

India in Transition

Although Sister Teresa had spent a few days in Calcutta when she first arrived in India, moving there from Darjeeling was a shocking transition. Far from being a breezy mountain resort town, India's third largest city was hot, humid, and desperately overcrowded. Its slums were lined with makeshift tin and cardboard shacks, and many beggars lived right on the streets and sidewalks. Indian-born

Beggars are a common sight on the streets of Calcutta.

English writer Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book*, called it the "City of Dreadful Night."

There were other sides to Calcutta as well. Once called "the City of Palaces," it had been the capital of the British Raj until 1911. Some neighborhoods were prosperous, with elegant Victorian architecture and a healthy cultural life, while others were known for their racy nightclubs and prostitutes. But the Sisters of Loreto convent



at Entally, a complex of several buildings, green lawns, and athletic fields enclosed by high walls, was next to one of the city's poorest slums, known as *Moti Jihl*, or "Pearl Lake." (The name referred to a discolored pond at its center.) Though the Loreto Sisters almost never left their walled compound because of their order's strict rules of enclosure, the sights Sister Teresa had seen just outside its wrought-iron gates were etched deeply in her heart and mind.

During her many years at Loreto Entally, Sister Teresa was known as a dedicated and cheerful worker. Rising at 5:00 every morning, she prayed and studied before going to Mass in the chapel. At St. Mary's School (one of two in the Entally complex), she worked side by side with Bengali nuns from a different order, who wore simple traditional saris in white or blue in place of the Loreto Sisters' full-length black-and-white habits. By all accounts, Sister Teresa was a gifted teacher who brought her geography and history lessons to life for the young students of St. Mary's School. In her geography classes, she told stories about growing up in Skopje, and had a talent for describing even those places

The Black Hole of Calcutta

Calcutta was notorious for an incident in 1756, in which more than 100 British civilians and soldiers were jailed overnight in a dungeon so tiny and airless that most of them were smothered to death by morning. Though some historians now doubt these reports, the phrase "Black Hole of Calcutta" lodged in the public imagination, adding to the city's dark reputation.

The Caste System

India has a rigid system of castes or social classes. Traditionally, the caste a person is born into determines what kind of work he or she may do. *Brahmans* are priests, scholars, and teachers. *Kshatriyas* are rulers and warriors. *Vaishyas* are merchants and farmers. *Sudras* are manual laborers. *Dalits* ("Untouchables") are outcasts. Today, changes in economic or political status may allow people to overcome the limitations of their castes, especially in modern cities.


she'd never seen firsthand in vivid detail. The sisters taught in a variety of spaces, including a former chapel that had been divided into five classrooms, a former stable, and sometimes outside in the courtyard.

The Loreto schools in Entally had an excellent reputation, educating "Loreto girls" who often went on to college and became educators and social workers. Together,

the two schools in Entally served about 500 girls, a mixture of well-to-do Indians, children of foreigners who were living in India, and local orphans who lived at the school. All wore the same uniform to erase the difference between their backgrounds, but this was not easy in class-conscious India. Every day, before she started class, Sister Teresa washed and swept the floor of her classroom. This was a source of great fascination for her Indian students, since such chores were always performed

*"Do not forget
that you went to
India for the sake
of the poor."*

—Drana Bojaxhiu



by servants from the lower castes, not by professionals such as teachers. Among other duties, Sister Teresa supervised the children's recreation hour and oversaw the evening meals and bedtime routine of the students who boarded at the school. She also made sure that the local children who came to St. Mary's School received regular baths, a great treat for many who lived without plumbing at home. Sister Teresa was firm about following the rules, but rarely lost her temper with her students. She expected them to treat each other with kindness, and was always ready to offer a smile or hold a child's hand.

Sister Teresa taught at St. Mary's School for many years, and was eventually asked to become its headmistress. When she wrote to her mother about this achievement, Drana sent back a stern letter, reminding her daughter of her vocation: "Dear child, Do not forget that you went to India for the sake of the poor."

In addition to her teaching duties, Sister Teresa helped organize the school's chapter of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, the same youth group she had joined back in Skopje. Though some of the boarding students went out once a week with a Jesuit priest, Father Julien Henry, to visit hospitals and poor

A handleless broom, made by binding together a bunch of twigs or dried grasses, is frequently used for sweeping by lower-caste Indians.





The British "Union Jack" was replaced by the new flag of India. The design at the center is an ancient Buddhist symbol called the Dharma Chakra.

families in Moti Jihl, Sister Teresa was forbidden by convent rules

to accompany them. This must have weighed on her mind as she taught the children of well-to-do families inside the convent, while those she most wanted to serve lived just outside its walls.

She did leave the Entally convent a few times during these years, most notably in May 1937, when she traveled once more to Darjeeling to take her final vows, changing her name for the last time. Now 26 years old, she would be known for the rest of her life by the name Mother Teresa.

There had been many changes in India during Mother Teresa's long years of seclusion. The Indian people had grown increasingly dissatisfied with their colonial status, and a movement for independence, or home rule, was growing in strength. At its forefront was Mohandas K. Gandhi, a small man of unshakable convictions whose followers called him "Mahatma," or Great Soul.

India's resentment of the British Raj became even stronger in 1939, when England's parliament declared a

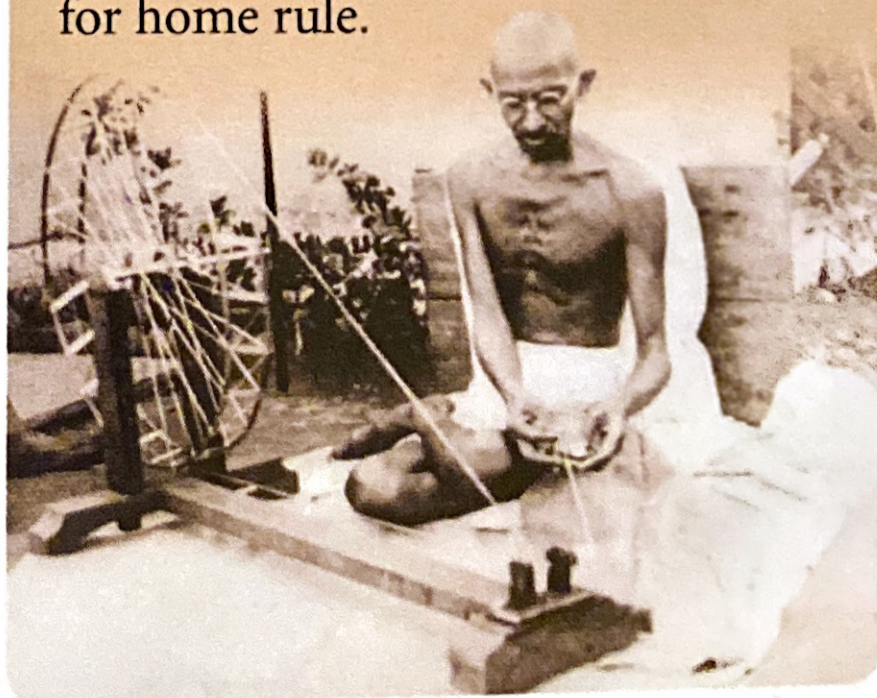


state of war with Nazi Germany. Just as they had done during World War I, the British dragged their colonies into World War II without asking for their consent. Since the British empire was vast, with outposts in Africa, the Middle East, parts of Indochina, and India, the term “world war” was painfully accurate. England’s allies France and Belgium were also colonial powers with extensive holdings on other continents, further expanding the scope of the fighting.

Calcutta was the center of British military operations in India and other parts of Asia during World War II, and there was a constant threat of air raids from the enemy nation of Japan. During the war, all transportation systems in India, from national railroads to the riverboats used to deliver rice, were taken over by the British military. Shipments of rice from neighboring Burma were stopped altogether. These shortages

Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement

Born in 1869, Gandhi trained as a lawyer in England and went to work in South Africa. His experiences with racial discrimination led him to establish a new form of social activism called nonviolent resistance, or *satyagraha*. Through mass demonstrations and symbolic acts, such as leading a march to the coast to harvest sea salt rather than paying the English salt tax, he galvanized India’s quest for home rule.



FAMINE

Famine is a widespread scarcity of food in a region.

combined with two winter-harvest disasters—a cyclone and a flood—to cause the Great Famine of 1943.

It is estimated that two to four million Indians died of hunger during this time. Calcutta's teeming streets were swelled by hundred of thousands of starving villagers, and the war refugees who were flooding into a city whose meager resources and soup kitchens were already strained beyond measure. Beggars slept in railway stations or lay starving on the sidewalks.

The Loreto Sisters at Entally were directly affected by the famine and the war. Food for the students and nuns

War on Many Continents

War broke out between Japan and China in 1937, and in 1939, Germany invaded Poland and other countries in Europe. When France, Belgium, and England entered the war with their colonies, much of the world was divided between the Allies of Western Europe (joined by Australia and the United States) and the Axis led by Germany, Japan, and Italy. By the time the war ended in 1945, more than 70 million people had died.

was now in short supply, and war-orphaned babies were frequently left at their doorstep. At one point, Mother Teresa and her peers were caring for 24 babies at once. Catholic missionaries who had escaped from Japan asked for shelter along with other war refugees. Then British military commanders took over the convent buildings, converting the schools and orphanage into a hospital

complex for sick and wounded soldiers. The Loreto Sisters—along with the boarding students and orphans in their charge—were forced to relocate. Some were sent away to Darjeeling and to convents in other cities, but Mother Teresa was able to continue teaching in a building on Calcutta's Convent Road.

After the war ended in 1945, the Loreto Sisters returned to their home at Entally. But the world outside their gates was still far from peaceful. As the movement for Indian independence grew, so did the tension between the country's two major religious groups. Muslims feared that an independent India ruled by the Hindu majority would exclude them even more

A poor Indian tends a cooking fire on the streets of a slum neighborhood near the Calcutta railway station.



forcefully than the British Raj. They pressed for partition into two independent countries, one Hindu and one Muslim.

On a brutally hot August day in 1946, these tensions erupted into violent riots in the streets of Calcutta, in what became known as the Direct Action Day, or the Day of Great Killing. More than 5,000 people were killed and thousands more wounded, and soldiers were called in to stop the rioting. The city's services ground to a halt, and with all food deliveries suspended, Mother Teresa went into the streets alone to get food for the 300 students who boarded at Entally. What she witnessed horrified her: "I saw bodies in the street, stabbed,

Calcutta police sometimes used tear-gas bombs to quell violent rioting.

beaten, lying there in dried blood." She





was stopped on the street by uniformed soldiers, who drove her back to the school with a truckload of rice for her hungry students. For many weeks afterward, the city was filled with smoke as the piles of bodies were burned in accordance with Hindu ritual.

It was during these difficult years that Mother Teresa met Father Celeste Van Exem, a Belgian Jesuit who would become her lifelong spiritual advisor and close confidant. At first, they seemed to make an

unlikely pair. Father Van Exem was an expert in the Arabic language and Muslim religious traditions, who had lived for several years among Bedouin Arabs. A bookish and scholarly man, he would later admit that he was less than enthusiastic when his superiors assigned him to advise the young Mother Teresa, a pious and simple nun who had a deep interest in helping the poor, but had led a sheltered existence within convent walls. This would soon change, as Father Van Exem came to sense something extraordinary in this humble nun.

India's Many Religions

India is a deeply religious country, with statues, shrines, and temples visible everywhere. The majority religion is Hinduism, founded about 5,000 years ago. Hindus believe in many gods and goddesses, and the cycles of birth, life, death, and reincarnation (called *samsara*). The largest minority religion is Islam, founded in the seventh century by the Arab prophet Muhammad. Followers of Islam, called Muslims, believe in one god (*Allah* in Arabic). There are also Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and small populations of Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews in India.