

INDIA TODAY

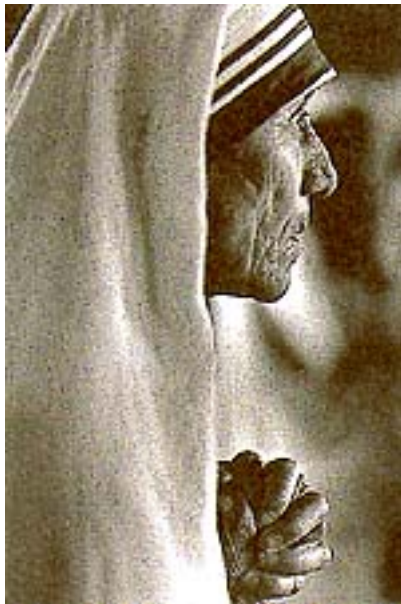


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GUEST COLUMN

BY NAVIN CHAWLA

"Touch the Poor..."



Mother Teresa, once described as a 'religious imperialist' and more commonly regarded as a 'saint', was at many levels a very ordinary woman, yet someone who has led one of the most extraordinary lives of this century. Armed only with an abundance of faith, she proceeded a small step at a time; today she has established a multinational organisation in over 120 countries that serves her special constituency of the homeless, destitute, hungry and dying. In the process, she became one of the world's

principal conscience keepers.



Although she herself remained fiercely Catholic, her brand of religion is not exclusive. Convinced that each person she ministered to was Christ in suffering, she reached out to people of all faiths. The very faith that sustained her infuriated her detractors, who saw her as a symbol of right-wing conspiracy and, worse, the principal mouthpiece of the Vatican's well-known views against abortion. Interestingly, such criticism has gone largely unnoticed in Hindu-dominated India, where she is widely revered.

As her biographer, I confronted her with the stinging accusation that she accepted money for her work from some rather dubious characters. Her answer was concise: "I have never asked anybody for money. I take no salary, no government grant, no church assistance, nothing. But everyone has a right to give. I have no right to judge anybody. God alone has that right." Hers remains the only charitable organisation that explicitly forbids fund-raising. "I do convert," she once said to me when she was accused of converting Hindus to Catholicism. "I convert you to become a better Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist or Protestant. When you have found God, it is up to you to do with him what you wish."

Mother Teresa was the youngest of three children. Her Albanian father died in mysterious circumstances when she was seven; from her mother, who struggled to rear the three children, she imbibed her deep faith, her charitableness, a fierce determination and even a sense of frugality. Inspired by the accounts of a group of Yugoslav Jesuits, she decided at 18 to join the Loreto Order of nuns then serving in the field of education in India.

She once told me that leaving the Loreto Convent, where she was

very happy, was even more difficult than leaving home. A European woman wearing a cheap sari, with neither money nor helper, must have presented a strange sight. It did not deter her from entering a slum, gathering a few children around her, picking up a stick and drawing the letters of the Bengali alphabet on the ground. People recognised goodness when they saw it. Soon someone donated a chair, another a blackboard, teachers volunteered their services until the school became a reality. From school to dispensary to a home for the dying where the poor could die in peace and some dignity, within two years, Mother Teresa became a well-known name among her chosen people, the poorest of the poor.

I once called her the most powerful woman in the world. She replied: "Where? If I was, I would bring peace to the world." I asked her why she did not use her undeniable influence to lessen war. She replied: "War is the fruit of politics. If I get stuck in politics, I will stop loving. Because I will have to stand by one, not by all."

The large bequests and donations were gratefully received and immediately ploughed into wherever the need was most pressing, from leprosy stations spread over Asia and Africa to homes for orphans and disabled children all over the world. Yet it was the "sacrifice money" that she remembers -- the Calcutta beggar who emptied his day's earnings into her hands; the young Hindu couple who loved each other so much yet refused a marriage feast so that they could offer her the money they thus saved.

The last time I met Mother Teresa was a month ago in Delhi, when she was on her way back from America to her beloved Calcutta. We spoke then of simple things, of loving, caring and sharing. She held

my hand in hers and said, "You must always work for the poor and the good of all people. You must continue to touch the poor." This then was her legacy and the world will always remember her for her special definition of the words 'compassion' and 'love'.

Navin Chawla, a senior bureaucrat, is the Mother's official biographer.



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