjavur District of Cauvery River Delta in 1969, Krishnammal Jagannathan and S. Jagannathan, two disciples of Mahatma Gandhi and his successor Vinoba Bhave, chose the area as the site for their new ashram. The ashram, which they named Vinoba Ashram was dedicated to the rights of the oppressed, the dignity of the poor, and getting land to the landless. Its location was an important, prescient choice by Amma and Appa (Mother and Father), as Krishnammal and Jagannathan are called by the Dalit villagers

among whom they work.

My own contacts with these two great social activists came in the 1970s when I was doing research on the Sarvodaya Movement, a social change organization that was an outgrowth of the work of Gandhi and Bhave. Through the activities of Amma and Appa I became interested in the role of social mapping, particularly when it came to social and cultural spaces focusing on communities which have been historically oppressed. This also matched my interest in the theme of crossing borders and the creation of new cultures. My research thus also has a social activist side in terms of the goal of ending apartheid in India. I wanted to try to find ways of addressing this powerful, insidious system, of helping in whatever way I could, however small.

Amma and Appa's work has focused on the goal of ending colonialism. This is colonialism broadly conceived, what the great women's activist of India Gabrielle Dietrich calls *internal and external colonialisms*. Colonialisms of the mind and the heart, these pernicious, vicious attitudes and behaviors have had an especially devastating effect on oppressed peoples. The taboo against transcaste marriage, of which Amma and Appa are one example, is one instance, as is the emphasis on purity and pollution.

Appa and Amma are people who want to create a new culture, a more humanistic culture. As an activist I also wanted to offer my service, especially after the Great Tsunami of 2004 and the devastation which it wrought. By sheer and terrible coincidence LAFTI's operations are in the Great Tsunami zone. The immense destruction and mammoth relief operations which followed had a great deal to do with Dalits and urban/rural policy in the Nagappatinam area, not only in the city itself, but in its satellite towns and villages as well.

It is important to note at the outset here that India is often seen as one vast galaxy of villages, intersected here and there by great cities. Urbanization is proceeding full speed ahead in India and Nagappatinam District is no exception. It is especially significant, however, that in India everyone is still in some way connected to the village. The rural to urban transition now taking place is leading to what is in fact a rural-urban nexus, yet the roots of most people's lives in India still lie in the village and especially in its constitution as a *panchayat*, an organization of five villages which come together for administrative, social, and political purposes. Sometimes these are no more than

hamlets, while in other cases we are looking at populations in the thousands of people. In practice urbanization in appears to be engulfing India, yet at the core of the society are still the villages and the villagers.

I should also say a word about my theoretical approach, if only briefly. I view the field of cultural studies, from which I will draw my interpretative approaches, as one of social activism. There is, in this theoretical framework the need to combine research with social activism, to do whatever one can to help. This is a moral as well as a theoretical stance. The Great Tsunami was a good example of immediate need for aid and help, but there are other ways that one can help as a scholar, too. In this paper it is the offer and promise of research and scholarship, especially in terms of informing people about Dalits, Dalit liberation movements, and people like Krishnammal and Jaganathan who show that changing the world can be a theme of one's life. People like them are often called social or cultural entrepreneurs. This paper will explore the power of such entrepreneurs. It is in the power of their ideas and their social action that we find peace, justice, and social change. In the end, the goals of LAFTI, like the goals of social activists everywhere, are healthy people, healthy cities and villages, and healthy communities.

The geographical setting: South India, Nagappatinam District, and Thiruvarur Districts

LAFTI's activities are situated in a wide area of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu in Nagappatinam and Tiruvarur Districts. These Districts were formerly one district. LAFTI ranges widely across these two Districts, depending on immediate needs. When there is flooding or other suffering LAFTI is usually the first NGO to arrive on the scene with assistance for the poorest of the poor. LAFTI was the first organization on the scene with assistance after the Great Tsunami of December 26, 2006. They were deeply involved in the clean-up and recovery. It is important to note that they also avoided acceptance of funds from large organizations like the Red Cross or World Vision because of the potential for these operations to be tainted and utilized by corrupt local politicians (as did indeed happen). LAFTI prefers to receive assistance, as they always have, from small donors and for dedicated projects such as hostels for school children, computer and

other training programs, and basic housing materials. Being staunch Gandhians, Amma and Appa work hard to maintain the village base of their activity.

Nagappatinam District is often called the Land of Religious Harmony because of its mixing of Hindu, Christian, Muslim, and (formerly) Buddhist religious institutions. This deep religious heritage included the export of Hinduism and Buddhism by the sea route to Southeast and East Asia which occurred during the Pallava era (5th–8th centuries AD) and Chola era (9th–12th centuries AD). The Cholas were responsible for some of the earliest and most complex urban phenomena of South Asia, including the great cities of Thanjavur, Nagappatinam, Gangakondacholapuram, Chidambaram, and many other urban centers in South India. Beyond South India, Chola political, religious, architectural, and economic expertise were exported to the great kingdoms of Srivijaya in what is now Indonesia (Sumatra, Java, and Bali) and the Khmers in the Indochinese Peninsula as models of state formation and urbanization (notably Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom).

The Cholas are best-remembered for their art, which included glorious bronzes, stone temples, and images of the divine. They should be remembered as well for another darker legacy, the social ordering of Tamil society. We wonder how and to what extent the caste system and what it has done to oppress so many people, even as it wove a social system that has remained more or less stable for a thousand years, came from the Cholas. It is a social ordering that, of course, goes even further back. What is this social organization that allows a few to trample on the dignity and humanity of so many?

We are reminded of the hybridity of South Asia, of how multiple cultures come together and work out arrangements, exchanging and interchanging as they create the conditions for new hybrid cultures. We see this even today in the society around LAFTI. Many, if not most, of the Brahmins seem to have left Thanjavur, for example. We do not see the *agraharams* that used to appear, with their red and white striped walls, whenever one was passing through villages along the banks of the Cauvery. There are other landlords now who use the labor of the Dalits: middle and other upper castes, Muslims enriched by money from the Gulf, Malaysia, and elsewhere. The labor, the hard backbreaking work of actually maintaining the fields, however, always goes to those at the bottom of the society. And especially to the

Dalits.

We thus continue to marvel at the power and the presence of the Cholas, even as we reflect on larger lessons from their society. Some scholars recently see the bronzes of the Cholas and much of their art as showing distinct Southeast Asian influences, the bronze artisans of the village of Swamimalai in Thanjavur District being said by some to having been descended from generations of Southeast Asians. Hybridity thus does exist, despite the privileging of purity and the depredations associated with concepts of pollution. What can this mean for a society in transition? We will come back to this in the conclusion.

Becoming models for the development of cities, towns and villages historically, the legacies of these eras continue today, especially in administrative divisions and village panchayat organization. The Tamil culture from which this all sprung has a dated history of at least 3000 years, with some scholars believing that a sophisticated Tamil culture has existed for as long as 5000–6000 years. Considerable trade with the Roman Empire during the Imperial Roman era has resulted in numerous archaeological finds of Roman coins and other artifacts, much of it in the Nagappatinam area. The word for rice in Latin (*oryza*) is derived from the Tamil word *arisi*, reflecting a serious debate concerning the origins of cultivated, irrigated paddy rice, some seeing it as coming from Thailand, while others believing it came from the Cauvery River Delta that is the center of Thanjavur and that provides the water for this “Rice Bowl of South India.”

By the 19th century much of the culture and social organization had solidified into a rigid and corrupt hierarchical system known as *jati* and which people outside India know as caste (from the Portuguese *casta*). It is this condition of degeneracy which greeted the British when they arrived. However, instead of providing new models of a liberated society, as was becoming current in England at the time, the rapacious traders and government officials of what would become imperial India simply imposed their model of property on the top of an oppressive social and economic system in the interest of their own profits. Regrettably, many early social scientists in India, particularly anthropologists, aided and abetted this plunder and the institutionalization of a severely degrading social system with their codification and organization of human society. At the time of India's Liberation in 1947 the Tanjore area and the Cauvery Delta had become a hotbed

of agitation and social ferment. This agitation exploded in the 1960s in a rural revolution led by the Naxalites (Maoist Communists), many of whom were drawn from the most oppressed of people in the caste system: the Dalits.

Dalits and LAFTI

The approach of Amma, Appa, and LAFTI to caste and oppression is one of healing. Nearly all of the workers and communities with which LAFTI is associated are Paraiyars, the origin of the English word pariah. Amma herself is from this community, as are most of LAFTI's leaders. Appa is from the Thevar community, a middle level caste that has risen to a position of great power in Tamil Nadu politics in the last twenty years. Their marriage was thus an early example of an intercaste or transcaste alliance.

Amma and Appa have chosen to downplay the actual spoken associations of caste and the Dalits with whom they work, despite the fact that they are almost all from that background. Why would this be so? The answers can be found in questions of confidence, empowerment, and dignity. From Amma's point of view it is not necessary to speak too deeply or too often of caste status. This is of course very much in keeping with Gandhian principles of social justice and equality. That being said, however, the status of Dalits is one that is only too obvious. Amma has sought a remedy to this hegemony and oppression in action and active struggle that is more oriented to achievements and less to rhetoric.

This is not to say that Amma avoids caste identifications or direct action concerning Dalit liberation. She believes instead that for people to be empowered and to receive dignity and respect they must first have the basic requirements for human beings met: land, a home, and a job. One of the major reasons she sees caste oppression as continuing has to do with the basic lack of these three basic requirements. In keeping with Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement, she and Appa believe that it all begins with land, hence the emphasis on acquiring the same. What is different with Amma and Appa, of course, is that with LAFTI they are aggressively seeking not only land donations but the capitalization, loans, and other instruments of the modern world needed for empowering Dalits.

The Dalits who work with LAFTI are then expected to contribute

in kind, either through donation of their labor or services or through support for LAFTI's active campaigns against prawn farm cultivation, illegal liquor, and other abuses in the society. LAFTI has the ability to summon tens of thousands of people (again, most of them Dalits) on less than a day's notice for these demonstrations and struggles. These demonstrations are still not directly about caste, although the surrounding society certainly understands who these demonstrators are and what is meant by them demonstrating. The deeper messages about caste are very obvious to the people of South India.

There is another point to be made here about caste and the approach of LAFTI to issues of social status and social hierarchy. That is the extent to which politicians in the past and present have utilized caste for electoral-based politics. Amma and Appa do not want to be tainted with the whiff of corruption that inevitably attends such politicians in India. Instead, LAFTI works with politicians only when the time is right, refraining from direct endorsements of particular politicians or their parties. This includes Dalit parties, one of the main reasons being the ambivalence which greets political leaders in general as they change their allegiances frequently, something that has happened with the Dalit Panthers Thirumaavalavan, for instance. Since the DPI Party has traditionally been rather weak compared with other caste-oriented parties it has tended to seek alliances, and these alliances often shift with the winds of change in the political landscape.

Clearly, there is a feeling here that human dignity rises above jati or caste-based politics when it comes to LAFTI's basic beliefs. As long as the frame of hierarchy is directly avoided, there is room for dignity and respect for all the human beings who are part of direct social action.

Fostering community in South India today

Amma, Appa, and the workers of LAFTI

Fostering community in South India today is one of the chief goals of LAFTI. How do Amma and Appa do this? This section begins with notes on what comes first for LAFTI and Amma, then a look at mobilization tactics around the time of the Great Tsunami, followed by the voices of individual workers at LAFTI.

LAFTI is a registered society with an Executive Committee and a

General Body Committee. The Executive Committee consists of Amma, Appa, and seven others, including one other woman. They maintain the accounts and the annual report. The Executive Committee looks after administration and makes decisions. There are 22 members in the General Body, with representatives from each village in LAFTI's area. Among these 22 members there are 11 men and 11 women. No one in either body receives a salary for this administrative work.

Taking care of primary comes first for LAFTI, for Amma and for the workers of LAFTI. The dignity and respect that come from having basic needs met is often overlooked in discussions about upliftment of the poor and the revival of community, focusing as these discussion often do on buildings and the material organization of the environment. But this dignity and respect is very important for Dalits and other oppressed peoples something which those of us who are privileged so often overlook. Without the space and time that comes from rising above concerns for basic survival it is hardly possible to move ahead in other areas. This is Amma's reasoning.

The amazing motivation and mobilization that Amma has achieved with the villagers begins with this lesson in the power of basic needs. Where to go next? On February 25, 2006, I organized a workshop and strategy session for LAFTI workers with the support of Amma and LAFTI leaders that addressed precisely this question. This workshop was followed in the afternoon by a long meeting with approximately 100 village leaders, both men and women. What is reported here is an introduction of the key staff of LAFTI (other reports will follow in a later publication).

Introduction of the LAFTI Staff

LAFTI Leaders Workshop (verbatim translation)

Kuthur, February 25, 2006

Meenakshi — Women's Leader. Tailoring Teacher. Leader of educational programs for women.

Vimala — Women's Leader. Accountant. Looks after the accounts for buying lands and other work.

Jothi — Women's Leader. Does all kinds of work, especially collecting money from the buying of land and gives that to Vimala, the accountant.

Kanagi — Women's Leader. Works in Perkalakudi, hostel warden at Valivalan and teacher to 15 children in a Balwadi (a day-care center set up by LAFTI). She also takes care of the poultry farms that Amma gave to poor Dalits as a small cottage industry/business. There are also herbal farms and vegetable farms and she takes care of those, too. She is going to start a training session for 26 women to make toilet pans (from models).

Vengopu — Men's Leader. Working here for 20 years. At first he was working in villages. Now he is the coordinator supervising the collections, solving the problems of the villagers.

Veerachamy — Men's Leader. Working here for 20 years. He opposes plans by the government which give trouble to the people. His work includes buying lands and coordinating with Gopu. He says that all the people related to LAFTI know Vengopu and him. For the past 10–12 years, they are showing more interest in the prawn farms agitation.

Vengopu — From 1992 this prawn farm agitation is going on. He (Veerachamy) has gone to jail three times. Thamba and a few others have also gone to jail with him. Only Amma and himself have not gone to jail. The Others have all gone to jail. Amma has not gone for the prawn farm issue, (though) for other previous issues she has gone to jail. The others have all been held for non-bailable offences like murder, attempt to murder, theft etc. They had to go to the High Court for all the cases. Then after getting bail, they were in jail for 45–50 days, but after that, too, they were released under conditional bail. They had to stay in the same area. They could go home for three months or so. (Most of the cases, especially the murder charges, were framed by local goondas, thugs in the employ of prawn farm owners. There was no basis in fact and the aim was to tie up LAFTI workers and prevent them from agitating).

Veerachamy is the head for the agitation. I look after the administration.

Veerachamy-Also goes to government offices to meet the officials, to get subsidies for lands. He goes along with Amma, so now everyone knows him. He also asks for food for work, training, and government jobs for those associated with LAFTI. He has also gone to Italy with Amma. Still he likes to do many things. He says that they do things that even political parties cannot do. Even now he has decided to protest for four reasons on 6th March.

He also arranges the documents for houses. The government should give houses to people who suffer from natural calamities other than Tsunami victims. He is asking that the TASMAL Wine shops run by the Government be closed. He is also asking that the prawn farming be stopped according to the court order.

Muniyan — Men's Leader. Works here for 20 years. For 15 years he has worked as a Cashier and Accountant. (Muniyan is the key financial wizard who keeps LAFTI running, most recently in tough times as there has been little income).

Kaliappan — Accountant. He works here for more than 15 years. He maintains all the accounts of LAFTI especially for local and foreign contributions. He submits reports to the Auditors.

Gandhi — Men's Leader. Works here for nine years. He does communication and correspondence work, especially all work done in English (Please note that all of these workshops were conducted in Tamil. The lack of English knowledge is a point that LAFTI leaders are now trying to address among themselves).

Asaitambi (Thamba) — Men's Leader. Works here for 15 years. He works along with Veerachamy in the protest and other movements and he goes to jail. (LAFTI photographer and brother of Vengopu).

Anbuselvam — Men's Youth Leader. Works here for eight years. He is not involved in making land acquisitions but is teaching. He was a student here first, and since his work was good he was selected as a teacher. (He came to LAFTI to learn carpentry). He is Dalit (who are usually doing hard labor) but since LAFTI wanted Dalits to learn other skills he was taught carpentry and now he also works as a carpenter in the houses built by LAFTI.

Bharathi Mohan — Men's Leader. Works here for four years. He is the warden in Kuthur Hostel. He maintains accounts and all works. And, a special point, he gives food to everyone!

Amma — He gives food to me especially!

Vengopu — In the beginning of LAFTI, his father worked with Amma. (Amma says that Vengopu's father asked him to help Amma.) He used to come along with his father and then got interested in working for LAFTI.

Veerachamy — Senthovur near Venmani is his native place. He was studying in the 6th or 7th standard when the Venmani incident happened. From that time he doesn't like the police. He was also interested in social service. After his high school he studied I.T.I. and became a molder. Once when he went to Mayiladuthurai he got a driver's job. So he took his license and worked as a driver for Agro Industry. Even before that, in 1968 when Amma started her work in this area, he was interested in her work. Once when there was a flood in the Mayiladuthurai area, Amma was helping there and she came to Agro Industry to buy seeds. He was 19 when he was

working there. At first he wanted to join the police, but because of their misbehavior, he disliked the police. He was also very active in Communism. In 1986 there was an election for panchayat head for the first time. Dalits were living in his area as the majority. Somehow Sivagurunatha Pillai, a man from the Pillai caste, got the seat allotted for Dalits. So in protest against this he left the job and came to this place (LAFTI) (N.B., Veerachamy has a strong identity as a Dalit).

(Amma — They (Dalits) got money from Sivagurunatha and gave him the seat.)

Even though Pillai did many good things, he was disliked because he took the seat of a Dalit. He was there for two terms. Later Veerachamy opposed him in the election, but he lost. He left the jobs which he had been doing for eight years because of the election. (Since no government employee can stand in the election.). He lost with 16 votes as, he says, because there were superstitious beliefs about Communism (He was running as a Communist). At that time Amma was working for the landless in that area. Once there was a conference in Mannargudi. When Amma went to a Mirasdhar (landlord) to ask for paddy, the Mirasdhar as usual heaped the paddy on the ground thinking of Amma like other common people. At that time Amma wanted to know who was the man who opposed Sivagurunatha. All political parties had approached Veerachamy. Later he joined the ADMK when M.G. R was the Chief Minister. He was also given a very high post in the party. Amma wished to meet him. When he came to meet Amma, she told him that it is good that he lost in the election, because if he had won he could have helped only 500 people but if he joins her, he could help more people. He was impressed by Appa and Amma's story. So, he told them that he would join them. But Amma asked him to leave all his political works if he wished to work here. Now he feels very satisfied for choosing this work.

Muniyan — Native place : Kaavalakudi. He was studying in the 5th standard when the Venmani incident happened. He was very young but still something affected him. Ten years later, when Amma came to his place to buy lands, she wanted a literate person. (He had studied under the old SSLC) He told Amma he would go with her. He served as the head of a Grama Sabha (village assembly) for three years. He used to attend meetings. The Grama Sabha is a group/committee which identifies the landless and helps them. About 30-40 families in one group. Among them 3-4 people would be representatives. He was one among these representatives. Amma has given many lands to the landless people in the neighbouring areas. Seeds and fertilizers were needed. So they started an agro service. He worked there for three years. He was the third most important man in the agro service. Only in 1992 did he join here as an accountant.

Kaliappan — Native place: Koothur.

He was first influenced by Appa's words, when Appa asked "When there are people who don't have enough food or good huts, why should there be big houses?" Appa would have been 80 years old when he said this. His speech was so aggressive, even Amma spoke up. There were other people, too, in the meeting. At that time he was working in a government shop after finishing his B.Com. He lost his job when some storekeeper cheated him. He was into communism, too. He says that nothing can be done through *ahimsa* (non-violence), that only through violence could things be done (a surprisingly frank opinion expressed in this Gandhian organization and at which the other members simply chuckled, looking with some affection at him). At that time LAFTI's work attracted him. He worked as a Grama Sabha secretary for three years. There were 100 cows under LAFTI. Without people's care 40 of those cows died, and he was given care of both the village meeting and the remaining 60 cows, along with one other man for three months. After seeing his work, they asked him to take training in a fishery for three months. From that time he has been working for LAFTI.

Anbuselvam — 29 years.

He took carpentry training for six months. Ten people learned carpentry along with him, and all are working for LAFTI. All ten have continuous work in LAFTI, but they also work for others in the village.

Bharathi Mohan — 30 years. Native place: Rayithamangalam.

He studied M.A. He was teaching in a tuition centre. He heard through Vaidyanathan that there is a job in LAFTI for the warden's position. Thus, he joined LAFTI. He is here for the past four years.

Meenakshi — Native place: Kudavasal.

She is here for the past three years. She was working in Prajvida, an organization run by Gopu's father. He introduced her to LAFTI.

Vimala — Native place: Manalmedu.

She has finished B.Com. When she was looking for a job, her uncle met Amma and got a job here for her. For six months, she taught in the adult education scheme in Koothur. After that she was asked to work in Mel-palam as an accountant in a dairy farm. Later Amma asked her to write accounts in the office since her handwriting is good. She is working here for 15 years.

Jothi — Native place: Alathambadi.

She is working here for 15 years. She first joined the tailoring program started by Amma. Since she had to travel more after this training for her work, Amma arranged for her to take care of a Balwadi (day care center) in Keerangudi. She has also taught adult education in the village. (Her husband and her son-in-law are both working as carpenters for LAFTI).

(Amma: Even though her family people opposed giving her daughter in marriage to a Dalit, she made her daughter marry a Dalit. She should be appreciated for making the marriage like any ordinary marriage with invitations etc. – N.B., Jothi is not a Dalit herself but from a higher caste)

She is the leader for women protesting. She has had an important part in many protests. She has also gone to jail. She heads the protestors.

Kanagi – First she was working in an Oxford tuitions school. Through an employee of LAFTI she came to work in LAFTI. She worked in a balwadi. She also does all kinds of work.

(Amma: All the workers do all kinds of work)

There is much more to report on these workers and the village leaders as well, but because of space limitations for this paper I will end here by noting that, as we can see, the goal of fostering community has been a key to LAFTI's work.

Urban and rural vitality in Nagappatinam and Thiruvarur Districts

The workers of LAFTI are both men and women, young and old. They come from a variety of backgrounds and represent a crossing-over, a mixing of differences. At the core of LAFTI's operations is a vitality that mixes both the traditional rural and the increasingly urban character of Thiruvarur and Nagappatinam Districts, too.

This vitality can be spoken of in classic terms from Indian philosophy. It is a vitality which fundamentally organizes and drives LAFTI as an organization through the principles of *gram swaraj* (village self-rule) and extends to the many programs which LAFTI has in place at any one time.

No conflict. No compromise. That is the ethic and methodology of Amma and Appa for social, ecological and economic problems. As Amma said to me, "You approach the women first. Get them on your side. The power of *shakti*, female divine energy, will carry you far. You approach women partly because this is not about political parties, which men are so quick to become involved with and which suck up resources that could more effectively be used elsewhere. The DMK, the Communists, and others may speak a good line, but end-results are what we are really looking for. The men will be brought along later by the women."

The women are also the end-point victims for many of the problems caused by social and economic injustice, including alcohol which Amma and Appa, being good Gandhians, completely oppose. For women there are communal struggles every day, and then the struggles with their own men who may gamble or drink away what little there is. Not all men, of course, but the record is decidedly one-sided.

One notices that Amma constantly asks women and men wherever we stop in the course of the fieldwork about the ownership of the lands we are looking at, especially inquiring about those lands that look to be illegally owned or are lying fallow when they could be used.

In the end it is about the same deeply felt human needs. As Amma told us, "People are attached to me and I to them. Fellowship. It is fellowship they are starving for." The basic dignity and respect which Amma accords to all people, whatever their age or wherever they come from, follows her belief in the 'unity of the light,' that 'the spirit is one.' "Where there is Poverty," she says simply, "We will find it."

The housing program

My first contact with Amma regarding the housing program came in 2003. It was in a letter which spoke of her commitment to the housing program. We had met on and off over the years, but this was the first time that she explained the specifics of the housing program to me.

12th August 2003

My Dear David Willis,

As you know I am from a humble origin. I was born in a small hut. When I was in 8th class I used to draw a picture of a hut and wrote about the sufferings of the people in the hut and send that article to all the educated youths, of course there were not educated ladies at that time. Due to the experience of the poverty in my young days I have developed a tremendous love and compassion for the poor. It makes me to run about to find out the sources to help them.

I am from a poor landless family. Land is life-giving resource to the poor. All along my mind I was thinking of land to the landless. At present I want to give a decent living quarters atleast to 5000 poor families. It is a

big aim. Let us try our best to fulfill this aim. I would like your active cooperation and participation in this great endeavor.

May God bless and guide us.

With kind regards,

(Krishnammal Jagannathan)

My research and activist agenda with LAF'TI began anew at this time. The success of this program of LAF'TI's has been stunning. Over 10,000 families have received homes, all of them built with their own hands and with the help of LAF'TI. The monies which have been needed for loans are gradually repaid to LAF'TI or in kind through rice or other crops that have been raised.

Later that month during my fieldwork I noticed that the housing program is really a proxy for Amma's messages of dignity, respect, and empowerment for the Dalits. Finally the results are coming, all the time, really, and in so many ways, for this person of compassion and boundless energy. A letter from LAF'TI in September 2006 illustrates this as well:

15th September 2006

Dear Friends,

Greetings from LAF'TI.

LAF'TI is delighted to inform you that for the land distribution of 1061 acres of cultivable lands to landless poor, the Tamilnadu Government has issued a special order for the free stamp duty to register the lands in the name of landless poor women. It is a great blessing to the poor people. The registration charge for one acre is at least Rs.5,000 (100 Euros). The poor cannot afford. So the Government has come forward to sanction free stamp registration. In two weeks time the lands will be registered and it will benefit 1061 families.

LAF'TI workers worked very hard for nearly one month, meeting the concerned officials to get this special order. The dam water is plenty and the people are happy to start the cultivation as owners. It is a great achievement for the LAF'TI workers.

With love and regards,

(Krishnammal Jagannathan)

Economic sustainability: programs for workers

One of the key goals of LAFTI is to help people stand on their own two feet with dignity and respect. They have introduced a number of programs for economic sustainability with this in mind. Chief among these are training programs for computer technicians, carpenters, masons, mat-weavers, and other small industries which can help workers either have a full-time job beyond agriculture or supplement their agricultural work. Much of this approach has to do with self-sufficiency. Because of the space requirements of the present paper, a detailed report on these programs will be explored in a later publication. An outline can be found on the LAFTI website (www.lafti.net).

Education programs

LAFTI regards education as critically important for the future. Many LAFTI workers were actually trained by LAFTI or raised in LAFTI's hostels as boys and girls. From the beginning of LAFTI Amma and Appa have been committed to offering support for the education of children. Early on in the history of the organization they established hostels for children where promising boys and girls from distant villages could live closer to towns near LAFTI with good schools (This is yet another sign of the growing urbanization of India, of course).

At present LAFTI runs three hostels for children. The original hotel, at Gandhigram near the Workers' Home and within the Gandhigram Rural University where Amma and Appa had their first headquarters, now has about 60 children. The Workers' Home, it should be noted, was a training ground for many activist leaders over the years, including Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, and the American Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, both of whom spent considerable time with Amma and Appa. These two humble souls have reached out to many lives through their work.

Kuthur has a hostel for about 40 boys, and Vallivalam, (south of Kuthur and near some excellent schools) has a hostel for about 60 girls. Many of these children have parents who have either worked

with LAF'TI, benefited from LAF'TI's activities, or both. Nearly all are Dalit.

When I have asked Amma about the possibility of actually building a school beyond the hostels which provide food and shelter for the children, she looked dreamily and said that would be wonderful but for now we have to do what is necessary step-by-step. The education programs go beyond simply supporting children and providing them with material and spiritual sustenance. Numerous and frequent programs aimed at educating the people about the problems of alcohol, a scourge of the Indian countryside, and the environmental destruction of prawn farms have been organized, as witnessed in this recent letter from Amma:

8th March 2006

Dear David,

Everyday we are receiving lot of visitors. We have started many activities in the villages. On 5th October we had a public meeting with 2000 people. In the meeting five resolutions passed. Fighting against illicit liquor, prawn farms, demand for house site to live, better houses and land to till. It was very wonderful. We have planned to organize youth to take up these problems and fight.

Thank you for your memorable visit to LAF'TI.

With love and kind regards,

(Krishnammal Jagannathan)

This last comment is a reference to my visit in the winter of 2006 when I proposed the idea of seminars and workshops for LAF'TI workers and leaders. The main idea initially for these workshops was to be able to gather information and materials about LAF'TI from everyone together. Amma quickly realized that these meetings would be useful leadership training tools and a chance to examine where LAF'TI had come from and the next stages to be considered. Here is a letter from Amma after those seminars that reflects how she grasps and utilizes every tool and approach possible to further the causes of LAF'TI.

March 10, 2006

Dear David,

Received your email. The seminar is a good point to stimulate new thought in the mind of the villagers. For age long they suffered and (have been) depressed. They need more motivation and education. Your participation in the seminar and the questions are appreciated by all the participants. Some of them were eager to share their experiences with you. Again we had a public meeting in Valivalam. They all came and participated. They are prepared to give time and energy to LAFTI's activities.

Happy to know that you are coming to our area in August.

With love and kind regards,

Krishnammal Jagannathan

By early May LAFTI had realized another objective in their educational struggles, a significant achievement indeed:

11th May 2006

My Dear Friends,

Greetings from LAFTI.

It is a great joy that LAFTI has achieved in constructing a hostel building for the girls at Valivalam. That land (place) belongs to the temple, but one big landlord was enjoying the land illegally along with 309 acres of temple land. To release these lands we have struggled for many days and went to jail for 53 days. Finally the lands were released from the landlord and distributed to landless and we got the land for hostel building.

To construct a beautiful big building means lot of funds. To find funds to construct the hostel building is another struggle. We organized funds through many institutions and friends. It includes the kind contribution of our good friend Mr. Vittorio Merlini, (Gruppo 1%), Sestola, Italy. With great difficulties we have completed the building and 13th May (today) is an auspicious day for India. On that day Buddha got enlightenment and many temples in this area are celebrating the temple festivals. So we have organized the opening ceremony on May 13th. This is for your kind information. May I kindly request you to pray for the progress of the girls who are staying in the hostel.

With love and regards,

(Krishnammal Jagannathan)

Amma and Appa continue to support educational programs wherever they can find opportunities to help the poor, always with the goal of helping the Dalits to achieve dignity and purpose. They do this with compassion, love, and understanding, three wise educational approaches that tell more about the role of education for LAFTI than schools, books, or uniforms ever will. It is these questions of basic psychological survival, which follow those of physical survival, that are at the bottom of LAFTI's agenda for change, questions that are deeply tied to the environment and the consequences of natural and man-made calamities.

Dalits in the urban/rural nexus: policy proposals and directions

The need to address the downtrodden and the poor is now being realized at the highest levels of government as well, as we can see in the text of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's address to the Indian nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort in New Delhi on India's 60th Independence Day in 2006:

There is visible progress all around. However, when I see this, I have some worries. And I am aware that every Indian has similar worries. Even as we move forward rapidly to claim our rightful place in the comity of nations I see that there are vast segments of our people who are untouched by modernization; who continue to do backbreaking labour; who continue to suffer from iniquitous social orders.

As Pankaj Mishra (2006) has noted, too, "the increasingly common, business-centric view of India suppresses more facts than it reveals." The alleged rise of India is starkly met with the statistic that the country's per capita gross domestic product is \$728, only slightly higher than much of Africa. At the same time, the Human Development Index ranks India at 127, just above Myanmar and more than 70 points below Cuba and Mexico. Nearly 380 million Indians still live on less than one hundred yen or a dollar a day, with half of all children in India malnourished. Every year 2.5 million children die in India, which is one in five of child deaths worldwide. Literacy has grown, but many of the 61% of the literate population can barely write their name. Moreover, as Mishra points out, "In the countryside, where 70 percent of India's population lives, the government has re-

ported that about 100,000 farmers committed suicide between 1993 and 2003.” And that number is increasing every year.

And yet there is hope when we note the compassion of organizations like LAFTI to bring empowerment and help to the poor. Please note this letter of Amma in May 2006 concerning the social oppression of Dalits in temples and the change of policy at the State Government level:

19th May 2006

My Dear David Willis,

I am very thankful to your letter. It is a great joy to share with you that there are a lot of changes coming in Tamilnadu. Due to the change in the Government our actress Jayalalitha is defeated and Mr. Karunanidhi has come to power. That is the ADMK is defeated, and the DMK has come to power.

Karunanidhi has got a social background. He is from a Devadhasi family. In those days women are entitled not to marry but are common to the temple with no fixed marriage. So Karunanidhi's mother belongs to that community. We can say socially backward. Karunandihi is from Tiruvarur, so as soon as he came to power he passed an order that everybody has got the right to enter into the temple and offer Bhooja. It gives rise to the Dalits to raise their social status. The social evil of untouchability will be less. Is it not a good change? You can tell and share with your students there will be good changes in Dalit's lives.

With love and regards,

(Krishnammal Jagannathan)

Environmental considerations

At the same time, not only is preserving the environment a great concern, LAFTI has worked to develop an activist agenda against the depredations of industrial agriculture, especially prawn farming, which has had a devastating effect on the coastal lands of South India. A recent challenge which may prove even more important in the long run is the exploration and potentially future production activities of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) of the Indian government. Large swaths of agricultural land are being commandeered for

this exploration, and the results can hardly be called benign in the rural regional landscape.

Other programs for infrastructure and self-sufficiency are also considered critically important by LAFTI. Local economies need to be revitalized, and LAFTI is doing this not only through self-help entrepreneurial programs for rural Dalits and others but also through training programs in high-demand skills such as carpentry, masonry, computers and so on.

There are a number of major challenges facing both these Dalit workers and LAFTI as an organization. Foremost among these is the gradual modernization, even urbanization, of their community landscapes. While this is happening LAFTI is committed to the development of these communities. As Amma wrote in 2006,

April 29, 2006

My Dear Friends,

In the name of development, lots of things are happening in the world. In India in the name of globalization the Governments making innumerable plans to improve the life of the people. But unfortunately they are implementing the plans at the expense of the common man. For the last two weeks there was lot of news about the Narmada River Dam Project. Surely it benefits the landlords but thousands of hill tribes who are living in the river area are forcefully vacated from that place, sudden order from the Government was executed to displace thousands of people. They are about 35,000 families.

One good soul Medha Patkar a young lady started a movement, "Save Narmada River", she is very pure and sincere to fight for the rights of the people. Many times she undertook fasting programs, conducted many rallies in Bombay and Delhi and went to Supreme Court, the verdict that the people's need should be attended immediately providing them proper living quarters and livelihood facilities. The verdict is very clear that then only dam should be started. The verdict is a deaf one to the ears of the Government. They utterly failed to implement the verdict. Nothing has happened to protect the interest of the people. They are left uncared for. So many times Medha Patkar undertook fasting. Finally she decided to drown herself in the Narmada River water. But the Government didn't allow her to enter into that area. Last week she undertook 18 days fast in Delhi. She is very weak. Nearly 10 days in the Intensive Care Unit in All India Medical Institute at Delhi. On the request of many eminent political leaders and media, including the ex-Prime Minister, and others who are

interested in the public cause she ended her fast. But she is continuing the struggle. Fortunately she is having a mass behind her. When she was in a critical condition we all were very much worried about her life and just prayed.

Regarding our prawn struggle, the same problem. Jagannathanji fought continuously against prawn farms from 1992, hundreds of false cases are filed against satyagrahis (who are fighting against prawn farms), our workers and the people are under the great pressure of police and court atrocities. Every week and every month the workers & the villagers have to attend the court cases. They have to go to the court, stand in the presence of Judge with folded hands, bowing their heads till evening 5'O clock with the hope to get the judgment. What a torture finally the judge used to announce your case is postponed to next week. With heavy heart they returned back home. This same proceedings are continuing. The workers understand the court proceedings, but what about the villagers ? They become very impatient and started to scold the movement workers and they believe that spending lot of money in the court case can be won. It is unfortunate they are not able to understand the significance of Non-violent struggle. It is very sad that the non-implementation of Supreme Court Judgment to close down the prawn farms is not taken up for hearing in the Supreme Court. Jagannathanji is very much frustrated. The Government is indifferent to the common man and we are all tired of the struggle, fasting, and imprisonment continuously. This is what happening in India.

But now the election propaganda is going on, what a sad situation, crores of rupees are spent on propaganda work, they are wasting the money, fighting with each other. For the common man it is a drama, next month May 8th getting money for their vote, they are ready to vote for anybody. They are not able to realize the significance of the vote This is what is happening.

LAFTI is planning to awaken the people against the election propaganda, taking as its main issues the prawn farms and liquor shops that are everywhere a sore to the eyes. Nobody is talking about it so we are organizing the people to have a rally, offer satyagraha against these two problems, prawn and the liquor. So this is for your kind information.

Jagannathanji is always planning to undertake the fast against the prawn farms but we are restraining him. We all have determined not to allow him to undertake fasting programme.

Very happy to inform you that there are (a) few activists like Medha Patkar who is a strong voice for the voiceless displaced hill tribe families of 35,000.

Let us pray for her success in restoring peace and justice to the unfortunate neglected human beings.

With kind regards,

(Krishnammal Jagannathan)

The linkages and support for the poor by people like Medha Patkar, Krishnammal, and Jagannathan are very important indeed, not just for the poor and oppressed but for all of us. There are now other, even more wide-ranging linkages to consider.

Transcaste, transnational linkages

Dalit communities will continue to exist, although there is a clear trend towards consolidation and alliances between various Dalit sub-castes. Paraiyars and Pallars are leading the way in these efforts. These transcaste linkages are mirrored by transnational linkages across space and time as well, indicating possible paths for the future for LAFTI in terms of policy proposals.

One of the most important goals of LAFTI is to develop new approaches and new policies for rural vitality. Much of this has to do with the creation of agricultural and small industrial infrastructure for the rural poor. Land comes first, followed by housing that is both effective and appropriate for rural/urbanizing conditions. Both of these enable the producers themselves to benefit and prosper. LAFTI's community development policies reflect both the past, in terms of best practices, and the future, as the history of what LAFTI has done to empower rural workers reveals potential new directions.

What are the regional characteristics of community in urban/rural India today? One of the most important is that many regions of India that had formerly been rural with a nearby metropolis are now seeing the phenomenon of radiating urban community. This rural/urban nexus includes core urban areas becoming linked to surrounding rural towns and villages through a network of vital and growing ties. Primarily economic but with social and political links, these ties are growing alongside this urbanization. Towns are becoming small cities and villages are becoming towns.

What infrastructure is necessary for the poor in order to vitalize their communities in this situation? Housing is certainly one key com-

ponent of this work, in other words providing basic amenities and shelter. So, too, are activities focused on sustainable economic development for workers and their communities. 'Community-based' is thus a key policy concept and approach.

And while the politicization of caste and identity politics has meant the strengthening of caste and the growth of casteism and caste-related politics, there is a secularization of society, too, so that caste means less on a daily, public basis on the one hand while larger identities such as being Muslim or Hindu have come to dominate public perceptions of society, on the other. What has this set of transitions meant for the Dalits?

Driving into any city in India now has the feel of both the new and the old, of how things have changed but how they have stayed much the same. There are fewer bicycles and bullock carts and far more cars, trucks, and motorcycles, but there are also people lining the roads who are eking out a living in the most marginal of occupations: cobblers and sweepers, vegetable and fruit vendors, construction workers and other laborers, hauling and moving goods, providing the muscle, the strength, and the basic for the new development. Many of these jobs have traditionally been identified with Dalits. It is in this new context that new policies will need to be developed.

The India of waiting and waiting has given way to an impatient competition, a race to whatever is next. There is a sense of tension and possibility in the air. But for many there is also a sense of some being left out and left behind. That is what I have been searching for, where and how the politics of being marginalized is having an impact on the daily life of the people.

Krishnammal and Jagannathan, two veritable saints of our time who have opened our hearts to some of what is happening in India, have given us pause to consider the larger picture of where our lives co-mingle with those affected by class, by caste, by the Great Tsunami, by haves and have-nots, and by the oppression of an economic and social system that upholds tradition in the service of a persistent apartheid.

This apartheid of the society is also an apartheid of the spirit as nature has been literally torn apart from us, the prawn farms of coastal Asia wreaking havoc on what had been more or less balanced eco-systems being just one example. The ripping apart of local cul-

tural fabric that has ensued cannot be underestimated. The policies of LAFTI aim to resolve some of these great problems, not only for the Dalit minority but for all of us. It is in the power of hybridity, of the mixing of the best answers from many traditions that the future lies, not in rigid divisions imposed by ideas about purity and pollution.

Krishnammal and Jagannathan have worked hard to bring awareness and action of these injustices and challenges. They have brought the wisdom of the past, of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, and others, to their work. The achievements of LAFTI, the policies they are pursuing today, and the continuing development of new approaches by LAFTI workers deserve special attention. The future is now, and it is people-oriented organizations like LAFTI that will lead the way to a more equitable, more just society for us all.

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