

10-1-2005

Jesuit Higher Education in Southern India: A Revolution in the Making

John Izzo, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Izzo, S.J., John (2005) "Jesuit Higher Education in Southern India: A Revolution in the Making," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 28, Article 12.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol28/iss1/12>

JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN INDIA: A REVOLUTION IN THE MAKING

By John Izzo, S.J.

The option is a direct challenge to casteism, and this creates a dangerous environment for the Jesuits and their work, both from without and from within. Since 1978, at least 18 nuns, brothers, and priests, including five Jesuits, have been murdered working with the Indian subcontinent's poor.

Liberty to captives

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; freedom to captives, and sight to the blind, to let his oppressed go free. —Luke 4:18

While the Indian subcontinent undergoes tectonic social reconfigurations, emerging into the twenty-first century as a major economic, political, and spiritual force, Jesuit higher education in Southern India is reconfiguring itself to challenge India's multi-millennial structures of social injustice, and spearhead new educational models for India and other parts of the world. According to Madurai's Jesuits, they have shifted the paradigm away from traditional educational models to match today's needs.

"We're starting a revolution here," Fr. Xavier Alphonse, S.J., exclaimed after a grueling 14-hour workshop. Xavier Alphonse is the founding director of

the Madras Centre for Research and Development of Community Education (MCRDCE) in Tamilnadu, India's southernmost state, and home to the Madurai Jesuit Province. MCRDCE, which sponsored the workshop, is one arm in the multi-dimensional transformation taking place in Madurai's higher education system. On the surface the Jesuit colleges and universities do not appear revolutionary. They seem quite ordinary, much like their American counterparts. But appearances say little of their radical policies or the oppressive underbelly of Hindu conservatism that threatens the process—threatens not only the schools but the Jesuits themselves.

The province of 504 men runs four university-colleges, a teacher-training college and a community college among its more than 30 apostolates. The five col-

John Izzo, S.J., a member of the California Province, now at Boston College, has long experience in India.



leges and universities rank with India's elite, designated "five-star" by the government. In 2004, Loyola College, St. Joseph's and St Xavier's were among 47 out of 394 accredited colleges and universities granted the "Potential for Excellence" award by the government's University Grants Commission. For the second year in a row, Loyola was judged among the top ten colleges in India, ranking first in arts, third in sciences, and fourth in commerce.

But Madurai has chosen a different standard by which to judge its colleges' success. "We do not run the colleges for name and fame," Fr. Provincial Francis Xavier wrote in 2002. "We want [to] form men and women, not for the top 15 percent, [but] for the economically poor, socially oppressed, and politically marginalized, people [of] the slums, rural villages, remote hilly places. The youth we form should become instruments of a new social order."

Caste and the colleges

French Jesuits founded India's first Catholic college at Trichy in Tamilnadu in 1844 to educate poor Catholics for upward mobility and responsible citizenship. Their goal was to overcome ignorance, illiteracy and superstition. But in time college admittance became dependent on examinations and school records, excluding those who could not afford private schools.

The colleges attracted the well-to-do, mostly higher-caste youth, and prepared them to succeed in business, education, and politics. "The best came in," wrote Francis Xavier, "and left as the best. [But] What have [they] done to change the face of India? Our influence, through education, has been minimal. In times of crisis how many stood with us or raised their voices? Anti-conversion bills (read: "anti-Christian") were introduced with little or no opposition. How many registered their objection? We helped them come up in life, climb the social ladder. Have we instilled in them a spark of fire for social concern or for socio-religious harmony? Have we formed them to be the voice of the voiceless?" In fact, to the Catholic schools' chagrin, their graduates have been among those leaders cutting off funding for Catholic Schools and promoting anti-conversion laws to curtail the Church's work.

While Indian law guarantees schooling to the age of 14, many Dalits and Tribals are denied part or all of their education. A Dalit Jesuit with a Ph.D. in Economics tells how, as a 13-year-old, his parents were chastised at their thatch-roofed mud house by caste villagers for allowing him to read. The last thing traditional caste people want is for Dalits and Tribals to become educated, self-sufficient, and demanding of their rights. These Dalits and Tribals, over 25 percent of India's population, are the most disadvantaged of India's 1.1 billion people. Traditionally they have been the most poorly represented in Jesuit schools.

Dalit Catholics are the worst off of all. As Christians, they are technically outside the legal caste system and not eligible for government aid. But as Dalits they are oppressed and exploited by caste people. And within the Church they are cheated and exploited by caste-Catholics, denied equality within parish communities, refused full participation in religious celebrations, until recently excluded from seminaries and religious orders, and denied responsibility in Jesuit colleges.

Rumbles and reactions

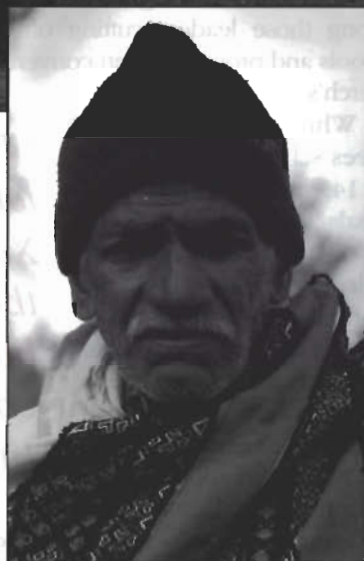
The winds of change blew over the [Madurai Province with the 32nd General Congregation," wrote Dr. Rajarathinam, S.J., Madurai Province Coordinator of Higher Education. The worldwide 1960s-and-70s awakening of Jesuit

"The best came in," wrote Francis Xavier, "and left as the best... What have they done to change the face of India?"



Above: A rural village Dalit boy studying in his backyard.

Right: A mountain Tribal priest—indigenous (pre-Hindu) religion.



social consciousness provoked a shift in the Province's priorities, opening social ministries for the poor and raising troubling questions about educational policies. In the words of Xavier Alphonse, the 32nd General Congregation upset the rhythm, complacency, and proud achievements of the colleges. By the 1980s, questions were being asked: why do the colleges exist and for whom? What have they achieved? Some thought they were hopeless, irrelevant, a waste of time and money. "Close'em down," critics demanded. Higher-education Jesuits were visibly disturbed. Some would not accept the challenge.

"We need change," Fr. Provincial Michael Jeyaraj, S. J., told the province in 1984. The Province Assembly responded courageously that the colleges would change and be willing to pay the price, but the changes did not materialize—words and more words, meeting after meeting through two provincialates, and nothing concrete happened. In 1991 Jesuit educators admitted their failure.

According to Rajarathanan, the college men were not ready for change.

The motto: Towards Liberation Together with the poor/Dalits

Ready or not, in 1991 Fr. Provincial Aloysius Irudayam promulgated a province-wide policy on higher education, binding on all five colleges and universities; but it took another 10 years before the "Policy" became effective. It was revised in 1998, and again in 2001-02; and now, after more than two decades of active and passive resistance, Madurai is aggressively implementing it. The Policy details a preferential "Option," in the light of the Gospel and Ignatian Magis, meaning the colleges will preferentially, not exclusively, admit and minister to the poor, especially Catholic Dalits; and the Jesuits will cast their lot with them.

Policy points

- strive for academic excellence—where excellence is defined as maximally developing the latent potential in each student
- form men and women integrally as agents of social change working to establish a just society, focusing on the excluded and the marginalized
- impart religious, moral, and ethical values
- Catholics study doctrine; other Christians Bible study; and non-Christians ethics
- all exposed to human rights and social analysis
- classes take multi-day field trips to Dalit and Tribal villages; work for the urban poor
- faculty lead and accompany students, and make annual two-day retreats
- engage in research and work for the improvement of the environment and the betterment of the poor and disadvantaged
- outreach extension centers for the urban and rural poor within each school's locale
- spiritual direction and instructional programs for alumni/ae—to raise awareness and engender deeper faith commitment to the Option

Admissions

- no Catholic Dalit or Tribal undergraduate denied admission
- student body at least 5 percent Catholic
- preference to first-generation applicants, local and rural students
- 25 percent reserved for poor
- 50 percent for minorities
- Order of priority for undergraduates:
 - Catholic Dalits and Tribals
 - Catholic non-Dalits or Tribals

- other Dalits or Tribals
- non-Catholic lower castes
- others
- 25 percent graduate seats reserved for Catholic Dalits
- 25 percent graduate seats reserved for Catholic women.

In hiring faculty, preferences are given to Catholics, Dalit Catholics, first-generation learners, rural residents; locals, and for those having a Jesuit vision. The non-teaching staff is appointed according to the same preferences as for student admissions.

Road blocks

The Policy's implementation has uncovered problems. Many Dalit and Tribal students, even the brighter and better-schooled, are not prepared emotionally, socially, or psychologically for university life. They come from backgrounds where there is no hope or expectation of higher education, professional training, salaried employment, or careers. The Policy calls for extensive tracking, counseling, remedial programs, and tutoring, but this is not enough. Upon graduating, some do not know what to do. They have no experience with job-hunting, interviewing, etc. They return to their villages—educated beggars. Throughout India there are about 45 million educated unemployed. Tamilnadu alone has about 5 million.

Reaching beyond — People's Colleges

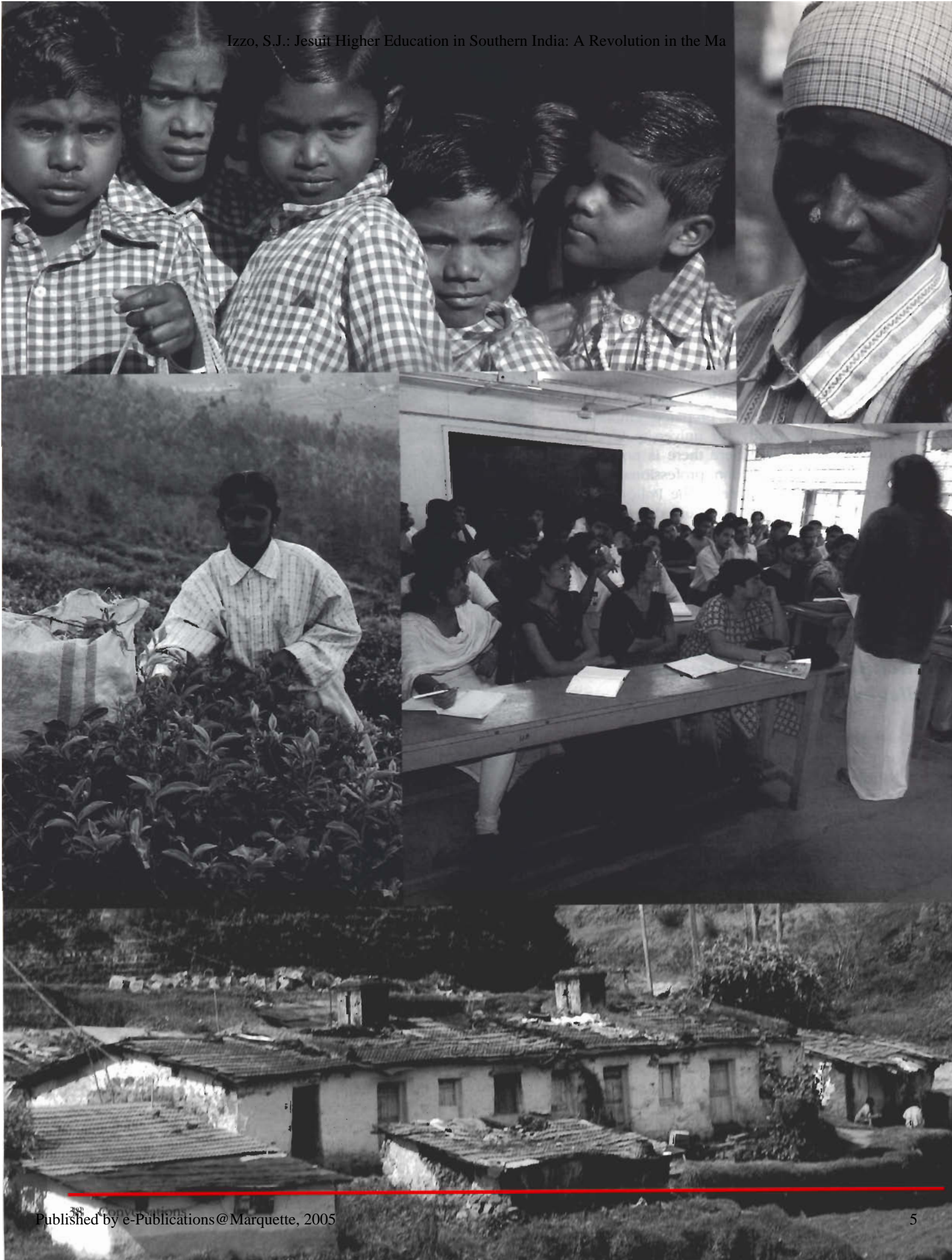
Even with the Option, Madurai's colleges reach only a few of their targeted population. Nationwide, of 160 million first graders, six million reach college. Of almost 100 million aged 14-to-18, about 75 million have dropped out of school or never attended. In 1995-96, 26 million Indian children dropped out of grades 1-8, and most became child laborers. In Tamilnadu 90 percent of girls drop out by high school. Dropout rates are highest among Dalits. While general literacy rates in Tamilnadu are close to 60 percent, literacy among Dalits is about 40% (almost 8 million illiterates), and below 30 percent for Dalit women (4.5 million illiterate Dalit women). But Madurai's Jesuits are committed to making value-based higher education available to all.

The Madras Centre for Research and Development of Community Education (MCRDCE) has created a new community-based higher education model specifically designed for the uneducated, undereducated, and unprepared for education. MCRDCE's 'community' college is an alternative holistic system, formed in collaboration with neighboring communities and local



Loyola College opening day assembly.

industries. The program is work-related and success-oriented. At base it emphasizes *living* skills—personal skills for self-acceptance, self-esteem, motivation and goal-setting, problem-solving and decision-making, time and stress management; it helps students develop mechanisms for coping with sexuality, loneliness, depression, fear, anxiety, HIV Aids, alcohol and substance abuse, failure, criticism and conflict. It provides



training in team work and leadership, career guidance, and work-environment experience.

As of 2004, 81 community colleges had begun in Tamilnadu, and 115 throughout India, with 35 more planned. To date they have served about 35,000 students, over 70 percent of them women. Seventy-five percent of the graduates have moved into employment, and 16 percent to higher education. And in 2004 Xavier Alphonse was invited to introduce the MCRD-CE model to South Africa.

Threats from without

The Option is a direct challenge to casteism, and this creates a dangerous environment for the Jesuits and their work, both from without and from within. Since 1978, at least 18 nuns, brothers and priests, including five Jesuits, have been murdered working with the Indian subcontinent's poor. It is estimated that over 30 have been arrested, tortured or abused. In September, 2004, in Kerala, five Missionaries of Charity were viciously attacked with iron rods and chains on their way to a Dalit community. In Tamilnadu one Jesuit has been arrested four times, tortured and accused of attempted murder because he is helping Dalits whose land was stolen by caste villagers.

The fundamental problem is economics. In Tamilnadu, where 66 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture for its living, land owners need cheap dependent labor. This need is addressed by the caste system which enables a tiny minority to control the rest of Indian society through successive layers, each of which dominates the groupings below itself, with Dalits at the bottom. The only occupation most Dalits are qualified for is coolie-work, agricultural day labor. Over 80 percent of Dalit workers are agricultural laborers, but only about 54 percent of the available workers are employed. Tamilnadu male coolies work about 150 days per year, earning Rs50/day (\$1.10), barely enough for rice and vegetables. Caste traditionalists and land owners are frightened by the prospects of losing control over this work force.

The principal threat to the Jesuits is the RSS (National Volunteer Force), a militant fascist group, and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the RSS's political wing which controlled India's Parliament from 1996 to 2004. These fundamentalistic forces have been behind India's anti-conversion bills which are used to curtail Christian social workers among the Tribals and Dalits—whether or not there is evangelizing. These anti-conversion laws can give legitimacy to political violence in the eyes of caste people. When the RSS attack Christian

workers, the implicit message is: "The Dalits should be untouchable to you too. Leave them alone!"

To complicate matters, the Jesuits are not welcomed in some dioceses. "We hate the Jesuits," a Tamilnadu diocesan priest said.

"The Jesuits organize the Dalits, and they start demanding their rights. There's more hatred now than ever." Maybe so, but there are many parishes in Tamilnadu where

Dalits are not afforded their full legal and canonical rights. Christians are supposed to be outside the Hindu caste system, but the reality is, caste-consciousness has been part and parcel of the Catholic Church for as long as the Church has been part of India.

"We hate the Jesuits" a Tamilnadu diocesan priest said. "The Jesuits organize the Dalits and they start demanding their rights."

The enemy within.

The greatest threat to Madurai's Option may be the Jesuits themselves. "One of the powerful obstacles [to the option was] caste loyalty," wrote former provincial, Michael Jeyaraj. By the 1990s, Jesuit casteism was pushed into the open. "With a whiff of wind," wrote Aloysius Irudayam, "the lid was suddenly opened and laid bare the contradictions, and put us in an embarrassing position. The genie of caste kept tightly sealed for years frightened us."

A 2001 Province poll documented the issue:

- 92 percent said Jesuits take part in caste associations; 77 percent said casteism plays a covert role in the province, and most Jesuits operate on a caste basis;
- 52 percent said the Dalit option leads to casteism; 50 percent felt the Dalit option was thrust upon province by a small group;
- 38 percent felt it was too narrow an option; 21 percent said the Dalit option is unrealistic.

Today Madurai Jesuits fall roughly into three categories:

- Dalits and those who strongly support the Option,
- those who criticize the Dalit Jesuits, their supporters, and the methods by which the Option is implemented,
- those in the middle.

Jesuits at either end are hurt, angry, disillusioned, militant, and sometimes mean-spirited. Those in the middle either say nothing, or express dismay,

Tribal orphans from a Jesuit-run mountain orphanage.

(Photo credits for this article, John Izzo, S.J.)



confusion, or depression. A “we-them” dynamic has evolved, and there is a noticeable breakdown of trust and communications. Many speak openly only with members of the same caste or sub-group. Painful as this is, some see it as a sign of hope. The problem is in the open, the colleges have changed, and Madurai is paying the price.

Challenge to U.S. Jesuits

When many U.S. Jesuit colleges were founded in the mid-to-late 19th century, there was a need to provide quality education in a Catholic environment for immigrants and their children. But where is the need today? Are there population segments that are not able to take advantage of our present educational system? Could a paradigmatic shift in Jesuit educational thinking open doors of opportunity for today’s marginalized Americans? What if our colleges and universities reached out preferentially to the most disadvantaged and underprivileged, and centered our curricula on a course of studies designed to best help them?

Today, Jesuit colleges and universities provide our students with wonderful opportunities in urban and rural outreach programs, cultural immersion groups, pro-justice activities, volunteer

backwater geographical areas, often rural and less developed; inner cities; gangs; migratory groups; Native American reservations; prisons; certain immigrant communities.

No one in the United States with the desire and ability to better him or herself should be condemned to a life of fear, crime, mediocrity, or misery because traditional educational opportunities appear out of reach or irrelevant. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau statistics, approximately 24 million Americans have no high school diplomas, and another 21 million have high school diplomas but no college. There may be at least 50 million undereducated, unemployable, or underemployed Americans, either for insufficient education or social conditions that do not support a higher education.

Can we justify giving residual attention to these disadvantaged with the argument that we give a first-class education to some 150,000 of the brightest and most advantaged in society? Can we afford to not offer the best of our talents and resources to these needier people? Should we satisfy ourselves with the belief that we are waiting for them with open arms—if only they will meet our requirements—when the Gospel challenges us to go to them with open arms and meet their requirements. Can we, in conscience, simply shrug our shoulders in response to St. Paul’s challenge to be all things to all people?

And finally, are we willing to pay the price: with our students? with our alumni and alumnae? with society-at-large? with our faculties and staffs? with our fellow Jesuits?

• *There may be at least 50 million undereducated, unemployable or underemployed Americans...*