

India Untouched

The Forgotten Face of Rural Poverty

Abraham M. George

THE WRITERS'  COLLECTIVE

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India Untouched: The Forgotten Face of Rural Poverty
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To

Mariam, Ajit, Vivek, Ammachi and Achachan

for everything you are to me.

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FOREWORD

India recently had a stunning election, with incumbents across the country thrown out, largely by rural voters. Rural Indians, who make up the country's majority, clearly told the cities and the government that they were not happy with the direction of events. I think I can explain what happened, but first I have to tell you about this wild typing race I recently had with an eight-year-old Indian girl at a village school.

The Shanti Bhavan school sits on a once-scorpion-infested bluff about an hour's drive - and ten centuries - from Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley. The students are mostly "untouchables" (the lowest caste in India), who are not supposed to even get near Indians of a higher caste for fear they will pollute the air others breathe. The Shanti Bhavan school was started by Abraham George, one of those brainy Indians who made it big in high-tech America. He came back to India with a single mission: to start a privately financed boarding school that would take India's most deprived children and prove that if you gave them access to the same technologies and education that have enabled other Indians to thrive in globalization, they could, too.

I visited Mr. George's school last February, and he took me to a classroom where eight-year-olds were learning to use Microsoft Word and Excel. They were having a computer speed-typing lesson, so I challenged the fastest typist to a race. She left me in the dust - to the cheering delight of her classmates. And dust is an appropriate word, because a drought in this area of southern India has left dust everywhere.

"These kids - their parents are ragpickers, coolies and quarry laborers," the school's principal, Lalita Law, told me. "They come from homes below the poverty line, and from the lowest caste of untouchables, who are supposed to be fulfilling their destiny and left where they are, according to the unwritten laws of Indian society. We get these children at age four. They don't know what it is to have a drink of clean water. They bathe in filthy gutter water - if they are lucky to have a gutter near where they live. Our goal is to give them a world-class education so they can aspire to careers and professions that would have been totally beyond their reach, and have been so for generations."

After our little typing race I asked the eight-year-olds what they wanted to be. Their answers were: "an astronaut," "a doctor," "a pediatrician," "a poetess," "physics and chemistry," "a scientist and an astronaut," "a surgeon," "a detective," "an author." Looking at these kids, Mr. George said, "They are the ones who have to do well for India to succeed."

And that brings us to the lesson of India's election: the broad globalization strategy that India opted for in the early 1990's has succeeded in unlocking the country's incredible brainpower and stimulating sustained growth, which is the best antipoverty program. I think many Indians understand that retreating from their globalizing strategy now would be a disaster and result in India's neighborhood rival, China, leaving India in the dust. But the key to spreading the benefits of globalization across a big society is not about more Internet. It is about getting your fundamentals right: good governance, good education.

India's problem is not too much globalization, but too little good governance. Local government in India - basic democracy - is so unresponsive and so corrupted it can't deliver services and education to rural Indians. As an Indian political journalist, Krishna Prasad, told me: "The average Indian voter is not saying, 'No more reforms,' as the left wants to believe, but, 'More reforms, please' - genuine reforms, reforms that do not just impact the cities and towns, but ones which percolate down to the grass roots as well."

India needs a political reform revolution to go with its economic one. "With prosperity coming to a few, the great majority are simply spectators to this drama," said Mr. George. "The country is governed poorly, with corruption and heavy bureaucracy at all levels. I am a great advocate of technology and globalization, but we must find a way to channel

their benefits to the rural poor. What is happening today will not succeed because we are relying on a corrupt and socially unfair system.”

If there is one thing I have learned about this new era of globalization that we are entering into it is this: All of the inputs, to do good or ill, will increasingly be available to more and more people. What will distinguish who does what with them will be imagination. That you cannot download. You have to upload it, the old-fashioned way, through teachers, parents, role-models and culture. Abraham George has precisely the kind of imagination that we should all want to emulate and, I certainly hope he will be a role model for many others in his native country and around the world.

Thomas L. Friedman
Foreign Affairs Columnist
The New York Times

PREFACE

IN THIS BOOK, I will try to tell the story of rural India from my personal experiences of working among the poor in the villages of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in South India for the past eight years. The backdrop is the day-to-day lives of a great majority of Indians who live in the villages, mostly untouched by the rapid economic progress that has been occurring in every city across the country since reforms were introduced in 1991. The euphoria behind gains in foreign investment, export revenues, foreign exchange reserves and technology-based services has masked the deplorable conditions faced by the rural population. The widening gap between the haves and have-nots, and the ever increasing numbers of poor people, illustrate a story of broken promises by the rulers of India. It must be told candidly and honestly, not to indict anyone or any group, but to seek solutions that would reduce the hardships faced by hundreds of millions of people in this great nation.

When I left India for America in the late 1960s, the country was still struggling to cope with the difficulties it had confronted since gaining independence some 20 years earlier. A quarter-century later, I returned to a new India that was beginning to show the promise of prosperity for some in the industrial sectors. I had come to start a charitable foundation to educate a few children from socially and economically deprived families, especially among the “untouchables.” Since then, my work has drawn me into several connected areas, each one dealing directly or indirectly with issues of poverty and sustainable development. It is those experiences that I want to share with the

hope that the lessons I have learned would offer different perspectives and insights into some of the critical problems facing India today.

India is a land of great beauty, contrasts, and contradictions. For more than 4,000 years, its ancient civilization absorbed the values of every invader, suffered with grace every natural disaster, and accommodated the complexities of a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. Today, in the face of globalization and a powerful technological revolution engulfing much of the world, India is reaching out to these forces to satisfy the needs of its one billion plus population. The changes that have taken place in the country over the past decade have been profound, bringing opportunities and hope to millions of people. Yet, there exists two different Indias – one reaping the fruits of change and the other enduring eternal adversity.

While urban India is beginning to benefit from the economic liberalization measures being instituted, much of the rural population has been left behind. The 650 million or so people living in over 500,000 Indian villages are simply spectators to the drama being played out in the cities, and there is little hope that their lives will be any better in the foreseeable future. Despite the lofty ideals and goals constantly pronounced by the country's leaders, the truth is that rural India is simply the bread basket for the rest of the nation, to be used and exploited. If there is to be any justice and respect for human rights, it is the plight of the poor, especially the social underclass, that needs to be addressed. This book is about what can and must be done to bring about economic prosperity and social justice for all Indians.

India has had many notable successes during the past half century, especially in agriculture and information technology, but this book is not about those advances. Instead, it examines critically the broader policies and practices successive governments have employed, and which still continue, but have not yielded the desired results for the poor. The focus of the book is not on personalities but on issues and solutions. I have avoided discussing or taking sides in politics, except in elaborating policies and events that have had a major impact on the nation. The social work being carried out by our foundation has given me firsthand knowledge of the present government system and its many shortcomings in dealing with the problems faced by the poor. It has also put me in constant touch with the poor villagers in the Dharmapuri District of Tamil Nadu. In discussing their problems and by offering alternative solutions, I hope readers will be motivated to evaluate the premises under which present policies are being executed.

Honest efforts to overcome the problems of rural India have been mired in a swamp of obstacles ranging from poor planning and public governance to thousands of years of traditions, beliefs and unjust social hierarchies and practices. For more than 50 years, successive governments have initiated various programs to deal with poverty, but they have not made any major dent in the economic and social status of hundreds of millions.

Having been raised in India, and subsequently educated in the West where I have run businesses, I have now come full circle. My strong desire to demonstrate a successful model for solving some of the perennial problems of rural India stems from my life experiences in two worlds. My dual advantage as an outsider looking in, and as an insider working within the system, I believe, gives me a unique perspective from which to analyze these issues with a fresh and unbiased focus.

My attempt in socioeconomic reform is documented here in a series of interwoven essays that contradict the generally held assumption that rural poverty in India is beyond redemption. The book addresses several issues: education, economic development, social justice, healthcare, environment, free press, art and culture, and ethics. The underlying contention is that only through a determined and sustainable effort by the government, supported by non-governmental organizations, international agencies, and philanthropic institutions, and with active participation by the private sector, can the social and economic problems faced by the rural population in India be effectively tackled. This would require embracing new ideas that are a departure from the traditional ways of dealing with rural poverty. I have attempted to present some of the ideas that have evolved from our foundation's work in India.

In discussing each of the topics, I have also related my experiences, offering some realism to the subject being considered. Although I have avoided naming most of the individuals involved, all the narrated incidents are real and accurate. I have learned many lessons from those events, some of them frustrating and painful. It is my hope that they will provide some of the necessary understanding and insight to succeed in a complex environment involving many players – government, international agencies, private sector, non-governmental organizations, and beneficiaries.

If peace and tranquility are to prevail, India cannot go on much longer ignoring the plight of millions of poor people. A free and democratic India offers great promise, but only if it can mobilize its human resources to work as one people for the common good. It must turn despair into hope and prom-

ises into reality. With sound policies and their effective implementation, India can achieve prosperity and security, and assure social justice, equality and human rights for all its people. The unanswered question is whether India's leaders and policymakers can be persuaded by a participatory public to alter priorities, policies and practices to benefit all its citizens, both rich and poor.

I am thankful to all those in The George Foundation who strive every day to carry out its humanitarian mission. I must express my appreciation to the many well-wishers and supporters who have stood by me through the years. Finally, with humility, I thank the many poor people who have allowed me into their lives.

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Finally, I am grateful to my sons Ajit and Vivek, who have been great sounding boards.

Chapter 1

A LONG-AWAITED JOURNEY

THE EARLY YEARS

I was born and brought up in the seaside town of Trivandrum in the coastal state of Kerala, at the southwestern tip of India. My memories of youth are still poignantly filled with the natural beauty of my home state. Kerala is renowned for its scenic backwaters, paddy fields and lush plantations. An intricate network of lagoons, lakes, canals, estuaries and the deltas of 44 rivers interweaves the landscape and connects to the Arabian Sea. Through the centuries, several of the world's major religions have made a home in this state, and people go about their lives not seriously worrying about their differences.

Visitors often come away with fond memories of the traditional Kathakali dance, celebrated boat races, exotic elephant festivals and ancient Ayurvedic medicine. The literacy rate and the percentage of college graduates are both higher here than in any other state.

As a young man, I was attracted by the discipline and glamour of the military and opted to join the officers' training. My first posting in 1966 was to the North-East Frontier that borders China at the Sela mountain passage 14,000 feet above sea level through which the Chinese army had marched in its invasion of India. During my years in the army, I learned much about loyalty, leadership, teamwork and discipline. There is, I suppose, a stage in

everyone's life that has a greater impact on his future than all others. For me, it was these army experiences that helped shape much of my outlook on life. I also realized that, while I admired the dedication and values with which the military functioned, it was not a lifetime career I wished to pursue. I felt there were other opportunities out there, possibilities for a future where I could apply what I had learned from the army.

In the third year of my service, I suffered a hearing disability that continues to plague me. At the time, doctors in India were not trained to handle my medical problem as it needed specialized surgery. Fortunately, my mother was already in America teaching physics and working for NASA as a research scientist. I knew my mother's position provided me the opportunity to go to America where I could have my surgery done and then embark on a new life. After considerable effort, I managed to persuade the Indian army command to give me a medical discharge. A new chapter in my life had begun.

A NEW LIFE IN AMERICA

The transition from India to America was a startling, nearly overwhelming one. I joined my mother in Alabama during the heyday of segregationist Governor George Wallace. I felt I had gone to another world, not simply another country. Most of it was very foreign to me, so different from India and the life I had known. I think all immigrants to America experience an initial period of bewilderment, mixed with surprise and awe. I was exhilarated by what lay ahead of me and wanted to avail of every opportunity.

In America, as a graduate student, I specialized in developmental economics and finance with the hope that one day I would be able to make a contribution to India or one of the impoverished African nations. I was working part time for the Singer Company to meet the expenses toward my studies. As a young man too idealistic about what he should be doing with his life, I asked the management of the company to remove my name from its records after I had left so that I would never be identified with a profit-making institution.

My attempt to join the World Bank failed, and soon after completing my doctoral work I decided to enter the teaching profession. But teaching was not sufficiently gratifying, and I wanted to go out and do for myself what I was preaching to my students. That was when Chemical Bank, now part of JPMorgan Chase, offered me a job as an officer. It was time for me to put aside my idealism, work for a prestigious bank, and save enough money over the years to do something for humanitarian causes.

I had worked for Chemical Bank for only two years when I decided to start a company offering computerized systems to large multinational corporations to enable them to deal with their international financial risks. It was several years before my business became somewhat profitable, but when personal computers came along, we migrated our software to this new environment with great success. As I began to make money, I dreamt of the day when I would save enough to pursue work for the poor.

I had been away from India for too long, and consequently, my impressions about the country hadn't kept up with the changes that had taken place during the interim. Moreover, my experience in the Indian army had insulated me from civilian life. I had seen the poor living conditions of the tribal people in the Northeast frontiers of India, but it had not really raised sufficient awareness in me about the widespread poverty throughout the country. I had read that a great majority of Indians, especially in rural areas, were very poor, but their lives were too distant for someone like me who had been brought up in a middle-class family in a fairly prosperous town in Kerala. My social conscience was raised only when I began to read and watch on American television about the lives of the poor and the social injustice of the caste system in India.

By 1995, after 25 years in America, I felt I had accomplished what I had set out to do in my professional business career. I had not lost my youthful idealism; it had been buried, perhaps for awhile, but I felt there were more important things to accomplish than success in business. I had built a company from the ground up and would soon sell it to a large multinational firm, thereby concluding another chapter of my life. It was time for me to pursue what I had originally set out to do, to work full-time in the nonprofit sector.

What I knew about the hardships faced by the poor in India and elsewhere had affected me emotionally. I always believed that, after accomplishing my professional goals, I would turn towards nonprofit work in developing nations. While I was most interested in India, it mattered less to me which country I worked in as long as my efforts would make a difference and help alleviate the poverty and suffering that was pervasive worldwide.

THE BIRTH OF THE GEORGE FOUNDATION

It was during this time that my good friend Angeline Nair decided to return to India and settle down in Bangalore after spending nearly 20 years in America. She and I shared similar interests in social service and had worked

together in the United States to provide a better education to African-American inner-city children who came from underprivileged and broken households. Angeline and I spent a lot of time discussing the ills that the poor of India faced and the sheer lack of hope to change their fates. The more we talked, the more we realized we had a duty and an opportunity to do something about it. She promised to help me start a foundation in India that eventually became The George Foundation.

It was in January 1995 that I went back to India after a long absence. I returned with the goal of reducing the injustices and inequalities I had observed and learned about from the media and many published works. I had a renewed sense of purpose and a lifetime of experience to undertake what I thought was a social obligation. Money, I had decided, was not an end but a means to an end. I had been professionally and financially successful, because of the opportunities that I had seized in my lifetime. But it was only the luck of my birth that allowed me these opportunities. I felt it was not fair for me to enjoy selfishly the fruits of my success when many others had never had a chance. It was my duty to do something about this inequity.

I took the journey with my 12-year-old son, Vivek, who had not seen much of India until then. I had spoken to him at length about the great landscapes of India – the majestic Himalayan mountains in the north and the plains and plateaus that cover much of the country. We talked about some of India's great souls – Buddha, Gandhi, Tagore and Vivekananda – as I wanted him to be proud of his heritage. Vivek was worried about how he would be treated by the people he would be meeting, but I assured him of the hospitality and the caring he could expect.

We decided we would tour India for two weeks, visiting my old haunts, showing my son parts of the country that had personal significance to me. We landed in Delhi on a January morning only to find the city covered by a thick fog. As the day proceeded, the air did not seem to clear, and we inquired whether Delhi was usually that foggy. It wasn't fog, we were told, but smog. Delhi was then one of the most air-polluted cities in India.

I had expected to see lots of changes and signs of real development. Three years had passed since new economic reforms had been introduced by the government. Yes, the city was more crowded, with more cars and other vehicles. Perhaps there were a few more buildings. But real sustainable development? I saw little signs of meaningful progress in Delhi. The same was true of every other city we visited; India had grown, but not necessarily the way I had

hoped. My home town of Trivandrum, once a beautiful and fairly quiet place, was now congested with people, vehicles, houses and shops. The quality of life had not improved noticeably for the middle class, but people seemed busier. In some ways, life in Trivandrum had probably deteriorated for most people, except for those who left to work in the Middle East and had returned with considerable savings.

Angeline had organized a meeting with several prominent individuals of Bangalore society, like-minded individuals who believed in the need for social service. I found an extraordinarily talented young man, Jude Devdas, who would soon head all of the foundation's activities in India. Over the years, he has proved himself to be one of the most determined and hardworking individuals I have ever met. He oversees and coordinates every project we run and closely works with me to manage the finances of the foundation. His commitment, honesty and loyalty have been beyond measure. This meeting was the birth of The George Foundation, a nonprofit charitable trust that would work toward addressing some of the most persistent problems in Indian society, especially with regard to the poor.¹ It was the turning point in my life and in my professional interests. The sale of my company in America soon followed; I was now committed to humanitarian work in India.

Starting a nonprofit organization is no easier than starting a profit-focused company. If anything, this stage of my life was even more difficult than running a company, at least emotionally. My wife, children, parents and siblings all lived in the United States. America was my home just as much as India was, and I would not abandon one for the other. I would be forced to shuttle back and forth between the two countries and work through the phone and email to keep The George Foundation functioning smoothly. I had also decided to start a new company in America, both to keep myself busy while in the United States and to help gain additional funds for the undertaking in India.

My primary interest was in poor children, and I had learned that the main problem facing them was lack of access to anything resembling quality education. I felt that Indian society had long given up on these children, and there was no real hope for them to rise beyond their meager beginnings. Many people probably believe these children are simply incapable of doing anything better. Hence, the initial idea was to start a primary school in a rural village. It would be a world-class boarding institution for children from the poorest homes and for those belonging mostly to the lowest castes, mainly the "untouchables."

The school could not just be a holding pen designed to keep the kids in place until they assumed their lifelong roles as servants and workers to the rich. Instead, I was determined that it would be one of the best in India, a school that normally only the children of the richest families could afford. I would give these children the same opportunities as the children of the wealthy and powerful. As far as I knew, it was a model no one else had embarked upon in India. It was to be named Shanti Bhavan, Haven of Peace.

There are certain advantages to working in India, and one of them is that the cost of many things is much less than it might be in the United States. The initial estimate for Shanti Bhavan was roughly \$200,000 dollars to build the school and then a few thousand dollars more each year to run and maintain it. However, as my plans for this educational institution widened, those estimates increased manifold. It was going to be a costly project that I would be funding nearly entirely on my own. But my course was set, and my commitment to the Shanti Bhavan concept was unshakeable; I was determined to make it a reality.

Shanti Bhavan was only the first step in our humanitarian work in India. When I started The George Foundation, there was no plan to go beyond Shanti Bhavan. Yet, there is so much to be done, so many difficulties that plague the nation. Social work in India is like emotional quicksand; once you take a step into it, you are pulled in deeper by all the other issues surrounding poverty. Many interrelated problems faced by the poor came to my attention. I knew I couldn't stop with just Shanti Bhavan.

Lead poisoning prevention became the next target on the agenda of the foundation. We realized that children in urban areas were being poisoned by lead in the air from vehicle exhaust and through many other pathways. Increased lead levels in the blood interfere with brain development in children, especially those with nutritional deficiencies, and cause many neurological problems. Lead poisoning was affecting over one hundred million children in India's cities, and yet, there was little or no awareness among the public. We took up the mantle of lead poisoning prevention and, by the year 2000, were successful in persuading the oil refiners to remove lead from gasoline throughout the country.

With our work in education and the environment, we opened ourselves to new projects. Soon we realized that basic health care and other key social necessities for the poor needed to be addressed. A rural hospital and community center catering to some 20 villages was established, and we also started "co-

managing” four government-run primary health centers that serve a population of more than 150,000 people. Projects in farming and land ownership for women, promotion of the arts, and a school of journalism were all added to the list of important issues we felt we should work on.

While on the surface these projects seem diverse, they have the interrelated aspect of sustainable development, social justice and the strengthening of democratic institutions. It is my experience in these areas and the issues surrounding them that I have attempted to describe in this book. In doing so, I have tried to provide solutions that we have found effective with our own initiatives. While the projects we have undertaken are limited in scope and cover only a relatively small population, the lessons we have learned might prepare others to overcome the obstacles they might encounter. I have also openly expressed some of my impressions about India from my somewhat unique vantage point – the views of someone of Indian origin who has spent much of his adult life abroad and has now returned to do social work in rural India.

Many of my Indian friends in America cautioned me about the work I was planning to undertake, explaining that the obstacles were too big, and I would only have frustrations. Some of them told me about their horrendous experiences at the hands of government officials who purportedly created bureaucratic hurdles to extract money for simple legitimate requests. I was not deterred by any of those words of caution, though it became obvious to me that, if I were to succeed with honest work, I must avoid government involvement in whatever I planned to do in India. I decided on some very basic principles to follow, not too different from what is practiced in every good enterprise.

Regardless of the charitable nature of the projects I planned for in India, they would be run with business-like efficiency and accountability. Performance would be demanded of all employees in the foundation, and everyone would be encouraged to meet the high standards we set for ourselves. The power of money would only be used to accomplish our humanitarian goals and never for any undue advantage. To avoid real or perceived conflict of interest, I would not take up any business opportunity in India for personal gain. The foundation would adhere to the highest principles of professionalism and ethics in all its work. Finally, no individual in the foundation, especially myself, should seek personal recognition or reward for our work, except for the satisfaction we derive from getting things done and improving the lives of poor people.

LEARNING ABOUT POVERTY

I was naive enough, perhaps even foolhardy, to believe that one private individual could make an appreciable impact on a multitude of age-old problems. But I was convinced that together with inspired and talented co-workers, we could make a meaningful difference, and I proceeded on that principle. If we could lead the way in some areas, then others would follow and multiply whatever success we could achieve. The road we have embarked upon as The George Foundation, the goals and ambitions we have set out for ourselves, and our accomplishments and failures are part of the story I wish to tell. These past years were filled with extremes – moments of great joy, immense frustration and profound sadness. We have also faced much adversity on the path toward social welfare and reform. Hardly a day passes without a major incident or obstacle to overcome.

The first tragic event came during the initial year of recruitment for Shanti Bhavan. Lalita Law, the principal of the school, and social workers from The George Foundation combed distant villages in search of children to start their education at the school. This process was a long and arduous one because parents were dubious of our intentions. Still, some were willing to trust us and trust that our intentions for their children were genuine and good-hearted. Among those parents was a single mother, an attractive young woman whose son was four years old.

Her son, Vijay, was tested by our selection team, and Lalita decided that he should be admitted into Shanti Bhavan. However, he still had to be given a physical, and a date was set for him. The agreed date came, but Vijay did not come to the school for his test. At first we were worried that his mother had had second thoughts like other parents, but we were still hopeful.

Lalita decided she would go in search of Vijay and his mother, at least to find out why she decided not to let her son attend Shanti Bhavan. She went to the village only to find the hut empty and no sign of it having been lived in for some time. The villagers offered no information and were oddly silent about the whereabouts of both Vijay and his mother. But Lalita was persistent. She went back two weeks later and still could not find any sign of either mother or child. Finally, on her third visit to the village an old woman told her to go to the nearby Victoria Hospital where she would find what she was looking for.

Determined to uncover what had transpired, Lalita immediately made her way to the hospital. There she was greeted with a gruesome sight; Vijay was in

a hospital bed with severe burns covering much of his body. While he would survive his injuries, he was horribly scarred. Only then, after asking one of the local doctors, was she told what had happened.

Vijay's mother had been lured by some men who came to the village claiming to be hiring servants to work in the Middle East. This was not an uncommon practice; the wealthy of the Middle East often hired cheap, menial labor in India. Even meager pay would seem like true wealth compared to the squalor they were resigned to live within their village. Desperate for a new life, Vijay's mother went with the men in their jeep.

Whether or not the men were truly hiring for a Middle East employer, they had no such intentions toward Vijay's mother. Instead, once she was away from the village, they proceeded to gang-rape her. This continued for days. When they were finished with her they dumped her at a nearby village. Such brutality is not uncommon in the poor villages of India.

The nightmare, however, was far from over for Vijay's mother when she returned home. Instead of sympathetic friends and neighbors, she received scorn and outrage. The villagers accused her of being a flirt, of inciting the men and bringing sexual attention to herself. They also brought up the past, once again blaming her for her husband's departure some years earlier. They ostracized her and cut her off from the community. She was a non-entity, a wanton woman who had brought this upon herself. There was no pity, no kindness, no sympathy, and no justice.

Life had no hope; there was no meaning to her existence anymore. She simply wanted an escape from it all. Unable to bear the burden any longer, the young mother poured kerosene over herself and set herself on fire. But Vijay was nearby when she decided to take her own life, and he rushed to grab her, perhaps to put out the flames. As his mother burned, so did Vijay from the raging fire. Luckily he escaped with his life but bore the scars of his desperate attempt.

Although Shanti Bhavan was not equipped to deal with such cases, I felt we had to make an exception. We decided to admit him into the school and treat his injuries, both physical and mental. Both plastic surgery and therapy were employed to help him recover. It has been a hard road for Vijay, but he has walked it well.

Back in New Jersey, I was busy balancing time between my company affairs and the activities of the foundation in India. Then as now, my daily routine started with an early morning call to India that usually lasted an hour or

more, before I rushed off to the office. During working hours, I would take some time off to reply to emails and send new instructions to my key staff at the foundation.

The day would end with another set of phone calls. I wanted to be sure that, regardless of my physical absence in America, no one in the foundation would feel that I was not readily available to guide them when needed. My constant fear was that something terrible might happen one day, and I would not be able to do anything about it.

One night, my sleep was broken by the harsh ringing of the telephone. A quick glance at the bleary red digits of the clock told me it was well past two in the morning in New Jersey. It could only be bad news. It had to be a problem in India, an emergency at the foundation. I was most afraid that something serious had happened to one of my trusted people.

Reaching over my wife, Mariam, who was still fast asleep, I fumbled in the darkness for the phone, already having mentally braced myself for the worst. In the short time since I had started Shanti Bhavan, we had met with several setbacks. I was learning quickly that the project we had undertaken was more difficult than I had first thought. But with those setbacks came a perceptive understanding of the conditions and a certain emotional fortitude. With each problem successfully beaten, I felt a greater reserve of strength.

On the other end of the line was a panicked Lalita. She was speaking so quickly that I could not understand half of what she was saying. "Calm down, Lalita," I said, urging her to take a breath and tell me what was going on.

Slowly, Lalita began anew, explaining what had occurred. A rough looking man, probably in his early forties, had shown up at her home that morning when she returned from Shanti Bhavan. He had demanded the return of Sheena, a nine-year-old student at Shanti Bhavan. He told Lalita that Sheena's mother, his first wife, had committed suicide along with his second wife a day before. The man (call him Karin) demanded that Sheena come with him for two days of burial and prayer.

Lalita asked Karin whether the police had investigated the matter and if it had been officially ruled a suicide. Karin became belligerent and angrily replied that the police had already confirmed the deaths as suicides the night before. How could the police declare two deaths as suicides in just one evening of investigation, she thought. Once again, he demanded that Sheena return with him for the proper ceremony. Suspicious, Lalita replied that she would arrange to have the child brought over, but that Sheena could not stay

overnight with him. Sheena had earlier told Lalita about family incidents that led Lalita to believe sexual abuse was taking place at the home.

Lalita's response only infuriated Karin further, and belligerence turned into out and out threats. He told Lalita that she'd better watch out and that he would take care of her. A courageous and competent woman, Lalita was still unnerved. Violence against women in India is a serious problem, especially in families, and in rural areas the authorities are less aggressive about investigating and prosecuting such cases. Lalita knew there could be real trouble against her and the foundation.

This was danger of a kind we had not faced before. We had dealt with crooked bankers and dishonest landowners, corrupt political officials and hostile police, but not a domestic issue of this type. I was sure there was more to the story of the two dead wives than Karin had related, and I feared for the safety of both Lalita and Sheena.

I instructed Lalita to speak to Jude Devdas, the CEO of the foundation, who would arrange to have Frank (one of the top employees of Shanti Bhavan) take Sheena to Karin's home for the burial ceremony and prayers, but to stay in her presence while the rituals were being performed. He was to then bring her back to Shanti Bhavan. We were not willing to let Karin keep Sheena overnight, at least without knowing more about what was really going on. I also told Lalita that she should go to Karin's house, with two senior staff members, to find out more. We needed to know quickly what the real story was.

Frank took Sheena to her home and Lalita, with the entourage from Shanti Bhavan, arrived in the evening. There were two women at the home, apparently relatives of Karin's, and they proceeded to berate Lalita for her unwillingness to leave Sheena in Karin's care. Initially, the scene was chaotic, but Lalita managed to calm them down long enough to ask some questions. The two dead wives were 40 and 15 years old. The older one had claimed to be Sheena's aunt, however, it was revealed that the older woman was Sheena's mother. Why she had lied about her identity was a mystery. The 15-year-old, a girl barely out of her adolescence, was Karin's own niece as well as his second wife.

The questioning led to another round of arguments; both Karin and his two female relatives told Lalita that Sheena should be left with them for a few days. They argued that because Sheena's mother was dead, her place was now with them at home. Though tensions mounted, Lalita stood fast and ex-

plained, as calmly as possible, that she could not relinquish Sheena to anyone but an official guardian. After all, Karin was not Sheena's father. She simply did not have the authority to do so. While this did not sit well with either of the two women or Karin, the point was made. Sheena was coming back with Frank. Lalita left with her senior staff, while Frank waited until the ceremony was done. Finally, Sheena returned to Shanti Bhavan under his escort after an arduous day and night.

The matter was far from over, however. Karin continued to try to have Sheena turned over to his custody. The reasons for his insistence were varied, but we believed he intended to make Sheena (a nine-year-old girl) his next wife. The risks were high and in such situations, turning to the police is not an option; they simply would not protect either us or Sheena. There is no government institution that would effectively intervene in support of the child's interest. The threats mounted from Karin's side and we were left in a dangerous position. For a while, we arranged special protection for Lalita.

We had to balance Sheena's safety with the overall interests of the school. I feared Karin might resort to violence against Lalita. There was no easy or immediate answer. Finally, we offered to hire a lawyer for Karin so that he could officially attempt to gain custody of Sheena. In turn, we also hired a different lawyer to counter Karin's claims of custody in the interest of the child. I felt if the process was taken to the courts, Karin would be appeased, while we retained custody of Sheena. It was a dangerous gambit, but our options were slim.

We have been able to drag out the matter for three years now, keeping Sheena away from Karin. But with constant threats, it is not certain how long we can hold out without any support from the community or the government. Moreover, Karin and his sisters are turning up at Shanti Bhavan periodically and showering Sheena with beautiful clothes and gold ornaments. Sheena is being swayed by all those expressions of affection. If she will not cooperate with us as she grows older, we may not be able to do much for her.

This hurdle was just one of many I had to tackle in my new life in a world I had hardly known before. It is one thing to be idealistic with a desire to help others, but now I was confronted with the realities of very complex situations characterized by poverty, ignorance, and unjust social norms. Yet this was the life I had slowly but surely been building toward through the years. Regardless of the trials and tribulations we had to go through in accomplishing a long cherished ideal, I was savoring the new challenges we had in front of us.

The stories of Sheena and Vijay illustrate just some of the troubles that are not uncommon to slum dwellers or villagers but are a symptom of the hardship of rural life in India. Poverty, crime and ill-health are not the only difficulties millions of rural people have to overcome; a majority of them are victims of caste- and gender-based discrimination. If the foundation was to tackle these problems, I needed a better understanding of what was going on in the nearby villages. For a start, I chose to conduct a series of interviews in the hope of gaining some insight into the hearts and minds of the underprivileged in rural India.