

Between invisibility and dignity: India's 'Dalit' and globalisation

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The road that took me to the 4th World Social Forum ([WSF](#) [1]) in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), in January 2004, started with my work as an anthropologist in Britain. There, I had my first encounter with [caste identity](#) [2] and practices of “untouchability”. This took place among a Sikh diaspora community that saw itself as an egalitarian brotherhood, and thus overtly *rejected* caste divisions.

This apparent contradiction – between a community both defined by and refusing caste – drew my attention to the intricacies and complexities of caste identity. It also led me to an interest in the growing mobilisation of [Dalit people](#) [3] – in India, in the rest of south Asia, and around the world.



Dalit NGO Federation march at the World Social Forum in Mumbai, January 2004

In Mumbai, it was virtually impossible to avoid the Dalit political presence in the alleyways of the huge disused industrial complex that housed the WSF. After a six-week march and rally across India, tens of thousands activists had reached Mumbai, there joining their brothers from elsewhere in south Asia – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

They promoted their political message to the global gathering through seminars, demonstrations, dance, singing, and poetry. But it was the incessant, haunting beating of drums that was most symbolic, for Dalit have turned the same drum which traditionally connotes their “impurity” into an emblem of pride and self-assertion. In this mixture of activities, Dalit leaders succeeded in bringing untouchability and caste-based [discrimination](#) [4] onto the agenda of this huge global gathering.

A hidden apartheid

Who exactly are “Dalit” and why have they long endured discrimination by supposedly “higher” castes? The roots of their condition across south Asia in their subordinate place in a Hindu religious and social hierarchy that ranks social groupings according to their relative degree of

purity and pollution. Dalits, or untouchables, are placed at the bottom. But they are not (as is often stated) “outcaste”; they fully belong to the caste system, and indeed one of the main functions of untouchability is precisely to define where that bottom stands in practice.

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The legal term for untouchables is [“scheduled castes”](#) [5], but this covers only those Dalit who are classified as Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. According to official figures, there are 180 million Dalit in India, but if Muslim and Christian Dalit were included, the number would be much higher – even more so if those in neighbouring countries were counted, for untouchability crosses the boundaries of both Hinduism and India.

Their “impurity” has historically relegated Dalit to degrading occupations such as sewage collection and scavenging. They are denied access to temples, village water resources and common land and are discriminated against in access to jobs, housing and purchasing of land (no less than 65 million are landless agricultural labourers). Daily life for rural untouchables is one of dire poverty, humiliation and a series of restrictions – on their movements, on the way they speak and dress, their style of celebrating marriage. A daily dose of humiliation is a

constant reminder of their subordinate position in the social order. This is truly the “hidden apartheid” of which Dalit activists speak – not a phrase only, but a reality.

Yet Dalit resistance to this oppressive goes back at least eighty years to the inspiring leadership of B. R. Ambedkar [6] (1891-1956), himself a Dalit who rose to a prominent position in India’s independence movement and its first government. Ambedkar was one of the first to popularise the term “Dalit”, whose meaning in Marathi – the language of some 70 million people in the western Indian state of Maharashtra [7] – is “oppressed”.

Ambedkar’s supervision of the post-independence Indian constitution, promulgated in 1950, led to the outlawing of untouchability. It introduced an affirmative action policy in favour of scheduled castes, and reserved places for Dalit in the public sector, education, government service and public companies. A few months before his death, Ambedkar lead a movement of mass conversion of untouchables from Hinduism to Buddhism, which he saw as completing his work of emancipation.

A new urban Dalit elite emerged in the following years as a result of these pro-active policies. This class, educated and more assertive of its identity, managed to achieve political power through alliances with low castes in the most populated state of the country, Uttar Pradesh. Yet simultaneously, and partly as a reaction against this very assertiveness, atrocities against Dalit – murders, rapes, social boycotts – have continued; oppression finds new forms.

An elusive enemy

The passing of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act in 1989 [8] has not been effective in halting these violations. The Indian state has in recent years often proved itself unable or unwilling to protect Dalit; indeed, state representatives – police especially – are frequently accused of active participation in anti-Dalit violence. In response to the non-implementation of the act, and to counteract state inertia, several Dalit intellectuals created the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights in 1998. The NCDHR [9] was one of the most vocal organisations at the World Social Forum in Mumbai.

The aim of their mobilisation at the WSF was to help forge a sense of solidarity between *all* minorities: untouchables, women, Muslims, Christians, “tribals” [10] (as India’s indigenous peoples are known) – for all share some form of oppression. In this sense, the term Dalit seems to be acquiring a more political and broad-based meaning, as “black” did in the United States and Britain in the 1970s.

This does not make for easy alliances, within Dalit communities as well as between them and other groups. The fragmentation of Dalit into numerous castes and sub-castes makes unity and cooperation difficult to create, while there have been many instances of Dalit or tribals taking part in riots against Muslims – the most horrendous recent example being in Gujarat [10] in 2002. Oppression divides as well as unites.

In the face of these challenges, Dalit activists identify two powerful enemies. The first is *Hindutva*, the extremist ideology espoused by the ruling *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) that conflates India and the Hindu religion and thus makes second-class citizens of its non-Hindu minorities [10]. The second is just as real but more elusive: globalisation, especially in its currently dominant, neo-liberal form.

At Mumbai, Dalit spokespersons reiterated the message that neo-liberal globalisation releases market forces that make the poor poorer, and reduces public employment on which many Dalit rely. Instead, they advocated reserved employment guarantees for Dalit in the private sector,

and socially responsible investment codes by foreign companies that favour Dalit. By contrast, there were no dissenting voices at the WSF arguing for the emancipatory potential of globalisation for Dalit – although some Indian papers have argued that economic transformation also contains this aspect.

Touching the world

But if Dalit representatives are antagonistic to globalisation as it impacts on their communities in India, they increasingly seek to internationalise their own cause. This internationalism was exemplified at Mumbai in the way that Indian Dalit had invited their brothers and sisters from Nepal and Sri Lanka, Roma from Romania, *burakumin* from [Japan](#) [11], lower-castes from West Africa – all of them the object of systematic, descent-based mistreatment. Dalit are also organising through the (Europe-based) [International Dalit Solidarity Network](#) [12], created in 2000. The IDSN, active in Britain, Denmark, Holland, Germany, and France, owes much of its campaigning style to the anti-apartheid campaign over South Africa.

The IDSN lobbies national governments in [Europe](#) [13] to include the question of caste-based discrimination in their bilateral relations with India. Dutch diplomacy has been especially active in this respect, and this has led to tensions with India. The movement also pressurises the UN Sub-commission on Human Rights, [Forum Asia](#) [14], and its [Committee](#) [15] on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination to seek to have caste-based discrimination taken as seriously as any other form of human rights violation.

In all this activity, Dalit in India and elsewhere seek no more or less than to be at last recognised as equal human beings.

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