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Untouchability still prevalent in rural Gujarat: survey

Manas Dasgupta



AP A woman of the Ramnami sect of untouchables, who tattooed their entire bodies with the name of the lord for not being allowed to enter a temple. File photo
Despite tall talk of progress and development, the practice of untouchability is still prevalent in rural areas of Gujarat.

This was found in a survey by the Navsarjan Trust and the Robert F. Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights. It was carried out over three years in randomly selected 1,589 villages in the State. The compiled report of the findings was released here on Wednesday by University Grants Commission Chairman S.K. Thorat.

The report said that not only was untouchability practised against Dalits by caste Hindus, it was practised by the relatively 'upper' sub-caste Dalits against the 'lower' sub-caste Dalits. It said while 98 forms of untouchability was practised by caste Hindus against the Dalits, 99 forms of caste discrimination was found within the Dalit sub-castes.

Giving a few examples, the report said a Dalit woman was "assaulted" for trying to take part in a village "garba" dance organised by caste Hindus. Even the sarpanch, if he happened to be a Dalit, was expected to sit on the ground while caste Hindu panchayat members sat on a pedestal. The Dalit passengers were required to vacate the seats in government-owned State transport buses for non-Dalit passengers.

Marriages

It said inter-caste marriage was strictly prohibited in 98.4 per cent of the villages and such marriages within the Dalit sub-castes was found banned in 99.1 per cent of the villages. Any violation of the "rule" would invariably attract a violent reprimand against the defying couple, who were often forced to leave the village. Even in tea kiosks, cups and saucers were kept separately for the Dalits and such customers were required to clean their own utensils before putting the same back in the rack meant for the Dalits.

In schools, separate sitting arrangements were made for caste Hindus and Dalits for mid-day meal schemes. Dalit students were not served water in schools. They were expected to go home or carry their own water with them.

"The report shows that the existing legal system has failed to address the problem of untouchability and it is time for human rights activists to act strongly," Navsarjan Trust executive director Manjula Pradeep said.

98 forms of untouchability practised by caste Hindus while 99 forms of discrimination found within Dalits

Inter-caste marriage strictly prohibited in 98.4 %; similar prohibition among Dalits in 99.1 % villages

Keywords: [Untouchability](#), [human rights](#), [Dalits](#), [Gujarat](#)

Untouchability still prevails across Gujarat: study



Written by NT Network

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AHMEDABAD: Caste-based discrimination against Dalits is widespread across Gujarat, the land of Mahatama Gandhi, even 60 years after India became a republic, says a study.

“Untouchability continues to penetrate numerous aspects of daily life with Dalits facing discrimination at almost every level from access to education and medical facilities to restrictions on where they can live and what jobs they can have,” the study said.

The study was undertaken over three years by Navsarjan Trust, the largest state-level organisation that promotes rights of Dalits, and the Robert F Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights.

The 53-page report, released by the University Grants Commission Chairman, Prof S K Thorat here on Wednesday, was based on intense research and data collected by 106 Navsarjan activists from 5,462 survey respondents across 1,589 villages in Gujarat, covering almost all known untouchability practices including communal, caste-based and religious life, food and touch. The data from other states was not collected for the report- ‘Understanding untouchability: A comprehensive study of practices and conditions’, the Navsarjan Trust executive director, Ms Manuja Pradeep told UNI.

“Segregation of housing, drinking water wells, places of religious worships and separate sitting arrangement in schools and public events by untouchables and caste-Hindus continues to be nearly universally practised across villages in Gujarat, despite national laws banning such actions,” the report said.

The report outlines a pattern of persistent discrimination not only against Dalits by members of non-Dalit castes, but even between sub-castes of Dalits.

The report was envisioned by 2000 RFK Human Rights award Laureate Mr Martin Macwan, the team members of Navsarjan and RFK global advocacy team members, including Dr Christian Davenport, Professor of the University of Notre Dame, and Dr David Armstrong of the University of Michigan.

The study outlines a framework for quantifying a diverse range of human rights abuses against Dalits, collecting data and conducting analysis that surpasses all previous examinations of the issue.

“Understanding untouchability is crucial to ending untouchability. Dalits face untouchability in every aspect of their lives. By lifting the veil of ignorance we have no excuse not to end it,” said Mr Macwan, founder of the Navsarjan Trust and 2000 RFK Human Rights Award Laureate. “The study provides not only new data but a framework for the unpacking of the complexities of untouchability. We hope this new approach will help bring the development of solutions within the grasp of government officials, activists, religious institutions and all of society,” said Dr Davenport, a co-author of the study.

For millennia, the practice of untouchability has relegated a sector of Indian society to a life marked by humiliation and indignity. These practices were sanctioned by the dominant religion in India, Hinduism, in its most important texts (the Vedas and Manusmriti), but are not practised by members of all religions.

Legally caste discriminations were abolished by the Constitution and subsequent legislation, including the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976, and the Prevention of Atrocity Act, 1989, which punishes those non-Dalits who continue this discrimination. The issue continues to be one of the most politically divisive issues in the country.

“Caste-based discrimination is the most complex human rights issue facing India today. It is our hope that these findings will provide critical data for the Dalit movement to shape its interventions, for the government of India to seriously and systematically examine and address its own gaps in ending discrimination, and for the international community to apply similar approaches to ending discrimination globally,” said Ms Monika Kalra Varma, Director of the RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights.

“This study provides advocates with the information they need to see strengths and weaknesses in the current laws protecting the human rights of Dalits. The continued prevalence of these demeaning and hateful practices across all

communities shows that the legal system is failing to address untouchability, including between the Dalit sub-castes, and the time for action is now," said Ms Pradeep.

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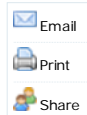
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Untouchability is still practised in Swarnim Gujarat: Report

Paras Jha / DNA

Thursday, January 28, 2010 8:51 IST

Ahmedabad: For Dalit communities in Gujarat and in the country, even after 60 years of India becoming a republic and 50 years of Gujarat becoming independent, nothing has changed much. A study conducted by Navsarjan and Robert F Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights, revealed that nearly 98% untouchability is practiced by Non Dalits (ND) on Dalits for serving tea and more than 97% in matters such as touching articles of worship, during Katha, religious services by ND priests, temple entry etc.



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The result of the study was released on Wednesday by Prof. Sukhdev Thorat, chairman, University Grants Commission at Gujarat Vidyapith, in presence of social scientist prof. Ghanshyam Shah, Gujarat Vidyapith, vice-chancellor prof. Sudarshan Iyengar, retired Justice of Rajasthan High Court, AP Ravani, Central University of Gujarat Vice-Chancellor prof. RK Kale, social activist Indukumar Jani, Dalit activist and founder of Navsarjan Martin Macwan and Navsarjan's executive director Manjula Pradeep.

Appreciating the study, the experts expressed the dire need for action to be taken to eradicate this 3000-year-old practice of untouchability and social discrimination. Prof. Thorat said, "This is a widespread study, so it can't be questioned and may be applicable to other areas of the state also. This study reflects the reality of Gujarat's social situation."

Indukumar Jani said, "This report has thrown light on the fact that our age old mentality has not yet changed. Caste system will only be eradicated if the citizens of the country are sensitised."

Sudarshan Iyengar said that, "though we are celebrating Swarnim Gujarat, looking at the facts revealed in the study is like spoiling good fish with an ill sauce. Social distances between Non-Dalits and Dalits had reduced when Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb

Ambedkar were alive, but after their death the situation has not been changed."

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