

WORLDFOCUS

December 1, 2009

Calling the world's attention to the caste issue in India

For more on the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Washington D.C. last week, Worldfocus spoke with [Ramaiah Avatthi](#), a professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai.

Currently a Fulbright Scholar at Columbia University, Ramaiah contends that Manmohan Singh has largely ignored the issue of caste-based discrimination and atrocities.

The caste system is the traditional South Asian hierarchy that consigns people, based on their birth, to ranked social classes.



Activists say that India's PM has been reluctant to address casteism head-on. Photo: Flickr user [LondonSummit](#)

Worldfocus: Do you think Prime Minister Singh avoided certain issues during his U.S. visit?

Ramaiah Avatthi: Before Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama, human rights organizations such as [Amnesty International urged Obama](#) to persuade Singh to address the human rights concerns, particularly caste violence against Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables). This group, also known as Scheduled Castes, constitutes 166 million in India — and up to 250 million in South Asia.

The two leaders focused on Afghanistan/Pakistan, the fight against terrorism, global warming, economic development and nuclear proliferation. Thus the scope for discussion of caste was very limited.

Worldfocus: How would you assess casteism in India today?

Ramaiah Avatthi: The Dalits are subjected to inhuman torture and humiliation when they try to live with dignity like other citizens of India. Their assertiveness is often met with dire consequences.

There have been incidents in the recent past in which some Dalits were forced to consume human excreta and urine. Some were blinded by pushing needle into their eyes. Dalits have been raped and murdered and sometimes paraded naked.

Some non-Dalit families, particularly in states like Haryana, choose to kill their daughters for their "crime" of falling in love with Dalit boys. They are denied the minimum wage and forced work for generations as bonded labor. Most child labor also belongs to Dalit communities. This is not a thing of the past but is very much a part of day-to-day reality in most parts of rural India.

Worldfocus: What concrete policy changes should PM Singh implement?

Ramaiah Avatthi: There are a number of Constitutional safeguards to protect Dalits from injustice and exploitation. But we need more welfare measures to improve their educational and economic condition and to ensure representation in decision-making bodies.

Worldfocus: Has the international community taken note of the Dalit situation?

Ramaiah Avatthi: With the relentless efforts of Dalit activists and civil society organizations in the last 50 years, the issue of caste has come to center stage at the UN. Yet, violence against Dalits continues.

According to our National Crime Records Bureau, the number of crimes against Dalits increased from 26,887 in 2004 to 27,070 in 2006. Even brutal crimes such as rape and murder are on the increase. For instance, the number of Dalits reported to have been murdered by non-Dalits was 654 in 2004 and 674 in 2007.

Similarly, the number of reported cases of Dalit women being raped by the non-Dalit men was 1157 in 2004 and 1349 in 2007. Why do crimes against Dalits continue unabated, despite powerful laws against atrocities? Is the law ineffective — or the government?

It is interesting to note what Martin Luther King said in 1955: "You have never had real peace in Montgomery. You have had a sort of negative peace in which the Negro too often accepted his state of subordination. But this is not true peace. True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice. The tension we see in Montgomery today is the necessary tension that comes when the oppressed rise up and start to move forward toward a permanent, positive peace."

It is also interesting to note what the Indian Prime Minister said in his speech at the White House on November 23: "India and the U.S. are bound by democracy, rule of law and respect for fundamental human freedoms." This was a response to President Obama's declaration that the relationship "between the U.S. and India is one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century."

The crux of the matter is whether such statements will remain merely rhetoric — or will actually promote justice for oppressed communities in both countries.

- Watch the Worldfocus signature video: [One woman fights for members of India's lowest caste](#)
- Watch the Worldfocus signature video: [India's "untouchables" trudge through the sewers](#)
- Read more in Worldfocus Perspectives: [Indian nationalism begins to challenge caste destiny](#)

- Ben Piven

Tags: [A. Ramaiah](#), [atrocities](#), [Ben Piven](#), [caste](#), [caste system](#), [casteism](#), [Dalits](#), [discrimination](#), [Manmohan Singh](#), [President Obama](#), [Ramaiah Avatthi](#), [Untouchables](#)

COMMENTS

16 comments

12/06/2009 :: 01:22:50 PM

niila keshava Says:

There was a time in the annals of Indian history when social reformers took up the challenging task of ridding the society of caste differences. Men of the status of Kabir, a highly evolved sadhaka, great poet and noble social reformer, were destined to be born in India. In those days all the social reformers raised this single slogan: "Question not one's caste or creed; God's devotees all belong to Him". There was a sense of elation as a new consciousness dawned upon the people.

But this period was short-lived. People with vested interests, who fostered and encouraged the sentiments of caste differences, became the so-called leaders of society. They once again succeeded in driving into the mass consciousness the age old feelings of hereditary caste distinctions. As a result the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaeshya classes came to consider themselves as superior to the Shudras. The latter consequently developed an inferiority complex. On the other hand, some political leaders, motivated by selfish interests, established their "vote banks" by playing on the feelings of caste and religious differences. From time to time, in order to safeguard their "vote banks" and increase their numbers, these politicians resurrect the ghost of caste and religious sentiments. To achieve their goals, they manipulate and incite violent riots leading to murder and arson. They have indeed plumbed the depths of human degradation.

We humans are the children of one God. Parama Purus'a, the Supreme Father, is one for all of us and Parama Prakrti is our Divine Mother. So why should there be any discrimination amongst brethren? These rigid distinctions of caste and creed have been carefully created by men to serve their own interests. These sentiments help them to perpetuate their rule over the masses. Their aim is purely a selfish one, to gain power and establish their supremacy. From its very inception, Baba's mission took up the challenge of uprooting this concept of caste distinction from the social consciousness. It raised the slogan: "Ek chula, ek chowka, ek manava samaja" ("One kitchen, one home, one human society").

Besides this, all those who continued to adorn themselves with the

signs and emblems of caste distinctions were declared unfit for initiation. So it was that those who continued to wear the sacred thread, or wore the unshaven lock of hair on the head, were refused diiksha, initiation. In this aspect Baba stands apart from His contemporaries. His role is unique, for He initiated a new era in the history of human society. For this He often had to face grave opposition and had to put up with slander and calumny. But He never compromised on His principles. In fact, this uncompromising strictness in upholding His principles was one of the most illuminating aspects of His personality.

Baba fiercely opposed all sentiments of caste distinction. He would be enraged if a sadhaka or a non-sadhaka was instrumental in encouraging or reviving this sentiment. One can recall many such incidents that took place in His lifetime. They are now well known. This one however is yet an untold story. The incident took place in Jamalpur.

One day, as per His daily routine Baba left His home at the opportune time and was proceeding towards the ashram. Accompanying Him was Dasharath Dada, "the one who possessed the enchanted telescope".

On the way they came across a big crowd that had gathered in front of a house. The atmosphere was grave and solemn. Feigning curiosity, Baba turned to Dasharath Dada and said, "Dasharath! Go and see what has happened – why is there such a crowd?" After making inquiries, Dasharathji conveyed to Baba that this was the house of a supposedly high-class Brahmin family. The head of the family had just expired and the entire family was overcome by grief and sadness. Relatives and friends had all gathered in mourning. The body of the deceased was being prepared for its final journey.

Baba heard all this as though He was unaware of what had taken place. As He continued to walk ahead, He turned to Dasharathji and said, "Dasharath! Look carefully and see what is the future path of progress for this disembodied mind".

Dasharath Dada had already been graced with the gift of omniscience. As he walked alongside Baba, he utilized his power and replied, "Baba! It has regressed. In the next birth it will get the body of a dog". Thereupon Baba went on to expose the real character of the deceased person. He said that although this patriarch was a prominent member of the Brahmin community, he had acquired no virtue, nor practiced any piety in his life. In fact he had fallen prey to the mental disease of excessive greed and self-gratification. Goaded by these propensities, all his actions had been sinful and wicked. He never reflected or pondered over his misdeeds. He remained lost to the world, intoxicated by his arrogance and pride derived from his Brahmin lineage. He was obsessed with the vanity of his Brahmin caste, and had developed an exaggerated sense of his superiority.

Baba went on to say, "Now when he will be reborn as a dog, what will be his state? That false sense of pride that he had in his 'lofty status', ultimately where did it get him? In spite of being a Brahmin, in his next life he will be born as a dog. What did he stand to gain? All through his life he treated the lower castes with scorn. He would disdainfully tell them to keep away from him. He was consumed with hatred and mistakenly nurtured a false sense of vanity of caste superiority. In spite of his Brahmin status, in his next life he will be a dog. All the false arrogance and conceit of Brahminhood will now be demolished. In spite of being born a Brahmin he was unable to imbibe the true spirit of Brahminhood. Just imagine his state in his next life when he takes on the body of a dog. If perchance that same dog were to stray into a gathering of Brahmins, will they not treat him as an untouchable and drive him away? With that the entire arrogant concept of "untouchability" will be rendered meaningless. Those very people whom he hitherto considered to be untouchables will also desist from having any

contact with him. Consumed as he was by his caste mentality, what did this Brahmin gain in his life? In fact he lost everything.

"Human beings should gladly accept and acknowledge the ideal of unity and equality of all men. One should draw perennial inspiration from the thought that the Supreme Father is the Supreme Spirit. With this in mind one should go ahead performing good and virtuous deeds. Herein lies man's humanity. This is the real Dharma of mankind. This truly is Sanatana Dharma. This

12/04/2009 :: 04:48:16 PM

Dr. Umakant Says:

A Clarification and a Sincere Apology!

"It does not mean to say that he had no interest in catering to other pressing issues". This is the correct wording that should be read in my earlier comment (no.13) on this matter.

12/04/2009 :: 04:40:42 PM

Dr. Umakant Says:

"I have never claimed to be a universal leader of suffering humanity. The problem of the untouchables is quite enough for my slender strength. I do not say that other causes are not equally noble. But knowing that life is short, one can only serve one cause and I have never aspired to do more than serve the Untouchables." These were the words of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. It does mean to say that he had no interest in catering to other pressing issues. The Constitution of India is a great and living example of his contribution to making India a modern and progressive country. It is always easy and convenient for non-Dalits to raise 'other issues' when they are confronted with issues related to caste based discrimination/violence and thereby they always try to delegitimize the core and fundamental issues related to caste based inequality, discrimination and exclusion of multiple kinds. Prof. Ramaiah's interview on World Focus should be seen in a particular context of issues related to caste based discrimination, exclusion and the continuing violence that is perpetrated on Dalits every day. Every 18 minutes a crime is committed against Dalits, this figure is compiled by the National Crime Record Bureau of the Government of India and also reiterated by none other than Mr. Veerappa Moily, the Union Law Minister in a public meeting in New Delhi (See, Moily presents a gloomy picture of rule of law, Times of India, New Delhi, 27 November 2009). Mr. Moily was certainly raising this issue in a general context wherein he also talked about vulnerable situation of women, children and other disadvantaged groups. No one including Prof. Ramaiah is trying to underestimate/belittle other pressing issue that warrants urgent attention from political establishments both at national and international level. Infact the Appeal Letter issued by the Amnesty International US has mentioned a host of several critical issues that should have been taken up during the bilateral dialogue between President Barack Obama and Dr. Manmohan Singh. As a matter of fact none of those issues were taken up during the meetings which took place at the White House. There are other groups too which had raised their issues of concern. Prof. Ramaiah's interview on World Focus is on a specific issue which is slowly and steadily gaining global recognition. Criticising Prof. Ramaiah and other Dalit Rights Advocates in an "Out of Context" situation is definitely an example of caste hindu's arrogance and nothing else. Why blame Prof. Ramaiah for raising Dalit issues and ignoring other issues? Is this not an attempt to delegitimize Dalit's claim for excellence at national and international level??? Prof. Ramaiah's interview and even the acts of Dalit Rights Advocate are not an attempt at making any kind of "generalizations" or "Sweeping Statements", an accusation that is being hurled with a clear intent of delegitimizing Dalit's claim for equality, justice and accountability.

12/04/2009 :: 03:02:20 PM

Dr. Umakant Says:

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12/04/2009 :: 10:32:51 AM

Dr.P.Ilango Says:

No one can deny the fact that there is discrimination against Dalits in different regions of India and that there are atrocities and acts of violence and human rights violations against Dalits, happening here and there in the country. The point I'm trying to make is that there may be many such matters of grave concern within the context of a particular country all of which can not be addressed by the leaders during bilateral meetings. For example, of late, there is certainly an upsurge in maoist and naxalite extremist activities claiming or affecting hundreds of lives in many regions. If Dalit issue is so important to be included in a bilateral dialogue, is it not important to include even the concerns relating to the escalation of naxalite or maoist activities? We should not make broad generalizations or sweeping statements while arguing these things. What I need to be convinced are facts and figures relating to the Dalit population, their educational attainments, occupation-wise distribution, the percentage of Dalit households which have benefitted from the government's reservation policies, exact facts and figures relating to violence or atrocities against Dalits and exact statistics showing that there is widespread discrimination against Dalits in all walks of life in India. While we talk about 'Conspiracy of Silence', I think, we should also be aware of an uncomfortable 'Culture of Silence' among certain sections of non-Dalits who, in spite of their caliber, skills and accomplishments, may not be able to reach the top echelons of society and suffer silently and there is also the other extreme of certain members of the Dalit communities who have already reached very high positions trying to push their own 'agenda' everywhere and also suppress the non-Dalits and do all they can to prevent them from coming up, which is silently endured due to fear of being branded as 'anti-Dalit' or something like that.

12/03/2009 :: 09:17:09 PM

JC Says:

Wow, Dalits are still being treated as sub-human in India. 250 million of them? That's almost the population of the US. India will never be a true super-power if you guys still keep doing this to your own people. You used to have a great religion which do away with Caste System - Buddhism - and you banish it from your lands. Unless you guys reform Hinduism, China will beat you guys and India will forever be second-class world citizens, no matter how many nukes you have or how rich your upper castes become.

12/02/2009 :: 11:04:25 PM

Dr. Kasi Eswarappa Says:

I am totally agree with Prof Ramaiah sir and also want to say that discrimination of dalit bahujans has become everyday phenomenon in India and it is even more in the higher education institutions of India such as IIMs, IITs and other scientific institutions.

It is very sad that even after 65 years of independence the situation of dalit bahujans have not changed much. It is pity on the part of Indian government and leaders to claim that they have become global leader/power. Unless you change the present scene of the dalit-bahujans your success is mere waste.

12/02/2009 :: 02:58:03 PM

Dr. Umakant Says:

Prof. Ramaiah has very rightly pointed about the glaring omission of issues related to caste based discrimination in the bilateral dialogue between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. It is wrong to emphasise that issues related to caste based discrimination is limited in its scope and that is why it should not form part of bilateral dialogue between India and other countries or even at global forums like UN, EU, World Bank etc.

Issues/matters which affects a great chunk of humanity, approximately around 300 million at global level out of which close to 170 million are in India itself, are gaining global recognition, whether one likes it or not. One also need to be reminded that appeal to President Obama to raise issues related to caste based discrimination, is actually a reminder to President Obama about the US House con. Resolution no. 139 which calls on the United States government to work with India to address the problem of untouchability by raising the issue of caste discrimination through diplomatic channels and encouraging US businesses, USAID, the State Department, World Bank, and other US programs and organizations working in India to take every possible measure to ensure Dalits are included and are not discriminated against in their programming. (<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=hc110-139>). Dalits are not asking for any charity, rather it is a call for parity. Issues related to caste based discrimination, exclusion and every day violation of human rights of Dalits have remained out of global discourse for a long time mainly due to a "Conspiracy of Silence" on part of the political/intellectual establishment including media and the civil society at large both at the national and international level. The global dimension of issues related to caste/descent based discrimination has been affirmed by several UN bodies in recent years. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Dr. Navanethem Pillay also gave a clarion call to 'Tear Down the Wall of Caste' in an opinion piece in the month of October 2009 (<http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/28F485EBDDDEC9D6C125765400557905?opendocument>). It is certainly wrong to accuse Prof. Ramaiah and other Dalit Rights Advocate for being subjective while raising issues related to growing caste based violence. Caste based discrimination/violence is not confined only to rural areas, rather it is a phenomenon which happens on a sustained basis in multiple forms in varying degrees both in rural as well as urban settings. Deliberate ignorance is a privilege which is enjoyed by the defenders and practitioners of caste system only and not by the victims/survivors of caste tyranny and not even by Dalit Rights Advocates.

12/02/2009 :: 12:07:13 PM

Niila Keshava Says:

It is a paradox that we are though of as having spiritual knowledge, yet have a caste system. The fact is we are morally behind the West and we do not practice our spiritual knowledge in religion or on the practical level. According to Brahma concept, all are the progeny of one Supreme progenitor. Therefore there should not be any social inequality as expressed in the caste system. According to modern biology, we have common ancestors; therefore Brahmin Caste must come from the Monkey Caste! It is time for social justice and it is time for morality in our society. They we can be proud to be an Indian – not before.

12/02/2009 :: 11:08:41 AM

Professor P. Ilango Says:

Professor Ramaiah has expressed his anguish over the lack of emphasis on the human rights issues, particularly the violence against Dalits in the discussions between Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and American President Barack Obama. He has mentioned that the two leaders focused on Afghanistan/Pakistan, the fight against terrorism, global warming, economic development and nuclear proliferation and thus the scope for discussion of caste was very limited. I feel that the two leaders would have had to restrict to issues of a global nature affecting the whole humanity. While I do share Professor Ramaiah's sentiments concerning the Dalit issues, I find it hard to believe that there is

widespread ill treatment of Dalits all over the country. With the reservation policy, a large number of Dalits have pursued education and reached top administrative positions in the country. The atrocities against Dalits by Non-Dalits are happening in some remote pockets, particularly, in the rural areas. In urban areas, despite some subtle forms of caste-based discrimination here and there, we don't see blatant violations of human rights of the Dalits. While I acknowledge the existence of discrimination and violence against Dalits in different forms and at varying levels with different magnitude in different regions of the country, I think one needs to have a balanced view of the whole matter and first of all collect facts and figures relating to the issue and then objectively analyse the situation rather than making broad generalizations just going by our own subjective impressions and sentiments. For example, as far as the statistics relating to crimes against Dalits are concerned, I feel that the increase between 2004 and 2007 could be just a reflection of the overall trend of increasing crime rate in the country rather than a reflection of the increase in crimes against Dalits. All that I am saying is that we need to be very objective, scientifically disinterested and emotionally detached while dealing with issues such as this.

12/02/2009 :: 10:03:51 AM

ASOKAN PAPPU Says:

The message and feelings of Professor Ramaiah Avatthi on the atrocity happening on the Dalits people is highly valued and at this juncture it is paramount important to address for further tangible framework, legislative monitoring pro-active mechanism to avoid any irreversible damages occur along with the other global issues and challenges.

12/01/2009 :: 11:48:59 PM

KIRIT PARMAR Says:

Professor Ramaiahji, truly highlighted current scenario of untouchables who are living in India and oversea. Mr.Manmohan Sing himself has two under privileged status i.e. migrated to India during partition and belongs to religious minority. He himself witnessed the atrocities of upper castes during 1947 and 1982-84. Then we need to respect his political vulnerabilities though he is genius in all aspects.
thank you very much Sir for your eye opener responses for the human rights activities i.e. gods and goddess.

12/01/2009 :: 11:01:47 PM

Dr.V.Sethuramalingam Says:

Professor Ramaiah refelcted the real picture of Indian Caste System. He illustrated states like Haryana for caste based attractities. I would like to say that the practice of caste system worst southern states of india.

Here is the answer for the question " Why do crimes against Dalits continue unabated, despite powerful laws against atrocities? Is the law ineffective — or the government?"

IT IS BECAUSE OF THE INDIFFERENT ATTITUDE OF THE LAW ENFORCING AUTHIORITYES.

12/01/2009 :: 06:30:32 PM

SS Roma Says:

india and cina r danger for the world economy.....POWER FOR EUROPE FROM ROMA

12/01/2009 :: 06:03:01 PM

Matha Goram Says:

True to his nature PM Manmohan Singh has gone on unprecedented record to espouse the causes of the disadvantaged including the Dalits and other minorities. The absence of quantitative progress is sad commentary that in a democracy winner takes all - survival of the fittest.

12/01/2009 :: 05:33:02 PM

priyakarthik Says:

Hi all!!!!!!

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