

Human Right Violations against India's Dalits

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Background

The main purpose of this article is not only to publicize the gross human rights violations against India's 250-300 million untouchables (now known as Dalits), but also to create international awareness and to seek international support for the plight of the Dalits in India. It is evident that the Afro-Americans suffered slavery for some centuries. The Jews suffered holocaust and martyrdom for some time, but Dalits have been suffering humiliation, loss of respect, dignity, culture and above all, unspeakable horror of the caste system for the last three thousand years of human history (Thind, *Our Indian* n.pag; Thind, *Tentacles* n.pag). The world communities must assume responsibility in bringing total justice to the Dalits who have been systematically deprived of their respect, dignity, culture and rights by the upper caste people of India. What is amazing that even after 55 years of India's independence, and as India is signatory to many international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on the "Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination," and even though untouchability was abolished by India's constitution in 1950, there is no difference in the lives of India's Dalits as their fundamental human rights are violated on a daily basis. India has been called the "world's largest democracy." It is merely "A DEMOCRACY OF THE FEW FOR THE FEW AND BY THE FEW" and is probably the largest violators of human right acts in human history. What is worse to notice is that untouchables can not fetch a bucket of water from the village well or socialize in village tea stalls or cafes, as their touch pollutes every thing (Thind, *Our Indian*; Thind, *Tentacles*).

In fact, Dalits have been considered the most degraded, downtrodden, exploited and the least educated in Indian society. They are considered to be "untouchable" because their touch to high caste people is considered polluted and uncleaned. The caste hierarchy has excluded these people from the caste system and therefore, they are "outcaste." For decades and until today, they have been barred from sharing water, food and shelter and are forced to live in ghettos, and

hence are referred as “*segregated*.” They have been socially, culturally, and politically subjugated and marginalized through three thousand years of India’s history. What is still surprising is that the Dalits experience the agony of untouchability very deeply in all walks of life: social, economical and political (Narula n.pag).

Until today, India’s caste system has compelled them to perform the most inhuman jobs, from the manual scavenging, skinning animals, disposal of the dead animals, cleaning streets, landless labour, bonded labour, child labour and performing the most inhuman tasks, such as cleaning the toilet and disposal of human waste (Thind, *Our Indian*; Thind, *Tentacles*; Narula).

Caste System in India

India is a country with a lot of traditions, culture, and beauty. The most pathetic part of these traditions is an unwanted, ugly, and inhuman structure called the *Caste System*. One cannot but feel ashamed of the caste system as this system continue to discriminate the human persons and stratifies them into different groups (Ambedkar, *Annihilation* n.pag). In Hindu society, caste is still the most powerful factor in determining a person's dignity. Socially, Dalits are placed outside the four-fold graded caste system of Indian Society (see below). Hindu Scriptures divide the people on the basis of birth (descent-based discrimination). The social structure of India is stratified, with inbuilt inequalities and injustices, based on the caste system sanctified by *Brahmins (Hindus)* (Ambedkar, *Castes* n.pag; Viyogi n.pag). Although social stratification exists in almost all societies, the caste system is quite unique to Indian society. Sanctioned by the religio-philosophical system, the Dalits are socially placed outside the four-fold caste system and they are referred to as the fifth caste (outcaste).

India’s caste system has existed for more than 3000 years and appears to be deliberately and intentionally developed by the Brahmins (priests) in order to maintain their superiority over the other castes. Typically, the caste system is divided into 4 distinct classes. This is referred as “Varnas”. At the top the caste hierarchy are the Brahmins, the priestly class. According to the Hindu religious book called *Manusmruti*, the Brahmins came from the head of God. They are eligible for learning, teaching and perform religious ceremonies (Talukdar 1-16;

Moon n.pag). The others cannot teach and perform sacrifice, hence they have 100% control on religion, education and Vedas. Next come the Kshatriyas. The people in this class are warrior, and according to *Manusmriti*, they originated from the shoulder of God. They are eligible for learning. Their work is to protect the people by waging war against the enemies (Talukdar 1-16; Moon n.pag). The Vaisyas are the trading class and came from the thigh of God. Their work is to trade and feed the above two classes (Talukdar 1-16; Moon n.pag). Finally stand the Sudras. This is the servants class and came from the feet of God. Their work is to do all menial work for the above three classes. They are not entitled to learn anything (Narula n.pag; Talukdar 1-16; Moon). In addition to the above four classes, there is a fifth class called “untouchables” or outcaste. They literally have no caste and means oppressed, downtrodden, broken and exploited social group (Narula; Moon).

Such a rigid caste system is not found anywhere in the world outside India. Once born in the caste, a person’s status is predetermined and immutable. Birth decides any talent the person may develop, and one cannot alter one’s status or wealth the person may accumulate. Similarly, the caste in which a person is born predetermines what profession or activities he will pursue. What is surprising is that even today most Hindus who are living abroad still practice the caste system in their country of residence (*India Abroad* 11).

Human Rights Violations against Dalits in India

According to the Hindu religious belief, “ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT BORN EQUAL.” This creates caste-based discrimination against Dalits, which is then open to various forms of violence against them, which include public humiliation, torture, rape, beating, and killing, etcetera.

The untouchability is the basis for atrocities and violence, denial of basic needs, land rights, legal discrimination, infringement of civil liberties, inferior or no people status, de-humanizing living and working conditions, impoverishment, mal-nourishment, bad health conditions, high levels of illiteracy and continuing social ostracism is continue to the reason for human rights violations against dalits (3).

Even today, in rural India, Dalits are prevented from most common

social activities such as sharing water, food and drinks. They are barred from wearing shoes when meeting high caste Hindus. They are not allowed to cycle through village streets in which higher caste people live. They can be publicly dehumanized by small crimes such as shooing away a chicken, dogs, and other pets that belong to higher caste people. They are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in the most degrading conditions, and are routinely abused by the hands of the police and higher caste Hindus who enjoy government protection. Most Dalits continue to live in precarious conditions and are not allowed to use the same well, visit the temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls or even cannot claim the land that legally belongs to them. Most Dalits continue to live in extreme poverty, without land, and they lack opportunities for better employment and education (Narula; Ambedkar, *Annihilation*).

According to the National Commission of Human rights of India, more than 62,000 human rights violations are recorded annually. On average, two Dalits are assaulted every hour, three Dalit women and children are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and at least two Dalits are tortured or burned every day (Narula; *National Commission n.pag*). Due to space, it is not possible to describe an individual human rights abuse. Following are some of the most inhuman "Human Right Violations" that took place in recent time in India. For instance, recently, five Dalits in the Northern district of India, Haryana, were lynched by a mob of 4,000 Hindus on the allegation that they skinned the cow (according to Hinduism, the cow is considered holy), as these victims denied a bribe to police. In another incident, a four-month pregnant Dalit women from Tamilnadu district (Southern part of India), was beaten by upper caste Hindus from the same village. She was stripped naked and paraded in front of the village as well as her family members. Later, police beat her in jail, which resulted in her miscarriage (Ambedkar, *Annihilation*).

Less than 3.5% culprits are prosecuted for such crimes, and out of 10 cases of atrocities against Dalits, only one is prosecuted. The problem is not the law; implementation is a total failure because the less than 15% high caste Hindus who control 85% of the wealth, power, justice system, police and 100% of the media. Hence, the culprits go unpunished (*National Commission n.pag*).

Most importantly, these violations are not only performed against Dalits, but also on other minority communities in India. For the last few years,

Hindu masses have been directly associated with the human rights violations against Muslims, Christians and Sikhs throughout India. For instance, Hindus killed more than 3,000 Muslims in a Mosque demolition in 1992. In 1994, more than 4,000 Sikhs in the Delhi area were killed in Communal riots. In recent years, more than 2,000 Muslims in Gujrat and hundreds of Christians have been killed (Varhade n.pag).

Human Right Violations against Dalit Children

According to the national Commission for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), there are an estimated 115 millions children working in slavery, and amongst those, approximately 80-90% are Dalits who work as bonded labour in order to pay off debt (*National Commission; Varhade*). In slavery, children, often from poor families, are picked by a high caste restaurant or shop owner and are forced to work 16-18 hours a day at wages of not more than 2-3 dollars per year (*Ambedkar Annihilation; Varhade*). Their denial to the order of their owner or trying to escape can result in severe beating and no food and water for several days. According to government statistics, an estimated 800,000 Dalits are manual scavengers who are involve in clearing human feces from pubic and private latrines and disposing of dead animals (*Ambedkar, Annihilation*). A recent survey conducted by two teams of National Geographic stated that “in one toilet there can be more than 400 seats which all have to be manually cleaned. This is the lowest occupation in the wold, which is performed by the community occupying the lowest status in the caste system” (O’Neill 8-31). In addition to the above, there are approximately 50,000 Dalits girls who are forced to practice a Hindu religious practice of child prostitution, called *Devdasi*. Devadasis, literally meaning “female servant of god,” and they usually belong to the Dalit community. Amazingly, this practice still exists in Indian states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnatka, Orissa and Maharashtra. Once dedicated, the girl is unable to marry, is forced to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members, and is eventually auctioned off to an urban brothel, where she may die due of many sexual diseases, including HIV/AIDS (Narula; Varhade; O’Neill 8-31).

Human Rights Violations Against Dalit Women

According to Arpita Anant, researcher on the behalf of South Asia Partnership of Canada, Dalit women in India face the triple burden: caste, class and gender (for details on Dalit women's issues, please refer to the chapter by Ms. Sonia Mahey) (Anant 1-8). As stated by another woman activists in India, "No one practices untouchability when it comes to sex." Rape is a common phenomenon in rural areas. Women are raped as part of caste custom or village tradition. According to Dalit activists, Dalit girls have been forced to have sex with the village landlord (Narula). In rural areas, "women are induced into prostitution (*Devadasi system*), which [is] forced on them in the name of religion." The prevalence of rape in villages contributes to the greater incidence of child marriage in those areas. Early marriage between the ages of ten years and sixteen years persists in large part because of Dalit girls' vulnerability to sexual assault by upper-caste men; once a girl is raped, she becomes unmarriageable. An early marriage also gives parents greater control over the caste into which their children are married. Moreover, Dalit women are also raped as a form of retaliation (Thind; Ambedkar, *Tentacles*; Talukdar 1-16; O'Neill 8-31; Anant 1-8). Landlords and the police use sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women to inflict political "lessons" and crush dissent within the community.

One of the reasons that Dalit woman continue to be target of atrocities is that in rural areas, due to extreme poverty, lack of education, and as high caste Hindus own 80% land, Dalit women are forced to work on minimal wage. A slight denial to their orders or daring to ask for a raise in wages can result in humiliations, beating, torture, rape, killing and jail. More often, Dalit womens and children are held by as ransom to catch their spouses on minor charges (Ambedkar, *Annihilation*).

Opportunities for Dalits in Education

The government has made reservations for Dalits, so that they can enter into jobs in the public sector, parliamentary State Assemblies and Universities. This reservation, however, makes them even more vulnerable in the society. Most Dalits continue to live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunities for better

employment or education, with the exception of a minority who have benefited from India's policy of quotas in education and government jobs. According to Constitution of India, reservation for Dalits in Government jobs is secured, but in reality, only a few are filled out as they have full control of recruitment. According to the National Commission for SC and ST and as per India's constitution, total job reservation for Dalits is 22.5% but only 2.1% in case of class-I (Dalits serving in public commission, civil services, chief executives in major companies) and 9.0% in the case of class-II (this includes Dalits serving as college lecturers, bank manager, in government, etcetera). To date, most Dalit students are prevented from entering in government as well as the public sectors as a part of the caste-based discrimination, hence there is a stiff increment in unemployment.

Many bright Dalit students are prevented from sitting in the front classroom row, sharing water or food, and mixing with high caste students. Teachers are often violent against them for showing greater aptitudes in classrooms. Often humiliated in front of class by the teacher and high caste students, most of those students return back to their family profession. For instance, most recently a Dalit girl student who accidentally joined a street dance performed by high caste performers was humiliated and was threatened with rape if she complained to the police. Turning to the police for a complaint only exaggerated the situation. She later committed suicide (Narula).

The Role of International Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in the Dalit Cause

Now the United Nations and the Human Right groups have exposed the sufferings of these voiceless peoples to the rest of the world. Many Non-Government Organizations (NGO) both in India and as well as abroad have been involved in raising the plight of India's 250 million untouchables.

Amongst many, one of the NGOs in North America is called "The Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice" (ACJP), named in honour of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), who was India's foremost human right activist and an untouchable. He has been recognized as the Chief architect of India's Constitution. Dr. Ambedkar was an emancipator, scholar, extraordinaire, social reformer and a true champion of human rights (*National Commission*; Keer n.pag). He was the

first Dalits who received a Ph.D. and L.L.D. from Columbia University, USA, D.Sc. and Bar-at-Law from the London School of Economics, and D.Litt. from Osmania University, India. Moreover, he was the first law minister of Independent India (Keer).

The most immediate task of the ACJP is to bring the plight of the Dalits to the attention of the International community and to document and publicize human rights abuses. The mission of this organization is to foster recognition of the human rights of, and to develop support for, the indigenous peoples of India. The long-term objectives are to enfranchise Dalits as full citizens of their society. This will require broad-based financial and political support for the Dalits, as well as legal and educational changes in India, so that they may re-establish their dignity, culture and civilization.

As warned by the Vice President, Mr. Yogesh Varhade, since fundamentalist Hindu forces are pushing this caste system to the limits, this will result in civil war, instability in South Asia and Global Peace will be in danger. Millions of refugees could infiltrate North America and Europe, further resulting in a complete collapse of the economy, and could cost million of dollars (Varhade n.pag).

The Indian Government is only interested in developing trade with Canada, but does not reveals its “dirty secret” of human rights violations and caste-based atrocities on millions of Dalits. The Canadian government should show compassion to towards dissolving untouchability. For this, Canada should put pressure on the Indian government to recognize untouchability as “racial discrimination” and put policies in place to protect human rights and the dignity of million Dalits. Moreover, the Canadian as well as the world media should take an active role in publicizing the plight of Untouchables.

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