

Dalit

Dalit, meaning "broken/scattered" in Sanskrit and Hindi, is a term mostly used for the castes in India that have been subjected to untouchability. Dalits were excluded from the four-fold varna system of Hinduism and were seen as forming a fifth varna, also known by the name of *Panchama*. Dalits now profess various religious beliefs, including Buddhism, Christianity and Sikhism.

The term *dalits* was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of *Depressed Classes* prior to 1935. It was popularised by the economist and reformer B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), himself a Dalit, and in the 1970s its use was invigorated when it was adopted by the Dalit Panthers activist group. India's National Commission for Scheduled Castes considers official use of *dalit* as a label to be "unconstitutional" because modern legislation prefers *Scheduled Castes* however, some sources say that *Dalit* has encompassed more communities than the official term of *Scheduled Castes* and is sometimes used to refer to all of India's oppressed peoples. A similar all-encompassing situation prevails in Nepal.

Scheduled Caste communities exist across India, although they are mostly concentrated in four states; they do not share a single language or religion. They comprise 16.6 per cent of India's population, according to the 2011 Census of India. Similar communities are found throughout the rest of South Asia, in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. They have emigrated to countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore and the Caribbean.

In 1932, the British Raj recommended separate electorates to select leaders for Dalits in the Communal Award. This was favoured by Ambedkar but when Mahatma Gandhi opposed the proposal it resulted in the Poona Pact. That in turn influenced the Government of India Act, 1935, which introduced the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes, now renamed as Scheduled Castes.

From soon after its independence in 1947, India introduced a reservation system to enhance the ability of Dalits to have political representation and to obtain government jobs and education. In 1997, India elected K. R. Narayanan as the nation's President. Many social organisations have promoted better conditions for Dalits through education, healthcare and employment. Nonetheless, while caste-based discrimination was prohibited and untouchability abolished by the Constitution of India, such practices still continue. To prevent harassment, assault, discrimination and similar acts against these groups, the Government of India enacted the Prevention of Atrocities Act on 31 March 1995.

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Etymology and usage

The word *dalit* is a vernacular form of the Sanskrit दलित (*dalita*). In Classical Sanskrit, this means "divided, split, broken, scattered". This word was repurposed in 19th-century Sanskrit to mean "(a person) not belonging to one of the four Brahminic castes".^[1] It was perhaps first used in this sense by Pune-based social reformer Jyotirao Phule, in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile "untouchable" castes from other Hindus.^[2]

Dalit is mostly used to describe communities that have been subjected to untouchability.^{[3][4]} Such people were excluded from the four-fold varna system of Hinduism and thought of themselves as forming a fifth varna, describing themselves as a *Panchama*.^[5]

The term was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of *Depressed Classes* prior to 1935.^[3] It was popularised by the economist and reformer B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), himself a Dalit,^[6] and in the 1970s its use was invigorated when it was adopted by the Dalit Panthers activist group.^[3]

Dalit has become a political identity, similar to the way African Americans in the United States moved away from the use of the term *Negro*, to the use of *Black* or indeed *African-American*.^[7] Socio-legal scholar Oliver Mendelsohn and political economist Marika Vicziany wrote in 1998 that the term had become "intensely political ... While use of the term might seem to express an appropriate solidarity with the contemporary face of Untouchable politics, there remain major problems in adopting it as a generic term. Although the word is now quite widespread, it still has deep roots in a tradition of political radicalism inspired by the figure of B. R. Ambedkar." They suggested its use risked erroneously labelling the entire population of untouchables in India as being united by a radical politics.^[2] Anand Teltumbde also detects a trend towards denial of the politicised identity, for example among educated middle-class people who have converted to Buddhism and argue that, as Buddhists, they cannot be Dalits. This may be due to their improved circumstances giving rise to a desire not to be associated with the what they perceive to be the demeaning Dalit masses.^[8]

Other terms

Official term

Scheduled Castes is the official term for Dalits in the opinion of India's National Commissions for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), who took legal advice that indicated modern legislation does not refer to Dalit and that therefore, it says, it is "unconstitutional" for official documents to do so. In 2004, the NCSC noted that some state governments used *Dalits* rather than *Scheduled Castes* in documentation and asked them to desist.^[9]

Some sources say that *Dalit* encompasses a broader range of communities than the official *Scheduled Caste* definition. It can include nomadic tribes and another official classification that also originated with the British Raj positive discrimination efforts in 1935, being the *Scheduled Tribes*.^[7] It is also sometimes used to refer to the entirety of India's oppressed peoples,^[3] which is the context that applies to its use in Nepalese society.^[4] An example of the limitations of the *Scheduled Caste* category is that, under Indian law, such people can only be followers of Buddhism, Hinduism or Sikhism,^[10] yet there are communities who claim to be Dalit Christians^[11] and the tribal communities often practise folk religions^[12]

Harijan

Mahatma Gandhi coined the word *Harijan*, translated roughly as *people of God*, to identify untouchables in 1933. The name was disliked by Ambedkar as it emphasised the Dalits as belonging to the Greater Hindu Nation rather than being an independent community like Muslims!^[13] When untouchability was outlawed after Indian independence, the use of the word *Harijan* to describe the ex-untouchables was more common among other castes than the Dalits themselves.^[4]

Regional terms

In Southern India, Dalits are sometimes known as *Adi Dravida*, *Adi Karnataka*, and *Adi Andhra*. This practice began around 1917, when the *Adi*- prefix was appropriated by Dalit leaders in the region. It embodies a theory that they were the original inhabitants of India, although this is dubious.^[15] The terms are used in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, respectively, to identify people of "untouchable" castes in official documents.

In the Indian state of Maharashtra, according to historian and women's studies academic Shailaja Paik, *Dalit* is a term mostly used by members of the Mahar caste, into which Ambedkar was born. Most other communities prefer to use their own caste name.^[16]

In Nepal, aside from *Harijan* and, most commonly, *Dalit*, terms such as *Haris* (among Muslims), *Achhoot*, *outcastes* and *neech jati* are used.^[6]

Demographics

Scheduled Caste communities exist across India and comprised 16.6 per cent of the country's population, according to the 2011 Census of India.^[17] Uttar Pradesh (21 per cent), West Bengal (11 per cent), Bihar (8 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (7 per cent) between them accounted for almost half the country's total Scheduled Caste population.^[18] They were most prevalent as a proportion of the states' population in Punjab, at about 32 per cent,^[19] while Mizoram had the lowest at approximately zero.^[10]

Similar groups are found throughout the rest of South Asia, in Nepal,^[4] Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.^[20] They have emigrated to countries such as the United States,^[21] United Kingdom,^[22] Singapore,^[23] and the Caribbean,^[24]

Social status

Dalits have had lowest social status in the traditional Hindu social structure but James Lochtefeld, a professor of religion and Asian studies, said in 2002 that the "adoption and popularization of [the term *Dalit*] reflects their growing awareness of the situation, and their greater assertiveness in demanding their legal and constitutional rights"^[25]

In the past, they were believed to be so impure that caste Hindus considered their presence to be polluting. The impure status was related to their historic hereditary occupations that Hindus considered to be "polluting" or debased, such as working with leather, working with night soil and other dirty work.^[26]

History

Gopal Baba Walangkar (ca. 1840-1900) is generally considered to be the pioneer of the Dalit movement, seeking a society in which they were not discriminated. This is despite the work of Harichand Thakur (ca. 1812-1878) with his Matua organisation that involved the Namasudra (Chandala) community in Bengal Presidency, British India. Ambedkar himself believed Walangkar to be the progenitor.^[30] Another early social reformer who worked to improve conditions for Dalits was Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890).

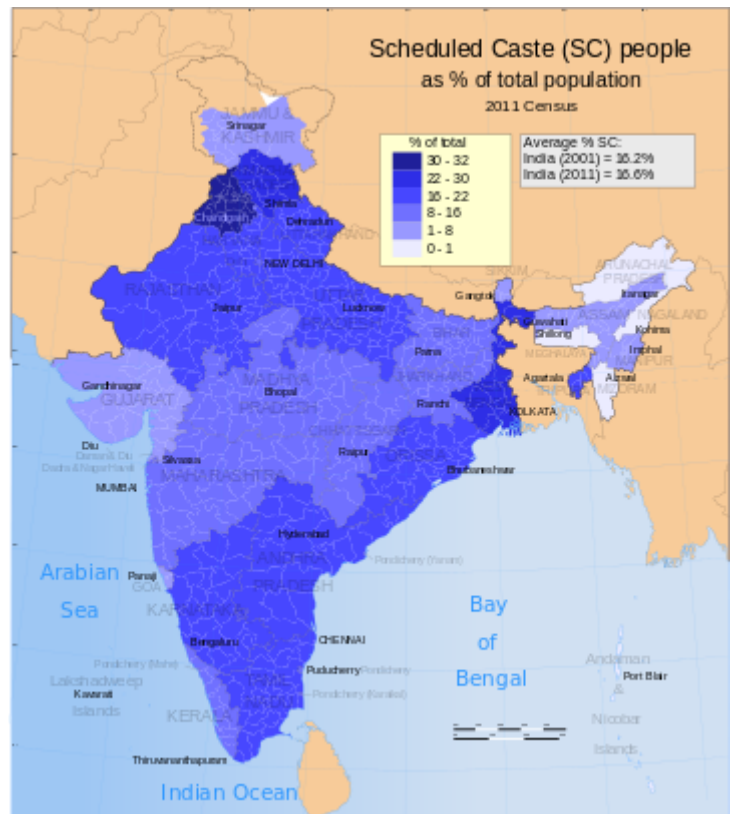
The 1950 Constitution of India, introduced after the country gained independence, included measures to improve the socioeconomic conditions of Dalits. Aside from banning untouchability, these included the reservation system, a means of positive discrimination that created the classifications of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Communities that were categorised as being one of those groups were guaranteed a percentage of the seats in the national and state legislatures, as well as in government jobs and places of education. The system has its origins in the 1932 Poona Pact between Ambedkar and Gandhi, when Ambedkar conceded his demand that the Dalits should have an electorate separate from the caste Hindus in return for Gandhi accepting measures along these lines.^[31] The notion of a separate electorate had been proposed in the Communal Award made by the British Raj authorities,^[32] and the outcome of the Pact - the Government of India Act of 1935 - both introduced the new term of *Scheduled Castes* in replacement for *Depressed Classes* and reserved seats for them in the legislatures.^[33]

By 1995, of all federal government jobs in India - 10.1 per cent of Class I, 12.7 per cent of Class II, 16.2 per cent of Class III, and 27.2 per cent of Class IV jobs were held by Dalits.^[34] Of the most senior jobs in government agencies and government-controlled enterprises, only 1 per cent were held by Dalits, not much change in 40 years. In the 21st century, Dalits have been elected to India's highest judicial and political offices.^{[35][36]}

In 2001, the quality of life of the Dalit population in India was not similar to that of the overall Indian population, on metrics such as access to health care, life expectancy, education attainability, access to drinking water and housing.^{[37][38][39]} In 2010, Dalits received international attention due to a portrait exhibition by Marcus Perkins that depicted Dalits.

According to a 2007 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), the treatment of Dalits has been like a "hidden apartheid" and that they "endure segregation in housing, schools, and access to public services". HRW noted that Manmohan Singh, then Prime Minister of India, saw a parallel between the apartheid system and untouchability.^[40] Eleanor Zelliot also notes Singh's 2006 comment but says that, despite the obvious similarities, race prejudice and the situation of Dalits "have a different basis and perhaps a different solution."^[7] Though the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability the oppressed status of Dalits remains a reality. In rural India, stated Klaus Klostermaier in 2010, "they still live in secluded quarters, do the dirtiest work, and are not allowed to use the village well and other common facilities".^[41] In the same year, Zelliot noted that "In spite of much progress over the last sixty years, Dalits are still at the social and economic bottom of society"^[7]



Scheduled Castes distribution map in India by state and union territory according to the 2011 Census of India.^[10] Punjab had the highest proportion of its population as SC (around 32 per cent), while India's island territories and two northeastern states had approximately zero.^[10]

Economic status

According to a 2014 report to the Ministry of Minority Affairs, over 44.8 per cent of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and 33.8 per cent of Scheduled Caste (SC) populations in rural India were living below the poverty line in 2011–12. In urban areas, 27.3 per cent of ST and 21.8 per cent of SC populations were poor.^{[42][43]}

Some Hindu Dalits have achieved affluence, although most remain poor. Some Dalit intellectuals, such as Chandra Bhan Prasad, have argued that the living standards of many Dalits have improved since the economic liberalisation began in 1991 and have supported their claims through large surveys.^{[44][45]} According to the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011, nearly 79 per cent of Adivasi households and 73 per cent of Dalit households were the most deprived among rural households in India. While 45 per cent of SC households are landless and earn a living by manual casual labour, the figure is 30 per cent for Adivasis.^[46]

A 2012 survey by Mangalore University in Karnataka found that 93 per cent of Dalit families in the state of Karnataka still live below the poverty line.^[47]

Discrimination

Education

According to an analysis by The India Governance Research Institute, Dalits constituted nearly half of primary school dropouts in Karnataka during the period 2012–14.^[48]

A sample survey in 2014, conducted by Dalit Adhikar Abhiyan and funded by ActionAid, found that among state schools in Madhya Pradesh, 88 per cent discriminated against Dalit children. In 79 per cent of the schools studied, Dalit children are forbidden from touching mid-day meals. They are required to sit separately at lunch in 35 per cent of schools, and are required to eat with specially-marked plates in 28 per cent.^[49]

There have been incidents and allegations of SC and ST teachers and professors being discriminated against and harassed by authorities, upper castes colleagues and upper caste students in different education institutes of India.^{[50][51][52][53][54][55]} In some cases, such as in Gujarat, state governments have argued that, far from being discriminatory, their rejection when applying for jobs in education has been because there are no suitably qualified candidates from those classifications.^[56]

Healthcare and nutrition

Discrimination can also exist in access to healthcare and nutrition. A sample survey of Dalits, conducted over several months in Madhya Pradesh and funded by ActionAid in 2014, found that health field workers did not visit 65 per cent of Dalit settlements. 47 per cent of Dalits were not allowed entry into ration shops; and 64 per cent were given less grains than non-Dalits.^[49] In Haryana state, 49 per cent of Dalit children under five years were underweight and malnourished while 80 per cent of those in the 6–59 months age group were anaemic in 2015.^[57]

Crime



Dharavi is a slum in Mumbai, founded in the 1880s during the British colonial era. The colonial government expelled Dalits, along with their traditional profession of leather and tannery work, from Mumbai (Bombay) peninsula to create Dharavi.^[27] Currently, about 20 per cent of the Dharavi population are Dalits, compared to 16 per cent nationwide. Dalits live together with Muslims (who constitute about a third of Dharavi's population) and other castes and tribes.^{[28][29]}

Dalits comprise a slightly disproportionate number of India's prison inmates.^[58] While Dalits (including both SCs and STs) constitute 25 per cent of the Indian population, they account for 33.2 per cent of prisoners.^[59] About 24.5 per cent of death row inmates in India are from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which is proportionate to their population. The percentage is highest in Maharashtra (50 per cent), Karnataka (36.4 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (36 per cent).^[60]

Caste-related violence between Dalit and non-Dalits allegedly stems from Dalit's economic success amidst ongoing prejudice.^{[61][62]} The Bhagana rape case, which arose out of a dispute of allocation of land, is an example of atrocities against Dalit girls and women.^[63] In August 2015, due to continued alleged discrimination from upper castes of the village, about 100 Dalit inhabitants converted to Islam in a ceremony at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi.^[64] Inter-caste marriage has been proposed as a remedy,^[65] but according to a 2014 survey of 42,000 households by the New Delhi-based National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland it was estimated that only 5 per cent of Indian marriages cross caste boundaries.^[66]

A 2006 article reported incidents of violence, disputes and discrimination against Dalits in Maharashtra. The article noted that non-Dalit families claimed they do not treat Dalits differently. A carpenter caste person said, "We tell them anything and they tell us you are pointing fingers at us because of our caste; we all live together, and there are bound to be fights, but they think we target them."^[67]

There have been reports of Dalits being forced to eat human faeces and drink urine by Christian Thevars, an OBC.^{[68][69][70][71]} In one such instance, a 17-year-old girl was set on fire by Yadav (an OBC) youth, allegedly because she was allowed school-education.^[72] In September 2015, a 45-year-old dalit woman was allegedly stripped naked and was forced to drink urine by perpetrators from the Yadav community in Madhya Pradesh.^[73]

Prevention of Atrocities Act

The Government of India has attempted on several occasions to legislate specifically to address the issue of caste-related violence that affects SCs and STs. Aside from the Constitutional abolition of untouchability, there has been the Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, which was amended in the same year to become the Protection of Civil Rights Act. It was determined that neither of those Acts were effective, so the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 (POA) came into force.^[74]

The POA designated specific crimes against SCs and STs as "atrocities" - a criminal act that has "the quality of being shockingly cruel and inhumane" - which should be prosecuted under its terms rather than existing criminal law.^[74] It created corresponding punishments. Its purpose was to curb and punish violence against Dalits, including humiliations such as the forced consumption of noxious substances. Other atrocities included forced labour, denial of access to water and other public amenities, and sexual abuse. The Act permitted Special Courts exclusively to try POA cases. The Act called on states with high levels of caste violence (said to be "atrocities-prone") to appoint qualified officers to monitor and maintain law and order

In 2015, the Parliament of India passed the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act to address issues regarding implementation of the POA, including instances where the police put procedural obstacles in the way of alleged victims or indeed outright colluded with the accused. It also extended the number of acts that were deemed to be atrocities.^{[74][75]} One of those remedies, in an attempt to address the slow process of cases, was to make it mandatory for states to set up the exclusive Special Courts that the POA had delineated. Progress in doing so, however, was reported in April 2017 to be unimpressive. P. L. Punia, a former chairman of the NCSC, said that the number of pending cases was high because most of the extant Special Courts were in fact not exclusive but rather being used to process some non-POA cases, and because "The special prosecutors are not bothered and the cases filed under this Act are as neglected as the victims".^[76] While Dalit rights organisations were cautiously optimistic that the amended Act would improve the situation, legal experts were pessimistic.^[74]

Segregation

Fa Xian, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who recorded his visit to India in the early 5th century, mentioned segregation in the context of the untouchable Chandala community.^[77]

Throughout the country the people kill no living thing nor drink wine, nor do they eat garlic or onions, with the exception of Chandalas only. The Chandalas are named 'evil men', and dwell apart from others; if they enter a town or market, they sound a piece of wood in order to separate themselves; then men, knowing who they are, avoid coming in contact with them.

— Fa Xian, 399-414 CE^{[77][78]}

While discrimination against Dalits has declined in urban areas and in the public sphere,^[79] it still exists in rural areas and in the private sphere, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources.^[80] Some Dalits successfully integrated into urban Indian society, where caste origins are less obvious. In rural India, however, caste origins are more readily apparent and Dalits often remain excluded from local religious life, though some qualitative evidence suggests that exclusion is diminishing.^{[81][82]}

According to the 2014 NCAER/University of Maryland survey²⁷ per cent of the Indian population still practices untouchability. The figure may be higher because many people refuse to acknowledge doing so when questioned, although the methodology of the survey was also criticised for potentially inflating the figure.^[83] Across India, Untouchability was practised among 52 per cent of Brahmins, 33 per cent of Other Backward Classes and 24 per cent of non-Brahmin forward castes.^[84] Untouchability was also practiced by people of minority religions – 23 per cent of Sikhs, 18 per cent of Muslims and 5 per cent of Christians.^[85] According to statewide data, Untouchability is most commonly practiced in Madhya Pradesh (53 per cent), followed by Himachal Pradesh (50 per cent), Chhattisgarh (48 per cent), Rajasthan and Bihar (47 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (43 per cent), and Uttarakhand (40 per cent).^[86]

Examples of segregation have included the Madhya Pradesh village of Ghatwani, where the Scheduled Tribe population of Bhilala do not allow Dalit villagers to use public borewell for fetching water and thus they are forced to drink dirty water.^[87] In metropolitan areas around New Delhi and Bangalore, Dalits and Muslims face discrimination from upper caste landlords when seeking places to rent.^{[88][89]}

Traditions, rituals and customs

In several incidents if dalits found burning holika for Holika Dahan ceremony, they are tonsured and paraded naked in the villages.^[90] Also in some parts of India, there have been allegations that Dalit grooms riding horses for wedding ceremonies have been beaten up and ostracised by upper caste people.^{[91][92][93]} In August 2015, upper caste people burned houses and vehicles belonging to Dalit families and slaughtered their livestock in reaction Dalits daring to hold a temple car procession at a village in Tamil Nadu.^{[94][95]} In August 2015, it was claimed that a Jat Khap Panchayat ordered the rape of two Dalit sisters because their brother eloped with a married Jat girl of the same village. The claim was denied.^{[96][97][98]}

Religion

Most Dalits in India practice Hinduism. According to the 61st round Survey of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 90 per cent of Buddhists, one-third of Sikhs, and one-third of Christians in India belonged to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes.^{[99][100]}

Hinduism

History

Ambedkar said that untouchability came into Indian society around 400 AD, due to the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism (an ancient term for Brahmanical Hinduism).^[101] Some Hindu priests befriended Dalits and were demoted to low-caste ranks. Eknath, another excommunicated Brahmin, fought for the rights of untouchables during the Bhakti period. Historical examples of Dalit priests include Chokhamela in the 14th century, who was India's first recorded Dalit poet. Raidas (Ravidass), born into a family of cobblers, is considered a guru by Dalits and is held in high regard. His teachings and writings form part of the Sikh

holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. The 15th-century saint Ramananda Ray accepted all castes, including Untouchables, into his fold. Most of these saints subscribed to the medieval era Bhakti movement in Hinduism that rejected casteism. The story of Nandanar describes a low-caste Hindu devotee who was rejected by the priests but accepted by God.

Due to isolation from the rest of Hindu society, many Dalits continue to debate whether they are "Hindu" or "non-Hindu". Traditionally, Hindu Dalits were barred from many activities that central to Vedic religion and Hindu practices of orthodox sects. Among Hindus, each community followed its own variant of Hinduism. The wide variety of practices and beliefs observed in Hinduism makes any clear assessment difficult.

Reform movements

In the 19th century, the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission actively participated in Dalit emancipation. While Dalits had places to worship, the first upper-caste temple to openly welcome Dalits was the Laxminarayan Temple in Wardha in 1928. It was followed by the Temple Entry Proclamation issued by the last King of Travancore in the Indian state of Kerala in 1936.

The Punjabi reformist Satnami movement was founded by Dalit Guru Ghasidas. Guru Ravidas was also a Dalit. Giani Ditt Singh, a Dalit Sikh reformer, started Singh Sabha movement to convert Dalits. Other reformers, such as Jyotirao Phule, Ayyankali of Kerala and Iyothee Thass of Tamil Nadu worked for Dalit emancipation.



A school of untouchables near Bangalore, by Lady Ottoline Morrell

In the 1930s, Gandhi and Ambedkar disagreed regarding retention of the caste system. Whilst Ambedkar wanted to see it destroyed, Gandhi thought that it could be modified by reinterpreting Hindu texts so that the untouchables were absorbed into the Shudra varna. It was this disagreement that led to the Poona Pact.^[31] Despite the disagreement, Gandhi began the Harijan Yatra to help the Dalits.

The declaration by princely states of Kerala between 1936 and 1947 that temples were open to all Hindus went a long way towards ending Untouchability there. However, educational opportunities to Dalits in Kerala remain limited.^[102]

Other Hindu groups attempted to reconcile with the Dalit community. Hindu temples are increasingly receptive to Dalit priests, a function formerly reserved for Brahmins.^{[103][104][105]}

The fight for temple entry rights for Dalits continues to cause controversy.^[106] Brahmins such as Subramania Bharati passed Brahminhood onto a Dalit, while in Shivaji's Maratha Empire Dalit warriors (the Mahar Regiment) joined his forces.^{[107][108]} In an 2015 incident in Meerut, when a Dalit belonging to Valmiki caste was denied entry to a Hindu temple he converted to Islam.^[109] In September 2015, four Dalit women were fined by the uppercaste Hindus for entering a temple in Karnataka.^[110]

There have been allegations that Dalits in Nepal are denied entry to Hindu temples.^{[111][112]} In at least one reported case were beaten up by some upper caste people for doing so.^[113]

Buddhism

In Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and a few other regions, Dalits came under the influence of the neo-Buddhist movement initiated by Ambedkar. In the 1950s, he turned his attention to Buddhism and travelled to Ceylon to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. While dedicating a new Buddhist vihara near Pune, he announced that he was writing a book on Buddhism, and that he planned a formal conversion. Ambedkar twice visited Burma in 1954; the second time to attend a conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha (Buddhist Society of India). He completed writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in 1956.

After meetings with the Buddhist monk Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Ambedkar organised a public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on 14 October 1956. Accepting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts in the traditional manner he completed his conversion. He then proceeded to convert an estimated 500,000 of his supporters. Taking the 22 Vows, they explicitly condemned and

rejected Hinduism and Hindu philosophy

Sikhism

Guru Nanak in *Guru Granth Sahib* calls for everyone to treat each other equally. Subsequent Sikh Gurus, all of whom came from the Khatri caste, also denounced the hierarchy of the caste system.^[114] Despite this, social stratification exists in the Sikh community. The bulk of the Sikhs of Punjab belong to the Jat caste;^[115] there are also two Dalit Sikh castes in the state, called the Mazhabis and the Ramdasias.^[116]

Sunrinder S. Jodhka says that, in practice, Sikhs belonging to the landowning dominant castes have not shed all their prejudices against the dalit castes. While dalits would be allowed entry into the village gurudwaras they would not be permitted to cook or serve langar (the communal meal). Therefore, wherever they could mobilise resources, the Sikh dalits of Punjab have tried to construct their own gurudwara and other local-level institutions in order to attain a certain degree of cultural autonomy.^[117] In 1953, Sikh leader, Master Tara Singh, succeeded in winning the demands from the Government to include Sikh castes of the converted untouchables in the list of scheduled castes. In the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), 20 of the 140 seats are reserved for low-caste Sikhs.^[118]

Sikhs adopt standard surnames such as Singh to disguise caste identities. Nevertheless, families generally do not marry across caste boundaries.

Talhan Gurdwara conflict

In 2003 the Talhan village Gurudwara endured a bitter dispute between Jat Sikhs and Chamars. The Chamars came out in force and confronted the Randhawa and Bains Jat Sikh landlords, who refused to give the Chamars a share on the governing committee of a shrine dedicated to Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh. The shrine earned 3–7 crore Indian Rupees, and the Jat Sikh landlords allegedly "gobbled up a substantial portion of the offerings". Though Dalits form more than 60 per cent of Talhan's 5,000-strong population, local traditions ensured that they were denied a place on the committee. The landlords, in league with radical Sikh organisations and the SGPC, attempted to keep out the Dalits by razing the shrine overnight and constructing a gurdwara on it, but the Dalit quest for a say in the governing committee did not end.^[119]

Chamars fought a four-year court battle with the landlords and their allies, including the Punjab Police. In that time Dalits conducted several boycotts against the Chamars. The Jat Sikhs and their allies cut off the power supply to their homes. In addition, various scuffles and fights set Chamar youths armed with lathis, rocks, bricks, soda bottles and anything they could find fought Jat Sikh landlords, youths and the Punjab police. Dalit youngsters painted their homes and motorcycles with the slogan, *Putt Chamar De* (*proud sons of Chamars*) in retaliation to the Jat slogan, *Putt Jattan De*.^[119]

Attack on Bant Singh

Bant Singh is a lower caste Mazhabi Sikh farmer and singer from Jhabhar village in Mansa district, Punjab, India, who has emerged as an agricultural labour activist, fighting landowners.

After his minor daughter was raped in 2000, Bant took the rapists to court, braving threats of violence and attempted bribes. Rapes of Dalits by non-Dalits are not commonly reported. The 2004 trial culminated in life sentences for three of the culprits.

On the evening of 7 January 2006 Bant Singh was returning home from campaigning for a national agricultural labour rally. He was assaulted by seven men, allegedly sent by Jaswant and Niranjana Singh, the headman of his village, who have links with the Indian National Congress party. One of them brandished a revolver to prevent any resistance while the other six beat him with iron rods and axes. He was left for dead, but survived.

He was first taken to civil hospital in Mansa but was not properly treated there. Then he moved to the PGI at Chandigarh, where both lower arms and one leg had to be amputated since gangrene had set in and his kidneys had collapsed due to blood loss. The original doctor was eventually suspended for misconduct.^[120]

Jainism

Historically Jainism was practiced by many communities across India.^[121] They are often conservative and are generally considered upper-caste.^[122]

In 1958,^[123] a Sthanakvasi Jain called Muni Sameer Muni^{[124][125]} came into contact with members of the Khatik community in the Udaipur region, who decided to adopt Jainism. Their centre, Ahimsa Nagar, located about four miles from Chittorgarh, was inaugurated by Mohanlal Sukhadia in 1966. Sameer Muni termed them Veerwaal,^[126] i.e. belonging to Mahavira. A 22-year-old youth, Chandaram Meghwal, was initiated as a Jain monk at Ahore town in Jalore district in 2005.^[127] In 2010 a Mahar engineer called Vishal Damodar was initiated as a Jain monk by Acharya Navaratna Sagar Suri at Samet Shikhar.^[128] Acharya Nanesh, the eighth Acharya of Sadhumargi Jain Shrivak Sangha had preached among the Balai community in 1963 near Ratlam.^[129] His followers are called Dharmapal.^[130] In 1984, some of the Bhangis of Jodhpur came under the influence of Acharya Shri Tulsi and adopted Jainism.^{[131][132]}

Christianity

Many Christian communities in South India follow the caste system. The social stratification in some communities such as the Goan Catholics remained but varied from the Hindu system.

Political involvement

Dalit political parties include:

- Bahujan Samaj Party
- Republican Party of India factions,^[133] active in Maharashtra
- Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi and Puthiya Tamilagam are the two major dalit parties in Tamil Nadu
- Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh led by Prakash Yashwant Ambedkar, Ambedkar's grandson
- Lok Janshakti Party, Bihar
- Bahujan Shakti Party Nepal^[134]
- Dalit Janajati Party, Nepal^[135]

Anti-Dalit prejudices exist in groups such as the extremist militia Ranvir Sena, largely run by upper-caste landlords in Bihar. They oppose equal treatment of Dalits and have resorted to violence. The Ranvir Sena is considered a terrorist organisation by the government of India.^[136] In 2015, Cobrapost exposed many leaders especially like C. P. Thakur alongside former PM Chandra Shekhar associated with Ranvir Sena in Bihar Dalit massacres^[137] while governments of Nitish Kumar (under pressure from BJP), Lalu Prasad Yadav and Rabri Devi did nothing to get justice for Dalits.^[138]

The rise of Hindutva's (Hindu nationalism) role in Indian politics has accompanied allegations that religious conversions of Dalits are due to allurements like education and jobs rather than faith. Critics argue that laws banning conversion and limiting social relief for converts mean that conversion impedes economic success. However, Bangaru Laxman, a Dalit politician, was a prominent member of the Hindutva movement.

Another political issue is Dalit affirmative-action quotas in government jobs and university admissions. About 8 per cent of the seats in the National and State Parliaments are reserved for Scheduled Caste and ST candidates.

Jagjivan Ram (1908 – 1986) was the first scheduled caste leader to emerge at the national level from Bihar.^[139] He was member of the Constituent assembly that drafted India's constitution.^[140] Ram also served in the interim national government of 1946^[141] He served in the cabinets of Congress party Prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru,^[142] Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi.^[143] His last position in government was as Deputy Prime Minister of India in the Janata Party government of 1977-1979,^{[144][145][146]}



Bahujan Samaj Party(BSP) is an Indian Dalit party

In modern times several Bharatiya Janata Party leaders were Dalits, including Dinanath Bhaskar, Ramchandra Veerappa and Dr. Suraj Bhan.

In India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, Dalits have had a major political impact.^[147] The Dalit-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had previously run the government and that party's leader, Mayawati, served several times as chief minister.^[148] Regarding her election in 2007, some reports claimed her victory was due to her ability to win support from both 17 per cent of Muslims and nearly 17 per cent Brahmins^[149] alongside 80 per cent of Dalits.^[150] However, surveys of voters on the eve of elections, indicated that caste loyalties were not the voters' principal concern. Instead, inflation and other issues of social and economic development dictated the outcome.^{[151][152][153][154]} Mayawati's success in reaching across castes has led to speculation about her as a potential future Prime Minister of India^[155]

Aside from Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Damodaram Sanjivayya was chief minister of Andhra Pradesh (from 11 January 1960 – 12 March 1962) and Jitan Ram Manjhi was chief minister of Bihar for just less than a year. In 1997, K. R. Narayanan, who was a Dalit, was elected as President of India.^[34]

Vote bank

Votebank politics are common in India, usually based on religion or caste. Indeed, the term itself was coined by the Indian sociologist, M. N. Srinivas.^[156] Dalits are often used as a votebank.^{[157][158][159]} There have been instances where it has been alleged that an election-winning party reneged on promises made to the Dalits made during the election campaign^[160] or have excluded them from party affairs.^[161]

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Sub-Plan

The SC, ST Sub-Plan, or *Indiramma Kalalu*, is a budget allocation by the Government of Andhra Pradesh for the welfare of Dalits. The law was enacted in May 2013. SCs and STs have separate panels for spending. The plan was meant to prevent the government from diverting funds meant for SCs and STs to other programs, which was historically the case. As of 2013, no equivalent national plan existed.^[162] Scheduled Castes Sub Plan and Tribal Sub-Plan funds are often diverted by state governments to other purposes.^[163]

While the Indian Constitution has provisions for the social and economic uplift of Dalits to support their upward social mobility, these concessions are limited to Hindus. Dalits who have converted to other religions have asked that benefits be extended to them.^[164]

Beyond South Asia

United Kingdom

After World War II, immigration from the former British Empire was largely driven by labour shortages.^[165] Like the rest of the Indian subcontinent diaspora, Dalits immigrated and established their own communities.

A 2009 report alleged that caste discrimination is "rife" in the United Kingdom.^[166] The report alleged that casteism persists in the workplace and within the National Health Service^[167] and at doctor's offices.^{[166][168]}

Indians are divided on the subject^[169] and such claims are disputed by the UK Hindu Council^[167] who assert that the issue was being "manipulated" by Christians and other anti-Indian activists eager to convert Hindus.^[170]

Hindu groups asserted that caste issues will be resolved as generations pass and that a trend towards inter-caste marriages should help.^[171] Some claim that caste discrimination is non-existent.^[172] Some have rejected the government's right to interfere in the community. The Hindu Forum of Britain conducted their own research, concluding that caste discrimination was "not endemic in

British society", that reports to the contrary aimed to increase discrimination by legislating expression and behaviour and that barriers should instead be removed through education.^[173]

A 2010 study found that caste discrimination occurs in Britain at work and in service provision. While not ruling out the possibility of discrimination in education, no such incidents were uncovered. The report found favourable results from educational activities. However, non-legislative approaches were claimed to be less effective in the workplace and would not help when the authorities were discriminating. One criticism of discrimination law was the difficulty in obtaining proof of violations. Perceived benefits of legislation were that it provides redress, leads to greater understanding and reduces the social acceptance of such discrimination.^[171]

More recent studies in Britain were inconclusive and found that discrimination was "not religion specific and is subscribed to by members of any or no religion".^[174] Equalities Minister Helen Grant found insufficient evidence to justify specific legislation, while Shadow Equalities minister Kate Green said that the impact is on a relatively small number of people.^[174] Religious studies professor Gavin Flood of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies concluded that the Hindu community in Britain is particularly well integrated, loosening caste ties.^[175] Casteist beliefs were prevalent mainly among first generation immigrants, with such prejudices declining with each successive generation due to greater assimilation.^[174]

From September 2013 to February 2014, Indian philosopher Meena Dhanda led a project on 'Caste in Britain' for the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which focused on the proposed inclusion of a provision in the Equality Act 2010 to protect British citizens against caste discrimination.^[176]

Supporters of anti-caste legislation include Lord Avebury and Lady Thornton.^[177]

Sikh diaspora in Britain

Sikhs in the United Kingdom are affected by caste. Gurdwaras such as those of the Ramgarhia Sikhs are organised along caste lines and most are controlled by a single caste.^[178] In most British towns and cities with a significant Sikh population, rival gurdwaras can be found with caste-specific management committees.^[179] The caste system and caste identity is entrenched and reinforced.^{[178][180]}

Dalit Sikhs have formed a network of lower caste temples throughout the UK. Caste tensions erupt between higher caste Jat Sikhs and lower caste Sikhs. Violence has erupted between the two communities over inter-caste marriages. In the city of Wolverhampton, there have been incidents of Jat Sikhs refusing to share water taps and avoiding physical contact with lower castes. At a sports competition in Birmingham in 1999, Jat Sikhs refused to eat food that had been cooked and prepared by the Chamar community.^[182]

Many Jat Sikhs refer to lower-caste temples by name such as the *Ramgharia Gurdwara*, *Ghumaran Da Gurdwara* or *Chamar Gurdwara*. The majority of higher caste Sikhs would not eat in a Ravidassi house or in Ravidassi temples. Many Chamars stated that they are made to feel unwelcome in Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. Many Sikhs do not wish to give Chamars equal status in their gurdwaras and communities.^[183] Sikh Chamars (Ramdassi Sikhs) united with fellow Chamars across religious boundaries to form Ravidassi temples.

Mazhabi Sikhs were subjected to the same forms of inequality and discrimination in gurdwaras from Upper caste Sikhs and unified with Hindu Churas to form Vālmiki temples.

Sikh gurdwaras, which often are controlled by the older first generation immigrants, in Britain generally frown upon inter-caste marriages even though they are on the rise. More and more families are affected by inter-caste marriages.

The few gurdwaras that accept inter-caste marriages do so reluctantly. Gurdwaras may insist on the presence of *Singh* and *Kaur* in the names of the bridegroom and bride, or deny them access to gurdwara-based religious services and community centres.^[184]



A Sikh gurdwara in Smethwick. The majority of gurdwaras in Britain are Caste based^[178] and one can indirectly inquire about a person's caste based upon which gurdwara he attends.

Dalits in the Caribbean

It is estimated that in 1883, about one-third of the immigrants who arrived in the Caribbean were Dalits. The shared experience of being exploited in a foreign land gradually broke down caste barriers in the Caribbean Hindu communities.^[24]

Literature

Dalit literature forms a distinct part of Indian literature.^[185] One of the first Dalit writers was Madara Chennaiah, an 11th-century cobbler-saint who lived in the reign of Western Chalukyas and who is regarded by some scholars as the "father of Vachana poetry". Another early Dalit poet is Dohara Kakkaiah, a Dalit by birth, six of whose confessional poems survive. The Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi^[186] (Indian Dalit Literature Academy)^[187] was founded in 1984 by Babu Jagjivan Ram.

Notable modern authors include Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, who focused on the issues of Dalits through their works and writings. This started a new trend in Dalit writing and inspired many Dalits to offer work in Marathi, Hindi, Tamil and Punjabi.^[188] There are novels, poems and even drama on Dalit issues. The Indian author Rajesh Talwar has written a play titled 'Gandhi, Ambedkar, and the Four Legged Scorpion' in which the personal experiences of Dr Ambedkar and the sufferings of the community have been highlighted.^[189]

Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav^[190] and Shankar Rao Kharat worked in the 1960s. Later the Little magazine movement became popular.^[191] In Sri Lanka, writers such as K. Daniel^[192] and Dominic Jeeva gained mainstream popularity

Dalits in the film industry

Until the 1980s, Dalits had little involvement in Bollywood or other film industries of India^[193] and the community were rarely depicted at the heart of storylines.^[194] Chirag Paswan (son of Dalit leader Ram Vilas Paswan) launched his career in Bollywood with his debut film Miley Naa Miley Hum in 2011. Despite political connections and the financial ability to struggle against ingrained prejudices, Chirag was not able to "bag" any other movie project in the following years. Chirag, in his early days, described Bollywood as his "childhood dream", but eventually entered politics instead. When the media tried to talk to him about "Caste in Bollywood", he refused to talk about the matter, and his silence speaks for itself.^[195] The first Bollywood film to portray a Dalit character in the leading role, although it was not acted by a Dalit, was Eklavya: The Royal Guard (2007).^[196] The continued use of caste based references to Dalit sub-castes in South Indian films (typecast and pigeonholed in their main socio-economic sub-group) angers many Dalit fans.^[197]

Internal conflicts

Several Dalit groups are rivals and sometimes communal tensions are evident. A study found more than 900 Dalit sub-castes throughout India, with internal divisions.^[198] Emphasising any one caste threatens what is claimed to be an emerging Dalit identity and fostering rivalry among SCs.^[199]

A DLM party leader said in the early 2000s that it is easier to organise Dalits on a caste basis than to fight caste prejudice itself.^[199]

Balmikis and Pasis in the 1990s refused to support the BSP, claiming it was a Jatav party^[200] but over 80 per cent of dalits from all united Dalit castes voted BSP to power in 2007.^[150]



A Valmiki Temple in the UK. Caste segregation has meant that Mazhabi Sikhs and Hindu Churas have united to establish their own temples throughout Britain. Some Valmiki temples keep a copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib*^[181] and Mazhabi Sikhs and Valmiki prayer together

Many converted Dalit Sikhs claim a superior status over the Hindu Raigars, Joatia Chamars and Ravidasis and sometimes refuse to intermarry with them.^[201] They are divided into gotras that regulate their marriage alliances. In Andhra Pradesh, Mala and Madiga were constantly in conflict with each other^[202] but as of 2015 Mala and Madiga students work for common dalit cause at University level.^[203]

Although the Khateek (butchers) are generally viewed as a higher caste than Bhangis, the latter refuse to offer cleaning services to Khateeks, believing that their profession renders them unclean. They also consider the BalaDhobi, Dholi and Mogya as unclean and do not associate with them.^[204]

Notable people

See also

- Ambedkar Makkal Iyakkam
- 2006 Dalit protests in Maharashtra
- Health care access among Dalits in India
- Sikh Light Infantry, a dalit Sikh regiment of Indian Army
- Dalit nationalism
- Bhopal Conference
- Dalit Freedom Network
- Namantar Andolan

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