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No temple entry for dalits in Gujarat

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Vijaysinh Parmar , TNN 7 December 2009, 04:21am IST

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AHMEDABAD: Sunday was Dr B R Ambedkar's death anniversary, 'Nirwan Diwas' as Dalits call it. And we hate to be doing this. But the bubble of a Vibrant Gujarat needs a prick in the bottom. At the lowest level of the society, Gujarat is not happy. Untouchability still exists in various forms in Gujarat.

In a first-of-its-kind study on a large scale, representing 98,000 Dalits across 1,655 villages in Gujarat. it comes out that 97 % respondents feel they have 'no entry' at certain places in their own villages, including a temple or where a religious ceremony is taking place.

Mahatma Gandhi himself wrote about the problem of untouchability in Gujarat when he set about establishing a base in Ahmedabad. He said in his writings that when he insisted on keeping a Dalit ('Harijan' as he insisted on calling them) in his ashram here, people started shying away. Even sponsors developed cold feet and funds started drying up. Babu put his foot down and had his way.

Almost 95 years later, Gujarat is still not listening to the Mahatma even as the world tuned in. The bar for Dalits is felt at not only temples but also 'satsangs' and 'kathas'. At these religious events, not being able to sit on a cot/chair with other upper castes, has been clearly established as a sign of untouchability.

The study has been carried out by Ahmedabad-based Navsarjan Trust with three US-based organisations — the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the [University](#) of Notre Dame, Indiana, Dartmouth College at the University of Michigan and Robert F. Kennedy Centre for Social Justice and Human Rights, Washington, DC.

"This is the first study on such a large sample size and we covered 99 forms of untouchability that are still practised in villages. There are 12,500 villages in Gujarat where Dalits live. We have covered 1,655 of these villages and around 11 per cent of the total Dalit population," says Manjula Pradeep, director of Navsarjan Trust.

During the study, the researchers did not find a single village where no form of untouchability is practised, giving an unnerving idea about the extent of the problem in a state which is home to Mahatma Gandhi. Ahmedabad-based social scientist Prof Ghanshyam Shah, a retired professor from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, who has studied the problem of untouchability in detail, also assisted in the research.

Prof Shah says, "Dalits face untouchability at religious places the most because the concept of untouchability has been centered around religion and 'purity'. It may seem for urban middle classes that many things have changed, but the ground reality is harsh till today."

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Dalit kids shamed at mid-day meals

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MODHVANA (SURENDRANAGAR): As a part of Gunotsav, about 3,000 government officials had fanned out across Gujarat last month to ensure quality education in primary schools.

They perhaps missed out on the untouchability practised in schools. As per the 'Census on Untouchability', a study representing 98,000 Dalits across 1,655 villages in Gujarat, 53.78% Dalit children studying in primary schools are discriminated against in mid-day meals.

"We are made to sit separately during the lunch hour," says Vijay Sitapara, 9, who belongs to the Valmiki caste, the lowest of the socially downtrodden. Vijay, who studies in class IV at the government primary school in Modhvana, says schoolmates from other castes avoid having food with them.

While other backward class children would still have food, though seated separately from the Dalits, higher caste pupils stay away altogether from mid-day meals at this school because the food is cooked by a Dalit. "I come from a Dalit family. Naturally, higher caste members will not eat what I cook," says Gauri Vankar.

Even as the syllabus teaches equality, students learn lessons in untouchability in practice. All Dalit students are forbidden from participating in cultural events. Valmikis have to also clean up school toilets. Dharmendra Sitapara cleaned up the toilets since he was in class IV. Now, he is in high school which has a sweeper.

"It is shameful that we are nurturing these prejudices at such an early age in the temples of learning," says Ganshyam Shah, a social scientist who assisted the study carried out by Ahmedabad-based Navsarjan Trust with three US-based organisations - the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, Dartmouth College at the University of Michigan and Robert F Kennedy Centre for Social Justice and Human Rights, Washington, DC. "Sadly, the very tools to eradicate discrimination have become carriers. They are helping sustain age-old caste systems," says Martin Macwan, a Dalit rights activist.

Hair loss!

Shyam Sitapara, 8, of village Modhvana, Surendranagar, dropped out of the government primary school after class II because students, mostly from upper castes, started taunting him for his long hair. Shyam lost his mother at an early age and his father is a landless labourer. Valmiki kids grow their hair till a special ritual is performed at a community temple. But his father does not have the money to perform the ceremony and host a community feast. He now just roams around the school, longing to go inside, but afraid of the humiliation he may face.

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