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Untouchable in School
Experiences of Dalit Children in Schools in Gujarat

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Acronyms

Dalits	Former “Untouchables”
Harijan	Older word for Dalits, still being used in some rural areas
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abiyan
MMS	Midday Meal Scheme
GoI	Government of India
NCDHR	National Campaign of Dalit Human Rights

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Executive Summary

The legacy of untouchability has resulted in Dalits continual marginalization and oppression, leaving them amongst the most deprived groups in Indian society. Legal and constitutional provisions have been created to redress their circumstance, but their dire situation persists. A major contributing factor to their position is the existing caste-based discrimination. This discrimination results in daily humiliation, exploitation and exclusion in many areas of life, of particular interest for this study, education.

While the recent discourse on education reform in India has broadened its attention to include quality of classroom teaching in addition to access Dalit children face additional obstructions in benefiting from enriching education. Although illegal, practices of untouchability continue to be part of Dalit children's everyday experience in many parts of India especially in rural areas.

This study is based on the perception that, as a public space, schools are suppose to be non-discriminatory and inclusive, designed as a vehicle for social mobility. However, as untouchability and discrimination exist in society, schools inevitably reflect this social phenomenon. If discrimination in schools is to be adequately tackled so that schools fulfill the objective of acting as a means of social change, then caste-based discrimination must be explored in greater detail. This study therefore aims to document the existence and processes of different forms of discrimination against Dalit children and begins to explore the consequential impact it has on them.

Research on discrimination and untouchability is rarely explored through the eyes of children. This study, conducted in rural Gujarat, presents an approach that fulfils Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to consider the views of children; the unbiased and honest statements of Dalit children create visibility of the experiences, illustrating both the existence, severity and detailed processes through which discrimination unfolds. Additionally, by employing a holistic approach, methods such as interviews, focus groups and observations were directed toward ascertaining data on the entire universe of the children, consisting of their community, home and school life.

During the course of the findings, three reoccurring themes become evident: power dynamics influence relationships among key actors, detailed processes of discrimination offer key explanations for discrimination, and the concept of untouchability perpetuates discrimination. Mindful of these themes, this qualitative study discloses both overt and subtle acts of discrimination in all dimensions of the Dalit children's lives.

Within the community, this study documented that Dalit children must prescribe to classic symbols of untouchability, all designed to keep in place the stringent principles of the caste system and to rigidly maintain power dynamics through the historical notions of purity and pollution. This includes

geographically segregated living spaces, restrictions in accessing public water sources, shops and temples and visits to dominant caste houses.

In their home, Dalit children experience untouchability in activities such as serving of food, seating, movement and tasks. Traditional tasks associated with the Dalit community are still allocated by the dominant caste to further exemplify their low position. Evident even in the private home of the Dalits, untouchability seeps into every segment of human interaction.

As the focal point of this study, it becomes clear that this caste-based discrimination occurs in the school as well. The study supports the notion that discrimination occurring in the community is reflected in the attitudes and actions of the dominant caste and has an impact on Dalit children in school. Discrimination is visibly present in separate seating arrangements in the classroom and the mid-day-meal and in access to drinking water. It is also evident in less obvious ways such as allocation of cleaning tasks and it appears in modified forms such as clustering of children along caste-lines in seating arrangement to again prevent full integration.

Interactions between Dalits and their teachers and peers also revealed discriminatory acts and attitudes. While teachers did not distribute unequal punishment in one village, acts such as instructing Dalit students to unfavorable places, and attitudes such as comments relating to the Dalit children's capacity and denial to leadership positions, illustrates the teacher's role in perpetuating discrimination. In this village, despite an absence of severe teacher discrimination, children clearly perceived teacher favoritism to the dominant caste, supported by claims of inflated academic grading and delaying punishment for dominant caste children. Both dominant caste parents and children influence became an important feature in dictating the teacher's actions. Peer treatment also plays a pivotal role in shaping the Dalit children's experiences of school as teasing and the requirement to use titles of respect for the dominant caste children define their every day. Although they do not play together outside of school in school they do. However, fighting due to caste-related issues remains a distinct feature in the interplay of peers. Most exemplarily of Dalit children's exclusion is obstruction to participate in cultural activities. This creates not only an unwelcoming environment, but an atmosphere in which they are actively excluded from the very activities that express their identity.

The children's ability to clearly articulate the types and processes of discrimination provides insight into the impact this has on them, and becomes particularly helpful in revealing their ability to cope with discrimination. Probing questions on feelings exposed emotions such as anger, wonderment, powerlessness, sadness, and frustration, all contributing to the perceptions of school as an unwelcoming space, and inevitably supporting the link between negative association of school and dropping-out. In only scratching the surface of such finding, the need for further study on Dalit children's emotions and the aforementioned link between drop-outs and discrimination becomes apparent.

This study reveals areas in which discrimination against Dalit children does exist in school. It further helps to support claims that schools can act not only as a reflection of the caste-based discrimination in the community, but also as a means to perpetuate it. Therefore, it becomes crucial to study every aspect of

the Dalit children's lives. As caste based discrimination is influenced by social, cultural, economic and political factors, the concept of social exclusion proposes to look at several inter-related features that contribute to a group's exclusion, and therefore it becomes a useful tool in analyzing Dalit children's situation. Additionally this analysis includes the negative psychological impact discrimination has on these children but nonetheless a desire to change their present circumstances and emphasizes their resilience.

What becomes of utmost concern is the apparent air of normalcy attached to the practice of untouchability. "It is the normalcy of discrimination that allows it to permeate society"¹ most evident in that there is no attempt to hide it. In order to alleviate this situation, school must take a leading role. Schools are an integrative space in the community and can contribute to change children's perceptions. Therefore caste-based discrimination in schools is a severe problem that needs urgent attention by research and policy-makers.

¹ Interview with Prof. S. Thorat, Director IIDS, 11.8.06

1 Introduction

“In school I was made to sit in the back together with the other Dalits. That made me very angry because I never had the same chance as the others. The teacher had much less attention for us in the back. It was difficult to listen to what he was saying. I was afraid of the teacher because he scolded me a lot. I never felt comfortable to ask questions in the classroom. When he asked me questions and I gave the wrong answer, he hit me. If I didn’t come to school, the teacher didn’t ask for the reason but just hit me. He sometimes called me bad names like ‘Nirka’ or ‘Dheda’. Often he didn’t come and sometimes he slept in the classroom. We Dalits were not allowed to participate in song and drama programmes in the school. If there was a festival, our parents never came. In the morning assembly the Dalits had to sit in the back. Only the upper caste children were allowed to say the prayer.”

(Naresh, 13, Dalit, Surendranagar District, Gujarat, now in Navsarjan school)

While there have been major improvements in access and quality of primary education, many children, especially in rural areas face difficulties in gaining an enriching educational experience. Dalit children face additional burdens related to their caste identity. There are approximately 160 million Dalits in India, more than half of which are children. Although illegal, they continue to be discriminated against on the basis of untouchability, especially in rural areas. A recent study on untouchability in rural India found that practices of discrimination continue to dominate the everyday life of Dalits in 25% of India’s villages (Shah, Mander et al. 2006).

Research on discrimination against Dalit children in schools is scarce.² The India Education Report 2003 identifies Dalit and Tribal children as the most educationally deprived groups. Therein Nambissan and Sedwal argue that “policy fails to acknowledge or confront the role of discriminatory caste relations that pervade the educational experiences of Dalit children”. They direct the perspective on the social processes in education “such as teacher attitudes and peer relations (that) critically define the educational experience of Dalit children, their dignity and sense of self-worth” and criticize that there is no documentation of classroom processes. Therefore there is an urgent need for further research on these processes and their implications for child development (Nambissan and Sedwal 2003: 83).

While existing studies mainly identify the different forms of discrimination inside schools, this case study takes a holistic approach wherein the primary focus is on the experiences of Dalit children not only in school but also in their community. In order to understand the interrelations between the “three universes of the Dalit child” (Thorat), the family, the community and the school, this research is mainly based on extensive interviews with Dalit children. This approach is of particular importance given Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), expressing the need that “*the views of the child be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*”. As protectorate of the CRC UNICEF is in the position to promote this human right.

² Major studies include Kumar’s study on the Mushar community in Bihar (Kumar 2004), Subrahmanian’s and Balagopalan’s study on the process of inclusion of Dalit children in schools in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan (Subrahmanian and Balagopalan 2003), Velaskar’s study of Dalits in Maharashtra (Velaskar 2004) and Nambissan’s work (Nambissan; Nambissan and Sedwal 2003)..

With this backdrop of continuing discrimination and social inequalities, schools can be a powerful instrument for social transformation by being a means of social mobility. Schools have the power to be inclusive spaces that bring together children of all social backgrounds and remove prejudices. However, as this study reveals schools also harbour the potential for continued discrimination. Therefore "*The normalcy of discrimination allows it to permeate the public spheres that therefore reinforce the existing social inequalities*"³ Dalits, along with other social groups such as Adivasis and religious minorities, consist of 30% of the Indian society, who face discrimination in schools (Balagopalan 2003). This strengthens the need for societal discourse to alleviate this situation.

³ Interview with Prof. S. Thorat, 12.8.06, Director IIDS

2 Background

2.1 Dalit Children in Education

Trends in Education in India

Educational deprivation is a global phenomenon. In 1999, 120 million children in the world were out of school, 38% of them in South Asia (UNICEF 2004). In following the commitment to the 3rd Millennium Development Goal to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015, the Government of India (GoI) aims to provide quality education up to class 8 as stated in the 83rd constitutional amendment in 1997.⁴ Although committed to education as a right and the MDGs, universal access to quality education remains a difficult task. Yet, estimates on the number of children out of school still range from 35-70 million.

Due to the UPE's target signed by the GoI, a strong emphasis on the enrolment of children in schools is visible in the policy documents. There have been major improvements especially in literacy and enrolment. While in 1971 only 29.45% of the total population were literate, in 2001 it was 65.38% (GoI 2001). Similarly, the enrolment among Dalits has increased significantly in the past decade, especially amongst girls. However, as later elaborated, the gap between the enrolment of Dalits and non-Dalits remains significant.

A shift has been made from the primary focus of enrolment to improving the quality of schools. In 2000, the GoI started the countrywide programme Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) to provide quality education for all children. UNICEF is a major partner in this sector-wide approach in education. Its objectives are to "provide useful and relevant elementary education for all children in the 6 to 14 age group by 2010" and "to bridge all social regional and gender gaps, with the active participation of the community in the management of schools" (SSA 2000, quoted in Saxena). Thus, national level policy-making is progressive and has identified major areas of concern. However, the implementation of these policies at the district level remains difficult.

Apart from the allocation of resources, the effective management of funds and the implementation of policies remain a major problem. In order to improve these processes and contribute to improved quality of education, the government directed its policy reforms towards decentralisation, first visible in the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and currently in the SSA. The idea is to strengthen ownership of communities in decision-making in education policy, in particular by establishing Village Education Committees (VECs). But change towards improved quality remains fragmented. The majority of government primary schools, especially in rural India, exhibit severe problems such as teacher absenteeism, lack of facilities and poor quality of teaching.

⁴ This was transformed into the 93rd bill, which is still being debated.

The low quality of government schools coupled with parents' desire for good quality education has resulted in increased enrolment in private schools. This trend further contributes to the division between socio-economic strata in society as the economically and socially powerful groups opt out of the state education system and the deprived groups remain in poor quality schools.

Dalits and the Stigma of Untouchability

While these trends affect all children from economically deprived backgrounds, Dalit children face additional hardships in school based on their caste. Caste is the social institution that historically organized the Indian society into segments in a hierarchical order. One major feature of the system is the concept of ritual purity and pollution with the purest groups situated at the top of the hierarchy and the most polluted at the bottom. Formally known as "Untouchables", they have renamed themselves as "Dalits" meaning "broken people". Historically, the caste system prescribed fixed 'impure' and 'polluting' occupations. Dalits still continue to perform these occupations such as producing leather (Chamars), sweeping, and the removal of human waste (Valmiki), rendering them "achchut" or untouchable. Traditional caste rules therefore prohibit physical contact.

Although the constitution penalizes discrimination based on caste⁵ it continues to exist in three dimensions that include exploitation, exclusion and humiliation (Shah, Mander et al. 2006).

Exclusion manifests in geographically separated living of the Dalit community from the higher caste village. Additionally, Dalits face problems in accessing public services such as water and shops and are prohibited from using shoes, bicycles, umbrellas or the common tea glasses in teashops. In some villages Dalits are not allowed to hold their marriage processions in the roads of the dominant caste village. Furthermore, despite reservations in governing bodies they remain widely excluded from decision-making processes. Dominant caste decision-makers are likely to further exclude Dalits in their actions or are indifferent to their needs to improve living conditions.

Humiliation is an every day experience of many Dalits. Poor treatment includes having to call the dominant caste respectfully as "bhai", not being allowed to sit in their presence, being abused (often called caste names) and physical assault. Humiliation in its most violent forms manifests in the high number of criminal offences against Dalits. Villages are burned and people attacked and injured. Between 1994 and 1996 98,349 such cases were registered with the police (HRW 2003).

Exploitation: Dalits were traditionally denied ownership of land and several continue to work as landless agricultural labourers, rendering them below the poverty line. It is this very situation that makes them prone to constant acts of exploitation. With limited avenues for redress, they are usually forced into submission. Dalits have to work without being paid even the minimum daily wages for tasks such as being forced to labour in the fields of the dominant caste and removing carcass.

⁵ Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989

After independence the constitution provided extensive protection and measures of positive discrimination such as reservations in education and employment. Therefore especially in urban areas opportunities for social mobility such as education led to a minority of Dalits with higher income and higher employment positions essentially in the public sector. However, despite improvements for a small percentage of Dalits, the long history of economic and social exclusion has led to a continued marginalization of Dalits.

48.1% of Dalits in rural India live below the poverty line as compared to 31.3% of the total population. The complex mechanisms of discrimination and social exclusion lead to a significant overlap between caste and class: “*Caste dynamics still continue to underlie social and economic relations, especially in rural India where Dalits still occupy the lowest position in the village hierarchy in terms of social and ritual status*” (Nambissan and Sedwal 2003: 74). Considering that Dalits are not a homogeneous group, separated by sub-castes, gender, class and locality, Dalit women are likely to face multiple discrimination, experiencing a triple burden of poverty, gender discrimination and untouchability.

The concept of social exclusion is used throughout this study to analyze the situation of Dalit children in education. As Kabeer points out, this concept opens the perspective of poverty to a wider view on power relations in society:

“I would be in favour of retaining the concept for social policy analysis for a number of reasons. First, it captures an important dimension of the experience of certain groups of beings somehow ‘set apart’ or ‘locked out’ of participation in social life. Secondly, a focus on processes of exclusion is a useful way to think about social policy because it draws attention to the production of disadvantage through the active dynamics of social interaction, rather than through anonymous processes of impoverishment and marginalization” (Kabeer, 2000: 84).

Therefore social exclusion advances the understanding of poverty in that it traces the mechanisms of impoverishment of certain groups in society and identifies all the actors involved.

Dalits and Education

Traditionally, Dalits were denied access to education; it is especially since the constitution established special provisions that their participation in education has significantly increased. In acknowledging the responsibility to compensate for the historical deprivation, one of the six governing principles of the GoI is “*To provide for full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs and religious minorities*” (GoI 2004). To further increase access to education for Dalits and other deprived groups, GoI has created various programmes and schemes such as the Midday Meal Scheme (MMS) to provide lunch, scholarships and free provision of books and uniforms. However, despite political efforts to create equality in access, the majority of Dalits continue to face multiple deprivations in comparison to other social groups.

Figures for India	Others / All	Dalits	Analysis
% of population (1991 Census)	82.5 (others)	16.5	
Number of people	1.2 billion	150 mio	
Literacy (2001 Census)	65.38%	46.85%	Dalits are less educated
Gap in literacy between SC and others Report SC Steering Committee 2001	1971: 14.78% 2001: 18.53%		
Female literacy rate Report SC Steering Committee 2001	54.16%	32.75%	Dalit women are less educated than the average Indian women
Drop-out 1-5th standard, as of 1998-9 Report SC Steering Committee 2001	39.74% (All)	44.27%	Dalits are more likely to drop out
Drop-out 1-8th standard, as of 1998-9 Report SC Steering Committee 2001	56.82% (All)	63.58%	
Drop-out 1-10th standard Report SC Steering Committee 2001	71.34% (All)	80.58%	It is especially difficult for Dalits to achieve higher education

Fig. 1: Educational Indicators of Dalits

This table shows that Dalits lag behind other population groups in all educational indicators. “While provisioning is inadequate in terms of physical access even at primary stage, the issue of how socially accessible schools really are for Dalits has never been addressed.” 83 (Nambissan and Sedwal 2003). While access has been increased through the initiatives of the government, completion of elementary education is far from satisfactory and the drop-out rates of Dalits are significantly higher. Untouchability as well as economic deprivation cause additional burden for Dalit children in education, leading to low performance. Srivastava in his research on educational deprivation shows that Dalits have the lowest enrolment rate of all caste groups, even in the highest consumption quintile:

	Dalits enrolment	Dominant castes enrolment
Highest consumption quintile	65.1%	90%
Lowest consumption quintile	40.7%	83.5%

Source (Nambissan and Sedwal 2003)

As indicated above, enrolment is not only dependent on income (Srivastava 1999). This research points to the lag in indicators between Dalits and non-Dalits which needs further attention. This study attempts to explore discrimination in school as another major factor along with economic deprivation, which leads to the low performance and/or drop-out of Dalits in education.

2.2 Target Area

2.2.1 Gujarat

Although ranked as one of the most industrialized states in India, Gujarat is not without its share of social problems. 80% of the population live in rural areas, many which remain primarily feudal. Of the approximately 18,000 villages in Gujarat, an estimated 12,000 are comprised of Dalit communities. Out of the 7% of Dalits in Gujarat (the lowest percentage of any state in India) the majority live in villages,⁶ resulting in a significant number of Dalits living in oppressive conditions. In addition to that the growing trend towards fundamentalism in Gujarat has especially contributed to having a negative impact on the state and its people, by creating an environment that is not favourable to all communities, castes and religious groups. A recent Navsarjan survey documents several forms of discrimination in many villages.⁷ The government's slow progress to address discrimination creates a dismal environment for Dalits.

Additionally, although the central government dictates the basic directions of education policy, the states have significant influence, creating a source of concern especially with the recent trend in Gujarat towards saffronizing the curriculum. According to the district administration officer in Gujarat, "discrimination between teachers and Dalit students is nonexistent,"⁸ illustrating the government's ignorance on this issue. Amidst these negative trends, alongside the government, UNICEF has contributed to raising the enrolment rates. In 2001 with an attendance rate of 77.4% and a completion rate of 66.7%, Gujarat rates comparatively better than other Indian states (GoI 2001). Although the enrolment rates have increased, societal and political processes continue to create an environment that is not favourable to Dalits, thereby again emphasizing need to look beyond access to education.

2.2.2 Village profile: Gosal

District: Surendernagar

Taluka: Sayla

Village: Gosal.

Gosal has a population of 1100 consisting of 280 households belonging to various caste-communities, of which 25 households are Dalit families.

Lay out of village: The village is laid out along caste lines with the Darbar's (the dominant caste), Rajputs, Koli's, Bharwar's segments located in the main village and the Dalits segregated.

Panchayat structure: The local self-government (the Panchayat) consists of a Sarpanch (a Dalit), a deputy Sarpanch and 6 other members. Every community in the village is represented at the Panchayat, which

⁶ Sharma, M. (2004). *Unquiet Worlds. Dalit Voices and Visions*. New Delhi, Mukul Sharma. Ideas and Impressions.

⁷ www.navsarjan.org

⁸ see Artis, E., C. Doobay, et al. (2003). *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for Dalits in India: Case Study on Primary Education in Gujarat*. Workshop on Human Rights: From Grassroots Courage to International Influence, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

meets once a year at the “Panchayat Ghar” (Panchayat House). The primary issues taken up at these meetings pertain to village development, distribution of district grants, and other local village level problems including education. Politics and caste structure play a major role in decision-making exemplified by the continual roadblocks created in decisions that would benefit the Dalit community. As a result of the reservation policy the Sarpanch is a Dalit, which has created a necessary place for Dalits in village level politics. Observations revealed shortcomings and tensions with other members of the panchayat. The Sarpanch explained that if he “would want to build a well for the Dalits, the Darbars would actively create opposition.” The Sarpanch also stated that there are provisions made for a separate glass and plate for him at the Panchayat meetings, revealing untouchability practices within government processions, albeit strictly prohibited by law. Furthermore, he must address the Darbars respectfully as ‘bhai’, never by their names. He acknowledged that the situation in Gosal needs drastic change and that only if the Dalits organize, a movement towards this much needed change is possible. However, because of the continued intimidation by the Darbars, any kind of organized movement would require government protection, a feature unavailable at the present time.⁹

Other features: The primary occupation for all community members in Gosal is farming and herding. However, Darbars own the large tracts of land, while the Dalits are mostly farm labourers dependent on daily wages. Five hand pumps supply the everyday washing water for the village and one well supplies the drinking water. It should be noted that the villages in the district of Surendernagar face acute water scarcity, contributing to the absence of toilet facilities in the entire village. All houses in the village have basic electrical power supply. The village has one market, Bal Mandir or Aangan Wadi (pre primary crèche) and a community hall for meetings and functions.

2.2.3 School profile: Gosal

Number of Students: 224 (Boys: 112, Girls: 102)

Teachers: There are four male teachers including the principal and two female teachers, who primarily belong to the Patel community. There is no Dalit teacher. According to the principal, the school is understaffed. For instance, he is responsible for all administrative tasks as well as teaching.

Facilities: There are five rooms in the school. During observation, it was evident that the attention paid to enhancing the appearance of the room for grades 1 to 4 was in stark contrast to the classrooms of the higher grades (5-7). The later rooms lay bare and the classrooms dingy. It is not uncommon for two grades to be conducted simultaneously in one classroom. The only existing toilet in the village is in the school. However, due to acute shortage of water, the toilet has been dysfunctional since the time of its construction. There is drinking water facility only for the teachers. The students are required to bring their own drinking water from home or return home when needed. There are no computers, projects, maps,

⁹ Interview with Sarpanch, 12.07.06, Gosal

globes, or library in this school. The students are provided with the bare necessities. According to the district education coordinator, there has been improvement in the past years through the construction of an additional room and higher enrolment and lower dropout especially amongst girls.

2.2.4 School Profile: Katariya (Navsarjan)

Number of students: 44 (Boys: 36, Girls: 8, all from various villages in Surendranagar district)

Navsarjan¹⁰ started an elementary education programme in 2005 to provide schools especially for Dalit children with 3 objectives:

- 1) to improve the situation of high drop-out rates
- 2) to provide education for empowerment and social change
- 3) to contribute to remove untouchability and the caste system

As of now 3 schools have been opened. They are open for all children as long as they follow their rules. However, all of the 180 children currently enrolled are Dalits. The pedagogical methods in the schools are child-centered. Everything has to be in a “touchable” distance from the children since the organisation believes in learning through touch. This is to counter-act practices of untouchability in their village and to recondition the children. The curriculum is focussed on the transmission of values of equality and empowerment of the children. Children learn “rational thinking” as opposed to a belief in the caste system.¹¹ The concept of living together makes the schools a holistic learning environment for the children to experience these values on an everyday basis.¹² Taking the children out of their environment of the village where they experience tensions between the caste communities makes it possible to reflect on their situation in the village and to empower them through physical activities such as Karate. Katariya is one of the Navsarjan’s school, opened one year ago for classes 5 to 7. It is a privately run school, with no government aid. All aspects of the school are funded by Navsarjan Trust.

Teachers: The school has six teachers, who are trained by Navsarjan Trust for a period of six months. The salary paid to the teachers is Rs 3000 per month, significantly below the average government salary. Key objectives of the training are to create a sense of empathy in the teachers to promote the development of the children. Gender equality is a key issue.

Other facilities: Katariya is a boarding school with a playground, 3 classrooms, one for each level, and a library. Still newly established, the model toilets (bio-gas engineered) are in the process of construction and the water is drawn from a bore well for drinking water as well as for other daily use. Innovative teaching material and simple sports equipment are apparent in the classrooms.

¹⁰ Navsarjan is the biggest Dalit NGO in Gujarat founded by Martin Macwan. It works towards the removal of untouchability, towards equality in society and empowerment of Dalits through leadership.

¹¹ Interview with Martin Macwan, 10.7.2006, Ahmedabad

3 Methods

3.1 Establishing the Framework

After consulting academics, the study was structured to study two schools in depth, one government school with MMS and adequate proportion of Dalits and a second model school run by a Dalit NGO. Children from the later school were chosen because they would be able to reflect on their experience in government schools in relation to their new environment in the model school.

3.2 Unit of Analysis

The study is focused on two locations in the District of Surendranagar: the school in Katariya (run by Navsarjan Trust) and the village Gosal. In addition the school in the village of Bhalgawada was included for observational purposes. The school Gosal was the focal point of the study. In-depth interviews were conducted not just with the students but also with the school and village administration as well as parents of the children, including a family profile. The school in Katariya was utilised since these children had prior experience in government school until class 5. This would enable them to compare their experiences as well as provide them with a comfortable environment to communicate in. Since the children are from many villages this provided a random sampling to document discrimination throughout the district.

The qualitative study includes in-depth interviews with 21 Dalit children: 10 Dalit students from Gosal and 11 Dalit students from Katariya, in grades 5-7. Additional students from the dominant caste community were interviewed to provide a broader dimension and verify the data of the Dalit student sample and to gather their perspectives on the issue of Discrimination and of the power dynamics in the village. Although difficult, efforts were made to achieve gender balance, considering views of girls are rarely represented in school.

Complete sampling group:

	DALIT Students Interviews	Other Interviews	Focus groups
DSK(Pre-test)	4	2 Directors	1 group with staff
Gosal School	10 (5 girls; 5 boys) of the 25 Dalits	7 dominant caste students, 3 teachers, 3 parents	2 focus groups (10 Dalit students; 9 dropouts) = 19
Kataria School	11 (5 girls; 6 boys)	1 Principle	2 focus groups (10 Dalit students; 8 Dalit students) 3 repeat girls = 15
Bhalgarwada	0	1 Principle, 1 Dalit teacher	0
	25 Dalits children		34 Dalit children

Focal Sample group: 21 Dalit students, 7 dominant caste students

¹² Interview with Jassubhai, headmaster of Navsarjan School, Katariya, 12.7.2006

3.3 Techniques

3.3.1 Preliminary visits

A visit to the Valmiki Basti familiarized the researchers with a typical “basti setting” and to better understand the subject matter and protocol. A pre-test of the questionnaire at DSK (vocational training centre run by Navsarjan Trust) enabled further critical review of the interviews, ascertain discrimination in the context of Gujarat and to discover techniques to gather data on the impact of discrimination on children. Finally, visits to schools in the neighbouring villages of Katariya provided both a source of comparison and a testing ground for interviewing and making key classroom observations.

3.3.2 Interviews/Questionnaires

The questionnaire was the primary research method employed, which aimed to provide the subject of discrimination with qualitative data. The 64 questions included open and close-ended questions and were structured in order to interconnect the community, family, and school of Dalit children.

Questions probed school aspects such as seating, the MMS, access to drinking water, tasks assigned, leadership roles, teacher and peer interaction. Under teacher interaction the area of punishment, favouritism, and discriminatory acts as well attitudes were incorporated. Similarly in the section on peer interaction aspects of playing, power dynamics, visits etc were added.

While closed ended questions enable the research to examine the existence of discrimination, open ended questions provided an opportunity to allow the children’s voice to be given due importance and helped gain in-depth insight into processes of discrimination and its impact. A sensitive approach was ensured so as not to overburden the child and keep the questioning style flexible.

Teachers were questioned in semi-structured interviews primarily to determine their attitudes regarding the capacity of Dalit children and their general approach to teaching. Care was given to understand the context of the teacher, including their difficulties. Teachers were also questioned on the curriculum, particularly on value education. Semi-structured interviews were also used to gain a perspective on Dalit parents and their role in children’s life with relation to school and the community, as well as their personal experiences of untouchability.

3.3.3 Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus groups was two-fold: to identify key areas of discrimination, particularly in Gosal, and to determine whether discrimination existed and to identify key children for further questioning. Additionally, this was a crucial technique given the sensitivity of the topic as it provided a comfortable environment for the children in which to share their experiences.

Two focus groups were organised at Katariya; the first focus group, consisting of 10 children, was conducted on the on-set of the visit and centred on 5 key questions related to the children’s previous experiences in government schools: their aspirations, likes and dislikes in school, tasks performed in

school, and peer interaction. The second focus group consisted of 9 students. Aiming for more in-depth understanding, the questions probed issues related to participation in school, peer and teacher interaction, village interactions, and more direct questions including how they came to know their caste, what happens when they try to raise a complaint, how they view discrimination and how it makes them feel, and what it means to be a Dalit.

Two focus groups were also organised at Gosal. The first focus group, consisting of 9 children was conducted upon arrival. It covered the full spectrum of questions, both relating to logistical questions of seating arrangement, tasks, etc, but also included in-depth questions relating to how they respond to discrimination and their feelings.

While not a central focus of study, the additional focus group with 9 dropout children was designed to examine the reasons for drop-out and to explore the potential link between these reasons and discrimination faced in school.

3.3.4 Participant Observation

Observation was conducted both at Katariya as well as Gosal. It helped to gain a sense of the resources available at the schools, also to verify the processes of classroom interaction, teaching methods and teacher attitudes described by the children. A classroom checklist was used to ensure thorough observation. Observation became the key tool to witness discrimination such as untouchability practice at the well and separate seating in Gosal.

3.4 Bias, Assumptions and Constraints

Language was the greatest challenge given that the research team was unfamiliar with Gujarati and all team members had to rely on translation. The sensitivity of the topic lead to initial hesitation to directly address discrimination based on caste, so as to avoid hurting sentiments of the children. But after the first interviews, it became evident that the children were more open than expected, thus enabling questions to be rephrased into more direct questioning. Additionally, a common reaction to research visits of this nature is the tendency on the part of the subjects to adjust the environment according to what they believe the researches want to see, including changes in attitudes and cover-ups. The area of discrimination is particularly sensitive to this practice as witnessed on a visit to a test school. This did not however appear to affect daily functioning at Gosal.

Although the research tried to be gender sensitive there is a definitive lack of girls in the sample given the general paucity of girls in the two locations. A major constraint of the research was the permanent presence of dominant caste members on the locations of the research affecting the research process.

4 Findings

The following findings examine the ‘universe of Dalit children’, exploring untouchability in the community, the home and school.

4.1 The Community

The underlying concept of purity and pollution creates extensive restrictions on Dalits in everyday interaction within the community. Derived from the caste system, untouchability manifests most notably through restrictions in water and food. In this respect, Gosal exhibited classic manifestations of untouchability especially in public spaces.

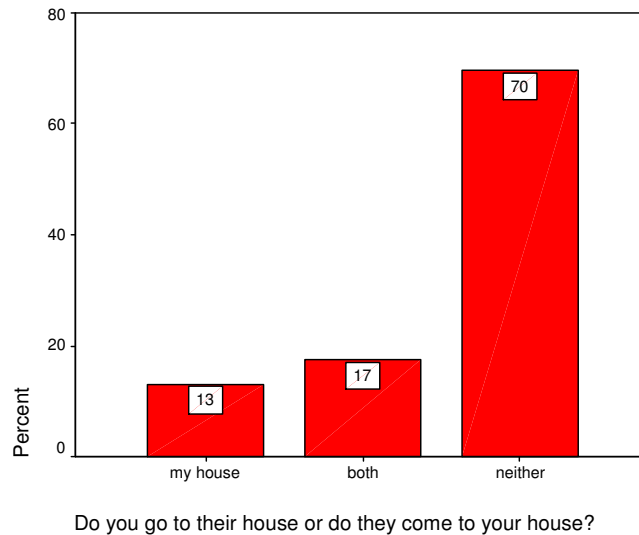
4.1.1 Geographical Segregation of Habitations

Segregation of communities is a common feature of villages in rural India, divided along caste and occupational lines. Typically, Dalit enclaves are located outside of the village, resulting in ‘ghettoized’ living in many regards. This residential segregation (Thorat 2004) is a direct form of exclusion as it obstructs access to public facilities mainly located in the dominant caste habitations: “*Untouchability is further reinforced by state allocation of facilities; separate facilities are provided for separate colonies. Dalits often receive the poorer of the two if they receive any at all*” (HRW 2003). Relevant for this study, segregated habitations have a negative effect on the interaction of children causing limited intermingling. This traditional form of exclusion was evident in Gosal where the Dalit community lived clustered in one section of the village. Although, it should be noted that the divide was not as distinct as in the nearby village of Bhalgavada where the Dalits lived in a ‘Harijan Basti,’ causing the children to walk through the dominant caste habitation in order to access the school. As geographical separation is designed to prohibit interaction and free movement within the village, examples such as not visiting each other’s homes and playing together, existed in Gosal as well as in Bhalgavra.

Dalit children mentioned problems when entering the dominant caste habitation such as subjection to verbal and physical abuse. More commonly, they expressed feelings of discomfort and fear upon entering the village and explained that visits occurred on a need-only basis for shopping, school and accessing water. One child’s comment reflects his experience, “*I felt uncomfortable to walk in the upper caste village because sometimes I got hit. On the way to school I often had problems.*” (Naresh, Katariya)

This shows the Dalit children’s hesitations to move freely, forced to negotiate their way through the dominant caste village on a daily basis. Severe restrictions e.g. forbidden to use bicycles and chapels documented elsewhere, was not exhibited in these communities. However, these internalized restricts seem to transform into quiet reluctance, evident in the comment, “*I was teased on the way to school. But I walked through the upper caste community anyway*” (Naresh, Katariya).

As indicated by the graph below, 70% of the Dalit children do not go to the houses of dominant caste children and vice versa. Interviews with the dominant caste children revealed conditioned responses to the reasons for not visiting Dalit homes, such as “*it is not nice to go*” and “*its (the segregation) correct,*” further proving traditionally entrenched beliefs (Raju and Lala, Gosal).



These dynamics have negatively impacted one essential feature of childhood: playing together. This was most evident in the existence of separate playing fields. The dominant caste children clarified that the Dalits played elsewhere while the “*Rajputs the Kolis, the Bharvars and the Darbars play together. Dalits play separately*” (Lala, Gosal). This was supported by the finding that 70% of the Dalit children do not play with children from the other communities outside of school (later discussed in more detail).

4.1.2 Water

The research disclosed that the Dalits were not allowed to directly access the public source of drinking water at the well in Gosal. This information was verified in the interviews with a Dalit girl and a Darbar girl. The Dalit respondent replied that she is not allowed to touch the well and is dependent on the dominant caste women to receive water, thereby waiting in-line until served. The Darbar girl confirmed that “*the Harijans have to stand in line and get water from Darbars and only Darbars are supposed to give water to them*” (Raju, Gosal). This was affirmed again by direct observation at the well where Dalit girls stood aside until the dominant caste women poured water into their matkas. It is essential to note that there was no attempt to hide this act of discrimination, implying the normalcy and acquiescence to this practice. This information was also collaborated by the interviews with Dalit parents who expressed this as an everyday experience.



Dominant caste women pouring water in the matka of Dalit girls

Other surveys in rural areas revealed incidences where Dalits are not even allowed to use a well in the village at all¹³ or are located in the dominant caste habitations. It could not be determined that the well was situated in the dominant caste community.

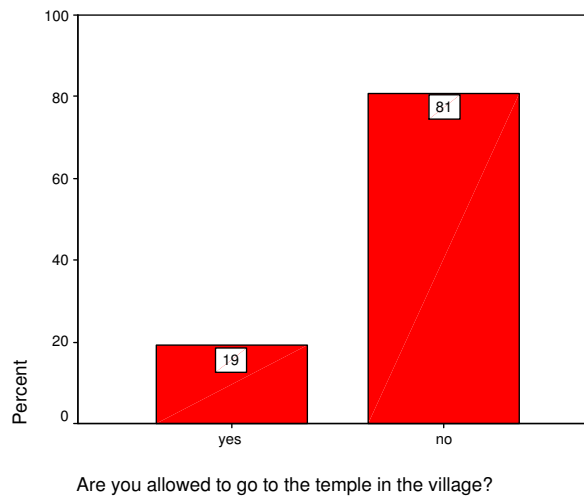
4.1.3 Shop

As revealed by observation, in both villages, shops are located in the dominant caste habitations, where Dalits have to enter to complete everyday errands. This places them in a vulnerable position as they are forced to walk through uncomfortable environment. Furthermore, upon entering shops, they are faced with overt untouchability in the exchange of items and money. As one respondent described, *“If we get milk from them they pour it from the top and if we give them the money, they drop it in our hands as there should be no direct touch”* (Bharti, Katariya).

4.1.4 Temple

Untouchability and the concept of purity and pollution are epitomized at the temple, the dominant Brahmin community’s source of power and intimidation. Hence the penalties for entering the temple in most cases are severe. Communities tend to spend large amounts of money on the temples, witnessed in Bhalgavada where it was proudly stated that 50 lakhs was recently collected for reconstruction. Furthermore, this construction is often performed by Dalits. However, as one dominant caste woman in Gosal explained, *“the Dalits were used in the construction of the temple but once the deity was placed, their entry into the temple was forbidden for fear of pollution.”*

¹³ HRW (2003). Broken People, Human Rights Watch. P. 27



As the graph indicates, this denial of access to the temple seems to be a common practice in the district of Surendernagar. Repercussions for entering the temple, as indicated by the children, were “*getting kicked out,*” and as one boy reported he was even hit when he tried to enter the temple causing him to be fearful of entering. (Ramji) As noted in the comment above, Dalits are not even allowed to stand at the steps of the temple.

4.1.5 Tasks

Human Rights Watch documented violations related to the delegation of tasks within communities: “*...Dalits are largely unable to escape their designated occupation even when the practice has still been abolished by law. In violation of their basic human rights, they are physically abused and threatened with economic and social ostracism from the community for refusing to carry out various caste based tasks*” (HRW 2003).

In Gosal, the resident dominant caste have a right of authority over Dalit families, varying in degree according to proximity to the dominant caste household or their area of influence. Examples given by adult Dalits in the community entail appearing for any task that is ordered; in most cases no protest is made. As also iterated by the adults in the village, the Dalits are still called on to perform such tasks as removing dead animals, gathering wood for funeral pyres and wedding rituals, and laying dung and mud in the residences of other communities. The Dalits also reported that they are called upon to work in the fields; although they are paid nominal wage, they do not have an option to refuse this order as supported by the Sarpanch’s wife, “*We still remove dead animals from the village, and still get hit if we do not obey orders. In every locality the closest dominant caste resident has control over the nearest Dalit family and they rule like lords.*” (Rattenben, Gosal). This is also supported by the comment of another Dalit boy: “*The Bharvars hit my father because he didn’t let them graze their cattle in our field*” (Mahendar, Katariya).

The gender aspect of designated tasks is also glaring in the home where the girls are delegated tasks such as sweeping, cleaning, and washing dishes, while the boys carry out other tasks such as running errands and helping with farm related work. The role of the girl child and the woman is clearly defined and her

place in society already demarcated, remaining detrimental to girls' educational opportunities. This was clearly observed in the drop-out focus group where 6 of the 9 children were girls. The need to assist with household tasks was given as a main reason for dropping out.

4.2 The Home

4.2.1 Purification

As discrimination is the legacy of the “purity-pollution” concept, forms such as separate seating, restrictions on serving and movement, assigned tasks, and access to resources has permeated even the private home of Dalits. While traditionally assigned occupations such as scavenging, sweeping, removing dead carcass, carrying out burial services, among others, create the association with being “unclean,” it is also their very being that is deemed “polluting” and “dirty”. Traditionally, Dalits are excluded from participation in certain categories of jobs (e.g. sweepers excluded from cooking) and cannot purchase certain consumer goods (e.g. vegetables and milk) because their occupation and physical touch is considered ‘polluting’ (Thorat 2004). A breach of these rules often carries penalties such as verbal and physical abuse and social boycott, resulting in further alienation. In Gosal, Dalits reiterated purification practices of Darbars, “*if you touch a Darbar, he will go home and ask someone to sprinkle water on him, to purify*” (Rattanben, Gosal). Their children continue to carry this stigma, as children also reported that the result of their touch requires fetching water for purification. In addition to temple and shop restrictions, this demonstrates the extent of intervention into children’s lives causing them to lead restricted lives, as they are constantly reminded to avoid ‘polluting’ through physical contact.

4.2.2 Serving

As a result of pollution, Dalits are forbidden to touch food and water belonging to the dominant caste or to serve and be served by them. Stringent rules regarding serving were disclosed by the principal of Gosal, “*if a Dalit drinks from the cup of a dominant caste (Darbar), the cup will be thrown away.*” Similarly, the aforementioned Sarpanch comment about the use of separate dishes at the Panchayat meeting is an example of complete segregation to avoid ‘accidental pollution’.

Other studies discuss how this practice extends to outside the home, such as eating in hotels and tea shops wherein Dalits are allowed to buy food or drink only if prepared to wash their own plates (Nambissan and Sedwal 2003).

4.2.3 Seating

As dictated by caste rules, an ‘untouchable’ would be unable to sit in the presence of a dominant caste as a sign of servility and respect. Through observation in the field, the subservience of the Dalits in the presence of a dominant caste was repeatedly on display. Dalit adults in Gosal were constantly on alert, as

the presence of any dominant caste member prompted the Dalits instantaneous standing up or sitting on the floor. Upon inquiring about this action, one parent explained, “*If a Darbar comes in I have to stand or sit on the floor.*” (Santuben, Gosal) This practice is not limited to the adults; the children expressed similar restrictions, “*When we go to the Koli’s house they make us sit on the floor and when they come to our home they put a blanket where they sit*” (Chanda, Katariya). In this respect, seating acts as a means of power control and dominance. An indication to the extent of this problem is evident in the response of the Dalit Sarpanch expressing pride at being “allowed” or granted permission to sit with the Darbars during the monthly Panchayat meetings.

4.2.4 Moving

Most children hesitate moving through a dominant caste area simply to avoid humiliation, taunts and teasing, limiting travel only to shop and school, as it is rare that they visit a dominant castes home. However, if they are allowed to enter their home, movements would be restricted to outside the house since entry into the home is not permitted. Also witnessed was that the Darbars would not enter the house of a Dalit, standing only outside or more commonly at the boundary wall. Although they have the right to access any part of the village (as opposed to the Dalits), they still do not enter a Dalit’s house. This was observed not just in Gosal but also in the neighboring village of Bhalgawada, where the dominant caste are not seen anywhere near the “Harijan Vas”. However, in Gosal the OBC’s were not as stringent in following these restrictions and entered Dalit houses.

4.3 The School

School acts as a common ground where children from all the communities are called to interact together, where otherwise they remain segregated as illustrated above. As such, school could provide a means to overcome discriminatory practices by promoting equal treatment of all children. In this examination of whether the school reflects societal relations, it was determined school can act not only a reflection of the community, but also a means to perpetuate the discrimination of Dalits in various dimensions.

4.3.1 Seating

A common form of discrimination in school is the requirement for Dalits to sit in the back of the classroom and/or on the floor. The interviews in Katariya revealed active teacher discrimination, as one girl reported, “*the teacher told me to sit in the back and to sit with children from the same caste and to sit with the girls*” (Chanda, Katariya). In Gosal, the teachers’ actions took the form of passive discrimination through what appeared to be their helplessness against the dominance of the Darbar children to defend their place in the first rows of the classroom. Although complete compliance by the Dalits to sit in the back row was not evident at Gosal, a discriminatory process emerged; if the Dalit children attempted to

sit in front, the Darbar children demanded that they move to the back. This stronghold in the classroom was depicted in the comment of a Darbar girl: “*The Darbar girls sit in the front. The Harijans sit in the back. Sometimes children move around but I always sit in the front*” (Raju, Gosal). Although the classrooms are commonly small, sitting in the back causes problems as it is known that children receive less teacher attention, absent conscious efforts by the teacher to address them. Difficulties in reading the blackboard and listening to the teacher are common occurrences.

Additionally, to check for discriminatory practices, the sitting arrangement was crosschecked with the register. It was found that castes were clustered together, whereby the Dalit children were positioned in the middle of the register with other castes listed adjacent to them. In this regard, reorganization of the register prevents overt discrimination if the seating arrangement is followed by the teacher and the students. Without enforcement, reorganization serves little purpose in combating discrimination. However, this clustering along caste lines reflects a modification of discrimination in that it prevents full integration of students.

4.3.2 Midday Meal

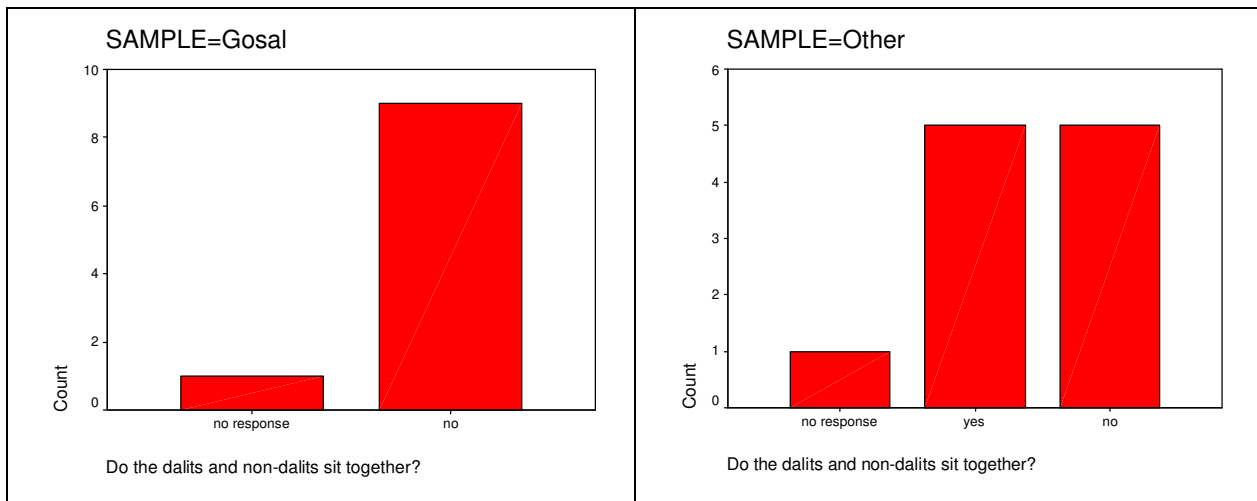
The Midday Meal Scheme (MMS) was originally conceived as a means of attracting children from lower income groups to school by reducing the cost of schooling and improve performance of students. The significant overlap of the economically deprived groups and Dalits has resulted in the perception that the MMS is primarily for the Dalits. The dominant caste children at Gosal reiterated this. This was also directly observed during MMS where the older dominant caste children were absent leaving only the younger dominant caste children to eat.

Both Dalit and dominant caste children expressed the poor quality of the food, particularly the presence of worms, illustrating some neglect with which this scheme for unprivileged children is taken. Furthermore, complaints are dismissed, as one respondent stated that the teacher simply replied “*you get free food and you still complain,*” (Govind, Gosal) further implying that a scheme designated for Dalits is not worthy of quality food. The Sarpanch has submitted two written complaints and parents have often visited the school to complain, but to no avail.



Picture Separate Seating of Dalits (left) and dominant caste children in Gosal

The most overt discrimination manifests in separate seating and serving of food, designed to preserve untouchability. In Gosal, direct observation revealed that the children were made to sit in separate circles as captured in the picture above. This was also confirmed by the children’s responses documented in the graph below. One child explained that the sitting arrangement was such that the Darbars would not have to face the Dalits (Babu, Gosal), illustrating the extent of the discrimination.



4.3.3 Water

In addition to food distribution, untouchability is practiced in fetching, serving and sharing of water in school. The general problem in accessing water in Gosal is similarly visible in the school. With no proper water facility in school, the majority of children bring bottles; it remains unclear whether this action is attributable to lack of water facility or to prevent touch. The destruction of the common tap, as described

below, suggests the later. However, the arrangement of drinking water in vessels for the teachers, which is only accessible to the Darbar boys, certainly reveals unequal accessibility. It was made clear that the Dalit children would not be allowed touch the water brought for the teachers or touch the bottles of other dominant caste children. Additionally, it is only the Darbar girls who fill water for the teachers, as well as serve guests on occasions or otherwise.

4.3.4 Tasks

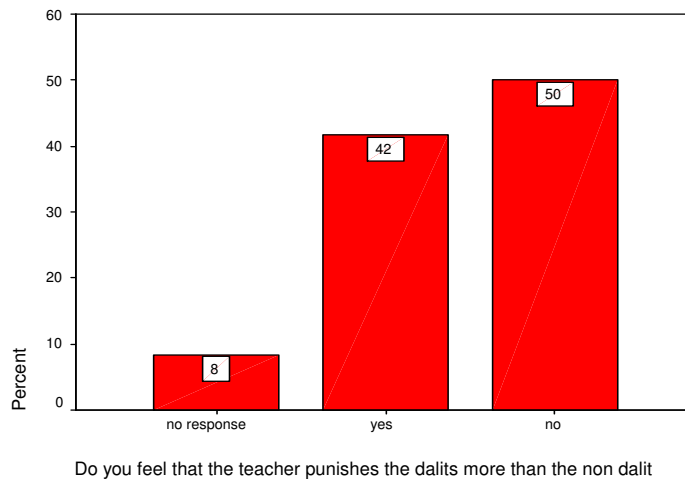
The power arrangement is evident in the tasks in school as well. While all the children are allocated tasks in school, it is usually the Dalit children that are assigned the menial tasks such as cleaning the toilets. The cleaner tasks such as fetching drinking water are reserved for the Darbar children as reported by a dominant caste girl (Raju, Gosal). Furthermore, she noted that the cleaning jobs are done by the shepherd and Dalit communities. In Katariya, one child reported that he cleaned the toilets for one year, which was also supported by two other boys who stated the same; only the Dalits were made to clean them. This issue was not relevant in the context of Gosal since there was no functioning toilet. However, the Dalits complained that they are given more cleaning work than the dominant caste children, describing their frustration in detail, “*The Harijans clean the room and the Darbars sit. The Darbars give orders and say ‘clean this, clean that’. Why don’t they do it? Do they just come to sit around?*” (Leela, Gosal) This comment clearly illustrates an awareness on the part of the Dalit children that the unequal distribution of tasks and a complete sense of frustration, creating poor schooling experience. Lastly, one boy in Katariya reported that he was made to clear away dead animals in school, providing clear evidence of the perpetuation of the traditionally assigned tasks of the Dalit community. The continuation of the performance of menial tasks in school creates a negative association with school. This was clearly stated by the drop-out children in Gosal.

As witnessed in Bhalgawada, gender discrimination is also an important issue in the school. When asked about the distribution of work, a group of boys explained that only the girls are responsible to wash the utensils.

4.3.5 Teacher Treatment

The teacher is one of the main contributors in creating children’s perception of school. In the response to what children dislike about school, reference to the teacher was common (6 of 10 in Katariya). This can perhaps be explained by the students’ new experience with qualified teachers in their new school.

In other studies, it has been well-documented that teacher discrimination is a common part of Dalit children’s school experience. In this study, it should first be noted that in Gosal the children’s perception was that the teachers punish all students equally, particularly after breaking-up fights (see graph below). However, many children illustrated the processes through which teachers contribute to discrimination through both their actions and their attitudes toward Dalit children. Within these actions and attitudes, the intensity of the discrimination also varies.



Teachers Discriminatory Acts

The most overt acts of discrimination by the teacher were expressed by the children's comments that the teacher makes them sit separately in both the classroom and the mid-day meal. Not only are they told to sit separately, but they are designated an unfavorable place. One child reported that *"suppose we try to sit together (in MMS), the teacher says, you sit separately, in the sunlight"* (Vipul, Gosal). Additionally, upon inquiring as to why so many Dalit children sit in the back, children relayed that the teacher directed them to sit there (Manu/Dileep/Vipul, Gosal). Separation based on caste was also highlighted in comments regarding play time. In Katariya, children reported that the teacher actively told the Dalit children to play separate from the dominant caste children (Milan/Praveen, Katariya). Another obvious act of discrimination was observed in the teachers' delegation of tasks in accordance to fixed occupations inherent to the caste system. Preferential treatment given to Darbar with regard to tasks was also observed maintaining the delineation of tasks.

While unequal distribution of punishment was not present, other examples of unfair treatment were revealed in individual interviews. Less intense discrimination was exhibited in comments related to homework and academic grading. While it is clear that all students receive corporal punishment and scolding for acts such as failure to do homework and misbehavior, it becomes difficult to determine when punishment is based on caste. Yet, in Gosal Dalit children explained that the Darbar children are given an extra day to complete their homework before receiving punishment, whereas they were punished immediately.

In terms of academic grading, the process was explained by one child in the following comment: *"Whether they (Darbars) write anything or not or if they know anything or not, they are passed. If we know something, they pass us, but if we do not, they fail us. Even if the Darbar children get less than everybody else, they are passed"* (Govind, Gosal). Such acts by the teacher create perceptions in the mind of the Dalits of an obvious tilt toward the dominant caste. Favoritism as an indicator of discrimination demands further study, as it was only revealed as significant towards the end of the research.

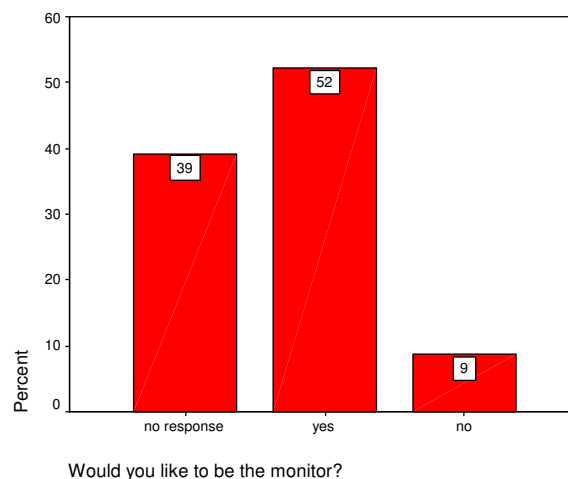
Discriminatory Attitudes of Teachers

Children in Katariya reported instances of the teacher's direct discriminatory attitude toward them. One form of discrimination manifested in the reduced attention given to the Dalit children, particularly in asking questions. For example, one child explicitly commented that *"They let us sit in class, but they never ask us questions"* (Milan, Katariya). However, this is not the case everywhere, as evident in Gosal, whereby the majority of children reported that the teachers equally ask questions to all students. Although, inevitable that children receive less attention, the teacher's instruction to sit in the back implies a potentially neglectful attitude toward Dalits.

Research has also shown that there is a negative attitude toward Dalit children in schools regarding their capacity to learn and other characteristics such as leadership and behavior (Subrahmanian and Balagopalan 2003). This present case study confirms the existence of the teacher's negative attitudes. The simple, but telling comment by a teacher, *"you know nothing,"* (Milan, Katariya) expressed by a Dalit boy illustrates the teacher's low expectations.

The teacher's low expectations are also exhibited in his/her hesitation to designate Dalits to leadership positions such as classroom monitor. It is a common practice that the brightest children in class are assigned classroom monitor. Although, a boy in Gosal came first in class, he was dismissed by his teacher when it came to filling this role, despite his request to do so. This also illustrates the teacher's perception of Dalits as being unable or rightfully fit for leadership roles and directly reduces the children's self-esteem.

The findings illustrate that over 60% of the children have not been class monitors, despite their aspirations to be monitors.



One comment by a child in Katariya revealed a teacher's direct discriminatory attitude in selection of the monitor. Upon inquiring as to why he cannot become monitor, he said that *"the teacher says that because you are from a lower-caste you can't be the monitor. The Darbars and Patels are monitors, we are not"* (Praveen, Katariya). When asked how refusal made them feel, one child expressed that it made her 'feel bad' when her request was not accepted. While some children expressed anger, 5 of the 10 children shared a feeling of helplessness, evident in comments such as *"there's no point,"* or *"there's no chance."*

Statements such as “*only dominant caste children are selected*” represent feelings of agitation. One child even reported that there is discrimination in the selection of monitor, followed by a comment that she “*doesn’t like to be Harijan*” (Leela, Gosal).

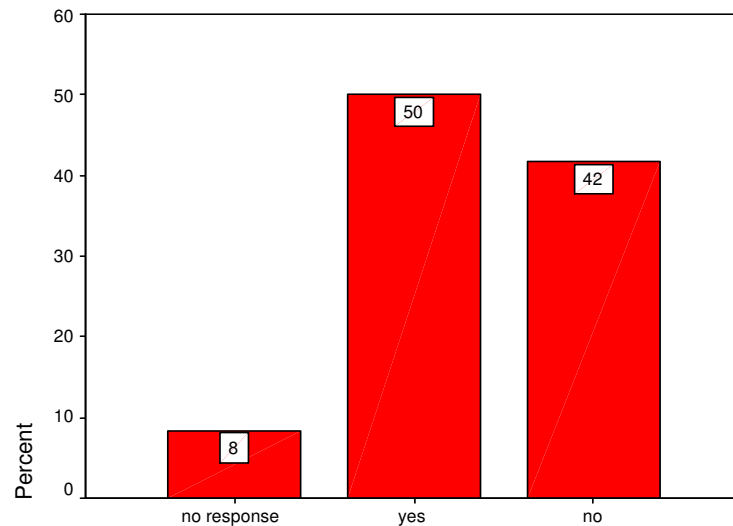
Another significant finding was a Dalit boy’s story that his teacher encourages him in the garden work, but never in class. This potentially indicates the perception of lower academic expectations of Dalits. Finally, one Dalit boy’s explanation of the teacher’s response to fighting in school, typifies the teachers perception of Dalits as problem children. When complaining to the teacher regarding a fight, the teacher responded, “*It must be your fault, you are like this*” (Naresh, Katariya).

Teacher responses can partially be explained by the power relations within the village, whereby the Darbar parents and the children hold a tight grip on societal interplay. Therefore, some teacher discriminatory actions are influenced by the Darbar parents’ authority. Four children in Gosal relayed stories about the Darbar students bringing their parents to school to complain. While the parents act to intimidate in this context, it is not so much the presence that is troubling. Rather, it is the teachers’ acquiescence to the Darbar parents. One child described the process as such: “*If they get hit, then they fight with the teacher, go home and call their fathers. The fathers come to school and fight with the teacher. The teacher doesn’t say anything. But if the same thing happens to the Harijans, then the teacher will come and fight. They never say anything to the Darbars*” (Vipol, Gosal).

Surprisingly, this same controlling feature was exhibited by the Darbar children. In Gosal, Dalit children told of instances where “*the teacher called a Darbar boy by his name, ‘Haresh,’ and that boy told the teacher, call me ‘bhai’*” (Govind, Gosal) and that the Darbar children say “*bad words to the teacher, if the teacher would say anything*” (Lela, Gosal). This is illustrative of how the teachers are entrenched in the power relations in the village and are also subjugated to the demands of the Darbars. Moreover, one Dalit child reported that the teachers are scared of the Darbars and the “*Darbars can do as they please*” (Praveen, Gosal).

Therefore, the role of the teacher in ensuring fair treatment on his/her part and to cease discrimination amongst peers is constrained by factors such as an inability for constant supervision, and as discussed above, the power hold of the dominant caste. This does not remove the teacher’s accountability in their actions or non-actions to end untouchability practices. For instance, the teachers’ role in delegating tasks and continuation of calling of bhai/ben exemplifies how the passive role of the teacher perpetuates the system of discrimination.

While it is difficult to conclude the discrimination of the teacher in certain areas, what is certainly apparent is the perception of the children. When inquired about teacher favouritism, 7 out of 10 Dalit children in Gosal reported that they believe the teacher favours the dominant caste over the Dalit children.



Do you feel like your teacher favors uppercaste children over dalits?

As exhibited in Katariya, this too is difficult data to generate, as it is believed that the children there may not have understood the question properly.

The researchers were careful to differentiate between teacher discrimination based on caste and favouritism remaining cautious of the blurred line. However, it can be said that the perception that the teacher favours the dominant caste children implies a feeling of less worth. While this is difficult to document and requires further study, it was found that because of this favouritism, feelings of helplessness were ascertained from beliefs such as “*we don't have a chance*” (Naresh, Katariya).

4.3.6 Peer treatment

Teasing and Power Relations

The interaction between the dominant caste children and the Dalits is limited to school. In Gosal, the dynamics of their relations are based on the traditional caste hierarchy and the already established power structure. The dominant caste children particularly the Darbars constantly intimidate the Dalits in order to reinforce their power position, threatening to bring their father to school to instill fear.

One type of teasing occurs in the form of derogatory name-calling. A few children reported that they had been called derogatory names, including ‘dedha’ and ‘lilui’; one child declined sharing the negative names. It also became clear through observation that the use of the term Dalit is not common, as respondents are still referred to as ‘Harijans’. While use of bad names was documented, the children habitually commented on the need to call the dominant caste children by specific names, ‘bhai’ and ‘ben’, as a sign of respect; one Dalit girl even noted that they have to call the younger Darbars with respect as well (Leela, Gosal); non-compliance usually results in fighting or as reported by one child, teacher scolding. This demand is another clear example of the dominant caste’s attempt to maintain their power clutch. While the aforementioned interplay is clearly discrimination, it should be noted that it is difficult to decipher what teasing is associated with caste. While one child was simply unaware of the reasons for

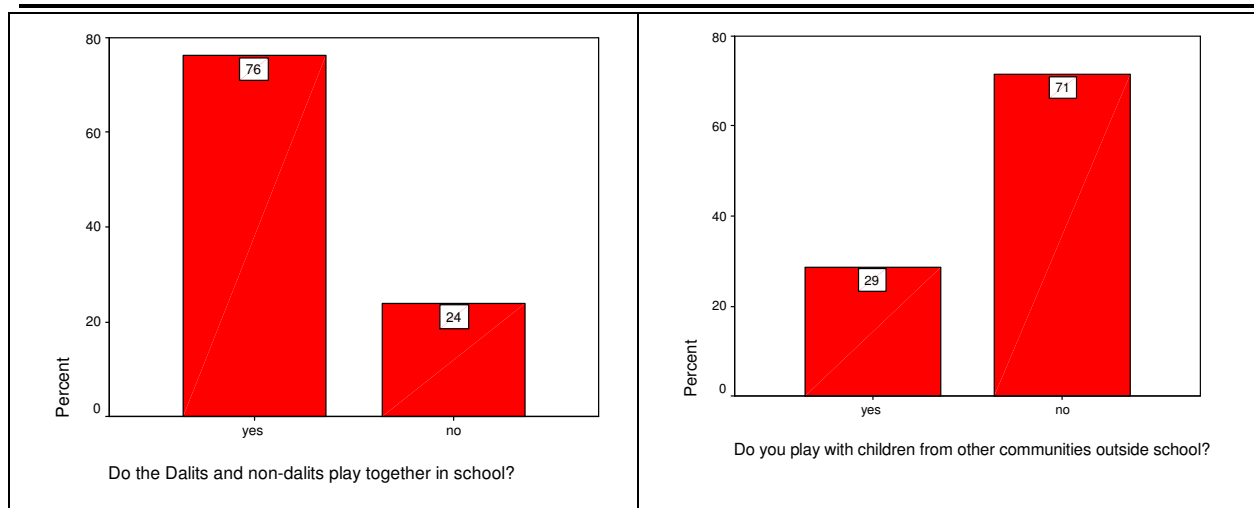
teasing, his comment that he “*didn’t know why he was bullied,*” still serves to express his wonderment of this unequal treatment (Haresh, Katariya).

While children at the Katariya school commented that fighting was not generally an issue in their previous school, respondents at Gosal indicated that fighting is a definite feature. Fights occurred during most daily school interaction including playing, seating, monitor, and failure to call Darbars ‘bhai’. In the midst of an interview, one child even pointed to a group of Darbar children who “*come to the school to create trouble*” (Babu, Gosal) The OBC boy confirmed that there are always fights between Darbars and Dalits, also noted by a dominant caste child (Jaydeep, Gosal). Whether these conflicts occurred because of active resistance by the Dalit children or because of a higher incidence of tension is unclear; nonetheless fighting remains a feature within Gosal. This unequal relationship can help to explain the situation, one where the Dalit children must follow any commands and orders made by the Darbars. Fights often break out between the Darbars and the Dalits on the non-compliance of these orders. Many times the children also said that the Darbars hit them; while this is normal children interaction, the reasons for hitting included failure to call with respect, failure to perform school tasks, and touching of plates, each related to issues of untouchability. As one Dalit girl described, “*when the benches came to our school, the Darbar kids sit in front and we sit in the back. If we try to sit in the front, the Darbar kids fight with us*”. (Leela, Gosal)

Children were vividly affected by the constant fighting. A common response to what they dislike most about school included fighting, all of which were collected during the closed interviews, particularly telling when compared with the children’s response at Katariya, which expressed other concerns. Consistent response were given when asked what they would like to change in school, many children in Gosal responded “no fighting.”

Playing together: Friendship

The findings revealed a major distinction in the interaction of children within the school grounds and outside.

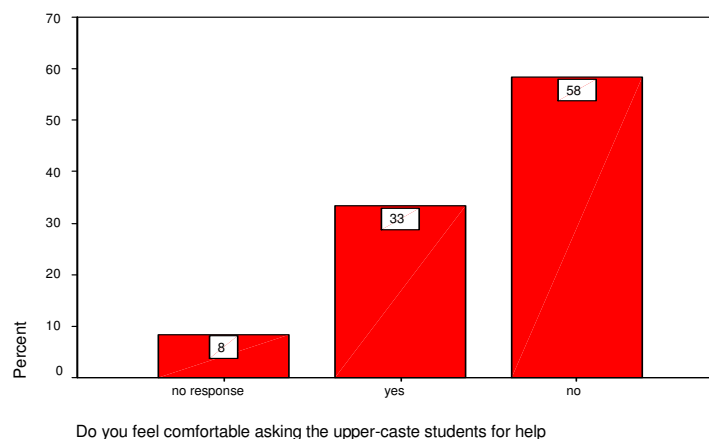


As mentioned above, children play in separate fields outside of school, but when confined within school parameters, they are forced to play together. However, this natural interaction was occasionally prohibited by teachers, as illustrated by comments such as, “*Then the teacher tells us ‘Dalits play separately.’ The Darbars and the Patel children play separately*” (Praveen, Katariya). Frequently, the children would play together in the teacher’s presence. Problems occurred only in the teacher’s absence, when the children refused to play together. Despite these difficulties, it is clear that school can be a means of integrating communities. Yet, a failure to address the tensions that exist and proper teacher enforcement and consistent supervision will obstruct this possibility.

An attempt was made to better understand the difficulties occurring during children’s interaction. It can therefore be inferred that additional methods of exclusion are imparted on the children. It was stated in detail by a few students that the Darbars “*get us out and tease us,*” also confirmed by an OBC boy. (Lala, Gosal). A few children also responded that they are asked to leave during play or are not invited to play at all. As one Dalit girl relayed, she did not feel included. This was a difficult question to ask given that it touches on the sensitive issue of belonging. Explanations were provided in simple responses such as “*Darbars only make friends with Darbars. They don’t make friends with Harijans*” (Leela, Gosal). When asked if they complain, many replied that they “*can’t fight.*” This indicates awareness on the part of the children of the repercussions for fighting in school. It also implies a sense of helplessness.

Questioning/helping each other

The majority of children expressed that they did not feel comfortable asking the dominant children for help. This phenomenon is particularly concerning when combined with the fact that the classroom monitor is primarily from the dominant caste, a main source of assistance second to the teacher. The absence of academic exchange in some cases can be described more as a mutual lack of reciprocation of information, whereby in retaliation, the Dalits also refuse to help the dominant caste. Again, feelings of pointlessness and fear of abuse were exhibited. “*We don’t ask them for help because we will not get it*” (Praveen, Gosal).



No better explanation can be provided than by the words of one child when asked what happens if they sit together; he simply replied, “repulsion” (Vipul, Gosal).

4.3.7 Participation in cultural activities

Children’s active participation in school activities is imperative to creating a feeling of belonging and enhances their self worth. School functions and activities are also designed to create an interactive and enjoyable environment for the children. Yet, on many occasions, the Dalit children are either consciously blocked from participating or as more subtle form of exclusion, they are not asked to participate. These activities turn into another vehicle for discriminatory practices when the child is actively excluded. One child, who performed a song in brilliant detail during the study, later revealed that he was not allowed to participate in activities in his prior school, such as Independence Day and Republic day.

4.3.8 Scholarships

While scholarships are designed to financially assist all families in funding basic school items such as uniforms and books, it is not uncommon for Dalits and girls to receive a higher stipend. Issues relating to difficulties in accessing scholarships have been well-documented. While these difficulties did not appear present at Gosal, parents did complain of delayed receipt of payment, indicating the poor implementation of a program designed to assist the marginalized sectors of society. Distribution of supplies was also probed, as it was relayed by one teacher in Delhi that the Dalits are made to stand-up during class to receive their stipends. This discrimination, although not discovered in Gosal, results in an adverse effect of positive discrimination, breeding further resentment within the dominant caste children and acting to brand the Dalits. This deserves further study.

4.3.9 Curriculum

It is widely accepted that the curriculum can be a major source of fighting against discrimination. Together with good quality teaching, a well-designed curriculum can lead to critical thinking and reflection on societal processes in the school. When asked whether they talk about issues of caste discrimination in school, the teachers in Gosal seemed unsure of how to respond. They eventually replied

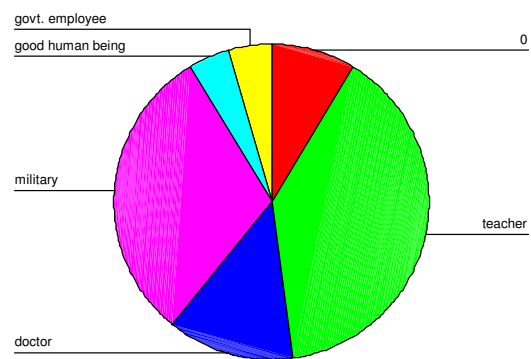
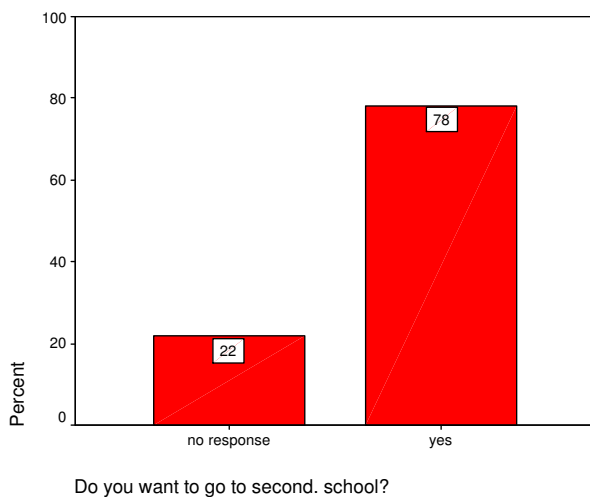
that they teach the history of the caste system and its traditional occupations. They also remarked that such topics were not included in their teacher training.

According to Martin Macwan, the curriculum for primary schools in Gujarat does not include a critical reflection of the caste system and issues of discrimination. On the contrary, a study of 3000 common reading materials for children found that rather than fostering a culture of tolerance, children’s literature reinforces caste discrimination through representation of Dalits as “lesser humans.”¹⁴

4.3.10 Transportation

As elaborated above, the geographical segregation of the Dalit habitation brings about difficulties accessing the school. Additional restrictions apply; the case of a girl in Tamil Nadu who was prohibited from using a bicycle to go to school exemplifies the severity of some restrictions. Other examples include the prohibition to wear shoes. Restrictions in transportation were not relevant in the Gosal context since the Dalit habitation was in close proximity to the school. In Bhalgavra, the situation seemed to be more difficult for the Dalit children although no proof can be presented. However there are difficulties in access when it comes to secondary schooling that affect children from all communities in all the villages observed.

The graph below shows that all the children hope to attend secondary school. However, distance proves difficult. As confirmed by the teachers, this is only possible if they stay in hostels in Sayla or Limbdi, which especially for the girls seems to be problematic.



What do you want to become when you grow up?

¹⁴ Only available in Gujarati language www.navsarjan.org

5 Conclusions

Discrimination against Dalit children does exist

The main conclusion of this case study is that discrimination based on caste is an everyday hurdle for Dalit children, which affects their life in their home, in schools and the community. Using qualitative research methods, this study was able to explore that there are multiple dimensions and processes of discrimination in all three dimensions of untouchability: exclusion, humiliation and exploitation. Additionally it was also observed that discrimination persists in modified forms, such as the clustering according to caste in the register in Gosal. Therefore one must be mindful of new forms of discrimination.

It is crucial to study every aspect of Dalit children's life

In order to change the dynamics of caste based discrimination, it is a key to understand how children perceive acts of discrimination and how they negotiate the world around them. Furthermore to tackle discrimination in school it is essential to examine every aspect of children's life in their family, in school and in the community. Without this holistic approach, one overlooks important power dynamics that infiltrate the boundaries of school.

Additionally, children do understand the power structures around them. Children as young as 10 years imbibe societal processes, understand them and are willing to share their stories. Therefore, they are key informants on processes of discrimination and its effect. In explaining how the dominant caste demanded special treatment, such as sitting on the khats while they are relegated to lower positions on the floor, the study found that children are able to identify contradictions within society. The children clearly recognize this unfair treatment and innate inequality. Being excluded is clearly comprehended by children resulting in negative feelings such as powerlessness.

The concept of Social Exclusion is key to analyse the situation of Dalits

It is not just acts of discrimination but the wider phenomenon of social exclusion that needs to be examined in order to identify all the actors and conditions that maintain the power structure of the caste system. Therefore it is not just one group, but many actors and conditions that aim to maintain their power positions. This approach was used to understand the power structures in Gosal. This revealed that it is inadequate to simply blame the teachers or the dominant caste students for discrimination. Rather, it is crucial to analyse the role of the Darbar parents. They have a strong influence on all aspects of schooling including their influence on the teachers and the Dalit children. However, this should not take away the responsibility of the teachers who constantly submit to the demands of Darbar parents such as lenient grading of their children. Additionally, it appeared that the OBCs in Gosal discriminated against the Dalits in order to protect their own position in the hierarchy.

Discrimination has a psychological impact on children

Dalit children carry the stigma attached to being “untouchable”. They are daily reminded of their lower caste status in statements such as “Dheda call me bhai” which ensure that they never overstep boundaries that are drawn by the dominant caste. Therefore, much energy is spent in conforming to these boundaries. In addition to their experiences of untouchability in school, children often experienced traumatic incidences in their communities such as the unequal treatment by the police and abuse by the dominant community. This creates a cloud of fear in the life of Dalit children.

The question of how discrimination made the children feel reveals emotions such as anger, wonderment, powerlessness, and sadness expressed in statements such as “I get angry,” “I ask why they keep untouchability,” “what’s the point in fighting,” “they keep untouchability,” and “I feel bad.” Negative comments by the teachers such as “you know nothing” (Naresh, Katariya) exemplify a lack of expectations from Dalit children. This leads to the perception of school as an unwelcoming space. Research suggests that such discrimination in schools leads to lower self-esteem and these dynamics might help to explain the reasons for dropping out. The psychological impact on Dalit children’s identity and self-worth goes beyond the scope of this study and requires full attention of psychological research.

Dalit children want change

Usually Dalit children are conceptualized as vulnerable and problematic groups in education. However, especially in Katariya, children clearly had dreams, aspirations, and a deep understanding of their responsibility to change the situation of Dalits in the future:

I am going to school because I want to develop myself. I want to get as much knowledge as possible. My goal in life is to develop my community. Therefore I first have to develop myself to pass my knowledge on. I think this will be a difficult task. If I could change something in my village I would remove the untouchability. I would make sure that everybody can go to school and that there is no discrimination in school. (Naresh, 11).

When asked what they disliked about school many children mentioned their experiences of untouchability and the constant fights with the dominant caste children. The children expressed a desire to live equally in a community without the limitations created by caste differences. This illustrates that as contrary to the negative conceptualization of Dalit children as problematic, they seem to have developed a sense of resistance. Statements like “*I feel angry, that I have to call a boy like me “bhai” (Praveen, Gosal)* show that while the older generation has reconciled to their fate the children are attempting to move beyond these restrictions.

Schools need to create this change

Even though there are small acts of resistance, the unequal power structure is deeply internalized by both Dalits and non-Dalits. They are victims of a superficial understanding of their superiority and these

attitudes have been engrained in them from an early age onwards. Comments by dominant caste children such as “I don’t go there, it is not nice to do” and “We don’t go where the Dalits live, it’s dirty” illustrate their instilled sense of superiority. Dalit children are questioning the inequality but there is no space where they can openly address their grievances.

This is where schools have to be proactive and create a space for reflection on such inequalities. In addition to changing the most overt forms of discrimination such as separate seating, there must be attempts to change these internalized perceptions. Therefore, the focus on improving quality in education is pivotal. Although quality of primary education is repeatedly emphasized in educational reform, improved quality must include the principle of non- discrimination in the curriculum in classroom teaching and in teacher training. Only then can schools be inclusive spaces to create forces of societal change for the children of all caste backgrounds.

Recommendations to UNICEF

UNICEF contributes to achieving the goals of universalizing primary education. The approach is to work on an advocacy level, through capacity building and to promote model schools. UNICEF is a major partner of the GoI in the SSA. As the objectives of the SSA identify, the marginalized groups in society need special attention in order to achieve universal primary education. In order to improve the situation of Dalit children, UNICEF could consider the following recommendations:

- UNICEF's education policy 2002-2007 identified 4 focus groups: girls, urban poor, working children and tribal children. It is crucial to extend the focus to Dalit children in UNICEF's strategy.
- UNICEF must expand their framework of assessing quality and include the forms of discrimination based on caste as a main indicator. This will enable UNICEF to monitor those who are indifferent or actively participating in discrimination based on caste in schools.
- Extensive critical research throughout India to collect data on the status quo of Dalit children with a focus of highlighting voices of children
- Make discrimination in schools visible as a global phenomenon
- In research on drop-out children, focus on the correlation of reasons for drop-out and experiences of discrimination in school
- UNICEF should create visibility with regard to caste-based discrimination through running campaigns to create public attention and dialogue (similarly to the recent campaign on gender discrimination such as Meena and Girl Stars)
- To advocate for mainstreaming of discrimination based on caste in education policies
- Coordinate with Dalit NGOs to assist in teacher training and strategic planning and implementation of government programs
- While emphasizing participatory planning processes UNICEF must be cautious of the existing power relations in villages based on caste hierarchy in order to make sure that services meant for the community are easily accessible for the Dalit community, not only in terms of geographical aspects but also socially.
- Work together with NCERT and NIEPA to include especially in the social science curriculum issues of discrimination and exclusion especially the experiences of Dalit and other marginalized groups

Recommendations for further research on this issue

- Further develop a methodology of research on caste-based discrimination of children in school that includes their communities and the psychological impact of discrimination

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- To ensure that research personnel is familiar with the Dalit community in order to create an atmosphere of comfort and trust.
 - To conduct focus groups upon arrival to identify Dalit children and potential leaders .to facilitate comfort amongst peers, which also provides children time to become comfortable with the topic before beginning with intensive questioning.
 - A more upfront technique of questioning on caste, was more receptive as this is more the language of the child
 - To be mindful of power relations in the village and the constant presence of dominant caste members as they would intimidate and be factors of undue stress to the children.
 - Children aged 10 and below were found to have difficulties in understanding key questions and in articulating their feelings.

APPENDIX

Indicators of Discrimination¹⁵

- Availability and efficiency of services
- Additional limitations including poverty, patriarchy
- Additional forms of discrimination
 - Policy, organizational structures and service deliveries not sensitive to concerns of Dalits
 - Physical access to services- Can they reach it without fear or abuse?
 - Physical access- e.g. transportation
 - Discrimination in delivery
 - Separate seating
 - Told that they are not worthy of provisions
 - Not given same attention, not encouraged, appreciated
 - Not given opportunity to lead
 - Not given opportunity to take part in school functions
 - Not given opportunity in sport/to play
 - Fear asking questions
 - Tasks that reinforce their caste occupations (others not asked to do the same)
 - Excessive punishment- e.g. verbal abuse, demeaning references
 - Special provisions not implemented properly and the cost burden.
 - Participation of Dalit community
 - Involvement in decision making committees
 - Involvement in planning-monitoring process
 - Are the issues that they raise given necessary waitage
 - Do they organize and conduct programmes
 - Benefit sharing-significant inequalities, proportionally benefiting, equity and justice principles e.g. anti-poverty program
 - Barriers, violence and backlash experiences WHEN THEY DEMAND
- Angles:
 - Discrimination OR Neglect
 - At the policy-strategy level, At the Structural/institutional level, At the Adm/Mangment level, At the service deliveries, at the beneficiary level, at the outcome level
- Explanations
 - Adherence to hierarchy of caste- treatment in keeping with caste
 - Concept of untouchability and pollution- shunned because they are polluting
 - Linkage to occupations they hold
 - Gender aspects

¹⁵ Provided by Annie Namala, IIDS

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