Globe eBooks

Out *of* India

The Globe's **Stephanie Nolen** reflects on being a student of India – and what she's learned over five years about the fate of a critical superpower

THE GLOBE AND MAIL PRESENTS:

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PHOTO: CANDACE FEIT. COVER IMAGE: CANDACE FEIT

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A couple of days after I moved to India in November, 2008, a public relations official from UNICEF took me out for a fancy lunch (which, alas, doesn't happen to foreign correspondents nearly as often as you might think.)

We went to a restaurant with white walls and exposed brick, and ate Japanese food with lacquered chopsticks – it was all very New India. Over lunch, she mentioned, almost in passing, that nearly half of Indian children are malnourished, and that that statistic hadn't changed one bit, despite the fact that the country had posted 10 per cent economic growth for nearly a decade.

"Wait, what?" I said, putting down my chopsticks. "Why not?"

And so a few days later I was on a train into the heart of Old India – to rural Madhya Pradesh, the district with some of the highest child malnutrition rates anywhere in the world, higher even than African countries with chronic cycles of famine – to try to figure out why not.

In many ways, what I saw in that village was familiar to me from years of reporting on food crises in Ethiopia and Malawi. Babies with limbs like twigs; empty grain boxes; kids who looked five years old but told me they were actually 10; despairing, weary mothers. But Malawi has no booming economy, and its government isn't pouring billions of dollars into social welfare schemes like India.

I was stumped by that village, and by the question of why malnutrition persists in superpower India.

(cont.)

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In the end, the answers I started to piece together – you'll read them in the following pages – began a line of inquiry, a fascination, that shaped all the rest of my years in India.

I also covered big business deals and plenty of hard news here. But the stories that drove me as a reporter – and the ones that elicited the strongest response from readers – were about something else, the country we don't see on the "Incredible India" billboards or hear nearly as much about.

These stories, a baker's dozen of which are collected here, examine the twin forces of caste and gender and all the painful ways that they continue to shape life for so many Indians. They are stories from a side of India that I had to work to see, to struggle to decipher, and they are the best tool that I think I can provide to readers who seek to understand this critically important nation.

I was supported and enlightened by a great many kind people in my time in India, and I am grateful for their patience – particular thanks to Sudha Varghese, Harsh Mander, Tripta Narang and Katherine Hay. My gratitude also to the many Globe and Mail editors and colleagues who backed and enhanced the Breaking Caste project, and helped me to share the remarkable story of the girls over the years. Prerna – "the school called inspiration" – was mine.

Stephanie Nolen
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New Delhi, India

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PHOTO: CANDACE FEIT

A school called inspiration

More than 40 years ago, a teenager in India began a lifelong journey that took her far from her comfortable home to be with the poorest, most reviled "untouchables." Eventually she created a school where outcast girls, the lowest of the low, can learn everything from math, Hindi and English to championship karate – and, most of all, self-esteem. But when they graduate, will their country have a place for them? **Stephanie Nolen** reports, in the first of a series

DANAPUR, BIHAR, INDIA – The sky is still dark, the air still cool, when Poonam is roused by the shrill blast of the housemother's whistle. Tousle-haired, her face crinkled with sleep, she bundles her bedroll and shuffles with her friends out of their crowded dorm and to the lawn.

Still yawning, she takes her place in the front row of three ragged lines and begins to swing her arms and legs. This half-hour of exercise wakes her, and she is giggling by the time the girls head back inside. She fills a small plastic tub from a hand pump and gives herself a quick bucket bath. Then, back at her bunk, she lifts her uniform from its small steel case, smooths its pleats and puts it on: knee socks, grey kilt, white blouse, heavy shoes. Biting her lower lip, she wedges her long hair back in two barrettes.

She lines up for a plate of bread and daal and a steel cup of watery yogurt, and eats squatted on the veranda out front, her Hindi notebook propped in front of her for some last review.

By 7 a.m., she is on her way - her pink glasses perched on her button nose and her backpack pulling down her shoulders - out the gate of the girls school and up the road. Of the 125 girls here, Poonam has shown herself one of the brightest, and rupees have been saved to send her and a few others to private school. The rest of the girls watch with silent envy as she sets off; the responsibility is immense.

But Poonam, at 15, brims with confidence: She will get her high-school diploma, then go to university and get a bachelor's degree. And then she will be a teacher, she says - the best kind, who always takes the time to make sure students understand. In Poonam's whole community, there are only 10 people who can read, but she is undeterred.

"If I try, I can be and I can do anything," she says one evening. She sits with a few other girls in the circle of a lone light bulb, eking out a last hour of study. Her voice is filled with conviction. "If I don't try, I won't be able. But trying will take me far."

It is a beautiful idea - beautiful, and completely unfounded.

There's a popular image of India today, of technology start-ups, call centres, film sets, even a space program - the emerging superpower in the business pages, the one the government splashes on its "Incredible !ndia" billboards.

But Poonam lives in another India, one she shares with three-quarters of her 1.2 billion fellow citizens.

In the official India, "untouchability" - the social exclusion of Dalits, the people at the bottom of the Hindu caste system - is an antiquated, illegal practice, countered with a plethora of affirmative-action schemes.

But in Poonam's India, caste is still rigidly

enforced, in her village and most other rural areas. It's the India where a million girls have gone "missing" in the past six years because of sex-selective abortion, and where female work-force-participation rates are among the lowest in the world.

Poonam is a Dalit and a girl in India's poorest state. The odds stacked against her are immense.

It is an article of faith here that urbanization and economic growth are bringing greater equality. For some people, in the biggest cities, this is indisputably true. But Poonam is the acid test: In her India, in her lifetime, will it ever be enough just to work hard and have a dream?

This story starts long before Poonam came to school. It starts in 1964, in an airy classroom in a whitewashed Catholic school in the lush heart of Kerala, the southernmost state of India.

Another teenage schoolgirl, this one lanky but strong, is hunched at her desk: The teacher has left the room, but she is oblivious to the hubbub of chattering girls that has erupted around her. She has in her hands a magazine - a precious thing, something the girls only see a few times in a year. This one is from the Mission League, and it tells of the work being done in other parts of India by nuns and priests who work among the poor.

The article that has caught her attention is about Bihar, a state far to the north. There, she reads, the people are so poor that they sleep by the roadsides, in mean little huts or no shelter at all.

The girl puts the magazine down and tries to picture it. Her parents own a plantation, where they grow ginger and rice and pepper. They are not rich, but they are prosperous. The workers on their farm have less, of course, but her parents pay them well, they have sturdy houses and she plays with their children in the yard after school some days. She tries to picture people so poor they must sleep at the roadside. She can't.. And she decides, in that moment, that she will one day go to see for herself.

One year later, that girl, Sudha Varghese, set out on the four-day train journey north. In a quietly radical act, the first of many, she joined a Roman Catholic religious order, the Sisters of Notre Dame, which worked on education in Bihar. By becoming a nun, she was taking the sole path that would allow an Indian woman, then or indeed even now, to live as a woman alone, single and independent, for the rest of her life.

She spent a few years training at the Notre Dame Mother House in Patna, the Bihari capital - she had to learn English and Hindi, the language of the north; prepare for taking her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; and learn the basic skills of teaching and social work.

But Patna was disappointing. While Bihar was far poorer than Kerala, life in the Mother House was soporifically comfortable. So, in just a couple of years, Sister Sudha struck out on her own: "I wanted to be with the poor - and not just the poor, but the very poorest among them," she says. "So I went to the Mushahar."

The name means "rat eaters" - a sneer at the people at the bottom of the caste system. In a rigidly segregated society, the Mushahar are deemed by dint of birth to be the most reviled, below even the "manual scavengers" whose traditional job is to collect excrement from people's homes and carry it away in baskets on their heads.

The Mushahar are found mainly in the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; elsewhere, this bottom-caste position is reserved for other groups.

Dalits make up 16 per cent of Bihar's 103 million people, and Mushahar are about 15 per cent of Dalits. They are the least literate (about one in 100 adults can read), and have the worst health and economic indicators.

Almost without exception, Mushahar own no land, have no job but occasional farm labour, and are made to live apart from the rest of the community - to the southwest, so wind that blows over them does not touch the rest of the village.

Sister Sudha had known about caste, of course; her family was likely high-caste Hindu before converting to Christianity many generations before, although they never talked about it. The labourers on their farm came from the Dalit community, but she was raised sharing meals with them.

Bihar was an alien world, the one she had been seeking. She travelled out of the capital for a couple of hours to the tola - Mushahar settlement - of Jamsaut, and asked if she could stay.

"I was looking for a people and I found them," she says.

A LOOK OR TOUCH THAT 'POLLUTES'

The idea of "untouchability" - that some people are so "polluted" simply by virtue of the family into which they are born, that they cannot be touched, sit or eat with others - was laid out in ancient texts of Hinduism, and endured for nearly 2,000 years.

Organized resistance began in the mid-1800s and grew slowly; in 1950, India adopted a new constitution that outlawed caste discrimination. New affirmative- action quotas were meant to give the former "untouchables" - who began to call themselves Dalit, a Sanskrit-derived word for "the broken people" - access to education and to government jobs.

Today, Dalits make up a sixth of India's population, about 170 million people. In the biggest cities, many Dalits have been

able to leave untouchability behind. India's President is a Dalit woman; so is the chief minister of the largest state. In cities, Dalits can attend schools, buy tea at a café,and live where they like, although individual landlords may turn them away when they hear their surnames.

But in rural India - where 70 per cent of the country's population lives - the great majority of Dalits are landless workers; they make up the bulk of the population in bonded labour. A national survey in 2006 found that in more than half of the villages, Dalits were not permitted to enter non-Dalit houses, to enter places of worship, to share non-Dalits' food or use the same barbers or laundry services.

So it is hard to overstate how bizarre Sister Sudha's arrival seemed to the people of the tola - this young woman in her crisp, clean sari, who did not shrink from their gaze or their touch, but stepped inside their settlement and asked to stay.

In a pattern of generosity that would last for decades, they gave her a home - first, she shared a tumbledown hut, but when more children came and the family needed the space, she slept in a grain storage shed. "I got used to curving my body around the circle of the bins," she recalls.

The largest adjustment was learning to wake at 4 a.m. so she could go with the women into the fields to relieve themselves: There were no latrines, and modesty dictated that women could make this trip only in the dark.

Much of village life shocked her: Everything was grimy, muddy, covered in flies that feasted on the animal waste and food scraps tossed in the lanes, and no one had the habit of washing.

"But slowly, slowly," she says, "these things moved away and I began to see the children." She started with simple things: gathering women in the evenings around a small fire and talking to them about hygiene and the health of their bodies and their children. She taught the alphabet to children who couldn't go to the school in the dominant-caste section of the village.

Still, she saw herself as the student. "I was a beginner with regard to being in this community and being with the people, learning their culture, learning to accept them and also to really fashion my life so that I will become part of them."

Only very slowly did she set out to pass an idea back - that, as excluded as the people of the tola were, they had rights.

When they worked all day in the fields of a landlord who then scoffed and refused them the 30 cents they were promised, she led them back to sit, silently and peacefully, in his yard, until they were paid. She gathered children and took them to school, and went back every day to make sure they were

allowed to sit on benches, not confined to windowsills or the floor, and to touch books like other children.

She told her neighbours that their children were entitled to a government stipend to pay for school books and uniforms, and that they could insist that police investigate the dominant-caste village-council members who had pocketed the funds.

She stayed for 21 years.

It was not a religious mission. "It's a purely humanitarian exercise," she says. "Wherever I see there is something lacking in them being a fully human being, I like to support them and see that they reach their full human good - so that is my purpose."

This philosophy places her in a tradition of Indian public service that is often called Gandhian, but with a respectful tilt of her head to the Mahatma, Sister Suhda rejects that label. Instead, like many of the Dalits, she holds as her inspiration Bhimrao Ambedkar, a Dalit who became a lawyer in the 1920s, led the fight against untouchability and drafted India's constitution.

Ambedkar nearly succeeded in setting up a separate electoral system for Dalits, arguing they could never have real political power in a system privileged castes would inevitably dominate. But Gandhi foiled that, threatening a fast unto death if Dalits were given their own system. Many still begrudge him that, and his larger failure to do more to end caste inequality.

There are others in India who practise Sister Sudha's style of integrated grassroots activism, such as Aruna Roy, who spearheaded the anti-corruption Right to Information movement; her husband, Bunker Roy, who founded the Barefoot College to educate poor, rural women; and Murlidhar Amte ("Baba"), a social worker who spent decades living with and advocating for lepers.

These activists tend to come from privileged backgrounds but spend their working lives closely tied to impoverished communities, working for education and social development. But there are only a handful of stories quite like Sister Sudha's, of living on the margins for decades, pushing for the most incremental change.

'IT'S ALL HER DOING'

As years passed, Jamsaut's women became Sister Sudha's focus. She had realized that rape was ubiquitous. "No one practises untouchability when it comes to sex," she snaps.

Or to drinking - higher-caste men would come at night to drink the date moonshine the Mushahar men brewed, then help themselves to the women, who had nowhere to hide.

The men rarely protested, because they relied on the income, and the women felt

helpless. But mothers began to confide in Sister Sudha - stories they told her in despair, for what recourse did they have?

Finally, one day in 1992, when a young girl had been brutally gang-raped, Sister Sudha took her and her mother to the police station. When the police refused to register a case - "no one would rape a woman in clothes so dirty," they said - the women sat there on a bench, all through the night and the next day, until finally the disgusted police took the report. And Sister Sudha kept pushing the police until they arrested the men in question.

By then, authorities had begun to dread the sight of her, for now she spoke the language of the law. Frustrated that the legislation meant to protect the Mushahar was never implemented, she had decided in 1987 to take on the legal system.

"I saw the people in my village all the time being duped - the high-caste people would say, 'You have to pay for this or for that document,' or 'You have no right to this or to that.'"

For three years, she commuted to law school in Bangalore; she aced her exams and became an advocate.

In the next two years, she registered nine rape cases. "There were a lot of threats. They were ready to finish me off - 'It's all her doing: Which Mushahar ever files a case? Which Mushahar ever went to the police?' ... I was frightened. But I decided I could not show it."

Gradually, Sister Sudha's work became a small empire, which she called Nari Gunjan, or Women's Voice. Using funds scraped together from her parents and siblings - who thought she was mad but wanted to help - and a bit from the community itself, she started an educational centre where Mushahar girls could get a basic education and some income-generating skills.

A Unicef staffer happened to see it, and arranged a grant of a few thousand dollars. So Sister Sudha expanded to 50 educational centres across rural Bihar, where girls and groups of older women learned about sanitation, reproductive health and their rights. She travelled the state, supervising it all on a bicycle - "the cycle sister," they called her.

Eventually, she says, she had simply become Mushahar. She planned to stay forever. But in 2005, some teenage Mushahar boys were attacked by dominant-caste young men. The boys filed a police case - and the wrath of the assailants' families came down on Sister Sudha.

She protested that she hadn't even known about the incident. But ultimately, she was behind it, from all her years of convincing the Mushahar that they had rights. The families made it known that she should disappear or they would do it for her. The police said they could not protect her - or

Prerna School for Mahadalit Girls in Danapur, Bihar. PHOTO: CANDACE FEIT

would not.

Heartsick, she put a padlock on her wooden door in Jamsaut and went back to the convent in Patna. She lasted just days on its smooth floors and soft beds: "I could not survive there." She decided that the time had come to concentrate on a new project.

Girls, she had concluded, were the key to change for the Mushahar. To be a girl in the lowest caste is to be the person of the least value in every community, in every state. Until their lives changed, there could be no real talk of change in the country.

The girls needed education, but could never study in the villages. Even when they were permitted entry to school, they had too much else to do to attend with any regularity - herding livestock, gathering firewood, minding baby siblings or transplanting rice seedlings in the paddies.

Sister Sudha resolved to build a residence, a hostel where girls from all the tolas could come and stay and have no job but to learn. She would build them a home where, instead of the all-purpose "Mushahar," people would call them by their names.

PRERNA IS BORN

In Lal Kothi, near the outskirts of Patna, she found a place. It was half public latrine and half water-buffalo shed, but the state government helped her repair it, and, with donations and volunteer labour, the stink-

ing, derelict building became a two-storey dormitory with a kitchen and a small, open study space.

She named it the Prerna Residential School for Mahadalit Girls - prerna is Hindi for inspiration.

The first girls arrived in 2006. Parents were anxious - they wanted their children to be educated, but it was a shocking idea to send a young, unmarried girl away on her own. Often, mothers had to mount sustained campaigns to persuade fathers and mothers-in-law.

"In almost every case," Sister Sudha says, "the mother is the critical thing that makes change possible."

From Jamsaut, Poonam's parents sent her. She was 10, or maybe 9 or 8 - no one had ever asked. She was half the height of a Canadian girl her age. She did not own shoes. She had a perpetual squint, and had never seen a doctor, let alone had her eyes checked. At home, when she bathed, it was by accident, in the ponds where the children chased the buffalos.

She had never used a latrine. She had never slept on a mattress. She was in Grade 5 - she'd attended school when she wasn't working with her parents - but had never owned a book.

The hostel was a strange new world: Poonam had never paid attention to the hours of the day before. Here, there was a schedule, and bathing, and three meals every day - she did not have to wait until the men, boys and adult women were finished and eat their scraps. She could even be first in line with her plate. Within months, she had shot up several inches and developed rounded arms and legs. She had glasses that helped her read. The hours of studying were an almost unimaginable luxury.

But the nights were unnerving, so far from the familiar noises of the village; girls whispered about ghosts and demons. To soothe fears, Sister Sudha has them line up each night to sing a prayer - a non-denominational one, as she is fanatical there be no Christian prayers or any other religion's.

"No matter how dark my way, I will trust in you and you will help me continue," the girls sing, in Hindi, to an unnamed god. "Help that I think not of what I have received but be more conscious of what I can give."

Sister Sudha had planned to send the girls, who now numbered 125, to the government school next door. But like so many others in India, it was a disaster: The teachers seldom showed up, and when they did, they sat gossiping on the veranda. On a good day, they might write a lesson on the board before they walked out. The children were left to puzzle out the mysteries of subtraction or the alphabet alone. After a semester, the girls had learned nothing.

PHOTO: LANA SLEZIC

So she pulled them out. For a dozen of the brightest, she scraped together the money, $200 each a year, to send them to a private school up the road. There were no other Dalits at the school, but the director is a businessman, and a fat envelope of fees paid up front quashed any hesitations he had.

For the others, Sudha hired some local, unemployed university graduates as teachers. Squashing together the bunk beds, she cleared a couple of rooms and started a school of her own. She followed the government curriculum, but bolstered it too: She wanted the girls to learn to sing and draw and paint. They asked for dance class. And she hunted up a karate teacher.

"Karate, I felt, would give them more self-confidence, and also self-protection - because many of these girls, in their homes and the fields where they go to work, they could be victims of sexual and physical abuse. So karate would give them strength to protect themselves" - and maybe to fight back.

The girls took to it. In fact, this year, 20 of them travelled to the national competition in Gujarat - the first time they had ever

been anywhere besides the school and their villages. They won gold or silver in nearly every category, a sweep so astonishing that Bihar's chief minister summoned them and offered to send the winners to world championships in Japan.

Sister Sudha found herself organizing passports and plane tickets for seven girls who, a year before, had never even been in an auto-rickshaw. In Tokyo, they gawked at the skyscrapers, the gleaming white-tiled hotel bathroom and the machine in the dining room that hissed out Coke or coffee. They came home with seven trophies.

But something else surprised them most: "They were so astonished by how much respect people showed them," she says. "They said, 'Imagine, bowing to me, speaking to me, this way.'"

LOOKING STRANGERS IN THE EYE

Poonam returns to Prerna from the private school at 1:30 in the afternoon, and lunch is waiting. She changes quickly from her uniform into one of her two dresses, using a safety pin in place of a broken zipper, as the dress has had many owners before her. She pauses briefly for lunch: rice, lentils and potatoes.

Then she takes her books out of her backpack, and begins laboriously copying the unfamiliar English words of a fairy tale - in the Bihar version of The Boy Who Cried Wolf, it's a lion instead, and after the third time the boy calls "lion!" it eats him. Poonam sighs and hastily turns that page.

It's hot in the dormitory, with not even a breath of wind through the iron grills on the windows. The smaller girls tumble on their bedrolls, telling secrets and playing checkers. A few fall asleep.

But at dusk a whistle blows again, and Poonam joins the others as they gather on the school field for free-form games of tag, tackling and races. They move with a freedom and unself-consciousness that would be unthinkable in the village. No one is watching. No one will seize their arms and angrily remind them what is acceptable for Mushahar girls.

Everything they feel the urge to do is acceptable here: When they run, they are astoundingly fast. When they tackle, they are lethally efficient. And when they laugh, they are loud.

This has been Sister Sudha's fundamental goal, to replace the sense of worthlessness inculcated in them since birth.

"All that they have known and heard and seen is, 'You are like dirt.' They have internalized this: 'This is my lot,' they feel. 'This is where I belong. I don't belong on the chair. I will sit on the floor, and then no one can tell me to go any lower than that.'

"All their lives, they are told, 'You are the

last. You are the least. You do not deserve to have.' They learn very fast to keep quiet, don't expect changes and don't ask for more."

At the school, where everyone is focused on the girls' well-being and achievements, she shows them they are worth more. As soon as they step outside its walls, someone mutters, "Mushahar," and they are reminded they are untouchable.

But by helping them to explore new things and excel, Sister Sudha hopes that they will come to know at a visceral level that they are as good as others, and sometimes, even better.

The constant subtle reinforcement has had a profound effect. The girls stand straight. They gleam with health. Their pale blue dupattai are pinned precisely on the shoulders of darker blue kameez. Their teeth are shiny white. Their braids are tied in fat ribbons. They greet adults with a respectful pranam - hands meeting in front of their hearts - and they look strangers in the eye when they say hello.

"That takes a long time - when they come here, they are just looking at the ground all the time," Sister Sudha says quietly. "To get their heads lifted is something."

By 10 p.m., a warm, heavy dark lies over Prerna, and the last giggles have died out in the dorms. Even bookworms such as Poonam have stowed their cherished books beneath their bunks, tucked in the corners of their mosquito nets and closed their eyes.

On the concrete steps out front, Sister Sudha sits awake. She knots her grey-streaked hair at her neck, loosens it distractedly, knots it again, and tries to envision a future for her girls.

Their lives have undergone unthinkable changes in a few years, but their families and their villages are not changing nearly as fast. "It will be really a challenge for them to meet even their own family, their own sister who did not study here," she says.

These are the ideas that plague Sister Sudha: Where will they go when they leave? What is it realistic to think they can do?

"In the hostel, we are here to protect them. But they won't always have someone to fight for them or protect them. They have to prepare themselves to face that."

Land of the rising son

Globe and Mail correspondent **Stephanie Nolen** examines India's very public battle to halt the shocking decline in the number of girls being born. Technology has made it easy for mothers to choose the gender of their babies. But why, she asks, is the obsession with boys most pronounced among those who are well off?

NEW DELHI – The information is traded in whispers over cappuccinos in the cafes of South Delhi and in the locker rooms of seaside gyms in Mumbai.

That doctor won't tell. But this one will. For a price.

And once you know, call this clinic – they will help with the "problem."

In India, it has been illegal for 15 years to tell a pregnant woman the sex of her fetus – and to abort based on gender.

And ever since a national census in 2001 found that millions of girls were "missing," the government has been throwing money at the problem. There are cash payments to parents when a girl is born, bursaries to send girls to school and a cheque on a daughter's 18th birthday.

These measures, launched under the slogan Save the Girl Child, aim to give parents an incentive to have daughters, and a cushion for what is perceived as the exponentially greater cost (a girl will almost certainly need a dowry, and will join her husband's family, taking her earnings and property with her).

There are some early signs that these interventions may be working, in poor families.

But $100 on the birth of a girl – or even $2,500 at her marriage – means nothing to the country's wealthiest families. And that is where the gender gulf is yawning most deeply. The richest neighbourhoods in the country – the wealthy farming areas of the Punjab, the middle-class areas of Mumbai and other cities, and here, the leafy neighbourhoods in the south of the capital – have the biggest gaps.

High-caste families in urban areas of the Punjab have just 300 girls for every 1,000 boys, researchers financed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) reported last year. In South Delhi, it's 832 girls born per 1,000 boys; in the state of Haryana, home to the high-tech hub of Gurgaon, it's 822. (In "normal" circumstances, demographers expect to find 950 to 1,000 girls born for every 1,000 boys).

Conventional wisdom has long held that as India develops – as more families struggle their way into the middle class, more girls go to school and more women join the work force – traditional ideas about the lesser value of girls will erode. The incentive to abort them would fall away.

Instead, the opposite has happened, and the reasons – and solutions – have government and activists stumped.

"These educated, well-off women, who still want sons – this is really the crux of the problem and the government has not caught on to it," says Farah Naqvi, author of a major study on attitudes to "son preference."

"Yes, you have these very modern women

today – you see them in spandex at the local gym ? but it's a complicated modernity. It's two worlds these women are straddling."

Women with a Grade 10 education or higher are four times as likely to have a second child who is a son, after a first daughter, as are women who are illiterate. "These educated, employed women are earning very well, and yet they prefer a son," says N.B. Sarojini, head of SAMA, a health organization that tries to help women resist sex-selection pressure. "Why are rich women worst? If you have a male child, you are more valued in society – it's true in any class." The crucial question, she adds, is why that idea has proved so immutable.

One of the dark ironies of India's growing prosperity is that it seems, in many quarters, to have exacerbated traditional ideas about the cost of girls, rather than changing them.

"It's no longer okay to marry your daughter off at 13: You have to give her education, job prospects – the expense of a daughter has been heightened," says Mary John, head of the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi and an author of the IDRC study. "It's an unintended consequence of modernity."

NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR AN OLD PURPOSE

Son preference has ancient roots in India – as it does in many other countries. The earliest, colonial-era censuses from this region show skewed gender ratios. Until the 1970s, girls were eliminated through infanticide and neglect. Then, as now, women faced immense pressure to produce sons and undertook regular fasts or nightly temple visits in their quest for male children. Then ultrasound technology was introduced here in 1975 – at first, in an effort to diagnose fetal abnormalities and illnesses.

But almost immediately it began to be used for sex selection: a high-tech replacement for offerings made at the temple offering. Soon, there were newspaper advertisements offering pregnant women and their families the test: "Spend 500 rupees now to save 500,000 rupees later," by avoiding a dowry.

Ultrasound technology kept getting better, and cheaper. Soon there were mobile clinics, which travelled among villages that lacked even clean water or electricity, to offer fetal scanning, and abortions. The mobile clinics performed a scan for as little as $12 – which can be a month's earnings for a landless agricultural labourer, but is viewed as a wise investment compared with the risk of an unwanted daughter.

In 1994, after sustained campaigns by women's-rights activists, the government made it illegal both to use ultrasound to determine gender and to tell a parent what the gender is. The new law said all ultra-

sound equipment must be registered (with the hypothetical goal of auditing all those who provided the service based on the gender ratio of babies born to their clients) and threatened doctors who did sex determination with up to five years in prison.

But investigations of doctors, who form a powerful political lobby here, have been exceedingly rare – usually they follow "stings" by journalists – and fewer than a dozen doctors have been convicted. Meanwhile, it is common knowledge among families which doctors will disclose gender, either directly or by handing parents pink or blue candy, pens or booties after the scan.

The situation has become even more complicated today, with many of India's almost totally unregulated and ubiquitous fertility clinics offering gender determination of embryos – creating male embryos to implant in women who want to skip the hassle of getting pregnant, carrying a fetus for 16 weeks and then aborting. This practice was outlawed in 2004 – but is offered openly in three fertility clinics visited by The Globe and Mail.

In 2007, a wealthy Mumbai couple went to court to argue that the law against sex determination infringed on their right to "balance their family" and have a son, in addition to the two daughters they had. They said they were not going to "destroy" a female fetus, but rather use technology to "select" a male embryo. (The court ruled against them.)

In addition, sex-selection kits (of varying effectiveness) are now widely available in India for about $300, sold over the Internet from countries where they are legal.

In conversations in cafes and other social settings, 13 affluent women in Delhi confirmed that they were told the gender of their fetus by doctors at upscale private clinics; while some said they were seeking a different "family balance," none would discuss whether she had broken the law and asked to terminate a pregnancy. (While the statistics show the practice is widespread, there is surprising reluctance to discuss it, which may indicate a change in attitude to sex selection.)

Two women said doctors who do not ask questions about the reason for a termination charge about three times as much – $600 – for performing the service.

There are many reasons Indian parents still feel they must have sons. When a Hindu or Sikh parent dies, a son must carry out the last rites; if not, the very devout believe they won't reach heaven. Sons are perceived to carry on family lineage in a way daughters cannot. They also live with their parents all their lives, and care for them when old.

And then there's cold, hard economics: In the words of a Punjabi proverb, raising a daughter is like watering your neighbour's garden. Girls leave home at marriage, taking whatever skills or assets they have accrued.

And the practice of dowry, once restricted to the highest castes, has been adopted at all levels of society – as a sign of social status – and is nearly universally practised even though it was outlawed in 1961. (Like the law against sex selection, this one seeks to alter a widely accepted social practice, and there is little enforcement – in fact, many feminists argue, government is reinforcing the practice by offering cash to unwed girls on their 18th birthdays.)

In aspirant middle-class families in south Delhi today, a typical dowry provided to a groom's family can include a sports car, a large apartment, all its furniture including high-end electronics, and thousands of dollars in clothing. "Increasing materialism ? and the emphasis on obtaining consumer lifestyle products has exacerbated the problem of dowry," Ms. Naqvi says.

Navsharan Singh, who heads the gender program at IDRC's India office, noted that dowry was a way to allow girls to share in family property; although India's inheritance law was changed two years ago to allow daughters to inherit, this has yet to have had an impact.

SMALLER FAMILIES LOWER THE ODDS

Meanwhile, family size is shrinking across all sectors of Indian society – the "small family norm" is pushed aggressively by government. Son preference endures even though people in upper income brackets rarely have more than two children, and so go to great lengths to ensure they have a son.

"Sex selection followed by abortion is a difficult, painful practice that few if any women would seek out – so you need to look at the dynamic in this family that makes a woman so desperate to have a son that she will undergo this pain," Ms. John says. "If you're only having one or two, you do need this boy, that's the perception – the boy is an investment worth making, and the girl, as much as you might love her, she's going to have duties in another family. Call it rationalization or justification, but these are the motives."

Last month, the Delhi government released new data drawn from birth registrations and said triumphantly that the sex ratio had actually increased from 820 girls born for every 1,000 boys in 2005 to 848 in 2008 – which means 19,000 more female births in 2008 than the year before. The government attributed the gain to its "Laadli" scheme – the Hindi word for darling or beloved – which gives each family with an annual income under $2,500 that same sum when a daughter turns 18.

But activists scoffed, calling the numbers bad statistics (the total number of births reported was down, when in fact it is believed

to have risen considerably) and saying they actually represented a gross under-reporting of boy births – many poor women do not give birth in hospitals or clinics, and never register their babies' births, but the Laadli scheme gives families with girls a powerful incentive to do so, distorting the numbers.

Either way, the Delhi statistics confirmed that gender ratios are skewing with growing affluence: Muslims, the poorest residents, registered 1,040 girls per 1,000 boys. Sikhs and Christians, the two wealthiest groups, had 873 girls and 875 girls per 1,000 boys.

Ms. Naqvi noted that positive attitudes about modern women, who are earning their own income and contributing to families, exist simultaneously with concerns about women's increased independence and autonomous decision-making, seen by many as negative changes that clash with traditional Indian values, which link family honour to the sexual purity of daughters.

Her research found that young women were most receptive to challenging sex-selection, but Indian women of any class rarely make decisions about their reproductive choices themselves: Husbands and in-laws are usually intimately involved.

At a south Delhi abortion clinic this week, for example, five of six patients booked for appointments had been accompanied by their mothers-in-law. The clinic director, who did not wish to be quoted by name because of the sensitive nature of the subject, noted the large sign – which must, by law, be posted – saying sex determination was illegal and not offered there. Five of the 200 patients she sees each month are well into their second trimester, when fetal gender can be confirmed, and claim to already have daughters. She turns them away, fearing sex-based termination is their primary motive.

"But others lie, and how can we check? They say they have sons already, and came because of contraceptive failure, and that entitles them to abortion ? and there is nothing I can do about that," she adds.

Abortion has been legal in India since 1971, and safe and cheap terminations are available in government hospitals and private clinics, an accepted part of government's "small families" population-control practice. But the campaign to protect female fetuses presents complicated moral questions for defenders of reproductive rights: It uses language such as "defending the rights of the girl child," but Indian feminists debate the issue uncomfortably: Is the implication that male fetuses do not have rights? Or have different ones?

Ms. Singh notes an "incoherence" between a woman's right to abortion and the state's restricting her from choosing her child's gender: "We've been struggling with these questions. Choice is individual but the consequences are societal, when the rights

of those who survive are also compromised – I'm rendered less wanted and my claims as a citizen are less valid."

HUMAN TRAFFICKING MEETS THE NEED

The shortage of potential wives is a subject of frequent coverage by the Indian media. And there are alarming stories – particularly from Punjab and Haryana – of human trafficking. Lower-caste women are bought in states such as Jharkhand, where the sex ratio is roughly equal, and then sold for a few hundred dollars in higher-caste communities.

There are also reports of a surge in polyandry – of a single woman "married" to all the brothers, or to brothers and uncles, in a family, and kept, essentially, as a sex slave with the sole function of producing sons. Media coverage of the "feticide" issue here is inevitably accompanied by dire predictions that violence against women and other crimes, even terrorism, will rise as frustrated young men lose outlets for their sexual urges.

But activists say this analysis misses the real problem. "I hate this argument – I don't care if men don't find brides; we're talking here about missing women," Ms. Singh says. "What matters are the social and political entitlements of the women who survive – those of us who made it. It's a devaluation of women manifest in such violent form: Your very sex is so worthless it's being eliminated."

India's government seems to be waking up to the idea that sex selection is not only a practice of the poor: "Growing economic prosperity and education levels have not led to a corresponding mitigation in this acute problem," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said last year. Yet currently there are no policy initiatives – other than soap operas with "feticide" plot lines – aimed at middle or upper-class women.

Ms. John of the Centre for Women's Development Studies argues that clinic raids, bursaries and television ads are not going to stop the sex-ratio slide, when the roots of the problem lie in people's rational decision-making. "If we have no social security system or public health care, and health and education are getting more expensive; if you don't query marriage norms in our society as the successful outcome of parenting; if you don't want to enable daughters to be strong – these are the things that have to change."

PHOTO: ZACKARY CANEPARI

If India is booming, why are its children still starving?

After 15 years of rapid growth, India has made no progress on childhood malnutrition, unlike many poorer nations. As **Stephanie Nolen** reports, its culture poses many special obstacles – but that could also be the key to change

DEHDE, INDIA – Devsingh Adivasi has baggy pants. Not literally - in fact, he has no trousers at all - but that's the term for a child like him: At two years old, he has rolls of slack flesh that sag below his buttocks and gather at his ankles, as if his skin was made a few sizes too big.

Devsingh is acutely undernourished. He is less than half the weight or height he should be; he's not able to stand on his own; he is intrigued by the small ball made of reed scraps his mother Papo has rolled for him, but does not have the energy to chase it.

He has never eaten a vegetable and never eaten a fatty food - never, in fact, eaten anything other than the flat bread his mother makes on a cow-dung fire every day or two. He nurses sometimes at her slack breasts; Papo herself, in her late 20s, weighs about a third less than is healthy. She says, softly, that she knows her son gets little milk from her and that she should eat more. "But what would I eat?"

Devsingh is one of six children, all of them malnourished. Each one of the 70 families in this village in the northern Indian state of Madhya Pradesh has a child, or several, in a similar condition. But this is not a blighted place with a unique, horrible problem. What's most horrifying about it is its normalcy, across this state and across northern India.

Canadian parents have been invoking malnourished Indian children for three generations to encourage their own children to eat their crusts or lima beans. In that time, however, India has transformed itself from a land where millions of people died each year in famine to one whose explosive development has won it "emerging superpower" status. In the last 15 years, India's average annual economic growth has been 7 per cent. It's expected to come close to that mark this year even amid the global economic crisis.

India has a booming information-technology industry, an exploding middle class and cities with sleek subway lines, neighbourhood sushi restaurants and rickshaw drivers who use cellphones. Last year it sent a rocket to the moon. But there is one thing that has not changed - the rate of childhood malnutrition, which still affects one in five children here and causes 3,000 infant deaths each day.

A staggering 40 per cent of undernourished children in the world are Indian; the rate here is twice as high as it is in all of Sub-Saharan Africa and five times higher than in China. The land of the economic boom finishes third-last on Unicef's global list of child nourishment, worse than either Sudan or Ethiopia. In fact, the number of starving children is increasing 2.5 per cent annually, while population growth is barely 1.4 per cent.

India's government itself professes shock that the situation has not improved as the economy has grown. "The problem of malnutrition is a matter of national shame," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said last year. There is a growing sense that the scale of the problem does not befit a country claiming superpower status.

"It is embarrassing," acknowledges Mahesh Arora, who heads the national child-nutrition program through the Ministry of Women and Child Development. "We are trying our level best. You must realize India is a huge country and some areas are doing much better than others."

Better is a relative term. In the north and east, at least 55 per cent of children are malnourished; in the south it is about 30 per cent. The Adivasi family lives in the worst of the worst areas, and what happens in their house - and what doesn't - does much to explain why the problem persists.

The family has some of the basic problems that plague people around the world, having no land, no assets, no cash to buy food nor any real way to change their situation. As elsewhere, efforts to help the very poor here have been marred by corruption and mismanagement. But these ills are exacerbated by a collection of factors peculiar to India, from a squabble over the philosophical legacy of Mahatma Gandhi to intractable battles over caste hierarchy to the uncommonly stark powerlessness of Indian women.

The Adivasis share their surname, derived from their group in the Hindu caste system, with their whole village. They are what's called a "tribal" group - an indigenous population at the very bottom of the traditional hierarchy. They own no land, and the soil on the land they have been allotted is rocky and infertile and rain is rare. Their village is a jarring hour's drive (not that anyone here owns a vehicle) down a dirt track off a rural road down a lousy highway that leads only to a small town with no industry or opportunity.

No one here in Dehde has a toilet or a source of clean water to wash their hands; they are, like half of all Indians, "open defecators" who walk into the surrounding fields to relieve themselves. Their children run and play surrounded by excrement and as a consequence suffer episodes of life-threatening diarrhea nearly every month.

There is a school in the village, but as in many other parts of India's corrupt and poorly-managed public education system, the underpaid teacher shows up only a few times each month; looking around, it isn't difficult to understand why he might be hopelessly discouraged. There is not a single literate adult in Dehde.

There is a community health worker, 50-year-old Battu Bai, who is paid $36 a month by the central government to weigh the children and keep track of their growth.

She enlists a couple of 12-year-olds, the only people here who are numerate, to read the scale and fill in her charts. She is supposed to exhort the mothers of underweight children into proper feeding but, she says, rolling her eyes: "I am hammering them all the time but the men are the decision makers and it doesn't matter what I say."

Ms. Bai does not have the skills or the resources to treat the diarrhea that claims so many children here each year. She can only refer families to the clinics in the regional capital of Shivpuri, two hours away. But few have money for transport and, she says, the men aren't interested in making the trip and forbid their wives to go alone with sick children.

"Who would cook, or see to the other children?" grumbles Devsingh's father, Prashadi, when Ms. Bai asks him yet again about having his wife Papo take their child to a Unicef emergency-nutrition centre.

STUNTED LIVES

In Dehde, poverty is a congenital condition. Papo, who has tawny hair that spills in curls down her back, married Mr. Adivasi when she was 17. She gave birth to their first child a year later. A full 20 per cent of pregnancies in India are in girls between 15 and 19; a quarter of those, like Ms. Adivasi, give birth at intervals of less than 18 months, taking a toll on their own health and leading to weaker babies.

If these children survive infancy, they grow up stunted - no one in the Adivasi family is more than five feet tall. In fact, research by the World Health Organization showed definitively last year that the idea that Asians are inherently shorter than people in the West is nonsense and the disparity is primarily the result of broad, chronic intergenerational malnutrition.

The children are not just stunted physically. They experience delays in cognitive development that can never, at any later point, be repaired. This has consequences for India as a nation: The World Bank says that undernutrition is reducing the country's GDP growth by three per cent each year, as it reduces any individual's lifetime earning potential by at least 10 per cent.

Like Ms. Adivasi, a third of Indian women are themselves underweight. In addition, 59 per cent of pregnant women here are anemic, which means they give birth to low-birth-weight babies with weak immune systems who struggle to breastfeed properly.

In fact, breastfeeding - a free, critical intervention that can make a massive difference in survival past the first month of life - is a fraught part of the nutrition puzzle here. Ms. Adivasi says that she waited until three days after Devsingh was born to nurse her son. For the first two days, which Unicef

calls the most critical for determining infant health, she gave him nothing, believing her colostrum (the antibody-rich, yellow liquid new mother's bodies produce before milk) was unhealthy.

Overhearing her recount this, a couple of village men jump into the discussion: "Even an animal would not feed its child with its first milk!" one man says. Another adds, "No woman here would be allowed to give that to a baby."

PHOTO: ZACKARY CANEPARI

India's central government has helpfully put up billboards at the entrance to many of these villages, extolling the virtue of colostrum in lines of Hindi script that, of course, almost no one here can read.

In many places, a father or his mother will consult an astrologer for an auspicious day to start breastfeeding - which could be as many as 30 days after the child's birth. After that, in some families, the babies who survive those first crucial weeks are breastfed for up to three months. But when they begin to fuss, wanting more nutrients than their malnourished mothers can apparently provide, fathers or mothers-in-law often insist that nursing women introduce solid food or buffalo milk, diluted with unclean water - even though babies should be given breast milk exclusively for their first six months.

In other geographic and caste groups, people believe in breastfeeding exclusively far, far past that point - even up to two years. This, too, is nutritionally damaging: After about six months, children need solid food sources of vitamins and nutrients.

"It's not rocket science but it is science," said Purnima Menon, a researcher with the International Food Policy Research Institute. And no one is explaining it to women such as Ms. Adivasi.

In any case, Dr. Menon added, "Giving information to a young woman alone is not useful if she has such low status that she can't make the decision." Yet when Mr. Arora, the government nutrition chief, talks about the need for a massive national ad campaign about correct infant and child feeding, he talks always about educating "mothers," not their husbands or in-laws.

This may be the single greatest cause of India's vicious malnutrition problem: the striking lack of autonomy of women, especially young women and those in rural areas. Today, the Adivasis' grain box is empty

- Ms. Adivasi thumps it, scowling at the hollow sound. But when there is grain enough for her to make five chapati flatbreads, her husband eats two, the six children share two and Ms. Adivasi gets one.

When Ms. Bai, the community-health worker, hears this, she reminds Mr. Adivasi that his wife is breastfeeding and needs extra calories. "She gave me two," he says with a shrug. "I didn't ask what she ate."

He goes on to describe how he struggles on the 250 rupees (roughly $4.50) that he, his wife and the older children earn each month to buy food and pay the fees for the one son who goes to school. (They do day labour for a national program targeting the very poor.)

But after Ms. Bai pulls her sari down over her eyes and adds a loudly muttered observation, Mr. Adivasi acknowledges with a shrug that he spends more than half that monthly income - 150 rupees - on bidi, traditional cigarettes. The revelation startles an outsider, but no one in Dehde seems to find it surprising.

In villages like this one, male children are prioritized from the moment of their conception. "There's a reason why you see so many more boys than girls in the nutrition centres," says Anne Philpott, an adviser on nutrition to the British international development office in India. From ages 1 to 4, according to Unicef, the mortality rate for Indian girls is 61 per cent higher than it is for boys.

Nothing, notes Dr. Menon, is more core to the function of a family and a society than the way in which it divides responsibility for caring for its children. This is why a state such as Madhya Pradesh, compared with African countries that have similar populations, ranks so badly on malnutrition: Women may in general be oppressed in Ethiopia and Congo as well, but they have autonomy over feeding their children.

"On purchasing food, on feeding herself, on health care - the critical question is how does the gender inequality play out," says Dr. Menon. "Women in Africa can be out in society at the market, or generating income, buying food for her family. In India women often cannot make those decisions. So here we need to target men as well for purchasing behaviour: Women often don't see the market, so there's no point telling them what to feed.

"And you have to work with older women too if you want to change breastfeeding - because the poor young mother is in no place to argue with her husband or her mother-in-law."

So entrenched are these patterns - and so normal are listless toddlers such as Devsingh - that nobody here feels they need to react in alarm, says Dr. Vandana Agrawal, nutritional specialist for Unicef in Mad-

hya Pradesh. "A mother sees that her child is weak but she sees that all the children around her are similar so she doesn't perceive a problem and so she doesn't try to address it," she says.

"She's working in the fields or doing daily wage labour, she gets up and takes care of the whole family, she prepares food and leaves the child with an elder sibling of eight to 10 years old, and nobody takes care of that child in a systematic way."

Indeed when Ms. Bai tries once again to talk to Prashadi Adivasi about how underweight Devsingh is, he insists there is nothing wrong and simply gets up and walks off while she is speaking.

CASTE-AWAYS

Over top of this toxic brew of poverty and sexism is a uniquely Indian complicating factor, the enduring hold of the caste system. Regional child-health workers, and even rural outreach workers such as Ms. Bai, are usually political appointees (the patronage system extends down to the lowest level) and often of a higher caste than the people they serve. As a result, the lowest-caste women are often hesitant to use those services.

In addition, the Adivasi people are considered to be of such low caste that they are barred by custom (not by law, which officially forbids such discrimination) from any of the limited private labour opportunities around their village.

There is a flip side to this situation: Caste organizes Indian society into units down to the smallest community level. Along with the country's long history of mass public action, that should make it easy to do effective public education on behaviour such as breastfeeding.

"If the astrologer is telling women not to breastfeed until 30 days, then get out there and educate the astrologers. Make them your change agents," says Ms. Philpott, the British nutrition adviser.

With this kind of concerted effort, a great deal can be done quickly: Thailand cut its rate of child undernutrition in half in four years in the 1980s; China cut its by more than half from 1990 to 2002. Vietnam and Brazil have had similar successes. In Malawi in southern Africa - where the economy has not grown at all and the AIDS epidemic has dramatically worsened public health - the government has nevertheless succeeded in cutting the proportion of malnourished children from 30 to 19 per cent in the past decade.

These countries each followed a different approach, but what they had in common were strong government leadership and a combined emphasis on public education, primary health-care delivery and interven-

tions with very poor households. China made an aggressive push to get clean water and sanitation to the poor; Thailand put 20 per cent of the national budget into health care.

India has one major program to tackle undernutrition, called the Integrated Child Development Service. The $1.6-billion initiative began in the 1970s and set up a network of kitchens and feeding centres in rural and urban low-income areas across the country. While it has been praised for its ambition, it is cumbersome and badly managed - "a shambles," in the off-the-record assessment of one government consultant involved in designing it. Corrupt officials skim the cash, or poorly-trained bureaucrats mismanage the distributions.

"There is no strong monitoring, and there is no accountability of district officials - no sense that 'I have to serve,' " says Unicef's homegrown expert Dr. Agrawal, who has watched schemes come and go for years as statistics stay stubbornly unchanged. "I get so frustrated with India," she adds.

Paradoxically, some of the greatest obstacles are unintended consequences of the work of lobby groups whose members are deeply concerned for the poor. India has a powerful "right to food" lobby, a coalition of charities and civil-rights groups that fought long and hard to extend the Child Development Service to cover all children and for the wage-labour program that employs the Adivasi family for a few days each month. These are widely considered one of the great victories of the powerful leftist political movement here.

Through nearly a decade of litigation, the movement has persuaded the Supreme Court to order the Indian government to take steps such as serving midday meals at all public primary schools and providing grain at highly subsidized prices to millions of destitute households (although far from all). "You cannot overstate the importance of these steps," says Delhi-based activist Kiran Bhatty.

Yet the very success of this coalition means that the focus of discussion has been on feeding schoolchildren - a debate over whether to provide them with enriched biscuits or a precooked meal dominated the discussion in the national parliament all last year. But the most crucial part of the malnutrition crisis in India has to do with babies, long before their school-aged years. "By the time we're talking about 'food'," says Anne Philpott, "it's too late."

Invoking Gandhi

In recent years in Africa, great nutritional gains have been made by providing micronutrient supplements. Giving children Vitamin A at the age of six months, at the cost of a nickel each, can cut child deaths by 25 per cent. But such efforts were derailed

in India when a Hindu fundamentalist lobby protested that the capsules were coated in gelatin, a product made of cows, which are sacred in Hinduism. (Today, some areas are having success with liquid Vitamin A drops.)

Fortifying widely consumed foods with nutrients such as iron has also been crucial in Africa, and it is desperately needed here, where most people are vegetarian. A stunning 75 per cent of preschool-aged Indians are acutely anemic, according to a national family-health survey. But the anti-corporate left here is highly suspicious. "The anti-business lobby puts an emphasis on products that are locally made and feels that fortification could just be a money-making scheme," said Dr. Menon.

For example, breastfeeding advocates fear that any discussion about fortifying foods for infants will open the door to formula companies, even though fortification can now be done in the home or a feeding centre, improving an infant's diet without compromising breastfeeding.

Opponents of fortification also frequently invoke the name of India's great independence fighter, Mahatma Gandhi. In his time, he preached the sanctity of the village and said that Indians should sustain themselves on what they grew and produced at that level.

That argument was aimed at trying to lessen British colonial power, but today his self-proclaimed disciples use his words (and little has more power here than invoking "Gandhiji") to oppose food fortification by saying that whatever is produced in a village should be sufficient.

"There's a perception that surely all of this can be done through food - through natural means, the Gandhian approach - and that the newer approaches are somehow artificial," said Luc Laviolette, Asia program director for the Micronutrient Initiative, a Canadian program that has worked with the Indian government to boost Vitamin A supplementation here with some marked successes. "The reality is that for all these reasons - gender, land, plus economic reasons - staple foods alone are not enough."

Ms. Bhatty says the right-to-food lobby is not trying to turn back the clock: "It's not about a Gandhian utopia at all," she says. "There are many good reasons to go local, starting with the fact that you need local buy-in if a scheme is going to be sustainable. Using local foods revives local practices, it boosts the local economy and it has environmental advantages."

Underlying these political tussles are systemic failures of the Indian government - it has failed to prioritize public health, spending just two per cent of the national budget on health care, compared to 13 per cent on defence. There is ample research showing that cheap, relatively simple interventions

can have a huge impact, yet none of these are as politically popular as food aid and none are happening at a large enough scale to bring real change.

And while even slum dwellers have doubled or tripled their incomes in India's economic boom, that is rarely enough to get them out of the slums into a house with sanitation and clean water, so their children continue to fall prey to monthly bouts of diarrhea and other illnesses.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE ...

There are some stirrings of hope. A few weeks ago, for example, the government introduced its first new guidelines on feeding children since 1975. Last October, the budget per day per child for food supplements was doubled from half a penny to one cent.

The prime minister has appointed a commission on nutrition and promised funds, which Ms. Philpott finds heartening. "The fact that economic growth is so good and they are translating that into programs is a good sign." The nutrition program's head, Mr. Arora, predicts cheerfully that this could all start to show results in five to 10 years.

Yet in Dehde, it all feels so far away as to be nonsensical. There is electricity for only an hour each night; girls in stained cotton saris collect water at the hand pump; women pat cakes of cow dung into circles to dry on the mud-house walls and burn for fuel. And nothing so far - no economic boom, no space program, no superpower status - has changed the basic truths for the Adivasi family.

"We don't have for ourselves so we don't feed the child - we are poor so we don't have these things to feed him," Mr. Adivasi says, with equal parts resignation and defiance.

And after he has left the smoky dim of the family's one-room house, when Ms. Bai leans close and tries to urge Ms. Adivasi to do something for tiny, frail Devsingh, the young mother rocks squats back on her heels. "What can I do?" she asks softly. "What is there for me to do?"

PHOTO: STALIN RAMESH

India's troubling miracle

New HIV infections in much of India have dropped by half since 2000, a globally unmatched achievement. But some of the reasons why make it a less appealing example

CHENNAI, INDIA – When government health workers gave Thenmozhi and her friends condoms, they would blow them up and bat them back and forth in the streets of their slum in Chennai, giggling. It didn't really occur to her that she ought to use the condoms with her clients, the neighbourhood men who paid her for sex, to protect herself from AIDS.

That was a disease of other people, other countries. Thenmozhi (who like many in her community uses only one name) had many problems - a drinking, philandering husband who once set her on fire when he got angry, and feeding her children with no job and a Grade 3 education - but AIDS was not one of them.

And then five years ago, a different kind of health worker dropped by her two-room flat - a woman Thenmozhi knew, who made about $50 a month selling sex like she did. She sat on the cement floor, helped Thenmozhi pick through some rice and told her there was AIDS in India - in fact, right there in their crowded fishermen's slum in the capital of the southern Tamil Nadu province. It had recently killed a man they both knew.

She invited Thenmozhi to a community centre, where she heard informal lectures about the virus and how sex workers must band together to insist clients use protection. When she left, her handbag was full

PHOTO: STALIN RAMESH

of condoms and the results of her free HIV test: negative.

Thenmozhi went on to do a most remarkable thing: "After that, I always used a condom. With every man who paid." And when she passed the age of 40 last year and transitioned into the role of madam - renting her bedroom to younger women and their clients - she handed each of them a condom, too.

Although her actions may seem logical and obvious, AIDS-education programs around the world have found that people rarely do the logical, obvious thing and use condoms once they learn about the risk of HIV. They may use condoms sometimes, in some cases. They almost never use them with the zealousness of Thenmozhi.

And yet she is no aberration. She is simply one example of the way the country has cut its rate of AIDS infection in half in the last decade, moved away from the brink of catastrophe and quietly achieved a great but unheralded public-health victory.

In southern India, HIV incidence (the rate of new infections) was 2 per cent per year in 2000; by 2007 it was just below 1 per cent. In the north, where HIV is far less prevalent, there was no large decline, but also no increase.

Only much-smaller Thailand, which implemented a mandatory-condom campaign in its sex industry in the 1990s, has ever posted similar declines.

What has happened here is starting to draw global attention. Yet so much of this story is unique to India, with its strengths (such as pro-active governments) and its weaknesses (particularly the rigid control kept over its female citizens) that it's questionable how much its example can be applied anywhere else.

When India announced in 2007 that it had 2.3 million people living with HIV, rather than the 5.7 million reported the year before, the government first attributed much of the change to better data collection. Many in the AIDS field were skeptical.

"We and all the other AIDS organizations think the number of people accessing services is increasing, so why are the infection numbers so low?" says Anjali Gopalan, head of the Delhi-based Naz Foundation and one of India's most prominent AIDS activists.

Northern states have weak mechanisms for reporting AIDS cases, while marginalized populations such as the transgender sex workers and drug users she works with are never part of door-to-door surveys, she says, so tens of thousands of cases may be missing from the official statistics. And in all regions, many people are still going without adequate treatment.

Nevertheless, more and more research points to a substantial change in sexual behaviour and with it a decline in the spread

of HIV. Syphilis infections, which closely mirror HIV, have had an almost-identical drop.

"The decline is real. The numbers have plausibility and credibility," says Prabhat Jha, an epidemiologist who directs the Centre for Global Health Research in Toronto, and was an architect of India's early AIDS-control program. "There has been a profound change in behaviour among clients and sex workers that accounts for most of the drop."

While India has a significant population of intravenous drug users - as many as half of whom, in some areas, have HIV-AIDS - the bulk of the HIV transmission in this country happens through heterosexual sex. Men, often married, pay professionals for sex, get infected and then pass the virus to their wives or regular partners, who infect children at birth.

In 1997, Prof. Jha - who is Indian-born but grew up in Winnipeg - found himself in Kamithipura, the teeming red light district of Mumbai. He had just been hired by the World Bank to design a national AIDS intervention for India, and with him was another Manitoban, Frank Plummer.

Now the director of the national Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control in Ottawa, Dr. Plummer was then a microbiologist renowned for his work in the early days of HIV in East Africa. Prof. Jha wanted his assessment of India's situation.

"Frank looked around, and he said, 'This looks just like Nairobi in 1984,' " Prof. Jha recalls. Those words made him shudder: He was well aware of the horrifying swath of destruction AIDS went on to cut through the slums of Kenya and so many other African nations.

But the parallel was obvious: In India in 1997, HIV infection was exploding among sex workers, drug users and truck drivers in congested urban areas. But almost no one knew about the disease and no one was doing anything to protect themselves or their other partners.

In a country of this size, with a frail public health system, it was an unfolding disaster. The newly-formed National AIDS Control Organization said the country's infection rate was the fastest-growing in the world. Prof. Jah ran mathematical models that predicted more than 20 million Indians with HIV by 2010.

But it didn't happen. The aversion of this crisis has many who work in AIDS control feeling justifiably proud - theirs is a significant achievement in a field notable for its rare victories. Billions of dollars and 15 years of effort in the worst-affected nations in Africa have yielded declines in HIV infection of at best 5 or 6 per cent (except possibly in Uganda, which saw a very sharp drop in the late 1980s - the reasons are hotly debated

today).

Ask those involved, such as Prof. Jha - who had a $200-million budget from the World Bank to try to stop infections - what worked, and they list mass distribution of free condoms; the use of "peer educators" such as the sex worker who visited Thenmozhi; and a media campaign full of frank messages.

All of which have been tried, and tried, and tried in Africa, with only meagre impact. So why did they work in India?

Windows of opportunity

The first difference is timing. HIV was spreading quickly in Africa by the mid-1960s, yet it was 20 years before anyone tested an African for it.

By the time real efforts to stop the virus got under way, hundreds of thousands of people had already died and in many countries 10 to 15 per cent of the general population was infected.

The first HIV cases in India, on the other hand, were not found until 1986, here in Chennai, when two men tested positive. For the next few years, there were only a handful of cases.

By the time some far-sighted bureaucrats got on the job in the mid-1990s, HIV was just at the 1-per-cent rate which epidemiologists consider its viral tipping point - and, most critically, not yet in the general population but still largely confined to high-risk groups.

"We still had a window of opportunity," recalls S. Ramasundaram.

Today he heads the department of public works in Tamil Nadu's state government, but back then, he was a director in the health department, and was handed the new AIDS file.

He had a background in demography - and looking at Prof. Jha's models of projected spread of HIV, he had a similar full-body shudder of horror.

"I argued with the government. Very rarely in development do you get a crystal ball. I said, 'If you don't do something, it's going to be doomsday.' "

Mr. Ramasundaram was talking - urgently and often - to state leaders, and that is the next key difference from Africa. Tamil Nadu is the state that has posted the greatest gains on HIV and its government has been active and engaged since the day those first cases were reported - in sharp contrast to the denial with which many African leaders first confronted HIV.

(The huge sizes of Indian states - Tamil Nadu's population is 64 million, larger than three-quarters of African countries - and the differences between them make comparing Indian states and African nations more accurate than using India as a whole.)

Mr. Ramasundaram launched an AIDS-control organization at arm's length from the government, to minimize bureaucratic

slowdowns and corruption.

He brought in the best private advertising agencies in the state, gave them a budget bigger than Coke or Pepsi (then the biggest spenders) and had them vet all their ads with people living with HIV.

Then he blanketed the state: billboards, cricket stadiums, movies and newspapers in every language.

"There were so many messages on HIV then - the Chief Minister called me and said, 'You're frightening people.' I said, 'Sir, that's the point.' He said, 'It looks like we have a big epidemic!' I said, 'No,

we want to prevent a big epidemic.' "

Next he turned to community groups that were already working in slums and with sex workers, and tasked them with going door-to-door to spread the word.

The leader was Lakshmi Bai, a fast-talking, whirling-sari-clad social scientist with years of experience with sex workers, including not only women but gay and transgender men.

She eschewed the idea of a straight-up AIDS program; instead, she involved the sex workers in projects to build their self-esteem, organized them into collectives with food and clothing banks, and pushed them to confront government with their needs.

"You don't think only about just one disease. You can't talk just about AIDS," explains Ms. Bai, who now runs the non-governmental Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative. "But when you are doing all these things together, they are going to listen to what you are saying about HIV."

"My body is a temple and I have to take care of it - the director has told us we are precious people and God's spirit lives in us," says Thenmozhi, speaking with the kind of reverence that many sex workers seem to have for Ms. Bai. So, she added, condoms only make sense.

HIGH-RISK FOCUS

The Tamil Nadu program benefited from bitter experience in Africa, where the thinking had been that for each dollar of AIDS prevention funding, 20 cents should be spent on the high-risk groups and the rest on the general population.

By the late 1990s, Mr. Ramasundaram explained, research had made clear that there would be far more impact from spending the whole dollar on those high-risk groups - and keeping the virus out of the general population. Condom use by sex workers rose from 40 per cent to 90 per cent in three years.

Meanwhile, the billboards and movie ads were addressing a particular population: "Don't treat Tamil Nadu as an African country ... the literacy level is higher, the adaptation to change is faster and the technology

absorption is higher," Dr. S. Vijayakumar, now head of the state AIDS agency, says (with a certain smugness that often characterizes the reflections of those in the field here).

However, in terms of one key bit of technology, there was indeed a crucial difference in India: Condoms had been actively promoted here since Indira Gandhi's population-control policies of the 1970s.

Also, there was little of the cultural distaste and discomfort that has greeted condom campaigns in Africa - and no conservative Christian church to lead a public outcry about abstinence.

There were, however, plenty of trained lab technicians and statisticians and the sort of qualified staff an AIDS program needs, the human resources that are so often lacking in Africa.

And there was cash. When Mr. Ramasundaram set up his new state AIDS organization, the World Bank offered up millions of dollars, which meant he didn't have to compete for scarce state-health resources.

"It was crucial that we had that source of funding," he says.

International agencies rushed to support India's AIDS response in its infancy; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation alone pledged $342-million (U.S.) over 10 years from 2004, its largest program anywhere.

Darker side

But there are also less-pleasant truths about India's victory over HIV. Beyond literacy,

condoms, blunt ads and brilliant bureaucrats, one thing more than any other has checked the spread of the virus here: the oppression of Indian women.

The extreme control exerted over women's personal lives - first by their parents, then by their husbands and in-laws - means that very few ever have the opportunity to have a sexual partner other than their husbands.

Where 25 per cent of men report more than one sexual partner, less than 2 per cent of women do. Married women get infected by their husbands, and sometimes pass HIV to their children, but the virus stops there: They do not have other partners to pass HIV on to.

This is a marked contrast to Africa, where it is now clear that the "concurrent sexual network" - the tendency for both men and women to have overlapping partners rather than serial ones - has been the key driver of the epidemic.

(Meanwhile, discrimination has played a sharply different role in the spread of HIV among men who have sex with men - it has extremely limited AIDS organizations' ability effectively to provide these men condoms and information. As a consequence, they have HIV infection rates 10 times those of

the general population.)

There is, in fact, a broader issue of culture at play in India's AIDS success story, the sort of squishy subject that makes AIDS researchers flinch because it lies so far outside tidy quantifiable data.

But many in the field agree that Indian society remains rigidly hierarchical, still infused with the powerful role of the caste system, and people are accustomed to the strong role of government in their lives.

That's a contrast to many African countries with weaker states and more egalitarian societies. And it meant that when the Indian government sternly told people to use condoms and cut back on partners, they listened.

ZERO PATIENT

Mr. Vijayakumar believes that in the next couple of years, his AIDS control agency can drive new infections down to zero. It's a breathtakingly ambitious goal - it has never been done anywhere else - but he brandishes an impressive array of maps, charts and software programs to demonstrate just how he is going to do it.

His office collects data from every possible source - from blood banks to maternity hospitals to neighbourhood clinics for sex workers - and can pinpoint where each new infection comes from.

He has a three-pronged strategy based on continued prevention messages, better reach of the interventions that prevent parents from infecting children, and continued work with the high-risk groups.

"We should be able to do this," he says, working long past dark in an office where a steady flow of assistants ebbed in and out bearing yet more charts and data sets.

"I have a plan in place - my problem is my high-risk groups. If I can bring them into the health fold we'll certainly be able to do it."

But Mr. Vijayakumar is watching his budget shrink, and government, donor and public attention shift away from HIV, as success itself eases the sense of panic.

Many say the shift in government funds is justified, given how few people HIV kills in comparison with basic public-health problems such as water-borne diarrhea, child malnutrition, smoking or road accidents. The Gates Foundation is redirecting its funding to issues such as maternal and newborn care.

Yet HIV remains of critical concern here: With 2.3-million infected people, this country has the third-largest burden of HIV-AIDS in the world, and has succeeded in getting treatment to fewer than half of the people who need it.

The successes achieved have been mostly in the richer south of the country. The outstanding question is the north, with much

weaker governments and health systems that have yet to embark on serious AIDS-control programs.

Other factors make the north vulnerable too. "There are large numbers of migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and they are a huge worry," says Mr. Ramasundaram. A major factor in the African pandemic has been workers spending months or years away from their wives and paying for sex in their host cities.

Overall, the precise situation with HIV in the north is unknown - mother-child transmission could be exploding.

India's AIDS interventions have been relatively cheap - a tenth the cost of Thailand's sex-worker and condom intervention - but they are not free. "The era of 'Big HIV' in India may be over, and we know that once condoms become common in commercial sex, they stay common," says Prof. Jha. "But there is a huge 'if' - the Indian government has to continue to pay for the cheap and effective ways to curb HIV for at least the next decade, especially in North India."

In Chennai, Lakshmi Bai, who has lived through a rare, radical shift in sexual behaviour, is as often gloomy as she is encouraged. "So much life has been lost," she says - a fact often glossed over by the bureaucrats and researchers excited about the falling infection rates. While many HIV-related deaths are not reported as AIDS, at minimum several hundred thousand Indians have already died of the disease, Prof. Jha estimates.

"Everything is not rosy here," says Ms. Bai. "There is so much to do! I'm quite worried about sustainability, with the funders leaving. Even now, with all this 'empowerment' blah-blah, sexual decisions are taken by men."

There are 50,000 Tamil Nadu sex workers on her books today, but new young girls - and young men - show up all the time. "If you're not going to continuously address, what will happen? If these things are not done - disaster only."

But when Thenmozhi sits in a circle with the women at the drop-in centre, when they joke and gently mock their clients, the married men "who say they can't eat the same food every day," disaster seems far away. The women bemoan their troubles - shirking husbands and mounting bills. But AIDS is not one of them.

PHOTO: LANA SLEZIC

What's better than a miracle school for 'untouchable' girls? Two schools, for a start

Stephanie Nolen revisits a woman who's changed the lives of India's most marginalized children, and finds she's doubled her efforts

BIHAR, INDIA – When mealtime arrives the first night, the new cook hauls the steel pots out of the kitchen. Big enough for adults to bathe in, the pots brim with rice, lentil daal and fragrant masala vegetables.

Ninety schoolgirls line up and hold out their hands for the steel thali tray that will be their plate from now on. The cook holds out the ladle to the first in line to serve herself, but the girl is frozen in confusion. All down the row, eyes are wide, disbelieving.

It is more food than most of them have seen in their lives.

These girls - who have always eaten last, left with only the scraps at the edge of the pot - are being told to help themselves. To fill their plates.

And they do. They eat and eat, giggling through mouths stuffed full. When at last they sit back on their heels, unable to swallow one more grain of rice, their plates are still covered in food.

Now, Sister Sudha Varghese steps forward and calls gently for their attention.

"You have eaten very well," she says approvingly in Hindi. There are giggles. Sister Sudha goes on, her words slow and measured: "There will always be enough for you here. You will have three meals every day, and you will have two snacks, and there will always be as much as you need.

"But food is precious," she tells the girls, all of them silent now. "And many in our community are hungry. And we do not want to waste. So please, take only what you need."

Come morning, the girls line up again for breakfast. This time, they fill their plates just so far, no further. One of the smallest girls approaches Sister Sudha, wraps a thin arm around her waist. "People in my village are hungry," she says earnestly. "We can't waste."

Here you will always have what you need: The words, when the slight nun speaks them into the fading light of her new schoolroom, are deceptively simple. But they are the bedrock of Sister Sudha's educational philosophy, of the revolution she is trying to engender in one of the world's most marginalized communities.

Nearly 50 years ago, Sister Sudha, then a teenager, came to the eastern state of Bihar from her native Kerala to join a Catholic religious order and work with India's poorest people.

She soon fled the comfortable confines of the convent and spent the next 25 years in a tola, a huddle of mean mud houses at the edge of a village that are reserved for the Mushahar, a group at the very bottom of the Hindu caste system.

These are the so-called untouchables, or Dalits, deemed by virtue of their birth too impure to eat, walk, bathe or even breathe among their neighbours.

Eventually, Sister Sudha was driven out of the village by her own success: When Mushahar she had educated on their rights demanded police action over their abuse, the dominant caste members came looking for her. She moved nearer to the capital of Bihar, Patna.

She was determined to try an experiment she had been thinking about for years: She would build a safe and nurturing place for Mushahar girls.

She would take them away from the strenuous farm work and domestic labour they perform from the time they are toddlers, and away from the omnipresent risk of sexual assault and certain marriage in their early teens. She would educate them, in the school curriculum and in something more: She would try to dislodge their deep sense of inferiority and teach them the rights they are promised in India's constitution - and how to fight for them.

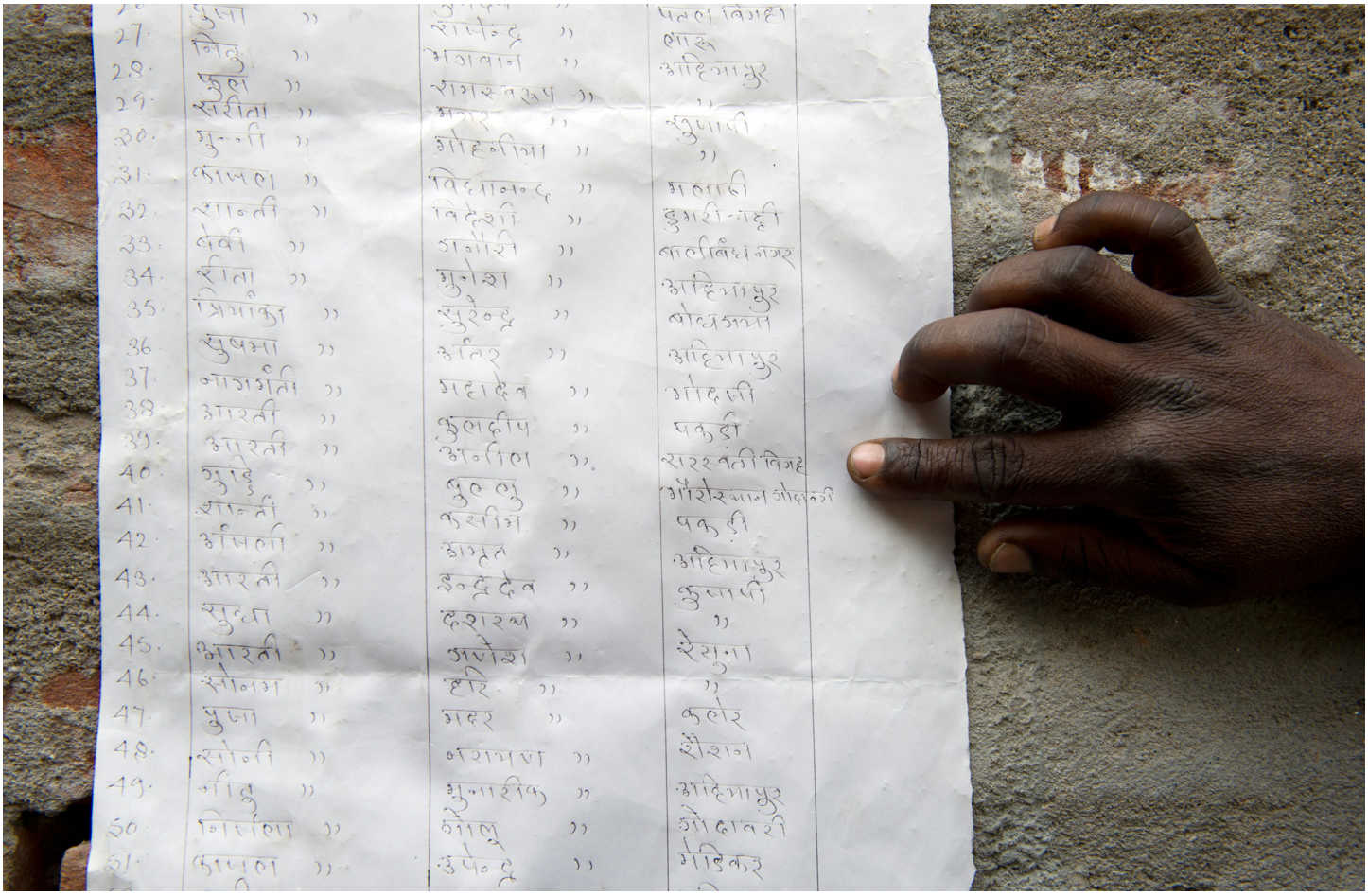
Sister Sudha called her residential school Prerna, the Hindi word for inspiration. In the past six years, its students have flourished beyond everyone's wildest expectations, except for her own. She imagined just what has happened: The girls would win international karate tournaments, fine-art competitions and school prizes; they would bloom with poise, confidence and a quietly nourished defiance.

Yet even as they flourished, Sister Sudha began to feel the limits of Prerna - just 125 girls, when everywhere she went in the state there were so many more, glinting with the same potential but left herding buffalo, collecting firewood and walking with their heads down. She was bothered, too, by suggestions that Prerna's success was an aberration.

Meanwhile Bihar state came to be headed by a canny Premier, Nitish Kumar, who has identified the Mushahar and other low-caste groups as both a vote bank and an obstacle to his progress statistics. He sent word asking Sudha if she could replicate Prerna. She said she would try. He promised the money to rent and convert a building, hire teachers and buy books, beds and pots.

For a location, she chose the congested town of Gaya, about five hours from Patna. It is a few kilometres from Bhodgaya, the place where the Buddha found enlightenment, which has an airport and a stream of pilgrims and tourists from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Tibet and beyond. Gaya, by contrast, has nothing of note except the high rate of starvation deaths in its large Mushahar community. But it does have the demand: Mushahar parents "are beginning to realize what they have been missing," Sister Sudha says.

(cont.)



Parents flock to the new school on the first day to read the entrance list and see if their daughters have made it in PHOTO: LANA SLEZIC

CROWDING THROUGH THE DOORS

The new school, called Prerna 2, has space for 100 girls on three floors of a single narrow building. It took the best part of a year to get it open, navigating state bureaucracy and fending off predatory civil servants and resentful neighbours. There were delays when builders did not show up, funds were not sent and deliveries did not come.

Meanwhile, Sister Sudha sent word to all the Mushahar tola within 100 kilometres, saying each family could send a girl to take an entrance test - to measure not education, as few have any, but ability and eagerness to learn. She posted the list of successful candidates and announced the school would open, ready or not, in February.

The first day, families began to arrive mid-morning. The girls were in their best clothes, with their meagre possessions in little satchels, and giggly with anticipation, clinging to the small siblings they would be leaving for the first time. They lined up to register even as workers trudged past with piles of bricks on their heads and a sociable cow belonging to the previous tenant poked her head in the window.

There was one arrival the school's founder was not expecting, a young woman with her three-year-old daughter. Sister Sudha explained the school was for older girls. The mother said she knew: She wanted to enroll herself. She'd been forced by her parents to leave school and marry at 12. Now, her husband was dead. She was still a teenager. Couldn't they find her a place?

Sister Sudha directed someone to write down the woman's name and address. She could not take her here at Prerna 2, but she would look for a place for her.

Next through the door was Leela Devi, 29, with her daughters Anjali and Shushan, who were 12 and 11. Ms. Devi explained that she had left school in Grade 2 - "I can read and write my name and my husband's name and my kids' names." But as for her daughters, "if they study here, they can be teachers, or doctors."

She watched the bustle of opening day with satisfaction, although her daughters looked bewildered at her words.

At midday, Sister Sudha gathered all the parents together in the big main room. "It's a very important day for you and for us, it's a day of joy," she began. "Because your girls are taking a new step in their lives. ... Our communities, whether in Gaya or in Patna or anywhere else, lag behind in education, and those who lack education have hardly any scope to grow."

The parents nodded earnestly. Most had signed the enrolment form with a thumbprint.

But she continued with a warning. "One thing I want to tell you right from the beginning: Your girls might look small today, but the school environment, regular meals and sports - all of these things will make them grow faster. In five or six years, they will start looking big. But then don't start thinking, 'They have grown up, and we have to get them married.' "

When girls are married, they have to leave the school. "So you yourself," Sister Sudha went on, "would be taking your daughter off of the path of education and harming yourselves. All our previous students who chose to leave school and get married, they regret it now."

In the late afternoon, the parents made their ways out the door. There were no big displays of emotion, just some brisk admonishments to study hard; any girls who were overwhelmed brushed their tears back quickly. Sister Sudha told the teachers to start leading them in games and songs to keep them distracted.

Ambitions yet unglimpsed

The new girls were not yet like those of the first school. They were skinny, grimy and scratching at lice, with attention spans, she figured, of eight minutes at best. And something more: "If I ask the girls in Prerna

1, 'Who would you like to become?' they would say, 'I want to become a teacher. I want to be a doctor, an engineer, I want to be the district magistrate.' All kinds of things come out. But when you ask these girls, they have no idea."

PHOTO: LANA SLEZIC

No one has ever suggested to these girls they can be anything but landless farm labourers like their parents. "That kind of ambition is not there yet, or they are not able to express it. But then, I have my ideas - that it is there."

The next morning brought a series of firsts: The girls were woken before it was light and shown how to roll up their bedding and sweep the floor. The housemother, Jyoti Kumari, doled out toothbrushes and toothpaste, led the girls to the row of taps out back and instructed everyone to wash their faces and brush their teeth.

Then they were taken in small groups around to the hand pump out front, in the sheltered courtyard. The girls squinted uncertainly at Ms. Kumari, but she moved briskly, filling a bucket, tugging off dresses and handing out shampoo. Shivering in the morning chill, the girls were lined up and scrubbed - for many, it was their first bath in months; from now on, they would do it each morning.

Ms. Kumari gave out lengths of sarong to use as towels, and made sure everyone had a comb. Next came an intense session of hair brushing and braiding, as the mats and knots of months were worked out. In an hour, the girls were lined up again, looking noticeably tidier.

Out in the yard, the new sports teacher began to teach basic calisthenics, with some flailing and bumping along the way. The girls learned a prayer, and then a song - asking a non-specific god to give them strength (Sister Sudha intended to keep this school as non-sectarian as the first Prerna).

The girls were preparing to file in to breakfast when the nun, who had watched quietly from a back corner, stepped forward. There was one more thing they would do each morning, she said: "You must say, 'Jai Bhim!' "

The girls looked blankly at her.

"We say, 'Long live Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar,' " she told them. The girls clearly knew little or nothing about the legendary Dalit leader, architect of India's constitution,

whom Dalits revere with the devotion that dominant-caste Hindus have for Mahatma Gandhi. "He was a leader of the Dalits, and the laws of our nation were written by him. He was from a Dalit community, a Dalit family, a family like ours.

"He got the opportunity to study, and not just in India. He was so bright, he went abroad to America and England, and practised law. Do you know lawyers, the ones who wear black coats and fight cases in courts? Our Babasaheb Ambedkar went to study in England and then came back to India. He wrote the first laws of our nation. So he is the biggest leader for our people."

Her charges were still staring.

"So every day after prayer what will we say? We'll say for him, 'Jai Bhim!'"

The girls repeated the words, but too softly, Sister Sudha scolded. She wasn't finished with the history lesson. "Ambedkar also faced a lot of discrimination but he fought against it. He made a place for himself, he struggled, and he left us three mantras."

She waited, but the girls did not know the mantras. She looked to the new teachers - they didn't know either.

"Become educated!" Sister Sudha thundered. "And? Unite! And? Struggle. ... Do you know what it means to be united? To become one! Together to fight for our rights."

By now her eyes were blazing and the girls' chins were lifted and their shoulders straight. No one had ever spoken to them like this.

"Demand your rights, and if you have to, fight for them. If we fight together, we can do anything."

Once more she punched up her fist, and this time every girl yelled, "Jai Bhim!" And then she sent them in to breakfast.

'Maybe I am very greedy'

It is with full plates, quick hugs and simple, radical lessons like these that Sister Sudha will change these girls' lives, as she has at Prerna 1. But she can't be at both schools at once, and if she starts more - as the state government is urging - she will have ever less time to spend at each one. She realizes the risk.

"Maybe I am very greedy about them," she said of her girls. "Because I see what can be done with them." Every time she visited another village, she saw what she might do with the girls there. "So maybe I have given into that temptation also." She laughed. "But there is no harm in trying."

At least, she hopes not. The Prerna schools have answered every question about what these girls are capable of, except the one that may prove most important: Where will they go after that? They no longer fit easily in with their families and their villages. But with caste-based atrocities reported in newspapers each day, it is clear that change in India at large has not hap-

pened as fast as at Prerna.

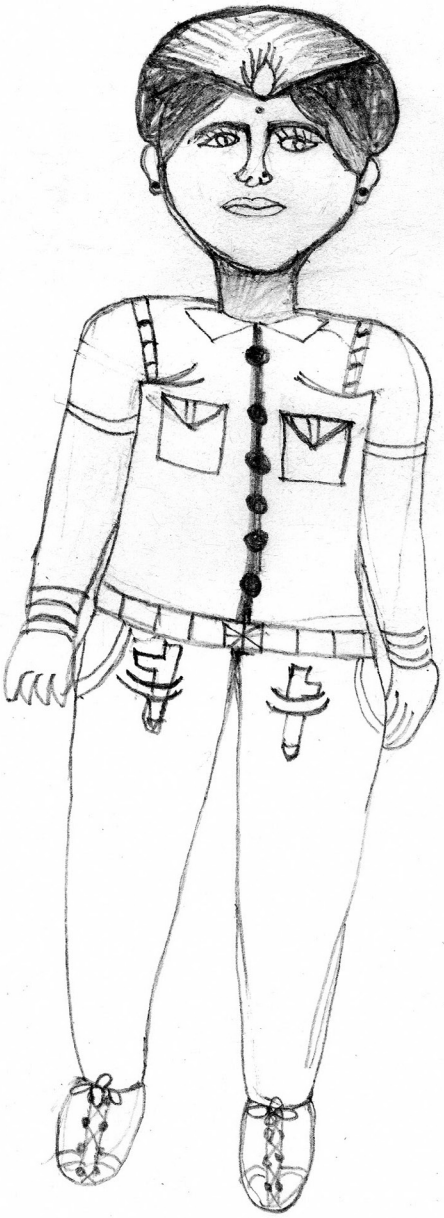
"My dream and my hope for them is that they would be educated," she said of her new charges. "They'll be people with self-confidence, independent, and someone who can stand up in their community and attract other children to follow the way that they have taken, the way of education. And they will become agents of change and help their society to go ahead.

"And I'm sure they themselves will begin to dream."

PHOTO: LANA SLEZIC

Students at Prerna share what they hope to become

Name Jyoti Kumari



I will be a Police officer

Date 11/8/2011

Name Lakshmi Kumari class - IV

I will be a Judge

Pooram Kumari

I want be Teacher

Students

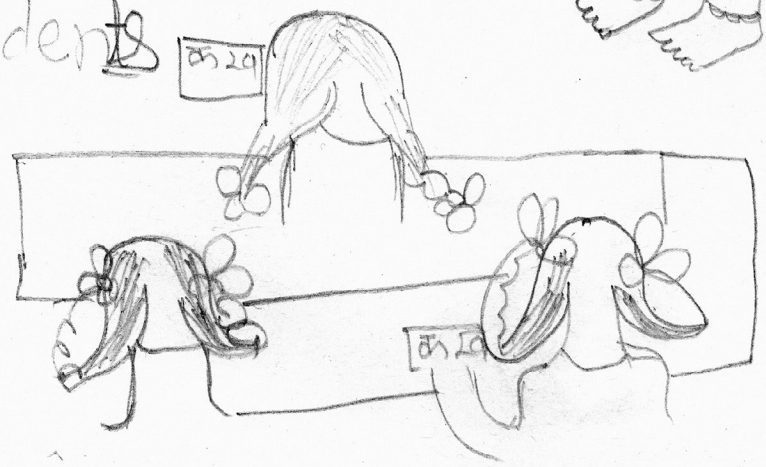


PHOTO: SIMON DE TREY-WHITE

Two is enough

India has won international acclaim for protecting women's reproductive rights even as it reins in a booming population. Yet, in the countryside, where most poor people live and most babies are born, **Stephanie Nolen** finds quite a different story: government sanctions against couples who insist on having more than two children and effectively one form of birth control for those who fall in line – sterilization.

KAMRORA, INDIA – Noni Raja did just what she was supposed to do. She married when she was 20, in 2004, and gave birth to a son a year later. In 2006, she had a daughter. And a year after that brought the second son she needed to fulfill her obligations in the eyes of her in-laws, farmers with a tiny plot in this hardscrabble hamlet in the Indian heartland.

Everyone was pleased with her. Ms. Raja proceeded to find a job as a government health-outreach worker, and enjoyed the esteem that came with the $15 or so she brought the family each month.

Then Noni Raja did something rather less expected. She got up one day, caught a bus into Mahoba, the nearest town, and presented herself at the hospital for a tubal ligation.

She spent a couple of hours recovering, took the bus home and informed her startled in-laws that she had had "the operation."

Years later, her mother-in-law is still affronted. "I didn't like it," Kiran Devi says as the two women sit in the spring sun on their front stoop. "She went against our wishes."

At the time, Ms. Raja wanted the best for the children she already had, which meant ensuring there would be no more.

Being surgically sterilized seems an extreme form of contraception for such a young woman, but India's approach to family planning left her with no other choice.

Even worse, her defiance would come back to haunt her.

India began grappling with the magnitude of its population even before it became independent in 1947; it was labelled a crisis in the 1970s when the government of Indira Gandhi carried out mandatory sterilizations, en masse.

But since those dark days, the country has emerged as a leader in the field, adopting the language of "reproductive health and rights."

That means, in the words of the World Health Organization, that India is committed to ensuring its people have "the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so" - and that their decision be "free of discrimination, coercion and violence."

This official position - which contrasts starkly with China's strict one-child policy - has won India international plaudits; last year, it was invited to co-chair a prestigious summit on family planning held in London, and feted for its progressive approach.

Yet spend some time talking to women in Kamrora - and dozens of villages like it in the "Hindi belt," the poor states that span India's middle bulge and are home to about 450 million people - and you learn something that never came up at the meeting in Britain: The policy this country has on paper is markedly different than what hap-

pens in real life.

The reality is harsh and repressive and targets the most marginalized, often the lowest-caste, women. It is also far from effective in areas with the highest birth rates, paradoxically driving the rate up and making poverty worse in the process.

Beijing has been widely criticized for limiting families to only one child, but India has adopted many aspects of its policy. With 1.2 billion people and on course to overtake China as the planet's most populous country in about a decade, India is taking steps many consider nearly as harsh - but cloaking them in the far more benign-sounding "two-child norm."

And despite all the government rhetoric about how its citizens have choices and condoms are brought right to village doorsteps, the truth is that, in the northern half of the country, the Indian health service consistently delivers only one form of contraception in the rural areas, where 70 per cent of the population lives.

That is tubal ligation, often performed at "camps," where dozens of women are sterilized in a day; more than half of them are 25 or younger, and they are often illiterate and unclear about what the surgery means.

'It's entirely coercive'

Unlike many women, Noni Raja knew exactly what she was doing when she got on the bus to the city: She has been trained in family planning, which she is charge of delivering in Kamrora, and is responsible for distributing a government-funded supply of condoms and oral contraceptives. It is the only access to birth control people here have, as most cannot afford a trip to the city. Yet, in a situation typical of India's badly managed social schemes, it has been two years since Ms. Raja last received anything to dole out. Today, her kit contains one desiccated packet of prophylactics and an expired pregnancy test.

So, when a village woman confides that her in-laws have given her permission to stop having babies, Ms. Raja knows that the only option is sterilization. To make sure that she promotes it, the government pays her $3 for each woman she brings in - and, if she does not deliver as many as the government expects, she stands to lose the only wage-paying job in Kamrora, other than breaking stones in the quarry.

Ms. Raja is the best-educated woman in the village - she finished 10th grade before her health-worker training - but she says with a sigh that it's sometimes hard to explain the surgery to her neighbours. Research from the Centre for Health and Social Justice in Delhi shows that state governments aggressively target women from the poorest aboriginal and Dalit (once known as "untouchable") communities.

Those who undergo the operation may

not understand what is being done, but they know that there can be severe consequences if they do not comply with the two-child norm.

"We're on the track to be just like China," says Leena Uppal, an earnest activist who co-ordinates the National Coalition Against Two-Child Norm and Coercive Population Policies. "It's entirely coercive - for the women, for the health worker, who will lose her job if she doesn't bring in enough people. The whole focus is on closing off wombs, of making sure these women don't have any more babies."

China's one-child campaign, adopted in 1979, forced women to have abortions if they conceived again without state approval, or fined couples heavily, especially in urban areas. India's policy involves no such direct punishments, but its impact can be harsh in a place such as Kamrora.

Parents with more than two children are denied access to everything from a subsidy for babies delivered in hospital and school bursaries to the right to run for political office. A law now being considered would deny them access to subsidized food - a tactic The Times of India, the country's largest newspaper, recently reported, favourably, on its front page.

The problem, says Abhijit Das, an obstetrician who runs the Centre for Health and Social Justice, is that, while the government's policy has changed since Mrs. Gandhi's era, when the rural poor were seen as strangling the country's chances of progress, its mindset has not. There is a genuine commitment to ending poverty and a sincere desire to see families better able to care for their children. Yet officials based in air-conditioned offices in the capital still believe that ignorant rural poor people are dragging the country down by mindlessly having babies, and simply do not know what is best.

"The construction of the population problem is a middle-class creation," Dr. Das says, "and it has caste and class distinctions: The 'wrong' people are the ones who have eight kids."

In this, India is not unlike the West, where there is public debate about the higher birth rate of "welfare moms," aboriginal people and immigrants. The idea is entrenched, and it results in policy entirely disconnected from the reality of life in a place such as Kamrora, where families have many good reasons for having more than two children.

First, mortality rates remain high - children, as Ms. Raja will tell you starkly, die here. Almost one in 10 do not live to see their fifth birthday. Subsistence agriculture remains the only employment option, so the young are needed to work in the fields and later, in the absence of any real social-welfare net, to care for their parents in old age.

And couples have children because there is no way not to have them: Those unwilling to undergo sterilization - newlyweds, for example - have access to no other form of birth control.

The two-child norm flies in the face of the idea of "reproductive rights," Ms. Uppal notes. "What is a more basic right than deciding how many children to have - and when to have them?"

It also punishes women when the decision is not really theirs to make. Ms. Raja's family expected her to have a third child, but when she did, she became ineligible for a central government allowance to provide extra food while pregnant and breastfeeding (a policy supposedly aimed at poor, Dalit women like her). As well, she lost the right to run for the local council, and her daughter was disqualified from a bursary program designed to boost girls' education.

The policy is enforced by local-level officials, often haphazardly. As part of her health-worker job, Ms. Raja has succeeded in obtaining the bursary for having a baby in a maternity centre for a number of women with more than two children, even though it is theoretically denied. At the same time, she says, other women in Kamrora have been denied a state bonus for mothers who have daughters - a measure designed to discourage sex-selective abortion, an especially grim side effect of the two-child policy. The desire for sons, to carry on a family name and inherit land and assets, is so strong that families may abort girls to get the two boys they want and stay within the limit.

India already has one of the world's more sharply skewed sex ratios. As in China, millions of women are "missing" from the normal population balance. And yet the mandarins in charge of its population policy reject any comparison with China.

"There is no grounds to call [Indian policy] repressive," says S.K. Sikdar, who heads the family-planning division at the national Ministry of Health in Delhi. "We learned our lesson [in the 1970s]. ... This isn't a population issue any more; it's a mother-and-child health intervention."

Energetic and driven, Dr. Sikdar insists that "we don't have a two-child norm." He says that the only message to women from government is about the benefit of having children later and at least two years apart.

"Our only intervention is to give people free access to [child] spacing. ... I know our women are quite happy with what they have," he says, adding that the government has had great success in delivering condoms and oral contraceptives directly to rural doorsteps - that kit of Ms. Raja should be replenished every month.

Many of the more punitive policies in place today have been set by state governments, but the two-child norm also applies

to a number of benefits, such as nutritional support for pregnant women, that come from the national government. Dr. Sikdar acknowledges this, but he says that "low-performing states" (the poorest ones with highest fertility) are exempt.

That news has not reached Kamrora - or dozens of other areas where poor women, often Dalit, are denied access to school meals, clean-water schemes, the female-child bonus and the maternity-home payment because they have more than two children. All state family-planning programs are run on money from the central government.

A.R. Nanda, who was once in charge of population policy for India and established its family planning department, says that not only is there a two-child policy, it was explicitly borrowed from China: "The idea of withholding benefits comes from China ... 'If China can do it.'"

After taking its hard line in 1979, China saw its population growth fall sharply, and many in the Indian government were impressed. But they failed to grasp the basics of population science, Mr. Nanda says: "The highest drop in Chinese population came before the one-child policy; it came from equitable access to education, health care, including family planning, and a rise in income" following the communist revolution. From 1952 to 1979, China's fertility rate was more than cut in half, falling to 2.75 children per woman from 6.5.

"If you want to emulate, emulate the positive," Mr. Nanda says. "We ought to focus on equity."

In the 1990s, he oversaw the adoption of a rights-based approach - only to see it quickly and quietly usurped by politicians who still believed that the key was to move fast and stop the "backward classes" from breeding.

India's population is rising, but because of what demographers call "momentum growth." Sixty per cent of Indians are of reproducing age. Even if tomorrow India attained "replacement level" fertility - if people had only enough children to replace themselves when they died - the country's overall population would keep growing because the number of people being born will exceed those dying for several decades.

Despite alarms raised regularly in the media, fertility rates are, in fact, falling, and have been for two decades. In 21 Indian states and territories - including all of the more prosperous south - average fertility is at or below replacement level of 2.1 children per couple. The problem would take care of itself, says Dr. Das of the Centre for Health and Social Justice, if people in the high-fertility areas had access to jobs, education and, in the short term, condoms, birth-control pills and intrauterine devices.

Sterilization actually pushes population growth, he notes. "The largest amount of reproduction now is young women having their first and second children; sterilization does nothing to change this.

"The message [from government] is, 'Have your children quickly and terminate your reproduction.' When you give that message, you speed up the rate of delivery and you speed up momentum." You wind up with even more reproducing adults.

Contest prizes include a car

When India's policy was overhauled after Mrs. Gandhi, eliminating government-set targets for contraception and sterilization was seen as key to being less repressive.

But bureaucrats and health officials did little more than change their terminology.

"Targets and camps are back with a vengeance," according to Mr. Nanda, saying he has seen officials who meet their targets handsomely rewarded by, for example, having a government car at their disposal.

In 2011, Shivraj Singh Chauhan, the chief minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh, announced a drive to sterilize 750,000 people a year. Those who underwent the surgery or brought in new recruits were entered to win prizes, including washing machines, DVD players, gun licences and a Nano, the ultra-low-cost Indian car.

Often sterilizations are done at breathtaking speed, with a doctor performing as many as 35 a day; rates of failure and complications are much higher than the international norm.

Dr. Sikdar, as chief of national policy, says the camps are supposed to take place in medical facilities, and organizers of those that don't face criminal prosecution. But last year in Kaparfora in the state of Bihar, a doctor sterilized 53 women lying on benches in a school without electricity, and charges have yet to be laid.

Research by Dr. Das's centre consistently finds that it is women from the poorest communities, usually aboriginal people and those at the bottom of the caste system, who are targeted when a region needs to reach its quota. They may have no idea that the procedure is permanent, he says.

Navin Kumar, the health information officer who supervises Kamrora, says the state government gave him a target (for the 875,000 residents of Mahoba district) last year of 4,100 women and 400 men.

And yet, Dr. Sikdar insists: "We do not give targets - we have ... 'estimated levels of achievement' ... It's a management tool. A doctor has to make a plan based on numbers."

If local officials, such as Mr. Kumar, are being told otherwise, and health workers, such as Ms. Raja, are pushed to meet quotas, he says, it's a local aberration: A district politician may be keen to boost his reputa-

tion and "if, in his over-enthusiasm, he does something ..."

Anjali Sen, director for South Asia with the International Planned Parenthood Federation, says India's policy was drafted with the best of intentions, but she does not buy Dr. Sikdar's claim that there are no targets. State family-planning budgets come from Delhi, she explains, and "cash incentives are tacit acceptance [of targets] from the central government."

Ms. Uppal, the activist, says national officials could easily make sure the system is target-free: "They're the cops."

Dr. Sikdar says India is launching a new incentive program under which 860,000 health workers such as Ms. Raja will be paid $10 for every woman persuaded to delay her first child for two years after marriage, and another $10 if she waits two years before having a second.

Left unexplained is just how the women are supposed to avoid getting pregnant.

Certainly no one is relying on husbands to sort it out. During the Indira Gandhi era, most sterilizations were performed on men - there was no way to do a tubal ligation without invasive surgery, and female doctors, whom women patients prefer, were rare.

Vasectomies are still less complicated, but 95 per cent of the operations are now on women. Mr. Kumar says Mahoba district achieved 80 per cent of its target for women last year - but sterilized none of the 400 men.

There is a widespread belief, rarely challenged by doctors, that sterilization weakens a man and "robs him of his powers," as women in Kamrora say.

All of the government outreach about family planning - all the home visits and chat circles Ms. Raja organizes - focus on women. But ask the women if they actually make the decisions about children and birth control, and they burst into laughter.

Even Dr. Sikdar acknowledges the problem - he oversees a $20-million program that distributes free condoms to women who have "no control over fertility."

Or as Ms. Uppal puts it: "These completely disempowered women take condoms home to their husbands as if somehow they are going to be able to convince them to use them."

Dr. Das says the service delivery will not change as long as policy springs from a belief that the "wrong" people are having children.

"Our development priority is not to reduce family size, it's to raise income. We're not ashamed of the inequalities, of low education attainment, of poverty - why are we ashamed of population growth?"

'I nearly bled to death'

Noni Raja has thought a lot about choices,

and who gets to make them. Two years after her bold decision to have a tubal ligation, she received a brutal reminder of her place in the family hierarchy.

In 2008, her younger son died at the age of 1 from pneumonia that the local health centre failed to treat. She lost her bold, chattering boy - and something else. Her in-laws were unwilling to accept a daughter-in-law they felt had failed in her most important responsibility.

So they scraped together a small fortune, and took Ms. Raja to Jhansi, a city about eight hours away by bus, where they paid a surgeon to reverse her tubal ligation - a rare and complicated surgery.

The operation went badly. “I nearly bled to death,” Ms. Raja recalls flatly. But she came home and, two years later, produced that mandatory second son. Her place in the family was once more secure.

Today, that last baby is everyone’s mop-haired pet; mother and grandmother compete over whose lap he will lounge in.

Ms. Devi is defensive - but unrepentant about the extreme lengths they went to in the quest for another boy. “All the neighbours said it was not done, to have only one son,” she explains. “We were under pressure.”

PHOTO: LANA SLEZIC

Dying to get ahead

There's an alarming, ongoing rash of suicides among 'lower-caste' students who've earned places in the elite ranks of Indian education. Despite the country's claims to be a sleek 21st-century meritocracy, the habits of centuries of discrimination and social exclusion are not so easily shaken. **Stephanie Nolen** reports the students' disturbing tales as part of her continuing investigation into how India's schools and other institutions might heal – or deepen – historic wounds

NEW DELHI – The sharply truncated life of Anil Meena was marked by a ferocious tenacity.

From the mud house in rural Rajasthan, where he grew up in a family of subsistence farmers, he made his way first to school and then to the top of his class.

He studied with monomaniacal intensity and passed the entrance exam to the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), the most prestigious of India's professional colleges - an achievement almost unfathomable in the largely illiterate aboriginal community from which he came.

At AIIMS, he battled through classes where he couldn't understand a word of the English being spoken and pored over a dictionary to get through textbooks.

When an arbitrary rule change - that just happened to affect only students from backgrounds such as his - cost him a passing grade in a crucial exam, he tried repeatedly to meet his course director, his friends say. He sat outside the man's office for four or five hours at a time for a week.

But Mr. Meena had come up against something his intelligence and perseverance could not overcome: Students of his kind are not welcome at AIIMS, no more than they are at other prestigious Indian universities. They rarely graduate. No one was prepared to help him succeed.

On March 3, Mr. Meena hung himself from the fan in his small dormitory room. He was 22.

His death was a crippling blow to his family, a shock to his friends and an ugly blemish for AIIMS. It was also the 20th reported suicide in four years at an elite Indian educational institution by a student who was either aboriginal or Dalit - the people from the bottom of the Hindu caste system, once known as untouchables.

The suicides have emerged as a subject for fierce debate. Following the promise of the new India, these students are hyper-achievers from the grimmest of backgrounds, who made it into the schools that produce engineers, doctors and business leaders who are sought the world over.

But when they get there, they are often isolated, humiliated and discriminated against. They are told overtly by their professors that they will never make it to graduation. Yet many feel they cannot drop out - families and communities are invested in their success, and many have taken huge loans.

Some, trapped in this dilemma, have chosen to end their lives.

In the very places that produce the innovators who are supposed to shape its future, India is dogged by the darkest forces from its past.

"It's very pervasive and very invisible," says Shweta Barge, who monitors educational discrimination for the National Cam-

paign for Dalit Human Rights. From a Dalit community herself, Ms. Barge often tried to keep her identity cloaked as she managed to earn a postgraduate degree. "Those [Hindu] ideas of purity and pollution exist across every stream, in every school. It gets to hardcore Indian values: It's not just about where you reach; it's about where you came from."

A GRIM TALLY

The suicides have occurred at 16 different institutions, including the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and at the universities of Hyderabad and Bangalore.

In 2008, a final-year Dalit medical student at Government Medical College in Chandigarh in the Punjab hung himself in the college library; Jaspreet Singh left a note in his pocket describing how the head of his department told him repeatedly to his face that he would never, ever be permitted to be a doctor.

That professor had failed him several times in course work, although Mr. Singh had never before had anything but top marks. After his death, an external committee re-evaluated his exams and found that he should have passed. He was awarded his degree posthumously.

On March 3, 2010, exactly two years before Mr. Meena's death, another young aboriginal man killed himself at AIIMS. Bal Mukund Bharti, 25, was just weeks away from earning his degree, something unprecedented in his community in Madhya Pradesh.

His parents, who'd taken out massive loans to support him, told a team from of investigators from the Insight Foundation, which works to support Dalit and aboriginal students, that he repeatedly complained of harassment from his professors.

He said that one often complained, "I don't know where they come from, these Dalits and [aboriginals], getting here without studying anything."

Yet Mr. Bharti was, in fact, brilliant. He had scored eighth among hundreds of thousands of students nationwide in the intensely competitive engineering entrance exam - he passed up the seat to become a doctor instead. AIIMS carried out no investigation and says he had psychological problems.

And this April, an MBA student hanged herself at a private college in Gurgaon, the new technology and industry hub on the edge of Delhi. Dana Sangma was aboriginal, from Meghalaya state in India's remote northeast.

The university quickly released the explanation that she was distraught after being caught cheating on an exam - but her uncle, her home state's chief minister, who had personally enrolled his niece at the high-priced school, called that claim preposterous.

He registered a complaint with the National Commission of Schedule Castes and Tribes, saying she had been driven to suicide by harassment at the college.

India has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, especially in the age group of college students. But these deaths stand out because of the clear connection, often described in suicide notes, with the discrimination the victim endured.

Meritocracy on trial

The issue goes to the heart of a story that India wants to tell about itself these days: that traditional guarantees of privilege - wealth and caste - are losing power in favour of merit.

But if that is at all true, it is thanks largely to the program of "reservations" - a form of affirmative action under which all publicly funded educational institutions must reserve about 40 per cent of their seats for aboriginal (or "tribal"), Dalit and "other backward caste" students.

A percentage of jobs in government institutions are also reserved, as are political seats in municipal government.

The education reservations were set out in the Indian constitution adopted in 1950, although it was decades before there was more than a handful of such students who even reached the point of applying, and uproars from dominant-caste students and their families were a consistent drag on the program's full implementation until recently.

Today, there is a politically incorrect tint to complaining about reservations, but many dominant-caste students still resent them.

India is desperately short of higher-education institutions. The Ministry of Human Resource Development says the country needs at least 1,500 more - 520,000 students wrote the entrance exam for the IIT this year, competing for fewer than 10,000 spots.

A degree from one of the elite engineering or medical institutes is a ticket to a life of comfort. But the competition for seats, combined with the reservations, means the admission cutoff - the minimum grade for acceptance - for non-reserved students hovers in the high 90s.

Dalit students are perceived as taking seats that should go to students who scored higher. Indeed, there are thoughtful critics, such as the leading New Delhi public intellectual Gucharan Das, who point out that inequality in India today does not always follow traditional lines - some in the "other backward caste" groups are prospering, but they pressed to be included among the reservations, while other poor people are left out.

But those are the exceptions. Anoop Kumar, who runs the Insight Foundation, says most of the backlash against reservations

comes from an (often deliberate) misunderstanding of the principle. "People are defining merit strictly in terms of marks in the entrance exam, and that conveniently discounts all the other factors affecting the performance of the students," he says.

"So a student from an urban, upper-caste, upper-class background who has both parents literate and studied at a an elite, private [English-language] school is considered more 'meritorious' when he or she has 85-per-cent marks, than a reservation-category student who goes to a terrible government school in [Hindi] and has no one in the family who is literate but still scores 75-per-cent marks."

Yet their dominant-caste peers still grouse that the reserved-category students would never make it if they had to compete on an open field. Their professors often share that view: As Ms. Barge points out, the faculty in these prestigious institutes is overwhelming made up of people from the dominant castes, since only a single generation of Dalits really has had the chance for a professional education.

"They have this idea rooted in their psyche that tribal and Dalit students 'don't have the merit and can't match up to us,' " says Ajita Rao, a Dalit medical doctor who studies discrimination in professional education. "That's the hidden thing."

Dr. Rao says that resentment, hostility and isolation - rooted in the idea that Dalits and aboriginals are "unclean" - permeates college life. They are shunned in dining halls and dorms and mocked in classes, ever reminded of their marginalization.

This has a debilitating effect on students who always thought of themselves as achievers.

"You go for [an oral examination] and they ask you your name and where you are from, and you say Meena from Rajasthan - they say, ' Oh, okay,' " says Jagram Meena, 20, who was a close friend of Anil Meena's (but no relation - their surname is given to all in their caste group).

He says such exchanges have a direct effect on his performance: "You feel dehumanized and you forget everything you want to say. They are saying, 'Okay, you are a reservation-category student and you don't know anything.' You're marked from that moment."

AN INQUIRY IGNORED

In 2006, a series of protests by Dalit and aboriginal students at AIIMS complaining of discrimination prompted the central government to appoint Sukhadeo Thorat, a prominent academic from a Dalit background, to investigate.

His three-person commission found dorms segregated by caste, students subject-

ed to open hostility by their teachers and even physical attacks by dominant-caste students on those they considered inferior.

The Thorat report said these students consistently reported having less time with oral examiners, and being asked their surname in unnecessary situations. It faulted AIIMS for failing to provided language support to students coming from Hindi- language schools and for relying heavily on subjective assessments rather than more objective tests.

Also, in a grim foreshadowing of the experience Anil Meena would describe a few years later - the report criticized cases of sudden rule changes that had a disproportionate impact on reserved-category students.

In Mr. Meena's case, the weight given to one assessment was changed to 50 from 25 per cent, seemingly arbitrarily, after the exam had been conducted. This caused him and many other students to fail - almost all reservation students, said Mahinder Meena, an intern at AIIMS (also from the Rajasthani aboriginal community) who helped organize protests after the suicide. The Thorat report recorded a pattern of such incidents.

AIIMS's administration rejected the report "in totality," calling it biased, although under public pressure it did increase its language-learning support.

Discrimination denied

In the wake of Anil Meena's death, the administration acknowledges only that he had been depressed about failing an exam and was struggling with English.

"This was a tragic event," says Rakesh Yadav, AIIMS's subdean for academic issues. "No institution wants that."

The school did offer financial compensation to Mr. Meena's parents. But Dr. Yadav rejects the idea that the university's conduct had any role. "It is absolutely not true. All support any [medical] student needs is provided - the faculty and the administration is always there to help out."

Dr. Yadav will agree that the area of language support might be insufficient - that an hour a day might not be enough to get a unilingual Hindi student through a medical curriculum. "It's basically a language problem."

Beyond that, however, he says there was "no discrimination" in AIIMS. "If you say faculty are doing the discrimination - it's too much. ... They assess students based on marks."

As for bias, he adds, there are processes to prevent any individual professor from vindictively undermining a student, but clinical skills, for example, must by definition be evaluated in person: "To modify it to be 100 per cent objective - it's not possible."

However, after Anil Meena's death, AIIMS contacted Prof. Thorat again and asked him

to return to the school to investigate, which he considers a major improvement over the hostile reception to his last inquiry.

"This time there is an attitude to do something about the problem they face," he says. "I have a feeling that because of these two suicides ... it shook the faculty and teachers."

Jagram Meena hopes so. He points out that his friend Anil placed 400th in the all-India medical entrance exam, far higher than most of the general-category students at AIIMS.

They both certainly struggled in their first year - they had to consult the dictionary 10 times to read a single page of their textbooks - but Anil was managing.

He played Bollywood music loudly to relax, or joined friends - mostly from his caste group - for cricket in the courtyard. His father and brother were taking loans to send him fees every month. He was coping, Jagram says, until the rules kept shifting.

"We're in no way lower than the general-category students," says Jagram, sipping tea at the canteen outside the student dorm.

"One day," he says - when the public schools that prepare Dalit and aboriginal kids are as good as everyone else's - "we'll all be one category."

But Mahinder Meena cuts him off, demanding to know how change like that could come as long as it's almost impossible for Dalit students to succeed.

"Our fear about his suicide," Mahinder says, "is that it will change nothing."

PHOTO: CANDACE FEIT

Sister Sudha's dilemma:

You can unlock the potential of India's most oppressed girls, but they still have to find a place to use it

DANAPUR, INDIA – The girls are giggly, jostling with excitement in the warm autumn sun. Sister Sudha Varghese stands patiently and waits for their attention. When her 125 students fall quiet in the courtyard outside their yellow dormitory, she gives them a last gentle lecture.

"Don't get sick," she tells them in Bhojpuri. "Go and visit the festival shrines, but don't roam around at night. Enjoy your holiday. Come back in a week."

Her tone is light, but a filament of anxiety runs underneath the words: Come back.

She looks them over one last time, then sends her charges out through the gates of Prerna Residential School for Mahadalit Girls, to join the parents who have been waiting outside since early morning. The girls are headed on a rare visit home to the slums and villages where they grew up, to celebrate the festival of Dushera.

Poonam, 15, a star student and school leader, is one of the last to head out the gate. Her mother, Rajkumari, waits for her nervously, pulling the end of her yellow sari tight over her head. The two have not seen each other for six months, and they are shy at first; they sneak small sideways glances outside the school as they look for a rickshaw or a horse cart to take them home to their village, Jamsaut. After four years of regular meals at school, Poonam is a head taller than her mother, but still respectful.

Sister Sudha watches them head down the path, then closes the black iron gate and sits on the school steps. The girls stayed up all night, giddy about the holidays. Now, the school is startlingly quiet, and she will worry all week until they are safely back with her.

Prerna - the word means "inspiration" - is a school for Mushahar girls, "untouchables" at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, which makes them the most exploited children in the most marginalized community in the poorest state in India.

Girls such as Poonam are often married off by the age of 12 or 13. As Mushahar girls, they are widely seen as without rights, and easy targets for sexual assault. If they are raped, their own community views them as unmarriageable, so practical parents think it best to have them married before they can be attacked and tarnished.

"They go home, and the grandmother says, 'She has become big enough - we should look for a boy,' " Sister Sudha explains with a sigh. That means the end of a girl's studies and, more than likely, the quick erosion of everything she has gained at Prerna, in a life of relentless physical labour.

Sister Sudha, a Catholic nun turned quietly radical social activist, came to Bihar from the south of India more than 40 years ago. She went to live in Jamsaut and dedi-

cated herself to working with the Mushahar to end their exploitation: She fought legal cases, organized demonstrations and set up a network of education centres for women in dozens of communities in the state of Bihar.

Six years ago, she left the village and began an experiment. She was troubled that Mushahar girls were unwelcome in most schools and constantly in demand for domestic and farm labour for their parents. She suspected that if she could boost them into a new world, in which they were treated with dignity and tasked only with learning, they might emerge as leaders - a vanguard for change.

She decided to bring in one or two girls from each community in a four-hour radius. When they first come to her they are shy and hunched, like the parents who waited at the gates. But six months later, they have begun to learn that they have every right to take up space - to have ideas, expectations and ambitions.

Yet Sister Sudha's anxiety as the girls leave for Dushera hints at the deep fissure that runs through her experiment: Her girls are now caught between their old lives and their new potential. They have learned to dream, but their families, their villages and India itself have little place for a Mushahar girl with dreams. Now, they stand out - and when you are Mushahar and female, that's rarely a good thing.

Four girls from Prerna have completed high school so far. They went back to their villages and married (at least one, Sister Sudha says wistfully, found an educated boy). They also got jobs as vikas mithra, liaisons between local government and the Mushahar, earning $90 a month - a considerable accomplishment.

But Sister Sudha wants much more for her girls: vocational training, perhaps for jobs as receptionists or data-entry clerks. University for the clever ones, such as Poonam. And then professional jobs, and marriage, of course, but to educated men.

None of it sounds impossible. Until you are back in Jamsaut.

THE INVISIBLE FENCE

An hour after leaving school, Poonam and Rajkumari (the family's only surname is a caste name they do not use) arrive at the small road that branches to Jamsaut, lined with small shops and a brightly painted Hindu temple. They hurry past these to the Mushahar tola - the small patch of land reserved for people of their caste, behind the village proper, bordered by swamp.

Their house is a half-brick, half-mud structure about the size of a master bathroom in a Canadian suburban home, with a roof of twigs laid over scrap sheeting.

Poonam rushes to hug her younger sisters and brother, then turns to the tasks that made up her days before she moved away to Prerna: She fetches water in a tin pot from the tola's hand pump, chases a family of pigs away from the entranceway of the house and lights a dried cake of buffalo dung in the hearth, filling the unventilated house with noxious smoke, to make tea with a handful of loose leaves and a pinch of black pepper.

Her mother asks her to go to the shop, passing her a crumpled 20-rupee note (about 35 cents). The fastest route would be to go behind the house and cut 15 metres across an empty green field, past other, larger houses, to the small village store. But she turns the long way down the path - and when a foreign visitor heads for the shortcut, Poonam gasps and yanks her back. It is as if there is an invisible electric barrier, and she will not step over it. She flinches if she even comes close.

When the visitor asks her why, Poonam, normally quick with observations, is stumped. Her people live here. Others live over there - and she does not know them, does not talk to them, does not meet their eyes on the road and never, ever takes the footpath past their houses.

About an hour after Poonam returns to the village, three men arrive outside her house: They are lighter-skinned, well-dressed men from the dominant caste in the village; one sports a large gold watch. Rajkumari pulls her sari over her face. Everyone looks down. One of the men stands above Poonam's aunt, who is seated in the only chair, and glares - she moves to sit in the dirt nearby, and he takes the plastic chair. The men start to fire questions at Rajkumari: Who are the foreigners, and why are they here in the tola?

The women pull their children close. Rajkumari mutters an answer and fidgets in the dirt. The visiting reporter and photographer introduce themselves; the reporter explains that they are trying to learn about the lives of the Mushahar. The men smirk.

"Their life has changed, become better. They're educated. They go out to work," says one, Rajesh Gupta, with a confidence at odds with the untruth of his statement. "Earlier, they were the ones who took anything, without retaliation. Now, they stand up for themselves." He does not make it sound like a positive innovation.

The men stay and glower a while longer, then walk off, laughing loudly. The reporter asks Rajkumari if she has ever been to any of their houses. She looks baffled: "Of course not."

She casts an uneasy glance at her eldest daughter. Tall and clear-skinned, Poonam is such a different creature from the grubby, runny-nosed, half-clad children of the tola.

The upper-caste men have noticed her, and Rajkumari saw them noticing.

A RELIC THAT STILL RULES

The invisible fences that keep Poonam in one small corner of Jamsaut were built at least 2,000 years ago, laid out in ancient Hindu texts that specify rigid social stratification into four castes, divided by occupation, with priestly Brahmins at the top and craftspeople at the bottom.

Below them is the fifth category, the "untouchable," the outcastes - or, as many call themselves, Dalits, from the Sanskrit for "broken people" - consigned to tasks deemed polluting (working with leather, sweeping streets), and excluded from almost all contact with the rest of society. In this region, the lowest rung is reserved for the Mushahar, traditionally known as rat-catchers.

All of this may sound like an ancient relic, with little relevance in the "Incredible India" of the tourism billboards, the emerging international powerhouse. The Indian constitution adopted in 1950 outlawed caste discrimination, and set aside 15 per cent of seats in government jobs and public educational institutions for Dalits, who make up a sixth of the population.

Those "reservations," as they are known - a form of affirmative action - have improved the lives of many Dalits. So have the more recent processes of economic liberalization and urbanization. In the 1980s, Dalits emerged as a powerful voting bloc in many states, and Dalit-based political parties have since had a key role in forming governing coalitions at the national and state level.

The system has helped to create Dalit judges, professors and business leaders, provoking deep bitterness in some dominant-caste Hindus, who claim that their own children can no longer get into college or the civil service. Many social programs also aim to improve life for Dalits, including the Bihar government's "Mahadalit Mission," which provides Sister Sudha funds to feed the girls of Prerna.

Yet hundreds of thousands of Indians still use the services of valmiki, or manual scavengers, who collect human waste and carry it away in baskets - a system viewed by some caste Hindus as less polluting than using a latrine. A recent national survey found that 45 per cent of villages maintain a "two-tumbler" system, in which separate dishes are kept for Dalits to use at tea stands. And even with her new education, Poonam will not take the shortcut past caste Hindus' houses, ever.

In the nation's newspapers, every single day, there is a report of an attack on Dalits who try to enter a temple, a Dalit woman who resists sexual advances by dominant-

caste men or Dalits who try to use a village hand pump. Last year, police registered 38,597 cases of caste-based violence, ranging from rape to arson to assault. The real number is probably much higher - research by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights has found that only one in five such attacks is ever reported to the police.

But India's government prefers to focus on the success stories. When activists tried to have caste included in a United Nations declaration on discrimination in 2001, the government lobbied ferociously to keep it out. The government has consistently moved to block investigations or discussion by the UN Commissioner for Human Rights into caste-based discrimination.

After 21 years in Jamsaut observing all this at close range, Sister Sudha has developed a grimly pragmatic analysis. Caste gets a religious gloss, she says, but religions change: Caste is jealously protected because it is in truth an economic system, a power relationship. "The status quo has to be maintained so that the benefits that are there can continue: You get cheap labour. You get people at your beck and call for almost nothing. You have the machinery to terrorize them into obedience with almost no resistance, no opposition."

The Mushahar, who own no land and subsist on farm labour that pays at best a dollar or two a day, rarely can give their children the education or economic mobility that might bring some social change. The caste system governs life in Jamsaut today much as it did 1,000 years ago.

Poonam had not thought much about caste before she went to Prerna. Now, she considers it curiously. "Before, we weren't able to go into the temples," she notes. "Now, we can. And in the past if we touched any of their belongings, they would never use them again."

She doesn't think that happens any more - though in fact she has rarely tried to touch anything belonging to a dominant-caste person. When Sister Sudha took the children to a festival at a temple, dominant-caste families let them in, but scrubbed it down ostentatiously after they left.

Poonam has no higher-caste friends in Jamsaut. Before she left, when she attended the village school, other girls were careful to keep her from touching their papers or pens, and would not pass her a book. When she went to collect firewood, people would hiss, "Mushahar," toss rocks and chase her off.

The biggest change in Jamsaut is that Poonam now thinks that's a problem.

THE FIRST OF SUDHA'S GIRLS

For a vision of what her future may look like, Poonam need only look about 100 me-

tres from her home. At the end of the lane is a house of much the same type, which belongs to a woman named Lalmathi.

She is Sister Sudha's pride and joy: When the nun first came to live in Jamsaut almost 30 years ago, Lalmathi was a tiny girl who ran about in a pair of torn knickers, waving a stick to herd pigs. But in the evenings she began to come to Sister Sudha, who used the stick to teach her to draw letters in the dirt. She convinced Lalmathi's parents that she should go to school - the dominant-caste people in the village didn't like it, but she made it through to matriculation, coached by Sister Sudha the whole way.

Whom Lalmathi would marry became a focus of discussion for the whole community. Caste rules said she must marry a Mushahar, but by the time she graduated she was in her 20s, almost unimaginably old, and vastly different from any of the illiterate labourers she might have been expected to wed.

Sister Sudha went on a search, and in a community in central Bihar found a young Mushahar man, Biteshwar, who was also unmarried and unusually bright. Lalmathi met him and grilled him: He had a bachelor's degree, he didn't drink, he didn't gamble, he was going to try to go to law school and he wanted her to keep studying after they married. He became her husband and came to live in her community.

She got a job as a teacher in a government school - the first person in the tola to move into the professional world. They have two children; their small house has an electric connection, and the children have plastic trucks and dolls to play with.

Lalmathi is a warm woman, quick to laugh. But in her quiet moments, she articulates a deep unease. The tola is the only home she has known, but increasingly she thinks that she and her family should leave. She would like to continue her education, and she wants her children to go to a good school.

"I would move to the city - to anywhere with a proper environment to study," she says in one breath. "But if I stay, I might influence others to get educated."

That's one problem - her sense of responsibility, of how profoundly Sister Sudha changed her own life. In addition, though, it's not as easy as simply heading for the city. In Patna, the capital of Bihar, the Mushahar live in tola as well - there is no guarantee a dominant-caste landlord will rent to her family.

It might be easier in Delhi, but that would be so far away from family, and they might have to adopt a non-Dalit surname to rent a room.

It is absurd, she says, for anyone to argue that caste is not a factor in India any more. When she cycles through dominant-caste ar-

eas on her way to work, people call out and mock her for her above-herself ambitions. At work, she says, "I sit down in meetings and everyone shifts away."

She has her own defences firmly in place. "I just ignore them. I think they are mad people. ... I stayed with Sudha a long time: I learned a lot about caste, and that gives me the strength to reject it."

But what about her children? What if she sends them to a city school and people find out they are Mushahar?

"People think, 'What can a Mushahar do? Catch fish or snails to eat - they can't be engineers. Why send the kids to school? A Mushahar can only be a Mushahar.'"

In a strange way, she thinks, they are safest here in the tola, where, if they keep to their own hand pump and their own pathways, the risks are minimized.

So, for now, she stays. And she watches Poonam on her visits home, and wonders how soon the choice will come for the Prerna girls - either staying near their families or moving into a world where the risks and rules are unknowable for them.

Whatever they do, whole communities are going to feel the reverberations.

The long odds

Much farther away, Annie Namala is also watching Poonam and the other girls of Prerna.

Ms. Namala, a Dalit from the south of India, is a prominent activist against caste discrimination. She runs the Centre for Social Equity and Exclusion in New Delhi; her husband, Paul Divakar, heads the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. They are long-time allies of Sister Sudha and have visited the communities where she works.

Most Dalit groups have seen some social mobility, Ms. Namala says, but the Mushahar in Bihar have experienced almost no reduction in discrimination and isolation. That is the first challenge for Sister Sudha's girls: "Mushahar" will always be the defining fact of their identity.

What's more, they are girls. "Even in the Mushahar community, the girls are the bottom of the bottom," Ms. Namala says with a sigh, reflecting late one night in her Delhi office.

This parallel system of oppression tends to get even less attention in India than caste. There was much startled denial here last June, when a wide-ranging global survey by the British Thomson-Reuters Foundation rated India as the fourth-worst country in the world in which to be a woman, below even Somalia.

The survey cited high rates of sex trafficking and the widespread practices of child marriage (47 per cent of Indian women marry before they are 18, Unicef says) and forced marriage, plus the persistent preference for sons, leading to an estimated 12

million girls going "missing" because of sex-selective abortion in the past 25 years.

The success of a handful of powerful female political leaders is often cited to refute allegations of pervasive misogyny. Yet India's rates of violence against women and sexual harassment are exceedingly high, while Indian women's rates of work-force participation, social mobility and power to make their own decisions domestically and otherwise are some of the lowest, in developed or developing nations.

This is the second set of obstacles for the Prerna girls. "Imagine the pain they are going to have if they hold their heads high," Ms. Namala says. Yet despite it all, she does believe that Poonam can achieve her dream of being a teacher and even a school headmistress, that her friend Laxmi can wear the judge's robes she dreams of and that Neetu can be a district administrator.

"It's going to be tough, but the transition is possible. It's going to take hand-holding. They will need little pockets of sanctuary. They will need one professor who will protect them at college, a boss who will protect them at jobs - each one's story is going to be a struggle story."

To do that, though, they will need to go to the city, and obscure as much of their pasts as they can. And then, Ms. Namala predicts, the girls will soon draw the attention of dominant-caste men - men who would never dream of marrying them, but will use gifts and promises to try to lure them into extramarital relationships.

Meanwhile, they will be living entirely outside the world known by their parents and families, almost unimaginably alone, when all their lives they have lived, eaten and slept in close confines. They will have to find ways to keep in touch with their own people. "There have to be times when they come back together," Ms. Namala says.

From watching them, she says, she knows the girls already have resilience. But now they will need something else. "You have to build up the anger in them, righteous anger: You cannot just hope for justice - they will need that to sustain them."

She pauses and looks troubled, then seems to square her shoulders on the girls' behalf. "Most of the reforms we've had come when one person takes it on and creates a sea change. It's possible," she says. "Uncomfortable is good. It's where growth takes place."

MOTHER COURAGE

For Poonam's mother, Rajkumari, it's all a terrible dilemma. By the time she was Poonam's age, she was married. A Mushahar mother traditionally has one primary job: to keep her daughter safe (and virginal) until the day she is delivered to her new in-laws.

But Rajkumari has another: to help Poonam be all the things she dreams of.

She is immensely proud of her daughter, who is now in charge of reading any paperwork the family needs for government welfare programs. The sole decoration on their walls is a clock Poonam won in a debating competition.

And Rajkumari is frank about the fact that Poonam is the sole economic hope for their family of six: If she can finish school and get a waged job, it could radically alter their fortunes.

But Rajkumari, at 33, has perfected the Mushahar art of taking up no more space in the world than she has to. To her, Poonam seems more and more like a foreign creature.

"When we ask her about marriage, she says,'I want to study, I want to become something.'" But if Poonam does get married, she will become the property of her husband's family - they probably won't let her work, and if they do, the money won't come back here. So she wants Poonam to have a working life.

Yet she sees her tall, strong daughter as acutely vulnerable, with all the attention she attracts. So, while in one breath Rajkumari says she won't mention marriage until Poonam does, in the next she says, "I'm thinking to get her married, because that's a girl's safety. A married woman is safer - someone is guarding her."

Still, a husband for Poonam will not be the kind the village women are used to inspecting, Rajkumari says. Her sisters and neighbours, listening in, nod in agreement. "I'll look for an educated man for her. I'm not sure where, but I'll look."

Poonam listens too, and smiles shyly, head down. Of course, her parents must make this decision for her. But they don't exactly understand what it is she would like to do. They have never been anywhere like Prerna, or the private school some of the students attend during the day, where - even though the girls are the only Dalits - the teachers tell everyone that discrimination based on caste is wrong, that everyone is equal.

That makes sense to Poonam. Other people have their ideas, but caste isn't going to stop her from doing what she wants - going to university, getting a job, having an independent life. "It's just about what you have in your mind," she says quietly.

But Poonam also knows there is more to it than that. She heard Sister Sudha's warnings about not visiting the festival shrines after dark, and she knows that a few years ago a girl from the village was grabbed and raped by a group of dominant-caste men when she was on her way to work the fields. The girl was dumped by the roadside and the police did nothing. Poonam knows the story well.

COMING BACK, ALMOST INTACT

When the festivals are over, the girls come trickling back to the school. Poonam arrives on Sunday night, delighted to return to her books. On Monday morning, Sister Sudha lines them up, and finds they have all come back but two: 12-year-old Sanju's family has decided that she has had enough education. And the family of Dharajia, who is 14, has found her a husband, a boy from another tola.

"They tried once before, in March, the last time she went home, " Sister Sudha says. "I talked to her parents and said she's not old enough. So I got her back. But now they were decided on getting her married."

She cannot afford the luxury of regret for more than a moment. She turns to her list of Mushahar families eager to send her their girls. Within a day or two, she has filled the lost girls' bunks and has two more slight, wide-eyed students on her classroom benches.

She can put aside the fear of losing them for six more months, until the next vacation, and return her attention to what they will do next.

"The whole country says, 'We have changed. We have improved.' But stand there," she says, gesturing in the direction of Jamsaut, "and see what changes have come. ... Until it comes to Mushahar girls, you can't say the country has changed."

Vasandi and a friend escaped bonded labour and are now learning tailoring skills from an NGO. PHOTO: STEPHANIE NOLEN

Dowry schemes lure girls to bonded labour

If you got clothes as Christmas gifts this week, they may include cotton from Indian textile mills where low-caste teens work for illegally low pay, under dubious promises of a future 'marriage bonus.'
Stephanie Nolen reports from Satyamangalam

SATYAMANGALAM, INDIA – Vasandi heard the girls in her village talking: Satellite television with movies. Air conditioning. Three meals a day. Swimming pools. And after three years, a bonus of 36,000 rupees (about $650), a sum of money so huge she could barely picture what it might look like, all those rupees stacked in a heap.

It could all be hers, if she were lucky enough to work in a local textile mill, the girls said.

They had heard the news from a recruiter, who was paid 1,500 rupees ($30) for each new single girl he brought to the mill works, with its unending hunger for fit bodies to keep the machines running 24 hours a day.

To Vasandi (who, like many southern Indians, uses only one name) it sounded splendid. She was 16. Not long before, she had left school after Grade 7. She was living with her family in a stuffy one-room house in a rural village.

And so, in May, 2010, her father dropped her at the gate of JV Spinning Mill outside this small industrial town. She put her small bag of clothes in the dorm she would share with 320 other women, mostly Dalits like herself, from the "untouchable" bottom of the Hindu caste system.

Within days, she had been trained to run skeins of cotton thread on to a giant spindle, and to clean cotton fibers off the machine continuously to keep it from jamming. Her ears grew accustomed to the constant thunderous clatter in the mill, and she got used to waking at dusk for a night shift.

She was working at one of the hundreds of mills and dye operations and garment factories that dot the plains of western Tamil Nadu, spinning cotton for textile factories that supply the biggest European and North American retail chains, including many brands people found this week under their Christmas trees.

H&M, Abercrombie and Fitch, and Marks and Spencer have all sourced materials from this area over the past few years.

There were indeed movies on the dormitory TV, but she was usually too tired after a 12-hour shift to watch them. There was a pool, where she dipped her feet, but none of the girls knew how to swim.

She was desperately homesick. She had never been away from her family and village before, and it would be six months before she was allowed home for a few days' visit. And the dormitory warden bolted the door on her building each night from the outside.

Still, she was earning $50 a month, with the promise of that bonus dangling a few years in the future. So she tried to settle in.

Her parents were earning a couple of dollars a day doing occasional agricultural labour - "coolie work," as it is called in English and Tamil around here - on the farm of a dominant-caste landowner. But often there

was no work. And no one Vasandi knew - other than the mill girls - had ever had a steady, waged job.

For a barely educated Dalit girl, it could seem a rare opportunity, marketed as Somangali Thittam, or "the marriage scheme" - an ostensible social-welfare plan provided by the textile industry, as a payoff from India's growing participation in the global economy.

Except for just a few details.

'BONUS' OR BONDAGE?

It was, for one thing, illegal. As a child under 18, she was by law required to be in school. She was also underpaid, earning less than half even Tamil Nadu's low minimum wage for apprentice textile workers, 196 rupees ($4) a day. (The mills counter that the lodging and meals they provide, which are obligatory, represent the balance of the wages.)

What's more, unknown to Vasandi, the money for that promised three-year bonus was being deducted from her own wages - making her, technically, a bonded labourer, which has been illegal in India since 1976.

Finally, the bonus was explicitly marketed as being for her dowry - the cash and jewellery her parents would be expected to give her in-laws at her marriage. Dowry has been illegal in this country almost as long as bonded labour. But there is so little enforcement of the law that the textile mills market the scheme with images of wedding jewellery designed right into the logo.

Vasandi never found out what that many rupees look like all together. She left her job this past May, two years after she started: She was anxious because girls were getting injured or falling ill from overwork around her. She thought she would be given the portion of her bonus she had earned - but the warden informed her that in leaving before the full three years, she would get nothing.

She admits she should have seen it coming: In her two years at the mill, she had only ever seen six girls out of some 600 receive their bonuses. Others were injured and let go or wore out and quit first - almost anyone close to the three-year mark would be fired for some pretext or another, she says.

That practice was found to be widespread in an industry audit by the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO), a Netherlands-based independent non-profit research organization.

Asha Kowtal, general secretary of the All-India Dalit Women's Rights Forum, says the Somangali schemes are nothing more than the caste system reinvented for an industrialized economy.

"How many Brahmin girls do you find in Somangali Thittam? How many Iyengar?"

PHOTO: STEPHANIE NOLEN

she asks, referring to the occupation-based groups that are considered to be the top of the Hindu caste system. "Only untouchable communities are making use of this. Somebody sitting in Toronto is buying a Banana Republic T-shirt or a Gap one and not thinking about reinforcing the caste structure and the patriarchy."

THE SUPPLY-CHAIN SIDESTEP

The Somangali Thittam scheme has been in place for about 10 years, says Karrupu Samy, who runs an organization called Rights, Education and Development (READ) that advocates for Dalits in bonded labour. In the past several years, READ has attracted the attention of international ethical-trade campaigners and thus of major clothing chains.

In a statement, H&M, for example, says it views the "schemes as absolutely unacceptable," but because the mills are only secondary suppliers, "we do not have direct contractual influence." So it pressures its own suppliers to pressure theirs, and lends support to the ethical-trade groups, the company says.

After 112 garment workers, most of them young women, died in a blaze in Bangladesh in November, companies whose

clothes were being stitched there, including Walmart and Sears, said they had no idea that their products were being made in that factory, which had repeatedly been cited for safety violations such as locked exits and blocked stairwells.

The companies said that local middlemen had subcontracted out their work, a murky system that made the supply chain hard to follow - and which is equally common in India.

International scrutiny has prompted some of the mills in Tamil Nadu to make improvements, such as introducing health insurance, raising the minimum age of employees and increasing the contact permitted with families.

But India's textile sector is so loosely organized - and facing such intense competition from China and Bangladesh - that mills change their names often to make checks, and in practice face little scrutiny, SOMO has found in repeated studies.

It says a majority of the mill workers are still under 18, with as many as a fifth of them younger than 14. A 2010 investigation by the Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women estimated that 37,000 young women are employed in the Somangali scheme, across 900 mills in the state.

The Globe and Mail conducted lengthy interviews with five young women who have worked in the mills in the past year under Somangali Thittam; they told near-identical stories. The JV Spinning Mill and the other factories involved all refused to answer questions or to admit a journalist. Of eight other mills contacted, six refused to talk and two said the scheme had been stopped.

SOMO says some have indeed stopped it. But READ's Mr. Samy has a darker reading: "All the international brands know about Somangali now, so the factories call it by another name," he says.

Staff with the Southern Indian Mills Association also refused to answer questions, but in a recent public forum on the scheme a director described it as an "opportunity for the empowerment of women."

It is true that the mill jobs are about the only work on offer in this region for young women with limited education. Female workforce participation remains low, as few jobs are believed appropriate for women. And the caste system remains deeply entrenched: Dalit girls are considered for even fewer jobs.

"When I went to work, there was some respect," says Vasandi. "People said, 'Okay, these girls are earning money.'"

But Mr. Samy argues that the mills are preying on his community, and reinforcing the idea that these factory jobs are the best these girls can hope for. "Only higher education is going to change things," he says.

Mr. Samy himself has a master's degree

in social work, but he remains a rarity in a caste group where tens of thousands of people still work in "manual scavenging" - collecting and disposing of human excrement.

"These companies interrupt the education of these girls, and exploit them," he says. "We need work, but not for under-18-year-olds."

'I'M TOO OLD TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL'

Divya Naharaj was 14 and just past third grade (with illiterate parents and teachers who rarely showed up at school, she had struggled to get even that far) when an agent came to her two-room house in the village of Mangalapuram to talk to her.

"He told me, 'Your uncle's daughter is working there and you can also go and your family's problems will be solved,'" she said. "My parents have only coolie work, so they don't earn much, and they have three daughters" - so a hefty dowry bill loomed on their horizon.

Ms. Naharaj went to the S. M. Mill in Shakti in January, 2010, learned to operate a knitting loom, and stuck it out for 19 months, working a cycle of four days of night shifts and seven days of day shifts, with a day off in between. She described her time at the mill in a grim, flat voice.

When she left to start working, Ms. Naharaj didn't imagine she was leaving school forever. "I had the plan to go back to school after the mill, but I haven't. I wanted to be a teacher, but now I'm too old to go back to school and sit with all the small children."

Some textile companies offer continuing education classes to support workers to finish high school, as Ms. Naharaj's did - but only after a 10- or 12-hour shift. "I wanted to go to class. But it was that or sleeping. And I was so tired." The closest she got to school was to take magazines and joke books out of the library.

These days she does housework; her two younger sisters go to school and her parents work in the fields until after dark.

Ms. Kowtal of the Dalit Women's Rights Forum says the Somongali scheme perpetuates the idea that a woman's worth is in her marriage, and that she is a financial burden to her family. But she isn't surprised to see it so openly marketed, because the Tamil Nadu government does it too - offering four grams of gold and $500 of "marriage assistance" to any girl who completes high school.

The state's chief minister, Jayalalitha, triumphantly introduced the plan a couple of years ago as part of a spate of measures she claimed would boost the status of women, openly defying the national dowry ban.

Ms. Kotwal calls this a classic Indian paradox: The country has excellent laws on

paper, but zero enforcement when it comes to the interests of the poor, marginalized or out-caste.

One reason the mills like the scheme, READ's Mr. Samy says, is that the teenage female workers can all be classed as apprentices, and thus by law can't organize into labour unions.

READ attempts to advocate for them; for example, it is trying to help Vasandi get her withheld wages. It also tries to give young women who leave the mills job training - the state government is supposed to provide them low-interest loans to start small businesses, but the reality is that most get married when they go home, and do not do paid work again, except in landlords' fields.

Vasandi is learning to stitch clothes, but she is also waiting for a wedding. "My parents are looking for a boy," she says, ducking her head shyly.

And her parents will borrow money to pay her dowry - a big pile of rupees.

PHOTO: SIMON DE TREY-WHITE

The dire straits of being single and female in India

As a brutal rape shocks male-dominated India into discussing the status of women, a movement grows that gives a voice to those with little standing – widows, divorcées, the abandoned and the never-married

NEW DELHI – Saraswati Singh came into the world on Aug. 15, 1947, and that, she says, may be why her life turned out the way it has. "I was born on Independence Day and up until now I'm independent."

She is the daughter of a farmer in Jharkhand, in the east of India, and from a caste where girls were married off by the age of 9 or 10. She persuaded her parents she should stay in school until the eighth grade. When they found a husband for her, he was illiterate. She balked. The groom's family was so insulted, they swiftly married him to a more grateful girl. Ms. Singh became tainted goods: She remembers her mother and aunts wailing that no one would marry her now. That suited her just fine. She went to nursing school, started a social-development organization and got into politics.

And she stayed single. It is difficult to overstate just how rare a choice this was – or is – in India. The critical importance of marriage, particularly for women, is one of the few values shared across all caste, ethnic and religious groups in this vast country. A woman's marriage is the event on which her family is focused from her birth.

Ms. Singh's choice not to marry is so uncommon that she was a rarity even at a recent annual gathering of India's National Forum for Single Women's Rights, for which she serves on the national executive. The organization – made up mostly of divorced, abandoned, separated and widowed women – was meeting to try to advance its agenda of rights for single women.

Over the past two weeks, women's rights have become the subject of emotional debate and protests in India, prompted by the gang rape of a 23-year-old woman on a moving bus here. The woman died on Saturday.

The situation for single women is particularly dire – widows are meant to receive pensions from the Indian government (about $10 a month), but separated and abandoned women do not. Divorced women are, in theory, entitled to a share of family property, but many women never succeed in getting a husband who leaves them to grant a divorce, and so cannot make a claim, explains forum president Nirmal Chandel.

And while in rare cases divorced and separated women may succeed in getting a court order for alimony from their husbands, those judgments are rarely enforced, and these women are typically left in penury, she says.

The forum's network of branches also supports women resisting the oppressive social customs that continue to blight the lives of widows.

Ms. Chandel, for example, was married at 22 in her small town in Himachal Pradesh in the north. Her husband died mysteriously two years later. Within hours, the stunned Ms. Chandel was set upon by her in-laws,

who removed her jewellery, her lipstick and her coloured clothes, and the mattress from her bed. She was dressed in a stark white saree, made to sleep on the floor, given plain food at meal times, and barred from any family gathering – customary treatment for a Hindu widow. When her in-laws sat together, she would overhear them blaming her ill luck for her husband's death.

After nearly a year of this, she caught sight of herself in a mirror, and thought, "I understand I've lost a husband but does it mean I also don't live?" She heard about the forum, and snuck out of the house to attend a meeting. Before long, she had a job as a co-ordinator with a local aid organization, and moved to another town. Her family, and her in-laws, were aghast. "My mother would say, 'How will you survive, alone?'"

Today, at 47, she walks with her chin lifted, shoulders square – not widow posture – and she wore a salwar-kameez of purple, orange, red and blue, with heavy turquoise and gold costume jewellery, when she addressed the forum. She seemed, in effect, to be demanding that the world see her. That is the greatest challenge for single women in India, she says: Without a husband, they do not exist – every government form asks for "husband's name," every festival has a role for wifely duty.

"This is a male-dominated society: As long as you have a father, brother, husband – you have standing," she says. "Once you don't have them, you have no importance."

One snowy-haired widow in a burgundy cotton saree nodded approvingly in the back row while Ms. Chandel spoke. Ginny Srivastava, 70, was born and raised in Burlington, Ont. But 43 years ago, she fell in love with a fellow education student at graduate school in Toronto; they married and came back to his native Rajasthan. They became social activists, working to fight poverty, and they noticed the dire straits in which many widows lived. They helped to set up an organization called The Association of Strong Women Alone, the first such group of single women, in 2000. Four years later, they held a meeting to which they drew 1,500 single women from 11 states to a song-filled gathering in Jaipur, and these most marginalized of women began to plot a national lobbying effort.

Yet around this time Ms. Srivastava's husband, Om, died – and suddenly she had a new and visceral understanding of how a woman without a husband is simply discounted. "A lot of human resource is just locked up and suppressed," she says.

Many things in the new India are changing, but the primacy of marriage is not one of them – the last census revealed that women are marrying at a slightly later age, and educated urban women in particular may stay single into their 30s, but there was no appreciable rise in the number of women who did not marry.

The forum, however, is making incremental headway. Last year the women obtained a rare meeting with Sonia Gandhi, the head of the ruling Indian National Congress party and the country's most famous widow. She heard them out sympathetically, Ms. Srivastava says, and asked some canny questions. Then she wrote a quick note on their file and within hours, the Minister of Family Welfare was on the phone asking to meet them.

The minister, Ms. Srivastava recalls, seemed horrified to learn about the measly pension her ministry pays out, and the women's lack of property rights. As is the chronic problem, she seemed never to have thought about single women before.

Both the government and UN Women sent representatives to the national gathering this year. The forum, with 50,000 members, is growing fast. Ms. Srivastava says that its greatest value may be in the new family it gives its members, who often find that when they are spurned by their former in-laws, their natal family shuns them too.

Komal Prathnik was married as a teenager to a young man her father chose in Rajasthan. He was an alcoholic who beat her – her arms and chest still bear the scars – and she left him when the youngest of their three children was one. She would have gone sooner, she says, but her own family told her they would not take her back. Finally, it didn't matter that she had nowhere to go. She did construction labour to support the children, and a bit of tailoring, and squeezed in the hours to earn a high-school diploma.

But while it was widely known that her cheating husband had beaten her, it was Ms. Prathnik who was shunned in the community: "They made my life miserable – I was taunted, I was called a tainted woman, my sisters-in-law made it almost impossible for me to step outside my house." Eventually, she says, she stopped talking altogether, and hardly said a word untilshe heard about the forum a decade later and went to a meeting.

And that was the start of her new life. "By now I've become strong. I don't bother today – they must still be gossiping." Ms. Prathnik is a woman on a mission, personally supporting victims of abuse (150 so far) to make the choice she did. "I'm working towards my goal of making women stronger and they can live in the outside world."

When Saraswati Singh was young and still startling people with her defiant plan not to marry, she taught herself to ride a bike and used it to travel through the area. People hurled insults at her. "I didn't bother, I did what I wanted to do," she says with a satisfied smile.

Yet still when she shows up at a community event, no one offers her a chair. Men discourage their wives from associating with

her, alleging she is of dubious morals.

"The issue is that once you are married people [say] 'she has a guard, she is controlled' – but the person who is not married, she is not controlled, she can go anywhere she wants to. So she is 'characterless.' " Morality, she says, is still a powerful tool for controlling women.

There are lonely nights when she doubts her decision to stay single, but that feeling always passes, she says. "I've met the Prime Minister, I've met ministers – I've been everywhere, lobbying. I'm proud of myself that I've done all this. I'm single but I'm not alone."

And she sees change coming. "Young girls … are now interested to know their rights, to talk, to fight," she says, crossing her arms in satisfaction. "Now the roads are jammed with girls on bikes – and even driving cars."

PHOTO: STEPHANIE NOLEN

Girls Interrupted

Stephanie Nolen continues her award-winning series on the plight of 'untouchables' in India by investigating another roadblock to real change for women: Despite the country's race to modernize, parents still see a girl's best prospect as matrimony, not education. Many are glad to marry them off as young as 13, despite today's laws against taking child brides

GAYA, INDIA – Seven girls went missing.

Last fall, Sudha Varghese sent 100 students from Prerna II, her residential school for girls here in the northeast state of Bihar, home to celebrate the Hindu festival of Dushera. Ten days later, only 93 returned. And the veteran social activist and educator suspected that she knew why.

Nine months earlier, when the families came to drop off their daughters, some as young as 8, at the school's grand opening, Sister Sudha had given parents a warm welcome, and a stern warning. "Your girls might look small today, but the school environment, regular meals and sports - all of these things will make them grow faster," she told them.

"In five or six years, they will start looking big. But then don't start thinking, 'They have grown up and we have to get them married.' You yourself would be taking your daughter off of the path of education, and harming yourselves." She spoke from experience, having had the same problem when the first Prerna opened in 2006.

Sister Sudha and her remarkable schools have appeared in The Globe and Mail regularly over the past year and a half in Breaking Caste, a series highlighting the continued plight of young Dalits, the people once known as "untouchable." The schools are for girls from the Mushahar community, the lowest of the Dalits, consigned to the bottom rung of the Hindu caste system, which remains rigidly in force in this marginalized corner of India.

A couple of semesters at Prerna can have a transformative effect - students are well fed for the first time, able to bathe each day, wear crisp new uniforms and, most important, have the scorn heaped upon their caste replaced with affection and respectful interest in their ideas. They bloom, these girls, transforming in a way that is a joy to behold.

Unless you are their parents. For them, it's terrifying. It is against the law in India for any girl to wed before she is 18 (or boy before he is 21), but it is the tradition, and still the practice, of the Mushahar to marry off their daughters at 12 or 13. The practice is not confined to the Mushahar: The figure for Bihar is 68 per cent, by far the nation's highest. But almost half of all Indian girls, 43 per cent, wed underage.

Like the dowry and the caste system, child marriage is a critical social issue for which India, in so many ways a beacon to the developing world, has fine laws, but lax enforcement. And while there is growing candour about the treatment of women - seen in the recent furor over a gang rape in Delhi - the subject of immature brides is trapped in the past.

Sister Sudha is a Roman Catholic nun from Kerala in India's far south; she came to Bihar to work with the poor 46 years

ago. Within months, she had fled a hide-bound convent to live in a Dalit village, and has dedicated her life to empowering the Mushahar.

The girls, in particular, have become her focus: She sees them, with the least power but huge potential, as the key to change in communities where no adult has ever spent more than a year or two in school, and women are frequent victims of harassment and sexual assault.

India's sexual violence epidemic captured world attention recently when a 23-year-old physiotherapy student was brutally gang-raped on a Delhi bus and died of her injuries - but that grim story came as little shock here in Bihar, just over the border from the village the victim's low-caste family had left seeking a better life in the city.

The first of their kind, the Prerna schools (the name means "inspiration" in Hindi) have proved revolutionary, not just for the girls, whose lives are turn from malnourished illiterate domestic drudgery into a glittering string of achievements, but also for their wider community, which is seeing Dalit girls in a whole new way.

Prerna students have won international karate championships and district-wide art contests, and been singled out by the Chief Minister of Bihar for their accomplishments. But the notion that girls must marry before they are 14 - for their own safety, for their family's honour and financial reprieve - has proved tenacious. Sister Sudha has seen students leave and go, in a matter of weeks, from being voracious readers, staying up late to study under a weak bulb, to child brides tending fires and pigs, soon damaged by pregnancies their bodies are too immature to carry safely.

They are also too young to know how to navigate the complicated dynamics of living in domestic servitude to their husband's family, and often face abuse. Once married, they never go back to school.

Over all, India's child-marriage figures are creeping downward - over the past 20 years, there has been a 15-per-cent drop in the number of girls married before 18 - but among the Mushahar, the rate has hardly budged. And it threatens everything Sister Sudha is trying to achieve.

Last fall, she waited a week or two and, when the seven missing girls still did not come back to school, she put out feelers in the community. Her suspicions were soon confirmed: In most cases, the parents were reported to be looking for husbands.

In the past, when girls have been pulled from her schools to be married, Sister Sudha has tried, with varying degrees of success, to talk parents out of it. At the first Prerna, near Patna, the state capital, the number has declined each year, as the community gets used to the idea of an unwed 16-year-

old - and sees Sister Sudha's protégées becoming teachers or public-health education workers, an unfathom- able idea a few years ago. This year all students at Prerna 1 returned after the holidays.

But the activist has grown weary of badgering parents. So this time, when the girls disappeared, she did something new - she went to the police. She had checked out the city's new superintendent of police, and found Vinay Kumar to be unusually compassionate, thoughtful and committed to social justice. And in him, she thought she might have an ally. Perhaps a few arrests for "permitting child marriage" would jolt the community into rethinking this practice.

'YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A MATCH'

And so, on a crisp but sunny morning last month, she set off for Kaleru Bhontoli, a Mushahar settlement outside Gaya, making her way past a field of bright yellow mustard plants, down a warren of small streets to the home of Guriya Manji, one of the girls who had not come back.

Her arrival drew all the neighbours out of their houses, but it was not difficult to spot Guriya, 13, in the crowd. Her hair was brushed in a shiny black bob just like she learned at school, her brilliant pink salwar-kameez was crisp and clean, and she stood out amid the grime and the tousle-haired, dust-caked children as if a spotlight were on her.

Everyone suspected why Sudha didi (she is universally known here by the Hindi word for elder sister) had come. And quickly, in voices barely lowered, they were advising Guriya to lie.

Sister Sudha took the girl into her family's two-room, pink-walled mud house, and sent neighbours off to find her parents. "I've inquired, and people say you are looking for a match," she said bluntly when they arrived.

"No, no. It's not true - she's 13!" Guriya's mother, Lailun, protested. Like many others, the Manjis have heard about the law - the first legislation "restraining" child marriage dates from 1929 and the age for girls was set at 18 in 1978. But the latest law prohibiting the practice was enacted just over five years ago, and only recently has Bihar's development-focused state government begun to advertise it.

So, the Manjis knew what they were supposed to say. But they do not know anyone who has ever been charged with marrying an underaged girl. (There have been just a handful of convictions across India.) In fact, they do not know any girls who were older than 14 when they wed. Lailun is 31, give or take a few years (birth records for the Mushahar are a recent phenomenon), and says she married at 13.

For 45 minutes, there was a circular, un-

easy conversation, Guriya staring fixedly at the floor and insisting in a tiny voice that it had been her idea not to go back to school.

'I GOT A FRIGHTENING VISION'

And then her mother's worries began to pour out. Lailun said the sight of her daughter grown tall and "fat" (which is to say, less skeletally malnourished than other women in the community) startled her when Guriya came home for the holiday.
"I got a frightening vision: If we leave her five years, what will she look like?"

She knows that 18 is the legal age of marriage, but it's so far off. "In five years, she will grow bigger and I can't keep an eye on her all the time, and what can happen?" she asked. "So many things can happen. Someone could misuse her sexually. Even she could get entangled with some boys who are around. Many things are being shown on TV and the young children imitate it. It's outside influences."

She and her husband, Amit, are at work all day, hoeing and planting for a dominant-caste landowner, and cannot guard her.

"All the girls her age are married - she's the only who is not," she said, wringing her hands. "It's not right, but parents can't keep watch so they get them married."

Guriya's father chimed in: "If I marry her, this girl is out of my way; it's off my shoulders."

Sexual assault is a constant and very real fear - dominant-caste men view Mushahar girls as easy prey who can be assaulted with no legal consequence, since police rarely pursue complaints made by Dalits. A girl must be "chaste" if parents are to secure her a husband. And because a girl becomes the property of her husband's family, the sooner she and her dowry can be settled, the better, for parents anxious about this huge financial obligation.

Neighbours and relatives squeezed into the room to offer their opinions, but Sister Sudha sent them out again. She put the question at last to Guriya: What do you want to do? Study? Get married?

The girl was rigid with anxiety and the unaccustomed sensation of being given choices about her own life. "Don't feel scared," Sister Sudha said, briefly touching her shoulder. "Don't feel that you're caught or trapped. What you want is the priority. If there's any problem with the school, a reason that you didn't want to come back, I need to know so I can fix it."

At last, Guriya burst out: "It was better there. I'm not happy at home. I would like to study. I want to go back."

But back was not part of the plan. Sister Sudha had already given away her spot - there are hundreds of girls on the waiting

list. When the seven did not return by the new year, she replaced them. Her goal with this visit was not to bring Guriya back - she felt the family had had an opportunity, and wasted it - but a last attempt to keep her from becoming a child bride.

Sister Sudha constantly steels herself in the face of the endless needs she confronts, but Guriya's desperation softened her resolve. The nun's brow crinkled as she tried to work out how she could squeeze one more girl into a dormitory already bursting at its seams. "I'll try to make an arrangement - only for you," she said finally. "It's a last chance."

PHOTO: STEPHANIE NOLEN

She turned then to Lailun. "You did not get a chance. Now, your daughter is getting a chance. You shouldn't say one word to stop her. Give her a chance to have her dream come true."

Lailun, by then in tears, pulled up her shawl toward her eyes. "I was thinking, How will I face you," she said. She had suspected that Guriya would not be allowed simply to disappear.

Sister Sudha left the parents with a warning. "If I learn you are planning to get her married, I'll lodge a police complaint. For five more years, you must give her education."

Back in the street, Sister Sudha had to laugh at the sight of Guriya, who was trying and failing to maintain a serious expression; a grin pulled at the corners of the girl's mouth and she was shivery with excitement. Climbing into her rattletrap jeep, Sister Sudha said with a sigh that she could not be too angry with the parents, because the busybody neighbours remind her how difficult their choices are - to be the first generation to break from tradition, to send their children into a world they have no idea how to navigate.

Her visit, she knows, may give the Manjis cover. Now, if people want to gossip or criticize them about Guriya, they can claim, "We would get her married, of course, but then we might end up in jail."

Until now, the problem with this tactic has been the police themselves: The Bihar force, overworked, under-resourced and as embedded in caste prejudice as the society it nominally serves, has not traditionally concerned itself overmuch with the human rights of Dalits, certainly not Dalit school-

girls. Sister Sudha said she has fought for years to have police take complaints of rape and abuse seriously - if she reported a marriage done with the parents' consent, she would be laughed out of the station.

But the soft-spoken and thoughtful police chief now in charge of Gaya is cut from different cloth. "Unless and until parents take cognizance of the fact that getting children married at such a young age has such adverse implications on their health and their education, things will not change," he said a few days after Sister Sudha sought out Guriya. "If we are educating the girl, we are educating the whole family, and she is able to take care of the children she will give birth to."

POLICE READY TO ACT

These are startling observations from a Bihari police officer, but Supt. Kumar understands Sister Sudha's desire to use the law. And if it comes to it, if parents push ahead with the marriages, he is ready to charge them.

But he hopes it won't be necessary. "I don't think it's going to give a long-term solution. ... When you are sending parents to jail, who will take care of the children, who are already very vulnerable? In most cases, the parents are [marrying them off] under certain circumstances - because they are not financially able to support the girl, or under community pressure. First, we have to create awareness, so they don't see their children as a liability."

Over the next few days, Sister Sudha and her staff tried to track down the other girls who did not come back, but these visits did not go as well.

Four hours' drive west of Gaya in the tiny village of Dharmpur, they went looking for four girls. One had been taken from Bihar to the big city, Kolkata, by her migrant-worker father, and no one had news of them. But at the Kumar home, they found Chand-ni, 14, sitting morose and listless in the courtyard of the house her family shares with three sets of uncles, aunts and their children.

Asked why she was not back at Prerna, the family blustered - "She was sick! She's going to a local school instead! Her mother has a new baby, and Chandni has to help!" But it took about three minutes for the truth to come out - they were hunting for a husband. Chandni has two cousins who also left Prerna, a 13-year-old for whom the family is also seeking a groom, and a nine-year-old whose mother decided not to send her because the older girls were not going.

Sister Sudha's network of Dalit organizers has only recently started to work in this area. None of the adults in this family - or the village, for that matter - had ever been to school, and as they talked, it was clear

they saw little point in it. “We’re working people,” one aunt said with a shrug. “We have to work all day to feed ourselves.” All the adults, and some children, do agricultural day labour for about $2 a day.

And what about the age-of-marriage law? Here, hours from a town, the idea that the police might concern themselves with a girl’s wedding is so alien as to be baffling. Chandni, when asked, said with a sigh that she misses playing, and studying at Prerna. She liked computer class, and karate. But she has three close friends in the village, and all now have husbands, so she knows what’s waiting for her.

“I don’t want to be married yet,” she said with a burst of courage. “I want to study.”

Her mother and aunts continued their conversation as if she had not spoken.

The Prerna team left frustrated, with a sense there was little progress to be made in the short term. “We will have to do more to show them the possibilities that come with education,” Sister Sudha said after her staff reported back about Dharmpur.

But for one of the lost girls, at least, there is a second chance.

Sister Sudha squeezed an extra bed into the dorm, and a few weeks ago, Guriya put on her red and white uniform and went back to school.

Can horror over rape change a culture?

A brutal sex attack prompts anger at patriarchal attitudes in a society – often citing women's independence as source of misfortune

NEW DELHI – She was the 637th case of rape the police registered this year in the Indian capital.

But the story of this young woman - found naked and near death after being gang raped on a bus Sunday night - seems to have pierced the pained resignation of Indian women and the men in their lives as few similar crimes previously have.

The attack has prompted feverish debate in parliament, with female members weeping in rage and vowing to bring change. There have been days of street demonstrations in the capital and beyond, with crowds demanding the death penalty for the rapists and fierce young women denouncing a "sick" patriarchal culture.

And this rape has ignited a new debate about how safe women can expect to be in this rapidly changing nation. On Thursday, protests and vigils in support of the victim spread beyond New Delhi to other cities.

The woman fighting for her life in a Delhi hospital is a denizen of the new India: She comes from a poor family and her parents sold their small parcel of land in Uttarakhand in the north to help fund her dream of becoming a doctor, according to Meira Kumar, the speaker of India's parliament, who met them in the intensive-care unit. The young woman recently completed a physiotherapy degree and was soon to start an internship; on Sunday night, she went to the movies with a male friend, a 28-year-old software engineer, and they caught what they thought was a city bus home around 9 p.m.

Police say the "conductor" collected 10 rupees - about 20 cents - from them for tickets and then taunted her, saying that only prostitutes are out in the streets after dark. Her friend tried to intervene. Then the conductor, driver and four friends - who had posed as passengers on what was actually a chartered bus - first beat him senseless with iron bars, then attacked the young woman, while the vehicle cruised through south Delhi, past some of India's most elite universities and research centres. The hospital said Thursday that after a second surgery, they were unable to save any of her intestinal system. She was briefly conscious on Wednesday; she wrote a note asking doctors to save her, and one to tell her parents she wanted to live, the hospital said.

She was found on the road barely 100 metres from one of the city's frenetic 24-hour news channels, and soon her story dominated the media. Irate members of parliament disrupted the session on Tuesday, demanding the government explain why women were not safe in the city. The next day, there were demonstrations outside police stations, on the highway and outside the chief minister's home in Delhi.

Police said they have arrested four of six

men they believe, based on closed-circuit television footage from around the city, were involved, and that two have confessed to the crime, saying they went out for a night of "fun" after drinking.

The outraged media coverage of this latest attack has recycled the popular idea that Delhi is the country's "rape capital," but the statistics reflect that it has better rape reporting than any part of the country. The Centre for Social Research, which works with Delhi police to offer rape crisis support, estimates that one in 10 sexual assaults in Delhi are reported. In less developed states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, "you hear of one in 25, and one in 100 is reported to police," because of the widely held belief that a woman raped is permanently shamed, said Ranjana Kumari, director of the centre.

There are approximately 40,000 cases of sexual assault pending before courts across India, according to the centre, cases which have dragged on for eight or nine years; most of the accused are out on bail.

However, there is a particular dynamic in the capital that is making women vulnerable, Dr. Kumari said. "The higher level of mobility of women - more independent, self-minded, strong women - their presence is very overwhelming for some set of people who are totally patriarchal, in a macho culture," she said.

She referred to a series of incidents in the states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, which surround Delhi, where in recent months khap panchayat, self-appointed local councils, have issued decrees variously banning women from wearing jeans and using mobile phones.

There has been fierce debate here this year, following other high-profile rapes, about women's "responsibility." Women assaulted leaving bars or late at night or while wearing Western clothes have been chastised by police, judges and politicians for bringing their misfortune on themselves. This time, however, there is a current of defiance in the protests, noted Subhashini Ali of the All India Democratic Women's Association. A young woman in central Delhi on Tuesday carried a sign saying, "Stop telling me how to dress, start telling your sons not to rape."

But rape is still not seen as a men's issue, Ms. Ali said. "I don't think many people are asking that question yet [of how men are being brought up and how it shapes their attitude toward rape]."

"But that's where we have to go."

Rape victim's death renews anger, sorrow and calls for change

NEW DELHI – The young woman who, much against her will, briefly became India's most famous citizen was cremated in the pre-dawn cold near her home in Delhi on Sunday, with senior politicians standing beside her shattered family.

The 23-year-old student died Saturday morning of injuries sustained during a savage gang rape carried out by six young men on a moving bus on December 16. She had been flown to Singapore for treatment two days before, a controversial decision made by the central government, and on Saturday night a state aircraft was sent from Delhi to fly her body home.

Her family was met at the airport by Sonia Gandhi, chief of the ruling Indian National Congress, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The government appears belatedly to have realized that, in a country where violence against women is so commonplace as to go almost unremarked, this case has elicited a level of rage unprecedented in recent years. Her cremation was kept closed to media and the public, and held immediately after the family's return.

The case has garnered international attention, and the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, weighed in Sunday. "Every girl and woman has the right to be respected, valued and protected," Mr. Ban said in a statement in which he welcomed efforts by the government but called for "further steps and reforms to deter such crimes and bring perpetrators to justice."

Protests continued throughout the weekend against rape, abuse of women, poor policing, and an overstretched ineffective justice system. But even as angry citizens demanded more from their government, a watchdog group made public its research showing that men charged with violent crimes against women hold political office across the country.

The Association for Democratic Reforms, a non-partisan, non-profit organization, said at least two members of the national parliament face sexual assault charges. According to its findings, six state MPs are charged with rape, while 36 other local politicians face charges of other crimes against women and girls including "molestation." Every party has fielded candidates facing charges of crimes against women; parties have put 27 candidates who face rape charges on their state election tickets in the past five years, the association said, based on its analysis of the candidates' own registration affidavits. (Of the 552 members in India's lower house of parliament, 162 face criminal charges of some kind.)

In Delhi, no mass demonstrations oc-

curred over the weekend, as police acted on the central government's orders to keep the heart of the city sealed off.

Instead small protests, of 1,000 people or so, dotted the city, with candlelight vigils Sunday night in dozens of neighbourhoods.

The bus stop where the young woman and a male friend caught what they thought was a city bus home after a movie has become a place of pilgrimage, drawing crowds with candles. Demonstrations were also held in Mumbai, Patna, Chennai, Bangalore and other parts of India.

Police have charged the six men, one of them a minor, with murder, and the government has appointed a special prosecutor to lead the case, which it promised to fast-track. Of 635 rapes reported in Delhi up to November this year, one has led to a conviction so far.

Indian media, prevented by law from identifying the woman, are walking a fine line, providing a stream of details from interviews with people they say were her close friends, neighbours and relatives in her family's ancestral village in Uttar Pradesh.

They described a fiercely determined student whose light was always the last one burning in the low-income neighbourhood near the airport where she reportedly shared a one-bedroom apartment with her parents and two brothers. Her father, reported to be a loader at the airport and to come from a low-caste community, is said to have doted on her and been hugely proud of her academic achievements. She was about to complete a physiotherapy degree and dreamed of being a doctor; her parents had sold their family land, and mortgaged a last plot back in Uttar Pradesh, according to The Hindu newspaper, to finance her studies.

Several media outlets reported Sunday that she was in the process of planning a February wedding to the young man who was with her during the attack. He was also severely injured and is recovering with family.

The level of care, including psychological support, that the young woman received after her attack, and the swift arrest of her assailants, showed what the Indian system is capable of when there is political will to respond to rape, noted Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

But many victims battle to get police to register complaints. "They often go from one hospital to another even for a medical examination, and report suffering humiliation at police stations and hospitals," she said. India continues, for example, to employ a "two finger test," in which a doctor inserts fingers into a rape victim's vagina to test for what is termed "vaginal laxity," or the presence of a hymen, since her sexual history is believed to have strong influence

on her credibility.

Marital rape is legal in India, while the theoretical minimum seven-year-sentence for rape is routinely reduced by judges in the relatively few cases that end up in court.

Five years in India:
False miracles and real inspiration

The Globe and Mail's **Stephanie Nolen** was posted to India when the world was hailing its economic rise, which was expected to lead to social transformation. But the country's gross inequities of class and gender, and its reluctance to confront them, made her fear it would defy those expectations. As she departs for her next assignment, she recalls a place that drove her to despair, and the hope she discovered in one of its lowliest corners

It had been a very bad week.

A couple of years into my assignment in India, I went to Bihar, the country's poorest state, to report on the development miracle that was said to be going on under its new government. I saw new roads, new schools, new toilets and newly minted health workers, all emblematic of the sort of rapid change that was supposed to be sweeping the country.

But I also met families of landless agricultural labourers who lived in windowless, low-roofed mud huts that would barely holds pigs. I saw a young couple sit down to their one meal that day: a pot of insect-speckled, four-day-old rice. A local official took me to a showpiece village for Dalits, the people once known as untouchables – then recoiled in visible disgust when one of the residents almost brushed his sleeve by accident.

In village after village, I met people living in conditions more grim, more horrifying than almost any I had seen in 20 years of reporting that had taken me from the AIDS-ravaged highlands of Lesotho to dust-baked southern Afghanistan. After a couple of days, I was nearly speechless with despair: If this was India's beacon of progress, well, the gods help us all.

With a couple of hours left before my flight back to Delhi, desperate for even a fragment of good news, I decided to look up an activist a friend had told me about on the outskirts of the Bihari capital, Patna. He'd described her work as revolutionary. So I had the taxi stop in the town of Danapur, tracked down the address – a plain, red, metal gate – and stepped inside.

I found myself in a playing field full of schoolgirls, caught up in a boisterous game of tag. When they saw me, they froze. Then they turned, put their hands together in a quick, respectful greeting – "pranam, didi" – and went right back to running.

These girls were so strong, and so confident – so unlike any of the people I'd met over the past few days. I ventured up the path and in the door, and met the school's founder, Sudha Varghese. She told me I had come to the Prerna Residential School for Mahadalit Girls. Those wild, free, creatures in the schoolyard were Dalit girls, a fact that made their sense of joyful inhibition even harder to believe.

Sister Sudha has made it her life's work to square the shoulders and raise the chins of these girls, these most marginalized citizens in the poorest corner of India. Within a few minutes of sitting down across from her battered wooden desk, my despair began to melt away.

The word prerna means "inspiration" in Hindi, and that school became mine: the vehicle for the most important stories I tried to tell in nearly five years as a correspondent in India.

It wasn't immediately clear which stories those would be. Certainly there was no shortage of breaking news to cover: Days after I arrived in the country, a band of young Pakistani men loaded down with weapons sailed into the Mumbai harbor and ran rampaging through the city. A couple of hours after I had picked up keys to the new office, I was on a flight to Mumbai into the middle of that story. After that, the pace rarely slowed.

I covered the largest election ever held in the world, when 417.2 million Indians voted in 2009. I reported on a nascent space program, and a massive Maoist insurgency. I wrote about the steady ascendance of women into local government because of an audacious affirmative-action campaign; the successes of the world's biggest-ever public-welfare scheme; and the craven robbery by officials that has crippled a food distribution system meant to feed the hungry.

There were big political stories – including corruption scandals of breathtaking scale – and big business stories. Economic growth has plummeted over my time here, from near 10 per cent per year to just over five per cent, but that has scarcely dampened the voracious interest the rest of the world has in this ballooning economy, which just this year overtook Japan to become the world's third largest. When I arrived, the signs of that growth were everywhere, at least in the cities. And there were stories to tell from the other India as well: the India of the 800 million people who still live in villages, and eke out a bare living on agriculture.

But the Prerna school gave me a way to write about the stories that lay underneath many of these others.

Again and again, I went out to investigate an issue – why were 47 per cent of children still malnourished, despite 15 years of roaring growth? Why had India managed to slash its rate of HIV infection when African nations using the same methods had had no success? And again and again the answer had to do with the status of women: Women didn't get to decide what their family grew or bought or fed their children. Women's mobility was so constrained that they could never have an extramarital relationship, and so never passed on HIV.

In my first days in India, I was startled by the absence of women in public spaces, save for the occasional portrait of a political leader such as Sonia Gandhi smiling down from the wall. That never lessened. But it took longer for me to notice the endurance of caste – the ancient stratification of society by birth.

Discrimination based on caste was outlawed in 1950, yet nevertheless the caste categories are now formally enshrined by government, because everything from subsidized rice to college admissions to par-

liamentary seats are subject to caste-based quotas.

A national survey in 2006 found that in more than half of rural communities Dalits were not permitted to enter non-Dalit homes, to use the same laundry man or barber as non-Dalits, to go into the places of worship, nor to share food or water or dishes with non-Dalits.

Ah, people told me, but that's the villages – it's different in the cities. Tens of thousands of people seem to want to believe that, because there are pages of name-change advertisements in the newspapers each day – placed by migrants seeking to leave their past behind by shedding their caste-revealing surnames.

But as I became more literate in the subtle signs of how caste plays out in India today, I began to see it everywhere: In the two sets of dishes at the home of a friend, a senior executive in the supposedly caste-blind tech industry – there was a steel set kept for visitors and workers of unknown caste. (This is called the "two tumbler" system.) In the way a street sweeper in a municipal-government fluorescent vest pulled the end of her sari out of the way lest it touch the suited workers walking by.

A senior civil servant confided that his colleagues, upon learning he came from a Dalit family, refused to visit his Mumbai home. Caste has proved resilient, an ancient system of discrimination grafting into a modern economy.

And yet from day to day neither caste nor gender discrimination received more than cursory coverage in the local media. I rarely heard people talking about either, and when I wrote about these issues, officials at India's Ministry of External Affairs summoned me to politely berate my outdated coverage.

"These are all things of the past – no one is concerned about these things any more," a senior spokesman chided me.

But that's not what I saw. One week I covered the launch of the new BlackBerry to a voracious Indian market in the high-tech "millennium city" of Gurgaon, outside Delhi – and the next week I drove a couple of hours further down that road and covered a violent siege against Dalits in a village where a dominant-caste woman had eloped with a lower-caste man she'd met at business school. It felt like time travel to the Middle Ages.

The conventional wisdom in theories of economic development, largely born out by recent history, is that rapid growth will be accompanied by sweeping social transformation.

In China, it came hand-in-hand with revolution. In 1960s Quebec, too, although the revolution was of a more peaceful kind. In Thailand and others of the so-called Asian

Tigers, traditional feudal systems were rapidly replaced with urbanized mobility. In next-door Bangladesh, the growth of the garment industry has created a vast class of women with waged work: badly paid, dangerous work, but work that has given them much greater autonomy and shaken up all the traditional ways things work there.

Will India be the country that defies that theory? As the Indian economy has grown, its rate of female workforce participation – already one of the lowest in the world, at 12 per cent – has declined further. Forty-six per cent of public places in rural India today maintain the two-tumbler system.

There are many places – South Africa and Brazil, for example – where growth has been accompanied by an increase in inequality between the richest and the poorest. But in all those places, the poorest, at least some of them, have seen their own baseline improve. In India, the basic indicators of quality of life – child deaths, maternal mortality, access to clean water and sanitation, quality of housing – have not budged for a vast tranche of the populace.

Seventy per cent of Indians still live on less than $2 a day. Less than 7 per cent graduate from high school.

There is a widespread belief outside India, put forth perhaps most often and most eloquently by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, that India cannot be a superpower if it does not confront and change the enshrined ideas about women, and all the old forces that keep much of the population shut out.

"India will rise or fall with its women," she told a gathering of political, business and cultural leaders at the Women in the World Summit recently. "It's had a tradition of strong women leaders, but those women leaders – like women leaders around the world, like those who become presidents or prime ministers or foreign ministers or heads of corporations – cannot be seen as tokens that give everyone else in society the chance to say, 'We've taken care of our women.' So any country that wants to rise economically and improve productivity needs to open the doors."

But maybe Ms. Clinton is wrong. Over the course of my years here, I have begun to wonder if India will be the country that will grow and grow and never undergo that transformative disruption.

"Our prime minister likes to say that what India is achieving today has no parallel in human history – this pace of economic growth in an open society," Harsh Mander, a prominent Delhi-based social activist who was recruited by Ms. Gandhi to advise her government, told me not long ago. He acknowledged with a gentle tip of his head that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was correct about that. "And yet we're leaving

millions of our people behind."

The people elected to power are utterly unmoved by this, he said. "When they drew up the new poverty line recently, they set it at 32 rupees [six cents] a day. That means one rupee for health care." It's tantamount to ensuring that those now at the bottom stay there. "They feel the country can keep on without these things changing, because it's been fine until now."

I wondered – as I sat on flights from Delhi to Mumbai as the only woman other than the "air hostess" on a packed 747; when a Delhi woman with a Master's in business confided which doctors would reveal the gender of a fetus, to facilitate the aborting of a girl; when a Harvard-educated business owner told me "those people" (lower castes) simply didn't have the inherent abilities to hold a professional position – just what it would take for any change to come.

We are sitting in rough wooden chairs under a lazy fan, my friend Poonam and I, and we are having a conversation we have had many times before. It is late morning, blanketed with the heat of summer in Bihar. We are in the front room of the Prerna schol, and from upstairs come the murmurs of a math lesson, a scrape of benches on the classroom floor.

Poonam, 16, is cutting class to sit and talk to me; she knows this is my last visit to Prerna for a long time, and she will sweetly tolerate my probing.

"What can you do?" I ask her. "What can you do, in India today?"

Poonam is from a group of Dalits called Mushahar, the child of illiterate, landless labourers who are so stunted by lifelong malnutrition that she towers over them when she goes back to visit, and she is not tall herself. When she walks in the street outside the school, neighbours will cross to the other side so her shadow does not touch theirs.

She is also a straight-A student with a love of biology. An artist. A prize-winning athlete. A trophy-holding debater. A canny observer of the world around her. A secret writer of sappy poetry. And a child, who cannot help but run when she comes into an open space. She considers my question for a minute, fidgeting with the light pink dupatta draped over her shoulders.

"The condition of women in the rural areas is very bad, very uncertain," she says in Hindi. "They have no choices, only to live the way they live today. They have no work, no health care. For urban women or upper-caste women it's not the same – they're educated, they have jobs as teachers or nurses or police officers. They have choices."

"Choices," I say, nodding. "That's a big one. Getting to make your own."

Poonam carries on. "Girls like us, if we take the opportunity given to us, we can become educated and get those jobs as teachers and nurses. It all depends on what you do with the chance you're given. It used to be only for those others. Now we also have that opportunity, if we take it. What used to be possible only for them is possible for us also."

After a couple of years of spending time with Poonam, Sister Sudha and the girls of Prerna, I was nearly convinced: Every time I left the school, I would sit on the evening flight back to the congested, smoggy buzz of Delhi, and feel newly hopeful about India's possibilities.

And then on the night of Dec. 16, 2012, a 23-year-old Delhi physiotherapy student named Jyoti Singh went to see Life of Pi with a friend. Here is what happened next, as later pieced together by police: They caught what they thought was a private bus home, and for three hours it rolled through the streets of the Indian capital, through five separate police posts, the curtains in its windows masking what went on inside.

The passengers – actually friends of the driver, who had hijacked the school bus for a night of "fun" – set upon Ms. Singh and her friend. First they robbed them, and then they began to beat them, and when the young man, a software engineer, fell semi-conscious to the floor of the bus, they dragged Ms. Singh to the back and took turns raping her – first using their own bodies, and later with iron rods that eviscerated her. Eventually they dumped the pair by the side of the road near a call centre, where employees coming off a night shift found them.

Ms. Singh came from a low-caste family – not as low as Poonam's, and not as poor, but people who had fought for the smallest toehold in the new India. Her parents had sold their tiny plot of land in Uttar Pradesh, a few miles from the Bihar border, and used the money to rent a two-room house in a Delhi slum and send their children to school. Ms. Singh, in particular, had been their big hope.

She justified their faith: She earned high marks, tutored neighbourhood kids, got into a professional college and got a call-centre job to help pay for it. She went to class all day, worked night shifts and barely slept. She packed away the salwar-kurtas people had worn back in the village, bought jeans and t-shirts and had her hair streaked.

She died in hospital 10 days after the rape on the bus, after painstakingly recording a statement for police (twice, because they messed up the first one) and pleading with them to catch the men who attacked her.

Something about this story – the brutality of the men who attacked her, Ms. Singh's courage, perhaps a camel's-back frustration

with the constant tide of news of violence against women – left people here enraged. In the days after the attack, and especially after she died 10 days later, there was an unprecedented outpouring of fury by many Indian women and the men who care about them.

There were massive street demonstrations in Delhi, which the panicked government tried to shut down with barricades, sealed streets and water cannons. A conversation erupted in public, not only about sexual violence but about harassment, sex-selective abortion, dowry and the myriad other ways women are rendered unequal in this society.

It took place in the erudite pages of the English-language newspapers, but in many other places as well. The girls of Prerna went to a candlelight vigil for Ms. Singh. They talked about rape.

But then, just as quickly as it had come, the conversation faded away.

"On the positive side, it was a moment of public empathy for a woman whose name we didn't know. There has been no mass public upsurge because of violence against women anywhere before, ever," Mr. Mander, the activist, observed when we talked about it in the spring. "You had the government not knowing how to respond but it got its act together and created the committee [to look at modifying existing laws] and a lot of what it recommended was accepted."

And then. "We hit the limits of empathy. Homeless women are being raped right here every night," he said, gesturing to the pavement outside his office window. "There are no demonstrations."

Even more disturbingly, there were fewer women around at all: After the attack on Ms. Singh, one in three female employees in the capital either reduced her hours or quit her job, according to a survey by the Association of Chambers of Commerce of India.

When I went back to Prerna after Ms. Singh's death, I found it impossible to look at the girls with the same optimism I had before. Jyoti Singh had tried plenty hard. She was focused. And look what happened to her dreams.

It made me terrified for these girls at Prerna, about whom I'd come to care a great deal, and it also made me think they were painfully deluded: Their hard work would never be enough.

And so when I went back to Bihar a few weeks ago, to tell the girls I was headed to South America to write about a new place, to thank them for their patience with me and to explain that I wouldn't be around so much to poke my nose into their lives – I couldn't resist having the conversation with Poonam one more time.

Sister Sudha sits with us, listening at first and translating when my Hindi and Poon-

am's English don't quite meet in the middle, and then taking over, gently probing Poonam's ideas.

"What about the future?" I ask, flinching a bit as I bring up Ms. Singh and her murder on that Delhi bus. "What can a girl like you do in India today?"

"I just have to be focused on my goal," she answers quickly, as she has told me so many times before. "Sometimes my friends call me to come and chat with them and away from my books and I stop studying – but there is nothing else in my way."

"But as soon as you step out through that gate, you're not safe," Sister Sudha says reflectively, waving towards the road outside the school grounds. "Your gender makes you not safe."

"I'm safe in here, though."

"But you can't stay here all your life" – Sister Sudha and I, in a chorus.

"Where we're unsafe, women must come together and raise their voices and speak out for change" – Poonam, deadly serious.

I try to keep the dismay off my face; Poonam is staring hard at me. But it is hard to imagine change coming just because some Dalit girls demand it.

"All around there are situations like this, the harassment and the violence," says Sister Sudha again, playing devil's advocate. "Better you should stay home and get married and have your children."

Poonam's reply is lightening fast. "But that also is not safe – you get a husband who is not humane, he does not treat you well and you become a victim of violence." She goes on, thinking about home. "You know, women in urban areas come together. But in villages they don't because of the fear of dominant castes."

Sister Sudha is still pushing. "Even within our own caste, people are exploited. Women are exploited by men."

Poonam bristles. "They always blame the girl. It's always her fault. Nobody looks at justice, who is wrong and who is right. Even in my own home no one will stand up for me."

She pauses for a minute and swings her legs back and forth a bit. She flips the dupatta up over her shoulder. She has a plan: "You have to get yourself educated and get a livelihood, a job, a post." With that, she says, she would have the ability to fend off everyone who tries to hold her back.

So – I should be hopeful?

Poonam speaks with the same certainty I first heard from her years before, when we chatted on my first visit to Prerna: "If I want, I can do it. If I want, I can be safe anywhere. I can be safe and I can manage."

How?

"The key is resistance. Resisting what they want, focusing on what I want."

"They. Who do you mean, they?"

"Boys. Men. Society. The key is resistance."

She says it with a fierceness and a conviction that make her seem so much older than 16.

That's Poonam's plan. Resistance.

And I can't help but feel hopeful when I hear it.

The Globe and Mail's Stephanie Nolen