



Understanding India

India is a land of amazing complexity, where hundreds of languages and ethnicities, dozens of religions, rigid social stratification and a multitude of political perspectives coexist. Although it has become the world's most populous democracy since independence from Great Britain in 1947, its potential has been compromised by vast inequities and many human rights problems. These include religious, ethnic and caste divisions that continue to divide the nation.

Dalits, on the lowest rung of the caste system, are denied their basic human rights, despite laws to the contrary. Following the mobilization that Dalit organizations achieved at the United Nations World Conference against Racism, the United Nations focused on the issue of caste discrimination. In 2002, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recognized caste-based discrimination as a form of descent-discrimination and strongly condemned its practice as a direct violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Confronting religious intolerance

Religious violence also continues to hamper India's progress internally



UUSC supports program partners that are amplifying the voices of women in India, as they work to end caste, religious and gender oppression.

and internationally. Since independence, not a single year has passed without Hindu-Muslim violence, and some years have been worse than others. The year 2002 was one of the worst years, with violence claiming over 2,000 lives – mostly Muslim – in the state of Gujarat. Alarming, there was substantial evidence of state government and police complicity. The sharp rise of right-wing Hindu forces in India has come under severe world criticism in recent years. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or the Hindu Nationalist party, is currently leading the country.

Sadly, India also has one of the largest and fastest growing HIV/AIDS epidemics in the world.

As the epidemic has spread, the long-standing practice of stigmatizing high-risk groups such as sex workers and gay men has produced deadly results. HIV/AIDS prevention programs for high-risk populations report severe harassment of their workers by police.

Conflict in Kashmir and the Northeast

India's Northeast region, an area isolated from mainstream Indian society by geography and culture, is plagued by human rights abuse, violence and low-intensity conflict. It has been under martial law for over 50 years.

Very little news of events in the Northeast reaches the rest of India. The region has more than 300

distinct indigenous groups who constantly confront forces of the Indian government. Poverty, violence and desperation have made drug addiction a serious problem in the area. The nexus of drug trafficking and the sex trade complicates the problem, as well as feeds the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region.

In Kashmir, despite high-profile diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the tension between India and Pakistan, over one million troops remain massed along the line of control set forth in a peace agreement signed in 1972. Dialogue with Pakistan is urgently needed, and it must involve the newly elected government of Kashmir. Border tensions inexorably build whenever the ruling party in either nation is threatened politically, only to dissipate after a hold on power is re-established.

Partnerships to build women's leadership

Since 1981, UUSC has successfully focused its programs on ending the oppression of women, addressing their powerlessness within society and aiming to empower them in all spheres of their lives. Since 1995, our program has also targeted a variety of complex but critical issues in human rights. Our partners work to organize women in highly militarized areas, combat violence based on religion and caste, and combat sex trafficking in India and regionally. The following are a few of the partner organizations with which we work.

Sahanivasa, in the 15 years that it has worked in Andhra Pradesh, has made remarkable progress in ques-



A group of trainers learn about HIV/AIDS during a lecture organized by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a UUSC program partner.

Venkatamma's Story

Venkatamma, a Dalit agricultural worker in the fields of an upper caste landlord, was denied her wages after putting in a full week in the fields and rendering household help in her quest for wages. The landlord tried to sexually abuse her, but workers rescued her. The landlord then went to her home and beat both Venkatamma and her husband.

Monitoring atrocities against women is an important component of Sahanivasa's women's rights programs, as organized women make a difference. The women's group organized by Sahanivasa mounted a protest in front of the police station demanding that the case be registered and the landlord arrested. The landlord escaped with the complicity of the local police inspector. The women's group then submitted a report to the district superintendent of police, and after a day of protesting, the police registered the case and arrested the landlord.

tioning the authority of the dominant caste in this rural area. With Sahanivasa's leadership, Dalits, agricultural workers, women and children became an organized task force challenging their feudal culture by using law as a weapon.

UUSC has supported the group's women's division, which organizes groups in 140 villages. The women

meet monthly to discuss ways to acquire land, advocate for fair wages and tenancy rights, protest caste-related human rights violations and discrimination, and address domestic violence. A credit plan instituted by the women, with Sahanivasa's help, has been a powerful force for raising the status of women and breaking their age-old dependency on money lenders and landlords.

Forum for Women's Rights and Development (FORWORD) was founded in 1992. It works toward achieving a just society free from caste, class and gender oppression, with justice, human dignity and equal opportunity for all. The organization promotes literacy, social awareness, leadership and unity among women of Dalit communities surrounding Madras, India. The area has rural traditions, but it is also influenced by the nearby urban culture. In the last year FORWORD's program has successfully motivated over 2,000 direct participants to look at their own oppression with a critical eye. These women have begun to see their oppression, not as their fate, but as human rights violations deliberately imposed by a patriarchal society.

Center for the Study of Secularism and Society (CSSS) was founded in 1992 in response to the violence between Hindu and Muslim communities. Through field activities, research, seminars and discussions, publications and training programs, CSSS works to spread the spirit of secularism in the country. UUSC is supporting the organization's Peace Education Training, which brings together activists from around the country who learn how to spread the message of humanism throughout India.

Center for Organization Research and Education (CORE) works for indigenous rights in conflict-ridden northeast India. Its work includes women and children's rights, documentation of civil and political rights, and support and training for indigenous organizations, including intern-



The coordinator of a health clinic in Calcutta shows sex workers a book about sexually transmitted diseases.

“I felt very shy when I first took part in the public demonstration program. But now, I am proud. I feel it is my duty to raise my voice against the injustice and violence against women in society in solidarity with other women. I am proud to stand in the street for my suffering sisters.”

— Mrs. Kumudha Ganapathypuram
A member of FORWORD's women's group

ship opportunities. In addition to its advocacy for regional issues, CORE has spearheaded campaigns to focus the efforts and attention of international and intergovernmental agencies on these issues with great success.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) began its work in 1995 as part of an AIDS prevention program in Sonagachi, the oldest and largest red-light district in Calcutta. Over 4,000 sex workers live in nearby brothels. Sanitation is deplorable, and basic services are nonexistent.

The women came together to stop exploitation, gain access to health care and set up alternative ways to earn a living. They are committed to giving their children, who are severely discriminated against, a better life. They have formed a credit union, started literacy classes, opened a cooperative store and are offering child care services. Through its networking efforts, DMSC now has 66 chapters and over 50,000 members in their fight to end extortion and abuse from police, pimps and local gangsters.

About UUSC

With more than 25,000 members and supporters, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is able to create long-term solutions to human rights challenges through a potent combination of social justice advocacy, education and support of community-based partner organizations. UUSC empowers women; supports the struggles of oppressed racial, ethnic and indigenous groups; defends the rights of children; and trains the next generation of social justice advocates. In addition, we provide financial and technical support when disasters strike, especially where human rights are threatened.

Whether working in the United States or internationally, UUSC believes that the best way to bring about and sustain social change is by supporting local leaders and ideas rather than imposing external solutions. While our programs change to meet the current need, UUSC's mission to advance justice and human rights remains constant.



The Forum for Women's Rights and Development (FORWORD) holds a training seminar on capacity building.

Looking beyond India

The human rights challenges facing oppressed women in India do not, of course, end at the country's borders. For this reason, UUSC is supporting the regional and international work of our program partners. CORE is the regional facilitator for the Focal Point Programme, which combats sexual exploitation of children. CORE also serves as facilitator for the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Additionally, CORE is an important contributor to the

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Sahanivasa was a leading proponent for the inclusion of Dalit rights at the 2001 U.N. World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa. The Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women has initiated programs at the regional and international levels to address the trafficking of women and children into prostitution with a program that reaches from India to Latin America and beyond.

Resources to learn more about human rights in India

- The UUSC Web site, www.uusc.org
- National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, www.dalits.org
- Center for Study of Society and Secularism, www.csss-isl.com
- Stop Traffic, www.stop-traffic.org



Unitarian Universalist Service Committee