

All around India, Dalits are demanding free access to their gods. Not far from Patna, Kunti Devi, a woman from the much-despised Dalit community known as Musahars, the rat-eaters, strode into a temple devoted to Durga, the Hindu goddess who slayed an evil demon. Kunti had her own demons to slay. By simply laying an offering of flowers before Durga, she effectively opened up the temple to her fellow Dalits. "The upper-castes knew I'd gone in," she boasts. "But they didn't dare say anything. They knew I had supporters who would beat them up."

Instead of risking confrontation, many Dalits are heading for the cities. For them, the urban centers offer hope, an escape from some caste barriers. As Bindeshwar Pathak, a New Delhi social worker, says, "Can we check who cooked the meal in a hotel, or who sat beside us on a bus? Can we stop someone from living next door?" But the choice of jobs for illiterate newcomers is grim. In Bhopal, Muni Bai, mother of nine children, earns \$22 a month emptying 40 latrines a day. She carries the excrement on her head, in a wicker basket she carefully lines with old newspapers. And the smell? She shrugs. "Just to fill my belly I've had to do these things," she replies. Muni Bai at least has some freedom. She probably considers herself better off than the Dalits of Khajuri, just 20 km from Bhopal, who have never heard of the great emancipator Ambedkar, who can't read or write and who are paid about \$14 a month toiling for their upper-caste landlord. "There's a terror in the village. We can't speak against them or we'll be beaten," whispers one old man.

Money is breaking up caste prejudices faster than any law can, and therein lies India's hope of shedding its ancient, shameful yoke of discrimination. Even by doing such menial jobs as washing dishes or sweeping factory floors, the Dalit in the city is better off than many of the higher-caste folks back in his country village. He may not be able to read or write, but his children will. One Dalit returned to his Rajasthan village on a break from his city job. "The priests stop us from going into the temple. But their sons come into our house because they want to watch TV," he says. "For years they said we were dirty. But now we look much cleaner than they do."

—With reporting by Faizan Ahmed/Patna, Meenakshi Ganguly/Belaur, Maseeh Rahman/Lucknow and R. Bhagwan Singh/Madras

Rise of an Education Eater

DRESSED IN AN ELEGANT, ASH-GRAY SUIT, NARENDRA JADHAV STEPS OUT OF his chauffeur-driven Suzuki and walks through the portals of the Reserve Bank of India in Bombay. The doorkeeper brightens and exults, "Jai Bhim!" This isn't how senior executives are normally addressed at the country's powerful banking authority. But Jadhav is different. Like the doorman, he is a Dalit, the oppressed caste of former untouchables who like to hail their departed leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar whenever they greet each other.

Jadhav, 44, is notable in another respect. Unlike India's millions of destitute Dalits, he is prosperous and highly accomplished. An economist, author and public speaker, Jadhav heads a 115-person think tank at the Reserve Bank formulating the nation's monetary, credit and exchange-rate policies. Having turned down a \$275,000-a-year job offer from a multinational financial company, Jadhav will



INSPIRATION: Jadhav, at home with his wife, had to keep asking, "Why me?"

soon take up an assignment with the International Monetary Fund in Washington. Until then, he will continue to bask in his status as a celebrity who has inspired countless other Dalits. Currently in production are a feature film and a TV serial based on his best-selling book, *Our Father and Us*, a chronicle of his family's rise from a plague-ravaged village in Maharashtra state to positions of power and prestige in the business and financial center of Bombay.

After plague killed Jadhav's grandfather, a landless laborer, his desperately poor grandmother migrated to Bombay in 1910 with her son and daughter. The son, Jadhav's father Damodar, did not attend school but was fortunate to land a lowly job with the port railway. The family moved to a Dalit slum dominated by men running from the law and by followers of Ambedkar, who became independent India's first Law Minister. Damodar Jadhav came under Ambedkar's spell and decided that, come what may, he would give his children an education. When a school refused admission to his eldest son J.D., he wept and squatted in the headmaster's office until the man relented. All of Damodar's six children acquired college degrees, his four sons going on to successful careers.

Narendra Jadhav says his love of learning helped him to make it. But as a young Dalit in a Brahman-dominated school, he was overwhelmed and rarely uttered a word. In Sanskrit class, Jadhav recalls being aware that he was learning the "language of the gods," for centuries the exclusive preserve of the high born. Didn't the Indian epic *Ramayana* relate how molten metal was poured into the ear of a lower-caste man who had the temerity to listen to the scriptures? "Whenever anything good happened to me," Jadhav recalls, "I'd ask, 'Why me?'"

A lot of good did happen, and today Jadhav lives in tony south Bombay with his upper-caste, corporate executive wife Vasundhara, son Tanmay (who plans to become a software engineer) and daughter Apoorva. "It's important to fight within the system," Jadhav says. "For Dalits, I'm an example that you can make it." He knows it will take years to erase caste prejudice from the Indian psyche, but he is an optimist. "Today you'll find a Dalit among the best in virtually every field," he says. "With greater interaction, barriers are bound to fall." The saga of the Jadhav family bears testimony to that certainty. —By Maseeh Rahman/Bombay