

# *Treasures* IN DARK PLACES

One Woman, a Supernatural God  
and a Mission to the Toughest Part of India

LEANNA  
CINQUANTA



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## Foreword

*E*very so often God raises up a work so astounding it begins to impact a nation. Church history is filled with examples of men and women of God whom He has used to lead such endeavors.

In the last century we saw the launch of great ministries such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, World Vision and a work my own father started called Teen Challenge. These all began at nearly the same time and were deeply blessed and internationally impactful.

In our generation God is once again doing such a work through Leanna and the TellAsia Ministries team. I have been graced to see with my own eyes this wonderful work of God. In northern India, one of the most hardened, unreached and difficult areas of the world, Leanna is pioneering and leading a work that is transforming a nation. Christ is being exalted, and thousands of churches have been planted. Miracles of healing and salvation occur daily and come in waves.

I've been around ministry and missions a long time. I have heard many grand visions that had no real evidence of resulting in change nor were they led by those with the capacity to see such a vision unfold. It might be tempting to think the same concerning Leanna and TellAsia Ministries. When this young woman set off alone for north India, many expected her to be just another missionary casualty. But instead, the unique approach God showed her resulted in astounding results. God proved that He has indeed “chosen the weak things of this world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Corinthians 1:27 κJV).

Today, TellAsia's vision to end child trafficking and illiteracy among millions of needy children may seem overzealous. I, like Doubting Thomas, would not have believed it unless I had touched this work personally. But God is doing it! Leanna's team through TellAsia Ministries is well on their way to seeing this vision become a reality. The Lord is empowering these humble believers to press on to complete their formidable goal. Much work is still to be done, but it is clear that the Holy Spirit is the source behind the successes.

*Treasures in Dark Places* will stir your faith, capture your heart and renew your vision to believe for the impossible. But most of all it will bring glory to God, and that is why this book was written. It's all about the love, goodness and power of God . . . and how He works through unpretentious, single-minded vessels who only want His glory to be known.

I thank God for Leanna, and I thank God that she wrote this book. Read it at your own risk. Your heart will be stirred, and there's no telling what God might call forth in your own life.

Gary Wilkerson

# Prologue

## *Starlit Eyes*

Regret not your attempt at laying siege to  
darkness,  
matter not the endeavor's apparent futility.  
You may only be a small light passing  
through,  
but groping multitudes now seeing the way,  
will reach the dawn.

**T**he wadded scar tissue of a butchered amputation trembled. With her remaining hand she thrust a steel bowl toward me, shaking a few coins in the bottom. Though less than twelve years of age, her face no longer expressed the softness of a child nor even the femininity of a girl. Blackened by an amalgamation of sunburned pigment and street grime streaked with rivulets of sweat, her cheekbones gave way to bloodshot eyes sunk deep in her skull. Beggar by day and

sex slave by night, she had been debased to a robot existing for the lewd pleasure of her torturers. Hardened by pain and abuse, not a shred of hope remained in her once-lovely face. The spark of life had drained from her eyes, now cold black pits devoid of life. Physically and emotionally she had been twisted and maimed, made into a beast, spirit broken, will and feelings decimated. Hers was a cold existence bereft of love, stripped of dignity, entombed while yet living.

“Jyoti!”

A voice made its way to my ears through the din of horns and bus engines and hawkers shouting their wares. Emerging from my entrancement, I remembered where I was. The bus stand. With my Indian friends. Setting out for a remote village.

Across the crowded street Vincent’s lanky frame filled the bus entrance. He motioned with his hand. “Hurry! Bus is leaving.”

The engine gunned—the driver’s “all aboard” signal.

The girl remained rooted, staring at me, bowl extended. Like the desperate fingers of a drowning wretch, her eyes reached to the core of my being, fastened themselves there and held me. To pull away would rip my heart in two. My soul was engulfed in the horror that composed her life. What could I do? How could I rescue her? I couldn’t. I was helpless.

The bus horn blasted—“last call.”

“Sister Jyoti, come NOW!”

My hand made an impulsive dive into my backpack’s front pouch but stopped short. The brothel owner would relieve her of the day’s coin collection the moment she returned for night duty. Instead I yanked a banana from the bunch procured moments earlier from a hawker. At least she could eat a banana. With regretful reverence I placed my offering

in her bowl, then tore myself away. Legs propelled my body to the bus, but my soul had been taken captive, utterly disturbed and forever, irreparably infected with the vision of this human tragedy.

The Roadways bus jolted and banged along a narrow strip of broken blacktop, its battered steel frame held together with half-stripped bolts. Swerving or screeching to an abrupt slowdown every few seconds it narrowly avoided a continuous stream of hazards including cyclists, pedestrians, goats, carts pulled by oxen, and crevasses in the pavement sufficient to snap an axle. My native friends had insisted that I occupy the prime spot on the bench we had managed to secure—the window seat. Even so, four of us were crammed into a space made for two and a half. Our fourth team member's leftmost pelvic bone clung precariously to the last inch of seat, his knees enduring the pushing and shoving of those packed in the aisle like upright sardines. The twenty-pound video projector, too precious to risk leaving with the rest of our gear up front in the bus cockpit, occupied both my lap and Janardhan's, and by the second hour, it had rendered my legs numb. I gleaned valuable millimeters of extra body room by letting my elbow protrude daring inches beyond the half-open window, but at risk of losing it to a passing vehicle. Here in northern India the game of "chicken" has been perfected and refined to an art form and I had by now given up the white-knuckled-tinge-and-wait-for-the-crash saucer-eyed terror that grips rookies at their first spin on an Indian road.

A diagonal crack bisected the thin slab of glass constituting my window. Loosely fixed in a metal track, it rattled back and forth at every jolt and jounce but managed not to shatter. On the seatback ahead of us ripped upholstery exposed



the seat's urethane innards and provided a convenient pocket where other passengers had deposited candy wrappers and empty chewing tobacco packets.

The roar of the ancient diesel Tata died, replaced by the tortured screech of shoeless brakes hitting the drums. The bus rocked to a near standstill, rolled forward and bumped down off a ledge. Then the engine gunned and we lurched forward once more. Pavement behind, dust billowed up on either side of the lumbering steel box, obscuring vision. The monsoon had long passed and not a drop of precipitation had touched this dirt road in weeks. Though passengers dutifully slid their windows shut, the powdery brown haze still boiled in, blanketing us with grime. But hardly a cough or sneeze was heard for men had already fished in their pockets for *rumals* and women had engaged the ends of their *saris*. In moments the brown hands of the hundred-some passengers on the 38-seater bus pressed makeshift dust masks over nose and mouth and continued their ride unflurried.

Krishna leaned across Janardhan and me to peer out the window. Scanning the landmarks, he searched for a clue to our whereabouts. Soon he exclaimed, "*Aa gaya, chalo!*" We had arrived, and there was no time to lose, because exiting the bus is the most difficult part of the ride.

Seated on the aisle, the job of plowing the way fell to Vincent, who enjoyed the advantage of unusual height for an Indian. From my position by the window the task of squeezing even a slender body past the solid mass of humanity clogging the full length of the aisle appeared futile. But in India, whether fitting people or vehicles through an impossibly tight space, another inch can always be found. Nobody says "Excuse me" because such etiquette is superfluous in a world with no room to step aside. When the bodies involved

are metal, back-and-forth maneuvering eventually results in the two vehicles managing to scrape past each other. When bodies are flesh, space is created not by maneuvering but by squishing. Shoulders provide a culturally acceptable means of creating inches where none exist. So Vincent pushed himself into the aisle-standers, and the rest of us followed with our noses in one another's backs to preserve those precious inches he created. Janardhan clutched the video projector against his chest. Thus we progressed steadily forward until at last I glimpsed ahead, protruding above the press of black scalps, a welcomed sign—the vertical steel pole marking the exit.

The bus shuddered to a halt and passengers piled out, jostling and shoving and tripping over feet, oblivious to whether the person they pushed was an old lady or a child. Making ourselves as thin as possible against the front partition of the bus to avoid being trampled, Janardhan transferred the video projector to me. Mindful of his near-complete blindness, it had been previously agreed that I would convey the fragile piece of technology down the stairs while he served as rear-guard to prevent me being shoved. Meanwhile Krishna and Vincent hoisted the rest of our gear onto their shoulders and we piled out into welcomed fresh air and elbow room.

Teenaged Krishna's bright eyes assessed the luggage and the man- and woman-power present, then swiftly began dividing the goods into four piles. These villages were his home, and the worn sandals precariously held to his calloused feet by a single toe loop knew the rocky paths. We stood at the edge of the northern plains where fertile fields and spreading Banyans gave way to rocks and plateaus and dust. *Naxalite* gangsters ruled this territory, and terrorized poverty-stricken villagers and the police folded to bribes partly out of convenience and partly to prevent their wives becoming widows.

No buses or rickshaws traveled between here and Krishna's village, so foot power would have to suffice.

"*Saman zyada hai, bhaya,*" muttered a puzzled Krishna, who couldn't decide how we would transport one particularly cumbersome element of our gear, the sixty-pound generator. After a good deal of discussion a decision was reached. Vincent and Janardhan would trade off lugging the generator and a backpack bulging with rolled-up sheet, stabilizer and extension wires while Krishna and I managed with the rest, which included, besides the projector, a two-foot speaker box, amplifier and mic and a jug of kerosene. So off we trooped lining out behind our guide, dust poofing rhythmically from beneath sandals. Squinting into the scorching afternoon sun, sweat cascaded down our faces and its gritty salty rivulets found their way into our mouths. The *dupatta* scarf, an essential element of feminine attire in rural India, added unwelcomed layers of insulation across my shoulders, and my neck itched desperately beneath its sweat-soaked polyester. Rocks in the path occasioned whoever trod immediately ahead of Janardhan to call out, "*Dekho JD, patr!*" JD bent his face downward, straining to see the hazard ahead. Though slowing and stepping carefully, he still usually stumbled on the rock. Even so he hummed a tune, his undefeatable optimism brightening the air.

The rest of us joined in, our spirits rising in celebration of the One who had freed us from bondage, who had loved us unto death and triumphed to give us life . . . the One whose love and salvation a new village would receive tonight for the first time since the world began.

After an hour or so the frequency with which Vincent and JD traded off carrying the generator attested to their growing fatigue, and my shoulders ached from the weight of the projector, encased in the mountaineering backpack

Mom had ingeniously redesigned to fit it. Our path skirted a bluff and crossed a field then disappeared into a shady grove. Wherever there is a bunch of trees on the Indian plain, there is also a village.

The narrow path wound between mud huts stuccoed with the image of an occasional god or goddess, the lone color amidst browns. Bony cows with bulging bellies lazily chewed their cud. Ponderous buffaloes, black hairless hides twitching to repulse the occasional fly, eyed us from their three-foot tethers. Goats with ever-mischievous motley-colored faces and tiny mouths and nimble feet darted here and there, searching for morsels that nobody else considered edible.

Ladies squatting in the doorways of their huts sifted tiny pebbles out of the evening meal's rice or pulverized spices between two stones. Skinny-armed toddlers with wide, hungry eyes and bloated bellies watched us from beneath thatched eaves. Their parents hoped the black string around their waists and heavy mascara smeared around their eyes would fend off the demons. Two boys of about five ventured out as we passed. They wore buttonless shirts that may have once been a color. Man-sized belts wrapped twice around suspended pants with broken zippers. They tagged along behind us, brown faces full of timid curiosity.

Men hovered in the shadows, weathered and hardened from relentless labor. Their dark eyes stalked us from beneath heavy brows emanating a mistrustful chill. Were JD able to see their faces, he might have maintained a degree more reserve in his greeting. Instead he grinned and waved and called out in the local dialect, "Bring family and friends to village square at seven o'clock. You receive ocean of mercy!"

The children gained confidence and more joined the troop. Shouting and jostling they trotted behind appealing

for further details. We heightened their curiosity with a provocative “Come and see!”

I thought any moment we’d arrive at Krishna’s home, but my optimism dwindled when he marched on with hardly a sideways glance and no offer to explain. My mastery of Hindi still insufficient to afford much conversation, the discipline of “wait and see” proved more practical and less embarrassing. So I stewed in my questions as out the other side of the village we tramped.

Our tail of children halted at the village edge as if having met an unseen boundary. For a few moments they stood gazing after us then cavorted back to their huts. On we trudged, leaving the village behind.

Before us stretched a deserted wasteland, barren of grass and treeless apart from an occasional shrub, littered with garbage. The ground was not sandy but packed mud adobe-hard and scarred with gorges cut by water. This was not a desert but a flood plain. Ahead materialized green cattails and beyond them, sparkling in the final afternoon rays of sunlight, flowed a great river. Still there wasn’t a sign of civilization. The unasked questions buzzing in my brain increased. What business did we have in the community dump? Why had we left behind the people for whom we’d come?

“*Jaiiii Masih kiiii!*” A voice strong and jubilant boomed across the plain. A man approached whose persona struck me as that of Moses descending Mount Sinai. His face shone with a radiance from deep within, and his smile injected me with a thrilling rush of the proximity of heaven. He strode toward Vincent, who responded with another “*Jay Masih ki!*”—“Victory to Christ!”—the Christian adaptation of the traditional Hindu greeting “Victory to Ram.”

The men embraced with hearty thumps on the back. “Moses” acknowledged Krishna with a fatherly squeeze before turning to the oddball—me.

“*Saroj Bhaya*,” announced Vincent. “This is Sister Jyoti. Sister Jyoti, meet Brother Saroj.” Not long into my foray to India the natives had bestowed upon me the name *Jyoti*, which means “Light.” “You brought light into our darkness,” they said. “We were alone in our vision to reach our homeland here in the north. Missionaries came and did their best, but they didn’t pay much attention to us. They put their own faces out front. But you believe in us, the native people. You realize the time has come for us to reach our own people. He has used you to bring His light into the darkness of our land. Together we will rescue the people from oppression and slavery.”

And so here I was. But at this point having arrived only a few months ago, my role was unclear. For the time being, the natives perceived the video projector I’d brought over to be the greatest piece of technology since the wheel, and the videos I’d acquired in the big city now fueled journeys to new villages, in which I felt privileged to participate. My primary contribution involved handling the video projector. Having operated no gadget more sophisticated than a bicycle, the sleek black piece of futuristic technology intimidated them. So I enjoyed my little niche as the tech-savvy American lady with the cool equipment by which a whole village could imbibe the message of God’s love and salvation.

“*Chalo, ghar!*” Saroj beamingly summoned us to follow him to his house. Vincent made a fatigued move to pick up the generator but Saroj beat him to it. Hoisting it to his shoulder, he running-walked ahead of us, excited to introduce us to his family. “Give me that!” Vincent tugged on my projector

pack. Relieved of his own burden, he would have none of a female bearing more than himself, but I hesitated. Whoever awaited at Saroj's house might now perceive me as the burden-less, pampered, wimpy foreigner. Vincent persisted so I reluctantly relinquished the pack.

Traversing the riverbank I scanned the terrain in search of the house that I now understood to be our destination. But all that appeared were cattails and water-hewn mud ditches and rocks and the occasional rodent scurrying for cover. Krishna had disappeared but now reemerged on a rusted-out cycle that creaked with every depression of the pedals. Onto it they loaded the generator and Krishna walked the cycle while Saroj balanced the load.

Ahead, camouflaged against the brown and green, almost concealed behind a rise, stood a chicken coop. Barely five feet at its peak, the walls were roughly woven from the reeds bobbing along the river's edge. Supported by tree branches for rafters, the same reeds composed the roof. Old clothes and plastic bags served as shingles, held down by bits of rubbish collected from the nearby garbage dump. When afforded freedom the cackling fowl make good use of daylight hours to range far and wide scratching for edibles so the absence of chickens was easily explained. *Odd, though*, I thought, *that a chicken coop would have nothing but a rag for a door. The foxes and weasels around here must enjoy fine dining.* Too small to house a cow, I reconsidered the possibility of its use as a goat shed.

Sweaty grime had collected between my toes and I imagined the pleasure of sitting down and dipping my feet in some cool water. I strained my eyes on ahead, intent on glimpsing the house. *We must be getting close since we've come to where they keep their animals*, I thought. *Maybe*

*their house is a riverfront.* My mind wandered. There it was. A smooth wooden dock. I gratefully unbuckled my sandals and plunged headfirst into cool waters. Then I crawled out, wrapped myself in a towel and lay back in an armchair while imbibing an icy Coke.

“Hallooooo!” Saroj bellowed a greeting.

I snapped back to reality. My comrades ahead had drawn up in front of the chicken coop. Before I could fish my senses out of the imaginary armchair, from the rag-covered doorway of what I had supposed to be an animal shelter emerged a woman and two scruffy children clutching her dress.

Saroj either ignored my gaping mouth and incredulous expression or, I hoped, hadn’t noticed. He proudly introduced us to his wife, Rita, from whose wizened face shone the same overcoming joy. Though teeny and frail in appearance, when she grabbed me in a grandmotherly bear hug, her bony arms possessed unexpected strength. Eyes gleaming with emotion, she touched her cheek to mine first on the right then the left, the traditional gesture by which traditional Indian women say, “I’m very pleased to meet you!”

Saroj was urging his daughter to greet me. Half letting go of her mother’s *sari*, the six-year-old inched forward. “Tell your name,” Saroj prompted. Dirty face and tattered skirt could not shroud the cherubic loveliness of this burnished angel. Eyes darting self-consciously from her mother to me, she murmured in Hindi, “My name is Priya.” Then with a giggle she dove behind her mother and peeked out with one eye.

Her little brother, gaining courage, presented himself and stuck out a hand. “My name is Arjun.”

I shook his hand. “*Jai Masih ki*, Arjun!”

Amidst the greetings I kept looking about, certain there must be more to this home. Surely if I looked hard enough I’d



spot metal trunks containing clothes, a cabinet with dishes and pots and a form of transportation besides that old cycle. But I was wrong. This family owned no more than two sets of clothes each. The only pot simmered on the cow dung fire flickering in a hearth molded of mud on the ground outside the hut. Apart from a meager bag of rice, the only sign of food was a bitter gourd termed *karela* having the appearance of a hybrid warty toad and green frog.

*This is the definition of poverty*, I thought.

Then I knew I was wrong. This was not the definition of poverty. Poverty is a middle-class family that has no joy. Poverty is a wealthy family enslaved to fear and strife. According to the economy of the world, Saroj and Rita were poor. They lacked education. They lacked financial opportunity. They lacked what the developed world considers necessities of life.

But absence of material possessions hadn't dampened Saroj and Rita's joy. They were no longer slaves. They had escaped the chains under which their kinsmen labored. They had found Jesus, and with Him they had found peace and purpose. Now they walked with the authority of the King of whose kingdom they had become citizens. They were wealthy with a wealth no money could buy. The strangest notion swept over me. I stood in the presence of true royalty.

Transformation begins with the spiritual, with aligning ourselves to God's plan and purpose. Because these children's parents had received Christ, the doorway to God's blessing now lay open, and beyond death lay an eternity of joy. But as I gazed at the children, such knowledge afforded disturbingly scant solace from the deep-down uneasiness and turmoil in my soul. Questions writhed about in my brain. *What future do these children have? Will they reproduce their parents' material deprivation? Will they, in the wake of countless*

*other underprivileged rural Indian children, be abducted and brutalized into sex slavery, or compelled to labor twelve hours a day in a factory?*

From a safe distance Priya and Arjun gazed wide-eyed and wondering at the oddity that was me. A homo sapien wearing light-colored skin hadn't wandered into their secluded habitat since the days of the British *raj*. But today being stared at like a zoo animal didn't trouble me. At least these children were gaining exposure to a brand-new mind-expanding truth: "The world is bigger than our village."

Out of the little shack Saroj carried the only furniture—two cots. Their wobbly legs supported wooden frames with rough hemp laced across hammock-like. In the absence of chairs we perched gratefully on the wooden rail, taking care neither to slip backward onto the sagging string nor to sit in the middle of the long side lest it break.

Upon a guest's arrival to an Indian home the standard and promptly undertaken act of hospitality is to serve up a steaming cup of sweet milky *chai* tea. Those without access to milk still serve that which they have. So from a bucket by the hut Priya dipped water with a steel cup, pouring it into four more cups balanced on a platter. Adding a bowl of coarse sugar and a spoon, she served us. When I took my cup and the proffered spoonful of sugar poured into my palm, Saroj glanced askance at Vincent and queried, "She foreigner . . . no drinking our water! She get sick!"

Having already drained his cup Vincent laid back on the string cot and stretched. "Jyoti isn't a foreigner. She eats and drinks our food and water. She's entirely Indian!"

I confirmed his statement with a confident smile and ventured a bit of Hindi. "Yep, my stomach's become Indian!" Saroj raised his eyebrows with a mixture of amazement and

respect as I thrust out my cup for a refill of the brown-tinted fluid.

Though my stomach had learned to cope with the rigors of Indian bacteria, my intestines were still trying to catch up and I was at the moment plagued with serious gastric discomfort. But I hadn't come to India for a luxury cruise. Such trivia did not merit my complaining.

In India, rural families live in close-knit groups. Law and order is minimal, and being separated from the group puts one at great risk from vandals and gangs. So when the chit-chat around the little hut turned to why the family lived in such a deserted place, my Hindi receptors strained to catch the words.

"Before we find Jesus, every day we live in fear of demons and spirits," said Saroj. "We visit holy place to find God but no happy, no peace in family. When we choose follow Jesus, peace and happy come in our home. We remove idol from our house and stop going to temple. Instead now we read Bible and pray. Now we no more fear. When we tell our neighbors they amazed to hear of God who love us and die for us and rise again from grave. They ask questions about Jesus and how they too can have peace and eternal life. But then witch doctor find out! He tell our neighbors because we remove idol from our home, the gods will curse whole village.

"From then on everyone's attitude change. They start to talk bad things about us and mock us. One day the village elders come in group and stand out front of our house. Rita scared they going to beat us. I scared too but I know Jesus give us courage. I put Rita and kids in back of house and step out to meet them. They say, 'Either bring idol back in your house or leave village immediately.' So, here we are."

Vincent's expression displayed concern. "So do they know we're showing the video tonight? Won't they stop us?"

Saroj chuckled. "They know I invite guests from city to come and show movie. No entertainment out here and rarely a visitor. So they curious to see why you come all this way. I expect they sit and watch our movie. Afterward we see what happen."

The shadows grew long. Time to set up the equipment had arrived. We gathered in a circle to pray. After inviting the Lord's presence this night to bring peace and freedom to more of Saroj and Rita's neighbors, we set out for the village.

Having decided the light-skinned creature was in fact human, and discovering I could even manage a few words of Hindi, Priya and Arjun had overcome their bashfulness. One on my left and one on my right, they gripped and caressed my hands. Shining brighter than the stars, their eyes shamelessly stared into my face.

"Auntie, how long you stay in India?"

"Auntie, what is America like?"

"Auntie, teach me English!" Children in India respectfully address older girls or women as "auntie."

I told them of America but avoided describing our plush houses, smooth roads, glitzy malls, technological wonders or material comforts lest they feel deprived.

While I taught them phrases in English, a cry of sadness rose up in my heart. Behind their eyes so full of life and hope, malnutrition lurked. If my gut was hurting from bacteria, theirs was hurting from cold, hard hunger. Their father's inability to afford a private school was obvious. Standards of education in the rural public schools were dismal. "Outcaste" Dalit children such as these, shunned by those of "higher birth," faced mistreatment and discrimination. Without an

education, their lives would be forced to recycle another generation of subsistence-level endurance of a harsh existence that daily challenged their will to live.

For now their tender age and innocence shielded them from such weighty thoughts. Nimble as deer they negotiated gullies and hopped over bushes as we walked. Feet full of hope, hearts full of expectation—optimism that would soon be worn to despair by the stranglehold of a suppressive reality. Ardently trotting beside my rugged leather sport sandals, their dusty feet in broken plastic flip-flops would likely travel no farther than the nearby town.

Their little hands, already roughened from living in a world of dirt and rocks, would have no chance to operate a computer or turn the key of a motorized vehicle. They would exist on lentils and rice, plagued by constant hunger pains and hunted by disease. They would pass their days in a narrow and primitive world, living in mud or thatch shacks and laboring in the field to eke out an existence, chained to poverty by debt and by a cruel system that views suffering as well-deserved penance for sins in a former life.

I longed to give these children three nutritious meals a day, and a good education including their dream of learning English. I longed to set them up for a bright future. And how many more similar to them or in far worse conditions? At least these children had two parents who loved them. Others didn't. Three hundred million people in spiritual and physical slavery. Seventy-five million of them children, and of those thirty million destitute, orphaned or at risk of abuse. Their rescue and freedom was why I had come.

But now that I was here, what was I to do? At least tonight, this village would learn of Jesus' love. A few would turn to Him. Tonight, some would be rescued from the spiritual

chains. The point at which deliverance must begin was spiritual transformation. Afterward and along with it would come the physical, educational and economic.

Priya's gaze still searched me and her hand still gripped mine. I squeezed it back but dared not look into her eyes or she would have seen tears in mine. Their faces blended with the face of the maimed beggar girl. The thought of their bleak future threatened to crush my heart. I, too, was once six years old. I was also the daughter of low income parents. But I grew up in America. I had access to education, and was born in a land of reasonable justice where everyone willing to work hard could come up in life. Not so for an Indian child born into the same situation. A girl child whose father had abandoned the family, or whose mother had died, was likely to follow in the footsteps of the wretched girl I had seen hours ago, whose deathlike gaze still tormented my soul.

Throughout my quarter century of life, Mystery had been preparing its charge for this embarking. But now as I walked on under the vast canopy of stars with the children's hands clutching mine as if I embodied the fulfillment of their impossible dreams, I felt altogether impotent and helpless. The light in this rag-clad six-year-old's eyes would only shine for a few more years until the reality of suffering wiped out her hope. How long before I could give her a better future?