

has always leaned heavily on the crutch of the big speech or bold press conference to turn things around. But he doesn't have a message problem; he has a reality problem. "The administration is like a person who talks more loudly and slowly to people who don't understand English," says a Senate Democratic aide. Unless the reality of the threats Bush faces from Iraq, the 9/11 Commission, and the economy abate, he'll continue to fare poorly. As Ayres puts it, "This election will be event-driven." Facts are stubborn things. ■

Chennai Dispatch

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BY STÉPHANIE GIRY

MUNIYAMMAL KRISHNAN, a small, round 45-year-old from Kunvathur, a village near Chennai (formerly Madras) in southeastern India, has worked as a "human scavenger" since she was a little girl, cleaning the latrines of upper-caste villagers.

Before there was running water in Kunvathur, she carried away human excrement in a bucket on her head. By birth, it's incumbent on Krishnan to handle feces for a living, because, like more than 150 million Indians, she is an untouchable and belongs at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Krishnan and six family members live on about 1,000 rupees (\$22) per month in a two-room house—a brick-and-mortar cube with a corrugated roof—in a little dirt alley. Standing in the door frame, under a picture of the elephant-headed god Ganesh, guardian of entrances, Krishnan described daily reminders of her status as an untouchable. Upper-caste villagers won't frequent the temple in which she prays. Her bosses enforce what's known as the "two-tumbler" policy: They refuse to let her use their cups for tea, forcing her to bring her own and drink outdoors.

For untouchables like Krishnan, who haven't benefited from the government's generous but poorly enforced affirmative action programs, the best way to fight caste stigma has been to convert from Hinduism to more egalitarian religions. But the future of that strategy is now uncertain, because the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party that heads India's ruling coalition, is reviving a long-forgotten law that penalizes religious conversions.

The BJP has worked hard recently to soften its trademark Hindu-supremacist rhetoric. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is turning statesman, having jump-started peace talks with Pakistan. In state elections in December, the BJP badly beat its main opposition, the secular Con-

gress Party, by focusing on economic issues rather than Hindu ideology. The party celebrated these victories by calling a general election for April, months ahead of schedule. Foreign media outlets suggested that this newfound moderation is a sign that the BJP is finally maturing. "Mr Vajpayee [has] tacked to a more moderate line, with campaigns stressing development and stable government," *The Economist* reported in January.

More likely, however, the BJP's chauvinism will resurface once it re-cements its grip on power. Indeed, the BJP's anti-conversion campaign is proof of the party's insidious tactics. While it offers a moderate face to key constituencies at home and abroad, it's quietly promoting bigoted policies that affect voters it knows it cannot win over, like untouchables and religious minorities.

LOWER-CASTE INDIANS are known as "untouchables" because they're considered too impure to touch: According to Hindu mythology, they are the bastard children of primordial low-caste and high-caste Hindus. Because of their tainted origin, untouchables were traditionally forced into the most squalid jobs and kept away from members of the upper castes. These rules survived for centuries, because they both honored Hinduism's founding myths and served the economic interests of the elite, which exploited untouchables as cheap labor. Today, untouchables still lag far behind other Indians. More than 20 million are bonded laborers. Only 7 percent have access to safe drinking water, electricity, and toilets. According to Smita Narula, a former researcher at Human Rights Watch, it's no coincidence that untouchables are disproportionately poor. "Poverty is manufactured to maintain the status quo," she says.

This oppressive tradition has been mitigated somewhat by protections granted to untouchables under the constitution India adopted in 1950. The constitution bans caste-based discrimination and requires that positions in parliament, higher education, and the civil service be set aside for untouchables in proportion to their share of the general population. These measures have propelled some untouchables to prominent political posts: K.R. Narayanan held the country's presidency, a ceremonial but visible position, from 1997 to 2002. They've also helped untouchables develop a social network, a distinctive subculture marked by rebellious literature and poetry, and a new political consciousness—untouchables now ask to be called *dalits*, the "oppressed" or "broken" people.

Still, the constitution's promise hasn't been met. Today, *dalits* account for about 15 percent of India's population and thus by law are entitled to 15 percent of the spots in the civil service and at universities. In reality, however, seats reserved for *dalits* in higher education remain vacant: They're open only to candidates who have the schooling to compete for them, and not many *dalits* do. The institutions in the best position to enforce the quotas—the police and the judiciary—rarely bother to, because they aren't subject to any them-

selves and don't have many *dalits* on their staff. Nor do untouchables fare well in the unregulated private sector. "In modern businesses, they [*dalits*] are conspicuous by their absence," reported *The Washington Post* in 2002.

Given the laws' limitations, *dalits* have tried to emancipate themselves by converting from Hinduism to religions that promise to treat them as equals. Traditionally a tool of Christian missionaries, conversion became a political strategy in 1956, when, during a mass ceremony, B.R. Ambedkar, a *dalit* leader, convinced half a million untouchables to convert to Buddhism to protest exploitation. Since then, another three million *dalits* have become Buddhists. And, according to John C. B. Webster, a leading authority on conversions in India, hundreds of thousands of *dalits* have quietly turned to Christianity. In the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, isolated villages have recently switched to Islam, whose influence is growing as young Indians return to the region after working in the Persian Gulf.

To be sure, conversion is no panacea. Its benefits can be largely symbolic, since upper-caste Hindus still view converted *dalits* as second-class citizens. Still, says Webster, conversion allows untouchables to redefine themselves primarily in terms of religion rather than caste, removing some indignities. And joining India's well-funded and well-organized Christian community, which runs some of India's best schools, can also bring significant social and economic benefits.

Yet, ironically, the laws that were created to uplift *dalits* make it difficult for them to convert. India's constitution mandates affirmative action programs for "scheduled castes" (its word for untouchables), but, in 1950, an executive order declared that non-Hindus didn't fall under that category and so weren't eligible. That put *dalits* in a cruel predicament: either stay Hindu and claim affirmative action or convert and forgo it. Since the '50s, religious minorities have lobbied the government to secure exceptions to this order for their *dalit* populations. Sikh *dalits* won all benefits in the mid-'50s; Buddhist untouchables got most of them in the '90s. But the government still hasn't extended any exceptions to Muslims. As a result, there are now three classes of *dalits* among religious minorities: those who get all the affirmative action set-asides (Sikhs), those who get some (Buddhists), and those who get none (Christians and Muslims).

This triple standard has created perverse incentives, said C.K. Tamarasan, a *dalit* member of the Tamil Nadu state assembly and the general secretary of the Republican Party of India, the party Ambedkar founded in the 1930s. In the state-funded Chennai apartment he uses as an office, Tamarasan explained that for some *dalits* it's worth losing benefits to convert to Christianity, because they gain dignity and access to the Christian community's vast network of social services. "Whatever the government can do for *dalits*, Christian missionaries can do better," he said.

But the situation is more complex. When I asked him if he is still a Hindu, Tamarasan shifted uneasily in his seat

and pulled from under his white shirt a medallion featuring Ambedkar on one side and Buddha on the other. Dangling it, he said he "practiced" Buddhism but hadn't officially converted; otherwise, he would have been denied the reserved state assembly seat he now holds. Like Tamarasan, some *dalits* convert without updating their civil status so they can continue to claim all government set-asides. But the vast majority of poor untouchables aren't savvy enough to play the system. They stand to suffer a loss with every gain, because their two best chances at advancement, affirmative action and religious conversion, often cancel each other out.

THE BJP IS now offering to relieve untouchables of this painful dilemma—not by solving it, but by removing their opportunity to convert. Banning conversions is consistent with the party's aggressive Hindutva ideology, which hopes to purge India of non-Hindu influences. The party treats Buddhism and Sikhism as indigenous offshoots of Hinduism, while demonizing Christianity and Islam as alien religions brought to India by colonialists and plunderers.

The BJP is the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu supremacist group, and the RSS's religious mouthpiece, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Leaders of both the RSS and the VHP have vociferously charged that foreign missionaries are turning *dalits* into Christians or Muslims in a bid to take over India. The VHP's general secretary, Mohan Joshi, estimated recently that some 1.8 million Indians convert to minority religions every year; at that rate, he forecast, "the country will be divided into two nations" within 25 years. This, however, is sketchy arithmetic. In fact, four in five Indians are Hindus. And the Christians' modest share of the country's total population—2.3 percent—is actually dwindling, because of Christians' lower fertility rates.

Still, bad math can make for good rhetoric, especially among BJP hard-liners like Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat state, who is suspected of having helped incite riots that killed 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. A few months after the riots, Modi was reelected on an anti-Muslim ticket and then started nursing back to life the defunct anti-conversion law. When he saw it through the Gujarat legislature in March 2003, the law existed in only four states. In three of them, the law was a forgotten legacy of the Congress Party, which had passed it in the 1960s and 1970s to court voters and then, having won their support, never bothered to enforce it.

The Freedom of Religion Bill, as the Gujarat law is known, punishes anyone who converts another person through force, fraud, or "allurement" with up to three years in prison and a fine of about \$2,200. Taken literally, it doesn't seem to violate the constitution's ban on caste discrimination or its promise to protect freedom of religion. But its fine print targets *dalits* who want to convert to Christianity and Islam. Aravinda Pajanor, a constitutional law expert based

in Chennai, says the law singles out untouchables by imposing stiffer penalties for converting them than for converting other groups. And, by prohibiting only conversions performed by "religious priests," it singles out conversions to Christianity and Islam, because those religions' ceremonies are officiated, whereas Hindu and Buddhist rites are not.

Worse, the law gives too much enforcement power to local magistrates, usually upper-caste Hindus prone to blocking defections to minority religions. The law asks magistrates to vet all conversions, and it allows them to prosecute those induced through "allurement" without defining what that is. Such gaps leave prospective converts with no clear idea of what's allowed and no grounds on which to defend themselves if they're accused of breaking the law. Moreover, Hindu supremacists argue that the law bans only conversions to minority religions because conversions to Hinduism aren't "conversions" at all. A native Muslim who wants to become a Hindu can't, they claim, because one is either born into the caste system or not. Meanwhile, a former Hindu *dalit* who has become a Muslim and wants to be a Hindu again isn't converting: He's merely "coming home."

The law is poised to spread quickly beyond the five states where it exists today. The BJP is committed to passing

it in every state it controls, and, because of India's complex party politics, it could also gain ground in other states. As long as opposition parties believe the law can help them forge alliances with the BJP, they too have a reason to endorse it. A national anti-conversion bill could also be passed if the BJP gains clear control of parliament in the upcoming elections. (The BJP-led coalition that runs India holds about 55 percent of the 545 seats in the lower house, but the BJP alone accounts for only about one-third.) In the meantime, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, a federal agency staffed principally with BJP sympathizers, is drafting a directive modeled after the Gujarat law that could become binding across the country, without congressional approval, as soon as it is published in the official gazette.

Minority groups and nongovernmental organizations have sounded the alarm, organizing protests and threatening mass conversions to Christianity and Islam. But the issue hasn't been getting the attention it deserves, largely because of the law's innocuous-seeming text, the BJP's patient maneuvering, and entrenched caste prejudice. That the BJP has kept its anti-conversion campaign quiet in the run-up to the April elections should make it more, not less, threatening. By the time it's in full view again, it could be too late. ■

Al Qaeda's new soldiers. Fair Game

BY ROBERT S. LEIKEN

AMONG THE MANY unpleasant truths Americans have had to face since September 11, 2001, is that some of their fellow citizens are among the terrorists trying to harm the United States. Shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, two men from Portland, Oregon, traveled to China, bound for Afghanistan, where they hoped to fight for the Taliban and Al Qaeda. According to the FBI, Earnest James Ujaama, a Seattle resident, tried to set up an Al Qaeda training camp in the northwestern United States in 1999. And, of course, Chicago native Jose Padilla was arrested in May 2002 after American intelligence alleged he had collaborated with Al Qaeda to try to build a "dirty bomb."

Aside from their nationality, another thread linked these men: All were converts to Islam. Each year, thousands of people become Muslims, and, while the vast majority join for reasons having little to do with politics, Al Qaeda has begun to single out the small minority who are susceptible to the violent philosophy perpetrated by the religion's radical fringe. Of the 212 individuals implicated in major terrorist attacks

around the world since the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, 18 were converts. Osama bin Laden reportedly sees Western converts as an especially potent weapon—not least because recruits from outside the Middle East and Central Asia are less likely to attract attention.

Despite the high-profile instances of American converts to radical Islam who then joined Al Qaeda, it is European converts who pose the greater threat. Because of the number of individuals turning to Islam in Europe, and because of the stronger Al Qaeda infrastructure there, Western Europe, it seems, has become fertile ground for a new type of Al Qaeda terrorist—one specifically recruited to evade post-September 11 security.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS HAVE many causes. Those adopting a new religion may find the tenets of another faith more appealing, or perhaps they want to share the faith of a fiancé or spouse. But, in Europe, a newly fashionable, and less sanctified, trend has increased the number of conversions to Islam. According to French scholar of Islamism Olivier Roy, bin Laden and his chief strategist, Egyptian jihadi Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri, are seeking to tap "protest converts," young Europeans who convert to Islam "to stick it to their parents, to their principal. They convert in the same way

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