
Dalits' Plight

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Dalits comprise of a wide range of “low caste” groups, officially designated as Scheduled Castes. Traditionally, the groups, characterized as untouchables, were those involved in polluting activities like 1) cleaning up after funerals, (2) taking life for a living, 3) disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides, 4) dealing with sewage and 4) eating the flesh of cattle, domestic pigs and chickens (most indigenous tribes fell in this category). [Encyclopedia Britannica].

In the Constitution of India, ‘Scheduled Castes’ are defined in Article 366(24) as, “such castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within such castes, races or tribes as are deemed under article 341 to be Scheduled Castes for the purpose of the Constitution.”

According to 2011 census, SC population is 20.14 crores; it is 16.6% of India’s total population.

Effects of Caste Discrimination

In India (according to CHRGJ-Human Rights Watch report), the practice of “untouchability” i.e. imposition of social disabilities on persons on the basis of their birth in certain castes relegates a vast majority of Dalits to a lifetime of discrimination, exploitation and violence, including torture committed by government and private actors. The report states, the deep rooted discrimination violates Dalits’ rights to education, health, housing, property, freedom of religion, free choice of employment and equal treatment before the law.

As per National Crime Records Bureau, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. It is a fraction of the cases that are not recorded because of fear of retribution by the police and upper-caste groups. Most of the cases that reach the courts fall flat due to acquittals. NHRC report states that the law enforcement machinery is the worst violator of Dalits’ human rights as police responsibility for torture of Dalits in custody, rape of Dalit women and looting of Dalit property “are condoned, or at best ignored”.

According to Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment Annual report 2013-14, in 45.5% cases relating to Scheduled Castes, charge sheets were filed during the year, and 21.8% of all charge-sheeted cases were closed after investigation. 17.1% of the total cases relating to Scheduled Castes were disposed of by courts during the year out of which 10% ended in conviction.

The UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance found untouchability to be "very much alive" in India’s rural areas.

In a survey conducted in 565 villages in 11 states, it is found that the practice of untouchability affects the lives and psyches of millions of Dalits, as documented in about 80% of the villages.

Dalits don't have equal access to public places such as schools, water facilities, police stations, ration shops, and village council offices. Over 20% of Dalits have no access to safe drinking water and about 48% of Dalit villages have no access to water source. Only 10% of Dalit households have access to sanitation (as compared to 27% for non-Dalit households). Most Dalits depend on the 'goodwill' of upper-caste community for access to water from public wells.

Usually Dalits are not allowed to use taps and wells in non-Dalit areas. In case the Dalits resent to the practice of discrimination, Dalit villages are not provided water for several days. A survey conducted by Action Aid across 11 states showed that 48% villages were denied water services.

Only 27% Dalit households have water sources within premises whereas it is 45.2% for the non-Dalits. 19.5% of Dalit households have access to drinking water sources away from their premises as compared to 14.5% for the non-Dalits. 32% of Dalit households have access to drinking water from taps as compared to 40% for the non-Dalits.

In case of sanitation, 28% of Dalit households have access to toilet facility whereas it is 42 % for general households. 43% of Dalit households have connectivity to waste water outlet while it is about 51% for non-Dalit houses. (MDGs and Dalits: A Status Report, NACDOR). Lack of access to safe drinking water and awareness about hygiene and sanitation are major causes of water borne diseases. Dalits further face discrimination while accessing health facilities and the vicious circle continues.

Dalits are also denied infrastructure accessibility (as per Social Equity Watch), as most facilities are situated around non-Dalit habitats. When Dalits try to enter the areas to access the resources, clashes occur, which sometimes lead to en masse killings. Dalits also prefer to live in a locality where their neighbors are from the same community. Despite urbanization, Dalits continue to live in segregated colonies as they are not able to get rid of their feeling of insecurity.

Dalit women are the worst affected because of the lack of access to water and sanitation. Other than the burden of household tasks, Dalit women have to fetch water from far off, usually another village, while putting up with abuses and discrimination, for the entire family. Young girls of the family are also allotted this task. As fetching water becomes their primary responsibility, they drop out of schools and lose any chance of getting education, and consequently of earning and uplifting the economic or social status of the family.

Dalit women have to bear another form of abuse; they are often made the object of retaliation; sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women are used by landlords to crush resistance and 'teach lessons' to Dalit community.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women noted that Dalit women in India suffer from "deeply-rooted structural discrimination".

Dalit children have also become victims of inequity. 54% of them are undernourished and 83 out of 1000 live born Dalit children die before their first birthday. They face systemic stumbling blocks in their access to education. 99% of Dalit children are enrolled in government schools lacking basic infrastructure, classrooms, teachers and teaching aids. In classroom, Dalit children are made to sit in the back and suffer harassment by teachers and other students. The UN special rapporteur on the right to education stated that teachers have been known to declare that Dalit students "cannot learn unless they are beaten". In 38% of government schools Dalit children have to sit separately even while eating. The effect reflects in Dalit children's high dropout rates and low literacy.

The caste based distribution of labor is reinforced by employment reservation / quotas as Dalits are mostly assigned posts of sweepers due to low literacy. According to Ministry of Welfare, Government of India report, 45% Dalits are not able to read or write. Moreover, the mess of widespread unemployment and cutthroat competition for other posts has increased hostility between Dalits and non-Dalits because of reservations in other posts. It gave rise to reverse discrimination as educated and affluent Dalits availed the largesse of employment opportunities through reservations while non-Dalits were denied those opportunities and made to bear the cost.

By 1995, 17.2% of jobs were held by Dalits; it was more than their proportion in the Indian population.

In a 2006 judgment, a Supreme Court Bench noted that the 'creamy layer' among the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes should be kept out of the purview of reservation, as it results in "reverse discrimination". It said, "Reservation is necessary for transcending caste and not for perpetuating it. Reservation has to be used in a limited sense, otherwise it will perpetuate casteism in the country."

Caste Discrimination among Converts

To escape caste based discrimination by upper-caste Hindus, a lot of Dalits decided to convert en masse to Buddhism, Islam or Christianity. But they forgot that caste identity is rooted in Indian society and is determined by socioeconomic status and above all, birth and ancestors' traditional occupations.

Adopting a new religion may give spiritual solace; it may change a person's personal views, but it doesn't alter society's outlook. In some cases, converts are provided financial assistance but it doesn't enhance their socioeconomic status; and anyways, conversion doesn't change ancestry.

Conversion to Christianity has not redeemed 19 million Dalit Christians from social discrimination and untouchability. It has only added to their misery. [dalitchristians.com]

To promote conversions, millions of dollars flow from US and Europe into Dalit ministries, particularly from evangelical churches. A Dalit Christian, Francis says, "It's a total money-making program of the church from U.S., European countries". [USCatholics report, Feb. 8; 2013]

Upper caste Christians do not treat Dalit Christians as equals. Though Dalit Christians experience the same caste discrimination as the other Dalits, they are deprived of the privileges of protection of Civil Rights Act and Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989.

Catholic churches in India are largely controlled by upper caste priests and nuns. At present, more than 70% of Catholics are Dalits; but the upper caste Catholics, totaling only 30%, control 90% of the Catholic churches administrative jobs. Out of the 156 Catholic bishops, only 6 are from lower castes.

Caste discrimination is worst among Christians in South India as in the region, entire castes converted en masse to Christianity; members of different castes continue to practice their old ways; there are separate communion cups, churches and burial grounds for members of the lower castes.

In Goa, the caste system prevailed as the original Hindu Brahmins became Christian Bamonns and the Christian clergy became almost exclusively Bamonn. The upper-caste Gaon Christians insist that only their representatives be given positions on the Pastoral Council of Goa's Catholic Church.

In Kerala, the practice of untouchability is prevalent as Syrian Christians considered it necessary to keep their upper caste status. They would go for a ritual bath on physical contact with the lower castes.

A wall built across the Catholic cemetery of Trichy over six decades ago symbolizes the caste-based prejudice in the community. Dalits are allocated burial space on one side of the wall, while upper-caste converts are buried on the other side.

In Madurai, non-Dalits attacked Chinnayi Ayyappan with petrol bombs for leading a group of Dalits demanding burial rights in the village graveyard. A few days later she succumbed to injuries at a government hospital.

The practice of untouchability prevails even among the Muslims; if a person accidentally touches an individual of an 'unclean' caste, the former must purify himself by a simple bath, particularly prior to performing a religious function like offering namaz, or entering a mosque. In certain areas, there are separate mosques and burial grounds for Dalit Muslims.

Among Indian Muslims, other than the Ashrafs and Ajlafas, there is the Arzal group, as recorded in the 1901 census; they are also called Muslims "with whom no other Muhammadan would associate, and who are forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground".

The Sachar Committee Report says, "the present day Muslim society is divided into four major groups (i) the ashrafs, who trace their origins to foreign lands, (ii) the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam, (iii) the middle caste converts whose occupations are ritually clean, (iv) the converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes – Bhangi (scavengers), Mehtar (sweeper), Chamar (tanner), Halalkhor (Dom) and so on".

Ali Anwar, who founded the Pasmada Muslim Mahaz after observing caste oppression by upper class "Ashraf" Muslims on low-class Muslims, noted that lower class Muslims have been trying to marginalize the Dalit Muslims by surreptitiously asking for quotas for "Backward-class Muslims" while excluding the Dalit Muslims from the category. The word Pasmada is a Persian word, which means deprived which is the equivalent of untouchables.

The lot of Dalit Buddhists is not any different. In Ladakh, Buddhist's practice untouchability with their own people, particularly with the Garbas, Mons and Bedas; they are not allowed to eat or drink from the utensils of others and are denied the right of becoming the head of the village or head of the monastery. Atrocities against them are carried out for the purpose of 'keeping them' in their place within the social hierarchy.

Discrimination against Dalit Sikhs has been reported frequently from Punjab (the state with the highest proportion of Dalits among all states); a case in point is the Talhan Gurudwara conflict wherein the Jatt Sikh landlords refused to give any share to the Chamars in the governing committee of a shrine which led to riots.

As it is evident, conversion does not guarantee escape since untouchability is practiced across all faiths in India; apparently, the attempts to counter caste discriminations through conversions arise out of prejudice towards Hindu community, which reflects in the discourse of most evangelists and activists; the violence ensuing Namantar Andolan confirms that such prejudiced discourses destroys whatever goodwill exists and in effect, fuels further acrimony between non-Dalits and Dalits and also between converts and Hindu community.

Some Dalit activists may have noble intentions of eradicating caste discriminations; but sadly, they are not able to think beyond demanding equal rights and reservations or conversions as a radical move. While they claim to be 'fighting' for justice as a group, they fail to understand that it creates situation of conflict with other groups; when they ask for reservations to uplift their socioeconomic status, they forget, it comes at the cost of others; when they seek conversions, they try to prove that the rot is only in Hindu society. Instead of ending caste discrimination, the fight for justice ends up fueling inter-group hostility while cementing a distinct group identity as caste identity, which is otherwise supposed to be determined by birth and ancestry.

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