"Caste at Birth" Turns Cameras on Harijan Plight
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British television recently aired a brilliant documentary titled Caste at Birth, directed by award-winning filmmaker Mira Hamermesh. The film was acclaimed by critics and viewers alike as it artfully probed into the exodus of millions of outcaste Harijans (children of God) from Hinduism into Buddhism and Islam.

"I am a convert to Buddhism" proclaims one Harijan in the film. "I have taken the example of Dr. Ambedkar who did so much for the upliftment of the Harijans in India."

Dr. Ambedkar, a political philosopher and close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, was one of the key founders of the Indian constitution. Because of his efforts, out-caste and low-caste Hindus received the constitutional right to improve their life and well-being. But Dr. Ambedkar himself had to suffer prejudice in the newly independent India - and in an important and much publicized footnote of Indian history, he converted to Buddhism.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Harijans (out of some 200 million) continue to follow his example. The reasons this exodus continues with such momentum occupy much of Hamermesh's film: segregated villages, barred from common well usage and temples, not allowed to own land. Efforts to improve their condition are met with resistance and violence. At the film's conclusion, a Harijan woman tells the story of the massacre of her family of 19 when the head of the family asked for a wage raise. Caste at Birth did not exercise the usual caste-bashing or sensationalize the issue as many newspapers in Britain have done in the past. HINDUISM TODAY spoke to Mira Hamermesh at her elegant home in north London.

"What I didn't want to do in the film was to be judging people. I had to ask this question, 'If I had been born as an outcaste in India, who would I be today?' It is easier for an outsider like me to be detached and look even with compassion on the immense problems that the Indian people have or inherited."

She tells us that if she came to India as a tourist, she would have never seen the severity of casteism. As a filmmaker, she became immersed in it, and in fact she says that most Hindus ignore the situation of pretend it doesn't exist. "When I arrived in Bombay to do this film, I could not find a researcher on this particular subject, and Bombay is full or researchers who are keen to pick up money." She finally found a budding journalist, a high-caste girl who was sympathetic to the subject and willing to navigate the dregs of Hindu society. "She told me she wouldn't know India in a hundred years as she came to know it on my team."

"I was very fortunate to be introduced to Swami Agnivesh almost at the last moment. He has a remarkable sense for seeking justice. It comes from within. We did not discuss much about how the conversions took place. The film is not about the evolution of Hinduism. He claims that many practices are distortions of the original practices which were not caste-bound and more open-minded. This is a debate which has to be picked up by TV networks worldwide.

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