

## Briefing on dalit and caste discrimination

### What is a caste?

The **caste system** describes a social hierarchy whereby restrictions or privileges may be afforded to different classes of people according to their heredity (or genes). As such, the assignment of rights is determined by birth. While the caste system has been formally abolished under some constitutions, such as in India, there is still widespread discrimination and prejudice.

The system is maintained through the rigid enforcement of social ostracism (a system of social and economic penalties) in case of any deviations, and the doctrine of inequality is at the core of the caste system.

Those who fall outside the caste system are considered “lesser human beings”, “impure” and thus “polluting” to other caste groups. They are known to be “untouchable” and subjected to so-called “untouchability practices” in both public and private spheres.

“Untouchables” are often forcibly assigned the most dirty, menial and hazardous jobs, such as cleaning human waste. The work they do adds to the stigmatisation they face from the surrounding society.

Caste systems are also found in Africa, other parts of Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific and in Diaspora communities around the world. Caste discrimination affects approximately 260 million people worldwide, the vast majority living in South Asia.

Read more here: <http://www.idsn.org/caste-discrimination/>

### Caste discrimination in South Asia

**Dalit** is the name given to the group of people of South Asian descent traditionally regarded as ‘untouchables’ or of ‘low caste’. *Dalit* is a term that many Untouchables, especially politically aware individuals, have chosen for themselves. The name means “oppressed” and highlights the persecution and discrimination India's 160 million Untouchables face regularly. First used in the context of caste oppression in the 19th century, it was popularized in the 1970s by Untouchable writers and members of the revolutionary Dalit Panthers (the name was inspired by the Black Panthers of the United States). Dalit has largely come to replace Harijan, the name given to Untouchables by Gandhi, much like the Black Power movement in the United States led to the replacement of the labels coloured and Negro with black. For some activists, Dalit is used to refer to all of India's oppressed peoples whether Hindus, Muslims, Christians, tribal minorities, or women.

In countries such as India, significant steps have been taken to provide opportunities in jobs and education. For example, the National Policy on Education, in 1986, aimed at the universal enrollment of all Dalit children aged six to 11, and 75 per cent of those aged 11 to 14. Other governments in South Asia such as Nepal and Bangladesh have also implemented policies to improve the living standards of their Dalit population. The 1990 Constitution of Nepal prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of caste, race, sex and religion, for example. In the 21st century, Dalits have begun to assert political control in populous northern states of India such as Uttar Pradesh.

Source: National Geographic, nepaldalitinfor.net, National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, India.

However, discrimination persists. Dalit children are more vulnerable to trafficking and child labour; most receive sub-standard education in government schools where they are verbally abused and are more likely than other children to be subjected to corporal punishment. The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education has noted that “teachers have been known to declare that Dalit pupils ‘cannot learn unless they are beaten.

## **India**

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2305735.cms>

A Times of India article reported that discrimination continues to obstruct the access of dalit children to schooling as well as to affect the quality of education they receive. Schooling among dalit children between the age of five and 14 has been relatively poor compared to that of the general population. Teachers may refuse to touch so-called ‘scheduled caste’ children, and such children may be the targets of violence.

Another article from an Indian journal, published on CRIN, reported on discrimination towards Dalit children at lunchtime. While midday meal programmes were being rolled out across the county “if you are a dalit child in Amreli or Banaskantha districts, in all probability, you will be asked to get your own dish or plate from your home and be served separately. The rice may contain worms and food will be insufficient. In other districts like Sabarkantha, Navsari, Dang and Bharuch, the discrimination may not be there, but the quality of food served may not be any better.” Read more: <http://crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=15179&flag=news>

A 2007 report by the Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice and Human Rights Watch, Hidden Apart, documents India’s systematic failure to respect, protect and ensure the fundamental rights of its dalit population.

The report found that Dalits comprise the majority of agricultural, bonded and child labourers in India, with many surviving on less than US\$ 1 a day, that is, by the UN and World Bank’s definition, in extreme poverty.

Dalit children also face consistent hurdles in their access to education. Testimonies

revealed that they are made to sit in the back of the classroom and endure verbal and physical harassment by teachers and students.

Their hostility toward Dalits' education-which includes discrimination against Dalit teachers-is linked to the perception that Dalits are not meant to be educated, are incapable of being educated, or if educated, would pose a threat to village hierarchies and power relations. Additionally, Dalit children are often subjected to corporal punishment by their teachers.

Dalits who defy the caste order or claim their rights face swift, brutal retribution

Dalit women and girls who are forced to become *devadasis*, and ultimately auctioned to urban brothels, are at particular risk of contracting HIV and AIDS.

Most *devadasis* also lack access to a residential house, health care, or educational facilities for their children. The practice of *devadasi*, in which a girl, usually before reaching the age of puberty, is ceremoniously dedicated or married to a deity or to a temple, continues in several southern states including Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Literally meaning "female servant of god," *devadasis* usually belong to the Dalit community. Once dedicated, the girl is unable to marry, forced to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members, and eventually auctioned into an urban brothel.

Although child marriage is illegal in India, the practice remains rampant, particularly in underdeveloped regions where economic pressure may force families into marrying off children at early ages in order to lighten the economic burden on families with daughters. This is often the case among Dalits.

The prevalence of rape in villages also contributes to the greater incidence of child marriage in these areas. Early marriage between the ages of 10 years and 16 years persists in large part because of Dalit girls' vulnerability to sexual assault by upper caste men and by parents' fear that their daughter will not be marriageable once she is raped.

[Source: Human Rights Watch: <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2007/02/12/hidden-apartheid>]

### **Dalit Discrimination Check**

The [Dalit Discrimination Check](#) is a tool developed specifically to help companies prevent discrimination and exploitation of Dalits in their Indian operations and suppliers.

### **Nepal**

A [factsheet](#) by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) tells the story of Manisha and Jhakondra. They grew up 200 meters from each other and went to the

same village school, so falling in love was a natural thing. But Jhakondra is a Dalit and regarded as untouchable by Manisha's non-Dalit family. As a result, she was beaten in her sleep by her uncle while her father threatened to kill Jhakondra. In the end, the young couple ran away to India and got married. Following their return, Manisha's parents reported Jhakondra to the police for girl trafficking, claiming their daughter was only 16 years old. When she proved that she was 18, the police chose to respect the constitution of Nepal and deemed the marriage between a Dalit and a non-Dalit to be perfectly in order.

But in this part of the world, tradition is stronger than legislation. As Jhakondra's husband, Manisha has herself become a Dalit and untouchable. Her family says 2 they regard her as dead.

### **Bangladesh**

According to [IDSN](#), "at a time when Bangladesh is busy positioning itself in the global economy, internationally condemned practices such as child labour are rampant and often fuelled by caste-based discrimination."

This seems caused by the fact that, whereas the Hindu Dalits normally attend schools built specifically for their communities, the children of Muslim Dalits are more likely to join non-Dalits in their education.

Countries that are truly developing regard improvements in education as an important benchmark for success. In Bangladesh, however, the most noticeable trend is that more and more children go to work rather than to school. The last official count, done by the State in 1996, found 6,3 million child labourers between the ages of five and 14 years. This is the equivalent of 19% of the total child population. A large number of these working children are Dalits for whom this development has alarming consequences. Instead of becoming the new generation with a better future through education, the children simply become the ever-younger faces of the old dynamics of caste-based discrimination.

### **Caste discrimination in Africa**

Caste discrimination is widespread in parts of Sahelian Africa and particularly amongst certain communities in West Africa, as well as amongst the Somali and Ethiopian populations.

For example, in West Africa that have societies with hierarchical caste structures within their boundaries include Mali; Mauritania; Senegal; Gambia; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Ivory Coast; Niger; Burkina Faso; Cameroon; Ghana; Liberia; Sierra Leone; Algeria; Nigeria and Chad. Affected populations within these areas are the Wolof, Tukulor, Senufo, Minianka, Dogon, Songhay, Fulani, Moorish, Tuareg, Bobo, Bwa, Dan, Serer and most of the Mande-speaking populations (including the Bambara, Malinke and Khassonke). The caste peoples of West Africa tend to form a small part of the population. The main occupational and descent groupings of the caste peoples can be classified as simply bards, blacksmiths and tanners or often as separate groups of blacksmiths, potters, bards/jesters, tanners and leatherworkers, woodworkers, weavers, brasscasters and other craft-caste specialisations. However, they are also often called upon to perform other tasks, which they may receive little, or no payment for, such as undertaking, message-bearing and certain ritual tasks including circumcision and excision.

Contact with people of caste is often seen as ‘polluting’, leading to segregation and consequent denial of equal rights. Violence may also be prevalent.

[Source: IDSN:

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

### **Legal measures**

The [draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent](#) is a comprehensive legal framework, developed to eliminate discrimination based on work and descent, the UN terminology for caste discrimination.

### **Further information**

- [Country Profiles](#)