

Press Release

Untouchability pervasive across public and private life in India study finds *Largest study ever conducted of practices of caste-based discrimination against “Dalits” widespread untouchability practiced across Gujarat.*

Caste-based discrimination, or “untouchability”, against *Dalits*, the community referred to as “untouchable”, continues to penetrate numerous aspects of daily life in India according to a new report to be released on **27th January 2010** by **Prof. S.K. Thorat Chairperson of the University Grants Commission, India at Ahimsa Shodh Kendra, Ahimsa Bhavan, Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad at 4 pm on the eve of 60 years of the Indian Constitution.**

Navsarjan Trust is the largest state level organization that promotes the rights of Dalits, the “untouchable” caste of Indian society in Gujarat. Dalits face 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. Navsarjan is one of the leading organizations in the advancement of Dalit rights in India.

The study was undertaken by Navsarjan Trust and The Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights (RFK Center) Segregation of housing, drinking water wells, places of religious worships, and separate sitting arrangement in schools and public events by touchable and untouchable castes continues to be nearly universally practiced across villages in Gujarat, the western-most state in India, despite national laws banning such actions.

After the largest data-gathering effort to date on the topic, the report, “Understanding Untouchability: A Comprehensive Study of Practices and Conditions,” 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 Laureate 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.

Using three years of intensive research, 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. The 53-page report presents data from 5462 survey-respondents across 1589 villages collected by 106 Navsarjan activists in Gujarat, covering almost all known untouchability practices including communal, caste based and religious life, food, and touch.

“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 Martin 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. Christian 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 (e.g., the Vedas and Manusmriti), but are not practiced by members of all religions. Legally the practices were abolished by the Constitution of India 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 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”, Manjula Pradeep, Executive Director of Navsarjan Trust.

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