



Caste-Based Discrimination in Southern Asia

Kanchan lives with her family in Delhi. She helps her mother at home and attends a local public high school. She is from a Dalit (low caste) family and she says that she is always forced to sit in the back of the classroom and is not allowed to participate in any of the school programs. Her family has financial difficulties and she does not always have the textbooks she needs for school. She is often humiliated by the teacher and other students for not having her books. When handing out the scholarship money to Dalit students, the teacher loudly calls them up to the front of the room to collect the money in front of all the other students. She said, "It is very humiliating in front of other children, who treat us differently based on our caste identity."

Dharmendra lives in a village in the northeast of India. His family is also a Dalit family and he faces many difficulties in trying to get an education. When Dalit children do well in school, others in higher castes in the village are not happy. He said, "When I go to the local shop, they heckle me, 'The studious one has come. There is no point in you studying, as in the end, you have to come and work on our farms. Now finish school quickly and join in the work.'" And at school he faces discrimination like Kanchan, "I do not know why I am always asked to sit at the back of the class. When I sit in the front seat, Bhumihar (higher-caste) boys harass me. When I complain to the teacher, the teacher says, 'You go and sit at the back, your place is there.'" On school holidays, he and his friends are often made to clean the school.ⁱ

At least 160 million people in India and up to 260 million people globally are considered by their own societies as "untouchable" – as polluted and polluting. In India, Nepal and elsewhere in Southern Asia, these people have taken the name of Dalit – or "broken" people. The Dalits, together with the indigenous hill and forest populations of India, who are now called Adivasi, occupy a social position below or outside the caste system. The caste system itself is rooted in Hindu tradition, but has spread to all parts of society including other religions.



The stigma attached to Dalits is based on their descent and their traditional occupations – usually the most dirty, dangerous and demeaning occupations in their societies. The stigma remains, regardless of any personal qualities or achievements an individual may have. Dalits and Adivasi people are more likely to be poor, uneducated, and malnourished than other members of Indian society, despite 70 years of affirmative action and targeted government programs, as well as the constitutional abolition of untouchability. Dalits continue to be excluded, marginalized, and shunned in all aspects of life, and their efforts to claim justice met with violent retaliation.

Some examples of caste-based discrimination include:

- Prohibitions, distinction, and restrictions
 - Prohibition of marriage between members of different castes, especially marriage with Dalits
 - Prohibitions against eating together or even using the same cups, plates, and utensils
 - Prohibitions for contesting elections and exercising their right to vote without coercion
- Discrimination and exclusion from civic amenities
 - Segregation in housing/residence, with Dalit families being confined to specific areas of the town
 - Prohibitions against Dalits using the same wells and other public facilities (including places of worship) as other higher caste community members
 - Denial of access to land ownership
- Forced and menial labor
 - Restrictions on the type of work Dalits can perform
 - Sub-standard wages
- Violence, particularly against Dalit women and those who fight for their rights

One of the most extreme examples of caste-based work restrictions is manual scavenging, the collection and removal of human feces from dry (non-flush) latrines. Manual scavenging survives in many parts of India, despite the adoption of measures such as the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993 and repeated government commitments to eradicate manual scavenging. Manual scavengers are most often from the Dalit community. They collect the feces in the dry latrine with simple tools or their bare hands and carry it away in pots. The Indian National Human Rights Commission has called manual scavenging “one of the worst violations of human rights.”

These discriminatory attitudes towards caste identity directly contradict the fundamental principle that all people are born equal in dignity and rights. As Christians, we believe that all human beings are made in the image of God, that every person is of intrinsic worth before God, and that every individual has a right to the fullest possible opportunities for the development of life. Most Christians in India are Dalits and many Dalits see Christianity as liberating. However, non-Dalit Christians also discriminate based on caste by not allowing Dalits to serve as pastors or attend worship in a church with members of higher castes.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you see discrimination in your community?
2. What kinds of actions help fight discrimination?
3. What can we learn from these experiences in Southern Asia?

Learn

Dive deeper into this issue by watching the video by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights called “NCDHR 20 Years Journey” at <https://youtu.be/rPyj5T-4Kr8>.

Pray

Pray with partners in Southern Asia working on Dalit Human Rights and against caste-based discrimination. Read a Southern Asia Initiative Bible study and prayer from a Dalit activist, pastor, and scholar called, “Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation”, https://www.globalministries.org/bible_study_repentance_forgiveness_and_reconciliation.

Advocate

You can help fight caste-based discrimination in Southern Asia by speaking up against discrimination wherever you see it. Find a local group working for civil and human rights for all and support their work.

Give

The Center for Social Equity and Inclusion (CSEI) exists to deepen democracy and to develop a robust, inclusive society in India by enhancing the involvement of communities that are excluded, including Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. Learn more about CSEI and their projects: https://www.globalministries.org/social_equity_and_inclusion_for_youth_in_india.

ⁱ Both Kanchan and Dharmendra’s stories are taken from a book published in 2016 by the Center for Social Equity & Inclusion called, “I Count – Count Me: Struggles, Aspirations & Achievements of Young People (Dalit, Muslim & Tribal)”.