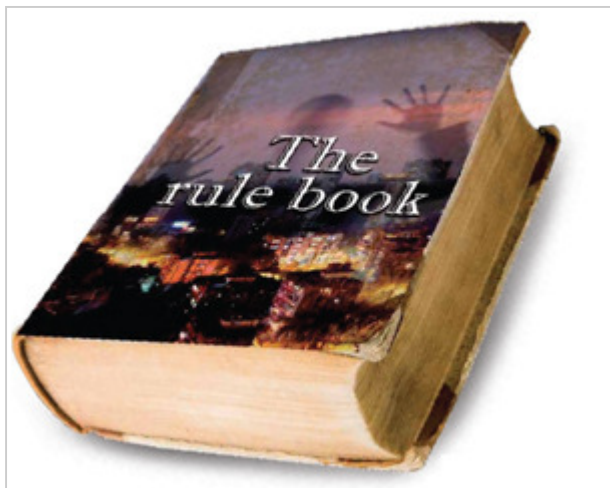


## Urban rules of untouchability

Wednesday, 03 November 2010 10:28



There is a polite silence around exclusion based on caste that happens in the cities. We trace the unstated rules through which it operates

By nisary mahesh and Asha menon

This is an exercise in mapping silence. In the cities, there is an unstated code that keeps some people apart. It is not polite to voice it, because the urbane believe themselves to be liberal and free of traditional biases.

However, untouchability — any form of exclusion based on caste — is prevalent in the cities. We trace the rules through which it operates by talking to people who are at the receiving end — the 'untouchables' of urban India.

### Rule 1

**A good place to start is the capital city. Here, your house broker will mysteriously become too busy for you if you are a Dalit.**

When Anoop Kumar was in his late twenties, he went house hunting with this friend. "We went to Gautam Nagar through a broker. The assistant of the broker showed me the place and we liked it. When we began negotiating for the rent, the broker asked us our caste. I said I am a Dalit and immediately there was a change of tone. The broker said that he needs to reconsider it, that he will need to talk to the landlord, that they nearly fixed another tenant. Later we found that it was the broker's younger brother's flat. We fought with him over it, but we still did not get the house."

### Rule 2

**While looking for a house, be prepared for questions on your caste.**

Anila Jagdish and her two friends were looking for a house in the heart of Kochi, Kaloor. There were the usual questions posed to single women and then, came the direct question: "What is your caste?". "I did think it was odd, but we had to name our castes like the whole thing was not awkward or nothing out of the ordinary." Anoop has been living in Delhi for the past ten years and he now notices subtler ways in which landlords probe to find out his caste. "They ask me my full name, assess my ability to speak English and then the most familiar question would be about my eating habits — vegetarian or non-vegetarian." Geeta Menon, of Bengaluru based Stree Jagruti Samiti which works with unorganised workers, says, "Many non-Brahmin people have spoken to us about difficulty in getting a house on revealing their caste."

### Rule 3

**Neighbourhoods can be very choosy.**

In Kochi, land-holdings of Scheduled Castes are bought by real estate companies. In these neighbourhoods, anyone who refuses to part with their small land-holding are not welcome to stay as a 'sore sight'. Balan, who belongs to the Pulaya community, was asked to vacate his plot by a real estate tycoon who had purchased the surrounding plots for a mega project. Balan refused and today, he is being harassed for that. "The drainage water from the project is being pumped to my plot," he says. There is a legal dispute, but Balan has little hope. "They can easily with their money power."

### Rule 4

**Common pathways are not open to all.**

Several instances have been pointed out in Kochi where Scheduled Caste people are forbidden from sharing pathways with upper castes. Umesan, a member of Vela community residing in Ernakulam says how his family was denied the use of a pathway through an upper-caste person's plot. "I had acquired rights for use of the pathway, since my plot has no access to the main road. But recently a person from an upper caste purchased the plot through which the pathway runs and he blocked the way." The matter was taken to court with the help of Dalit Service Society and the court ruled in Umesan's favour.

### Rule 5

**It is best not to assert your Dalit identity.**

Anoop is a student of Jawaharlal Nehru University, an institute generally known for its liberal politics. He joined the college for post graduate studies in International Politics. During a session on reservation policy in India, majority of the upper caste students said it was wrong. "Angry at their stance, I stood up and shared my experience of being Dalit." Shockingly, Anoop was punished for it. "The next two years, none of the upper caste students spoke to me. If you speak

about caste, you are immediately seen as a cadre of Mayawati's party. It leads to hatred." In Kochi, Girija talks about the threats she received and the harassment she had to face from teachers at her law college for organising Dalit students to avail government grants. "I was quite good at studies, but they manipulated the internal assessment to punish me. I had to seek the help of Dalit Federations for justice."

#### **Rule 6**

**There are separate benches for different castes, even in reputed educational institutes.**

On November 5, Bandi Anusha (student of a prestigious college in Hyderabad) grew tired of being kept apart. Says her father. "She was made to sit alone at the front bench after her friends came to know of her Scheduled Caste status," he says. Anusha decided to put an end to it and she was convinced that the only way out of this was to kill herself. Allegedly, she announced her intention to her classmates and nobody stopped her. She stepped out and messaged her father "bye dad im gng to die."

#### **Rule 7**

**City planning officials will have no qualms about exploiting the caste divide in slums, often to the detriment of backward castes.**

In Chennai's Nochikuppam, Perumal's was one of the many families that sought relief after tsunami. But he, like the other Dalits in the fishing hamlet, realised that they would not be given a house by the sea (within city limits) since they were classified as "NF" (non-fishing) in government records. Dalits like many other backward communities in the hamlet were employed in activities that surround fishing — like cleaning the boats, selling fish, mending nets etc. They infact formed a majority in the hamlet. "To reduce the cost incurred to the government, the officials said that we would get it in the outskirts," says Perumal. "And they told the ooru (hamlet) leaders to campaign for that and not bother about us." The leaders were easily convinced, since they themselves were vulnerable to eviction from the city if they did not cooperate with the babudom.

#### **Rule 8**

**You may not be good enough to sit next to foreign clients or for a flight ticket.**

Rajen Dev came to Hyderabad to work for a prestigious IT firm. Over the years, he has noticed that he is not being treated on par with his peers. Sometimes it is the smaller things. "It is difficult for me to my flight expenses cleared. I will need to follow the official procedure, while my upper-caste colleagues get it cleared informally." Then, there is the client visit during which Rajen is not encouraged to mingle with them. "They invite me but never seat me next to them. It could be for want of command over English language." But Rajen fears there are larger implications. "I've been denied a promotion for the past four years though I've been the best performer. I sat with my seniors to discuss a development plan if the problem was with my work. But no one seemed interested."

That an urban corporate would be discriminatory based on caste should not come as a surprise. In 2007, S Madheswaran and Paul Attewell had written in Caste Discrimination in the Indian Urban Labour Market (for Economic and Political Weekly), based on evidence gathered from National Sample Survey, that "Discrimination (against SC/ST employees) seems to be much more resilient in the private than in the public sector..."

#### **Rule 9**

**The definition of 'merit' at work will not be inclusive.**

"Merit in private sector is often defined in terms of what a person scores in an English-based, written exam," says Venkat of Madras Institute of Development Studies. Break it down and the skills required — proficiency in English — are not often accessible to backward castes. In 2007, when Surinder S Jodhka and Katherine Newman wrote a paper based on interviews with 25 human resource managers in large firms in New Delhi and National Capital region, they found that the cultural capital expected from employees — like "worldly, sophisticated and well educated" — is not accessible to members of SCs. Mr.R Prakash, Director, Institute for Dalit Development and Studies, Kerala is also the Superintendent in the Department of Industries. "There have been many instances in offices where people refuse to address Dalits with respectable terms like 'sir'," he says. "Even the office boys refer to Scheduled Caste officers as 'special quota', which means he has not come to the position due to his merit."

#### **Rule 10**

**You can be under tremendous pressure to perform, to prove yourself worthy of the 'benefits' given by the government.**

When Amaravathi, a national-level Dalit woman boxer from Hyderabad, consumed poison, her family members blamed her coach. "She used to tell us that her coach would frequently scold her to achieve results or leave the sports hostel (of Andhra Pradesh) since she was enjoying free amenities there (referring to the facilities given to SC/St students)," they said.

#### **Rule 11**

**Domestic help cannot use the same toilets or same water filters.**

"In some households, localities in Bengaluru, the women who clean the house and the toilets are not allowed to use the toilets not drink water from the filters," says Geeta.

**Rule 12****Even the Gods will discriminate**

"Neither churches nor the temples have not taken any steps to include the Scheduled Castes in their leaderships," points out Mr. P K Santhoshkumar, Secretary, Dalit Service Society, Kochi. 'The Kerala Temples Devaswom Bill' was passed in 2008, to include the Dalits in devaswoms. "But not one has been included even as committee members nor have they come forward, since they are not confident how they will be accepted in the 'Nair' dominated temple devaswoms."

**Rule 13****Pooja rooms are a no-enter zone for domestic help.**

In a posh locality in Chennai, a senior lawyer Veena was chided by her neighbour. Reason? For letting her domestic help clean her pooja utensils. "I calmly told her to wash them herself, if she has a problem with my domestic help washing them," says Veena. The neighbour has not spoken to her since then. It is common even in Bengaluru, says Geeta. "They are not allowed into the pooja rooms or touch some vessels. Even after they wash the clothes and vessels, water is sprinkled on the same." On a lighter note, she adds, "Ironically, how pure is the corporation water that is sprinkled?"

**Rule 15****We are all friends till dinnertime.**

Whenever lawyer Priyanka goes to her friend and Delhi-based senior journalist Maya Fernandes' house, she does not stay for dinner. Says Maya, "Priyanka is a Brahmin and she is not comfortable with having food in my house because I cook nonvegetarian food. She usually calls up and asks me to finish my dinner and wait up for her or leaves just before dinner. One day, when she did come early and had to wait for someone else at my house, she bought a packet of chips." It has definitely affected their relationship and Maya is not sure, if she can ever be a good friend to Priyanka.

**Rule 16****Humour is often used to sugar-coat offensive statements and behaviour.**

In a Kochi-based editing firm, Anila has to suffer another colleague's playful attempts at dividing the staff into different caste groups. "She counts the Nairs in the room by asking them to raise their hands. Then, she pitches Nairs against non-Nairs in debates. It is all done as a joke, so how do we argue? Most people join in so that they don't appear touchy or oversensitive." One day, this colleague proudly announced in the office that the Brahmin receptionist liked her the moment he saw her because of her fair skin. Abraham Ninan remembers an incident that happened in one of the leading IT firms in Chennai. He was there to take classes in effective communication and on day one he could spot the class clown. "The minute I asked him any question, the whole class would start giggling. I realised that he spoke in halting English. According to them, he clearly did not belong." He lacked in cultural capital.

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