

## Caste and the Dalits: A brief introduction

At least 200 million people in India and over 260 million people globally are considered by their own societies as 'untouchable' – as polluted and polluting. In India, and elsewhere in South Asia, these people have taken the name of 'Dalit' – or 'broken' people. The Dalits, together with the indigenous hill and forest populations who are now commonly called 'Tribals', occupy a social position below or outside the caste system.

The stigma that attaches to Dalits is based on their descent and their traditional occupations – usually the most dirty, dangerous and demeaning occupations in their societies. The stigma remains, regardless of any personal qualities or achievements an individual may have. The stigma also persists in India despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability, a range of legislative measures, and a complex system of affirmative action known as 'reservations'. Still today, Dalits continue to be excluded, marginalized and shunned in all aspects of life, and their efforts to claim justice are met with violent reprisals. In order to better understand the Dalit life-world, a brief introduction to caste and its dynamics seems necessary.

### Caste: Background, terminology and definitions

The English term 'caste' is commonly used in South Asia to refer to two distinct concepts of societal affiliation: *jati* (birth group) and *varna* (literally 'colour', but indicating order, class or kind).<sup>1</sup> The term *jati* is most often used for the social group to which one is affiliated by birth, and with which one may identify for such purposes as marriage. There are thousands of titles associated with specific *jati* groups in different parts of the region, with some of these titles being very localized.

The concept of *jati* refers to the experience of caste in the concrete and factual domain of everyday social life. *Varna*, on the other hand, is a scheme of only four symbolic archetypes--propounded in certain Hindu sacred scriptures<sup>2</sup>--which transcend specific regional associations, and which are most commonly understood as a ranked order of precedence of idealized human callings. The *varna* divisions consist of:

- the *varna* of *Brahmans*, identified with those fulfilling a priestly or teaching function;
- the *varna* of *Kshatriyas*, usually associated with rulers or warriors;
- the *varna* of *Vaishyas*, often identified with commercial livelihoods (merchants and traders); and
- the *varna* of *Shudras*, or menial labourers.

The four *varna* castes eventually developed into a social mosaic of 3000 sub-castes, with the Untouchables at the bottom of the list, and actually outside the list. Born into a particular caste, a person's status is predetermined and immutable. It cannot be altered by any talent the person may possess, success she or he may achieve, or wealth she or he may acquire. Within the four principal castes, there are thousands of sub-castes, also called *jatis*, endogamous groups that are further divided along occupational, sectarian, regional and linguistic lines. Collectively all of these are sometimes referred to as "caste Hindus" or those falling within the caste system.

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<sup>1</sup> S Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (1999) 8-9

<sup>2</sup> Such as the Rigveda, Manusmriti and the Puranas.

## Caste: The Leviathan

Caste is not a mere hierarchical social system but a complex phenomenon peculiar to the Indian sub-continent. The caste society is often illustrated through a variety of images - as a multi-storied building without a staircase,<sup>3</sup> a pyramidal structure, a hydra-headed dragon with capacities to mutate and survive multiple attacks, and a complex of ghettos. With its origins, potency and legitimization in Brahminical Hinduism, it is also presented through the image of a human body.<sup>4</sup> Caste, therefore, is also a culture, a belief system, a mindset and a bunch of practices that encompasses every aspect of Indian life.

Caste is built on a theory of self-elevation, and a socio-political ideology of domination and oppression, sanctioned by certain religious systems which hold human beings are not equal, and that some are ontologically superior to others. By legitimising domination, subjugation and even violence as divinely ordained, it perpetuates abuse, humiliation and violation of those considered inferior. In other words, caste tells one that, as per one's own karma, there are some above with the right to oppress, and that there are some below that one has the right to oppress. The cumulative effect of such exercise and acceptance of unjust and abusive power, and the glorification of and reluctance to confront such, is a distinct feature of collective Indian psyche.

By ascribing privilege in varying degrees as per locations in the social hierarchy, caste sustains apathy towards the sufferings of others, numbs the sense of justice and dignity, and stokes rivalry and struggles for power among its victims who are divided into thousands of sub-castes. Because of the consequent dynamics, those on the bottom rungs of this social hierarchy suffer the most, and their suffering is seen as normal and inevitable. To put it differently, caste keeps people divided, suspicious, envious of each other and divided so that those on the top remain stable and strong. Possibilities for and expressions of collaboration and solidarity among communities are rare because caste ensures 'social distances'.

Caste keeps people in a perpetual mode of greed, aggression, rivalry and insecurity, denying them to be and to evolve as human beings capable of love, respect, justice and compassion. Since it hangs so much on presumed superiority, it makes the ego of the one who asserts caste superiority so fragile that it feels threatened when the disempowered assert their dignity and rights. On the contrary, it feels safe and stable when its victims remain vulnerable for exploitation.

Because of the detrimental concepts of power - of domination and subjugation, that it relies on, it detests common discipline and mutual accountability. Therefore, democratic norms and the rule of law are mostly ineffective and tend to work in favour of those with access or proximity to power. So, life remains an endless struggle of negotiation and compromises, making one to accept injustice as inevitable.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Ambedkar in his first editorial for Mook Nayak (Leader of the Voiceless) in 1930 described the Hindu Society as a multistoried tower with no staircase or entrance.

<sup>4</sup> The Rig Veda, an ancient Hindu scripture gives its version of the origin of caste:  
"When they divided up the man, into how many parts did they divide *him*?  
What did his mouth become? What his arms?  
What are his legs called? What his feet?  
His mouth became Brahmin;  
his arms became the warrior-prince,  
his legs the common man who plies his trade.  
The lowly serf was born from his feet." (X: 90:11;12)

Since caste is the primary identity marker for Indians, all other identities – language, religion, region or ethnicity are secondary and, in most cases, irrelevant. In fact, it constantly resists any such pan-identities to replace it. India's politics, economy, education, development, democracy and every aspect of life – values, attitudes and relationships are shaped and driven by caste. Its prosperity and poverty, and its lauded achievements and loathed backwardness, and all such contradictions have their roots in caste.

### **Caste through Dalits - its worst victims.**

Despite giant strides in economic and technological growth and development, India is the home for the largest number of the poor anywhere in the world. Many sociological studies have proved that the majority of these are the victims of caste – the low castes, backward castes, Dalits and tribals who were forced to endure multiple deprivations for centuries.

Dalits are the worst of its victims. They are considered outside the caste system. They are the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable, and suffer from multiple disadvantages in terms of education, employment, health, housing, etc.

The Dalits are described as *varna-sankara*: they are "outside the system" – so inferior to other castes that they are deemed polluting and therefore "untouchable." They themselves are divided into further sub-castes. Although "untouchability" was abolished under Article 17 of the Indian constitution, the practice continues to determine the socio-economic and religious standing of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

The Dalits are called by different names in different parts of the region. These names were given by the Caste people as expressions of contempt, conveying a clear distinction between "we-the pure" and "you-the impure". In response to these insulting labels, the Untouchables have chosen to give themselves the name 'Dalit', which refers to the hardship of their condition of life. The term 'Dalit' has roots in Sanskrit where the root '*dal*' means 'to split, crack, open'. 'Dalit' has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. By saying that they are all these, the Dalits assert their awareness and indictment of the sources of their oppression and their determination to destroy them.

The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century, when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1826-1890), used it to describe the Outcastes and Untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), this term gained greater importance and popularity. For the people affected it has become an expression of hope – the hope of recovering their self-identity. The term has thereby gained a new connotation with a more positive meaning.

In Indian Government administrative terminology, the Dalits and Tribals are referred to as 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) and 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST), and other marginalized groups as 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC). The Government of India has officially documented these groups, primarily to determine those deserving reservation in education and jobs.

### **Caste discrimination and untouchability in practice**

Some of the practical expressions of caste-based discrimination and untouchability include the following:

- Segregation in housing/residence, with Dalit families being confined to specific areas of the village or town.
- De facto prohibition of inter-caste marriage, especially inter-marriage with Dalits.
- Social prohibitions against eating together or even using the same utensils. (In many tea shops, for example, a different set of mugs are set aside for use by Dalits.)
- Social prohibitions against Dalits using the same wells and other public facilities (including places of worship) as other community members.
- Public humiliation and violent attacks - including sexual violence against Dalit women - especially in reaction to Dalit individuals and communities claiming justice and their human rights.

One of the most extreme examples of caste-based assignment of the worst jobs is ‘manual scavenging’, the manual collection and removal of human faeces from ‘dry latrines’. Manual scavenging survives in many parts of India, despite the adoption of measures such as the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993, which prohibits the employment of manual scavengers or the construction of dry (non-flush) latrines and repeated government commitments to eradicate manual scavenging. Manual scavengers are invariably from the "untouchable" (Dalit) community. They collect the excreta with simple tools or their bare hands and carry it away in pots on their heads.

Dalits and other caste-affected groups often face violent sanctions and social and economic boycotts if they challenge untouchability practices and traditional norms. Paradoxically, sexual abuse and rape of Dalit women is not considered polluting to men from dominant castes. Caste and patriarchy are considered as the pillars of Hindu hierarchical society, and because of this the Dalit women are thrice oppressed – for being Dalit, women and poor.

Many crimes go unreported due to fear of reprisals, economic or social boycotts, and intimidation. According to National Crime Records Bureau’s 2018 Report, around 42,793 cases of assaults, 821 of murders and 2957 rapes involving Dalits were recorded. This means, every day 117 Dalits were assaulted, two murdered, and eight women raped in 2018. Sadly, the conviction rate stands barely at 28%.<sup>5</sup> There has been a steady rise in anti-Dalit crimes ever since the Rightwing Hindu government came to power in 2014. Crimes against Dalits and Adivasis have increased by 27.3% and 20.3%, respectively in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

### **Dismantling of caste**

However, there have always been dismantlers and demolishers of caste system starting with the Buddha in the sixth century B.C., followed by Charvakas, and then many down through history. The prominent among these were the Bhakthi movements during the medieval period, and leaders such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy and others during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The modern Dalit movement draws its ideological inspiration from the legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, one of the greatest of India’s public intellectuals, who wanted caste to be destroyed for the sake of a civilized India. His undelivered lecture later published as *Annihilation of Caste* continues to be one of the best sellers and the most valued critique of the Indian society. He asserted: “You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste

<sup>5</sup> [https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/crime\\_in\\_india\\_table\\_additional\\_table\\_chapter\\_reports/Table%207A.2.2.pdf](https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/crime_in_india_table_additional_table_chapter_reports/Table%207A.2.2.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/The-Politics-Behind-Rising-Atrocities-Against-Dalits>

will crack and will never be a whole.”<sup>7</sup> There have also been some apologetics of caste system. M.K. Gandhi was one such. He wanted to reform the caste system so that it is not so harsh. But Ambedkar held that caste is an evil system that cannot be reformed but only need to be destroyed.<sup>8</sup> The radical changes effected by the intrusion of colonial powers which included universal education, the influence of Islam and Christianity and similar forces and developments since then, and the vibrant grassroots’ Dalit movements all over the country continue to expose and resist the immortality of caste system.

## **Caste and religion**

Caste culture pervades every aspect of Indian life, including all religions. Almost all followers of the non-Hindu religions – apart from the Zoroastrians – are converts from the Hindu religion, and carry their caste identities, mindset and prejudices into their new religions.

Hinduism is not the religion of the Dalits. At various times, various groups of Dalits converted to various non-Hindu religions. Some embraced Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam or Jainism. A factor in these conversions, apart from personal faith commitment, may well have been the hope of rising to a position of equality with others and of attaining some measure of human dignity in this world. In their transition to a new faith identity, this hope has been realised to some extent, but not completely. In practice, the Dalits remained 'Dalits' regardless of religion. A Dalit is a Dalit whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Christian. Conversion into the new faith has not redeemed them from their 'dalitness', or the stigma of 'Untouchability'.

Among the 27.8 million Christians in India, the Dalits constitute the vast majority of Indian Christians. However, even within the churches, Christian Dalits suffer the same segregation, oppression and discrimination, the same social, educational and economic disabilities, only now at the hands of their fellow dominant caste Christians. Even though caste is antithetical to the Christian faith that holds all are equal in the sight of God, Christian responses and expressions down through centuries have thoroughly absorbed, assimilated and yielded to caste culture. While some seem to have no qualms about being its practitioners, camouflaging their aspirations under the guise of some inconsequential ecclesiastical heritage, others pretend that caste doesn't exist, or it doesn't change or challenge their faith affirmation and practice. One reason perhaps is that since caste grants privilege in varying degrees for those within the caste system, some seemed to have opted for it, even if it implied a rejection of the core of their faith. Ironically, those Christians who have been the victims of caste, prefer not to remember their identity even as they practise their faith and live among such or wage caste struggles among themselves.

## **Analogous situations of social exclusion based on work and descent**

The Dalits of India provide the paradigmatic example of social exclusion on the basis of caste, and the Indian government has insisted in a number of recent international human rights forums that 'caste' is a uniquely Indian phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> But Dalit communities--and untouchability beliefs and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://thewire.in/caste/behind-the-demolition-of-ambedkars-statues-lies-a-fear-of-justice>

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, Arundhati Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint*, Delhi, Penguin, 2019

<sup>9</sup> See eg India's fourteenth periodic report to CERD, 29 April 1996 (UN document CERD/C/299/Add.3) para 7: "Communities which fall under the definition of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are unique to Indian society and its historical process." See also the Indian Government's communication dated 30 September 1997 to the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, quoted in UN Document E/CN.4/1999/15 at para 92.

practice--are widespread in South Asia, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> And seen from the perspective of human rights, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the features of the South Asian caste system that are productive of inherited social exclusion and discrimination are shared with a number of other geographically and culturally disparate societies.

Similar situations exist in Japan (the *Burakumin*), West Africa ('occupational castes', such as 'blacksmiths' and *griots*), Somalia (the *Midgan-Madhiban* and other *sab* groups), Kenya and Ethiopia (communities such as the *Watta* and the *Fuga*), Igboland in Nigeria (the *Osu*), Yemen (the *Akhdam*), the State of Yap in Micronesia, and within Roma/Sinti populations. Residual expressions of discrimination based on such forms of inherited social exclusion are also known to exist in the diaspora in the case of at least some of these communities, particularly in the South Asian and Somali diaspora communities.<sup>11</sup>

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Or visit the following **Links and resources**.

Fact Sheets on caste in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka:

[http://www.idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/Old\\_files/asia/pdf/CastAnEye.pdf](http://www.idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/asia/pdf/CastAnEye.pdf)

National Council of Churches in India:

<https://ncci1914.com/concerns/#tab-id-3>

Catholic Bishops' Conference of India

<https://www.cbci.in/all-Commissions/Sc-st-bc.aspx>

Church of South India, Department of Dalit and Adivasi Concerns

<https://www.csisynod.com/>

International Dalit Solidarity network: <http://www.idsn.org/>

National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (India): <http://www.ncdhr.org.in>

<http://www.theinclusivityprojectrg/>

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<sup>10</sup> See generally the material and references included on the website of the International Dalit Solidarity Network <[www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org)>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theinclusivityproject.org>