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## **Human Rights: Living without Human Rights: Life as a Dalit**

### **Introduction**

*Why does India have this paradox, on the one hand the best IT experts in the world, on the other the feudal caste system? And why hasn't it changed despite a strong Constitution? (Thekaekara, 2005)*

Can you imagine being born into absolute poverty with absolutely no way out? Not only absolute poverty, but almost completely without any rights? This is the life of a Dalit in India's caste system. Actually, the Dalit are not even members of a caste: they are the under castes in Hinduism or the Untouchables, allegedly born into a polluted life because of past actions and, therefore, casteless. Officially in the Indian census the Dalits are called Scheduled Castes making up 16.2% of the total population (Census, 2011). Mahatma Gandhi called the Untouchables Harijans ("Children of the God Hari Vishnu," or simply "Children of God") and worked for their emancipation. Kocheril Raman Narayanan, who served as president of India from 1997 to 2002, was the first and only Dalit to reach the highest office (Thekaekara, 2005).

The World Bank sets the extreme economic poverty line for India at US\$1.08 a day, but roughly half of the 201 million Dalits live at or below this level. India has one-third of the world's poorest people, with the gap widening between the haves and the have nots. These extremes make it a "ticking time bomb" and, by 2026, the most populated nation in the world (Nelson, 2013). Most of the Dalit are extremely poor. *Dalit* is a Sanskrit word from the root *dal*, meaning "broken" or "crushed." In the 1970s, the Dalit Panther Movement adopted the term Dalit instead of "untouchables." Today, the word is widely used, especially by Dalit people themselves. There are certain strategies that the Dalit have tried and are trying for full emancipation, yet results are dismal at best. Those strategies include political, economic, social and religious strategies (Kumar, 2013).

The life of a Dalit is one where basic human rights are out of reach for the majority. It is a life without dignity – many of them are forced into manual scavenging – a practice that human rights activists want abolished (Thekaekara, 2005). Each week Dalits are murdered, Dalit homes are burnt, Dalits are kidnapped or abducted, Dalit women are raped and young Dalit girls are sold into sexual slavery. Employers can even murder a Dalit without any consequence. Out of every 100 people accused of or arrested on charges of committing crimes against the Dalits, more than 92 walk free after the court trials (ISDN, 2012).

According to the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* website (iheu.org) the “plight of the Dalits is the worst human rights problem in the world.” Some call it the “hidden apartheid.” Despite the Indian Constitution of 1948 prohibiting the practice of untouchability (or discrimination), very little has changed and the Dalits remain a segregated and discriminated against population (Thekaekara, 2005).

In recent years there has been an increase of movies and documentaries about this hidden apartheid bringing their situation to the forefront of international human rights organizations. Human Rights Watch recently focused on women: *Take Action to Improve Conditions for Dalit Women* stating their special needs for protection because they are the most vulnerable and discriminated against (Manjoo, 2013). The movie *Slum Dog Millionaire*, which won an academy award, offers what many consider a misrepresentation of a Dalit winning a game show, with hardly a whisper of India’s human rights violations or the caste system.

### **Without Dignity – the Untouchable**

According to the organization *Anti-Slavery International* ([www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)) caste discrimination is at the heart of debt bondage in India where Dalits are paid less than the cost of living, forcing millions to borrow money at high interest rates from unfair bosses who trap them in perpetual servitude. According to the Indian Labour Abolition Act all bonded laborers were to be released, rehabilitated, and their debts cancelled. That was over 35 years ago and very little has changed. On the website called *India Unheard, Video Volunteers*, visitors can learn about the many issues plaguing India’s states including short video titles such as “No Dignity for Untouchable Jobs,” “Dalit Community Struggles for Water,” and “Untouchability in Water Tanks” (Pillai, 2011).

In one community the Dalit well is empty and they are not allowed to be near the non-Dalit well, so they must wait, sometimes for 3 hours or more, for a non-Dalit to pour water into their jugs. In the documentary *Untouched* a Dalit mother cries. Her roof has been burned away because she went to the river and took water at the wrong place (Pert, 2007).

With a billion people in India, and the economy in certain sectors in the industrialized areas booming, the rural Dalit laborers will be hard hit as climate change continues to limit their water supply. These issues coupled with their continuous discrimination, the Dalit’s water supply will become even more challenging due to the unfair practices of ignoring their daily needs.

In the Indian economy, Dalits make up most of the agricultural, bonded and child laborers and many are forced into human trafficking. Despite laws to protect them, the Dalit still are largely rural and mostly very poor. It is true that some are educated and even some are voted into government, but, for the most part the Dalits still are unhappy and experience human rights violations in the workplace and in their villages. Some Dalit have converted to Christianity, making the Christians in India majority Dalit (Kumar, 2013) Yet, they still cannot escape their fate.

The term “untouchability” is still used. When asked what is untouchability in the documentary *Untouched* several of the respondents claim that it simply means if you are a Dalit you cannot touch a non-Dalit. Yet it also means as a Dalit you cannot drink out of certain glasses or touch certain wells or sit certain places or talk to certain people. Being born a Dalit still means there is very little chance at a good life (Pert, 2007). For many, employment is limited to occupations that are ritually impure, such as butchering, removal of dead animals, burials, and leatherwork. Every day, 1.3 million people in India are forced to clean human excrement with their bare hands in the abhorrent practice known as manual scavenging. This could be changed by implementing ways that would allow the Dalit to be protected from diseases and receive some dignity (Polizter, 2012; ISDN, 2012).

Dalits are outcasts relegated to the most menial and dirty of tasks and many face human rights violations throughout their lives. Similar to apartheid and slavery in the United States, it is not enough to make a law to change a country. It takes education and policy changes to change a country. India must be able to enforce the laws and send the guilty to prison (Kumar, 2013). The Brahmans, the highest caste, are the most responsible for discrimination. They believe that it is the fate of the Dalits to be disgraced for “karmic sins.” It is possible that Brahmans have committed crimes against humanity. An international tribunal, such as what was conducted for the Nazis after World War II, might reveal that there are certain Brahmans who are most responsible for the human rights violations in India against the Dalit. It has become the culture to discriminate.

The human rights violations are not the same for every Dalit and a minority of Dalits are virtually unaware of discrimination or abuse although they tend to live in the metropolitan areas. Some graduate college and lead typical lives. Some non-Dalit college students protest the treatment of Dalits, but many, many Indians still deny the existence of these human right violations and refuse to help. Some even have the audacity to say that the Dalit do not suffer at all anymore.

### **Women in Agriculture**

According to the National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research, women’s participation in agriculture in India increased by 12% since 1983 ([The Hindu](#), 2011). Agriculture is very important to the Indian economy and men typically no longer want the primary involvement, so women are now the farmers in much of rural India.

The Kerala women's collective farming initiative is considered the largest economic project of its kind in the country. It transforms women laborers into master cultivators and is set to emerge as a role model for the entire country under the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017) ([The Hindu](#), 2011). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation started the Sunhara India Project, which focuses on collective action through group structures where they target women as farmers (ASI, 2013).

Some key results of the Sunhara India Project are: the average increase in income for all 3 districts was 27%; the average income increase per household reported by women was 28%; 112 self-help groups in one district opened up bank accounts; and 35% of women reported greater access to finances (ASI, 2013).

A key component of the Sunhara India Project approach is the self-help group training. One woman has this to say about it:

*“When I first came for the SHG (self-help group) training, I received a lot of abuse and scolding from my in-laws because they thought that other people will speak negatively about us. [I got the courage to go to the training despite my in-laws because I knew] I was a part of a group, and if there will be any problem, then I have all of the other group members to help; other women in the group do it so I can do it too. My family used to sell our entire crop to a middleman. But when I started going out of my house to the women’s center, I learned that the price in the market is higher than what we pay the middleman. So I started taking the crop to the market and selling it myself. I earn three times the profit than what I earn when we sell to the middleman.”*

– SHG member, Pratapgarh (ASI, 2012)

All together this project by the Gates Foundation is helping about 6,000 women farmers in the Pratapgarh, Shahjahanpur and Sultanpur districts. The farmer leadership training includes topics like agricultural practices, use of demonstration plots, access to farmers’ resource center to purchase seeds, fertilizer and other inputs; and access to market and technical information. As a side note here, there is a void about traditional and organic farming methods and their contribution to the protection of the environment. I do find it curious as to why the Gates Foundation does not at least attempt to integrate traditional methods and natural, non-chemical, practices.

On the other hand, this project uses qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups and observation), which reveal that women enjoy making their own money. This has led to women discussing issues typically left alone, such as domestic violence and abuse. Plus leadership training increases their confidence and literacy skills. Literacy leads to improved economic and social levels.

Literacy for the Dalit is particularly low, with only 10% literacy rate in 1961 and approximately 40% today, with lower rates for girls than boys (ISDN, 2012; Kumar, 2013). Education and literacy classes cost money and many Dalit families cannot afford it. Women’s work burden in India is quite high (ASI, 2012). Some women find the effort to become literate worth the trouble and time. Perhaps other women who do not wish to become literate could still benefit from farming programs. Not everyone wants to become a leader!

## **A Typical Dalit Devotee Family in Southern India**

Covered from head toe in human waste, the bare chested Nirav climbs from the sewer of a crowded street and begins his way home to his rural village. He has less than 75 cents to share with his family. He is relieved to finish another day of hard work. While walking through the village where the higher castes live he is prohibited from wearing his shoes in the dirt road and must remove them. Nirav has an 18 year old son who dreams of attending occupational college, but he could not graduate from lower grades because he is a Dalit. This almost broke his mother's heart.

There has been much heartbreak for this family. Their meager home is owned by a cruel landlord who lives in the city. Payments for rent often are so high that Nirav must borrow money with high interest. One of their daughters had to be sold as a Devidasi to the Temple in the next village in order to make ends meet just a year ago. They hardly ever hear about her anymore, but each morning they pray at their shrine before breakfast that she will one day return home safely. They try not to think about the awful rumors they have heard about what happens to these girls.

Nirav and his wife lost two other children as infants and they are buried in the Dalit graveyard just beyond the hills. Nirav's mother is buried there, but his father had become a Christian and left India when he was a boy. Nirav never heard from him again. There are no health clinics or hospitals nearby and there have been many times when the whole family has been hungry for days and days. Their 13 year old son goes to school about 3 miles away, but he cannot eat lunch there and can only sit in the back of the classroom and watch the higher caste children learn.

Nirav washes his hands and feet from water his wife brought from the well earlier. There is not enough water for him to bathe his entire body. Water is a precious resource here and their Dalit well is often dry forcing his wife to beg for the non-Dalit water. They sit down for a meal of vegetables, rice and beans. They are lucky now that Nirav's wife is part of the collective farming experiment with the state government so they have nutritious food to eat. Aisha, Nirav's wife, has recently changed from agricultural laborer to cultivator! Nirav is grateful for his wife's opportunities and wishes that they had had this in their lives a year ago, so then maybe they would still have their daughter with them. Aisha farms on 3 acres of land with 5 different women. The government gave her a small loan to buy seeds to farm her crops and with a small surplus for market, it looks like she will be able to pay her loan back on time.

Luckily, higher caste women are in the collective farm so there is plenty of water available for the crops. On her leased land she farms beans, okra, paddy (rice), and tubers. She farms using organic and multi-crop methods taught to her by an agricultural extension worker from the government. There is a collective dairy farm in the next village and sometimes the family has buffalo milk to drink, but not today. Today is Nirav's and Aisha's 13 year old son's birthday. Before starting their meal, as devout Hindus they first sprinkle water around the plate as an act of purification. They have a modest shrine in their main room. Five morsels of food are placed on

the side of the table next to the shrine to acknowledge the debt owed to the *devta runa* (divine forces) for their benign grace and protection. For their son's birthday celebration, the sacred symbol "OM" has been added onto the small birthday cake along with "Happy Birthday." Also, a lamp is lit instead of having his son blow out the candles. In the Hindu faith, lighting a lamp is symbolic of new life, a new beginning or the spreading of knowledge (Mostly obtained from videos, ASI, 2012; and ElGindy, 2013).

### **The Four Strategies**

The Dalit political strategy is difficult to make cohesive because there are so many of them in terms of numbers and there are many different political parties in India. It is hard for them to agree. There are Dalit members of the Parliament and of State Legislative Assemblies, as well as Dalit party workers in all political parties. There are also Dalit political parties just for Dalits. With little political unity, it is hard for the Dalits to move forward (Kumar, 2013).

The Dalit economic strategy is difficult at best. Not only are the Dalits very poor they are also at the mercy of the higher castes for their livelihoods. Many do seek educational opportunities, if possible, and there are even some Dalits in the urban areas that are no longer recognized as Dalit. Yes, there are some that grow up without discrimination and have managed to become economically mobile (or their parents have), but most of the Dalits live in rural areas, as high as 75%, where educational opportunities are minimal. It is important to remember that the Dalit do not live in separate villages from the other castes, but on the outskirts of villages where higher castes have control over them (Pillar, 2011; Pert, 2007).

The Dalit social strategy includes educational opportunities and lifestyle changes. For example, some refuse to work the most menial jobs and attempt to escape the dirty jobs that give the Dalit social stigma. Development agencies and organizations have attempted to alleviate some of the burden put on the Dalit in the social and economic areas by offering them opportunities in small scale industries, skill building and seeking government assistance (Kumar, 2013).

The Dalit religious strategy includes reforms within Hinduism and exit strategies to other religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism. Matter-of-fact, most of the Christians in India are Dalit. The problem with leaving Hinduism for Indians that stay in India is that they will lose their affirmative action benefits, which apparently has happened or does happen enough to make a difference for some.

Finally, there is a movement to alter the Dalit identity from one of shame to one of pride. The Dalit identity is confusing and complex. There are no simple or easy solutions. Human rights violations must end and affirmative action laws must be upheld. Employers that discriminate must be punished (Kumar, 2013).

## Conclusion

India is the second most populated country in the world and over 80% of them are Hindus. Soon it will be the most populated country in the world. It seems as India's GDP grows, the social problems increase. There is a bigger and bigger difference between the haves and the have-nots. The highest caste, the Brahmans, have become wealthier and at the same time more reactive against the Dalits. The Dalits cannot eat the food they want, obtain the water they need or maintain a livable wage. Some of them are mistreated every day. If a Dalit makes an error in judgment from a higher caste member's perspective, it is punishable by severe and sometimes fatal consequences. The utter hatred that the upper castes have for the Dalits is hard to believe. How can a caste that holds the cow sacred torture another Hindu for merely touching something? It does not make any sense.

It is senseless. As if the physical beatings, arson attacks and debt bondage were not enough, the human trafficking and forced prostitution of young girls takes the seriousness of this situation beyond the borders of India. This is the world's problem. The governments of India need to step up and start punishing the greedy landlords that are charging out-of-control fees to the Dalits. Perhaps the United Nations or another international agency needs to send in some decent lawyers to make things right in India or create a watchdog, at the very least.

The world cannot continue to let these people suffer so needlessly, especially the exploitation of women and girls. It seems as if the problems all stem from this hatred or discrimination. The Dalit are experiencing today a segregated and oppressed life. As Harriet Tubman said, "I saved 1000 slaves and I could have saved a 1000 more if they had known they were slaves."

How can over 1 billion people change? I believe education is the key. First, many of the Dalit will have to work on understanding and transforming their identities from an untouchable or polluted person to one of empowerment and awareness. Second, the local governments need to have civil servants that are protected and paid a living wage to do the dirty jobs that every community needs to perform. These are jobs that anyone could obtain, similar to the way it is in the USA. Most garbage collectors have excellent benefits and hourly wages. Third, the hearts and minds of the Indian people need to be reconnected by their nation instead of divided by their religion.

Lastly, without even a second thought, the human trafficking of any persons, but especially girls and women, needs to be halted immediately by engaging law enforcement and the judicial system to do the right thing and if they cannot figure it out then maybe the international community needs to step in and show them how. Without a doubt, human rights violations are significant for the Dalit of India. Too many of them suffer every day because of discrimination and hatred.

All persons deserve a dignified life. All persons deserve access to resources to have food on the table every night and clean water to drink and use daily. For many of the Dalit that means access

to land where currently only about 15% of them have such access. Through collective farming experiments, like the one described above, it appears that India has an innovative and healthy alternative for many Dalit women and their families. Additionally, by practicing organic farming the laborers turned cultivators would not only be protecting the land, they will be subsisting from it for many years to come.

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