

Crossings

cross over from death to life



Spring 2010



SAVING GRACE

Christians fight infant killing in Indian slum

By Marcus Roundtree

INDIA--A baby girl, only a few hours old, is carried to her execution.

The woman who holds her calls herself a midwife, but everyone in this Indian slum knows who she really is: the bringer of death.

As the woman approaches the pressure cooker, the baby's mother does nothing. She paid, after all, about 30 cents for her newborn daughter to be boiled alive.

The woman lowers the squirming infant into the water. The lid snaps shut. The flames rise. Then the infant's scalded corpse is tossed to the dogs for them to devour.

Even more common, the mother refuses to nurse her starving baby until the "midwife" arrives to silence her infant daughter's pleading cries with a bottle of poison and cold indifference.

If the mother cannot find help, she kills the child herself. Then she unceremoniously buries her baby beneath her house, perhaps beside other daughters discarded before this baby.

How could a mother murder her own child, and why was Baby Grace spared? Such questions probe the depths of human depravity – and the passionate efforts of Christians who, at least in their small corner of India, may finally be turning the tide.

Sati,* an Indian Christian, lives a short walk from one of her city's slums. A squalid expanse of grimy one-room houses and trash-strewn alleys, it is a place teeming with misery. The men savagely beat their wives in nightly rages fueled by the alcohol they spend all their earnings to buy. The traumatized women turn to prostitution or menial labor to survive, leaving their children to gamble, drink and steal.

"That's the condition in the slum," Sati said. "Even the mothers don't really care for the children."

The children are Sati's main concern. With help from the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund, she and her husband Ravindra* run an after-

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school feeding and education program where more than 200 slum children come to escape their abusive homes, get help with homework, eat perhaps their only meal of the day – and learn about Jesus.

For years, Ravindra has listened to the children sing to God, unaware of another cry reaching the Lord's ears – the blood of their sisters.

"The people used to come and go, but we did not know the secret that they were killing their children," he said.

Eventually he and Sati learned the truth, which the mothers themselves confirmed.

"I can tell about 80 percent of the ladies have already [killed a baby girl]," Sati said. "All the kids' mothers have done it, and they are still doing it."

It comes down to money.

"[The parents] cannot afford to bring [the girls] up," she explained. "They have to give them in marriage, which costs a lot, and they have to pay a dowry."

The dowry, a payment in cash or goods from the bride's family to the groom, is illegal in India but still widely practiced in villages and urban slums. Combined with other wedding expenses, it amounts to a fortune for a family struggling to survive. As a

result, families in many poor areas of India allow one daughter to live but kill the rest.

"They say it's very hard for them," Sati said. "They say, 'If we cannot feed ourselves, how can we raise this girl and give her in marriage?'"

As Sati and Ravindra began to plead unsuccessfully with the slum women to spare their baby girls, they never imagined what God had in store for their lives. He revealed it in a village one day during an encounter that still haunts them.

"That day, a man brought us a baby that his wife and mother were about to kill," Sati recounted. "He said, 'You Christian people will take care of my baby, I know, so please take her.' He just put her in my hands and was ready to go."

Shocked and completely unprepared to care for an infant, they called the man back.

"We were not sure what we were going to do," Sati recalled. "We told him, 'Take the baby. We will go look for some orphanage or some organization that can take her, then we will let you know so you can give her back to us.'"

It was a mistake she mourns with tears.

"That evening when we came back to

the village, they had already killed the baby," she said. "We felt like we were the reason that child died."

In that moment, their excuses died as well. Determined that not one more baby should perish, Ravindra and Sati prayed and worked for three years to build an orphanage in a town about 40 miles from the city. They dedicated the building in October 2009.

"We announced in the slum that we were ready to take the infants," Sati said. "We said, 'Please don't kill the babies. Come and leave them here.'"

The response was heartbreaking.

"They said they would rather kill the babies than give them up," Sati said.

The women, who already feared being discovered as child-killers, worried their daughters would eventually find out who their parents were and tell others about their abandonment. Sati promised the women that the girls would be raised in the orphanage far from the city.

Then very early one November morning, Sati's dog Ruby began barking furiously. Her housekeeper went outside to investigate.

"She opened the door, saw Ruby, and then saw the baby on the doormat," Sati said.

Sati's heart flooded with emotion. They had announced the opening of their orphanage a month earlier, yet at that point, its cribs were empty. Now a newborn was at their door.

"I didn't know what to do," Sati recalled. "I couldn't even talk. I was really shocked."

Only three days old, Grace (as Sati soon named her) needed immediate care. Her feet were turned inward from a birth defect, and a medical checkup revealed the possibility of hepatitis, a virulent liver disease.

God's people swung into action. Sati and Ravindra's Christian friends provided clothing, diapers, formula and funds for hospital visits. Some contacted relatives in the United States, where four families asked to adopt Grace.

“God has provided everything,” Sati said. “I believe He will continue to provide. We don’t have [everything she needs], but I trust the Lord that He will provide for her, because He has brought her here.”

When news spread in the slum that a woman left her baby with Ravindra and Sati instead of killing her, people came to see for themselves. As Sati explained how she would have Grace’s feet fixed and then take her to the orphanage, the people praised Grace’s mother for making “a very good decision.” It was a change in heart Sati could hardly believe.

“The ladies were saying that from now on, people will start bringing more [babies] and stop killing,” she recalled. “It just came out from the ladies’ mouths.”

For Sati, Grace is not only comfort for the baby she and Ravindra could not save years ago, but also hope that the unseen holocaust around her may finally be slowing.

“When [Grace] came, I thought God has answered our prayers and saved this girl,” she said. “He will save more lives through Grace, because people are seeing [how we care for her].”

Ravindra has plenty of doubts.

Although Grace was spared, he suspects up to 90 percent of the women will continue to murder their children, even though they now know of a safe place to leave them.

“They still think killing [the baby] is better than giving it to others,” he lamented. “They think if their babies are living somewhere else, society will find out these babies belong to them, and then people will talk. They think if they kill them, people will talk for a week or a month, but after that, no problem.”

But he and Sati will still be there, working tirelessly to snatch life from the jaws of death and, they pray, to change the culture of female infanticide that still pervades the slum.

“I was just telling Ravindra that unless we have all these babies in our home, I will not be satisfied,” Sati said.

The road ahead is difficult; running an orphanage is expensive, and even now they do not know from where the funds will come. Nevertheless, this couple, who once did not have enough money to fill up their moped with gas but can now feed hundreds of children, trusts the Lord to provide.

“I know God has a purpose for

whoever He is bringing here,” Sati said. “He has a special plan for their lives, so I just leave it all in His hands. He will take care of everything.”

The story of baby Grace shows how seemingly insignificant acts of love can change the world in profound ways. Most Christians who donated to the World Hunger Fund probably never imagined they would be helping save a little girl destined for a pressure cooker. Those unforeseen blessings are what Bryson Holtson,* the Southern Baptist communication team leader for South Asian peoples, wants Christians to see.

“In South Asia, there are a billion people with these huge needs, and a lot of Christians feel overwhelmed, so they don’t do anything,” Holtson said. “But my experience from Africa to here is the things that seem so small to us could be something people never forget.”

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*Name changed.

Marcus Rowntree is a writing intern serving among South Asian peoples. For more information on how you can support the World Hunger Fund, please visit www.imb.org/worldhunger.



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Construction & Renovations UPDATE

There has been a lot of activity on our campuses since camp ended last summer. When camp begins in 2010, our Jonathan Creek worship center will be fully renovated. At Cedarmore, the new worship center will be complete. Both facilities will have a seating capacity of 650, along with state-of-the-art sound, video and lighting capabilities.

New zip lines have been constructed at Jonathan Creek, along with two additional zip lines at Cedarmore.

Other improvements include renovations to the Boone Lodge bathrooms at Cedarmore and a renovation to Waller Dorm at Jonathan Creek.



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