

## **International Labour Office Forthcoming Publication**

## **ILO Asia Pacific Employment Working Paper**

## DALITS AND EMPLOYMENT IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN INDIA

"Even after 60 years of constitutional legal protection and support ... Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of untouchability was Apartheid."

Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India

The forthcoming ILO publication appearing in October 2008 dealing with employment issues of dalits in the private sector in India will be a first of its kind. While within India numerous initiatives have been taken to eliminate discrimination on the basis of caste, only recently it has been catching the eye of the international (business) community as well.

This relative late involvement of the international community is not surprising. Although discrimination is a difficult phenomenon to deal with effectively and as old as humanity itself, happening everywhere every day, caste discrimination is different from many other forms of discrimination because of its hidden character, difficult to discern for an outsider.

Caste-based discrimination is certainly not confined to India alone, and happens in many other countries as well such as Japan and Senegal, but in South Asian societies stratification based on caste is deeply rooted, having a huge impact on social and economic relations.

Dalits come last on the social and economic ladder. Their occupational confinement is often restricted to menial and lowly valued jobs. Generally, their access to social services such as education and health services, and access to economic endowments

such as land and capital is very limited. Dalits therefore constitute one of the most marginalized and poorest segments of the population in countries like India and Nepal.

In India, decades of affirmative action have mainly been taken in the public sphere, with mixed results. Policy and legislative measures to promote equal rights for dalits have so far not touched upon the private sector, but this is about to change.

The Government of India is now urging the private sector to take on its responsibility of empowering dalits socially and economically. Although it has refrained from imposing legislation setting benchmarks for employment of dalits in the private sector, the government will not shy away from doing so if it deems it necessary to speed up the pace of elimination of caste based discrimination in the country.

The ILO Asia Pacific Employment Paper provides an insight on the discussion taking place in India since 2003 how private enterprises can support better and "decent work" employment opportunities for Dalits.

The Paper will provide basic background information to introduce Indian and foreign entrepreneurs to the social and economic obstacles this considerable chunk of the population, 175 million people, faces in determining their social and economic destiny.

It will highlight legislative and policy measures taken by national and international actors, and activities undertaken by the dalits themselves, judging their acceptability and effectiveness.

A labour market dominated by caste and descent based discrimination by definition is limited and inefficient. The workplace therefore is a strategic place to combat discrimination. The Paper will present human rights tools newly designed for the private sector allowing to take positive measures of corporate social responsibility contributing to more equitable employment opportunities for dalits.

India Inc. has never seen better times. The country is enjoying high sustained economic growth and there is a spring in the step of its business community. The ILO Employment paper seeks a better distribution of this newly created wealth by appealing to the private sector supporting this effort.

The impact and success of the paper shall be determined by the number of Indian and international private companies taking into account the special needs of dalit workers, declaring a policy of positive action based on the available human right tools. The paper argues that by doing so, companies will be part of a trend knowing winners only.

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