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Gonzaga Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa, standing between officers at left, addresses a meeting of Dalits in a village in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. (Provided photo)



by Philip Mathew

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For months, village women who passed a bar on their way to church or the Hindu temple suffered the lewd comments flung at them by drunken patrons. Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa, whose office was in the nearby town of Ginjee in Tamil Nadu state, knew of the bad behavior toward the women, most of them members of India's Dalit caste. A longtime activist for the Dalit in the area, the Gonzaga sister was more than willing to take on the offending business.

Feeling the public pressure, the bar owner threatened Alphonsa with dire consequences if she did not stop protesting his business. Government officials and local politicians also tried to thwart her. She did not falter, however, and, after six months, the owner closed his tavern.

Salesian Fr. Arul Valan, who works closely with Alphonsa, calls her a "saintly warrior" in the battle to create a casteless and egalitarian society in India.

"The uniqueness of our work has its roots in the uniqueness of Sr. Alphonsa's personality. She focuses on the marginalized and oppressed rather than on institutions and structures," the 49-year-old priest told Global Sisters Report.

His congregation's mission is a joint effort with the Gonzaga nuns to help the most oppressed in society. "We also collaborate with the Jesuits, human rights movements and civil society groups," says Valan, a co-founder and convener of the Thurumbar Liberation Movement.

He says he has not come across any nun who eats what the people eat, sleeps in their huts, and stays in villages that have no toilets or bath facilities. "No one has equaled her in her uncompromising battle against casteism and untouchability in society," he adds.



Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa at the Franciscan Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga generalate in Puducherry, southern India (Philip Mathew)

Alphonsa is a member of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga. The indigenous congregation is based in Puducherry, (earlier known as Pondicherry), a former French territory now administered by the federal government in southern India.

She is a social activist, who has worked for 20 years among Dalit people — the original "untouchables" in India's caste system — in rural areas and small towns in Tamil Nadu state, adjoining Puducherry.

The 64-year-old nun organized Dalits, and fought for their rights, especially for the Thurumbar community. Because the Thurumbar often serve the Dalit as launderers and cleaners and were once not allowed to be seen in daylight, they have been dubbed "the Dalit of the Dalit" and the "unseen."

Adherence to caste discrimination in India is illegal and has declined in urban centers but is very much in practice in more rural areas.

Dalits form more than 300 million of India's total population of 1.3 billion, their numbers on par with the population of the United States. They are the most oppressed and discriminated against group in the Indian caste system. Most work as landless laborers and face violence from dominant castes if they demand fair wages, equality and justice.

Stories of caste discrimination in different parts of India appear frequently in the Indian news media.



Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa (sitting on the chair at right) at a meeting of Thurumbars, traditionally washer men and women, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India (Provided photo)

Alphonsa, a Dalit herself, joined the Gonzaga congregation in 1974. "While in the convent, I made a commitment to work for Thurumbar," she said. She got special permission from her congregation to work among the traditional laundry workers in

Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu.

They live in thatched huts, far away from the upper caste enclaves and on the edges of the Dalit villages.

"They are also treated like slaves by the upper castes, who force them to wash their clothes. They are not paid wages. They go from house to house begging for food at night. They lead an inhuman life without any dignity," explains Alphonsa, who lived among them and shared their lifestyle.

She began her social activism in Puducherry by organizing Dalit domestic workers who were abused by their male employers. They were not given fixed salaries. The employers, however, would give some money to the girls' parents when they came to visit.

"I met the girls and their parents time and again and made them aware of their rights and duties," Alphonsa said.

After three years, Alphonsa started working in the Puducherry slums that used to be the den of sex racketeers who sent young girls to brothels in big Indian cities.

"I met the girls and their parents and made them aware of the reality, problems and dangers involved in it," Alphonsa said, adding that she stopped many girls from going to the brothels. The Puducherry Social Welfare Board, a government body, honored her in 1997 for her work in the slums.



The Franciscan Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga generalate in Puducherry, southern India (Philip Mathew)

A Catholic Dalit

Alphonsa recalls that four decades ago, religious congregations had discouraged Dalit women from joining them. "The Gonzaga congregation allowed us to join since it promotes the Dalit cause," she explains.

The Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu is divided along caste lines so much that there are separate cemeteries for various castes in some places. Even church leaders discriminated against the Dalit nuns, who were seen as polluters of the surroundings, and kept them from preparing the altar or cooking for the bishops and high-caste priests. The sisters were given food on separate platters and Communion only after everybody else received it. Alphonsa opposed such unjust practices.

She co-founded the Thurumbar Liberation Movement in 2003 "with the permission of my congregation and with the support of my colleagues." Its aim was to bring about human dignity, justice and respect for the community, she explained.

The movement set up a network of Thurumbar groups in the northern region of Tamil Nadu.

Alphonsa visits the groups and interacts with them on a regular basis. She also stays with them, identifies with them and shares their food.

The nun conducts study classes and awareness programs for Thurumbar. She tells them the importance of educating their children and provides job-related training to the youth.

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Realizing the Thurumbar people seldom sent their children to school because of poverty, Alphonsa intervened to help many of the children learn to study. One of them is Velankanni, who goes by one name only. She is now a first-year aspirant of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary congregation.

"Sr. Alphonsa has encouraged me to study and motivated me to become a sister. She is like my father and mother," the 20-year-old woman told GSR.

Alphonsa says her work conforms to her congregation's charism — "to do all we can to show preferential love and give fuller life to the afflicted in our society, especially to the oppressed poor, the abandoned women, the helpless children and the like, and thus to try our best to reveal in the Church, to all, the Christ who heals the afflicted."

Eight arrests, multiple beatings

Alphonsa has faced many challenges.

The dominant castes opposed and criticized her for organizing the Dalit. She was beaten up many times, and false police cases, instigated by the rich and the powerful, were filed against her. None of them reached a courtroom.

"I've been arrested eight times and kept in police custody for two to three days," she recalls, but asserts that "such challenges will never stop me from working for the

people."

A Thurumbar family in Tamil Nadu benefits from the work of their longtime advocate, Sr. Anth

A Thurumbar family in Tamil Nadu benefits from the work of their longtime advocate, Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa, at left (Provided photo)

Talking about her days in police custody, she said: "Those were not happy days, but I was never bitter."

She remembers with gratitude that whenever she was in police custody, many of her supporters and well-wishers extended their support and solidarity with her.

Alphonsa also fought against customs and traditions that keep the Dalit in inhumane conditions in some Tamil Nadu villages.

One such custom insisted a Dalit bride could sleep with her groom only after she had spent the night with the upper-caste village chief. If she refused, the family was ostracized and denied food. Alphonsa organized people to revolt against such customs, which persist but to a smaller degree.

Her interest in the Dalit women prompted her to produce a documentary called "Echam Micham," which in Tamil means "left over," a reference to the "lord's right" custom and also to the leftover food they seek.

Gonzaga Sr. Robancy Helen hails Alphonsa as a dedicated and brave nun who works for the empowerment of the Dalit.

"The dominant caste people have filed many false cases against her. But she has never stepped back from her mission of love and dignity preached by Jesus," Helen, the former national program coordinator for Dalit issues in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, told GSR.



Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa, standing, addresses a meeting of Dalits in Tamil Nadu, southern India. (Provided photo)

The younger nun says Alphonsa is "a role model for the religious women in the church. She sees Jesus, her master, being with the poor and the marginalized."

Helen, who is also a journalist, says the church needs more committed religious like Alphonsa to give voice to the voiceless.

Another admirer is Shanthi, who uses only one name. She met Alphonsa at a meeting of Thurumbar people in her village.

"Low-caste people like me were treated like slaves by people who have money and power. The sister helped us get out of the inhuman life. She also supported our children to go to school," the 25-year-old Thurumbar woman told GSR.

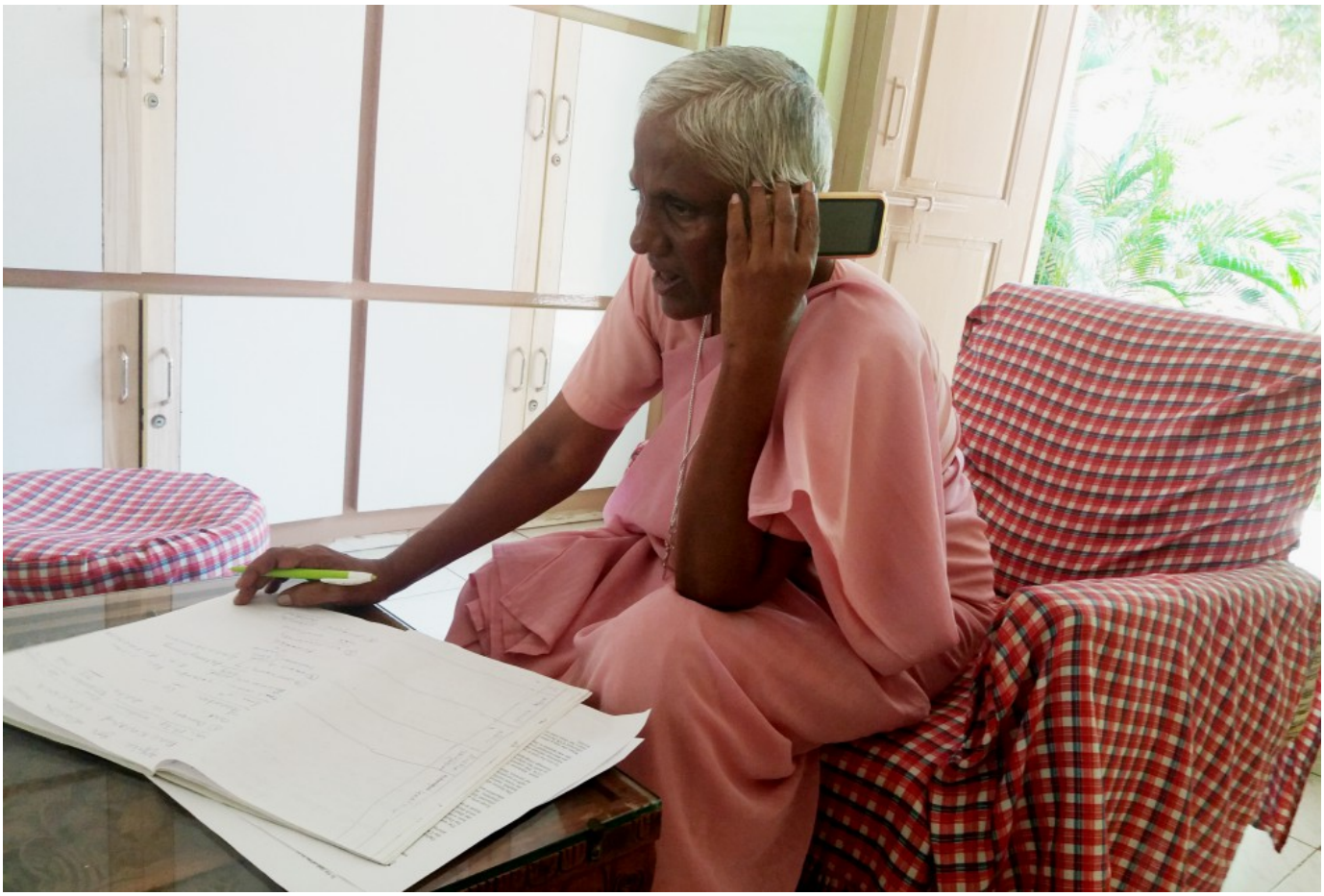
Shanthi says Alphonsa was beaten by the upper-caste people several times for working for Dalit liberation. "She has sacrificed her life for people like me. We are

deeply indebted to her."

Alphonsa has received 10 or more awards from state governments and nongovernmental organizations in India, including the Archbishop Oscar Romero Morning Star Award from the bishops' conference in 2017.

"The awards have been in recognition of my work for the emancipation of the Dalits from oppression and exploitation by the upper-caste people," Alphonsa said.

Bishop Sebastianappan Singaroyan of Salem says he has observed Alphonsa's 20 years of work among the Thurumbar people and "the enormous trouble" she has taken to motivate them.



Sr. Anthonysami Alphonsa takes a call at the Franciscan Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga headquarters in Puducherry, southern India. (Philip Mathew)

"She is a very committed religious, a role model for many," the 67-year-old prelate told GSR.

Alphonsa is a native of Sendarapatti village in the Salem district, which falls under the Salem Diocese.

Joseph Paul, a Dalit activist based in Bengaluru who has known Alphonsa for 20 years and has supported her in many protests, admires her for grassroots work among the marginalized.

"Many nuns prefer to lead a safe and secure life in their convents," he commented.

Decades ago, when Alphonsa started working with the Dalit as a Catholic sister, her mother asked her why she spent her time mostly with people in slums and villages, instead of a convent or a church.

"I told her that I'm a follower of Jesus Christ who spent most of his time with people to carry out his ministry. Jesus is my inspiration and role model," she says.

[Philip Mathew is a journalist based in Bangalore, southern India. He edits Asia Pacific Ecumenical News and is a correspondent for of Matters India, a news portal that collaborates with GSR and focuses on religious and social issues.]

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities** feature series. View the full series.