

Dalits

Profile

The term Dalit means 'oppressed', 'broken' or 'crushed' to the extent of losing original identity. However, this name has been adopted by the people otherwise referred to as Harijans, untouchables, and has come to symbolize for them a movement for change and for the eradication of the centuries-old oppression under the caste system. In legal and constitutional terms, Dalits are known in India as scheduled castes. There are currently some 166.6 million Dalits in India. The constitution requires the government to define a list or schedule of the lowest castes in need of compensatory programmes. These scheduled castes include untouchable converts to Sikhism but exclude converts to Christianity and Buddhism; the groups that are excluded and continue to be treated as untouchables probably constitute another 2 per cent of the population.

Historical context

The roots of Dalit oppression go back to the origins of the caste system in Hindu religion. The philosophy of caste is contained in the Manusmriti, a sacred Hindu text dating from the second century BCE. 'Untouchable' outcast communities were forbidden to join in the religious and social life of the community and were confined to menial polluting tasks such as animal slaughter and leather-working. The introduction of Islam to India from about the thirteenth century AD led to widespread conversions by many low-caste and 'untouchable' groups, and by the mid-nineteenth century about one quarter of the population was Muslim.

During the struggle for Indian independence two different approaches emerged for the improvement of the situation of the people now known as Dalits. The first was led by Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in raising the status of Dalit people (or, as he preferred to call them, Harijans) while retaining elements of the traditional caste system but removing the degrading stigma and manifestations of 'untouchability'. The other approach was led by Dr Ambedkar, a lawyer and himself an 'untouchable', who believed that only by destroying the caste system could 'untouchability' be destroyed. Ambedkar became the chief spokesperson for those 'untouchables' who demanded separate legal and constitutional recognition similar in status to that accorded to Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. However, this was opposed by Gandhi and Ambedkar eventually gave up the demand. After rejecting Hindu values, in 1956 he converted to Buddhism and was later followed by a large number of converts.

After independence the Indian constitution abolished untouchability in law. Today Dalit politics largely centres around the just dispensation of the affirmative action benefits (in employment, education and electoral representation) granted to them under the constitution. However, the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955/1976 and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, both derived from the constitution, remain largely ineffective in their implementation. Many reasons lie behind this, including a lack of political will on the part of both central and state governments, a lack of commitment of upper-caste and class bureaucrats to social justice, the absence of vigilance committees of citizens to monitor the implementation process, and a lack of statutory power on the part of the

Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe Commission (Mandal Commission) to directly punish the perpetrators of crimes against Dalits. Affirmative government action, with regard to Dalits, is all directed at amelioration of their economic status, without liberating them from the dehumanizing effects of caste and 'untouchability'. Caste and poverty are inseparably joined together and are at the root of the Dalit socioeconomic predicament.

Dalit women have been particularly badly affected in recent times. They are discriminated against not only because of their sex but also because of religious, social and cultural structures which have given them the lowest position in the social hierarchy. The stigma of untouchability makes them especially vulnerable victims of all kinds of discriminations and atrocities. In areas of health, education, housing, employment and wages, application of legal rights, decision-making and political participation, and rural development, Dalit women have been almost entirely excluded from development policies and programmes. The national population policy, which is geared to population control and in the process targets Dalit and women for family planning programmes, does so on the grounds that they are the cause of the population 'explosion' and of poverty. No change has been made in the attitudes of society towards these women and they continue to be oppressed, marginalized, violated and all but forgotten. In the expression used often in development policies and plans they are: 'women in extreme poverty'.

Politically Dalits have not been able to break into mainstream debates and discussions despite the system of reservations that works at both national and state levels. The main reason for this has been the co-option of the Dalit agenda into that of the mainstream political parties, which are usually led by upper-caste men, with a consequent neglect of the primary demands of Dalits. In the last few years the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party has for the first time given Dalits a vehicle for bringing Dalit issues into the wider political arena. The success of this party in the northern states especially has given rise to hopes that the old upper-caste domination of Indian politics may finally be on the verge of giving way. Particularly significant was the experiment with a minority government led by a Dalit woman in the largest Indian state, Uttar Pradesh. Although the experiment collapsed in October 1995, with the larger coalition partner withdrawing support for the government, for the first time a Dalit party led by a Dalit woman was able to gain political control of a state government. This trend, if repeated in other states, and if eventually transferred to the national scene, would bring Dalit politics and the Dalit agenda for social transformation into the national mainstream.

Almost 90 per cent of Dalits live in rural areas. Economic exploitation remains their most acute problem. They are almost all marginal farmers or landless labourers. Large numbers migrate to cities or to labour-scarce rural areas in different parts of India. Many are in debt and are obliged to work off their debts as bonded labour, despite the fact that this practice was abolished by law in 1976. In these cases a labourer takes a loan from a landlord or moneylender and in return agrees to work for that person until the debt has been repaid. In practice such debts are difficult to repay as interest rates are high and poverty forces the labourer into deeper debt. The debt can then be passed on to the next generation and it is almost impossible to escape the cycle of bondage. In some areas many high-caste landlords pay their Dalit labourers minimum wages in cash or food, or nothing at all; resistance is frequently met by violence, sometimes resulting in the death or injury of the victim. Mob violence against Dalit communities is frequently reported, sometimes led by landlords, and has been especially noticeable in situations where Dalit workers have joined labour unions or made progress in gaining education and economic mobility.

Many Dalit families have left rural areas to live in slums and on the pavements of the rapidly growing cities. Here they also tend to do the worst jobs for the lowest wages. However, in some cities traditional occupations such as sweepers have been organized in municipal unions and have the advantage of regular work and wages. Many Dalits work as casual day labourers, in small factories, quarries, brick kilns or on construction sites, as cycle rickshaw drivers or in petty trade. There are, however, growing

numbers employed in relatively secure jobs in areas such as public service, banking and the railways, and sometimes in private industry. Those resident in the cities have some access to secondary and higher education, and a growing middle class has evolved within the Dalit community. As opportunities for education increase and aspirations rise, Dalits should become a strong and positive force for change in India in the coming decades, especially if they are able to organize themselves across barriers of language and religion.

Current issues

The constitutionally guaranteed affirmative action policies have had some positive impact in increasing the representation of the Dalit in educational institutions, governmental jobs and elected position. Notwithstanding this improvement, Dalit continue to remain the most underprivileged class of the India society: the stigma and unacceptability of Dalits in India society remains evident to this day. Dalit continue to be discriminated against. They are marginalised and socially ostracised. A telling example of the social exclusion even in the face substantial national disaster was witnessed in the immediate aftermath of the 26 December 2004 tsunami. The tsunami brought a substantial amount of devastation for the Dalits of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is estimated that well over 10,000 died while 650,000 were displaced. More tragic and shameful was the fact that in the aftermath of the Tsunami, the Dalits of Tamil Nadu were made to suffer from worst forms of discrimination and humiliation. Notwithstanding the substantial losses, many Dalit victims have not been paid compensation - a consequence of their exclusion from the initial lists drawn up on the 27 and 28 December 2005. Dalits were excluded from making use of (and in some cases even entering into) makeshift relief camps; the untouchability syndrome dominated the upper Hindu caste mentality even at this time of dire human crises. The limited shelter that was provided to Dalits was close to what are regarded as less desirable areas, for example near graveyards or garbage dumps lacking in proper sanitation or other facilities. In these shelters there was no regular supply of water. After the Tsunami, several international agencies donated large portable water-tanks for the general consumption of all those who were affected by the Tsunami. In several instances, the Dalits were prevented from drawing water from these taps, because of the fears of the upper caste Hindus of the 'pollution' of water at the hands of Dalits, 'the untouchables'.

The Dalit people in general continue to survive under sub-human, degrading conditions. They suffer from abuse and violence. Dalit women have been made a target of rapes, and Dalit men and women physically abused. Several examples of such violence can be found; one recent example was provided when in 2006 Belchi, Bihar a Dalit family of six was burnt alive. Dalits were victims of social ostracism, having inadequate access to health care and poor working conditions. Dalit women continued to face 'double discrimination' on the basis of their caste as well as gender-deprived of education and basic health care they were frequently subjected into forced slave-like practices and menial labour. In the light of the egregious and systematic denial of the fundamental rights of the Dalits, the United Nations on 19th April 2005 (in an unprecedented move) decided to appoint two Special Rapporteurs to examine the substantial and deep-rooted problem of caste-based discrimination. The Special Rapporteurs are mandated to study all issues surrounding the discrimination against Dalits and report to the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. The three-year process will lead to the drafting of a set of *Principles and Guidelines* aimed at eliminating caste-based discrimination. Whilst by no means insignificant, the report and the ultimate *Principles and Guidelines* are not legally binding. In a ceremony (and as a sign of protest against the oppressive Hindu caste-system) during October 2006, hundreds of Dalits converted to Christianity and Buddhism. Repression and violation of fundamental rights of Dalits nevertheless continue. A study published in 2006 makes the observation that 'Dalit continue to be barred from entering Hindu temples or other holy places. Dalit men are beaten up for daring to cycle through the centre of a village. The women are banned from wearing shoes in the presence of caste Hindus. Dalit children often suffer a form of apartheid at school by being made to sit at the back of classroom and eat in segregated spaces'.