

# INTRODUCTION

Every sixth human being in the world today is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is an erstwhile untouchable, a Dalit. Today there are 165 million Dalits (equal to more than half the population of the United States) and they continue to suffer under India's 3,500-year-old caste system, which remains a stigma on humanity. However, Dalits are awakening. We are struggling against caste discrimination, illiteracy, and poverty; our weapons are education, self-empowerment, and democracy.

Hindus believe that God created the caste system. The sacred Rig-Veda, the earliest literary source in India, dating back to around 1000 B.C., describes how human stratification came about: a cosmic giant, Purusha, sacrificed parts of his body to create mankind. His mouth became the Brahmin, the priestly class; his arms the Kshatriya, the warriors and landowners; his thighs were made into Vaishya, the merchants; and from his feet were born Shudra, the servants. This fourfold division of society is called the Four Varnas (Chaturvarna). The untouchables have no place in the Chaturvarna, and are placed even below the lowest Shudra Varna.

Ancient Hindu law books such as *Manu Smruti* and *Gautama Dharma Shastra* did not allow Shudras and Dalits to possess any wealth other than "dogs and donkeys." The doors of education were closed to them. This is what the law books prescribe for untouchables who dare approach the sacred texts:

If he listens intentionally to the Vedas, his ears shall be filled  
with lead.

If he recites them, his tongue shall be cut out.

If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain.

In the Indian epic Mahabharata, dated around 1000 B.C., there is a celebrated fable about Ekalavya, a tribal boy and an outcaste. One day Ekalavya saw a group of young boys listening to the famed guru Dronacharya. He tried to befriend them but was surrounded by four armed guards, who roughed him up. The princes were learning the art of archery and warfare, and if Ekalavya was ever seen again in the vicinity, they warned, he would be killed.

But curiosity got the better of Ekalavya, who began rising at dawn to furtively watch the training of the young princes. He would strain to hear everything that was taught. By night, in the moonlight, he would practice, reciting the instructions he had heard the guru utter. He soon mastered the art of archery.

One day the guru saw Ekalavya shoot a deer that was bolting at lightning speed. Amazed at the precision of a young boy dressed in rags, the guru questioned him, and was shocked when he realized that this boy was a tribal outcaste.

Ekalavya wanted to offer *guru-dakshina*—the traditional gift offered to a teacher in gratitude—so he offered himself as the guru’s slave. Instead, the guru asked Ekalavya for his right thumb. Ekalavya was caught off guard. In his right thumb rested all the prowess of archery. But Ekalavya calmly said that a guru is equivalent to a god and he would gladly do as the guru wished. So saying, he severed his thumb and laid the bleeding stub at Dronacharya’s feet.

Every Indian child hears this mythological story about guru-bhakti—devotion to the teacher. “Great are the disciples as dedicated as Ekalavya. See, his name lives on forever,” children are told.

But I see the tale in a very different light. For me, Ekalavya is an outcaste—a Dalit—who was denied an education by the guru Dronacharya, who embodied the highborn. Dronacharya was protecting his knowledge and power as well as perpetuating a social order that was inherently unjust.

For me, the moral of the fable is simply that power will remain the guarded possession of the highborn, striving to ensure that an outcaste remains a lowly outcaste. Paralyzed by the system, the outcaste will never dare to question it.

Ekalavya was cornered into sacrificing his strength, and as consolation, his devotion was glorified and his silent consent transformed into a myth that promotes submission among the disempowered.

The 3,500-year-old caste system in India is still alive and violently kicking. In cities they will tell you, “The caste system is a thing of the past, it now exists only in villages.” Go to the villages, and they will tell you, “Oh no. Not here, maybe in some other village.” Yet open the matrimonial section of any newspaper and you will find an unabashed and bewildering display of the persistent belief in caste and subcaste.

Untouchability was officially abolished by the Indian Constitution when the country became a republic on January 26, 1950. Mercifully, today the untouchables are no longer required to place clay pots around their necks to prevent their spit from polluting the ground. They are no longer required to attach brooms to their rumps to wipe out their footprints as they walk. But while caste discrimination may have changed form, it has not disappeared.

When you meet a person in India today, even as you introduce yourself, your caste will quickly be assessed from your family name. Consciously or subconsciously, Indians, whether in their own country or abroad, still make judgments based on caste. Over the years, the caste system has taken on sophisticated dimensions; it has become subtler, though no less pernicious.

The fourfold Chaturvarna and the untouchables are divided into more than three thousand castes and subcastes, with mind-boggling differentiation built into the hierarchy. Every individual is believed to have been predestined by his or her fate into a caste. The caste is the defining factor in determining the course of a life. The place from where he drinks water, whom he dines with, whom he marries, and whether he becomes a scholar or a scavenger—all depend on his caste.

In this system of graded inequality, the Dalits were so inferior that their mere touch was believed to pollute others. They were denied human rights and were forced to scrape together a living from denigrating chores such as carrying human manure and removing the carcasses of cattle. They were powerless to change their caste-based social status. There was no scope for a revolt. How could mere mortals challenge a structure ordained by God himself? Social and religious sanctity had ensured unquestioning perpetuation of the age-old system.

The untouchables themselves were indoctrinated in the theory of karma, which stated that they were burdened with demeaning tasks only because of their own misdeeds in past lives. Their dharma—duty—now was to perform their tasks assiduously with the hope of redeeming themselves and aspiring to a better life in the next incarnation. A person belonging to a sweeper caste had to dutifully carry human excrement on his head with the hope that he could look forward to bettering his lot in another life.

Nirvana is the ultimate attainable bliss in human existence. In this state, the atma—the soul—is released from its path through a preordained cycle of 8.4 million births. The only salvation for humans is a life that follows prescribed devotion to the assigned caste-based duty; following it unquestioningly will lead to nirvana.

Certainly, revolts against the caste system did take place—the most notable being the one by Gautama Buddha in the fifth cen-

ture B.C., which questioned and discarded the Chaturvarna and the caste system arising from it. Buddhism gained prominence over a large part of India and spread to other countries such as China and Japan, and to Southeast Asia, from the fourth century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. However, Buddhism's influence in India declined in the seventh century and virtually disappeared as a widely practiced religion before the arrival of Islam in the tenth century.

The fourteenth century saw the emergence of a religious revival and reformation similar to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in Europe. It took the form of the anti-orthodox Bhakti movement, which included women and untouchables. At its helm were saints, poets, and philosophers—who came mainly from the lower strata of society—potters, gardeners, tailors, barbers, carpenters, and even untouchables.

The Bhakti movement established equality before God; its followers believed even untouchables shared the grace of God. As they reach God, they cease to be distinguished: as salt becomes one with the ocean, the untouchables become one with God.<sup>1</sup> However, the inclusiveness of the Bhakti movement was confined only to the religious sphere. Even the compassionate saint-poets tended to uphold the divisive caste system in the social realm. While the Bhakti movement raised awareness, it was not radical enough to challenge the social system in day-to-day life.

With the advent of the British Raj in the early nineteenth century, education, once the privilege of the upper castes alone, gradually became accessible to castes lower down the hierarchy. Knowledge brought with it the desire to be recognized and respected; it strengthened the resolve to struggle against discrimination.

In a historic event in 1873, Jyotiba Phule, a teacher in a Christian school who came from the gardener community, established the first non-Brahmin social organization that emphasized education for the masses and advocated reduction of Brahmin ritual power. Phule educated his childless wife, Savitri, who started a school for

women. Over the years, Jyotiba established many schools for untouchables and women. In the 1870s, Jyotiba's campaign for education of the traditionally disenfranchised laid the groundwork for massive social change. Even today most Dalits see education as the panacea for their problems. Indeed, literacy rates among Dalits have been improving faster than those among non-Dalits.

When the Prince of Wales visited India in 1889, he was greeted with signs:

*Tell the grandma we are a happy nation.  
But 19 crores are without education.<sup>2</sup>*

This was the beginning of a revolution.

Among the many erstwhile untouchable Dalit castes, the Mahar caste is the single largest in Maharashtra, a progressive province on the west coast of India, with Mumbai (Bombay) as its capital. Mahars are found in almost every village of Maharashtra, constituting around 10 percent of its population. Their quarters, called the Maharwada, are invariably set outside the village boundaries.

Traditionally, the Mahar's duty in the village, as classified by British administrative manuals, was that of an "inferior village servant." The Mahar was the "watchman and guardian of the village and the living chronicler of its concerns." Apart from arbitrating in boundary disputes and guarding the village, their duties also included carrying death notices and messages to other villages, bringing fuel to the cremation ground, mending the village walls, summoning landowners to pay land revenue in the chavadi (village hall), escorting those conveying the government treasury, sweeping the village roads, serving government officials, tracking thieves, and removing the carcasses of cattle from the village.<sup>3</sup>

These traditional duties of the Mahars came to be known as Yeskar duty, and were performed by every Mahar family in a village on a rotation basis. This duty, which came to be seen as a

birthright by Mahars, was compensated by the village in the form of baluta—entitlements in kind, such as grain and the meat and skin of dead cattle—besides a small amount of land known as watan.

There is a Mahar legend about how these birthrights came to be granted.<sup>4</sup> A handsome Mahar warrior named Amrutnak was in the service of the sultan of Bedar. He volunteered to rescue the sultan's queen, abducted during a hunting expedition. Before proceeding on his long journey to Kabul in Afghanistan, Amrutnak presented a small box to the king for safekeeping.

After many adventures, he succeeded in bringing back the queen. However, he was met not with gratitude but hostility because of the days and nights he had spent with her. When questioned, Amrutnak simply smiled and reminded the king about the "small box." The box contained the ultimate proof of his loyalty. In return for his self-castration and bravery, Amrutnak was granted his demand of fifty-two rights for his people, the Mahars.

The legend of Amrutnak is one of loyalty and self-sacrifice, which became a part of the Mahar psyche. However, the so-called rights included nothing more than a de facto right to begging, a claim to the clothing of the dead, and the like.

Mahars did find an outlet from their traditional village duties by serving as guards in the hill forts or enlisting in the military. The consolidation of British rule in India led to the Mahars' entry into the British Indian Army and paved the way to their awakening. The British Army provided the Mahars with more than a decent job. The army established compulsory education for Indian soldiers and their children, both male and female. Until then, women in general, and all untouchables, had been denied the right to learning. Education for the untouchables in the army gave them a new vision and a new sense of self-worth. They realized that the low esteem in which they were held was not an inescapable destiny but a stigma imposed on them by the priests. They felt the shame of it and were determined to get rid of it.

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Then, in 1891, came the birth of someone who would lead the revolution for equality in India. This man, a son of a Mahar school-teacher in the British Army, was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, affectionately known as Babasaheb.

Babasaheb was the great leader of the Dalit movement in twentieth-century India. It was he who organized, united, and inspired the Dalits to effectively use political means toward their goal of social equality. He was highly educated—a Ph.D. from Columbia University (1917), D.Sc. from the London School of Economics, and Bar-at-Law from Gray’s Inn, London (1923). These achievements, spectacular by any standard, were simply incredible for an untouchable.

Dr. Ambedkar wrote books on economics, history, law, sociology, politics, and comparative religion. He published *Mooknayak* (Voice of the Dumb), the first of many newspapers for Dalits. He led numerous protests and in 1935, when he felt that there was no way to change the Hindu caste system, he declared he would “not die a Hindu,” setting in motion a movement that eventually resulted in conversion of about five hundred thousand untouchables to Buddhism in 1956. He established a chain of hostels, schools, and colleges primarily for Dalits. He founded political parties that successfully politicized the Dalits throughout Maharashtra and, in due course, all over India.

Dr. Ambedkar submitted a concrete program of action called “A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of a Self-Governing India.” This document constituted the Declaration of Fundamental Rights for Dalits. It called for equal citizenship for Dalits, abolishment of untouchability, and the banning by law of discrimination. It demanded adequate representation for Dalits in public service and the establishment of a Public Service Commission for recruitment and enforcement. Most important, it demanded adequate Dalit representation in the legislatures and the right of Dalits to elect their own representatives through separate electorates.

Dr. Ambedkar often crossed swords with Mahatma Gandhi. Yet it was at the insistence of Gandhi that Dr. Ambedkar was chosen as chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Indian Constitution. In that capacity and also as law minister in independent India's first cabinet, he played a significant role in creating contemporary India's legal system. He was posthumously awarded India's highest civic honor—Bharat Ratna, the Jewel of India.

On India's independence in 1947, untouchability was abolished by law and an affirmative-action program against caste-based discrimination was put in place. This policy has had some success, and Dalits continue to gain political and economic strength.

On the political front, representation of Dalits in the political decision-making institutions at local, provincial, and national levels is commensurate with their population share. However, a united countrywide Dalit political force has yet to be established.

A strong Dalit middle class is emerging, but there is much that remains to be done. Past exclusion and discrimination has impacted Dalit access to capital assets and employment opportunities. This has meant a greater incidence of poverty and deprivation among Dalits.

Following an unprecedented macroeconomic crisis in 1991, the Indian government has adopted a new economic policy based on liberalization, privatization, and globalization. As a result, the Indian economy has emerged as one of the fastest-growing in the world. On the flip side, however, the rate of job creation has slowed down. This has led to a debate on the affirmative-action policy, which in India has been confined to the public sector. Presently, Dalit groups have been demanding extension of the policy to the large and growing private sector as well, but this is being opposed by corporate interests. The struggle of Dalits goes on.

The movement spearheaded by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar continues, decades later, to gather momentum. His message to Dalits to “educate, organize, and agitate” has been reaching far and wide.

Dalits, once rendered untouchable, are finding their voice. Indeed, they are mounting a slow but steady rebellion.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar touched the lives of millions of Dalits. One of them was Damu—Damodar Runjaji Jadhav. Damu was an ordinary man, but he did an extraordinary thing: inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, he stood up against the tyranny of the caste system. This is the story of Damu, my father, and Sonu, my mother, as told to me. In their lives and times, you will find my story as well.