

Unveiling India's "Hidden Apartheid"

By Ma. Victoria Cabrera-Balleza

Other than the Taj Mahal, India is famous for its caste system.

Unlike the Taj, however, the caste system is not something that's enviable; it's definitely not the stuff of tourist brochures, and it's not something that many people understand much about.

A system that segregates people into hierarchies, the caste system was developed by Brahmins more than 3,000 years ago, mainly to maintain their superiority in the highly stratified Indian society. It was eventually formalised into four distinct classes called varnas.

The Brahmins, the priests as well as arbiters of what is right and wrong in matters of religion and society, occupy the highest rung of varnas. The soldiers and administrators or the Kshatriyas come next, followed by the artisan and commercial class or the Vaisyas. The farmers and peasant class, or the Sudras make up the fourth class. The four castes are said to represent the Brahma's mouth (Brahmin), arms (Kshatriyas), thighs (Vaisyas) and feet (Sudras).

"Not human"

Those who fall outside the four categories are the Dalits or the untouchables, the most oppressed and exploited social group.

There are approximately 260 million Dalits in South Asia, 160 of whom are in India.

Higher caste Hindus avoid Dalits like plague. They will avoid having a Dalit prepare their food, gather their water or even enter their homes lest they become "polluted." If a Dalit's shadow as much as crosses a member of the higher caste, he or she will go through a rigorous series of rituals in order to be "cleansed."

Five decades ago, the Indian Constitution banned the discrimination of Dalits. In Article 14 of the chapter on Fundamental Rights, it takes a strong position upholding equality and against any form of discrimination. More importantly, Article 15, 16 and 17 stipulate its commitment to eradicate caste discrimination and commits itself to abolish the discriminatory practice of untouchability against the Dalits. Following this constitutional pronouncements, special programmes were established to improve their plight. Yet, there has been no significant change in their status in society: Their socio-economic and political options remain limited and they continue to be denied the right to enjoy dignified lives.

The Dalits are not considered to be part of human society. As such, the most menial jobs are given to them, such

as cleaning latrines and sewers, handling carcasses, butchering meat and acting as couriers of bad news such as the death of a villager. Moving out of these preordained jobs do not guarantee a change in the Dalit's status.

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In upper caste households, family members sprinkle "holy" water to purify anything that has been touched by their Dalit servant's hands.

No access

Brahmins generally enjoy the most number of privileges and opportunities, more so if they are male. These include access to good education and a powerful position in Indian society.

On the other hand, doors are perpetually shut for those unlucky enough to be born a Dalit. It means no release from a cycle of grinding poverty, inadequate education and no opportunities for social advancement. Dalit women are doubly oppressed since they also have to deal with gender-based discrimination. For instance, their exposure to outdoor work and abusive employers make them vulnerable to sexual

exploitation. Abject poverty has perpetuated the ancient system of Devadasi, where young Dalit women are “dedicated” to temples to serve priests. Devadasi is nothing but institutionalised prostitution.

Untold oppression

The oppression of Dalits, which began more than 3,000 years ago, has shown no signs of abating.

Today, Dalits continue to be segregated in all spheres of Indian life including places of worship, education, housing, land ownership, use of common wells and public utilities.

Archaic discriminatory practices continue, particularly in rural communities. A Dalit cannot wear shoes; those caught wearing shoes are required to take them off when they come across a higher caste person.

Dalits are not allowed to go through village streets where higher caste people live. They are confined to areas outside the village.

At a bus stop, Dalits must wait until all the upper caste people have boarded the bus. No Dalit is allowed to occupy any seat, even if it's vacant.

In recent years, the Indian government mandated the public sector parliamentary state assemblies and universities to reserve slots for Dalits. However, this only gave rise to resentments among upper caste Hindus who accused Dalits of robbing them of opportunities.

Black Papers, Dalit rights and the WCAR

In recent years, Dalits have formed human rights organisations that have demanded reparation and respect from the Indian government.

On December 8, 1999, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) released the Black Papers, the first documents in history that spell out in detail the human rights that have been denied the Dalits.

The Indian government, however, continues to deny its culpability in perpetuating the oppression of Dalits. It has strongly opposed efforts to address caste-based discrimination in the draft documents of the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), including the mere mention of the word caste.

The United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNCHR) has, however, passed several resolutions denouncing caste-based discrimination and classifying it as a form of racial discrimination.

The Indian government's intransigence on the caste issue has made the NCDHR all the more persistent about pushing for its discussion and resolution in the upcoming WCAR. The NCDHR hopes that this time around, world attention and action will be focused on this age-old problem.

Unlike the previous two international anti-racism conferences held in 1978 and 1983 that mainly discussed ending apartheid in South Africa, the WCAR is expected to draw the commitments from UN member in work-

ing towards the eradication of all forms of discrimination.

The WCAR provides a rare opportunity to raise the visibility of India's “hidden” apartheid at the international level. It is crucial for all Dalit groups to come up with a united stand against caste-based discrimination before the international community and the UN. It is also an opportunity for human rights groups around the world to express their support and solidarity for this cause.

It was for this reason that NGOs who attended the Asia-Pacific Networking Meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal last April 2001, declared that the campaign for Dalit human rights be adopted at a regional level.

A common strategy, joint lobbying and advocacy as well as support from organisations around the world can hopefully influence the content of the final resolution that will be adopted by member-States, such that it will reflect Dalit realities.

Strong international commitment will significantly enhance the ability of Dalit activists to pressure and influence the Indian Government to take back its position that “caste discrimination is not racial discrimination” and consequently implement its national and international human rights obligations. ♪

Reference: Website: <http://www.dalits.org/othercountries.html>, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights

Ma. Victoria Cabrera-Balleza is the Manager of the Media and InfoCom Services Programme of Isis International-Manila.