

# Dalits in India

Many refer to the untouchables situation as “hidden apartheid”. Apartheid is system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of race in South Africa.

There are currently 165 million Dalits in India-about 1/6th of the total population.

## Who are the Dalits?

- Dalit means “broken people.”
- Dalits were formerly known as “untouchables.”
- Dalits live at the bottom of India’s rigid social order known as the caste system.

## Are Dalits in a caste?

- No. A fifth group was created to perform tasks considered too menial or degrading to be performed by caste members.
- Dalits are so low in the social hierarchy that they are outside of the caste system and considered “outcastes.”

## What is Untouchability?

- Dalits are the manual scavengers, the removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers and cobblers.
- The mere touch of a Dalit was considered “polluting” to a caste member. Thus, the concept of “untouchability” was born.

## Isn't Untouchability illegal?

- The preamble to the Indian Constitution proclaims the goals of social justice and equality.
- Article 14 sets forth the principal of equality and prohibits discrimination in employment and education.
- The Constitution does not set forth a casteless society as a national goal.
- No law has been passed abolishing untouchability.
- The practice of untouchability is a punishable offense, but the law is rarely enforced.

## Are there affirmative action programs for Dalits?

- Yes. The Civil Rights Act of 1955, and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Act of 1989.
- The National commission of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was formed to protect Dalit interests and integrate them into society.
- All programs have failed to produce substantive change.

## Who called untouchability India's "Hidden Apartheid?"

- In December, 2006, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh became the first Indian leader to acknowledge the parallel between untouchability and the crime of apartheid.
- PM Singh described untouchability as a "blot on humanity" and acknowledged that despite constitutional and legal protections, caste discrimination still exists throughout much of India.

## What does it mean to be a Dalit in India today?

- Dalits endure segregation in housing, schools and access to public services.
- Dalits are denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions and are routinely abused by the police and upper-caste members.
- Dalits suffer discrimination in education, health care, housing, property, freedom of religion, free choice of employment, and equal treatment before the law
- Dalits suffer routine violations of their right to life and security of person through state-sponsored or sanctioned acts of violence, including torture.
- Dalits suffer caste-motivated killings, rapes and other abuses on a daily basis.
- Between 2001-2002 there were 58,000 registered egregious abuses against Dalits and Tribals.
- 2005 government report stated there is a crime committed against a Dalit every 20 minutes.
- Dalits comprise most of the agricultural, bonded and child laborers in the country.
- 2007 government report found 77% of all Indians live on less than \$.50 a day and most of them were Dalits.
- Dalit women face additional discrimination and abuse, including sexual abuse by the police and upper caste men, forced prostitution, and discrimination in employment and wages.
- Dalit children face continuous hurdles in education. They are made to sit in the back of classrooms and endure verbal and physical harassment from teachers and other students. The effect of such abuses is confirmed by the low literacy and high drop-out rates for Dalits.

## What is the international community doing to end caste discrimination and untouchability?

- 2/1/07, [European Union](#) passed a resolution that found India's enforcement of laws to protect Dalits "grossly inadequate. Also found that "atrocities, untouchability, illiteracy and inequality of opportunity, continue to blight the lives of India's Dalits." The resolution called on the Indian government to end caste-based discrimination.
- 2/13/07, [Hidden Apartheid Caste Discrimination Against India's Untouchables](#)-113 page joint report was published Human Rights Watch and The Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University School of Law. Report found that India systematically failed to uphold its international legal obligations to ensure the fundamental human rights of Dalits, despite laws and policies against caste discrimination.

- 3/9/07, United Nations Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) found that "de facto segregation of Dalits persists" and highlighted systematic abuse against Dalits including torture and extrajudicial killings, an "alarming" extent of sexual violence against Dalit women and caste discrimination in post-tsunami relief.
- 7/24/07, US House of Representatives passed a concurrent resolution condemning the caste system and untouchability in India.

<https://www.dalitsolidarity.org/dalits-and-untouchability.html>