

Hoffen auf den Neustart

Die Pandemie und der Lockdown sind für die Mädchen aus dem Internat eine Katastrophe. Online-Unterricht ist für die wenigsten eine Option, viele müssen arbeiten statt zu lernen.

Nach fast 10 Monaten Corona-Zwangspause konnte DACA-Direktor Vargheesh Antony SJ im Januar das Vidivelli Girls' Home, Mädcheninternat der Akademie, wieder öffnen: „Unser Team war gut vorbereitet, wir haben alle notwendigen Vorichtsmaßnahmen getroffen.“

Der Großteil der 124 Mädchen aus dem Vidivelli Girls' Home stammt aus abgelegenen Dalit-Dörfern Tamil Nadus und besucht die St. Anne's Higher Secondary School, etwa einen Kilometer entfernt. Neben einem umfangreichen pädagogischen Programm legt die Dr. Ambedkar Cultural Academy auch Wert auf Sport, Kunst, praktische Fähigkeiten und gibt den Mädchen Identität und Selbstbewusstsein, etwa durch Training in Silambam, einer alten tamilischen Kampfkunst.

„Die Situation ist erbärmlich“

Nur einen Monat nach Wiedereröffnung der Schulen meldeten mehrere Einrichtungen erneut Covid-Fälle. Zunächst wurde per Regierungsbeschluss für die Klassen 9 bis 11 das gesamte Schuljahr ausgesetzt, kurze Zeit später auch für die zwölften Klassen: Alle Abschlussprüfungen wurden auf das kommende Schuljahr verschoben, und auch DACA stellte den Betrieb ein, ob-
schon es auf dem Campus keine Covid-Fälle gab. „Die Situation unsere Schülerinnen ist erbärmlich“, klagt Vargheesh Antony SJ. Er beobachtet Konzentrationsstörungen, Verhaltensauffälligkeiten, sich verschlechternde



Die Kampfkunst Silambam gibt den Mädchen Selbstvertrauen.

schulische Leistungen. Online-Unterricht ist für viele keine Option: „Meine Eltern hatten große Mühe, uns Kinder während des Lockdowns zu ernähren“ berichtet etwa Zwölfklässlerin Gowri, die jetzt arbeiten muss, statt zu lernen.

Mit einem umfangreichen pädagogischen Programm, psychosozialen Angeboten und einem strengen Hygienemanagement rüstet man sich bei DACA, um die Mädchen nach der so sehnlich erhofften Wiedereröffnung aufzufangen. „Im ersten Lockdown konnte ich an den Online-Kursen teilnehmen, aber ich habe nichts verstanden“, sagt Priya aus der 11. Jahrgangsstufe, „aber als ich zu DACA zurückkam, hatte ich die Chance, die Sonderklasse für Englisch und Mathematik zu besuchen. Jetzt fühle ich mich etwas entspannter und habe eine Grundlage für die nächste Klasse. Ich bin DACA sehr dankbar.“

Steffen Windschall

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DACA: Trauer um Father Tony

Antony Raj SJ, Gründer eines Bildungszentrums für „Kastenlose“ in Tamil Nadu, ist am 10. Mai Covid erlegen. Joe Übelmesser SJ erinnert sich an den Traum seines Freundes: eine Gesellschaft, in der jeder Mensch in Würde lebt.

Ich habe Tony vor mehr als 25 Jahren kennengelernt. Sein damaliger Provinzial war zu Besuch bei uns in Nürnberg und bat mich um Hilfe bei der Fertigstellung von Tonys Doktorarbeit. Das war der Beginn einer langen Freundschaft.

Obwohl ich selbst mein Theologiestudium in Indien absolviert habe, habe ich erst durch die Begegnung mit Tony erkannt, in welcher Situation so viele Dalits, „Kastenlose“, in Indien leben müssen und wir halfen bei der Gründung von DACA, der Dr. Ambedkar Cultural Academy.

Etwa 10 Tage vor seinem Tod hat Tony zum letzten Mal mit mir telefoniert. Er hat einen sicheren Platz in meiner Erinnerung und in meinem Herzen und ich hoffe, dass

all die Mühe, die er für seine Leute auf sich genommen hat, auch in Indien Früchte tragen wird.

Joe Übelmesser SJ





Dr. Ambedkar Cultural Academy (DACA)

A Dream Born out of a Nightmare!

Our ultimate dream for DACA is that it becomes a catalyst for the rebirth of villages from being cesspools of cruelty and caste prejudice to self-ruling human communities where social and domestic peace based on equality and justice flourishes.

George Joseph, S.J.

It was an evening like any other at the Institute for Development Education, Action and Studies (IDEAS), a social action center of the Madurai Jesuit Province. A few Dalit young men and women, under the auspices of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM), were rehearsing a street play on Dalit and human rights and the need of struggling against caste oppression and exploitation of Dalits, also branded as untouchables and outcastes by the dominant castes. The group was unaware that agents of the dominant caste were eavesdropping.

Night came and a violent mob from the

dominant caste, armed with deadly weapons gate-crashed and started shouting and abusing Dalits and targeting particularly Fr. Antony Raj, SJ, founder of DCLM, who had been spearheading and leading the Dalit liberation upsurge in secular society as well as in the Church. They threatened him with dreadful consequences if he did not apologize for the street play and quit IDEAS forever. Fr. Raj, who valued his self-respect and dignity, resolutely refused and asserted his and the DCLM's right to fight for the civil rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. The confrontation continued all through the night in



the presence of helpless police officers.

As even the police could not guarantee the personal security of Fr. Raj, his superiors thought it wise that he should move to a less hostile area. More than 25 years later, Fr. Raj remembers the events of that night as a nightmare that his people, the Dalits, have lived with for centuries and continue to suffer from in different forms.

Dalits are the original indigenous people of the soil. The Brahminic view and way of life, which advocated a social system of ranked inequality and hierarchy, were imposed by the dominant castes. As a result, the Dalits were forced to do menial and dirty jobs (such as handling dead animals, cleaning toilets, and so on) and backbreaking agricultural labor with the stigma of being untouchables and outcastes. Thus, they were deprived not only of their human dignity but even the very right to be human. Their lives were marked by abject poverty, indignity, shame and humiliation, powerlessness and social exclusion. Today, they have discarded the many insulting nomenclatures that the dominant castes had given them and choose to call



themselves Dalits, meaning 'oppressed' or 'broken'.

India has a huge population of 200 million Dalits and most of them live as landless farm laborers in villages. If one in

*Top: Artistic dance
by young*

Dalit women.

*Above: Hostel residents
with founder.*

IDEAS

A Dream Born out of a Nightmare!

*Below: Diploma in Computer Application for unemployed girls.
Bottom: Giving training to self-help group.*

every six Indians is a Dalit, in Tamilnadu one in every five Tamils is a Dalit. Sixty five percent of Tamilnadu Church is Dalits. Catholic Dalits' situation is even worse, as they suffer from manifold discriminations. This is because, besides the violence, indignities, discrimination and exclusion that they suffer with their Hindu brethren, they, without having the benefit of positive affirmation policies guaranteed by the Indian Constitution for the Hindu Dalits, meet with similar discriminations, humiliations and marginalization in the Church too. The Dalits are socially discriminated, religiously ignored, and politically sidelined. Even now in some rural areas, Dalits

cannot put up decent houses; they will not be served tea/food along with others; their dead-bodies cannot be taken to the cemetery through the main streets etc. Even in the Catholic Church often, one finds two separate cemeteries: one for the dominant castes and one for the Dalits. Even in death, they are untouchables.

The Doctor Ambedkar Cultural Academy (DACA) is named after Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a man who was not only the father of the Indian Constitution, but also a tireless advocate for the annihilation of the caste system.

For DACA founder, Fr. Raj, his childhood experience of searing poverty and caste-based humiliation had sown the seed of activism in his soul.

He realized early in life that only education could lead him out of this deadly trap. His studies and spiritual formation as a Jesuit gave a moral and intellectual edge to his spirit of advocacy. In 1987, Fr. Raj joined IDEAS in Madurai and worked as a scholar activist. As a social activist, he actively assisted the victims of caste riots and atrocities that were taking place during that period and was the initiator and leader of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) and the Dalit Integration Federation (DIF), which was an umbrella organization for uniting and integrating the various Dalit movements and sub castes.

After that nerve-racking experience more than 25 years ago, Fr. Raj took some time off for reflection. During the course of his painful reflection, he realized that there was no thrust in his past efforts on the intellectual, character and ideological formation. It had been an emotional outburst against injustice and a rage against an unjust establishment. This became a basis of a rethinking on the strategy, which eventually culminated in the idea of establishing DACA as a people's institution named after Dr. Ambedkar.



Dr. Ambedkar once said, “My final word of advice to you is educate, agitate, organize and have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle”. For Dr. Ambedkar, as for Saint Ignatius, the starting point of social reform is education. Education trains the human mind to think and to take the right decision. The educated person gets enlightened and lives in a room with all its windows open towards the outside world. The motto of DACA is *Knowledge is power*. This power is imparted in and through education.

DACA, stands today as a proud symbol of Dalit assertion and empowerment. During the past 18 years, it has helped hundreds of young Dalits, chiefly girls, to recognize and develop their potential, recover their self-esteem and dignity through formal education, human and dalit rights training programs, skills training and various other activities. It has intervened at the time of caste conflicts and supported the victims. DACA has also reached out to 250 villages through evening study and supplementary education programs, besides forming a network of self-help groups of women, which have almost 8,000 women in its rolls. Inspiration for starting these self-help groups is the Grameen Bank for the poor founded by Nobel Laureate Prof. Mohammad Yunus and they engage in common and individual income generating activities.

Our ultimate dream for DACA is that it becomes a catalyst for the rebirth of villages from being cesspools of cruelty and caste prejudice to self-ruling human communities where social and domestic peace based on equality and justice flourishes and where eco-friendly values and technology ensure self-sufficiency and a healthy ambience.

This would be realized through the parallel process of multifaceted and holistic education and empowerment. We have a



blueprint of it in the self-help groups of women, which are on the verge of creating model villages.

One wonders whether the popular quote of Paulo Coelho “When you want something, all the universe conspires to achieve it”, applies to the dreams of the oppressed, the dreams of Martin Luther King, of Nelson Mandela, of Ambedkar or of the Man from Nazareth. We know the mills of God grind slowly, but they do keep grinding and that too surely in favor of the poor and oppressed. DACA hopes and strives to create a society where Dalits would realize their dream of equality and dignity. DACA dreams of making the Dalits, now at the periphery of the society, to be the leaders in the center of the society and the Church.

Top: Girls from the hostel going for evening study.

Above: Training of future teachers is a key component.

Tamilnadu