

## Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, at least three separate caste systems coexist and interact with each other as well as with Hindu caste systems in India: the Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and India

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### Virtual resource center

The South Asia research Network on caste based Discrimination run by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) established a virtual resource centre, <http://dalitssouthasia.org>. The platform intends to promote the production, exchange and dissemination of research knowledge on caste discrimination and other forms of social exclusion, and facilitate academic exchange across the region. It further functions as both a resource centre and network of Dalit researchers and researchers on Dalits in South Asia. Working papers on three caste-affected countries, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were published in 2009. Due to a huge demand from grass root organisations and students, they were translated in to Hindi and made available online and in print. In May, IIDS organised an international Seminar on "Comparative context of Discrimination and equal opportunity Policies in Asia", which included national level presentations of the findings of the regional research project. IDSN has supported the project since its inception and partners with IIDS in dissemination of research findings and related activities.

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Tamil caste systems. Although there is no uniform practice of 'untouchability', caste-based discrimination is found in varying degrees in all three systems.

The caste system in Jaffna was traditionally the most rigid one with clearly defined patterns of inequality, discrimination and social rejection as described in a new book on caste discrimination in Sri Lanka launched in February: "Casteless or caste-blind? Dynamics of concealed caste discrimination, social exclusion and protest in Sri Lanka" edited by Kalinga Tudor Silva, P.P. Sivapragasam and Paramsothy Thanges.

The relative significance of certain depressed caste communities in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Jaffna suggests that caste discrimination is by no means a dead issue in contemporary Sri Lanka. Many of the IDPs remaining in camps in Jaffna are of Panchamar (low caste) background. This is a consequence of a combination of factors, including lack of alternative housing, deep-rooted poverty, lack of social capital, exclusion from the local land market and security and welfare considerations of the affected people.

As an effect of the civil war, caste discrimination has become surreptitious and socially explosive in some instances. In the post-conflict phase caste consciousness seems to reappear affecting the reconstruction and relief phase, as reported by researcher Prof. Tudor Silva.

Underprivileged caste groups are often the hardest hit by civil war and natural disasters like the Tsunami. It is essential to learn from these experiences and not have 'caste-blind' policies; therefore caste must be explicitly addressed in social impact assessments and monitoring and evaluation of development programmes, including the reconstruction and reconciliation phase. In the course of 2009, local organisations and IDSN engaged with the European Commission on these issues and recommended that it support a post-conflict study on these aspects.

IDSN partners in Sri Lanka further report about growing evidence of caste backgrounds getting into play in the post-conflict political dynamics.