

Caste and conflict

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Caste discrimination is both a cause and a consequence of conflict. Violent clashes in affected communities often relate to caste dynamics when communal forces use violence to insist that Dalits remain at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Defiance of the prescribed social order by Dalits is consistently met with punitive violence and social ostracism. The likelihood of further clashes is exacerbated where perpetrators operate with total impunity. Because the effects of conflict are almost always greatest for the most vulnerable social groups, conflict frequently exposes Dalits to greater instability, abuse, and poverty. Caste dynamics also exacerbate the vulnerability of affected groups in the relief and reconstruction phases following emergencies and humanitarian disasters.

In India, Dalit assertion and resistance are the main causes of conflict and retaliation by dominant castes, often justified on the basis of purported religious doctrine. Other manifestations, including the subversion of land redistribution and the opposition of dominant castes to reservations and affirmative action programmes for Dalits, pervade all opportunities for Dalits in education, employment, and elections. Dalit resistance to this pervasive exclusion may eventually erupt into communal violence, as was the case in Orissa in 2008 when Dalit communities who had liberated themselves from the age-old inhuman practices of caste based discrimination and forced slavery were systematically attacked by dominant castes.

In Nepal, caste discrimination was both a root cause and consequence of the decade-long conflict in the country. The exclusion of Dalits from all facets of governance ensured their marginalization, unequal receipt of the state's attention and resources, and extreme poverty. The Maoists capitalized on Dalits' exclusion and poverty to recruit high numbers of Dalits into their forces; nevertheless, Maoist leadership remained dominated by members of the so-called upper castes. The conflict, in turn, exposed Dalits to higher levels of abuse by both sides, including increased vulnerability to torture and arbitrary detention, collective punishment, and sexual abuse.

In post-conflict situations entrenched patterns of caste discrimination may be repeated and even exacerbated. For example, caste consciousness seems to reappear in the reconstruction and relief phase in the wake of the civil war in Sri Lanka. The significance of social class, ethnicity and caste as obstacles to upward mobility of youth from disadvantaged social backgrounds has been one of the underlying causes of youth uprisings in Sri Lanka from 1971 onwards. Many of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who still remain in the camps are members of the "lower castes."

Without a sustained commitment to addressing caste discrimination as both a root cause and insidious consequence of conflicts, caste dynamics will prevail and conflicts will remain unresolved. States should take specific steps to safeguard the rights and physical integrity of marginalized and disadvantaged groups or castes, and ensure that accountability mechanisms are in place guaranteeing that caste is not used as a basis for abuses, unlawful detention, torture, and intimidation during elections. Governments and international organizations should develop measures to tackle exclusion and discrimination in all development and disaster recovery programmes, such as social equity audits and caste analysis frameworks, as proposed in paragraph 57 of the draft UN principles and guidelines for the effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent (A/HRC/11/CRP.3). Furthermore, appropriate 'affected community inclusion tools' should be developed and applied effectively in humanitarian programmes and operations, and members of affected communities should be fully involved in the planning and evaluation thereof.