

# Dalits

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## Who are the Dalits?

Dalits refers to over 450 communities in India (and South Asia) who are considered to be untouchables. Dalit – from the Sanskrit root *dal* meaning ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’ - is a name that these communities have chosen for themselves instead of humiliating or patronizing epithets like “untouchables” ‘harijans.’ By renaming themselves as Dalits, these communities have sought to affirmatively consolidate themselves, forthrightly speak about their sufferings, and assertively claim their rightful liberation. As it has been noted by several human rights organizations across the globe including the UN, Dalits face some of the worst forms of discrimination and marginalization in the world. But before looking at the sufferings of the Dalits and their means and modes of resistance, it is essential to be aware of the foundational social institution that facilitates and in fact, necessitates their discrimination and victimization in the first place, viz. the caste system.



Documentary “Dalit Women (We are not untouchable end caste discrimination now)”

6 Minutes

<https://youtu.be/NUaFQeUlc1o>

## Caste System

Caste - a word introduced by the Portuguese from the Latin *castus* meaning pure breed - is basically a conflation of two different social systems, namely *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* (literally meaning color, but not to be interpreted in racial terms) is the fourfold occupation-based classification based on the ancient Hindu text *Rig Veda* which divides the society into Brahmins (Priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and kings), Vaishyas (Merchants), and Shudras (artisans and servants). *Jati* (from the word *jan* meaning birth) on the other hand, whose origins cannot be traced, denotes the birth-based marriage grouping. With time, these two systems merged, evolving into one hierarchically stratified system with each *jati* occupying a position within a *varna*. Some historians argue that in spite of inequalities, there might have still been some



kind of fluid mobility between the *varnas*, before ending up as a stagnant and rigid social structure under colonialism. Today, caste could mean either *varna* or *jati* or both depending on the context. And even though the marriage and occupational restrictions of the past appear to be relatively relaxed, yet caste continues to be an important identity marker for Indian/South Asian communities, unmistakably positioning them in a hierarchical social scale.

## Woes of the Dalits

The long and complex history of caste notwithstanding, Dalits have been for the most part 'outsiders' in this system. Based on Hindu sacred texts like the *Manu Dharma Sastra*, and prejudiced Brahmin and upper/dominant-caste traditions and interpretations, Dalits were condemned as ritually polluted/ing because of their unholy birth and polluting occupations. According to these religious beliefs, they are the '*avarnas*' - the non-varna people to be excluded from the society. It is such notions of exclusion that have been at the basis of violence and discrimination against Dalits. Researches point out that every day at least three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered and eleven Dalits are beaten. Along with such frequent acts of violence, a high percentage of Dalits are forced to live in extreme poverty, lacking access to basic needs (like water). The brunt of oppression is perhaps felt most by Dalit women, for whom the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy (often along with poverty) intersect to make them the 'downtrodden among the downtrodden.' It is important to note that such oppressive social and economic conditions often make Dalit women vulnerable targets for human trafficking and forced sex work.



Documentary "Sex Slavery in Mumbai: drugged, kidnapped & forced to work"

6 Minutes

[https://youtu.be/b6\\_mfjSY4kM](https://youtu.be/b6_mfjSY4kM)



Oscar-winning film "Born into Brothels"

1 hr 23 minutes

[https://youtu.be/\\_kyXFr2g1x8](https://youtu.be/_kyXFr2g1x8)



Like gender and economic status, religion too plays a key role in intensifying the marginalization of the Dalits. Now, because Dalits were not treated with dignity within Hinduism, many decided to embrace other religious traditions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. However, in spite of experiencing the same kind of oppression like any other Dalits, Dalit Christians and Muslims have been viciously denied the same affirmative aid provided by the Indian constitution to the Dalits, thanks to the communal-minded 'casteist' forces that wield power over it. The countless requests and protests for justice to the Christian and Muslim Dalits have sadly only fallen on deaf ears until now, making life and their religious journey difficult for them.



Documentary: "National Protest for Christian Dalits 2013" 3 Minutes.

<https://youtu.be/BjSDXqzU3bw>

It is further disheartening to note that the progress wrought by modernization has not succeeded in eradicating the evils of caste or untouchability. In the twenty first century, with all the advancements in technology and seeming liberality of globalization, while several communities have been freed from their obligated caste-based occupations, Dalits are still forced to do the despicable job of manual scavenging (handling human night soil).



Documentary "Forced to Clean Human Waste in India"

4 minutes

[https://youtu.be/y3XfjbwqC\\_g](https://youtu.be/y3XfjbwqC_g)

Even in the field of education - with all the possibilities it has offered to oppressed communities - the power of caste is so strong that even if young Dalits enter into institutions of higher learning (like Universities and Research Institutes), they are discriminated and humiliated, at times to the extent of pushing them to death.





Documentary “Death of Merit”:

Part I 11 minutes:

<https://youtu.be/2L3y9O1HCBw>

Part II 10 minutes:

[https://youtu.be/ADXnFf\\_5JT4](https://youtu.be/ADXnFf_5JT4)

### *The forced suicide of Dalit PhD scholar Rohit Vemula*

It is indeed concerning to know that crimes against Dalits have surged nearly 245 % in the last decade and 19 % in 2014, in proportion to the alarming rise of Hindu fundamentalism. Interestingly, the divisive presence of caste and, the sting of untouchability are limited neither to India nor South Asia. Based on the many researches conducted among the diasporic communities from South Asia in the US, the UK and other western countries, it can be categorically stated that these evils often seem to travel across the globe with surprising ease, under the guise of culture and religious faith. The result is that caste divisions and untouchability are audaciously practiced among diasporic South Asian communities with the silent but questionable endorsement of the western countries. The situation within the global church, especially the churches in the US and the UK unfortunately appears to be no different either, at least for the most part, bringing the reality of caste and the problems faced by Dalits closer than can be imagined.



Documentary “Segregation and Survival: The South Asian Caste System Within the UK”

7 Minutes

<https://vimeo.com/24139030>

### **Dalit Resistance**

Dalit reality, however, as in the case of many oppressed communities across the world, gladly does not end with statistics and stories of suffering. Throughout the period of their oppression, Dalits have stood against and resisted the oppressive structures boldly and courageously. They have expressed their dissent boldly through creative expressions of art, music and, faith. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. B. R Ambedkar - the pioneering Dalit leader who lived in the first half of the twentieth



century - and other leaders, activists and, academicians inspired by his life and thought, Dalits have become more resilient and assertive in the economic and political spheres.



*Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*



*Paraiattam - Dalit Drum Dance*

Within the religious realm, since the 1980s, Christian Dalit theology has emerged as a powerful voice critiquing and resisting caste and untouchability, especially its unchristian presence within the Indian Church, even while affirming and articulating the biblical values of equality, justice and peace for all, in and through the liberation of the Dalits. And, as the Dalit issue is now a global problem, their cause is taken up in many countries across the world, with the ecumenical movement taking the lead. It is encouraging to see the forging of networks of solidarity between oppressed peoples like the African American, Latino/as, minjung (Korea) and burakumin (Japan) communities, not to mention those victimized by global capitalism, environmental disaster and, homophobia across the world. This global partnering is certainly a new and welcome development in the pursuit of Dalit emancipation.



Documentary "Protest Caste at the White House"  
12 minutes

<https://youtu.be/etrFYFSnXx4>

### *Global Conference on Defending Dalit Rights, Washington DC*

Dalits across the world, therefore no doubt continue to face discrimination and violence in overt and subtle ways. Nevertheless, the story of the Dalits is also a journey of resistance against unjust oppressive structures, forming friendships of solidarity to affirm the dignity of all.



## References

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## Internet Resources

On Trafficking:

<http://www.traffickingproject.org/2010/02/human-trafficking-in-india-part-i-caste.html> accessed on 02.16.2016.

On increase in the crimes against Dalits:

<http://indiafacts.in/statistics/crimes-against-dalits-in-india/> accessed on 02.16.2016.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Crimes-against-dalits-rise-245-in-last-decade/articleshow/39904583.cms> accessed on 02.16.2016.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Crimes-against-Dalits-rose-19-in-2014-murders-rose-to-744/articleshow/49488994.cms> accessed on 02.16.2016.

On Dalit Christians:

<http://www.christiantoday.co.in/article/christians.demand.equal.rights.for.dalit.christians.observe.black.day/17800.htm> accessed on 02.17.2016.

On caste in the Diaspora:



[http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/102442/purvim\\_1.pdf?sequence=1](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/102442/purvim_1.pdf?sequence=1) accessed on 02.17.2016.

<http://www.ijssh.org/papers/426-H10009.pdf> accessed on 02.17.2016.

### **For Further Reading**

Clarke, Sathianathan. *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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