

## INDIA'S UNTOUCHABLES: STILL AWAITING EQUALITY

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers the history and current situation of the *Dalits* of India, also known as the Untouchables. A range of primary source material is consulted, including Hindu sacred scripture that defines the caste system, writings by Indian leaders who advocated on behalf of social equality, constitutional documentation, and census data. This research shows that, although there has been much progress towards breaking down India's caste system and achieving a greater degree of social equality, much remains to be done. This is especially the case in India's rural regions where caste distinctions endure. The article also considers caste among the Hindus of Bali, showing that Indonesia's Hindus are free of the worst kinds of caste discrimination that remain a problem in India.

Keywords: India, Hinduism, Dalits, equality, Brahmin, caste system, Gandhi

### INTRODUCTION

Having endured countless centuries of prejudice, marginalization, and oppression, India's *Dalits*, formerly known as Untouchables, did gain certain advantages from the nation's 1950 Constitution and the accompanying laws. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable amount of work to be accomplished for the *Dalits* to attain genuine legal equality.

The *Dalits* have historical ties to the ancient caste system in India (*Varna*), an ancient social structure that traces its origins back roughly 3000 years. This system classified people into four main social groups: priests, warriors, traders, and laborers, with each group assigned a specific social status primarily determined by their respective occupations. This structured social framework is clearly delineated in the famous and fundamental Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, whose composition date is a matter of ongoing debate but is likely to have originated in the early centuries BCE. In this text, the God Krishna addresses the warrior Arjuna, describing the roles of the four *varna* groups:

The duties of the *brahmins*, the *kshatriyas*, the *vaishyas*, and of the *shudras*, Arjuna, are distributed according to the qualities which arise from their own nature. Tranquility, restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, and uprightness, knowledge, wisdom, and faith in god are the duties of the *brahmins*, born of their innate nature. Heroism, majesty, fineness, skill, not fleeing in battle, generosity, and lordly spirit are the duties of the *kshatriyas*, born of their innate nature. Plowing, cow-herding, and trade are the duties of the *vaishyas*, born of their innate nature. Service is the duty of the *shudras*, born of their innate nature (Sargeant 2009).

With regard to the group now termed the *Dalits*, Klostermaier comments: “Hindu society has been characterized by caste divisions from time immemorial ... A large number of people who for various reasons were excluded from [the four castes] formed the so-called OUTCASTES, who, however, also maintained caste-like ranking among themselves.” (Klostermaier 1998).

This fifth group, the Untouchables or *Dalits*, born below the caste system, were pushed to the margins of society for a number of reasons. First, they were conventionally engaged in the most menial tasks, frequently entailing the disposal of deceased individuals and animals, cleaning of human waste systems by hand (e.g. sewerage), sweeping, tanning, working as landless labor, and butchering (Adhav 2021). Second, since Hinduism, the predominant religion in India, incorporates the idea of reincarnation, it was believed that *Dalits* were born into their social stratum as a consequence of their misdeeds in a prior life. Their role in handling the deceased was considered spiritually defiling and abhorrent. Consequently, the four castes regarded the *Dalits* as categorically 'untouchable' to prevent any potential contamination (Bhaduri 2013). Sutradhar explains this: “The *Dalits* were believed to be unclean and therefore must not touch anybody belonging to one of the four main castes. If they do, or even if their shadow falls on [an] upper caste member, the person is deemed to have been polluted and must perform a series of cleansing rituals in order to rid their body of this pollution” (Sutradhar 2013). Furthermore, exacerbating this issue is the fact that significant sects within Hinduism also consider a vegetarian diet as the preferred choice, making it evident that professions involving the slaughter of animals or the disposal of their remains are in direct conflict with the cherished beliefs of many (Narayanan 2007).

Another noteworthy aspect to consider is that *Dalits* typically exhibited the darkest skin tone among all the sects in India (Bhaduri 2013). This not only facilitates a more straightforward systematization, but their skin colour also symbolizes the hue

associated with the perceived impurities they were tasked with handling. Essentially, the *Dalits* exemplified how other castes sought to distance themselves from these impurities.

The term "*Dalit*" translates to "shattered, dispersed, and downtrodden" (Sutradhar 2014). Therefore, they are considered to have been one community before being broken, were together and then scattered, and were free before being oppressed. A long-held theory was that the first *Dalits* were thought to have originated from the 'dasas', captured in battle in prehistoric India. They were the first form of slaves and remained so when the caste system was established. Nevertheless, this theory is contested with various alternative explanations offered by researchers (Balasubramanian 2013).

The initial individuals who attempted to challenge the caste system were the reformers from the 5th century BC, namely Siddharta Gautama (Buddha) and Mahavira, whose teachings led to the establishment of Buddhism and Jainism, respectively. Nevertheless, due to the deep-seated nature of the caste system within Hinduism, it continues to be a prevailing issue in contemporary India, where *Dalits* constituted 16.6% of the population at the time of the 2011 census (Sivakumar 2013).

## FROM COLONY TO INDEPENDENCE AND CONSTITUTION

Gaining independence from British rule in India marked the end of a protracted journey characterized by various significant phases. The seeds of early nationalist zeal can be traced back to the 19th century, with the influential Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) playing a crucial role in nurturing this emerging patriotic sentiment. He promoted principles centered around equality and selfless service to fellow countrymen, as seen in the following excerpt from his writings:

The idea of privilege is the bane of human life. Two forces, as it were, are constantly at work, one making caste, and the other breaking caste; in other words, the one making for privilege, the other breaking down privilege. And whenever privilege is broken down, more and more light and progress come to a race. This struggle we see all around us (Vivekananda n.d.).

In his critique of the caste system, Swami Vivekananda was careful to absolve the Hindu religion of responsibility. He makes this clear in a speech that he gave on 26 September 1893 at the first meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago:

The religion of the Hindus is divided into two parts, the ceremonial and the spiritual. The spiritual portion is specially studied by the monks. In that there is no caste. A man from the highest caste and a man from the lowest may become a monk in India and the two castes become equal. In religion there is no caste; caste is simply a social institution (Vivekananda 1946).

Nevertheless, Swami Vivekananda did not propose a radical abolition of the caste system. Rather he saw it as providing certain benefits in terms of the functioning of society, but it needed to be subject to periodic review and reform. In interview for *The Hindu* newspaper in Madras in February 1897, he said: “Caste should not go; but should only be re-adjusted occasionally. Within the old structure is to be found life enough for the building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is — evolution of the old” (Vivekananda 1946).

Prominent Indian nationalist Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-1945) was profoundly influenced by Swami Vivekananda from an early age. However, he went a step further than Vivekananda in his call for equality for all in post-independence India, addressing the deeply embedded caste system but also noting gender marginalization in Indian society:

Let us not become a queer mixture of political democrats and social conservatives. Political institutions grow out of the social life of the people, and are shaped by their social ideas and ideals. If we want to make India really great, we must build up a political democracy on the pedestal of a democratic society. Privileges based on birth, caste or creed should go, and equal opportunities should be thrown open to all irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The status of women should also be raised, and women should be trained to take a larger and a more intelligent interest in public affairs (Bose & Ayer 1964).

A further significant chapter in the quest for independence is exemplified by the celebrated personality Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), who drew inspiration from the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Gandhi passionately campaigned against the caste system and championed the vision of forging a 'new India' marked by pervasive equality and the elimination of discrimination. He agreed with Swami Vivekananda in rejecting the association of caste with Hinduism, writing: “Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth (Gandhi 1996).

Gandhi devoted particular attention to the disadvantage of the *Dalits*, more so than did Vivekananda and Bose. He was compassionate towards the Untouchables from an early age, seen in his account of interactions with Untouchables while at school:

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism... I was hardly yet twelve when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an untouchable, used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often, I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him, why I was forbidden to touch him. If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform the ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.

While at school I would often happen to touch the 'untouchables', and as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to purification after the unholy touch was to cancel the touch by touching any Mussulman passing by. And simply out of reverence and regard for my mother I often did so, but never did so believing it to be a religious obligation (Gandhi 1951).

Gandhi accepted a *Dalit* girl into his house, treating her as his own daughter (Gandhi 1996), which was a highly symbolic act in pre-independence India. In the later years of Gandhi's life, starting from the 1920s, various social and political movements began to surface, advocating for additional dismantling of the caste system. In 1932, Gandhi founded the All-India Anti-Untouchability League in order to pursue his struggle, and the following year he founded a weekly newspaper called the *Harijan* (Gandhi 1996). He chose to refer to Untouchables not as *Dalit* but as *Harijan*, meaning a god-fearing person rejected by society (Adhav 2021). The League which he founded was later renamed the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*. Gandhi's bitter condemnation of the treatment of the *Dalits* comes through clearly in the following excerpt from his writings, in which he discusses "untouchability" and proper approaches to the Hindu sacred texts of the Vedas:

Untouchability is not a sanction of religion; it is a device of Satan. The Devil has always quoted scriptures. But scriptures cannot transcend Reason and Truth. They are intended to purify Reason and illuminate Truth. ... For me the Vedas are divine and unwritten. 'The letter killeth.' It is the spirit that giveth the light. And the spirit of the Vedas is purity, truth, innocence, chastity, simplicity, forgiveness, godliness, and all that makes a man or

woman noble and brave. There is neither nobility nor bravery in treating the great and uncomplaining scavengers of the nation [i.e. the *Dalits*] as worse than dogs to be despised and spat upon. Would that God give us the strength and the wisdom to become voluntary scavengers of the nation as the ‘suppressed’ classes are forced to be. How am I to plead with those who regard any contact with the members of the suppressed community as entailing defilement and of which they cannot be cleansed without necessary ablutions, and who thus regard omission to perform the ablutions a sin? I can only place before them my innermost convictions (Gandhi 1951).

The British colonial authorities took certain actions in response, such as the Government of India Act, which introduced specific welfare measures aimed at improving the disadvantaged status of the *Dalits* and advancing greater equality (Bharathiraja 2012). For example, seats in the provincial councils of state in British India were to be reserved for “the scheduled castes”, a term that was to be carried through to the post-independence Indian Constitution. However, unrest wasn't solely connected to the caste problem; it grew in intensity and became linked with demands for both equality and complete independence. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 marked the independence of these two nations from British rule. The assassination of Gandhi in 1948 deeply saddened the entire nation, but India persevered in its efforts to draft the new Constitution of 1950.

The drafting of the Constitution was, in reality, spearheaded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), a *Dalit* who had achieved the distinction of being the first among his community to receive education in the United States and England (Bharathiraja 2012). A highly educated lawyer and economist and later leading political figure, Ambedkar was a prolific author, devoting much of his writing in both the pre- and post-independence periods to exposing the history and injustices of the caste system, with particular reference to the concept of “untouchability”. He encouraged *Dalits* to renounce Hinduism and he converted to Buddhism shortly before his death. His passion in pursuing social reform, which some term as “liberation ideology” (Brueck 2016), is evident in the following excerpt from one of his speeches prepared for the 1936 Annual Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore:

Under the rule of the Peshwas in the Maratha country the untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or in his neck as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch through

mistake. In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted. In Poona, the untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot, hung in his neck wherever he went, for holding his spit lest his spit falling on earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it (Ambedkar 1979).

Jones and Ryan comment on the importance of Ambedkar's appointment to lead the writing of the Constitution in saying: "Dr. Ambedkar's selection as the person to head the Constitutional Commission was a sign that the reform values that the Indian independence fighters held were going to be instituted in law in independent India" (Jones and Ryan 2007).

The Constitution incorporated the principles of equality influenced by Gandhi's teachings. To some extent, the *Dalits* experienced benefits through constitutional provisions aimed at prohibiting discrimination in employment and various aspects of daily life, along with the allocation of parliamentary seats for *Dalit* representatives. Particularly significant were Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution, which established the concept of reserved opportunities in employment, education, and political participation (Bharathiraja 2012).

Article 15 began as follows:

"(1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

(2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to— (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or

(b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing Ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public."

Similarly, Article 16 stated at the outset:

"(1) There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State.

(2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State” .

However, the measures in the Indian Constitution designed to overcome the deeply-rooted manifestations of discrimination in Indian society and the government commitments to affirmative action on behalf of the *Dalits* have not managed to eliminate the stigma which they face (Adhav 2021).

## EXPERIENCE SINCE INDEPENDENCE

When examining the effects of the aforementioned Constitutional provisions on the *Dalits*, our analysis will revolve around three primary themes: education and employment, the status of women and children, and religious matters.

### Education and Employment

Since the adoption of the 1950 Constitution, there have been gradual advancements *Dalits*. Those born in more developed regions have gained fresh opportunities for education, enabling them to enter job markets that were previously inaccessible. Additionally, subsequent legislation has provided support. The Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, which prohibits discrimination and physical violence against *Dalits*, has enhanced the situation of this group and the improvement of their circumstances. This Act was designed to prevent atrocities against *Dalits* such as the attack on the *Dalit* village of Karamchedu in July 1985 where six *Dalits* were killed, with many others injured and three *Dalit* women being raped (Srinivasulu 2002). Furthermore, India witnessed the appointment of a *Dalit* President, K.R. Narayanan, who served from 1997 to 2002, signifying a substantial leap forward.

Moreover, *Dalits* have progressively assumed more prominent roles in various spheres. The proportion of *Dalits* pursuing higher education has been on a consistent upward trajectory. This is one contributing factor to the growing literacy rate among *Dalits*, which increased from 11% in 1960 to 37% in 1990 and to 66% as recorded in the 2011 Indian census (Statista Research Department 2016).

Nonetheless, when it comes to eradicating discrimination, the Constitution has proven most advantageous for a specific subset of *Dalits* in India: those who are male, Hindu, literate, and either born in or able to relocate to more developed regions. The reality is that in rural areas, farmers still rely on individuals from

dominant castes for resources and remuneration, resulting in continued extensive marginalization and discrimination for rural *Dalits*.

### Women and Children

While the continued presence of *Dalits* in the parliament and public services has notably improved the standard of living for certain individuals within the *Dalit* community, others find themselves ensnared in an enduring cycle of generational illiteracy, which in turn leads to low-status jobs, further exacerbated by daily encounters with discrimination.

In his campaigning for independence from British rule, Subhas Chandra Bose had identified Indian women as a disadvantaged group, calling for their emancipation in clear terms:

It is time for all lovers of freedom to band themselves into one happy fraternity and form the army of freedom. Let this army send out not only soldiers to fight the battle of freedom but also missionaries to propagate the new cult of freedom ... Our missionaries ... will have to rouse the entire womenfolk of the country for women must now come forward to take their place in society and in the body politic as equal partners of men (Bose & Ayer 1964).

A notably marginalized subgroup consists of *Dalit* women. In rural areas of India, women's access to education is limited, trapping them in their circumstances due to the dearth of opportunities. They confront pervasive discrimination on a daily basis, enduring the scorn of male members within the caste system and frequently experiencing sexual abuse. A 2007 Human Rights Watch report tells a harrowing tale that reflects the injustices experienced by many *Dalit* women at the hands of police:

Police ... routinely sexually abuse Dalit women during police raids as a means of exerting pressure on their male family members to surrender, give false evidence, retract their complaints, or silence their protests regarding police mistreatment... The case of Ms. Lebra is illustrative of this widespread problem. Ms. Lebra, a mother of three, was accused of stealing her upper-caste neighbor's jewelry in retaliation for refusing to give him crops from her land. When she was called in by the police for questioning, the police officer began molesting her daughter. When she tried to stop him, he grabbed Ms. Lebra's hair, pushed her down onto the ground and raped her (Chrg 2007).

As the second millennium dawned, a mere 1.6% of those responsible for crimes against *Dalit* women were apprehended, indicating a persistent institutional bias (Narula 1999). Two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Dalit* women continued to experience widespread abuse, with an average of ten *Dalit* women being raped each day in 2021 according to Beena Pallical, General Secretary of the National Campaign on *Dalit* Human Rights in India (Ohchr 2021). Dr Suraj Yengde, author of *Caste Matters*, confirmed this bleak picture in stating that "the *Dalit* female belongs to the most oppressed group in the world. She is a victim of the cultures, structures and institutions of oppression, both externally and internally. This manifests in perpetual violence against *Dalit* women" (Biswas 2020).

Although *Dalit* children are gaining greater entry into schools and educational opportunities, they frequently encounter discrimination from their peers and adults. They are sometimes segregated within classrooms and barred from interacting with non-*Dalit* children. Bharathiraja and Deivasigamani vividly illustrate a case of such discrimination, recounting the experiences of a *Dalit* boy named Omprakash, sourcing *Dalit* authors:

Omprakash was not allowed to sit on the mat and drink water. He sat behind everybody. The children... would tease him by calling 'Chuhre Ka' – a pejorative term which means 'you son of *Chuhras* [*dalits*], mean birth.' When Omprakash was in the fourth class ... the headmaster said 'You are a *Chuhre Ka*, your work is to sweep the school clean. In addition, [the headmaster] ordered him to clean the playground as well. This injustice to a *Dalit* schoolboy continued three days. Omprakash was not allowed to attend the classes (Bharathiraja 2010).

Beena Pallical confirms the above account in detailing what it means to be a *Dalit* child in schools: "It starts from when they are children. They are not allowed to sit at the front of the class, they are not allowed to eat with others, or play with kids from other castes. Very quickly, cliques form, and the *Dalit* are excluded. They do not know any other way, and their adult life is then deeply impacted" (OHCHR 2021).

As the world moved into the digital age, new and more sinister ways of targeting *Dalit* children emerged. While Generation Z children around the world discovered online spaces and games as a form of mass entertainment, for many *Dalit* children, social media merely offered a new avenue for being insulted and targeted with hate speech (Ohchr 2021).

## Religion

Approximately 93% of rural-residing *Dalits* and 90% of urban-residing *Dalits* adhere to the Hindu faith (Deshpande 2008). To break free from the Hindu caste system, numerous Indian *Dalits* have embraced alternative religions such as Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. The adoption of Buddhism holds a historical connection to the Buddha's own efforts to combat the Indian caste system and promote equality. A demographic breakdown of the Dalit population by religion, as reported in a 2008 document from the National Commission for Minorities, based on the 2001 census, is as follows: (Deshpande 2008).

	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Buddhist
Dalits	182,100,000	800,000	2,350,000	5,680,000	7,130,000

Since that report, further conversion of Hindu *Dalits* to other faiths has been steady, with Buddhism a particular attraction for *Dalits* seeking to escape their circumstances as Hindus. Conversions can be individual acts of choice or, on occasions, mass conversion ceremonies are held, such as the event on 5 October 2022, when around 8,000 Hindu *Dalits* became Buddhists in a very public conversion ceremony in New Delhi. In an even more striking statement of rejection of Hinduism, around 60,000 *Dalits* converted to Buddhism in a mass conversion event in the state of Gujarat in 2013 (Aswani 2022).

The 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act provides legal protection exclusively to Hindu *Dalits*. Non-Hindu *Dalits* have persistently advocated for their legal rights, contending that they endure a dual form of discrimination due to their exclusion from this law. “[T]he Presidential Order Government of India 1950 ... effectively prevents those professing religions other than Hinduism from being considered as Scheduled Castes” (Adhav 2021), thus denying them the protection afforded to lower castes according to Articles 15 and 25 of the Constitution (Japhet & Moses 2013).

## BALI'S HINDUS AND CASTE

Of Indonesia's huge population of around 275,000,000, some two percent identify as Hindus. The majority live on Bali, where over 85% of the island's population of 4.5 million are Hindu. They refer to their faith as *Agama Hindu Dharma*.

While representing an element in the world mosaic of Hinduism, *Agama Hindu Dharma* is distinctive in many ways, and caste expression is one area where these distinctions manifest themselves. The four traditional castes seen in Indian Hinduism

are found in Bali and known as *Brahmana*, *Satria*, *Wesia* and *Sudra*. These categories express themselves in certain social functions, such as allocating names, functioning as titles, to children: *Brahmana* children are named *Ida Bagus* (male) and *Ida Ayu* (female); *Satria* children take the names *Anak Agung*, *Dewa Agung*, *Tjokorda*, and *Dewa*; *Wesia* children are named *I Gusti Agung*, *I Gusti Bagus*, and *I Gusti Ayu*; while *Sudra* parents allocate names to their children according to birth order: *Wayan* (first-born), *Made* (second-born), *Nyoman* (third-born), and *Ketut* (fourth-born), with this order repeated for further offspring (Sihombing 2022). Moreover, caste structure in Bali is also reflected in the use of polite forms of language and marriage partner selection. However, these categories do not translate to a pervasive system of discrimination as still seen in parts of India, and there is no equivalent of the Dalit category (Pringle 2004).

The testimony of Aneeta Sundararaj, an Indian traveler to Bali, is telling in this regard: “The ability of the Balinese to treat their fellow man as human, if not equal, is like none other in this world. Nowhere else could it be possible for a low caste woman to keep the temple clean or decorate it and indeed be in charge of all ceremonies that occur within the temple” (Sundararaj 2007).

This optimistic picture is not borne out by all the sources, however. Sihombing comments that “Many Balinese people of high caste still do not wish to marry their daughters to men of lower caste since the girl’s caste will fall along with that of her husband. Understanding of caste has been taught and passed down the generations so that no family member, especially boys, can escape the caste associated with his family” (Sihombing 2022).

One research project by John Lansing based on interviews with Balinese reported a reluctance to discuss caste and, indeed, efforts to discard class distinctions. He reports:

Eventually we came to the delicate matter of caste... a temple priest interrupted me. He said that caste had no meaning in their village, because everyone now had the same caste... Several other village leaders then entered the discussion, explaining that in their opinion it would be disruptive for us to insist on interviewing people about their caste. Certainly people remembered their ancestry, but it had become the policy of the village to strongly discourage any attempt to assert one’s caste, because experience showed that this created discord in the community (Lansing 2012).

Yet qualitative research conducted by Lambok Sihombing did unveil a clear awareness of caste differences among Balinese. His interviews with representatives of all Balinese castes produced clear evidence of caste-consciousness, but one which is gradually eroding. One interviewee, a certain *I Gusti Ayu* Adi Utama of the *Wesia* caste, commented:

I think it is impossible that the caste will be forgotten because it has become the Balinese culture. So if a person, for example, is born in a *Brahmana* caste, his descendant will remain *Brahmana* at any time, except from a *Brahmana* woman who marries a Sudra man, then the offspring will follow the husband. It will not change but maybe the behavior will change along with the times today. Caste will still exist but it will not be as strict as it used to be (Sihombing 2022).

Nevertheless, what is absent in the Balinese caste context is the concept of the *Dalit*, the outcast who is subject to pervasive and debilitating discrimination on the basis of being born outside the caste structure.

## CONCLUSION

The previous discussion has implied the influence of geographical location on the Dalit experience in India. In rural areas, Dalit men frequently have to undertake extensive journeys for employment, which can adversely affect their family obligations. The prolonged absence of husbands and fathers often heightens the vulnerability of women and children to heightened discrimination. Moreover, the relatively improved living conditions of *Dalits* in more urbanized regions can obscure the issue of discrimination against rural *Dalits*, as those with the potential to bring about change within the government may remain unaware of the challenges faced by rural communities.

Some forms of discrimination against *Dalits* do go unnoticed. In India's national sport, "*Dalit* under-representation in Indian cricket has received scant attention" (Bhawnani 2018). The legacy of this age-old discrimination is evident even in Indian diaspora communities. Reena Jaisiah, a British Hindu of *Dalit* origin, reported as follows in a media interview: "I own a shop in Coventry and there is one customer - who is from the higher *Brahmin* caste - who keeps asking me what caste I am. She still refuses to take the change from my hand when I serve her" (McManus 2009).

D. Shyam Babu, Senior Fellow at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research, sought to determine the extent to which *Dalits* are escaping from their caste stigma through

his study of “how many *Dalits* are wriggling out of their caste identity and entering class.” He refers to caste as “birth-based and primordial, immutable, and immobile” but defines class as “more of an economic category associated with urban industrial society” (Babu 2016). On the positive side, the reduction in poverty in India overall since the early 1990s has also been reflected among India’s *Dalits*. But overall, Shyam Babu argues that the complex nature of Indian society means that class “may not be a useful tool for measuring or understanding the progress of *Dalits* unless we modify its definition to such an extent as to blur the distinction between caste and class” (Babu 2016).

While the Indian Constitution and associated legislation have brought about improvements for some *Dalits*, not all have experienced the same advantages. What steps can be taken to address this issue? Altering deeply rooted attitudes that have developed over centuries will demand more than just two or three generations, emphasizing the importance of education and raising awareness, both domestically and internationally. In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, where the principles of equality and democracy are spreading, further amelioration in the circumstances of *Dalits* is bound to occur as time unfolds, but patience remains a crucial requirement. ■

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