

The International Dalit Solidarity Network
"Working globally against discrimination by work and descent"

Caste in Kenya

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Background

The issue of discrimination based on caste in Africa may appear a far-fetched idea to many. Moreover, at any time that it emerges, it usually only associated with the Asian community in most African countries.

However, as initial findings reveal, discrimination due to caste is something that is very much alive and dictates the pace of life of many people in Kenya and Africa who are affected by it. According to Professor Michael Kirwen of Marknoll Institute of African Studies, discriminations on basis of descent exist in Africa especially in West Africa. On his part Fernando Azonnanon in his article Respecting Cultural Diversity appearing in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement magazine, links discrimination on descent to modern slavery and he says

"... the Baatonum region, individuals belong to certain ethnic groups have long been considered subhuman, even to this day in certain places. Thus, the Abomey Kingdom reduced other communities in Benin, formerly known as Dahomey, to slavery." (IRCRC, 2002; 27)[\[1\]](#)

Nevertheless, we must admit that given that this is an issue many a times swept under the carpet of silence, many people especially the affected, have learnt to live with it, and mostly so, through self denial.

In view of this, we presently do not intended to provide detailed documentation of the situation, but just give a glimpse of what could be happening in Kenya and Africa generally, with a view to putting in place a case for detailed study into the caste system, in both Kenya and Africa.

The case of caste discrimination among the Hindus

In Kenya, the Asian Communities are largely identified according to their religious beliefs. Amongst this grouping is the Hindu community.

The question of discrimination due to descent, and specifically, as it relates to the caste system among the Hindus is rarely discussed in Kenya, in spite of the fact that this is a reality. The reason this is so may be explained by the fact that since migrating to Kenya, most Indians, as with most other Asians, are yet to get the feeling of being part of the larger Kenyan society.

Historically, Asians started showing up in Kenya, as business merchants from as early as 1000 AD, according to available evidence.* In Kenya, they speak different languages, profess different religions and practice different occupations, as dictated by their castes.

The problem of the Hindu Caste system is that the discrimination seems to be so much hidden as to defy detection. This is because the Indian population in Kenya is so small as compared to the other populations. On the other hand, due to the fact that the most noticeable Indians, or Asians for that matter are those who are well to do economically, very little attention has been given to the discriminated against castes: Asians are viewed by their black Africans as rich and arrogant.

This situation is vindicated in an anthropological study by Cynthia Salvadori, in: Through the open doors: A view of the Asian Cultures in Kenya Ms Salvadori notes:

The complexities of the Asian Sectarianism, caste and religion are so confusing... and the different groups are simply lumped together.... However, such a monolithic Asian Community exists only in the imaginations of non-Asians. (Kenway Publications: 1989).

Asians first came to Kenya in different shades and capacities and not exclusively as cheap labour during the construction of the Uganda Railway as it is widely believed.

Asians are believed to have set shop in the East African region as far back as 1000 AD and with them, their traditions and cultures. These traditions and cultures have persisted to date, and among them, the Hindu Caste system that has been identified

internationally as a discriminatory system that abuses the fundamental human rights of the people from the lower castes.

Hindus in Kenya today are divided into four main Castes, which are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra, from the highest to the lowest respectively. Traditionally one's place is determined by one's birth, and each caste has a specific occupation or economic lifestyle. Generally, there is no provision for intermarriages between the castes neither is there any hope of moving to another caste, through upward mobility. In accordance to this reality, Hindus came into Kenya as merchants, indentured labourers and professionals both in private and government employ. However, though they were in a new environment, various Hindu groups maintained their identity.

A large number of the Hindu communities belong to the huge Vaishya Caste, which incorporates farmers, traders and most artisans. The Brahmins are in a caste by themselves and the small Rajput Community claims to be the only true Kshatriya caste represented in Kenya. However, this assertion is not vindicated since many of the Vaishya groups – the Bhatias, the Bhoi, the Dhobis, the Lokhanas, the Patels, the Wnzas and the Sindhis – claim some sort of Rajput Ancestry.

Looking at the genesis of the Hindu Community in Kenya, it is not difficult to see discrimination in the socio-economic lifestyle. For Instance, the Brahmins, who traditionally are from the higher caste, have been able to rule the food industry in Kenya. This is because according to the code of manu, while traditionally one cannot eat food prepared by a member of a lower caste, anyone can eat food prepared by a Brahmin. Even though their number is very small, they are however, still very strict on membership to their caste. This is manifested by the fact that membership to social clubs run by the Brahmins is open only to their own ilk. And some having come in as professionals to Kenya, this still dominate this position and have virtually locked out the rest of the Hindus.

To specifically establish the discriminatory aspects of the Hindu caste system in Kenya, there is as mentioned earlier, need for research. We must contend that this is an area that a lot of attention has not been focussed over the years, and due to this fact, most Hindus who find themselves discriminated against have resigned their plight to fate.

The caste system amongst the Borana.

Unlike the Hindu caste system, the caste system found amongst the Borana in North Eastern Kenya is that of consigning the members of the lower caste (Watta) to a life of servitude. Although in the eyes of a non- Borana speaking and the government all Boran speaking people are all the same, closer scrutiny reveals a community divided into four distinct castes/clans. At the top, there are Borana Gutu (Pure), followed by Gabra, then Sakuye, and Watta clan being the last.

Amongst the Borana Speaking peoples, the instrument of such divisions is wealth. This wealth measured in terms of livestock – larger livestock (e.g., camel and cattle) – placing one, by inheritance, to the higher caste.

Traditionally, the Watta were a hunter-gatherer clan/caste and for generations other Borana speaking clans/castes have despised them; the word “*Watta*” has become synonymous with “poverty.” When the Colonial Government outlawed hunting the Watta people had to join other members of their community in sedentary life. Without livestock, many have remained poor, hence suffering inferiority complex and due to this lower socio-economic status, they have remained stigmatized.

According to Ibrahim Kosi Galgalo stigmatization continues to date. As he exemplifies, when children from other clans/castes misbehave, they are admonished to stop behaving like the Watta; in other words, they can never be role models due to their misfortune of belonging to the lower caste. As a result of such taunting most of the

Watta people have lost confidence in their own uniqueness. Subsequently some of their sub clans like Hegan and Kojot are today all lost because they are afraid to expose their identity lest they are victimized.

To survive today the Watta mainly work in servitude for members of the higher castes, making them, forever, slaves for their counterparts.

On the Socio-economic front, there are strict rules that forbid intermarriage to ensure purity of the upper castes. Inter-marriage between a Watta and Boran Gutu is unheard off. A recent example may suffice:

"I am a Watta," says Ibrahim Galgalo Kosi. "Recently, my niece eloped with a Boran Gutu boy. According to our people if such a thing happens, marriage is the out come with full bride wealth being paid. However, in my niece's case the bride wealth was paid but the lady was told the Boran Gutu do not marry from the Watta. This means that while bride wealth was given to us, the girl was not married."

The place of the Kenyan government

International standards, and specifically, the International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination obligate the Kenyan government, to ensure that no person suffers discrimination on any account. While the constitution of Kenya outlaws discrimination, there is no enabling statute, and hence this right is not in practice of justice.

Moreover, while Kenya has ratified the ICERD, it has failed to comply with Article 2(d) of the Convention, which calls for state parties to prohibit and bring to an end by all appropriate means including legislation all types of racial discrimination by any persons, group or organisation.

In fact, it can be argued that the government has been assisting in promoting discrimination by descent, especially in its employment practice. For instance, apart from the Judiciary in Kenya, Asians, including Indians, are not employed anywhere else in the public sector. It is important to mention that all those employed, and the lawyers' private practices are from the Brahmin caste.

As for the Watta, they suffer the same predicament. Moreover, even if their children were able to go to schools, they cannot mix with the rest of the children and eventually, they drop out.

This discrimination does even affect education of Watta people. Since most Watta people are poor, they do not go to school. Even those who attend school end up dropping because education becomes too expensive. On the other hand, while there are no discrimination tendencies in enrolment policies, most Watta children suffer from psychological humiliation in the hands of children from the other castes, and hence end up dropping out prematurely. This discrimination also definitely affects their employment. It means that while members of the higher castes can afford to easily be employed in either the private or public sector, the Watta are left behind since they cannot compete due to inferior levels of education. On the second level, where recruitment is done in their local area by the locals, the Wattas end up being discriminated against. For instance, according to one community elder, the County council has four major departments. These are mainly Range department, Sweepers department, Clark's department and Educations department. Whereas the Clarks and education departments require educated people, which automatically knocks out the Watta, the other two do not require academic skills. However, there are no Wattas in this department because the locals do all the recruitments. At the representational level, with the entire Isiolo district having 28 Council Ward seats, there is only one out of 28 councillors is a Watta, with two Assistant Chiefs. One of these Assistant Chiefs, according to Kosi Ibrahim, has worked for so long without promotion. Several Chiefs have been installed above him from other community.

Ibrahim Kosi Galgallo of the Watta captures it in his presentation to the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission:

“The community has suffered socially and politically from time immemorial. Many people would not like to intermarry with us and this has created a social stigma amongst us as unwanted, lower caste, worthless and downtrodden.” (Memorandum to the CKRC; 2002)

Conclusion In view of the foregoing, it is apparent that discrimination by caste is very much alive in Kenya and most probably in other parts of Africa. We therefore would recommend the following:

1. That the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination commissions research to unveil the magnitude of this situation in Kenya and other parts of Africa
2. That the International Non Governmental Organisations in the field of racism support more activities that will be geared towards unveiling the real situation of caste discrimination among African communities irrespective of race or tribe.
3. That the International Non Governmental Organisations in the field of anti slavery support more activities that will be geared towards unveiling the link between slavery and caste discrimination among African communities.
4. That African governments’ support the enactment of specific legislation to deal with cases of caste discrimination.
5. That African governments institute programmes or creating awareness about caste discrimination.
6. That the governments in Africa put in place employment policies that will move to eliminate caste discrimination.
7. That all African governments ratify ICERD and especially the optional protocol thereof to allow for individual complaints.
8. That the Kenya government ratifies the ICERD optional protocol.
9. That CERD scrutinises any reports submitted by African governments with a view to establishing whether the issue of caste discrimination is raised.

[1] The Magazine of The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Issue No 1 2002 pg 27