SEVA CONNECT

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CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION AS A DRIVER OF MODERN HUMAN SLAVERY IN INDIA: A STRUCTURAL CHALLENGE TO HUMAN DIGNITY

Caste, Labour, and Structural Exploitation

Modern slavery in India is deeply embedded within caste-based occupational hierarchies. Bonded labour remains prevalent in brick kilns, agriculture, construction, textiles, domestic work, mining, and plantations, where workers frequently experience debt bondage, wage withholding, restricted movement, and coercion. Internal migration from economically weaker states further increases vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour.

Dalits and Adivasis remain disproportionately represented among bonded labourers, child labourers, and trafficked persons. Historical exclusion from land ownership, education, formal employment, and access to credit creates intergenerational cycles of poverty that traffickers readily exploit.

As B. R. Ambedkar famously observed,

"Caste is not merely a division of labour; it is a division of labourers."

This insight remains profoundly relevant, demonstrating how caste assigns communities to exploitative occupations and perpetuates systems of economic dependence.

Regional Patterns of Vulnerability

Both North and South India exhibit distinct yet interconnected patterns of exploitation. Northern migration corridors involving Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan supply labour to construction sites, agriculture, and brick kilns, where coercive recruitment and debt bondage are common. In southern India, trafficking intersects with industrial sectors such as Tamil Nadu's spinning mills, Andhra Pradesh's brick kilns, and plantation economies across Karnataka and Kerala. Women and adolescent girls recruited under deceptive employment schemes frequently encounter forced overtime, confinement, sexual exploitation, and wage manipulation.

Numerous documented incidents of caste violence, social boycotts, land dispossession, and institutional discrimination across Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Telangana further illustrate how caste exclusion creates conditions that increase vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour.

Towards Justice and Human Dignity

India possesses a robust legal framework—including the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and anti-trafficking provisions of the Indian Penal Code—yet implementation remains inconsistent. Effective prevention requires rigorous labour inspections, survivor-centred rehabilitation, safe migration systems, caste-sensitive public policies, educational opportunities, economic empowerment, and community-based legal advocacy.

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 4) declares,

"No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."



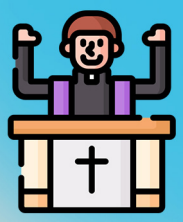
Likewise, Scripture affirms the equal dignity of every human being:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Conclusion

Modern slavery in India cannot be adequately understood apart from the realities of caste-based discrimination. Caste functions as a structural mechanism determining who is most vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and bonded labour. Eliminating modern slavery therefore demands an integrated response that combines legal accountability, social justice, economic inclusion, educational opportunity, and the eradication of caste-based discrimination. Upholding human dignity requires confronting not only individual acts of exploitation but also the structural inequalities that continue to sustain modern forms of slavery.

Adv. C. Fernandas Rathina Raja,
General Secretary,
Church of South India.



THE UNNAMED SERVANT GIRL: A MIGRANT-FRIENDLY READING OF 2 KINGS 5:1–3

"Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife." (2 Kings 5:2)

The story of Naaman often highlights the powerful Syrian commander or the prophet Elisha. Yet the turning point of the narrative is neither the military leader nor the prophet. It is an unnamed Israelite servant girl. Captured during war, displaced from her homeland, and forced into domestic service, she represents the forgotten victims of conflict and migration. From a liberation and migrant-friendly perspective, she becomes the true agent of hope.

The Hebrew Bible repeatedly reminds Israel to remember the experience of displacement: "You shall not oppress a foreigner; you know the heart of a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9). Israel's own memory of migration became the foundation of God's demand for justice. The servant girl embodies this painful reality of forced migration. She is a child, a female, and a captive servant, experiencing multiple layers of marginalization. Even her name is omitted, reflecting how systems of power erase the identities of vulnerable people, especially migrant women and children.

Yet the unnamed girl refuses to be silenced. She tells Naaman's wife, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kgs. 5:3). Her single sentence transforms the entire narrative. She possesses neither political authority nor military power; her only resource is her voice. Through that voice, kings, generals, and prophets are set into motion. The text reminds us that God frequently works through those whom society considers insignificant. Throughout the Old Testament, God's saving action often begins at the margins rather than among the powerful.

Today, millions of migrant children continue to experience conditions similar to the unnamed servant girl. They cross borders because of war, poverty, trafficking, climate disasters, or economic necessity. Many work as domestic workers, in agriculture, factories, construction, or other hazardous occupations. Like the servant girl, they often remain invisible, lacking legal protection, education, healthcare, and dignity.

The Church is therefore called not merely to rescue individual children but also to challenge the structures that create forced migration, child labour, trafficking, and exploitation. A migrant-friendly theology recognizes every migrant child as bearing the image of God and deserving safety, education, justice, and hope.

The unnamed servant girl reminds us that migrant children are not just victims. They have dignity, wisdom, faith, and hope. Her story calls the Church to listen to the voices of migrant children, protect their rights, and stand against every form of exploitation. Therefore, let us show the Red Card to Child Labour by protecting migrant children, promoting decent work for adults, and building a world where every child can live with dignity, safety, and hope. Amen.

This sermon was preached in observance of the World Day Against Child Labour

Preached by:

Rev. W. Jebasingh Samuvel,
Associate Director, CSI-SEVA.

WOMEN ON THE MOVE: FAITH ACROSS BORDERS

"Migrant women are not victims of circumstance—they are teachers of faith and life."

They leave behind homes, languages, and familiar landscapes. Some flee violence, others seek opportunity, and many simply want to protect their children. Today, nearly half of the world's migrants are women. Their journeys are not only stories of survival but also testimonies of faith, resilience, and leadership.

Migration is often framed as crisis, but for women of faith it is also transformation. These women are not passive victims; they are agents of hope, carrying strength and vision across borders. Their lives echo the stories of biblical women who shaped salvation history.

Ancient Voices, Modern Echoes

• Hagar (Gen 16:10–13) A slave and refugee, she reminds us that God hears the cries of the marginalized.
• Ethiopian wife of Moses (Num 12:1) Criticized for being different, she reflects the wounds of racism and the call to embrace diversity.
• Ruth (Book of Ruth) Her loyalty and sisterhood mirror the solidarity that migrant women build today.
• Orpah (Book of Ruth) Ruth migrates with Naomi, while Orpah returns. Both choices are valid human responses to displacement, showing that migration is not a single narrative of "success" or "failure," but of discernment and survival.
• Vashti (Book of Esther) Vashti symbolizes migrants who resist exploitation in workplaces, institutions, or political systems that demand conformity at the cost of dignity.
• Esther (Book of Esther) A foreign queen who saved her people, she reflects the leadership migrant women embody.
• Tamar (Gen 38; Mt 1, 3) Victim of injustice, she fought for dignity, echoing women who resist gender-based violence.
• Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24–30) Her persistence shows how migrant women's voices can transform communities.
• Priscilla (Acts 18, 27; Rom 16: 3-5) A missionary migrant, she reveals how migrants carry faith and mission across borders.

Key Messages for Today

• See God's image in every migrant woman.
• Move beyond charity to build relationships of respect and mutual support.
• Affirm leadership and strengthen the voices of migrant women.
• Walk together, learning from their courage, hope and faith.

By the Numbers

• 48% of the world's migrants are women.
• Women are more likely to migrate for family survival and caregiving roles.
• Faith communities are often their first support networks in new lands.

Closing Narrative

Migrant women are not only crossing borders; they are crossing barriers of exclusion and prejudice. In refugee camps, urban slums, and border crossings, they embody faith in action—leading prayer circles, sustaining families, and fighting for justice. Their resilience calls the Church to be more fraternal, sisterly, and open to the Spirit.

Migration, seen through their eyes, is not just movement of people—it is a movement of grace.

~ Ms. Glory Thomas

PEACE IN COMMUNITY

In a land where life is lived together, forgiveness is not a private virtue. It is a social act that can heal whole neighbourhoods.

In South India, life is fundamentally communal. We do not simply live near each other. We live with each other. Extended families share courtyards and kitchens. Neighbours know each other's children by name, and often their struggles too, sometimes more than we would like.

The church community is an extension of this fabric. The same families sit in the same pews for generations. Sunday is as much about being with one another as it is about being before God.

This closeness is a gift. But it also creates the conditions for deep wounds.

Ask almost any presbyter in a CSI congregation what weighs on them over time, and the answer is not only theology. It is conflict that never quite resolves. Conversations stop halfway. Relationships quietly harden.



Shared Lives



Shared Meals



Shared Faith

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." — Matthew 5:9



Summer Reflection

As the heat of May reveals every crack in the courtyard wall, the closeness of community life reveals fractures in our relationships. It also reveals, if we are willing, the possibility of repair.

The Wound We Carry

A brother who stopped speaking to his sister over land inheritance now sits across the aisle from her for twenty years. Two committee members disagree, and over time the congregation divides into sides no one formally names. A harsh word in a meeting is never taken back and never forgotten.

These are not unusual situations. They are ordinary, and that is what makes them heavy.

There is a particular kind of silence in churches. It is not the absence of sound, but the absence of peace.

Jesus is unambiguous: go and be reconciled first, then bring your gift. Not after. Not eventually. Before. His listeners would not have expected this, and neither should we take it lightly. The God who welcomes our prayers and offerings is the same God who notices the quiet tension between two people in the third row and says: go and fix that first.



"If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." — Matthew 5 : 23–24

Forgiveness & Compassion

Forgiveness is the engine of peace in community, and in our context, it is often the hardest thing to practise.

We carry a strong sense of honour. Who was wrong. Who was seen to be wrong. Who must make the first move. Forgiveness can feel like losing ground, like saying, “It didn’t matter.”

But Christian forgiveness is not pretending. It is not forgetting. It is not saying the wound was small.

It is choosing, sometimes unwillingly and sometimes slowly, to release the right to retaliate.

Not because the other person deserves it. But because we have received what we did not deserve.

Compassion makes this possible. It allows us, even briefly, to step into another person’s experience and to see them as more than the moment that hurt us.

Sometimes that shift is small. But it is enough to begin.

And beginning is often the hardest part.



"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." — Galatians 6:2

A small, familiar moment

After a Sunday service, two men stood near the gate. They spoke to others, but not to each other. They had worked together for years. Something had gone wrong, and no one quite remembered how it began. Over time, the distance became normal.

They never argued publicly. They simply stopped.

Everyone noticed. No one addressed it.

This is how division often lives among us. Not loudly, but quietly, settling into routine.

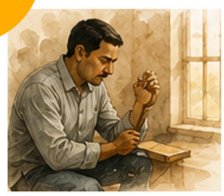
Summer Reflection:

In the height of summer, fruit that looks whole on the outside may be fermented within. Unresolved conflict works the same way in a congregation. Invisible on Sunday mornings, it slowly sours what should be sweet. Forgiveness is the harvest that begins with a hard choice.

Where are you in your community?

Select the one that feels most honest today. You didn't arrive here by accident

1



There's someone I haven't really spoken to in a long time, and we both know why.

For those carrying a silent wound

Reflection: The silence already has a name. You may not be ready to resolve it, and that is alright. But you can acknowledge it before God. Sometimes the first step is simply refusing to pretend it is not there.

2



I know I should let it go. But when I see their face on Sunday, something in me tightens

For those struggling to forgive

Reflection: Forgiveness is not a feeling you wait for. It is a decision you return to, often more than once. You may have to pray honestly, "I am not ready, but I am willing to become willing." That is still a beginning.

3



I'm not even a party to the conflict, but it's in my family, my row, my committee.

For those caught in the middle

Reflection: Being in the middle is uncomfortable. It can also be an invitation. Peacebuilding does not always mean fixing things. Sometimes it means refusing to deepen the divide and choosing not to carry words from one side to the other.

4



I see the fractures around me, and I feel called to help, but I don't know where to start.

For those longing to be peacemaker

Reflection: Start smaller than you think. Not with answers, but with presence. A simple, honest question such as "How are you, really?" asked without agenda can open more than careful advice ever will.

Sit with these: Reflection Questions

For personal journaling, family devotion, or a small-group discussion. Pause and ponder each question before moving forward.

About the wounds we carry

1. Is there a specific name, a face, that comes to mind when you read about unresolved conflict? What has kept you from taking the first step?

Take a moment. Write the name down if that helps. Don't explain or justify. Just name it, and hold it before God.

2. What does forgiveness cost you in this specific situation? Not in theory, but in this case.

The Christian call is not to pretend the cost is small. It is to choose to pay it anyway, in the same spirit that Christ paid ours.

3. When did you last receive forgiveness that you did not fully deserve? How did it change you?

Memory of grace received is often the deepest fuel for grace extended. Let that memory do its work in you.

About your congregation

1. Is there a quiet factionalism in your congregation that people refer to without naming? What is your part, even as a bystander, in sustaining it?

Bystanders to conflict are rarely neutral. We vote with our silence, our seating choices, our small agreements and omissions.

2. What would it look like for your CSI congregation to be genuinely known in your neighbourhood for how it forgives?

The multi-religious neighbours around you are watching. Not for perfection. They know you are human. They are watching to see if the gospel you preach changes how you treat one another.

A Summer Prompt

In this season of heat and dust, what one relationship could you bring a little water to?

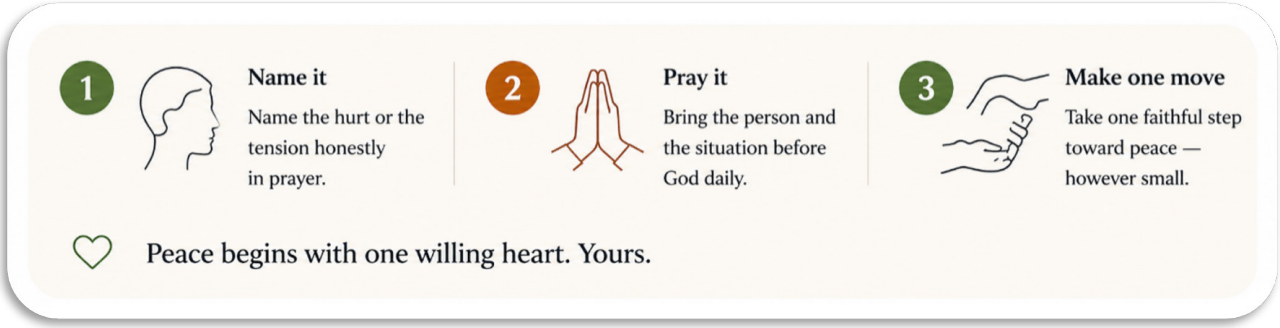
Not a full resolution. Not a big gesture.

Just one small act of reconnection. A message, a visit, or a word that acknowledges what has been left unsaid.

This Week's Challenge

One act of peace before Sunday

The Sermon on the Mount does not say "eventually go and be reconciled." It says to leave your gift at the altar, right now, and go. Here is how to begin, in three small steps:



1. Name it quietly.

Sit for a few minutes and name the person or situation you have been avoiding.

2. Pray it honestly.

Do not tidy your feelings. Bring them as they are.

3. Make one move.

A message. A brief conversation. A simple acknowledgement. Not resolution, just movement.

~ Mr. Praveen Daniel

MIGRANT CHILDREN AND THEIR CHALLENGES

Children in migration are those 'in search of survival, (who travel with their family or independently) security, improved standards of living, education, economic opportunities, protection from exploitation and abuse, family reunification or a combination of these factors.

In India, child migration is a widespread "invisible" phenomenon. These children largely fall into the seasonal or distressed migrant category, frequently accompanying their parents to construction sites, brick kilns, and agricultural fields. Trying to learn a new language and fit into a new culture can make things especially hard .The "Left Behind" Children, who remain in their home countries, face significant psychological and social challenges.



Migrant and displaced children, while on transit, destination or upon return, are pressed into early marriage, exposed to aggravated smuggling, violence and exploitation. These difficulties have lasting physical and psychological effects and can prevent children on the move, from reaching their full potential.

Key Challenges:

• Education Disruption: Migrant children often face high dropout rates. They frequently struggle to enrol in destination schools due to lack of transfer certificates, language barriers, or rigid academic calendars.

• Child Labour & Trafficking: Migrant children are at high risk of being pushed into informal work or becoming unpaid child labourers (often in agriculture or domestic work) and facing lower pay and longer hours compared to local children.

• Lack of Childcare: Younger children are often left alone at worksites—or forced to babysit their younger siblings—while their parents work gruelling , low-wage jobs.

• Health Risks: Displaced children frequently lack access to basic healthcare, adequate nutrition, and psychological support.

Strategic Solutions and Policies:

To safeguard migrant children, institutional and grassroots approaches must be prioritized:

• Inclusive Education: Implement portable education systems, flexible school calendars, and bridge courses.

• Child-Specific Legal Protections: Establish robust cross-border legal frameworks that prioritize the "best interests of the child".

• Targeted Support for Left-Behind Children: Integrate the dependents of migrants into national social protection and community mental health plans.

~ Ms. Aruna Stephen

EVERY PERSON BELONGS: UNDERSTANDING DISHA AND THE CALL TO INCLUDE

A reflection on disability, dignity, and the Church's walk of solidarity in India

There is a quiet revolution unfolding in churches, institutions, and community halls across India — one that does not announce itself with fanfare, but with the steady, patient work of inclusion. At the heart of this movement is DISHA: Disability Intervention in Solidarity and Holistic Accompaniment. It is more than a programme. It is a conviction — that every person, regardless of ability, is made in the image of God and deserves to live fully, freely, and with dignity.

India is home to over 26 million persons with disabilities (PwD) — and disability rights advocates estimate the real number is far higher when chronic illness, mental health conditions, and underreported rural cases are counted. In Tamil Nadu and across South India, PwD continue to face steep barriers: churches without ramps, worship spaces without sign language interpreters, and communities where disability is still whispered as shame rather than spoken as rights. DISHA, rooted in the Church of South India (CSI), calls the Church to face this reality — not with pity, but with solidarity.

Breaking Barriers: Accessibility

DISHA's first focus is dismantling structural, attitudinal, and ICT barriers. A structural barrier is a church with no wheelchair ramp. An attitudinal barrier is a congregation that prays for a disabled person to be 'healed' rather than asking what they actually need. An ICT barrier is a website a screen reader cannot navigate. True accessibility is not only about ramps — it is about building communities where difference is welcomed and every voice is heard.

"Inclusion is not a favour we extend to persons with disabilities. It is a right they hold and a grace we receive when we make room."

A Theology That Includes

DISHA actively builds a body of knowledge on Disability Theological Discourses on persons with disabilities , drawing on Scripture, Christian thought, and the lived experience of disabled persons. Central to this the CSI-DISHA Octave, observed from October 8th through December 3rd, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Each year, congregations are invited to reflect, pray, learn, and act placing persons with disabilities not at the front to be prayed over, but at the centre, as teachers and leaders.

Networks of Solidarity

DISHA builds bridges between CSI institutions already serving PwD hospitals, schools for the blind and deaf, rehabilitation centres, and community programmes. Beyond the Church, it joins hands with ecumenical partners, secular organisations, and the movements of PwD themselves. This is a solidarity model — one where the disabled community is recognised as the expert on its own experience, and the Church walks alongside, advocates, and amplifies.

What Can Each of Us Do?

Look at the spaces you inhabit. Are they accessible? When decisions are made that affect persons with disabilities, are they in the room? Listen to PwD in your community — not to fix them, but to understand their lives. And move — even in small ways. Observe the

DISHA Octave not as a date on the calendar, but as a turning point.

Voices That Inspire

"The measure of a society is found in how they treat their weakest and most helpless citizens."

- Jimmy Carter

"Disability is a matter of perception. If you can do just one thing well, you're needed by someone."

- Martina Navratilova

"Nothing about us, without us"

- Indian disability rights movement

"We know that equality of individual ability has never existed and never will, but we do insist that equality of opportunity still must be sought."

- Franklin D. Roosevel

DISHA reminds us that the Church is called to be the body of Christ — in all its beautiful, varied, sometimes broken wholeness. And in that body, there is a place for every person. Always.

For more on DISHA's work, to request resources, or to share your congregation's journey towards inclusion:

Connect with us: diakoniacsi@gmail.com

~ Mr. George Wesley

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