

Research to Practice Paper:
**Pathways to Reducing Dalit and Scheduled Tribes’
Social Isolation in India**

Claire Chauvel

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Lessons of Community and Compassion:
Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through
Policy and Program Development

McGill University
Professor Kim Samuel

The only parallel to the practice of “untouchability” was Apartheid in South Africa. Untouchability is not just social discrimination. It is a blot on humanity. That is precisely why the Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi declared, “My fight against untouchability is a fight against the impure in humanity.”¹

- *Then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 2006*

Introduction

Though India formally abolished the caste-system in 1950 and internationally is a consistent votary of human rights, caste-based discrimination is omnipresent as social taboos prevail. This conflicting reality is an affront to the principles of the ‘world’s largest democracy’ and its liberal, progressive constitution.² Presently, 16.6 percent of India’s population is composed of Dalits, formerly termed Untouchables or Scheduled Castes (SC), and a further 8.6 percent belong to Scheduled Tribes (ST).³ That means approximately 300 million people in India are economically poor, socially marginalized from birth, subject to acute discrimination and violence, and considered ritually impure because of systemic, embedded socio-religious norms dating back to the Vedic age (BCE 1500-500), the period Hinduism’s oldest scriptures were composed.⁴

¹ Sarkin, 2012, p. 554.

² Verma, 2012, p.206.

³ Kamdar, 2008, p. 233.

⁴ Chatterjee, 2013, p. 166.

In India, social isolation is a norm that is deeply entrenched and a gross impediment to growth.

This paper discusses select policies and programs that have been employed in India to eliminate the caste system. The intent is to provide a broad assessment and incite further reflection and action. It is important to first contextualize social isolation. Society's acceptance of lower castes' "social inferiority remains widespread."⁵ Changing this will require many pieces to come together. Legal rhetoric, affirmative action, grass-roots initiatives, and literature have all contributed to the march towards equalizing the playing field and conquering social isolation. Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted to verify the true impact of these initiatives. While these policies have achieved questionable results in promoting connectedness, they stand as important building blocks and could prove revolutionary if amended or properly implemented. The successful route to reducing the isolation of Dalits and ST in India is paved by a multi-layered approach and focused on the delivery and sustainability of human capabilities.

⁵ Fradkin, 2015.

1. Why Social Isolation Matters and Conceptual Frameworks for Empowerment

Social isolation is defined here as the denial of opportunities and rights and confinement to the fringes of society. As Amartya Sen notes, poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion go hand-in-hand.⁶ To eradicate one, you must eradicate all three. Both individual and society's cohesion and productivity are impeded by the caste-system. Mahbub ul Haq, the Pakistani economist who introduced the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Program, wrote: "The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives."⁷ The caste-system does anything but. Even if Dalits and ST were vested with rights and skill building, the caste-system hinders their ability to fully practice these gains. Thus, mechanisms must be put in place to breakdown this barrier. Namely, this can be done through affirmative action, education, and awareness campaigns.

The continued practice of caste discrimination — read social isolation — is a direct impediment to development, or more precisely the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose success is contingent on

⁶ Sen, 2000.

⁷ Nussbaum, 2011, p. 1.

inclusivity according to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon.⁸ Jeremy Sirkin, a prominent Professor of Law and International Human Rights, declared, “Dealing with caste discrimination... remains one of the most significant human rights challenges facing the world today.”⁹ Placing social connectedness at “the heart of our policy making and program development” will facilitate the accomplishment of the SDGs.¹⁰ Looking at India, a society predicated on exclusion, how can this be accomplished?

From a conceptual framework, the focus should be on achieving human capabilities through the cooperation of people centered development and government support. Human capabilities takes “each person as an end,” focuses on individuals “choice or freedom” vis-à-vis opportunities, and is “pluralist about value,” assigning “an urgent task to government and public policy.”¹¹ The state is historically responsible for discrimination. As such, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (discussed further below) rightly asserted that the state must be engaged in a policy of redressing its wrongs.¹² India’s primary tool for this has been the reservation, or affirmative action, system. For individuals to access their capabilities it is not just about granting rights but

⁸ Ki-Moon, 2015.

⁹ Sarkin, 2012, p.541.

¹⁰ Samuel, 2016.

¹¹ Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18.

¹² Verma, 2012, p.206.

assuring the ability to practice them. Government support begets the necessary environment for progress.

A precondition for people-centered development is “people’s awareness of their rights and of their power to bring the development process under their collective control.”¹³ This step requires education, the most potent form of empowerment and mobility, and the creation of a new societal paradigm. Of course, empowerment and mobility require holding the government accountable for constitutional promises and creating conditions whereby state law supersedes socio-religious caste-system norms in practice.

The next building block towards reducing social isolation is people-centered development, described by the UN as “development of the people, by the people for the people.”¹⁴ The pillars of this paradigm are awareness raising, social mobilization, participation, self-reliance, and sustainability.¹⁵ Promoting policies and programs that cater to these points is crucial to reducing the social isolation of Dalits and ST in India. Organizations like the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) strive to do just this.

¹³ Kurien, 1998, p. 42.

¹⁴ Cox, 1998, p. 513.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1998, p. 518.

It is imperative to be cognizant that general symbiosis is needed if policies and programs in India are to achieve a reduction of social isolation.

2. Examples of Policies and Programs that can Reduce Social Isolation

2.1 Government and Political Evolution of Dalit and Scheduled Tribe

Enfranchisement

In December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), succinctly deemed “the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere” by Eleanor Roosevelt.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, on 26 November 1949, the Constitution of India was enacted and the Republic of India born. A constitution is the bedrock of policy. Previously governed by the traditions and norms of the Hindu social order, or caste system, the Constitution was distinctly informed by the UDHR and the chairman of the Constitution’s drafting committee, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.¹⁷ Himself a Dalit and victim of discrimination, Dr. Ambedkar is considered the father and true champion of the Dalit movement and instrumental in furthering women’s rights. He maintained, “Turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot

¹⁶"Statement to the United Nations' General Assembly on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project.

¹⁷ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Report. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). 2008.

have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster.”¹⁸ India’s lawmakers sought to eradicate isolation and inequality through its constitutional provisions, which are “either directly arrived at furthering the aim of social revolution or attempt to foster this revolution by establishing conditions necessary for its achievement.”¹⁹ Legally barring the caste-system is an important step towards building an inclusive society.

The preamble of the Indian Constitution declares the nation secular and promises its constituents absolute justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.²⁰ A section of the Constitution is dedicated to ‘Fundamental Rights’ and ‘Directive Principles,’ emulating the UDHR. The provision resolves,

To secure to all citizens: justice, social, economic and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity, and to promote among them all fraternity, assuring the dignity of individual and unity.²¹

The Constitution also vows the state will not discriminate based on caste and pledges the broad promotion of education and opportunity. Partially fulfilling its mandate, the Indian government has upheld the rhetoric of the constitution in the legislative realm. Protective measures

¹⁸ Borker, 2016.

¹⁹ Granville, 1999.

²⁰ The Constitution of India, Preamble.

²¹ Thorat, 2002.

include the 1955 *Anti-Untouchability Act*, which legally abolished the practice of untouchability, and the 1989 *Scheduled Castes/Tribes (SC/ST) Prevention of Atrocities Act*, which was passed to address and prevent atrocities against members of the SC/ST.²² Development provisions include the national quota/reservation system, or affirmative action directed by the constitution. Almost half of university spots and government jobs are earmarked for individuals holding certificates validating their status as SC/ST.²³ Further, imposing a reservation system for elected representatives, if properly implemented, provides members from all factions to equally participate in decision-making.²⁴ Enfranchisement at the legal level is critical for it sets precedence and commitment. In turn, it must deliver and the populace must hold it accountable.

However, in reality, there exists great discrepancy between *de jure* equality and *de facto* inequality. These policies and reforms have “not been supported by the political will to protect potential victims and effectively punish those carrying out abuses.”²⁵ The constitution failed to offer a uniform civil code and secularism. Thus, untouchability was banned but

²² Thorat, 2002.

²³ Agrawal, 2016.

²⁴ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Report. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). 2008.

²⁵ Sarkin, 2012, p.544-3.

caste hierarchy persisted. Ambedkar warned when the Constitution was approved,

We are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality, and in social and economic life, we will have inequality. ... We must remove this contradiction... or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this assembly has so laboriously constructed.²⁶

Fortunately, India's democracy endures, but the noted contradiction persists and the pervasiveness of caste identification in India's political structure is a primary source of continued isolation and inequality. This contradiction needs to be mended. Though faults exist in India's legal structure, to accomplish a cataclysmic shift towards a society of connectedness, it is crucial to have legal support. After all, as Vice-President Hamid Ansari said, "The superstructure of a democratic polity and a secular state structure, put in place in modern India, is anchored in the existential reality of a plural society."²⁷ This manifestation, though not the current status quo, is the kind that encourages action and awareness towards inclusion of Dalits and ST. In short, the core of the Republic of India is a casteless, equal society. Constructive statements by government and public

²⁶ Fradkin, 2015.

²⁷ Onial, 2016.

actors set the tone for “society to accept and internalize the ideals behind such measures.”²⁸

2.2 Reservation System

Looking at social inclusion initiatives at the government level, any survey would focus on the reservation/quota system. This system includes Other Backward Classes (OBCs), an additional 52 percent of the population. While the quota system has been heavily politicized and at times is plagued by corruption and violent protests, it has resulted in “real political mobilization and power-sharing” for those who are most disenfranchised.²⁹ Sarkin and Noah Feldman argue that the reservation system needs to evolve from being caste based to economic-income and access to education based, or “means testing,” as the “reliance on caste identifications” has resulted in the strengthening of “caste-self identification in Indian politics” and life.^{30,31} Though the reservation system has enfranchised many, it is also currently polarizing society. This is best-illustrated by events that unfolded in February 2016 in Haryana state when upper-caste Jat communities violently

²⁸ Sarkin, 2012, p.545-6.

²⁹ Fradkin, 2015.

³⁰ Sarkin, 2012, p.547; 549.

³¹ Feldman, 2015.

demanding to be included in the quota system.³² Such a reality magnifies social isolation and maintains the caste-system under a different guise. At its core, affirmative action is designed to equal the playing field. Unfortunately, faulty enforcement and general lack of political will means the true scope of the reservation system and laws protecting the lower-castes is not discernable. The government needs to create an effective system of checks and balances that is vested with the proper power to enforce Dr. Ambedkar's vision of equality, manifested in the constitution and a plethora of laws and policies like the reservation system.

The government should also look to the private sector for help. Then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh beseeched private businesses in 2006 to "invest much more in vocational training and technical education, particularly for youth from a less privileged background and insure that employee populations begin to reflect the caste composition of the general population."³³ In great part, the perpetrators of caste-discrimination are those in upper-castes. One of India's greatest challenges is to motivate those of higher standing to "extend the universe of their benefits to include members of disadvantaged groups."³⁴ Matthew Bishop, a senior editor at *The*

³² "India Caste Protests: Five Dead as Haryana Violence Flares." 2016.

³³ Kamdar, 2008, p. 233-4.

³⁴ Verma, 2012, p.212.

Economist, is an avid advocate of philanthro-capitalism and businesses' active participation in development. In fact, pointing to initiatives such as that of Bill Gates, Bishop maintains that, "Business is at the core of finding solutions."³⁵ The SDGs also envisage a role for private business in development. Thus, so too should the Indian government and people.³⁶

2.3 Non-Governmental Initiatives

Institutions and instruments do not constitute a great enough force to eliminate such deeply rooted discrimination in India. Launched in 1998 by Dalit activists, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) has worked tirelessly to foster "solidarity, cooperation, and collective action" for the promotion of Dalit human rights and arouse an awakening among Dalits.³⁷ Essentially, NCDHR strives to catalyze community movements — action from within. NCDHR is not alone. International Dalit Solidarity Network and Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation (which constitutes 175 grass-roots Dalit movements) are but a few examples of community driven initiatives that have real potential to incite systemic change. To be sure, these organizations have already accomplished many feats. After all,

³⁵ Bishop, 2016.

³⁶ Bishop, 2016.

³⁷ Chatterjee, 2013, p. 176-7.

India is a democracy. Including OBCs, approximately 75 percent of voters belong to lower castes. The more they are conscious of both their political power and the injustice of their situation, the more people centered development is possible and the greater the pressure will be to hold the government accountable.³⁸ Dalit movements are inciting social change at the community, regional, and government levels. As Nandu Ram notes, “At the individual level, Dalit movements have changed the very psychology of Dalits about realization of their self, of their group or collectivity and of the system or society as a whole... society is in a transitory phase.”³⁹ Dalit movements should take note of successful community movements elsewhere, looking to mold them to Dalit designs. In Kenya, Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO) is an excellent example of the power that grass roots, holistic movements can have in reducing social isolation from within and inspiring hopes beyond what was/is traditionally possible for those who have been/are disenfranchised.

This awakening has prompted the proliferation of art and literature, reducing social isolation and giving the voiceless agency. For example, Dalits in Maharashtra, in response to Hindu literature being anti-Dalit, have sought to dismantle negative imagery of Dalits through their own literary

³⁸ Kamdar, 2008, p. 233-4.

³⁹ Ram, 1998, p. 117-8.

endeavors. This Dalit literature “attack(s) the caste system and socioeconomic exploitation of Dalits, and also assert(s) for their self-respect and dignified social identity.”⁴⁰ Much like the rediscovery of culture has empowered and connected First Nations in Canada, through programs akin to *Our Voices: Yukon First Nation Emerging Leaders*, literature can connect Dalits, thus providing a new lens for interpreting their place in the world.⁴¹ While education and literacy are powerful vehicles in the preservation of a system and its institutions, they can also be used to break glass ceilings and revolutionize norms.⁴²

Conclusion

India’s lower castes continue to face significant barriers to inclusion, and the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation persist. A single, silver-bullet solution remains elusive. However, a multi-pronged approach, encompassing initiatives such as appropriate legislation, enforcement, affirmative action, awareness campaigns, community movements, education, and literature, could go great distances in forming a more connected,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1998, p. 101.

⁴¹ For more information please visit: <http://tidescanada.org/projects/our-voices/>.

⁴² Parameswaran, 1998, p. 407-8.

productive society. The incentives to strive for social connectedness are clear: constructive, valued growth, equality, and good health.

Addressing the Indian parliament in 2010, United States President Barack Obama reiterated Dr. B.R. Ambedkar apt words, “What are we having this liberty for? We are having this liberty in order to reform our social system, which is so full of inequities, discriminations and other things, which conflict with our fundamental rights.”⁴³ This is a call to action. Rhetoric *is* the beginning, but it never suffices. It is high time the bridge between rhetoric and action is crossed.

Ultimately, India is a democracy and most voters are lower caste.⁴⁴ But the more voters are aware of the political power they wield and the Indian government’s mandate to uphold an equal, inclusive society, the brighter India’s future will be.

⁴³ "U.S. President Barack Obama State Visit to India." 2010.

⁴⁴ Kamdar, 2008, p. 233-4.

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