

DALITS

An agenda for social transformation

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Dalits, known and considered as the 'untouchables' to the world, are 19 per cent¹ of India's population. The identity of 'untouchable' emerged from the practice and belief—even today—that touching people from castes identified as the lowest can bring about defilement from the impurity that people from such castes carry from birth till death. This impurity comes from bad deeds or sins committed in a previous birth.

The caste system is the central fabric of the social, economic, political and cultural life in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, among other places in South Asia. Very little is known to the world outside about the caste system due to its non-visibility. This lack of knowledge exists both because of under-focused academic research, and the powerful defense of countries in which the caste system is present; these countries continuously deny the existence of the system to the world outside.

'Dalit' is the modern and popular identity term that is self-chosen by the community that has suffered historic discrimination on the basis of caste. Gandhi's attempt to identify these communities as 'Harijan' (children of god) has not gone well with the Dalits; many of them maintain a dislike of Gandhi due to his successful campaign to communalize and subvert the issue of effective political representation of the Dalits in pre and post-independence national governance.

Over time, the Dalit movement has gone through several paths and upheavals. It has spread itself across avenues of mass mobilization, affirmative action programs, religious conversions, land reforms, education, legal recourses, use of global human rights

¹ The constitution of India recognizes those castes, within Hinduism primarily, as 'scheduled Castes' that suffer from the disabilities arising out of the caste system. Those who from within the 'untouchable' community converted to Sikhism and Buddhism have been also included in the schedule to consider them eligible to benefit from the affirmative action program. 'Untouchables' who converted to Christianity and Islam have not been added to the Schedule in the constitution for political reasons. If people across religions who have suffered and continue to suffer from the caste discrimination are put together, it would be more than 25 % of the Indian population.

instrumentalities, and last but not least social reforms and spirituality. The journey has been long, slow, painful and self-inventing in spite the best legal safeguards—safeguards that remain non-implemented due to the very fact that in the minds of people, caste is more powerful than the constitution.

This short paper attempts to capture the realities of discrimination, reasons for its perpetuation, its inner contradictions, and the way forward in a way that brings out something encouraging, positive, inspiring and challenging. With the objective of sharpening the presentation, the paper focuses more on India.²

DALIT: what does it stand for?

D: discrimination

What governs the daily life of a Dalit is discrimination on the basis of caste. Discrimination manifests itself through visible practices such as separate drinking water wells, segregated housing colonies, separate burial grounds, segregated places of worship, separate seating of children during mid-day meals at school, prohibition of inter-caste dining and marriages, prohibition of dressing like others do or mounting a horse during a wedding, amongst scores of other forms³. Discrimination also manifests itself through non-visible forms in the shape of caste prejudices that can be heard in the spoken language through idioms and phrases as well as in literature.

Bhojpari is a village in Sayla sub-division of Gujarat, India. Dalit children were seated separately for the State-financed program of mid-day meals at school. Dalit teachers protested against the practice. This angered the elected head of the village council, who along with 40 other people defended the discriminatory practice. Navsarjan, a Gujarat-based human rights organization, took up the matter in the courts. As a result, the village head was convicted, sentenced to two years imprisonment, and fined Rs.2000. More importantly, the State issued a notification to all schools in the State to make them aware of the consequences they too can face if they continued with such discriminatory practices.

² . Although with variance in terms of its intensity and expression, the caste system is prevalent in other South Asian countries. Please refer to four country reports on the caste (Pakistan ,Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) researched by Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, new Delhi

³ Please refer Martin Macwan: Dalit rights: published by National Human Rights Commission of India and 'Broken People' by Smita Narula, published by Human Rights Watch.

A: atrocities

The most common response whenever attempts are made to change such caste ridden practices is violence. There are official figures published and placed before the Indian Parliament every year concerning murders, mass murders, rapes, destruction of property, arson and physical attacks that take place on the lives and property of Dalits. Though these reports depict reality, they are far from documenting the full extent of the violence; the State lacks a trustworthy system of tracking such violence, while police and other administrations fabricate data for political reasons⁴. The structural violence, however, is not visible. Public schools are the breeding ground and the place where caste discrimination is indoctrinated and spread.⁵

I met an 11 year old boy who had just secured admission in our primary boarding school. On my visit to the school, other children told me that the boy had a secret paper in his pocket, and he always held the paper even when he was asleep. I was curious and asked the boy about the secret paper. He said, "It's my FIR [First Information Report recorded of cognizable offence by police] but I don't know what an FIR is. But I know it's an important paper and I have to go to court with it." The boy along with his brother was riding a bicycle in the village. When they passed the upper caste locality, an upper caste person threw a shoe at them for daring to enter that locality. This was recorded as an offence. Children had numerous questions as to what an FIR is, what the role of the police is, what a court does etc., and I answered all of them. The school later organized a student visit to the local police station and the court. Later, the boy was summoned as the matter came up for a hearing in court. The parents of the boy had settled the case with the offenders for some money. The boy was asked to put his hand on the Hindu scripture and vow that he would speak the truth and nothing but the truth. The boy said, "I don't believe in Hinduism [the source of the caste system]. I can take the oath on Ambedkar' book." (Dr. Ambedkar was the national Dalit leader who chaired the committee that drafted the Indian constitution.)

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⁴ Please refer for further reading on the Subject:

(1) Atrocities on Dalits in Gujarat: Martin Macwan, Published by Center for Social Studies, Surat
(2) Dalit women speak out, violence against Dalit women in India, vol 1: Aloysius Irudayam S.J., Jayshree P. Mangubhai and Joel G. Lee, Published by National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, National Federation of Dalit Women and Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies, 2006
(3) Dalit human rights violations: Atrocities against Dalits in India, Published by National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, India.

⁵ Education for social reengineering: supporting the Dalit movement through Primary Education: Martin Macwan, paper published in Siksha: edited by Amit Kaushik, Published by Buffalo Books 2007

It was a legal problem since there was no provision to take the oath on Ambedkar's book. The judge thought since he was a small child he could be handled easily. He said, "Your parents have already settled the case for money, so now just sign this paper to end the case." The boy turned to the judge and said, "Sir, as you Judge may know, under the Atrocity Act [the special legislation under which the case was registered] there is no provision for a compromise. I learnt this in my school." The judge didn't know where to look and the only thing he could do was adjourn the case. The boy came out of the court and narrated the whole thing to me on the phone and asked me what could be done when a judge pressures for a compromise. I informed him of the provision to write a letter of complaint to the chief justice of the State high court. In an hour's time he called back to inform me that he had mailed the letter of complaint as a registered post.

L: linkages

The caste system has been able to survive scientific development, modernization and the market economy due to its strong linkages with the economic, religious, social, cultural and political order. Caste has been propagated as a system sanctified by Hindu religion. Over the years, as a way to reject Hinduism, Dalits have converted to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, but even with their converted faith they continue to be discriminated on the basis of caste by their new respective faiths.⁶

What is religious is essentially translated as social. Often, a decision by a village community to declare a social boycott of Dalits for not obeying caste rules is made in the temple premises. Even Gandhi, who undertook a "fast unto death" until Dr. Ambedkar—the Dalits' chosen representative—dropped his demand for separate electorates for untouchables as supported by the British, called that fast a "fast undertaken at the behest of God".

Post-independence land reforms in India attempted to redistribute the natural resource of agricultural land, but failed miserably when it came to Dalits. The land reforms succeeded, however, in providing land to poor but touchable castes. Historically the institution of caste has prohibited Dalits from holding property, thus

⁶ The documentary, 'India Untouched' by Stalin K. from Drishti Media.

rendering them by and large a landless class who stood to lose in the Indian post-independence green revolution.

Navsarjan⁷ received several complaints from Dalits that although land legally belonged to them under the land reforms program they did not have actual possession of it. Navsarjan decided to find out the extent of the problem, and its study revealed that in the concerned district in 214 villages there was approximately 6000 acres of land which was in legal—but not actual—possession of the Dalits. Insistence on possession led to several violent attacks. Navsarjan launched a huge campaign that involved mass mobilization, pressure on the State, and a legal suit which after almost five years of struggle resulted in the Dalits in question securing possession over more than 4000 acres of land.⁸

Dalits are predominantly represented in the class of landless agricultural workers. In the absence of uniform national legislation to govern both the wages and working conditions of agricultural workers, there persists a system of economic exploitation and bonded labor. This in turn perpetuates the overdependence of Dalits for their survival on the caste Hindus, and thus structurally reduces space for their struggle against them to fight caste discrimination.

I : internalization of the ideology

India has more than 6000 castes, each ranked hierarchically according to graded inequality. This hierarchy is based on the notion of purity and pollution. Broadly, however, there are three major groups of people: Touchables (67 %), untouchables (25 %) and those outside the caste system; Tribals (8 %) who were never a part of the Hindu culture do not maintain a caste system.

While there are sub-castes within the touchable group who are also ranked hierarchically, untouchability is not practiced between them. Most within touchable groups are extremely poor, sometimes poorer than some untouchable, but they have a touchable and therefore 'higher' status. Within the touchable section there is inter-dining but not intermarriage.

⁷ Navsarjan is one of the largest organizations in India addressing issues of caste discrimination. www.navsarjan.org

⁸ Law of the Landless, The Dalit Bid for Land Redistribution in Gujarat, India, Topher L. McDugal, International development group, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA.

Strangely, within the untouchable group there are more than 750 sub-castes. As a general rule, the untouchable group also does not have inter-dining or intermarriage. The lowest caste within the untouchables is further the most 'untouchable', discriminated and segregated by all other touchable as well as untouchable castes.

In 1977 I accompanied a group of professors to a village to do a socio-economic study of Dalits. I noticed then that all touchable houses had a cup or saucer placed in a hole outside the house, or placed the same way on a fence. I was told that it was the 'Rampatar' (utensil of Lord Ram, the Hindu deity). It was used to serve tea to untouchables; the touchable would pour the tea by holding the kettle above the cup, making sure the kettle and cup did not come in contact. The Rampatars were also maintained by the Dalit sub-castes considered higher to serve tea to the Dalit sub-castes considered lower. It was a powerful symbol that institutionalized caste system based segregation. 25 years later in 2002, Navsarjan organized a foot march covering a journey of over 4000 kilometers and 473 villages and urban areas. The program had a simple message: Dalits are not those who are from a particular caste, but are people who believe in equality. All Dalits therefore shall drink tea from the same cup and shall abandon the use of Rampatar for life. More than 200,000 people joined the march, which lasted for 98 days. The program also included washing of the dish after the meal, which most males had never done before, to communicate that the caste system includes inequality based both on caste and gender.

It is not difficult to explain to the reader as to why law alone can not do away with caste discrimination. Caste as a system is internalized by all who are under its influence. The Indian constitution has made the practice of untouchability a punishable offence, but it has not defined the caste system as unconstitutional.

T : transformation

How does one transform and annihilate the caste system? It can only be done by transformation of the identity. Identity within the caste system as both 'touchable and untouchable' or 'high and low' survives because it continues to provide meaning under the present system. Discovering the meaninglessness of the caste system is therefore the first major step towards transformation.

Within the 'untouchable' mind there is a kind of impulsive gravitational force to follow in the footsteps of the 'touchable', be

it by adopting their caste names, dialect, clothes, or anything else. To be 'touchable' is the dream, strangely perceived as the means of transformation, ignoring the fact that 'touchability' is only possible as a psychological and social construct in a dialectical relationship necessitating the presence of an 'untouchable' identity, and vice versa.

Transformation therefore is not to choose between a 'touchable' and 'untouchable' identity, but it is to do away with both. This can be done only with the conviction that both constructs are anti-human.

The search for an identity that gives a meaning to make life worth living is a constant search, especially for Dalits because of their suffering. 'Touchable' minds are less motivated to do away with their inhuman identity because they fear that their world—one based on hypocrisy—will collapse.

The journey to present 'Dalit' identity has traveled a long road from being identified as 'untouchable', 'unseeable', 'unapproachable', 'black castes', 'ati-sudra', 'harijan', 'depressed caste', and 'Scheduled Caste'. None of these has brought about a real change of meaning, since Dalits continue to be tied to the notion that at the end of the day, we are 'different' and 'segregated'.

Transformation therefore has to be a journey towards self-respect and value that can influence other minds to follow and gravitate towards it. My personal and professional journey of the last three decades has convinced me that 'Dalit'—as understood and internalized as a moral position of people who believe in 'equality'—is the giant step towards transformation. Dalits therefore are those who believe that all human beings are equal; Dalits are those who practice equality in their lives with all; and Dalits are those who fight inequality wherever it is seen in practice.

Gender discrimination, suffered by women across caste lines, has its genesis in the caste system. Dalit women suffer most because of their gender, poverty, and caste status. Intense suffering melts into a force to become the basic ingredient for social transformation. Women leadership is therefore critical to transform the caste system.

The limitation of space in this paper does not allow me to dwell more deeply on the subject. To summarize, given the fact that 'caste' as a system is an economic, social, political, cultural and psychological order, there has to be a multi-dimensional approach including strategies that involve using law, mass mobilization, awareness of rights, globalization of human rights, land reforms, affirmative action programs, education, women's leadership and re-inventing spiritual discourse.