

Pakistan's "lower caste" Hindus

# Equality denied



**IDS**N

International Dalit Solidarity Network

## Denial is no Longer an Option

For any “lower caste” Hindu (or Dalit) in Pakistan, a cursory reading of the constitution will be a peculiar experience. On paper, the nation upholds the promises of its founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. At the time of the birth of this Muslim nation in 1947, he rejected any kind of discrimination as Islam teaches equality. Yet, more than 60 years later, a majority of “lower caste” Hindus have personally experienced discrimination so ingrained that they have been denied a haircut from their local barber or been forced to wash their own separate crockery at a restaurant.

However, few “lower caste” Hindus will be able to read about this glaring discrepancy between law and praxis. An illiteracy rate above 75% is the norm among Dalits; for women the figure is closer to 90%. This doesn’t only prevent individuals from searching for a better future: poor education is just one example of the lack of care that the state shows towards a community of people deemed “untouchables”.

Pakistan’s attitude to “lower caste” Hindus has long been a case of double standards and denial. Most Pakistanis – Muslim or Hindu – know to which caste they belong. Everybody is aware that some of these castes are “more equal than others”. And, at the bottom of the ranking, “lower caste” Hindus are hit by double discrimination as non-Muslims in a Muslim state and as Dalits. But this discrimination is not officially recognised. Hence, there is no legislation against it. And, as a consequence, impunity is widespread. Abuse of Dalits, from forced labour to rape, is considered a free-for-all.

### A Regional Study

This fact sheet and the underlying study of Pakistan’s “lower caste” Hindus – “Long Behind Schedule” – are part of a regional study on caste-based discrimination undertaken by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). The regional research covers four countries; Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The full reports are available at [www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org) and [www.dalitstudies.org.in](http://www.dalitstudies.org.in). The Pakistan study’s main findings are highlighted in the “Challenges and Recommendations” sections of this fact sheet.

### A Word about Wording

In Pakistan, three terms are used to describe the victims of caste-based discrimination. “Scheduled castes” is the official term used by the state for “lower caste” Hindus. Internationally, these “untouchables” or “outcasts” increasingly refer to themselves as Dalits – “broken people”.

This fact sheet uses all three terms interchangeably. But, as the International Dalit Solidarity Network rejects the concept of dividing people according to castes, “scheduled castes” and “lower caste” are used in inverted commas.

Denial is however no longer an option. A groundbreaking new study of 750 households in the lower districts of Sindh and Southern Punjab, documents how discrimination permeates every aspect of the existence of Pakistan’s “lower caste” Hindus: in everyday life when they are denied a seat on a bus, a glass to drink from or an invitation to a wedding; in every meeting with society, from substandard schools to doctors who insist on using separate instruments to treat them; and, in their rare encounters with the upper echelons of society where “lower caste” Hindus are close to non-existent in parliament or any other position of power.

## Denial Starts with Numbers

Pakistan is home to 332 343 “lower caste” Hindus; a minority of 0,25% in a nation of mainly Muslim inhabitants. “Upper caste” Hindus number just over 2,1 million, according to the official census from 1998. After a consultation in 2007, representatives of “lower caste” Hindus, including five former legislators, argued that this information is incorrect. They believe that discrimination and the state’s denial of their problems begins with numbers and they estimate that the population of “lower caste” Hindus is more than two million.

Rather than being a minority among Hindus, the Dalits are the majority – a fact disguised by inadequate questionnaires and education of the enumerators who conducted the census. Official recognition of such a figure would make it difficult for the state to maintain the existing lack of development initiatives for “lower caste” Hindus.

In 2006, Parliament approved 6 000 projects in a national poverty reduction scheme. None was targeting the issues facing this particular group. And the State’s lack of attention is reflected in the World Bank’s and other international donors’ programmes in Pakistan. The “lower caste” communities are rarely prioritised.

This all leaves the vast majority of “lower caste” Hindus floundering in a vicious cycle: poverty and lack of land forces Dalits into often poorly paid employment. Many take loans from their employers and are unable to pay them back. This traps them into bondage and frequently forces them to let their children work as well. Then, without education, the children themselves become part of Pakistan’s illiterate masses. They are unable to vie for higher positions – where even well educated Dalits are often discriminated against – or for a political life with power to change the present state of affairs for “lower caste” Hindus. At present, none of the members of the National Assembly are Dalits. So far as legislation is concerned, “scheduled castes” experienced a setback rather than improvements, when a law securing them a 6% quota in government jobs was scrapped in 1998.

## Discrimination Begins at Home

Being a “lower caste” Hindu in Pakistan does not just define you as belonging to a particular caste and religious group. It also determines what you do, where you live and whom you have access to.

Based on century old traditions, Dalits will be predestined to do particular and often little respected jobs such as cleaning and farm work. They will reside in separate areas on the outskirts of the village or town to prevent others from being “polluted” by “the untouchables”.

**85%**

Proportion of “lower caste” Hindus earning between 500 and 3 000 rupees per month – the official minimum wage is 4 600 rupees.

(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

## Battling to honour international obligations

Pakistan is signatory to a number of international conventions and declarations that oblige the State to end all forms of discrimination and uphold human rights standards. But the relationship with international bodies such as the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) demonstrates a lack of will to adhere to the principles. Pakistan has yet to authorise CERD to receive complaints of discrimination from individuals or groups of individuals – and a number of reports to the committee are overdue. Whenever the state does respond to international bodies’ concerns over discrimination against Dalits and others, the denials are usually based on references to ideological texts and Pakistan’s status as a society built on Islamic values of equality. This lack of recognition of a problem is reflected in national legislation which – unlike what is the case in India – has no act against caste discrimination. This makes it virtually impossible for Dalits to seek redress at the courts.

“Untouchability” is obvious in all private and public spheres of life. While belonging to a low social class and living in a poor neighbourhood is a common experience for billions of people around the world, the daily discrimination in even the pettiest aspects of life is often what makes the lives of Dalits particularly unbearable. As was the case for blacks in apartheid South Africa, Dalits are considered so unclean that they need their own, separate crockery and cutlery; while “lower caste” Hindus can clean the houses of their employers, a Muslim is usually employed to cook the food out of fear of contamination from the “untouchables”.

In many villages, “lower caste” Hindus are only allowed to fetch water from common sources on condition that they don’t drink directly from the well or pump. 69% of Dalits interviewed in the present survey said that they are either not invited to weddings and other social gatherings in the neighbourhood or are served their food separately.



**Pakistan**  
 Between 330,000 and 2 million or between 0,25 and 1,20 percent of the total population

*In Karachi the segregation of the so-called 'Scheduled Castes' is complete in this tea shop. Men from the Kolhi caste are not allowed into tea shops owned by Muslims or dominant castes. Similarly, no other men than Kolhi men can enter a Kolhi tea shop.*

## — but is Condoned by the State

When moving into public space, the pattern of humiliation continues. During visits to health services, it's not uncommon for Dalits to meet doctors and nurses who refuse to touch their body parts or insist on using separate instruments. On public bus services, Dalit women will be left standing in the aisle while the conductor finds seats for "upper caste" Hindus and Muslims and serves them water from glasses unavailable to the "lower caste" Hindu.

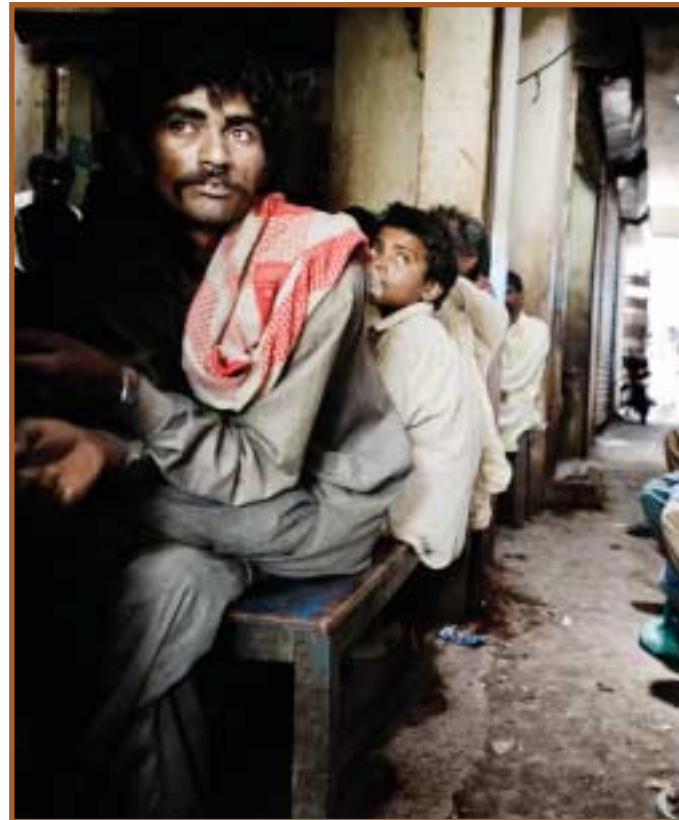
**77%**

Proportion of "lower caste" Hindus unable to get a haircut from their local barber.

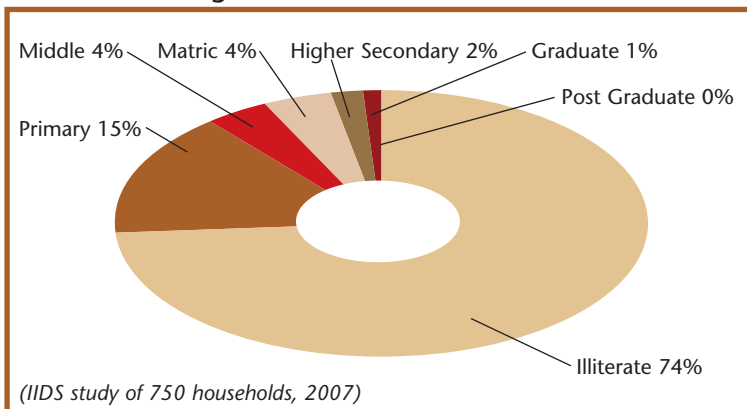
(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

In schools, Dalits will find a curriculum based heavily on Islamic teachings and obligatory studying of the Koran. And – again seemingly with acceptance by the authorities – the teachers

will treat them as second-class students and subject them to derogatory language, place them at the back of the class and humiliate them with corporal punishment.



### Education among the Scheduled Castes



**58%**

Proportion of "lower caste" Hindus who say they are paid less than "upper castes" (both Hindu and Muslim) for the same work. Few – if any official – reports speak of discrimination in the work place as the State is in denial of caste discrimination in general.

(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

"Lower caste" Hindus comprise the single largest group falling victim to caste-based discrimination. The abuse experienced on a daily basis is perpetuated where it really matters: in the allocation of jobs in the public sector and in access to land.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, no "lower caste" Hindu has ever been appointed as a judge or a magistrate. And, while 84% of Dalits are landless, the state has kept control of land that was confiscated when Hindus left for India at the establishment of the state of Pakistan in 1947 and during subsequent wars in 1965 and 1971.

## Sexual Desires make “Untouchables” Attractive

Pakistani “lower caste” Hindu women are usually at the bottom of the hierarchy in a Muslim country with pervasive gender inequality. But sexual desires can turn even the untouchables into attractive objects.

A survey of 750 households documents what has long been an established fact among Dalits: many of their girls and women are raped by Muslim men and often in gang rapes. These are rarely reported because of fear of further victimisation by a police force that, in any case, is known for not taking action against the perpetrators.



Bhirawali Mai Bheel, a 13-year old girl from Bahawalpur District, was kidnapped and raped for 22 days by two men who finally left her at a bus stop. Even though this case made it to the police, the family ended up accepting compensation of 25 000 rupees and withdrew the charges.

Other women are lured, used sexually and abandoned. Or they are forced to marry after converting to Islam. Kidnappings of girls and women leave the families feeling completely helpless as they wait for the announcement of the conversion. Once this happens, they are usually told by the authorities to forget about the case. For how can a Muslim girl ever return to parents who are “lower caste” Hindus?

Some Dalit girls voluntarily seek marriage with Muslim men as a way out of poverty. But if these marriages fail, the converted women often end up in the street — now belonging to neither the Muslim community nor their “scheduled caste”.

# 10%

Proportion of “lower caste” Hindu girls who go to school.

The national average for girls is 48%. Only 0,9% of Dalit women make it to grade 8. Poor or no education is a major reason for women becoming easy victims of forced marriage and conversion to Islam.

(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

8 Number of men who barged into a hut near the village of Ghulam Ali Khawar in district Larkana in the last week of February 2007 and gang raped three women until dawn. Nobody was arrested despite the case being in the media for a few days.

(“Daily Kawish” and IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)



Manu Bheel has become a symbol for the struggle against forced labour in Pakistan. Bonded and forced labour in Pakistan among ‘lower caste’ Hindus, some of whom have converted to Christianity or Islam, is widespread. In the provinces of Sindh and Punjab an estimated 0.75 to 1.5 million people are bonded labourers.

## Political Connections Allow Continued Slavery

In 1996, Manu Bheel briefly represented a story of change, when he was among 1 000 bonded farm workers in Sindh province to be released. Most of them were “lower caste” Hindus, forced to work as bonded labourers in conditions resembling slavery after poverty had forced them to take loans from their landlords. This is a destiny shared by hundreds of thousands Dalits.

Manu Bheel’s release was followed by a rehabilitation programme after which he managed to create a new life for himself and his family as a wage labourer. But his happiness was short-lived. Two years after his release, nine members of his family members were kidnapped, allegedly by men sent by his former landlord Abdul Rahman Mari.

Manu Bheel rushed to the police. But the window of political opportunity that had secured Bheel’s own release had meanwhile closed. Former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, had

# 83,6%

Proportion of "lower caste" Hindus with no land.

Landlessness is often the root of poverty that forces people into bondage. Without land, there is little access to credit.

(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

been replaced by Nawaz Sharif whose allies include Pir Pagara and his Pakistan Muslim League (Functional).

Pir Pagara in turn is supported by Bheel's former landlord Abdul Rahman Mari. Thus a change in the political landscape allowed Mari to seek revenge for Bheel's release and to kidnap his family with the impunity that characterises so much of the abuse of Pakistan's Dalits.

Eight years after the kidnapping – and after Anti-Slavery International had brought international attention to the case – the

Supreme Court ordered the police to recover Manu Bheel's family but the police claimed they were unable to do so. This prompted the Chief Justice of Pakistan to ask the Inspector General of Sindh Province to intervene.

But by May 2008, the case was still unresolved. And, Manu Bheel was continuing his five-year long hunger strike that has become a symbol of the fragility of any improvements in the life of Pakistan's "lower caste" Hindus.

# 75%

Proportion of crop typically retained by the landlord when

he and the labourer share the outcome. The labourer generally has to pay for seeds and other inputs as well, which leaves very little profit and forces him into taking further loans. As the labourer is usually illiterate, he is often cheated by the landlord who does the accounting.

(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

## A Woman's Pain is a Nation's Lost Potential

Much of the debate around Pakistan's "lower caste" Hindus focuses on the pain suffered by the victims of discrimination. A lot less attention is given to the price paid by a nation that prevents some of their citizens from developing their full potential. The story of Alya Oad is a case in point.



Women from the 'Bagri' Dalit community live with their families next to the D13-3 railway crossing in Karachi. They cannot own land and have to pay five euros per month for one little hut to the railway company employees as bribe. There is no electricity, no education or health facilities and no water. Water is fetched from a mosque nearby, but again a bribe has to be paid.

The 28-year old is one of the few Dalit women who have managed to get a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration (a BBA). She felt confident that she had managed to break the pattern of caste and class when she landed a job with the examination branch of one of the well-known teaching institutions of Karachi. But a couple of months after the initial warm welcome from her colleagues, attitudes started changing.

"You are cheating people with your name. Why have you got a name as a Muslim girl? You are a low caste Hindu, and we didn't know that," said a senior colleague. Then it got worse: "You are so beautiful because your mother slept with a Muslim man," read a note left on her desk. Oad wrote her resignation on the reverse and left the office.

Next destination was Islamabad. The initial responses were positive when she enquired about jobs. But when she turned up with her documents, no-one wanted to employ a Dalit. Instead, she got lewd telephone calls at night from the same people who had turned her down, suggesting that they could meet privately.

She refused and is now back living with her old mother and father where a research team found her during the study of 750 households. "This caste has become a curse," she said. "I don't know how to get rid of it. Why don't people consider me a human being?"

A poor nation like Pakistan is allowing itself to scupper valuable potential by not making room for the contributions from Dalits. This attitude is being noticed and "lower caste" Hindus have long lost confidence in the State and other levels of government.

No of the respondents say they are not reaping any benefits from the local government system, the authority closest to them. "Lower caste" Hindus and other marginalised groups do not participate in politics while the same political families that have ruled the country for the last six decades continue to dominate all spheres of government.

# 91,5%

Proportion of "lower caste" Hindus in Rahimyar Khan, Bahawalpur, Tharparkar and Umerkot districts who say that no political party gives importance to "scheduled castes".

(IIDS study of 750 households, 2007)

# CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Untouchability and Descent-Based Discrimination

“Lower caste” Hindus in Pakistan are officially known as “scheduled castes” and frequently described as “cahoots” or untouchables. They face dual discrimination as a minority in a Muslim country and as “lower caste” among fellow Hindus. They typically do the least respected jobs as fishermen, cobblers, brick makers, sweepers and farm workers. Their status as “lower caste” and their jobs are usually inherited through generations.

### Recommendation:

The existing census from 1998 is deeply flawed and underestimates the number of “scheduled castes”, making it easy to downplay their importance. The government should incorporate suggestions from the “lower caste” Hindus’ community for improvements to the counting process that will make it more likely to reflect the correct number. To pay adequate attention to “scheduled castes” in all assessments and planning, the government should provide data broken down by caste and other relevant groupings.

## State and Caste

Since the State defines itself as based on Muslim ideals of equality, discrimination is not acknowledged and not covered by any legislation. This makes it debatable as to whether Pakistan lives up to its international commitments against discrimination.

The constitution asks the government to uplift disadvantaged communities. But this promotion of social and economic wellbeing appears within the chapter titled “principles of policy” rather than the section on “fundamental rights”. Hindus are further disadvantaged by the lack of clear distinction between religion and state. Laws banning blasphemy against the Koran and the Prophet are often used to persecute Hindus.

### Recommendation:

The government must declare caste-based discrimination a punishable crime and enact laws that allow prosecution of perpetrators. Indian legislation in this regard can be used as a model. Furthermore, the government should announce a constitutional package containing provisions to uplift “lower caste” Hindus and other vulnerable groups. If the government is sincere in bringing “scheduled castes” out of denial, it should enforce a quota system in the judiciary system and all law enforcement departments.

## Economic and Social Status of “Scheduled Castes”

93% of Pakistan’s “lower caste” Hindus live in rural areas where only 16,4% own their own land. Consequently, many of them end up as farm workers in bondage. They often have to tolerate all kinds of inhuman treatment from employers who have provided them with loans and own the houses they live in. More than 85% are paid far less than official minimum wages.

### Recommendation:

Government should secure “lower caste” Hindus legal possession of their homes. One option would be to ask financial institutions like House Building Finance Corporation to provide interest-free loans for building. State land, particularly in Thar and Cholistan, should be prepared for cultivation and distributed to “lower caste” Hindus. Education should be made a top priority in areas dominated by “lower caste” Hindus who should receive free books, uniforms and scholarships.

## Nature and Extent of Untouchability and Discrimination

Pakistan has no official data on discrimination in public places and very little academic research on the topic. However, the present survey of 750 households of “lower caste” Hindus reveals widespread discrimination and untouchability in all spheres of life, including hospitals and other government controlled facilities. Access even to water was reported as a problem by 32% of those surveyed.

### Recommendation:

The government should impose an immediate ban on the practice of “untouchability” in both public and private spaces and publish a pamphlet describing caste discrimination as unacceptable behaviour. Police should be asked to remove separate crockery and eating utensils from hotels and restaurants.

### **Labour Market Discrimination**

Under the International Labour Organisation, Pakistan is a signatory to conventions intended to combat discrimination in the work place. But the survey reveals that few “lower caste” Hindus have decent positions in either private companies or public service. Instead they have jobs that are often exploitative and discriminatory in nature.

#### **Recommendation:**

Government, non-governmental organisations and international donors should initiate poverty reduction projects targeted exclusively at “lower caste” Hindus. These should include training in income-generating skills.

### **Discrimination in the Political Sphere**

91,5% of the respondents in the survey of 750 households believe that no political party regards their problems as important. A similar number say they get no benefits from the local government system. Even in parties with minority wings, “upper caste” Hindus and Christians tend to dominate. The Pakistan People’s Party has not got a single “lower caste” Muslim or Hindu among the 97 members of its top two policy-making institutions. But, more encouragingly, in 2007 the party was the first to hold a workshop to discuss the issues of “scheduled castes”.

#### **Recommendation:**

All political parties must ensure that “lower caste” Hindus participate in decision-making with particular attention to women. The Political Parties Act should be amended to make representation of Dalits mandatory. Reserved seats for “scheduled castes” must be made available at all levels of government.

### **Discrimination in Education**

Fewer than one out of every seven children goes to school in Tharparkar district which is home to 45% of Pakistan’s “lower cast” Hindus – a record low even for a country with one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. The few lucky ones find that compulsory reading of the Koran and other Islamic teaching takes up a lot of the curriculum, a clear violation of the rights of minorities which are assured in the constitution.

#### **Recommendation:**

Government must ensure that all prejudices and religious bias are removed from the curriculum. Teachers must be trained to treat students in an impartial manner.

### **Bonded Labour and Caste**

Pakistan is one of the few countries where slavery still exists in the form of bonded labour. It is rooted in feudal structures and perpetuated due to poverty and workers being obliged to stay with employers who have lent them money. More often than not, their wives and daughters are sexually abused.

#### **Recommendation:**

Implementation of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992 and the Action Plan of 2001 would help reduce the practice. Immediate rehabilitation of released labourers is a must.

### **Multiple Discrimination against Dalit Women**

Due to their low status and lack of education, Dalit women are often considered sexually available by Muslim men and are either lured into matrimony or kidnapped. Because the police seldom take action in response to their complaints, Dalits often become victims of rape. At home, poverty and frustration among “lower caste” Hindu men frequently lead to domestic violence.

#### **Recommendation:**

The government must institute a commission to investigate the claims of kidnapping and forced conversions. Religious clerics’ involvement in the latter practice must be stopped with immediate effect. A high court judge should be appointed to investigate an apparent pattern of rape of “lower caste” Hindu girls and speedy trials should lead to exemplary punishments.