

Title: Caste Struggle
Author(s): Sudip Mazumdar and Carla Power
Source: *Newsweek International*. (July 3, 2000): p30. From *General OneFile*.
Document Type: Article

Full Text: All rights reserved. Any reuse, distribution or alteration without express written permission of the publisher is prohibited. For permission: www.newsweek.com

Full Text:

On paper, the people in the slum on Delhi's Lodi Road don't even exist. The Dalits, or literally "broken people," as members of India's Untouchable castes are now called, don't show up on electoral rolls, ration cards or water bills. Huddled in the shadow of India's Housing and Urban Development Corporation, the slum huts are made of mud, cardboard and plastic bags. Kids play with pigs in the mud; mothers wash clothes in sewer water. These Kabariwallahs, or scavengers, sort through garbage or haul human sewage to earn a few rupees. The children beg at a nearby traffic light. Nobody goes to school. Says Om Prakash, a scavenger who has lived there for 40 years, "We've got a right to live."

That's about all many of India's "broken people" have. Theirs is not the India U.S. President Bill Clinton saw on his spring tour -- a land of software gurus and a fast-growing middle class. The Dalits may live in the world's largest democracy, but their lives are shaped by a system of sanctified apartheid. The Hindu caste system has ranked people in a strict hierarchy according to class and job for 3,500 years. The Untouchable castes, who handle society's "dirty" jobs, are at the very bottom of the heap. Villages are divided into Dalit and upper-caste hamlets. In villages, Hindu temples are off-limits to outcasts. In rural areas, Dalits are often victims of harassment, rape and violence from upper-caste landlords. Last month a militia army in Bihar state stormed the town of Miapur and shot dead 35 low-caste villagers, eight of whom were Dalits. The massacre was Bihar's eighth major caste-related attack in the past six months. The Indian Constitution long ago outlawed discrimination against Dalits. India has a Dalit president and more than 100 Dalits in Parliament. But despite quota systems in government jobs and education, members of the upper castes like Brahmins and Kshatriyas have a monopoly on power; they dominate business, the media and government.

After centuries of suffering from intense discrimination, they're beginning to fight back. The Dalits have begun their own civil-rights struggle. Inspired by the liberation campaigns of American blacks and South Africans, Dalits are beginning to use the vote, civil disobedience and even violence of their own to claim their rights. Their new assertiveness has angered the powerful and triggered an increasingly bloody struggle. According to the Human Rights Education Movement of India, a Madras-based nongovernment organization, every hour two Dalits are assaulted, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered and two Dalit houses are burned.

The Dalit movement is young and fragmented. Even the term Dalit covers scores of subcastes and tribes, many speaking different languages. Unlike racial apartheid in Africa or gender discrimination in the Muslim world, casteism hasn't captured the West's attention yet. But there are shoots of change. Earlier this spring, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights asked that next year's U.N. Conference on Racism include casteism on the agenda. Says Buta Singh, a Dalit member of Parliament: "If India can achieve [freedom] from the British, why can't the Dalits achieve independence from these caste-minded people?"

Changing a system sanctified by Hindu religious texts will be tough. Millions of Dalits have tried to escape the system by converting to Islam, Christianity or Buddhism. But the system is so rooted in South Asian society that caste persists in Christian and Muslim communities. Moreover, the Dalit movement threatens upper-caste privilege. Few upper-caste people are eager to overturn a social order that supplies them with cheap labor and social standing. Some upper castes have struck back at Dalits with "atrocities," as hate crimes are called in India. The frailest assertions of rights a Dalit candidate's running for the local council, a Dalit boy's falling for an upper-caste girl, a Dalit's using water from an upper-caste well can spark violence. Upper-caste leaders and even police have reportedly raped Dalit women to teach their husbands and brothers "lessons" about the dangers of demanding the minimum wage or reclaiming lost land, according to a 1999 Human Rights Watch Report. "The rise in atrocities is an [outgrowth] of the assertion of the lower castes," observes Dipankar Gupta, professor of sociology at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. "In generations past, no Dalits were beaten up because they 'knew their place'."

Not anymore. Grass roots are gaining strength. Perhaps the most radical is the Dalit Panthers, a Tamil Nadu

resistance organization based on the African-American Black Panthers. Led by 34-year-old Thirumal Valavan, whose stirring two-hour rally speeches have made him something of a cult figure in the region, the Panthers don't openly advocate violence. But the group does encourage Dalits to protect their rights by any means necessary. Last fall Valavan ran for Parliament and lost. His electoral bid's legacy was destruction. To scare off Dalit voters, upper-caste mobs burned 21 villages in the Cuddalore district, destroying 1,000 huts. They attacked 60 Dalit men, killing one. Valavan, who barely leaves his house without his five bodyguards, routinely receives death threats. "I recently got one saying, 'We will cut off your head in a month for fighting against upper-caste people'," he says.

Despite the dangers, Dalits are taking risks to free themselves from rural traditions. They've walked into tea shops and broken cups from the "two cup" system, which forces Dalits to drink from separate glasses. They've marched into temples, breaking the centuries-old ban against Dalits' entering upper-caste Hindu holy places. Hindu grooms ride on horseback to their wedding ceremonies but upper-caste vigilantes have attacked Dalits for trying to do the same. Last June in Rajasthan, a Dalit groom rode a horse for the first time, guarded by 400 policemen, ambulances and teams of doctors.

Dalits have no national leader, but a new generation of activists has emerged. In the southern state of Karnataka, M. C. and Jyothi Raj, a married couple, have been organizing Dalits in 300 villages through the German-funded Rural Education for Development Society (REDS). When the long-haired Raj, who wears black as a sign of pride in the darkness associated with Dalits, visited a Dalit village recently, a street celebration burst out. Villagers hoisted him on their shoulders, banging huge drums and screaming with joy and rage. They shouted the Dalit power slogan that Raj has coined: "Jai Bhim!" "Ambedkar Lives!" (B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit jurist and activist who helped frame the Indian Constitution, is the closest thing the Untouchables have had to a national hero. He died in 1956. Ambedkar's statue graces thousands of Dalit villages.) A throng of upper-caste villagers eyed the crowd warily. "The people worship us like gods," Raj says sheepishly. "In two local villages, we had to stop them before they put up shrines to Jyothi and me."

Over the decade, the REDS campaign for Dalit rights has gained strength. This spring, after an upper-caste mob burned seven Dalits to death, REDS mobilized thousands of Dalits to block 10 national highways forcing the government to provide shelter and compensation for the victims' families. In January, the Raj's launched the Ambedkar Era, a year of Dalit pride. In Tumkur, M. C. Raj lectured a crowd of 40,000 Dalits, telling them how their people had been the original inhabitants of India before the Aryan Hindus invaded. Many of the listeners have never thought of themselves as anything other than outcasts from Hindu society. "We thought that being a Dalit meant you were low," says Thippeswamy, a Dalit. "But why should we do slavish jobs for these people? We have our humanity; we deserve equality."

The few Dalits lucky enough to make it to white-collar jobs agree. "I welcome [violence]," says one of the country's top-ranking Dalit civil servants. "It's the only way. We've been pushed to the wall." Even in the corridors of power, Dalit professionals face discrimination. Two years ago, when a high-court judge in Uttar Pradesh took over his post from a Dalit, he was so worried about being tainted by his low-caste predecessor that he had the chambers "purified" with water from the sacred Ganges.

Some upper-caste Indians object to the government's affirmative-action policies, which they say guarantee too many jobs for lower-caste people at the expense of other castes. Under the Constitution, there are "reservations," or quotas, for Dalits: about 23 percent of government jobs and university places are reserved for "Scheduled Castes and Tribes." Dalit activists argue that as of last year, over a million "reserved" posts remained unfilled, ostensibly because there were no qualified Dalits to fill them. "Even under the reservation system, there's practically no recruitment," says K. S. Chauhan. He is one of three Dalit lawyers working among 3,000 attorneys at the Supreme Court. "In the power structure as it stands," Chauhan says, "Dalits don't exist." India's government is pushing for a constitutional review, and Dalits fear that they may lose their quotas. "Rubbish," retorts Maneka Gandhi, Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment. The purpose of the review, she says, will be "to see what we need to do to make it better."

The reservation system has had its success stories. Y. Chinna Rao remembers his upper-caste schoolteacher searching for a stick to beat him when he misbehaved. The man didn't want to touch Rao directly, for fear of pollution by a Dalit. Today, Rao teaches history at Delhi's prestigious Jawaharal Nehru University, a post he says was "literally above the dreams" of a boy who'd been forced to sit separated from upper-caste classmates. But the

reservation system that helped him succeed carries a new stigma. It means that caste is duly recorded on all official documents. Asked when their kids first knew they were Dalits, villagers say it was after their first day at school, when their teacher duly notes in the ledger that they are "SC" -- "Scheduled Caste." The label sticks, even after you've made it: 'People say, 'Oh, he's a reservation fellow', says the 33-year-old Rao.

Many Dalits fear that India's recent shift to a privatized economy, open to foreign investment, will hurt lower castes. Private industry has no quotas. "Once the private sector emerges as the strongest player," says Ambrose Pinto, head of the Delhi-based Indian Social Institute, "Dalits have no chance." But others say an open economy will bring just the opposite opportunity, since foreign investors don't care about caste. "If you can deliver the goods, you rise," observes Tarun Mehta, a Dalit who runs a Delhi-based insurance consultancy. "That will be good for Dalits."

India's swift urbanization is a mixed blessing for Dalits. Many lower-caste people have been moving to cities. "Our youth are leaving our village rather than depending on the dominant-caste people," observes Narasimhiah, a villager in the Tumkur district of Tamil Nadu. "They have become bold and independent." But activists point out that urban Dalits are still oppressed. Only Dalits clean sewers, break stones or sweep roads. "Who is building India's cities?" asks Ruth Manorama, head of the National Federation of Dalit Women. "Who is cleaning toilets, building its roads? Dalits."

Politics could change that. Over the past decade, Dalit political parties have emerged across the country. The 1998 election showed a consolidation of Dalits with other minorities into an effective voting block in many Indian states. A Dalit woman, Mayawati, was even elected chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. India got its first Dalit archbishop this spring, and its first Dalit Supreme Court judge last month. In Tumkur's local council elections this spring, Dalits ran for the first time. A Dalit named Ramesh K., like 300 other Dalits across the district, won. His wizened mother, Lakshamma, sees historic change. "When I was young, people would call me by the name of my caste," she says. "Now they call me by my name." That's a start.

Source Citation

Mazumdar, Sudip, and Carla Power. "Caste Struggle." *Newsweek International* 3 July 2000: 30. *General OneFile*. Web. 11 Jan. 2012.

Document URL

<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA63124613&v=2.1&u=1233clhs&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w>

Gale Document Number: GALE|A63124613

[Top of page](#)