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Factor 16: India

"Free Our Kids!" Satisfying the Hunger of the Dalits

Keith Bellows of the National Geographic society once said, "There are some parts of the world that, once visited, get into your heart and won't go. For me, India is such a place. When I first visited, I was stunned by the richness of the land, by its lush beauty and exotic architecture, by its ability to overload the senses with the pure, concentrated intensity of its colors, smells, tastes, and sounds... I had been seeing the world in black and white and, when brought face-to-face with India, experienced everything re-rendered in brilliant Technicolor." Between a surging population, bright colors, mango carts, curious languages, Hindu temples, and loud car horns, India is an exciting place that is full of growth. Economically, India has grown significantly in the past 30 years, with the GDP growth rate at an average of about 6.2%. India has been slightly developing in many other ways as well, such as number of poor, percent of underweight children, and youth literacy rates. Overall, India was and is a secure, beautiful, and stable place for millions of people to live. But for many others, this is not the case.

Take the Maliks, a fictional yet typical poor Indian family, for example. Second oldest of four children and a girl, Nanda wanted to go to school but knew it was pointless considering her future job of laboring would require little schooling. Instead, she saw her brothers off to school and watched as they jumped onto someone else's scooter to embark on the 6 mile ride; she was just happy they received such good opportunities. Her parents had left much earlier, walking their separate ways. Her mother headed towards town to continue her job of cleaning at a cheap hotel and her father towards the country where he would shovel animal manure. She stayed home while tending to her ill baby sister Rana, because hospitals and help were distant and cost thousands of rupees that her family just didn't make. Healthcare would only be pursued if absolutely necessary for one of the males of the family. Using the 275 rupees they earned on an average week (approximately \$5.60 US), Nanda's mother had gone to the market earlier. She watched carefully to make sure she bought from people whose social status wasn't too high simply because she couldn't buy from them and was doing what she had always done. She returned with more than normal, including some leftovers that others forced them to eat. But with this food, Nanda prepared the evening meal of daal, subje, and rice, much more than normal, and she was thankful for that. As economist and academic Jean Dreze put it, " The government can't get away with large-scale famine, but it can get away with chronic hunger. It has become an accepted part of life in India." The Maliks had always done nothing but serve others and would continue to do so as long as their status kept them from getting good jobs, and this lack of good jobs is what has kept them hungry for so long.

Despite its many benefits for some, for others India is just another place to work hard and scrape out a living. Because of its immense population, the GDP per capita is \$3,700, versus the United States' of \$48,100. 52% of its people work in agriculture, 34% in services, and 14% in industry. At birth people are expected to live approximately 67 years ("South Asia: India"). Among many other issues, hunger is one of the biggest. Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen once said, " When India achieved independence, more than 50 years ago, the people of the country were much afflicted by endemic hunger. They still are." One third of the world's hungry live in India, and over 7,000 people die of hunger there every day ("Hunger

Facts"). Many factors add to this colossal problem, but one of the biggest contributors is a part of the culture.

Hinduism is by far the most prevalent religion in India with over 800 million there belonging to it, and with Hinduism comes the caste system. The caste system is the dividing of the people of a society into groups based on ancestry and occupation, and the one of Hinduism is composed of four groups. The first are the Brahmins who are priests, second are Kshatriyas who are rulers or soldiers, third are the Vaisyas who are merchants and traders, and last are the Shudras who labor. Within Hindu law, Shudras are considered impure, they shouldn't be respected, killing one has no punishment, their land can be taken by anyone of higher caste, and they are born into servility and it is often thought that they should stay there. And not even included in a caste are India's 70 million Dalits, also called Harijans or "untouchables," who have little to no rights within this Hindu society. In smaller cities or more rural areas, Dalits cannot enter non-Dalit homes, shops, or temples. These kids must sit separate from higher caste kids in school and often aren't fed, can't use public facilities, and are just discriminated against altogether by other students and faculty. They cannot vote, and no dairy products are sold to or bought from them. 50% of Dalits live below the poverty line versus the 40% national average and illiteracy rates are a staggering 86% for women and 61% for men ("Dalit Samakhya"). Although "untouchability" was abolished by Indian law in 1955, society still holds this caste system in place. Jobs are supposed to be set aside specifically for Dalits, but often this isn't enforced ("The Untouchables: India Media Voices for Children").

This caste system effects agricultural productivity, household income, and food availability and quality by decreasing the number of people available to farm, worsening pay and job quality for Dalits, and making food literally more difficult for the lower caste to access. Dalits and people of low class aren't supposed to own land at all, and if they do, it's a miniscule amount; this has a direct affect on farming productivity because it impacts the amount of farmers and workers of the land. These cultural boundaries worsen household incomes by keeping Dalits and other low-caste people from getting good jobs. Unless they are extremely well educated, qualified, and lucky, Dalits work the "unclean" jobs, laboring, cleaning hospitals and apartments, preparing and burying the dead, getting rid of human and animal waste, and others. These children are often discriminated against in school and feel that a little education won't get them out of these jobs, so many don't go to school and at least 50% of Dalit students drop out, and therefore have no chance of escaping their caste and the occupations and income that come with it ("Social-exclusion-in-bihar"). In rural areas, Dalits have some of the worst food accessibility and quality in India because they can only buy food from vendors, stores, and markets that are owned by someone of a lower sub-caste within the Vaisyas and Shudras. It is not always easy for these untouchables to find such vendors and this makes getting food much harder, longer, and troublesome. The lack of sales of dairy products between Dalits and caste members would be a huge inconvenience for these people as well. Often times, members of higher castes give their leftover food to Dalits and force them to consume it in order to put them in their place symbolically; all humans deserve better food quality and more respect than that. And obviously, food condition and accessibility decrease significantly as household income decreases.

Varna, or the caste system, has had an even more immense affect on rural people and women. Females in India are about two times more likely to die before age five than boys are. Mothers often abort a girl but not a boy because they don't want to bear the burden of paying for the girl's wedding or education when they assume the girl will just be married off. In the past 50 years, India's sex ratio has dropped from 976 girls per 1000 boys to 914 girls per 1000 boys. Families of sick girls often do not seek immediate medical

attention like they would with a boy because they have less interest in the girls' survival. And lastly, girls are often fed very little, to the point of malnourishment, because parents fear well-fed girls will enter puberty first and have an expensive wedding sooner. According to UN figures, "India is the most dangerous place in the world to be born a girl" ("Dalit Freedom Network: Abolish Caste, Now and Forever!"). Women are extremely discriminated against within the caste system, so to carry the burden of being a woman and a Dalit in this society would be practically unbearable. Rural areas generally cling more to their culture and religion because of less impact from the West; Varna's tighter grip results in more intensified persecution of Dalits in these areas. Also, these people are sometimes forced to move away from cities or big groups of people, even crossing the shadow of one is said to make one of a higher caste "unclean," so these Dalits living in rural areas have to spend more money on transportation and less money on food.

The spread of technology has increased awareness of the Western ideal that all men are created equal so the amount of discrimination against these people has somewhat decreased, but the low-caste people being stuck in hunger is still a colossal problem involving millions of people. Is this problem overall fixing itself? As data that is specific to caste and class is unavailable, one must look at the poverty trends at large instead in order to best measure strides forward or backward in decreasing hunger involving Dalits and Shudras. The percent of children under the age of three that are underweight went from 53% in 1990 to 45% now. The number of India's poor went from 320 million to 301 million between 1994 and 2004. And lastly, youth literacy rates increased from 61.9%-76.4% between 1991 and 2001 ("Newsroom"). These statistics show that the conditions of India's poor may be slightly improving, but these changes aren't nearly as significant as they should be considering the number of people involved.

A less rigid caste system would decrease the number of hungry people by giving equal opportunity to all and therefore more freedom for the poor to have higher incomes. Not being held back by Varna means one could go to school, have a sound education, get an enjoyable and decent job, make a reasonable amount of money, have sufficient food, and have the capability to sustain the lives of oneself and one's family. The abolition of caste prejudice would mean people would be free to buy or sell to all which would create fresher and better markets and help the economy. Dalits could live wherever they wanted to and work at any job, providing more workers. Also, freeing low-caste people of set occupations would deliver many innocent people from hard labor jobs and young girls from prostitution.

The caste system should be overturned to address this factor and improve food security by bettering the school system to ensure quality and impartial education for Dalits, low-caste people, and all children. This should be done by having higher quantity and quality of schools for all, including Dalits, and ensuring that discrimination is done away with within public schools. This improved education would result in a better chance at a higher paying job for untouchables and therefore more food and healthcare and less hungry people. Educating Dalits is most important, but educating non-Dalits is almost as crucial, as a changed mindset is necessary for changed actions. If one only educates the low caste, one is stuck with some very skilled and quality victims and lots of big and dense bullies. But by getting these low-caste people into schools and jobs with Brahmins and Kshatriyas, where no one has preferential treatment and everyone is considered capable, can begin the degradation of the caste system and social standards that are causing more and more people to live without basic needs. Working in the schools and with younger generations ensures that this new mindset will stick, rather than just impacting the older generation, because it will be passed from today's children to their future children. But a mindset cannot be changed,

a habit broken, or a discrimination fixed in just one day, it must be something people live with and come to accept as their own. By placing these low-caste young adults in schools or jobs with high-caste young adults, society forces them to accept each other and learn to treat everyone as an equal. Without that behavior modeled and expected from people no one will conform to it, so schools having children of all castes and respectable teachers are needed. Within public schools, teachers who are unbiased and willing to give all kids equal food, seating, bathrooms, assignments, requirements, and tasks would be crucial to the kids understanding that no one is less capable because of the situation he or she is born into. Universities also must be on board with this in order to find teachers willing to have this mindset and educate them so they are completely capable of carrying out this attitude in the schools. Administrators who enforce these guidelines and ensure that they are being completely carried out would be needed. Getting quality people and schools requires effort, money, and time, so some incentive would need to be given to schools willing to integrate Dalits into their student bodies; funding, grants, and more international opportunities are just a few possibilities for compensation. NGO's dedicated to education may assist with funding, offer training, and lend a hand in various other ways. Teaching the low caste so it can do superior jobs and the high caste so it can accept these workers is vital to breaking down Varna so the poorer can have better food security.

Freeing the Indian people of the caste system would help the nation meet more of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and this is represented well by an organization called Dalit Freedom Network. " The Dalit Freedom Network partners with the Dalits in their quest for freedom, justice, and human dignity by mobilizing human, intellectual, and financial resources." This group focuses on providing education for Dalit children which has numerous positive impacts on these kids. It gives them a quality English education by trained professionals, it focuses on social and economic equality in all its values, and it provides social and economic privileges under the Affirmative Action Program. DFN also helps people who are now too old to take advantage of the opportunities in the schools by training them in market skills to help them get more advanced economically. Lastly, DFN provides basic healthcare to people that need it most. Many MDGs are fulfilled by this solution, some of them are an incredible and direct boost in primary education, increase in healthcare, and the breaking down of some social issues. This superb education improvement can lead to a better jobs, higher salaries, and greater healthcare options or more people able to afford healthcare for the first time. It abolishes social inequality which could pave the way for the dissolving of gender inequalities as well. Smarter, healthier kids will produce a more self-sufficient, productive, and successful community.

These changes are not possible unless key people play necessary roles in their entirety. Parents of Dalit children have to be willing to send their kids to these schools and parents of high caste children have to accept Dalit children's attendance. Dalits have to not hold themselves at a lower standard than others and non-Dalits have to accept this lack of a lower standard. Universities must find and educate teachers who are willing to promote non-prejudice and communities as a whole must bring forth these teachers. The national government of India's encouragement and support of these schools through incentives is of utmost importance if they are to succeed, and in doing this it can and will enforce the "equality to all" promised by its constitution. Although even without government support, our increasing awareness of this injustice outside of India may boost international assistance through private schools and institutions to bring about change. Even Americans can aid by just being there as a positive presence, by demonstrating alternatives to the cultural norm and modeling proper interactions. These kind of people are necessary, for

American's kind actions are capable of speaking very powerfully. Society must also support changes in its children's perspective on the caste system and be willing to adapt that change to itself.

Although breaking down the caste system may seem like an ambitious goal, it is crucial for justice to reign and less to be hungry. Overpopulation could threaten peoples' ability to find jobs if birth control and social norms aren't changed, and poorer people often have bigger families that are much harder to support and provide for. However as untouchables get more money, they will be able to better control family size and help slow down India's booming population. The integration of Dalits into the rest of the society may increase urbanization and cause some to lose jobs, but some of these Dalits may move to rural areas as well. Climate change may increase as more people have money to buy things that are more advanced and less eco-friendly, but some may take the initiative and be able to purchase things that are a lot more green and recycle, and the government could afford to focus more on developing green policies rather than feeding the poor. Before dealing with these issues, the caste system must be dissolved so that the hunger of the low caste can be sated and equality achieved. As Nobel Prize winner Pablo Neruda said, " For now I ask no more than the justice of eating."

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