



FULL STORY

They label me outcast

By Renee Cummings

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To die before the world knows you are alive is an existence Asha Zechariah knows all too well. In her 34 years, she has witnessed death in all its forms. Reluctantly, she has come to terms with an eerie reality that death could be a happier place.

'Experiencing dominance from birth to death from the upper castes; submission becomes everyday life. Submitting to the upper castes is accepted as our fate. But its fatalistic,' she says. 'We are outsiders, outside of the mainstream, we are outcasts, we are Dalits,' she laments; explaining that to be Dalit and to be Indian was a different meaning.

For Zechariah and a community of over 170 million Dalits who live in India; isolation is more than an emotional space it is a status within the state of India; a hideous truth where to be born Dalit is to be born less than human.

'It is the worst form of indignity and humiliation you can suffer,' she says as she explains what it feels like to be born invisible. She grew up in the shadows of Indian life into a community that has been victimised, bonded, and spiritually destroyed; without ever putting up a resistance.

Shut out from the world by an invisible door fortified by centuries of discrimination and prejudice, Dalits live in separate communities called colonies that are located outside the villages. Dalits cannot marry anyone from another caste or step into the homes of the upper castes,' she continues as she explains how India's caste system works.



Dalit children studying

'It has evolved over generations and centuries. If you are born into any other caste you are pure and clean but with Dalits there is a notion of impurity and pollution,' she says as she speaks in the most real terms of 'this great injustice' perpetrated on the fiction of blood purity.

It is the inability of that society to view Dalits as equal which troubles Zechariah most. 'If you are a Dalit, you are untouchable, it means I cannot touch you if I do you will be unclean. A Dalit cannot cross the path of a Brahmin,' she says nonchalantly. But shocked, I'm forced to stop her. 'And why is that?' I ask. 'Oh my God, the Dalit will be killed or the Brahmin will have to clean himself both by washing and with prayer,' she says, 'It will be extreme violence against the Dalit.'

It is an awful truth inflicted on millions of innocent people when all that makes this world worth living is guaranteed to all but you. 'You are taught to look at yourself with shame,' she says as she takes her time to break down the Hindu caste system. 'Brahmin are the priest caste, Kshatriya the warriors, Vaishya the business caste and Shudra the worker caste. Dalits do the menial tasks like cleaning the villages and moving dead carcasses,' she adds embarrassed.

Dalits have lived through generations of injustice at the hands of people who look just like them. She calls the age-old tradition of discrimination 'Brahminical hegemony.' 'Dalits remain outside of the four castes. It is Hindu caste order out of the Manusmriti an ancient Hindu book that prescribed social segregation,' she says. 'Dalits are excluded with limited awareness of our rights, culturally, socially, economically,' she adds. 'We remain in bonded labour, taking small pieces of land for credit. We remain bonded for several generations.'

She shares some of the most humiliating stories. 'Brooms were tied behind the backs of a Dalit so when he's walking he can sweep up his footsteps.' Her eyes were wet and her voice woeful. 'Those were the extreme forms of untouchability,' she adds. As though, she was reading from a shopping list, one after the other, she listed the many forms of discrimination Dalits experienced and continue to endure. 'No access to temples, no access to equal education and health care. There are reported cases of health care workers not going into Dalit homes to immunise and vaccinate Dalit children.'

'Dalit children are forced to sit in the back of the class and the teachers do not monitor their work, or give them homework; and they are being asked to clean the toilets in school,' she says. She pauses and takes a deep breath. 'The teachers come from the upper caste and although children from different castes are coming together in the school the teachers are still keeping them apart; ensuring Dalit children get no skills.'

To be fixed in a position of permanent inferiority combined with economic stagnation is where the Dalit stands. Woven into India's social order, there is a long history, a centuries old refusal to consider Dalits as fellow human beings. 'No one in India can deny caste based discrimination,' she tells me. 'The only thing they offer is that things are changing,' she says but is quick to add "not fast enough." Å

'The denial of opportunity in a hierarchal society where we are segregated and exploited; where privilege has been grabbed away from you and it is now only a hope and where you have to accept all of this as life,' she says is what it means to be born into the lowest caste, to be born an outcast in your own country.

Zechariah is adamant that it is a different, more demeaning, more painful, form of discrimination that Dalits experience; where to be Dalit is to be born shackled to an inferiority complex imposed by a political and social order so deeply encrypted on the Dalit psyche that 'to be cursed and spit on' is simply considered life. 'It goes so far back, it is so deep, it often goes unnoticed. It is too deeply engrained,' she says. 'Dalit culture is struggle,' she adds.

To develop an identity within this context is a challenge Zechariah continues to struggle with even though she was spared some of the many hardships inflicted on Dalits. It turned into a moment of great difficulty when I asked her what it means to be Dalit. 'Dalit means broken, crushed. We are an exploited, crushed group; that is the Dalit identity,' she adds as her eyes well up with tears.

She swallows hard to push the tears back.

It is a fundamental conflict that she struggles with daily as Zechariah strives to reconcile being a citizen of India and being born Dalit. 'The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments give special provisions for representation of Indian women and Dalits into local self-government bodies,' she says with an amused exasperation.

'But Dalits are not allowed to contest elections and when they do and win the seat as an elected member they go into the office and the seat for them to sit in is missing and that is only when they are actually allowed to enter the

office.'

'Citizenship is guaranteed by the Indian constitution but for Dalits it is not participative,' she says. 'So what do you feel when you look at your passport,' I ask. 'I see only a national identity,' she says. 'But most Dalit women do not have passports. They don't even imagine getting a passport. Mobility is so limited; most never move out of the community, they have only now started to get election cards and job cards, but not passports.'

To be Dalit is to live without imagination. 'You see yourself in relation to what you are not or what you can never be,' she says. 'We are outsiders, outside of the mainstream,' she laments. What pains her is that most Dalits are unaware of their rights and continue to live in the shadows of Indian life stigmatised and stereotyped by the negative images which society has imposed and which poverty has reinforced.

'Dalit women are trafficked for sex work,' she says.

Although changes have been made to the constitution of India, in reality they read as abstractions.

'In 2002, in Karnataka State, in Kambapalli village, eight members of a family were burnt alive over a land dispute. Villagers still live in thatched roof huts so it was easily set on fire. All the civil society groups got involved but the upper caste people paid them off and covered up the whole case,' she says. 'The case is in front the high court but there is still no response from the judiciary,' she adds in frustration.

'There have been public protests, mass demonstrations, but in a case of such extreme violence, why are we getting no response from the judiciary. Should we go to an international court of law is what we are trying to figure out,' she adds.

The daughter of a university professor and a mother who worked as a library assistant, Zechariah was fortunate to grow up in West India, the city of Pune, in Maharashtra state, where she was spared some of the trauma of living the life she was pre-destined to live. Her parents had mustered the courage and the cash to leave that life way behind.

'I was lucky, my parents migrated from the rural areas,' she says. 'If they didn't move I would be in one of the native villages where girls cannot complete their education and are forced to drop out of school because there are no facilities, no security; and to go to school you risk violence, rape or murder.'

Ten years ago, she graduated with a master's degree in social work and now works as a Human Rights Activist to bring international awareness to the injustices Dalits face. She came face-to-face with the horrors of Dalit life, at 24, when she started working in a night shelter operated by a non-governmental organisation; providing after-hours care to the children of prostitutes and other sex workers in Bombay's red light district.

'It gave me a lot of time for introspection. It made me think. I started to question myself; asking myself why? I kept questioning the fundamental reasons people were unable to move out of a particular life situation. It confused me,' she says as she explains how her family and friends just could not understand why she was so interested in an existence from which she was saved.

Her desperate search for answers to her many questions set her on the road, sometimes, travelling 15 to 20 days, in every month, to villages, to speak to rural women and document their concerns. 'The stories were the same. They had no control of their lives or their bodies or their thinking. Control was taken away by their husbands or their husband's family,' she says as she recounts how her new found awareness changed her thinking and propelled her out of social work and into human rights advocacy. 'I got involved with another NGO where I learned about channelling resources, finances, and planning campaigns and then a friend introduced me to the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights,' she recounts.

Zechariah represents a new vanguard of university educated Dalits ready to penetrate the mainstream and create dramatic impact by making the invisible visible. 'I must do something to bring opportunity to Dalits. The community is still unaware of its rights, still ignorant, and so scared to ask for our entitlement,' she says as she speaks with extraordinary optimism of her hope that Dalits will attain the self-respect and economic development that was denied them by the circumstances of being prejudiced at birth.

She is also optimistic that one day soon, in her lifetime, there will be a peaceful resolution and a shift in the balance of power. 'Dalits are very tolerant and accepting. We are full of grace that comes from a deep sense of tolerance,' she adds. 'And this is a good thing or else there would be huge blood shed. India has a population of about 1.25 Billion, Brahmin makes up two to three per cent and Dalit 20 per cent,' she says. 'There are about 300 Million Dalit across Asia.' It is here that she highlights the importance of the work she does in human rights training and reversing a psyche of oppression

She arrived in Trinidad, last Sunday, to participate in the Commonwealth People's Forum, a meeting of civil society groups; that precedes the Commonwealth Head of State Meeting (CHOGM), organised by the Commonwealth Foundation. The day after she arrived, she presented a position paper, at the Democracy and Governance Assembly, on Integrated Self-Governance through Participation of Dalits. It was well received. She returned to India, on Thursday.

Every nation has a sin or two. And leaders have a way they ignore what they care for the world not to see. But Dalit communities are living examples of cruelty, abuse, disappointment, doubt, bondage, hardship and inhumanity. There is an irrational contempt for Dalits, of inferiority and servitude, deeply embedded into India's psyche. It is a prejudice into which a Dalit is born.

'But where is the moral responsibility?' she asks. 'There are tears, pain, and frustration but there is also joy, we are a close knit community that comes together; no matter what there is still joy in our community. It is our only motivation or we would not be here.'

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abuse therapist. She is also a television and radio personality who just cannot get journalism out of her blood.
