

THE DALIT PEOPLE

AN INTRODUCTION TO CASTE DISCRIMINATION
IN 21ST CENTURY INDIA.



BY SIMON HAWTHORNE



For over 3000 years the caste system in India has meant that millions of people have suffered discrimination and oppression and it continues today. Thousands of acts of violence, persecution and prejudice take place on a daily basis against Untouchables, or Dalits as they prefer to be known. The term Dalit means downtrodden or oppressed.

Within Hinduism is perpetuated the belief system that men and women are not made equal and that the caste system determines, by birth, your opportunities and future.

Hinduism states that the four castes originated from four parts of the body of the god Brahma. The Brahmin or priestly caste proceeded from Brahma's head, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaisyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. Far beneath the Sudras are the untouchables or Dalits who were rejects from the social order altogether, being not made by God.

In the Hindu Scriptures called the Vedas, Manu, the law giver, decreed that the Dalits were not

made by God, being literally a mistake that should never have happened, and that within society should be considered lower than animals. The holy writings of Hinduism were traditionally read by the Brahmins and written in Sanskrit. Dalits are forbidden from listening to the Hindu holy writings and access to the temples is still forbidden. Indeed Manu wrote in the Vedas that; if a Dalit were even to hear the Sanskrit being spoken, 'they should have molten lead poured into their ears'. Although most moderate Hindus would reject such teaching today it still influences the attitudes of many.

Dalits have been subject to the most aggressive and dehumanising abuse for centuries. They are born into a culture that devalues them from birth. However, they are human beings and according to the bible; 'made in the image of God.' Women are often downgraded even further in Indian society. Yet in glorious defiance of their oppressors the women emerge from shacks in brilliantly coloured and beautiful saris. What ear rings and necklaces they possess will be displayed around their faces, and their children, even when their clothes are almost threadbare will have their hair in plaits or bows or decorated with a freshly picked flower.

To understand how this can apply to a country of 1.1 billion people in the 21st century, we have to go back over 3500 years when India was invaded by the Aryan's, who subdued the native or aboriginal people and introduced Hinduism, central to which is the caste system.

Today, the highest caste, the Brahmins number around 4% of the population but still hold most of the power and fortune of India. They have ruled the Indian population for thousands of years. It is largely from the Brahmin, the Kahastriya and the Vaishya that the high and middle class of India come today. Below these three castes are the Sudras, who are the low caste and number around 250 million people. They are employed to serve the other three castes and according to Hinduism, is the will of the god Vishnu, and as such they will carry out the most menial and dirtiest of jobs.

Below this group are the untouchables or Dalits. They too number around 250 million. They are still sometimes called untouchables and are often expected to cross the road when high caste people are passing in case they 'contaminate' them, and they will be violently chastised for any breach of their lowly position. This surely is a human rights issue that the world should wake up to. The caste system, we believe, is the greatest human rights issue in the world today, quite simply because of the vast number of people affected.

India is the world's largest democracy. Democracy is defined by a country's people electing it's government by free and fair elections and where the supreme power is vested in the government by the people. But what is free and fair about a system that denies Dalits access to polling booths in 12% of the villages surveyed.



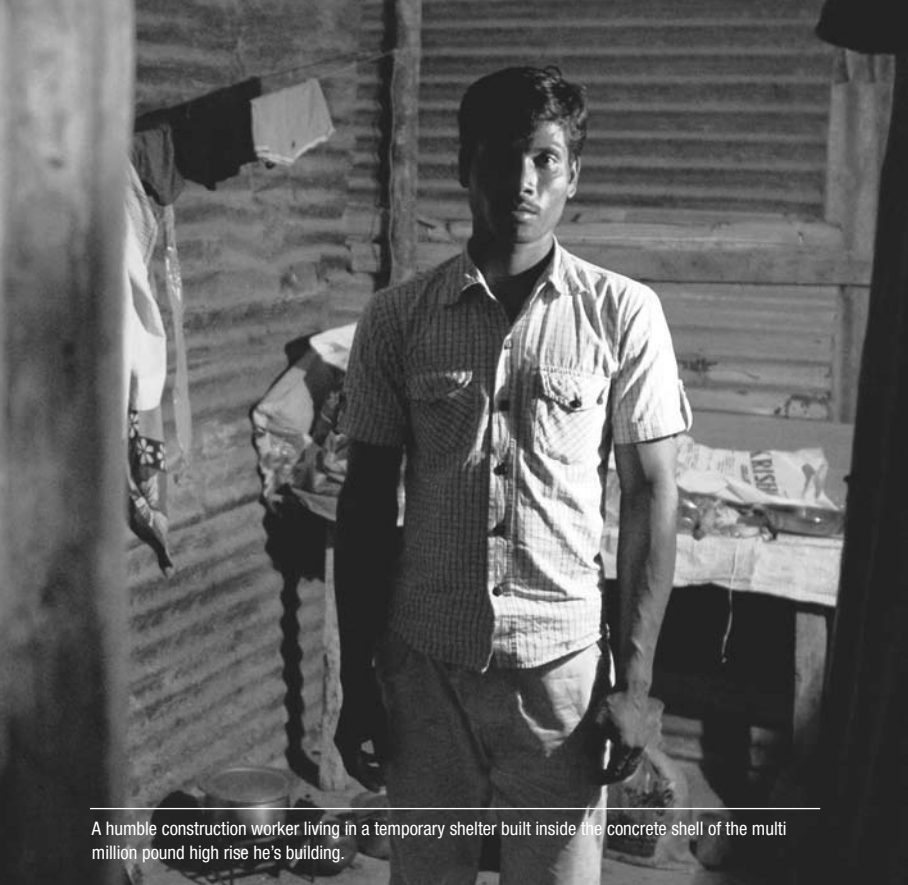
Recent studies carried out in Tamil Nadu in 2008 discovered that higher caste Hindus were given priority in boarding and seating on buses. The study also found that Dalits were not allowed to own male dogs in case their dogs were to mate with a high caste owner's bitch and thus 'contaminate' it.

Even in the matter of food there is discrimination. A study carried out in the same year in 521 villages of the more backward states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh found that, when buying food Dalits were forced to cup hands to receive food and change to avoid touching the seller and were often forced to pay a higher price than the high caste, a cruel twist for the impoverished Dalit.

In the south of India, many Dalit communities number up to 90% Christian. This is an amazing and undocumented fact and indicates a clear rejection of Hinduism amongst this community. If you are told on the one hand that you are recognized by God

and therefore society as being lower than an animal, not part of his body and that your lowly position in life is as punishment for acts in a previous life, then on the other that God loves you enough to die for you as the Christian gospel declares, and that your sins are freely forgiven and in God's eyes you are not only equal amongst all men, but that His spirit dwells within you at conversion, then the choice may indeed seem clear.

I say this is an unrecorded fact because the Dalit often receives allocated land to live on and their children may receive a free, even if basic, education. To declare yourself a Christian removes you from the category of people with this entitlement, a price the Dalit can ill afford. Whether this is a cynical attempt to lock the Dalit into Hinduism or an anomaly of the system isn't clear, but it remains the case that their conversion to Christianity remains unrecorded for this reason.



A humble construction worker living in a temporary shelter built inside the concrete shell of the multi million pound high rise he's building.



To visit the major cities of India today, it is easy to believe that the caste system is a thing of the past. Indeed in booming, modern India it is possible to arrive at an International Airport and travel by limousine to a luxury hotel, and be completely isolated from the poverty that is inflicted on the majority of Indians, who have no access, or hope of acquiring the new wealth of India. The truth is that today, 1 in 3 of the world's poor live in India scratching a living on less than 70 pence a day.

Mumbai has more billionaires than London yet it is still hard to avoid the poverty that is so endemic, and a glance out of most flights into Chatrapati Shiva Airport will witness the sprawling slum of Dharavi, India's largest slum, made famous in the film, Slum Dog Millionaire.

It is home to one million people who live within a square mile. Seven million people live in such slums in Mumbai and five million have no toilet and limited access to clean water. Yet today, India has over 100,000 millionaires. I believe it is impossible to argue that the caste system is not responsible for such a vast gap between the rich and the poor in India.

The number of millionaires in India doubled in 2010 yet today, any day, 5000 children will die of malnutrition in India. That is 1 in 3 of the children that die around the world through lack of proper food. The UN estimate that 1.7 million children in India will die before the age of one, 2.1 million before the age of five. 25% of children are born underweight and the percentage of underweight children age five is 20 times that of the West. If it can afford a space programme, nuclear weapons and currently enjoys 8% growth in GDP, India can afford to feed its poor. The truth is it chooses not to.

In 2007 the J.F.Kennedy Foundation, in partnership with an Indian charity published a report that was featured in the Times of India. It was the result of three years study in the state of Gujarat and took place in over 1600 villages. It reported that in 99.1% of villages inter-caste marriage was forbidden and often violently opposed.

To marry someone from another caste, simply for love, would invariably result in beatings and being thrown out of the community. The same report stated that in most schools that did provide an education to the low or outcast, separate seating areas were reserved for Dalits who were also required to eat and drink from separate vessels, and bring their own food into school where other children were fed in the school canteen. Because this survey took place in Gujarat does not in any way imply that the same abuses are not taking place and often more vigorously in other states across India. The Indian Government has promised education for all but fails to act to back up the promise.

In 2006, a comprehensive study carried out across 565 villages in 11 states revealed that in 28% of villages Dalits were prevented from entering police stations. How can justice be achieved if these people cannot even report a crime? In the same year, according to police records published by the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 27,070 reported cases of violence against Dalits.

If we know so many are prevented from reporting cases then how many more would not even bother trying if they believe that the judicial system itself is not on their side. The fact that only 2.3% of cases that ever get to court end up with a conviction is surely enough to discourage most from even trying to seek justice. The same study discovered that in 38% of schools Dalits had to sit separately while eating, public health workers refused to visit the homes of Dalits in 33% of villages, and the post would not be delivered to 23.5% of homes. Even the most basic human right - that of clean drinking water was denied in 48.4% of villages where the Dalits were segregated and required to drink from separate wells or water pumps due to their untouchability.





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India has no shortage of laws that it is liberal in passing but notoriously fails to enforce. They readily point to their statutes that should protect the rights of the individual but fail to do so. Acts of caste prejudice were made illegal in India more than 50 years ago, but have continued unabated with impunity.

A high caste Hindu can get away with murder as I have found in my own experience, by paying a simple bribe. In many cases the low caste can neither afford a defense nor expect a fair trial when corruption is endemic within the judicial system, the same system that the British introduced and which, again must put a special responsibility on this country to give the Dalit people a voice.

What is written in the Indian Constitution does not work itself out in practice in the villages and towns where Dalit women suffer abuse, humiliation, rape and are often tortured or paraded naked in public.

The United Nations estimate that 27 million people in the world today are in some form of modern day slavery through trafficking. Over half, around 15 million are in India making it the world center for people trafficking. Girls are most vulnerable as they are often sold into work when their parents can no longer afford to keep them.



But they are in great danger of ending up in the sex trade which numbers 1.2 million under age children, of the estimated 3 million prostitutes in India today.





The major religion of India is arguably as much a cultural system as a religion that one is born into. The poor within India are judged to be poor because of 'bad karma' in a past life. This is inevitably counter to a spirit of generosity and philanthropy and is inevitably reflected in the vast gulf between rich and poor in India. Why should you give to the poor if god himself has ordained that you are born to be poor, and for your past sins should remain so? Fortunately not all Hindus share such a view but they remain in the minority. Booming India has not been reflected in booming generosity.

The Brahmins today number around only 4% of the population but hold most of the power and wealth. Combined with the Kshatriyas and Vaishya, being the other higher castes, that number is still only 15%.

The low caste Sudras, who are also known as the backward castes number 250 million and below them, the Dalits are a similar number at around 250 million. Therefore a total number of 500 million, more than the entire population of Europe is in poverty, have restricted access to education and for many, even where they can worship.

Sometime during 2011 a child will be born that takes the world population to 7 billion. By 2020 that figure is projected to increase by a further .6 billion, similar to the entire population of the world in 1750. Today more than 3.6 billion people are barely getting enough to eat with more than 1 billion of them in total abject poverty. India has more cases of malnutrition than the whole of sub Saharan Africa. And let us not forget that somewhere between 10 and 30 million children die every year of the worst possible death, starvation and starvation related diseases. If the wealthy nations do not face up to their obligations to the poor, then these figures will increase exponentially.



There are many other places in the world that need financial support and suffer the abuse of dictators, military conflict, famine and natural disasters. They all need help from the more wealthy nations as is their duty. But India is increasingly being ignored. It is after all a democracy and growing in financial strength at an unprecedented rate. But if one in three of the world's poor live there, it has the highest number of child laborers, and it is the world's center for people trafficking, it is a country that must be challenged on it's human rights record. At the root of almost all India's human rights issues is the caste system and until the caste system is ended it will continue to make the lives of millions of people miserable.

Consider this - 500,000 people died in the tsunami that hit Indonesia on Boxing Day 2005 and we considered it a disaster on an unprecedented scale. 500,000 people have been made homeless in the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011 and we were shocked at this human tragedy.

In the second half of 2011 the Mumbai Government, as reported in the international edition of the Times, intend to demolish Dharavi and displace half the population or 500,000 people who will then be homeless and unable to earn a living. Only those who can prove they have lived there before 2000 will be eligible for resettlement in high rise tower blocks. This is the same number that was affected by the disasters of Indonesia and Japan. Surely the world can no longer ignore the plight of the down trodden people that form the low caste and Dalit communities of India.

Apartheid came to an end through a movement of people of many nations with one voice and one message – that apartheid is wrong. Through music people united around a song, 'Free Nelson Mandela' written by Jerry Dammers and friends and gathered in their tens of thousands at music festivals around the world. Perhaps it will take a similar movement of ordinary people to tackle this extraordinary phenomenon that has oppressed millions of people for millennia.

For centuries, the Dalit people have been forced to drink from clay cups so as not to pollute the vessel and contaminate those of a higher caste. Amazingly this practice is still wide spread across many states in India, though they are often now replaced with disposable plastic cups for the same purpose. It is designed to humiliate and reinforces the caste prejudice which remains a reality throughout the country today.

This symbol of oppression became a focus for us as we launched our brand Dalit Candles. We have produced many tens of thousands of clay candle cups that we have sold to raise awareness and funds for the charity Life Association. The candles are now available on line and at many local retailers.

Potting is traditionally seen as the work of the low caste or Dalits, due to it being considered dirty work and sourced from the earth. It is hard for a Westerner to understand this concept when it would be considered an aspiration to go to University to do a degree in ceramics or pottery.

But there are many mysteries and oddities associated with India's caste system and it was our good fortune to find such skilled potters in Dharavi that would help us launch our new brand, Dalit Candles.



The work of Life Association, brings hope to children who would otherwise be hopeless, exploited and in many cases abused. And we are incredibly fortunate to have our candle products to raise awareness and help finance our work. The receipts from the sale of our clay cup candles go directly towards our work in India and also cover our overheads. We are therefore uniquely privileged so that every penny of our child sponsorship programme goes directly to the children, without additional administration costs.

To sponsor a child with Life Association costs just £20 a month and provides a loving home, as well as healthcare, education, food and clothing. If you are a tax payer, then this amount gift aided adds another 25p in every pound to our work.

£20.00 a month provides hope and meets all the needs of boys like Nani and Rajender who live and study at one of our children's homes. They were rag pickers spending their days in the blazing heat on the rubbish tip collecting scraps from amongst broken glass, animal entrails and household waste for just .50p a day - or Sunny who was the son of a prostitute.

His mother died of Aids when he was just six when we found him on the streets in the Red Light District with no one to care for him.

Our children's programme in Mumbai, where Sunny now lives, provides a home for 10 boys or 10 girls who come from some of the most difficult backgrounds after living on the streets of Mumbai or are rescued from child prostitution. They are adopted for life into a loving Christian home. To fund one of these children's homes costs just £200 a month and provides all the needs of the children and the adoptive parents who care for them.

There is hope today for the Dalits. God's heart is for the poor and the marginalised, for the sick and the rejected, for those who suffer oppression and injustice and for the hungry and the homeless. And for all those who say 'why then doesn't God do something?' a voice comes back from heaven and says; 'why don't you do something?' - **Everyone can do something.**



If you would like to know more about the work of Life Association you can visit our website at www.lifeassociation.org.uk or visit our online store at www.dalit.co.uk alternatively e-mail us at info@lifeassociation.org.uk.

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Children playing at the Life Association home in Gannavaram

Life Association has been building schools and children's homes in some of the poorest parts of India and working amongst the Dalit people for the last 18 years. The Dalits, also known as Untouchables, have suffered under the caste system for over 3000 years.

Life Association works to raise awareness of the plight of the Dalits and hopes you find the content of this booklet helpful in understanding the difficulties they face.

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