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Voice of Minorities & Oppressed People in South Asian Societies

# B.R. Ambedkar's timeless relevance

p. 9



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# MINO-VIEW

## Quarterly Magazine

Voice of Minorities & Oppressed People in  
South Asian Societies

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### **Objectives**

The Mino-View, a quarterly magazine, is a humble attempt to cover all dimensions of minority's life and culture not only in Pakistan but in all states of South Asia. It will act as a mirror reflector, reflecting the issues related to the identified minorities and other oppressed classes in the region. The magazine seeks to serve the objective of shedding light on the darkest issues of our social system by voicing the concerns of minorities and other oppressed sections of the South Asian societies. We will welcome feedback from our respected readers and concerned quarter. We invite social forces from all over the region to join hands for adopting a way

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## Editorial

Welcome to the new edition of Mino-View. It is admirable that recent advancements have been made in the fight against caste-based discrimination in California and Brampton and mark a significant step towards building a more inclusive and just society. Caste-based discrimination has long been a deeply entrenched issue in South Asian societies, affecting millions of individuals who find themselves marginalized and oppressed based on their caste identity. It is a problem that has crossed borders and found its way into diaspora communities, manifesting as intra-community violence that often goes unnoticed by the broader society. However, recent developments in North America offer a glimmer of hope for those who have been fighting against this form of discrimination for decades. But the other side is still dark; when we talk about the discrimination prevailing within the origin of caste system, India and its prestigious educational institutions like Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) further underscore the urgent need for change. Such institutions often perceive the implementation of reservation policies as a dilution of their cherished standards, disregarding the need for inclusivity where students from different castes and backgrounds systematically placed in specific wings. According to the Indian government, 33 students at various IITs across India have committed suicide since 2018, while more than 19,000 students from the SC, ST, and OBC groups have left central colleges in the past five years. Educational institutions that has persisted for centuries. Inclusivity and progress, must confront the caste-based segregation, which should be centers of learning and diversity should be encouraged, not resisted and reserved category students must be provided with a supportive environment that fosters their growth and success. Apart from educational institution, most of the South Asian countries also need to address the issues related to the concept of inclusion and just society. The US Embassy in Colombo stressed the need of respecting and including ethnic and religious minorities as part of the post-conflict reconciliation process in Sri Lanka, according to a recent annual report on international religious freedom. The USIRF study, released by the US State Department, similarly emphasized specifically on communal attacks against Christians, Buddhists and Hindus as well as their places of worship in Bangladesh during 2022. The top representatives of leading minority organizations on communal attacks against Christians, government should act to free religious minorities from the fear and apprehension with which they live in Bangladesh. In this situation, it is crucial to recognize the voices of activists, scholars and leaders who have dedicated themselves to advancing the civil rights of marginalized communities, including Dalits. These champions, such as Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule and Dr. B. R Ambedkar, have long advocated for education as a powerful tool for societal transformation and equality. They understood that access to education could break the chains of caste-based oppression and enable individuals to develop critical thinking and challenge oppressive norms. So the legislative actions in California and Brampton signify a growing awareness of the need to address caste-based discrimination and create a more inclusive and equitable society. However, it is important to see these developments as stepping stones towards a larger, global effort to combat this deep-rooted issue because such legislations and individuals worldwide must unite in their determination to dismantle caste-based discrimination in all its forms. It is crucial for individuals, communities, and governments to continue working together to break the shackles of caste-based discrimination and build a world where every person is treated with dignity and respect, irrespective of their caste or background. Only then can we truly evolve into a good society, as envisioned by the great minds like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

# The Grip of Casteism

Neema Gadiya Pothing



Caste-based discrimination is a persistent problem deeply ingrained in Indian society. Addressing this complex issue requires a collective effort from various stakeholders, including the government, communities and educational institutions. However, a significant challenge arises when individuals in positions of authority within these entities themselves believe in the caste system and engage in discriminatory practices.

Multiple reports highlight the prevalent issue of caste discrimination in rural schools, where generations of students have been subjected to such discrimination, even during activities like the mid-day meal program. Take the case of the government school located in Charson village in Bageshwar district in Uttarakhand. The principal of this school is accused by the locals of discriminating against students based on their caste. Recently, the principal faced allegations of severely beating an 11-year-old child belonging to the scheduled caste. Manju Devi, the mother of the child, recounted her repeated visits to the school, where she pleaded with the principal to refrain from physically abusing her child and making derogatory comments about their caste. Despite her efforts, her child returned home on several occasions, sharing stories of being physically assaulted and humiliated due to their caste.

Her child was beaten up so much that she was forced to go to the police station and file a

complaint against the principal. Following Manju's complaint, parents of many other children also came forward and lodged complaints against the discrimination faced by their children. Although the principal has refuted all the allegations, the gravity of the situation called for an administration-level investigation into the matter. Currently, the accused has been removed from her position of principal by the higher authorities. Besides, educational intuitions, the community has a bigger role in promoting this age-old discriminatory practice. 20 km away from Charson, lies Lamchula, a remote village, where caste discrimination is even more deeply rooted. The settlement of the entire village is divided based on upper and lower caste communities. Different sources of water have been reserved for both the lower and upper castes. Moreover, the right to worship has been taken away from the people belonging to lower castes, as they are not allowed to enter temples in the village.

Padam Ram, the village head, strongly condemns the discriminatory treatment of individuals from lower castes, particularly concerning their freedom to worship as they please. He expressed his dismay over the upper caste households maintaining separate utensils exclusively for visitors from lower castes.

he remarked. Padam Ram also highlighted the troubling prevalence of caste-based favoritism in



political dynamics, emphasizing the need to address caste politics and foster a more inclusive society.

On the other hand, adolescent girls from historically and socially marginalized castes face a different set of problems. Tini (name changed), a student of class 10 from the village, shares her experience of caste discrimination.

Regardless of education, caste takes precedence over everything else, revealing that society still grapples with deep-rooted casteism. Sadly, caste discrimination continues to grow alongside societal progress.

Not only do Indian villages suffer from such discrimination, but even renowned institutions in metropolitan cities are making headlines for this very reason. A recent tragic incident at IIT Bombay, where a young boy from the Dalit community took his own life due to the unbearable humiliation he faced based on his caste, vividly illustrates the extreme and severe nature of this practice.

In the period spanning from 2019 to 2021, India has witnessed a distressing 11 percent surge in atrocities against Dalits. Recent data sourced from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals a notable escalation in recorded cases, with numbers escalating from 45,961 incidents in 2019 to 50,900 incidents in 2021. Notably, the state of Uttarakhand alone has experienced a staggering 35% increase in crimes targeting the Schedule Caste and Tribe communities over the



past three years.

These cases represent only a fraction of the numerous caste-based atrocities occurring within society. It is important to acknowledge that many incidents go unreported, allowing the insidious roots of caste discrimination to further entrench themselves. The hidden nature of these atrocities highlights a concerning trend, indicating that the problem is more pervasive and deeply rooted than official records may suggest!

*Source: Ground Report*



**“Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind.”**

# California State Senate passes caste discrimination bill



**In a historic move, the California State Senate passed legislation that would ban caste-based discrimination in the State.**

The state Senate passed a bill that would update California's civil rights law to explicitly include protections against discrimination based on a person's perceived caste. The measure, the first such effort by a US state legislature, would give people legal recourse to address claims of caste bias and discrimination in housing, employment, education and other areas. It was approved 34-1.

Promoters of the bill, being led by the non-profit Equality Lab, said that a similar bill is being introduced in the State House of Representatives before it can be sent to the Governor to be signed into law. Those who have suffered systemic harm as a result of caste bias and prejudice are explicitly protected by SB 403's provisions. Additionally, it establishes clear legal repercussions for anyone who tries to escape accountability or responsibilities for condoning or taking part in caste-based violence.

Introduced by California Senator Aisha Wahab, SB 403 adds caste as a protected category to an existing law, the Unruh Civil Rights Act, which provides that all people in the state of California are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, privileges or services in all business establishments.

Wahab, an Afghan American, claimed that while growing up in Fremont, a city in California's San Francisco Bay Area, she saw the toll caste took on other families. This bill would update California's existing civil rights law to include caste among other protected categories like race and sex.

"The more diverse California becomes and the

United States becomes, we need to protect more people in the way the American dream was originally supposed to," Wahab told NBC News when she introduced the bill in March. "Our laws need to expand and cover more people and go deeper."

But the legislation isn't without its opponents. Some Indian American groups have spoken against SB 403, saying that adding protection against caste discrimination isn't necessary in the U.S. and that it discriminates against Indians and Hindus. But Wahab said the bill is designed to protect groups across religions, nationalities and communities. It has the support of the American Civil Liberties Union, MeToo International and the California Labor Federation.

This landmark bill comes just weeks after the California Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously passed SB403 in April. It also follows the Seattle City Council's historic legislation banning caste discrimination earlier this year, as well as resolutions to designate caste as a protected category passed by the California Democratic Party, the California State University system, the Alphabet Workers Union, tech giants like Apple and Cisco and others. A coalition of groups across faiths and caste backgrounds also supported the bill.

"This is a win rooted in years of Dalit feminist organizing and we are just getting started in making the state safe for our entire caste-oppressed community," Thenmozhi Soundararajan, executive director of the Dalit advocacy organization Equality Labs, said in a statement. "We know that we have a long journey ahead of us with this bill, but we have made history with this vote and are proud to look forward to working with the California Assembly on this historic bill!" The bill now moves to the California State Assembly for consideration.

*Courtesy : Myind*

# B.R. Ambedkar's timeless relevance

Jadumani Mahanand



THE significance of a thinker and statesman or an iconoclast confronting injustice, is judged by time. Their thinking and actions set a benchmark for a timeless time. B.R. Ambedkar is one of those revolutionary thinkers who remain significant for future generations for he was ahead of his time.

A thinker is always judged by their intellectual contribution, but as Hindu scriptures sanctify that Shudra, Ati-Shudra and women should be denied education, intellectual pursuance of a person who belongs to an 'Untouchable caste' does not have the backing of inherited social capital nor are their thoughts easily accessed by others.

An 'Untouchable' or member of a lower-caste becoming an intellectual was punished. It was like a sin- violating the order of Varnashrama Dharma of Hinduism. There are several examples of such 'transgression' in Hindu scriptures. In the Ramayana, Shambuka was killed by Rama for crossing the boundary of caste order. Ekalavya chopping off his thumb as an offering to Dronacharya in the Mahabharata is another example.

The denial of education to a large section of society has had a generational impact even in the twenty-first century. In the nineteenth century, Mahatma Jotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai declared that education itself was a weapon to fight the Brahminical monopoly over education.

Ambedkar considered education a means to bring revolutionary social change and develop critical, emancipatory and egalitarian knowledge for a good society to evolve.

Ambedkar considered education a means to bring revolutionary social change and develop critical, emancipatory and egalitarian knowledge for a good society



to evolve. He created a standard to pursue education to acquire knowledge and intellectual excellence. For him, intellectual or academic engagement was as crucial for professional interest or earning bread and butter as it was in seeking to use knowledge for society's good.

Babasaheb's movement was not merely aimed at the emancipation of Untouchable oppressed castes. His intellectual contribution provided an epistemic vantage point in pointing out society's fundamental problems that offered a broader framework and perspective to understand it as a whole and entailed a radical emancipatory normative for revolutionary change.

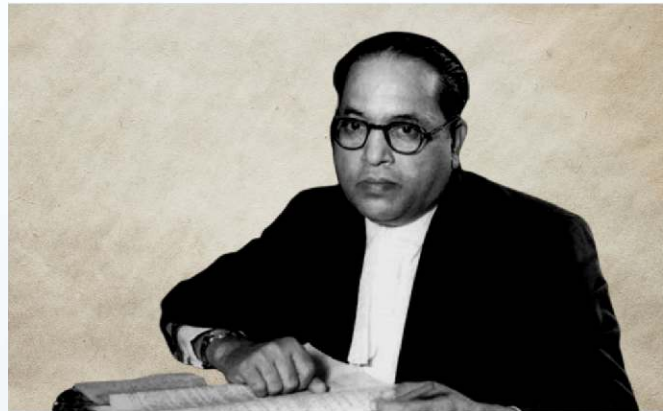
In his classic book *Annihilation of Caste*, responding to the work of upper caste leaders and organisations, Ambedkar raised basic questions like who is an intellectual, why is the intellectual class not interested in the question of caste and why do they never considered caste as a social or national problem.

In Hindu society, Brahmins are regarded as Bhudevas (Gods on Earth) and only they can impart education. In other words, Brahmins constitute the intellectual class.

According to Ambedkar, the intellectual class is the most influential, if not the governing class, in any country. The intellectual class could foresee, advise and lead the country, whose destiny depended on it. If the intellectual class is dishonest and indifferent to the plight of the rest of the society, it can't be helpful when the society is in crisis.

Intellectualism without virtue is meaningless. A knowledgeable person without morality is dangerous. "An intellectual could be a good man but easily be a rogue," he writes. Likewise, "an intellectual community may be a band of high-souled persons, ready to help, ready to emancipate erring humanity or it may easily be a gang of crooks or body of advocates of the narrow clique from which it draws its support."

Ambedkar further writes that Brahmins are regarded as the country's custodian vis-à-vis their caste. The protection of their caste is akin to protecting the country. Therefore, it is difficult to find a Voltaire in the Brahmin community



One needs to critically examine the role of Brahminism concerning knowledge production and control, where we find that the Indian polity, economy, culture and society are preserved through the Brahminical discourse of knowledge. Needless to say that upper castes control the architecture of democracy.

Upper castes have always been the majority in the system. For example, the judiciary has always been a caste profession. An upper-caste judge celebrates the Manusmriti in court, another defends caste and patriarchy, the pseudo-upper-caste liberal judge neither criticises the orthodoxy of religion nor rejects it and another upper-caste judge supports lower castes without really delivering justice.

A Dalit chief justice publicly said that it is difficult to get justice. His view seems correct considering the low rate of conviction against Dalit atrocities. In fact, there have been cases where courts deliver judgements without informing the victim's family, which is against the basic principles of natural justice. On the contrary, a high number of people from oppressed communities are in prisons.

Arguably, the pursuit of knowledge by upper castes is to maintain order and not change society. In his talk to BBC about *Prospects of Democracy in India*, Ambedkar writes: "To give education to those who want to keep up the caste system is not to improve the prospect of democracy in India but to put our democracy in India in greater jeopardy."

In his talk to BBC about *Prospects of Democracy in India*, Ambedkar writes: "To give education to those who want to keep up the caste system is not to improve the prospect of democracy in India but to put our democracy in India in greater jeopardy."

Caste discrimination in educational institutes is a glaring reality in India. In his 1916 essay *Castes in India*, Ambedkar endorsed that caste could become a global problem when Hindus migrate to other parts of the world. A hundred years later, caste has become a global problem. Whether it is California, Georgia or New York in the US, Canada, the UK or South Africa, caste has manifested itself in various forms.

Now students from a Dalit background have expressed their experience of the subtle ways in which they are humiliated for their caste names. For the first time in US university history, Brandeis University prohibited discrimination on the basis of caste in its non-discrimination policy. Harvard and California State Universities have also recognised caste in their anti-discrimination policy.

Furthermore, women's bodies, in particular, controlled by men not only perpetuates the superiority of men but also insists upon the architecture of race, class and caste. Caste exists in asymmetric graded inequality of power that distorts the worth of human recognition.

In her book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson writes: "It (caste) embeds into our bones an unconscious ranking of human characteristics and sets forth the rules, expectations and stereotypes that have been used to justify brutalities against entire groups within our species."

Ambedkar is both present and absent in academic and political discourse. He has become a token symbol in political discourse and is used by political parties. It is a distortion.

In the last few decades, a new Ambedkar scholarship is emerging in academia, coming from upper castes and Western academics. One must critically examine such scholarship, whether the presence of Ambedkar's thought is an impulse to change the casteist academic space or reproduce it in just its name so as to reoccupy the academic space.

Ambedkar relentlessly struggled to achieve human dignity for millions of toiling masses systematically oppressed by caste, class and patriarchy. His uncompromised fight against this systemic injustice led to the foundation of an emancipatory movement.



Over the decades, Ambedkar Jayanti has become a festival with several meanings - a celebration that captures the ecstasy, unflinching love, aspiration, assertion, inspiration and joy of struggle with which Ambedkar's followers connect. On April 14, his followers renew their pledge to wrestle with the unyielding struggle they face every minute. It is their day against the daily discrimination in Hinduism. They call it 'Knowledge Day'. In 2021, British Columbia declared it as 'Equality Day'.

Ambedkar is a spectacular example for those fighting against Brahminism's systemic injustice. He gave a new purpose to millions who had never thought of becoming civil servants, professors, chief ministers and legislators. Ambedkar fascinates them- becoming an Ambedkarite is their fate.

Babasaheb was one of the great world leaders who spent their life in the fight against an unjust system. He was a rare and exceptional world-class iconoclast and statesman who rose from the bottom to the top. More than 60 years after his death, he continues to be relevant across the globe.

However, scholars and intellectuals have not yet been able to properly capture the multiple facets of Ambedkar that have impacted 'Untouchable castes'. An Ambedkarite is guided only by the idea of justice. The name 'Ambedkar' is epistemic- a symbolic figure in a substantive meaning of the term that could alter the Hindu society. This should be the real reason for celebrating Ambedkar. Dalits often say, 'We are because He was.' Ambedkar exists in their political battle against injustice.

Ambedkar is part of their marriage ceremonies, his books are considered treasures- he is a cultural

memory. He is a symbol of pride, joy, assertion and revolution for a good society and life. Ambedkar is a shared memory when they celebrate anything good for them.

A Dalit who achieves something important is facilitated with an Ambedkar portrait. Likewise, a marriage pandal is decorated with Ambedkar's picture. This is the counter-culture against the Brahminical social order. Ambedkar is still alive due to his presence in Dalit lives, not because of the academia or political parties. Ironically, Dalits never get the credit.

### **Ambedkar and the present**

The idea of Ambedkar contradicts the present regime. For example, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was a renunciation of Hinduism. But he is produced in distorted forms by the government- the identity, not his idea. Furthermore, those who speak about his beliefs are jailed.

This is the irony of a majoritarian democracy that elects a government that becomes authoritarian and oppressive. Such a rule suppresses voices who dissent or are critical of it. The regime gives a free hand to its foot soldiers to impose the Brahminical order to perpetuate its ideology. Intellectuals, activists and students critical of the government are under surveillance or arrested- especially, Dalits and Muslims. The space for critical thinking and freedom of mind has declined in celebrating Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav.

In his essay Conditions and Precedent For a Successful Working of Democracy, Ambedkar identified that one of the conditions and precedents of a democracy is to have an Opposition. He writes: "Democracy requires not only that the government should be subject to a veto, a long-term veto of five years, at the hands of the people, but there must be an immediate veto... Democracy means that nobody has the perpetual authority to rule, rather the rule is subject to sanction by the people and can be challenged in the house itself."

The second necessary condition and precedent of democracy, Ambedkar writes is "constitutional morality and public conscience". "In the name of democracy, there must be no tyranny of the majority over the minority. The minority must always feel safe

that although the majority is carrying on the government, the minority is not being hurt or the minority is not being hit below the belt." Ambedkar offers a normative to political democracy that helps to develop critical thinking in the minds of citizen towards a vibrant democracy.

Second, Ambedkar's portrait has become a symbol for citizens who play the critical role of opposition to the ruling regime. The credit for celebrating Constitution Day as National Law Day goes to Ambedkarites across the globe, who have been using the Indian Constitution as their political normative for social transformation.

It is a historical moment to see Muslim women holding Ambedkar's portrait and the Constitution to claim their rights. Muslims are treated as second-class citizens by the Hindu majoritarian state with their existence facing a perpetual threat and violence. Therefore, Ambedkar and his thoughts are a timeless fight against time. His importance will endure because the oppressed have started to raise their voice.

### **Ambedkar beyond time**

Ambedkar dared to say what was right and wrong- he always spoke the truth. He judged society through the lens of justice. He claimed that all humans are equal and free. He believed that the misrecognition of communities and identities creates tyranny and inequality, which leads to systemic injustice. They want to be recognised by their distinctiveness as free socially autonomous beings without the imposition of identities.

Treating a person or a community with indignation is an act of anti-humanity. It is an offence to the fundamental notion of justice in which a person's freedom and equality are violated. Ambedkar's philosophy helps us to comprehend that humans need a universal moral standard to live in society. His intellectual pursuit entails priorities, praxis and social ethics that can orient towards an ideal of emancipation. His notion of enlightenment concerning the ethics of reason is to ascertain freedom and equality so that fraternity could lay the foundation of a society. The idea of a good society is possible when the distinctiveness of individual is duly recognised. It is a new identity and community in which a person's worth matters in seeking the common good- justice.

*Source: The Leaflet*

# Islamabad notifies rules for Hindu Marriage Act

Kalbe Ali

**In a key development, the Islamabad administration has notified the rules for Hindu Marriage Act 2017 more than five years after its passage, allowing the members of the minority community to solemnise their marriage in line with established rituals.**

The notification titled 'Islamabad Capital Territory Hindu Marriage Rules 2023' will pave way for the implementation of the marriage act passed in 2017 in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan as well.

An official of the ICT administration informed Dawn that the notification has been forwarded to all union councils of the federal territory for implementation.

As per the rules, relevant UCs in Islamabad will register a 'Maharaj' to solemnise marriages: the requirement for being a 'Pundit' or 'Maharaj' is that the person has to be a Hindu male with adequate knowledge of Hinduism.

However, 'Maharaj' will be appointed after the submission of a character certificate from the local police as well as with the written approval of at least 10 members of the Hindu community.

Similar to the case of the "registered nikah-khawan" for Muslims, respective UCs will issue "Shaadi Pert" (marriage certificate) to 'Maharaj' who would be registered with the relevant UC. All marriages would be registered at union councils as well.

According to the rules, a 'Maharaj' appointed under the marriage act would not take any money for officiating the marriage except for the fees mandated by the government. In case of the demise of a 'Maharaj' or cancellation of his licence, the marriage record kept by him would be submitted to the relevant UCs, which would be subsequently



handed over to his successor.

Section 7 of the rules deals with cases related to the termination of marriages and remarriages. These rules also allow Hindus living in Islamabad to approach courts under the West Pakistan Family Courts Act 1964 in case of marriage disputes.

## 'Major step'

Mehfooz Piracha, district attorney for ICT who drafted the rules, told Dawn that the notification "is a major step" towards ensuring the rights of the minority community. He added that now Punjab, Balochistan and KP can also adopt these rules.

"Politically and technically, it is easy for provinces to adopt the laws enacted in Islamabad rather than formulating new legislation for each jurisdiction," Mr Piracha claimed.

The "key effort" for the approval of Hindu marriage rules has been made by a group called 'National Lobbying Delegation for Minority Rights' (NLD).

Jai Parkash, an NLD member, said that a large number of Hindus were permanently settled in Islamabad and it was "essential" that the ICT administration implement this law retrospectively to benefit the local community.

It may be mentioned here that the Hindu community in Islamabad has grown significantly over the past decade due to migrations from Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa owing to security concerns.

*Source: DAWN*


# Unveiling The Tragic Link: Caste Discrimination And Suicides In Higher Education

Prema Sridevi

“In 2014, during my first round of fieldwork for my book on mapping discrimination in higher education in India, I had the opportunity to visit Hyderabad university, where Rohith Vemula became one of my respondents. Over the course of my research, I engaged with 600 students, aiming to understand the pervasive nature of discrimination. During our conversations, Rohith vividly described the discrimination faced by Dalit students, revealing that he had been denied a supervisor. I was shocked to learn of Rohith's untimely demise by suicide. Recently, while conversing with one of Rohith's close friends, he shared that Rohith had expressed the belief that the gravity of the discrimination issue would only be realised if someone made the ultimate sacrifice,” says N Sukumar, Professor of the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi.

Professor Sukumar is also the author of “Caste Discrimination And Exclusion In Indian Universities”, which details deep-rooted caste-based discrimination within Indian higher education system. Sukumar narrates the story behind the suicide of Senthil Kumar. Senthil, a Dalit research scholar from Tamil Nadu, chose the University of Hyderabad to pursue his PhD after obtaining an MPhil and an MSc.

“Senthil hailed from a low-income family in Tamil Nadu that engaged in pig rearing. When he joined the university, the department raised concerns about his proficiency in the English language, prompting the introduction of an English language examination. Senthil was failed in the exam twice, leading to the termination of his fellowship. These fellowships hold immense significance for students like Senthil, as they not only support their own aspirations but also



provide financial stability for their families. Senthil had urged his parents to cease their pig-rearing activities, assuring them his fellowship would sustain them. However, deprived of his fellowship and left without a research supervisor for an extended period, Senthil found himself cornered and ultimately succumbed to despair. Such tragic incidents transcend the label of “suicides” and reveal a deeper, more harrowing reality: they are nothing short of institutional murders,” states Prof Sukumar.

Professor Sukumar sheds light on the deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination prevalent within IITs. He highlights how these institutions often perceive the implementation of reservation policies as a dilution of their cherished standards, disregarding the need for inclusivity. One manifestation of this discrimination is observed in the language courses imposed on scheduled caste students, regardless of their linguistic proficiency. This assumption belittles their academic and linguistic abilities, relegating them to preparatory classes and earning them the derogatory label of “preppies”. Shockingly, even during simple introductions, students sometimes are asked to share their ranks and discrimination seeps in as their peers start categorising and treating them differently based on their rankings.

Prof Sukumar notes that the discriminatory practices extend to hostel allocations, with reserved

category students systematically placed in specific wings, reflecting a troubling pattern of caste-based segregation. Furthermore, hostels categorised by food habits inadvertently perpetuate caste identities, while disciplinary discrimination further compounds the challenges reserved category students face, particularly in civil engineering. Within these disciplinary divisions, instances of caste-based discrimination also persist, further exacerbating the plight of marginalised students.

Speaking to The Probe, Devan, a member of ChintaBar - an independent student body recognised by IIT Madras - expresses deep concern over increasing suicides. "These suicides are alarming and have left our students in profound sadness and hopelessness. At IIT Chennai, between January and March, four students committed suicide. Three of them are from the reserved category," says Devan. "During condolence meetings held after such tragic incidents, we have discovered more distressing details about our students' challenges. While the IIT administration has taken some measures and initiated programs, we recently met with the Director to push for more reforms."

Devan highlights a disconcerting observation: "We've noticed that official communications from the institute regarding these suicides avoid mentioning the term 'suicide'. By sidestepping the gravity of this issue, the institute administration appears evasive, hindering the resolution of students' academic and non-academic difficulties. The need to address this serious matter head-on is paramount."

Suicides are becoming the new normal in these institutions. Recently, the HRD Minister stated that over 19,000 students from SC, ST and OBC categories dropped out from central universities, IITs and IIMs between 2018 and 2023. As many as 33 students at various IITs across India committed suicide since 2018, as per the government. Out of the three institutes of higher education - the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), the National Institute of Technology (NIT) and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) - the IITs accounted for the maximum number of student suicides.



"The IITs don't value human life. They value only knowledge, but they don't value the source of that knowledge: the human brain because when the brain dies, it is the death of knowledge too. It is time the IITs cultivate a culture of empathy and understand that discrimination is unacceptable," asserts Professor Sukumar.

Speaking to The Probe, former UGC Chairman Prof SK Thorat explains the distressing problem of caste-based discrimination within higher education institutions. According to Thorat, this kind of discrimination is pervasive and does not depend on the economic background of SC/ST students. Instead, it is purely based on their caste, leading to their stigmatisation and subsequent isolation within campuses.

Despite the existence of reservation policies designed to provide opportunities for underprivileged communities, SC/ST students often find themselves at the receiving end of discrimination and prejudice. Being labelled as beneficiaries of affirmative action, they become targets of negative stereotypes and face marginalisation from their peers. This exclusionary behaviour extends beyond social interactions and pervades various aspects of campus life, including hostels and classrooms. Thorat highlights that SC/ST students are not only isolated within their peer groups but also face discrimination within the very classrooms where they seek knowledge. Teachers, who play a crucial role in shaping students' educational experiences, contribute to this alarming pattern of mistreatment.

"During my tenure as Chairman of UGC, I witnessed

an unfortunate trend of suicides in IITs. Recognising the urgency of the situation, I tried to address this issue. Although my term ended in 2011, we did the groundwork and made significant progress and in 2012 the equity regulations were introduced. These regulations aimed to tackle discrimination head-on, providing a framework for taking action against any instances of discrimination and establishing equal opportunities for all students across educational institutions,” says Prof Thorat.

Prof Thorat explains, “The primary objective of these regulations was to end discriminatory practices and ensure that educational institutions had mechanisms to prevent and address discrimination effectively. As part of this initiative, I advocated for the appointment of anti-discriminatory officers and encouraged colleges and universities to establish dedicated equal-opportunity cells. These cells would serve as vital resources, supporting students who faced discrimination and providing them with remedial coaching, particularly for SC/ST students”.

### The Way Forward

According to Professor Sukumar, addressing caste-based discrimination and its tragic consequences requires recognising caste as a stark reality. To combat this problem, he emphasises the need for comprehensive measures. Firstly, conducting an audit of all higher educational institutions is crucial to understand the extent and nature of caste-based discrimination prevalent within these settings. Additionally, strengthening SC/ST cells within these institutions would provide dedicated support systems for marginalised students, helping them navigate the challenges they face. Furthermore, the implementation of an anti-discrimination law specifically targeting caste-based discrimination is essential to establish legal protections and enforce accountability.

Professor Thorat, on the other hand, explains four key suggestions to address and curb discrimination within the IITs and higher educational institutions.

1. Enact an Act to Criminalise Caste Discrimination: Thorat proposes the implementation of legislation that would criminalise caste-based discrimination. Such an Act would serve as a



strong deterrent and reinforce the commitment to equality and social justice.

2. Offer Sensitisation Courses on Inequality and Discrimination: To foster awareness and empathy among students, it is imperative to introduce courses that delve into the complexities of various forms of discrimination, including caste, gender, race and others. These courses would promote a deeper understanding of social inequalities and encourage students to actively work towards creating an inclusive society.
3. Provide Remedial Coaching in Core Subjects and English: Recognising the disparities in educational opportunities, the provision of remedial coaching programs must be started for marginalised students. These programs would focus on core subjects and English language skills, helping bridge the academic gap and ensuring equal access to quality education.
4. Establish Equal Opportunity Cells and Appoint Anti-Discriminatory Officers: Thorat proposes the establishment of Equal Opportunity Cells within educational institutions. These cells would serve as dedicated platforms to address discrimination instances, support affected students and promote an inclusive campus environment. Additionally, appointing anti-discriminatory officers would ensure the effective enforcement of anti-discrimination measures and provide recourse for students facing discriminatory practices.

*Source: Probe*



# US notes harassment of religious minority groups in Sri Lanka

The United States, in its annual report on religious freedom, noted the harassment of religious minority groups in Sri Lanka in 2022.

The annual report on International Religious Freedom noted that the US Embassy in Colombo had emphasized the need for respect for and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities as part of the postconflict reconciliation process during meetings with the President, Prime Minister, cabinet ministers and other officials involved with religious affairs.

“Embassy and visiting Department of State officials met with Government officials to express concern about government harassment of and discrimination against members of religious minority groups and to urge the government to ensure due process for those in prolonged detention, in particular those detained under the PTA,” the report said. The US Ambassador in Colombo had also promoted religious freedom through private diplomatic advocacy and in public statements and speeches.

On 14 September 2022, the Ambassador visited the Colombo Dewatagama Mosque, the main mosque of the minority Sufi community Sri Lanka. The Sufis reported increased marginalization due to the spread of more conservative Islam. In her remarks, the Ambassador highlighted the contributions of the Sufi community in Sri Lanka and the United States and emphasized the need for religious freedom for all communities in the country. On September 21, the Ambassador met with a group of youth ambassadors from different religions working on an interfaith dialogue initiative and posted on social media that “tolerance and respect are essential for [a] peaceful and democratic society.”

Embassy and visiting senior Department of State officials met with Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu civil society and religious leaders across the country to better understand the views of the communities they represent and the problems they faced. In April, after a trip to the North and meetings with religious leaders from different faiths, the Ambassador emphasized the value of religious pluralism in a press release. In November, during a trip

to the Eastern Province, the Ambassador met with a bishop to discuss ways to strengthen interfaith relations. She also visited a Hindu kovil and posted on social media about the country's religious diversity.

Throughout the year (2022), the Ambassador or the Chargé d'Affaires offered public greetings, including on social media and participated in person or virtually in celebrations of the country's many religious holidays and other occasions. For example, the Ambassador publicly observed religious holidays such as Maha Shivarathri in March, Ramadan in April, Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April, Eid al-Fitr in May, Vesak in May, Eid al-Adha in July, International Day of Peace in September and Deepavali in October. She visited sites with religious significance and posted on social media her appreciation for the country's cultural and religious diversity. On International Religious Freedom Day in October, the Ambassador reflected on the country's religious diversity and the value of interfaith partnerships on social media.

The embassy supported multiple reconciliation projects that identified and resolved local grievances, built empathy and understanding among religious groups and supported government reconciliation efforts. The embassy led ongoing tolerance and unity programs in cultural centers promoting freedom of religion, as well as peaceful dispute resolution, among Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim youth. Embassy representatives supported the work of civil society organizations in strengthening the capacity of religious and community leaders by fostering peace building activities through district-level interreligious reconciliation committees. Through community-based civil society organizations and the National Peace Council, the U.S. government funded multiple foreign assistance programs designed to build on global best practices in interfaith cooperation, dialogue and confidence building.

*Source: Colombo Gazette*





# From Ambedkar to Jagjivan Ram to NCSC: Dalits' long struggle for inclusion in Indian Army

Dilip Mandal

The Indian Army is one of the largest and prestigious institutions in India, seen as a symbol of national pride and unity. However, the Army has historically been dominated by certain castes. This is the legacy or burden of the colonial idea of Martial Race that India still carries to some extent in the 21st century. The Indian Army still has regiments with caste, religion and community names. It still asks for caste certificates during recruiting.

Recently, India celebrated the birth anniversary of former deputy prime minister and defence minister Babu Jagjivan Ram (1908-1986). Many important dignitaries and leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge remembered him. Jagjivan Ram, a prominent Dalit leader, made efforts to include Dalits in the Army. However, his attempts were met with resistance and General Sam Manekshaw, then-Chief of Army Staff, refused to entertain the idea.

In his book *Army and Nation*, Yale University's political science professor Steven Wilkinson narrated the episode in detail, explaining how during an interview, Lieutenant General SK Sinha recounted an incident from 1972 when Jagjivan Ram, defence minister at the time, questioned the number of Scheduled Castes being commissioned from the Indian Military Academy (IMA). Sinha informed him that the percentage of SCs was only 1%. Ram was surprised and wrote to General Manekshaw, asking why the government's reservation policy was not being followed. Manekshaw asked Sinha to draft a reply. Sinha found a note in the files stating that reservations did not apply to the Army. In his reply, Sinha mentioned that the Army had more than 15% SCs in the ranks below officers, thanks to the Mahar Regiment and every battalion having 75-100 depressed classes as sweepers, cobblers, dhobis and so on. Wilkinson explained why and how the idea was shelved.

## Dalits in militaries

The recruitment of Dalits in the Army has a long and complex history. During the early days of the East India Company, Dalits were recruited in large numbers as soldiers. In the 1818 Battle of Koregaon, a battalion of Indian soldiers defeated the forces of the high-caste Peshwa rulers. A significant number of the 500 soldiers in the battalion led by the British belonged to the Mahar caste which was considered "untouchable" or ritually impure under the Peshwa rule and its members faced numerous humiliating restrictions.

This is also true about Dusadh or Paswans. Keshav Paswan, in his book *A Warrior Caste*, has asserted that Dusadh soldiers fought on both sides in the Battle of Plassey (1757). The British also recruited soldiers from various social groups and regions at various times: Bhils, Santals, Moplas, Ahirs, Minas, Christians, Kolis and other Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

Martial Race based recruitment, which led to non-recruitment of the depressed classes in the British Indian Army, has its genesis in the 1857 revolt. The post-1857 reorganisation of the Indian Army by the Jonathan Peel Commission involved recruiting soldiers from various social groups and regions, with emphasis on caste, religion, ethnicity and race. The 1879 Ashley Eden Commission upheld the Peel Commission's policy and in the 1880s, a new doctrine categorised Indian society into martial and non-martial groups based on race and physical features.

Arvind Ganachari, in his book *Indians in the First World War: The Missing Links*, argues that despite their "favorable show as an armed force, low-caste units were gradually reduced in size and number between 1870 and 1914." Only during wartime was the racial recruitment policy disregarded and low classes and castes were recruited. This created opportunities for social mobility, but these opportunities faded with the return of peace.

We can see this pattern during World War II when the Chamar Regiment was raised and disbanded once the war ended. The issue of reinstating the Chamar Regiment was raised in Parliament in the form of special mention by former Union Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh in 2011. Again in 2017, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes raised the demand of reviving the Chamar Regiment, but nothing has come of it. The NCSC, a constitutional body, wrote a letter to the Ministry of Defence: "It is strange that all the other regiments, such as Sikh Regiment, Jat Regiment, Dogra Regiment etc, formed on the basis of caste/religion continue to exist while Chamar Regiment was disbanded."

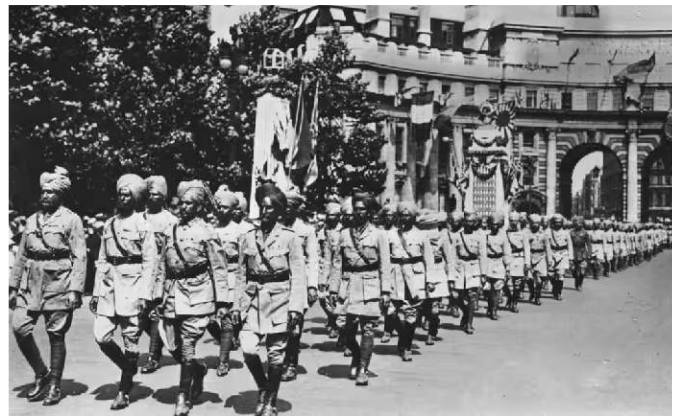
During World War I, the Mahars were allowed to join the Indian Army and were given their own unit, the 111th Mahars, which was later disbanded, only to be recruited again during the Second World War. The Mazhabi Sikhs were also recruited heavily during the war but were retrenched until 1932, when their unit was disbanded. However, they were recruited again during World War 2.

### **System of exclusion**

This is a longstanding issue for the formerly untouchables. At a meeting on 1 January 1927, at the Koregaon War Memorial, Dr BR Ambedkar (BAWS Vol-17, Part-3) said that many fighters from depressed classes had fought for the British during the Koregaon battle. However, they were later labeled as a non-military community. Dr Ambedkar stated that since caste Hindus treated them as untouchables, they had no other means of livelihood, which compelled them to join the British forces. He urged his people to pressure the government to remove the ban on their military career. Incidentally, Dr Ambedkar's father and grandfather had been soldiers in the British Indian Army.

Again during World War 2, on 18 June 1941, Dr Ambedkar wrote a letter to British administrators, raising the issue of depressed classes not being recruited in the Indian Army. In 1943, speaking at Naigaum, he urged community members to take full advantage of the opportunities offered to them to join the Army, Navy and Air Force. This reflects the urge of the depressed classes to join the armed forces.

The caste system has historically been used to deny



Dalits access to education, employment and basic human rights. The exclusion of Dalits reinforces the stigma and discrimination that Dalits face in all aspects of their lives.

The perceived exclusion of Dalits from the Army also has a psychological impact on the community. It sends a message that they are not good enough to serve their country. This reinforces the stigma and discrimination that Dalits face in all aspects of their lives.

As mentioned above, efforts have been made to include Dalits in the Army, but they have not been successful. While the Indian Army may have moved away from explicitly caste-based recruitment, retaining the names of historic regiments associated with specific communities can serve as a reminder of caste-based discrimination in the past and can send a message to soldiers and the wider public that caste identities are still relevant in modern society.

On the issue of caste certificates, the Army has said: "The requirement for aspirants to submit caste certificates and if required, religion certificates have always been there. There has not been any change to the Agniveer recruitment scheme in this regard." This begs the question: what is the purpose of asking for caste certificate?

I would argue that the Indian Army should focus on building a truly diverse and inclusive military that values soldiers based on their skills and performance, rather than their caste or community background. I am borrowing the words from the Writings and Speeches of Dr Ambedkar to conclude my argument: "The recruitment to the Army should be upon all Indians consistently with the considerations of efficiency and the possession of the necessary qualifications."

*Source : The Print*



## Dalit freedom hinges on religious reform



Mitra Pariyar

Despite dramatic political and legal changes in recent years, freedom eludes Nepali Dalits. Caste hatred penetrates and permeates every fibre of Nepali culture. Members of the “lower caste” or “unclean caste” that do not honour the traditional caste system are likely to be verbally abused and physically assaulted, if not killed. Over 70 percent of the Dalits rent properties in Kathmandu, Butwal, Dhangadi and other towns by faking their surnames; few landlords would accept them if their true caste identities were revealed. The idea of the country as a secular democratic republic sounds like a misnomer for most of us, as we still face exclusion, humiliation and violence reminiscent of the Rana autocracy.

Caste discrimination may have eased over the years, but Dalit life has become more complicated and insecure nowadays. This is due to the contradiction between traditional Hindu and modern secular laws. In the past, following the principles of casteist texts such as the Manusmriti and the Parasasmriti, state laws like the 1854 Muluki Ain officially denied the Shudras their fundamental human rights. The Dalits were thus reduced to slavery. Those laws have now been overhauled and the Dalits are granted rights and privileges as equal citizens. Anti-caste legislation passed in 2006 declares caste discrimination,

both in public and private spaces, a punishable crime. But these egalitarian constitutional and legal provisions are highly incompatible with the law of Manu.

This incompatibility between traditional caste laws and modern anti-caste laws has caused inevitable friction in society, even as the Dalits remain at the receiving end. Caste discrimination remains unabated as the Dalits asserting their rights according to the new laws—through inter-caste marriage and temple entry, among others—are often met with violent reprisals. The lynching of Nawaraj BK and his five friends in West Rukum in May 2020 for trying to marry a Thakuri woman is a prime example of this new reality.

Religious sentiments enrage the “upper” or “cleaner” castes when the Dalits try to undermine traditional caste rules. Indeed, not everyone may be well versed in the extremely casteist principles codified by the Manusmriti and the 1854 old Civil Code of Nepal. However, they have long been culturally trained to defend their sacred caste laws.

Nepal is a very religious and/or spiritual society, with religious customs and traditions holding sway in people's lives. There is a strong belief that

flouting traditional caste laws, particularly in maintaining social distance from the ritually “impure” Dalits, is likely to offend one's lineage deity (kul devta), ancestral spirits and other domestic deities. People greatly fear the wrath of their deities and gods and spirits. This is why people are often ready to shed blood to defend the caste order. Dalit murders are as much honour killings as the appeasement of (potentially) enraged deities.

Most Nepalis know or have experienced that caste has its taproot in religion and culture. The notion of ritual purity and pollution-as the French anthropologist Luis Dumont demonstrated for the Western scholars and others so impressively in his magnum opus *Homo Hierarchicus*-is paramount in Hindu culture. But it is also significant, to a degree, among Buddhists, Bongs, Jains, Muslims and Christian converts. Moreover, as part of their sacred tradition, Nepalis have exported caste discrimination among the diaspora, including in the USA, Europe and Australia.

Dominant Dalit discourse views caste discrimination as a purely constitutional, legal, political and economic issue. Many Dalits attached to communist parties emphasise class over caste. These are undoubtedly important aspects of Dalit suffering, but they are inadequate. The Dalit movement should pay more attention to religious and cultural elements. Following the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990, some Dalit groups conducted forced temple entry as an essential part of their assertion. During the “People's War”, the Maoists tried to contain untouchability in some of their bases by slaughtering and feeding cows, forcing their armed Dalit cadres into temples and homes of the Brahmins. These were appreciable efforts but did not go very far.

Dalit activists, politicians, policymakers and others concerned with caste discrimination must put the issue of religion at the top of their agenda.

This is key to Dalit freedom. They should not accept the hypocritical preachings of conservative Brahmins that use different arguments to show that Sanatan Dharma has nothing to do with casteism. We should first accept the role of religion and culture in perpetuating caste hatred. Then we must radically reform religious and cultural traditions per the modern constitution and law to attack caste oppression at its roots.

When I propose this argument, people often ask me: Can religion and culture be reformed whenever we want? Do they not transform automatically with time and with generational shifts? My response is: We can and should reform religion and culture immediately. Plenty of historical and contemporary examples of reforming other religions in other parts of the world exist. And such a reform will not necessarily hurt Hinduism. If the termination of the Sati custom did not damage the Hindu religion, an end to untouchability would not damage it either.

Another question may be: Who should initiate religious reform? Of course, the government is primarily responsible for changing customs, cultures and beliefs that continue to dehumanise six million Dalits. The Malla, Shah and Rana regimes of the bygone era systematically constructed Nepali social structure, customs and cultures on the basis of the Hindu caste hierarchy. The government of the democratic republic today is duty-bound to remove or defuse the ‘caste bomb’ previously planted in society.

To that end, other state organs-parliament, judiciary, political parties, media and civil society groups, NGOs and INGOs should also work in tandem. Dalit organisations must launch peaceful but effective campaigns to force the state to work in this area. Since caste and culture issues are highly sensitive, party leaders are unlikely to act until they are pushed vociferously.

*Source: Kathmandu Post*

# How Women Wrestlers' Movement Has Become a Wider Symbol for Justice, Dignity and Safety for Women

Bharat Dogra



Vinesh Phogat is a prominent woman wrestler who has been the proud winner of gold medals for India in Asian and Commonwealth Games. In more recent times, however she has spent most of her time struggling to get justice for seven women wrestlers, including a minor, who have complained of sexual harassment by a very senior official of the Wrestling Federation of India.

In a review of her experiences in the course of this struggle, very recently she wrote in *The Indian Express* (May 24, 2023) that they are not satisfied with the official response to their struggle so far and that their struggle will continue till they get justice. An oversight committee was formed by the Sports Ministry to probe the allegations but, Phogat has written, “we know now that it was an eyewash...There is no justice in sight.”

In addition she has stated, “Like many other girls I had to suffer silently all these years because of this man (the main accused in this case) and I had no option.” Regarding this struggle, in which she has been joined by other medal-winning wrestlers, she has stated, “What is the use of medals around your neck if you can't fight for justice.” She has stated that we are fighting for justice so that other women sportspersons do not have to endure such harassment and can compete in a safe environment.

Vineet Phogat, Sakshi Malik and other women wrestlers who are leading this struggle represent a group of high achieving women from rural and traditional sections of society who have won very high appreciation and acclaim among traditional as well as modern sections of society, helping to open the doors of new, non-traditional avenues for women, in sports and elsewhere. They have also been joined by some equally high achieving male colleagues like Bajrang Punia. If even they cannot get justice after such a prolonged struggle and instead of giving their best to prepare for their upcoming international events have to spend their time on the footpath in protests, then this will send a very wrong message regarding the progress paths open for women.

Women and girls in India have responded very well to

whatever limited openings that became more available for them in the more tradition-bound sections of society. Girl students have been consistently performing better than boys in schools in many areas. Even at a higher level there is the welcome news that the highest share of women candidates has just been recorded in the recent selection by the UPSC for civil services. All the top four ranks here have been claimed by women. What is more, even from the more tradition-bound villages, there have been many remarkable success stories of women, including those who have been elected as pradhans or head-persons of their villages under India's system of rural decentralization called panchayati raj.

It is in this wider context that the struggle of women wrestlers should be seen. It is significant that they have been receiving widespread support from not just the farmers' movement but even from those village-level organizations generally regarded as social conservatives in matters concerning gender equality and rights of women. Hence this struggle has acquired a larger dimension in the context of the aspirations of women and girls from rural and traditional areas. The fact that even the most successful among them are being denied justice for such a long time (this struggle started in January 2023) and that there is a possibility of the leaders of the struggle being victimized has hurt the feelings of all those in similar aspirational positions. In contrast, the more elitist and richest sportspersons, such as cricketers, have at best provided only very limited support to this struggle.

This struggle is no longer the struggle of just a few wrestlers but has become an identity mark for all those women and girls from traditional sections of society who want environs of safety, dignity and justice as they enter new avenues to improve their socio-economic conditions. They are asking-if even a struggle led by the superstars among us-international gold medal winners-does not get justice, how can our safety and dignity be assured? Hence justice for this struggle has become increasingly important for the justice, safety and dignity of a large number of women and girls.

*Source: Countercurrents*

# Brampton becomes third Canadian jurisdiction to include caste as a protected category

Shilpashree Jagannathan

Brampton, ON, the ninth largest city in Canada, has become the third Canadian jurisdiction to include caste as a protected category. On May 17, the Brampton city council unanimously passed the motion tabled by Councilor Gurpartap Singh Toor and seconded by Mayor Patrick Brown.

The council's diversity and equity office will now develop a framework with the Ontario Human Rights Commission to implement this motion. Including caste as a protected category will have implications for various processes, including hiring, employee relations, services and internal and external relations.

In a phone interview with New Canadian Media, coun. Toor highlighted the influence of similar motions passed by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Burnaby City Council, which prompted people to call for a similar move in Brampton. "The motion was passed unopposed," Toor said.

"With a significant South Asian population, Brampton's recognition of caste as a protected category acknowledges the lived experiences of Dalit communities," said Jaskaran Singh Sandhu, board member of World Sikh Organization of Canada.

Brampton, with a population of around 700,000, is the third-largest city in Ontario and fifth overall in Canada in terms of immigrant population, with South Asians forming the largest visible minority in the city.

The move by Brampton follows a trend of Canadian government organizations and

city councils taking action to address caste discrimination.

In March, the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal fined two individuals for using derogatory terms towards a member of a "low caste" during an assault. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted in favour of including caste as a form of discrimination in its policy and in April, Burnaby city council unanimously added caste as a protected category.

Vijay Puli, Founder & Executive Director of the South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network, Canada (SADAN), a civil rights organization, commended Brampton's initiative and expressed hope that other cities and institutions would follow suit in addressing caste equity in their policies.

The caste system is a rigid social structure that has existed in South Asia for thousands of years, segregating people into different social groups based on birth hierarchy. Identification of a person's caste can be determined by factors such as their last name, family background, food habits, occupation or racial profile.

Historically, individuals in "lower castes" have been relegated to menial jobs and subjected to lower social status. The term "Dalits" or "untouchables" is often used to refer to those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in Hinduism, while variations of the caste system exist among other religious groups in South Asian countries.

"I hope other city councils also enact a policy to add caste as a protected category," Toor said. "I also want Peel District to consider this move."

*Source: Yahoo*



# Bangladesh urged to act on US report

Emran Hossain



Interfaith groups and minority outfits have urged the Bangladesh government to act on the annual United States International Religious Freedom (USIRF) report which said Christians, Hindus and Buddhists are often targeted in the South Asian nation.

“The perpetrators of communal violence largely enjoy impunity,” the report, released on May 16 in Washington, said about Bangladesh.

“What the report says is true,” said Rana Dasgupta, general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.

“The government should act to free religious minorities of the fear and apprehension with which they live in Bangladesh,” Dasgupta observed.

Dasgupta noted that the population of minorities has decreased by 10 percent over the last five decades since Bangladesh's independence in 1971.

The government must ensure that this decline does not continue, demanded Dasgupta, citing the 2022 census, which said the percentage of Sunni Muslims increased to 91 percent from 89 percent in 2011 while the Hindu population decreased to 8 percent from 10 percent. Christians were down to 0.30 percent from 0.31 percent while Buddhists declined to 0.61 percent from 0.62 percent.

The USIRF report, published by the US State Department, contained details of communal attacks against Christians, Buddhists and Hindus and their places of worship in 2022.

Sanjeeb Drong, general secretary of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, described the USIRF report as a true reflection of what is actually happening in Bangladesh.

“It is the responsibility of the state to ensure the security of minorities,” he said, citing many incidents where perpetrators go scot-free due to political patronage.

What is worrying about Bangladesh “is the perpetrators of rights violation enjoy impunity,” said Drong.

The US report also talked about criticisms from minority communities for arbitrarily arresting their members under the sweeping Digital Security Act and its provision to prevent blasphemy.

“These attacks are sometimes politically motivated,” said Nirmal Rosario, president of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

“What we see happening with minorities in Bangladesh is actually occurring with minorities across the world,” said Nirmal. The USIRF report shed light on budgetary allocations for religious bodies.

The allocation for the Islamic Foundation increased to 18.17 billion taka (US\$179 million) compared with 17.58 billion taka (\$167 million) in fiscal 2021-2022. The Hindu Welfare Trust received 668.9 million taka (\$6.3 million) compared with 1.724 billion taka (\$16 million) The Buddhist Welfare Trust received 18.3 million taka (\$174,000) and the Christian Welfare Trust got 13 million taka (\$124,000).

When contacted, Mufti Mohammad Ruhul Amin, the Khatib who delivers the sermons at Baitul Mukarram National Mosque, like many other religious leaders, declined to comment on the USIRF report's findings that the imams were censoring their sermons to conform to government policies and diktats in the Muslim majority nation.

Source: UCA News

# 'Caste is anti-Asian hate': the activists fighting 'less visible' discrimination in the US

Claire Wang



Thenmozhi Soundararajan had one of her earliest encounters with India's ancient caste ladder when she was 10, during a playdate at a friend's house not long after immigrating to the US.

When Soundararajan revealed that she belongs to a caste once known as "untouchables" - also known by the Sanskrit term "Dalit" - her friend's mother, with a disgusted look, asked her to eat communal snacks on a separate plate so she could not taint the rest of the family.

"Caste is one of the most severe versions of anti-Asian hate," said Soundararajan, now one of the US's pre-eminent Dalit feminists, "but it's not as visible because it's hate amongst us."

Soundararajan spent the following three decades advancing the civil rights of Dalits like herself and her parents, who fall at the bottom of the caste system, which is woven into many religions across south Asia. In the diaspora, it often leads to intra-community violence that can be hard for outsiders to understand. A multimedia storyteller and musician, Soundararajan

has produced a documentary, a podcast and a new book, *The Trauma of Caste*, on caste oppression. In 2015, she founded the Oakland, California-based Equality Labs, the largest Dalit civil rights organization in the US, which conducted the first survey on caste discrimination in the US.

California, which has one of the largest south Asian populations in the country, has become ground zero for the caste equity movement.

In 2020, state regulators sued the technology company Cisco, alleging that two high-caste Indian managers had discriminated against a Dalit engineer by subjecting him to lower pay and inferior terms of employment. Last year, California State University became the first university system to add caste as a protected category to its anti-discrimination policy. And last month, California lawmakers introduced a new bill that would make the state the first in the nation to add caste as a protected category to its anti-discrimination laws. (In February, Seattle became the first US city to enshrine caste protections into its constitution.)



For Soundararajan, the legislation felt like a watershed moment for the caste equity movement that she helped build.

“It’s a culmination of a life’s work, both living under the trauma of caste and turning that pain into power,” she said. “I wish I could tell my younger self that it’s going to be OK.”

### Caste in America

The Indian caste system, which dates back three thousand years, divides Hindus by birth into four categories that determine their place in society. Brahmins, members of the highest caste, have historically served as priests and teachers. Dalits, who fall outside of the caste system, work as street sweepers and toilet cleaners.

According to the 2016 study by Equality Labs, which surveyed 1,500 south Asian Americans, two out of three Dalits in the US reported being mistreated by other south Asians at work because of their caste, one in four said they had endured verbal or physical assault and one in three said they had experienced discrimination in school. The oppression they describe is wide-ranging, from slurs and sexual harassment to unfair hiring and termination practices. One of the most notorious cases of caste discrimination in California involves Lakireddy Bali Reddy, an upper-caste landlord who trafficked and sexually abused more than two dozen Dalit girls.

Sonja Thomas, an associate professor at Colby College in Maine who researches the intersections of caste, race and religion in postcolonial India, said that studying south Asian migration history was a helpful way to understand the caste system, which affects nearly 2 billion people worldwide and 6 million south Asian Americans.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act brought in a wave of highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, scientists and engineers, from Asian countries. A vast majority of these highly skilled immigrants from South Asia, Thomas said, had come from educated, upper-caste families. In 1990, Congress created the H1B visa program for skilled foreign workers, creating an influx of tech workers from India who largely hail from dominant castes. (Three-quarters of



H1B visas issued in 2021 went to Indian nationals, according to the state department.) A Carnegie Mellon University survey on Indian Hindus in the US found that 87% were born into a dominant caste. Only 1% identified as Dalit.

Because dominant-caste immigrants had arrived in the US first, Thomas said, they had accrued the social and political capital to define south Asian American minority culture, which meant replicating the caste structure that made Dalits second-class citizens.

“The dominant-caste profile of south Asian immigrants in the US creates an environment where violence and hostility can thrive,” Thomas said. “You can be a religious minority and still perpetuate caste discrimination.”

### The fight against caste discrimination

Soundararajan describes the caste-abolition movement in the US as “interfaith and multiracial and very queer”. Equality Labs has built longstanding partnerships with groups including Black Lives Matter and a host of prominent labor unions, such as the California Faculty Association.

“We really see caste as a workers’ rights issue, a queer issue and a gender justice issue,” she said. “That intersectionality is crucial to our wins.”

Thomas said two high-profile cases in recent years had helped bring more mainstream attention in the US to the plight of Dalits. The first was the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit research scholar in India who was expelled from university housing over a caste-related dispute with a rightwing student group. The other was the Cisco lawsuit, which shed light on the subtler forms of injustice Dalit engineers endure in

the tech sector in the US.

Over the past decade, Soundararajan and other Dalit rights activists have zoned in on Silicon Valley, where caste discrimination is rampant due to the abundance of south Asians immigrants at big tech firms. While advocacy from groups such as Equality Labs have pushed Facebook, Twitter and Google to add caste as a protected category of content moderation, these companies have yet to adopt caste in their human resources guidelines.

“When those protections are not clarified in a very public form like a bill or an ordinance,” Soundararajan said, “companies are choosing when to implement civil rights and labor codes that protect caste-oppressed workers.”

### **Growing vitriol and violence**

As her influence grew, Soundararajan became, like many Dalit rights activists, a target of increasing vitriol and violence. When she “came out” as Dalit at 19, while studying at UC Berkeley, she said, all but one of her upper-caste Indian professors refused to advise her on projects. Over the years, she's received so many death and rape threats against herself and her family that she's had to move into a safe house for a period.

California's anti-caste bill now faces stiff resistance from Hindu advocacy groups. Prominent groups, such as the Hindu American Foundation and the Coalition of Hindus of North America, say legislation like SB403 unfairly targets Hindus, an ethnic minority group whose members already experience discrimination.

It's not the first time these accusations have been made. In 2018, Soundararajan created a poster with the slogan “Smash Brahmanical Patriarchy” to raise awareness about the vitriol that Dalit activists were facing on Twitter. A photo of Twitter's former CEO Jack Dorsey holding the sign created a political firestorm in India, quickly forcing the company to issue an apology. Last April, she was invited to speak about caste discrimination at Google. But the talk was canceled after a number of Google employees protested, telling HR that they feared for their lives and calling Soundararajan “Hindu-phobic” in internal message boards.



Tanuja Gupta, a former senior people manager at Google News who invited Soundararajan to speak, resigned from the company after facing repercussions for pushing back. When she challenged Google's decision to cancel the talk, Gupta said, the company lowered her performance rating and made her ineligible for promotion.

Gupta said the employees who opposed the talk, similar to the groups protesting the anti-caste bill, were in bad faith conflating a human rights issue with one of religious freedom.

Caste equity “is not a Hindu issue”, she said. “It's a civil rights issue where people of a certain category are denied their rights in terms of education, socioeconomic opportunity and housing, while being disproportionately subjected to violence.”

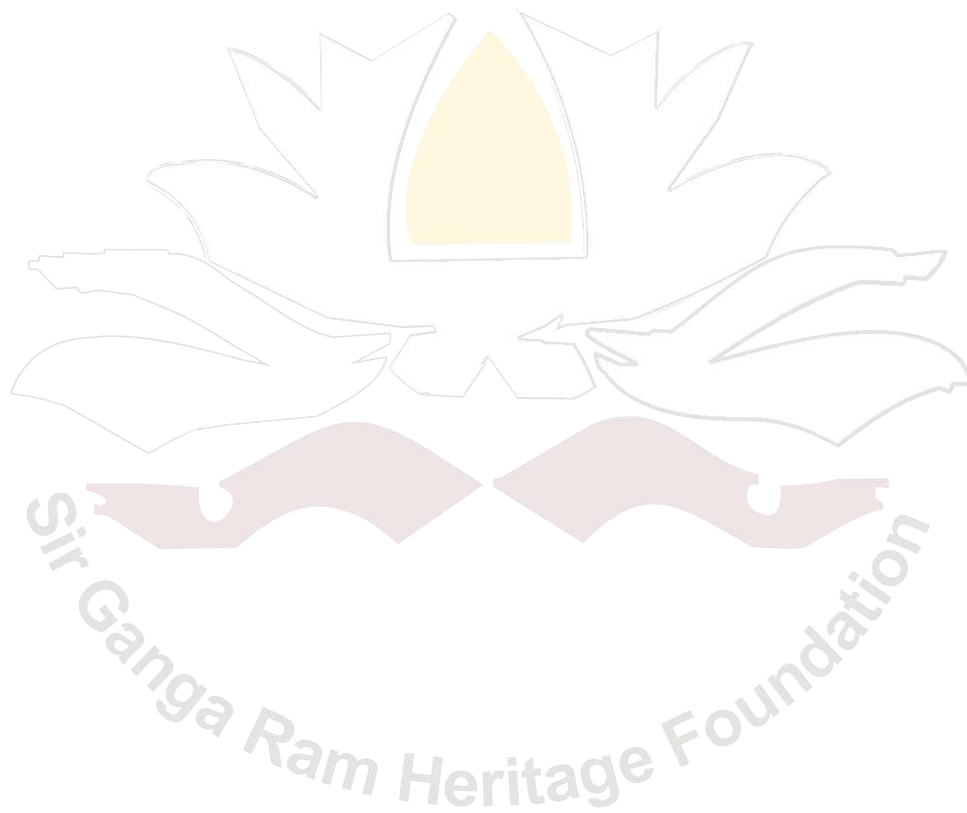
The argument for separating caste and religious freedom, Gupta said, has parallels in prominent US civil rights causes.

“When we talk about LGBTQ+ rights in this country, we don't say that that's anti-Christian,” she said. “When we talk about gender equity in this country, we don't say that that's anti-Judeo-Christian because of certain ways that women are talked about in ancient religious scripts.”

For Soundararajan, California's anti-caste bill, along with a spate of actions on college campuses, is just the tip of the iceberg.

“We're in a snowball moment,” she said, “and it's an amazing thing to be a part of.”

*Source: The Guardian*



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