India's "Untouchables" Face Violence, Discrimination

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More than 160 million people in India are considered "Untouchable"—people tainted by their birth into a caste system that deems them impure, less than human. Human rights abuses against these people, known as Dalits, are legion. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story: "Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers"; "Dalit tortured by cops for three days"; "Dalit 'witch' paraded naked in Bihar"; "7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash"; "5 Dalits lynched in Haryana";

"Dalits are not allowed to drink from the same wells, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls," said Smita Narula, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, and author of Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s "Untouchables.” Human Rights Watch is a worldwide activist organization based in New York.

India’s Untouchables are relegated to the lowest jobs, and live in constant fear of being publicly humiliated, paraded naked, beaten, and raped with impunity by upper-caste Hindus seeking to keep them in their place. Merely walking through an upper-caste neighborhood is a life-threatening offense.

Crime Against Dalits

Statistics compiled by India’s National Crime Records Bureau indicate that in the year 2000, the last year for which figures are available, 25,455 crimes were committed against Dalits. Every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched.

No one believes these numbers are anywhere close to the reality of crimes committed against Dalits. Because the police, village councils, and government officials often support the caste system, which is based on the religious teachings of Hinduism, many crimes go unreported due to fear of reprisal, intimidation by police, inability to pay bribes demanded by police, or simply the knowledge that the police will do nothing.

"There have been large-scale abuses by the police, acting in collusion with upper castes, including raids, beatings in custody, failure to charge offenders or investigate reported crimes,” said Narula.

Enforcement of laws designed to protect Dalits is lax if not non-existent in many regions of India. The practice of untouchability is strongest in rural areas, where 80 percent of the country’s population resides. There, the underlying religious principles of Hinduism dominate.

Hindus believe a person is born into one of four castes based on karma and "purity"—how he or she lived their past lives. Those born as Brahmans are priests and teachers; Kshatriyas are rulers and soldiers; Vaisyas are merchants and traders; and Sudras are
laborers. Within the four castes, there are thousands of sub-castes, defined by profession, region, dialect, and other factors.

Untouchables are literally outcastes; a fifth group that is so unworthy it doesn't fall within the caste system.

Although based on religious principles practiced for some 1,500 years, the system persists today for economic as much as religious reasons.

Because they are considered impure from birth, Untouchables perform jobs that are traditionally considered "unclean" or exceedingly menial, and for very little pay. One million Dalits work as manual scavengers, cleaning latrines and sewers by hand and clearing away dead animals. Millions more are agricultural workers trapped in an inescapable cycle of extreme poverty, illiteracy, and oppression.

Although illegal, 40 million people in India, most of them Dalits, are bonded workers, many working to pay off debts that were incurred generations ago, according to a report by Human Rights Watch published in 1999. These people, 15 million of whom are children, work under slave-like conditions hauling rocks, or working in fields or factories for less than U.S. $1 day.

Resistance and Progress

Within India, grassroots efforts to change are emerging, despite retaliation and intimidation by local officials and upper-caste villagers. In some states, caste conflict has escalated to caste warfare, and militia-like vigilante groups have conducted raids on villages, burning homes, raping, and massacring the people. These raids are sometimes conducted with the tacit approval of the police.

"There is a growing grassroots movement of activists, trade unions, and other NGOs that are organizing to democratically and peacefully demand their rights, higher wages, and more equitable land distribution," said Narula. "There has been progress in terms of building a human rights movement within India, and in drawing international attention to the issue."

In August 2002, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UN CERD) approved a resolution condemning caste or descent-based discrimination.

"But at the national level, very little is being done to implement or enforce the laws," said Narula.

Answer the following on a separate sheet of paper - 2 points each = 16 pts.

1. Title a sheet of lined paper: India’s Untouchables
2. Define untouchable
3. What Indian term means untouchable?
4. What does the term “legion” mean, as used in the reading?
5. Why do many crimes against untouchables go unreported?
6. How does a person become an untouchable?
7. List three jobs performed by untouchables.
8. what has the United Nations done in an attempt to help the untouchables?